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On the Margins of Formal Trade: Composition and Drivers of Informal Trade at the Raxaul-Birgunj Border Trade Point

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Abstract: *India and Nepal share one of the longest open borders in the world. Unlike most other boundaries between nations, this frontier is largely undermarketed and permits free movement of citizens of both countries. This study examines the dynamics of informal trade at the Raxaul-Birgunj border trade point which is the most commercially active crossing between India and Nepal. The study employs a primary survey of 100 purposively selected respondents, including petty traders, small-scale business operators, brokers and household traders. The study identifies the commodity composition of informal trade and the factors determining informal trade between India and Nepal. The findings reveal that food grains, vegetables, petroleum products and fertilisers constitute the dominant informally traded commodities. The findings also reveal that foot-carrying and bicycle transport account for over half of all informal trade, which highlights its livelihood significance for poor border communities. As far as determining factors are concerned, price differentials, established informal networks and the open border provisions emerge as the three most significant drivers. The study contributes to the empirical literature on South Asian informal trade and provides evidence based insights for bilateral trade policy reform.*

Introduction

The global trade is broadly split into two parts: Formal trade and Informal Trade. Formal trade takes place through the recognised and official channels of trade with tariff and non-tariff regulations; while Informal trade[1] is in the grey zones of the regulatory and procedural frameworks. Formal trade has received a lot of attention in the academic literature while informal trade has largely escaped the radar. India and Nepal share one of the longest open borders in the world, spanning 1,751 kilometres *(across 5 Indian states of Sikkim, West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand)*. Unlike most other

[1] The term *informal trade* denotes the movement of goods across borders without full compliance with legal, regulatory, or fiscal requirements. While difficult to quantify by nature, estimates suggest it accounts for a substantial share of total trade flows in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and parts of Latin America *(see UNCTAD, 2019; World Bank, 2020).*

boundaries between nations, this frontier is largely undermarketed and permits free movement of citizens of both countries. This openness has also created conditions highly conducive to the flourishing of informal exchange of goods and services across nations. Goods, labour and capital move across this border through both formal customs points and informal pathways simultaneously (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India).

The studies conducted by University of Maryland (1993) and Taneja & Pohit (2000) were two early attempts at analysing informal trade of India with its neighbours including Nepal. Their research found that informal trade between India and Nepal can be a wide range of activities from being completely illegal to extra-legal. This distinction is essential to grasp the fact that informal trade is a spectrum of economic practices influenced by regulatory arbitrage, price differences, institutional deficiencies and entrenched social networks. In the year 2023, India's total exports to Nepal remained at US$ 7.25 billion, while Nepal's exports to India stood at US$ 811. Nepal had a massive trade deficit with India which reflects deep structural asymmetry in bilateral trade relationship. Fuels completely dominate India's export basket to Nepal, accounting for 32 percent of all exports. The second largest category is Metals at 16 percent. Machinery and Electronics (9.69 percent), Vegetables (8.99 percent) and Chemicals (8.58 percent) round out the top five (WITS database accessed in May, 2026).

Historical Background of India-Nepal Relations

The roots of the India-Nepal relationship extend deep into antiquity, predating the formal existence of either state by millennia. The two countries share a civilisational heritage that is uniquely continuous and overlapping. It is rooted by certain ways such as shared traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism, the ancient administrative and cultural reach of the Mauryan Empire into the Himalayan foothills and the uninterrupted movement of peoples, goods and religious practice across the Terai plains and Himalayan passes. The inter-connection of places like Lumbini, Pashupatinath and Janakpur with places of veneration in India has maintained living cultural bonds across the border for centuries. The Licchavi rulers of ancient Nepal are historically traced to the Licchavi clan of Vaishali in Bihar. The Mithila region spread in India and Nepal was a unified cultural and linguistic zone for centuries. This is making the modern international border an artifact of political history that does not correspond to the lived cultural reality of borderland communities (Embassy of India at Kathmandu, 2024).

During era of the Mughals and the British East India Company, the Himalayan foothills and the Terai were zones of active political and commercial interaction. The expansion of Gorkha state brought it into conflict with the British East India Company. It produced the Anglo-Nepalese War of 1814-16 and the Treaty of Sugauli (1815-16). These events permanently shaped the territorial configuration of both Nepal and the territories that would become independent India. The Treaty of Sugauli was the foundational act of border delimitation between the two countries. The formal diplomatic framework of the contemporary India-Nepal relationship has been developed since 1950 with the Treaty of Peace and Friendship. The key provisions of this treaty include mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Article 1); an obligation to inform and consult each other about any friction or misunderstanding with neighbouring states (Article 2); a commitment that neither country will permit its territory to be used for activities threatening the security of the other (Article 3); reciprocal rights for nationals of each country in the territory of the other, including rights of residence, ownership of property, participation in trade and movement (Articles 6 and 7); and provisions governing Nepal's access to arms through or from India (Article 5) (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India).

Review of Literature

The theoretical economic literature on smuggling and informal trade can be traced to the seminal contributions of Bhagwati and Hansen (1973). Their article modelled smuggling as a rational response to tariff and trade restrictions. Their model demonstrated that in the presence of tariffs, rational economic agents will divert trade to informal channels. It is the case when the expected penalty cost of apprehension is lower than the tariff savings from avoiding official channels. They found that informal trade is an arbitrage response to regulatory price distortions. This remains the bedrock of the economic analysis of understanding India-Nepal informal trade dynamics. The gravity model of trade[1] posits that bilateral trade flows between two countries are positively related to their economic size (proxied by GDP) and negatively related to the trade costs between them, of which distance is the primary proxy. The

[1] Originally proposed by Tinbergen (1962) and subsequently given theoretical micro foundations by Anderson (1979) and Anderson & van Wincoop (2003).

model has been enormously influential in international trade economics and has been applied to understanding both formal and informal trade flows in developing country contexts.

Rao et al. (1997) included Nepal in their multi-country border trade study. They provided commodity level evidence that informal trade between India and Nepal was concentrated in categories where Indian goods were cheaper due to domestic subsidies or where Nepali imports faced higher tariffs than Indian domestic prices would suggest. This commodity level focus identified the specific goods that flow through informal channels and linking them to their specific regulatory and price drivers. Pohit and Taneja (2000) concluded that informal traders showed higher ethnic linkages than formal traders, that informal trade operated through flexible multi-commodity portfolios. They also identified that social trust replaced formal contracts and informal credit system provided by ethnic networks partially financed cross border transactions. Their conclusion has remained consistent across more than two decades in the way that unless the transaction cost environment of formal trade is substantially improved, informal trade will persist alongside formal trade even under conditions of trade liberalisation.

The literature also focused on quantifying the scale of informal flows. Taneja and Pohit (2001) made the first attempt at quantitative estimation of informal trade volumes using trader reported data on transaction frequencies, commodity values and border crossing patterns. While the estimates were acknowledged to be approximate given the inherent measurement challenges, the study established that informal trade was a commercially significant phenomenon. It is not merely a marginal subsistence level exchange but involves organised traders making deliberate commercial decisions. Karmacharya et al. (2004) conducted surveys at key border crossing points in Nepal (Birgunj, Biratnagar and Nepalgunj) and provided commodity specific data on informal trade compositions and trader characteristics. The researchers formulated the border crossing point level empirical database. Acharya and Pokharel (2014) published that the informal economy in Nepal was approximately 40 percent of the official economy during the period 2001/02-2009/10 and that informal trade activities had significant negative impact on Nepalese customs revenue.

Basnet and Aryal (2018) examined how informal trade affects household income, employment and poverty in border communities. Their findings concluded that informal trade was a significant livelihood source for poor households in border districts. They also found that traders faced substantial risks from regulatory uncertainty and enforcement fluctuations. Bhattarai (2019) applied a multivariate regression framework to survey data and identified price differentials, non-tariff barriers and border permeability as the three most statistically significant predictors of informal trade participation at the individual trader level. Gupta and Roy (2023) provided the first comprehensive field based documentation of the informal carrier economy. They highlighted the system whereby women and poor households collect goods on the Indian side of the border and transport them across the open border on foot, bicycles, or motorcycles to supply retail markets in Nepali border towns. Their findings established that carrying had become a full time livelihood for many poor families.

The SAWTEE-IFPRI collaborative report[1] constituted the empirical landmark of recent informal trade research. Based on surveys at customs points and interviews with key stakeholders, the report produced the first multi-site and multi-commodity assessment of informal agricultural trade at the Nepal-India border. It concluded that informal trade may be as large as formal bilateral trade. Because Nepal relies on informal channels for approximately 60 percent of its rice, 25 percent of its fertiliser and significant shares of vegetables & hybrid seeds. The study established a new empirical baseline for understanding the scale and composition of informal trade flows between India and Nepal (CSISA-SAWTEE, 2025). Pudasaini (2025) calculated aggregate import discrepancy indices of 4.2 percent with larger variations particularly in textiles, consumer goods and medium duty products. The narrowing of discrepancies during the COVID-19 period confirmed that a significant portion of the normal period asymmetry reflects informal flows rather than measurement error.

Focal Issues and Instruments

This study focuses on informal trade dynamics at Raxaul- Birgunj border trade point along the India-Nepal border. The site has been selected on the basis of commercial significance, accessibility and representativeness of informal trade phenomena. The Raxaul-Birgunj trade point is the most active commercial border point between India and Nepal. This study aims to identify the primary products

[1] This research represents the most comprehensive and methodologically rigorous empirical investigation of informal agricultural trade at the India-Nepal border to date.

exchanged through informal trade channels between India and Nepal. The study also aims to identify the economic, institutional and social factors which motivate individuals to participate in informal trade between India and Nepal.

The research design is survey method in which primary data have been collected from 100 respondents through structured questionnaire. The sample has been drawn from Indian side of the border to capture perspectives on informal trade dynamics. The study employs purposive sampling and respondents have selected on the basis of their demonstrated engagement in informal trade. The sample consists of (a) individual traders (petty traders, hawkers and self-employed persons); (b) small-scale business operators; (c) intermediaries, dalals (brokers); and (d) household traders. The mean scores and standard deviations have been calculated to identify the preferences of the factors determining informal trade between India and Nepal.

Commodity Composition of Informal Trade

The study highlights the commodities involved in informal trade between India and Nepal and the mode of transportation. This provides the commodity level empirical data pertaining to the study. The questionnaire recorded a checklist of commodity categories currently or recently traded informally. Multiple responses were permitted which have been presented in Table 1:

Table 1: Commodity Categories Involved in Informal Trade

Commodity Category	Freq.	Percent (%)
Food grains & cereals *(rice, wheat, maize, pulses)*	68	68.0
Vegetables & fresh produce *(onion, potato, garlic, tomato)*	57	57.0
Sugar, salt and edible oil	49	49.0
Petroleum products *(petrol, diesel, kerosene, LPG)*	41	41.0
Fertilisers and agrochemicals *(urea, DAP, MOP)*	37	37.0
Tobacco products and gutka	31	31.0
Textiles, garments and cloth	28	28.0
Spices and condiments *(ginger, cardamom, turmeric)*	24	24.0
Medicines and pharmaceuticals	21	21.0
Alcoholic beverages	18	18.0
Electronic goods *(mobile phones, accessories)*	14	14.0
Livestock and poultry	11	11.0
Other *(seeds, veterinary medicines, cosmetics)*	11	11.0
Timber and forest produce	9	9.0
Counterfeit/duplicate branded goods	7	7.0

As presented in aforementioned table, Food grains and cereals are the most widely traded informal commodity, reported by 68 percent of respondents. This prevalence of rice in the informal trade basket is directly attributable to export restrictions on rice imposed by India. This intervention severed Nepal's formal rice supply chains and created a price differential. Vegetables and fresh produce constitute the second largest informal category (57 percent) which reflects the impact of VAT imposition by Nepal on imports from India. The survey found that onion, potato, garlic and tomato were the most commonly traded vegetables. Sugar and edible oil (49 percent) represent an intermediate category where informal flows operate in both directions. Indian sugar flows informally to Nepal while refined edible oil processed in Nepal flows informally back to India. This exploits the rule-of-origin provisions of the India-Nepal Treaty of Trade.

Petroleum products (41 percent) reflect the structural price differential between Indian and Nepali fuel prices. Fertilisers and agrochemicals (37 percent) are of critical developmental importance. Because Nepal's formal fertiliser procurement system is supply constrained and meets only approximately 50 percent of agricultural demand. Tobacco and gutka (31 percent) and textiles (28 percent) complete a picture of consumer goods where India's larger manufacturing base and lower production costs create persistent price advantages. The appearance of spices and condiments (24 percent) reflects one of the few commodity domains where Nepal's informal export has competitive advantage.

The mode of transportation is a key variable that provides insight into the scale and physical risk of informal trade. The study also recorded mode of transportation of goods across the border which has been presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Mode of Transportation of Informally Traded Goods

Mode of Transport	Freq.	Percent (%)
On foot *(head-load/hand-carry)*	29	29.0
Bicycle or hand-cart	27	27.0
Motorcycle or scooter	22	22.0
Auto-rickshaw or tempo	12	12.0
Small truck or pick-up van	7	7.0
Via intermediary/agent	3	3.0
Total	**100**	**100.0**

Foot-carrying (29 percent) and bicycle or hand-cart transport (27 percent) together account for 56 percent of all transport modes. It means that more than half of all informal traders are operating at the individual carrying scale. The respondents also pointed out that the poor women and marginal workers make multiple daily crossings to supply goods at border retail markets. Motorcycle or scooter transport (22 percent) represents a more commercial mode of transportation. These are traders who carry petroleum products in canisters across informal border or who transport agricultural goods through unmarked pathways. Auto-rickshaw or tempo transport (12 percent) and small truck or van segment (7 percent) represent organised commercial consignments of vegetables, textiles and packaged food items. The 3 percent who operate entirely through intermediaries are typically higher value traders.

Factors Determining Informal Trade

The study highlights economic, institutional, social and cultural factors determining informal trade. The questionnaire recorded responses of respondents through Likert scales. Mean scores and standard deviations have been computed for each factor. Higher mean score indicates stronger agreement that the factor motivates informal trade. Table 3 presents the results computed for economic factors determining informal trade.

Table 3: Mean Scores of Economic Factors

Economic Motivation Factor	Mean	S.D.
Price differentials between Indian and Nepali markets.	4.58	0.61
Avoiding customs duties, taxes and border fees.	4.34	0.74
Higher profit margins through informal channels.	4.19	0.81
Seasonal demand and supply gaps.	3.84	0.96
Lack of capital to meet formal trade requirements.	3.48	1.04
Low access to formal credit and banking services.	3.27	1.09

The results confirm the central prediction of classical smuggling theory as discussed by Bhagwati and Hansen. According to respondents, price differentials between the two national markets are the dominant economic motivation for informal trade participation. In field observations, every respondent could immediately cite the specific price differential in their traded commodity. The high rating and low standard deviation for this factor indicate very high agreement across the sample. Duty avoidance is the second most important economic motivation. It confirms that the cost of formal compliance such as customs duties, border fees, certification costs, documentation charges, etc. represents a prohibitive burden for small scale traders. Higher profit margins operate as the commercial expression of the price differential and duty avoidance factors. Seasonal demand and supply gaps capture the dynamic character of informal trade, where a sudden supply shortage emerges and informal channels respond immediately. Capital constraints and credit access are secondary but significant barriers for newer entrants and daily wage carriers. Table 4 presents the results computed for institutional and regulatory factors determining informal trade.

Table 4: Mean Scores of Institutional and Regulatory Factors

Institutional and Regulatory Factor	Mean	S.D.
Established informal networks.	4.41	0.68
Corruption and rent-seeking by border officials.	4.27	0.83
Complex and time-consuming procedures.	4.09	0.89
High tariff and non-tariff barriers.	3.93	0.94
Absence of formal market *(agricultural produce)*.	3.71	0.98
Lack of formal trade infrastructure *(banks, labs, etc.)*.	3.45	1.07

The informal trade has built its own sophisticated operational procedures. The established informal networks highlight institutional reality that is frequently underappreciated in policy discussions. Social institutions such as known border tracks, trusted intermediaries, dispute resolution mechanisms and enforcement information networks constitute a service delivery system for cross border commerce. Corruption and rent-seeking affect not only do formal channels require payment of official duties; they also require payment of unofficial fees. This makes the total effective cost of formal compliance higher than the cost of informal trade. Documentation complexity reflects the multi-agency and multi-document trade administration which has been designed for large commercial traders and is inaccessible to small traders. High tariffs and Non -Tariff Barriers (NTBs) complete the picture of a formal trade system that is structurally designed for entities that can absorb compliance costs. It is not for the border communities who are currently the primary users of informal channels. Table 5 presents the results computed for social and cultural factors determining informal trade.

Table 5: Mean Scores of Social and Cultural Factors

Social and Cultural Motivation Factor	Mean	S.D.
Open border.	4.69	0.51
Family and Community networks.	4.14	0.87
Shared language and cultural ties.	3.94	0.93
Lack of awareness about formal trade.	3.39	1.07
Social pressure or expectation.	2.84	1.14

The open border is rated the single highest motivation factor across factors in all three categories discussed above. The Treaty of Peace and Friendship's (1950) open border provisions are the main enabling circumstances for informal trade at Raxaul-Birgunj trade point. The intergenerational family and community networks capture the deep social embedding of informal trade as a livelihood tradition. There were many respondents during field work whose parents and grandparents had engaged in the same trade. Shared language and ethnic ties (the Maithili and Tharu cultural continuity across the border) provide the common social mechanisms within which informal activities are negotiated and performed. In these mechanisms, credit is extended and disputes are resolved without recourse to formal legal mechanisms. The relatively low rating for social pressure is an important finding. It confirms that informal trade participation is genuinely voluntary and economically motivated rather than socially coerced. The consolidated ranking of these factors confirms that the informal trade at Raxaul-Birgunj border trade point is not driven by any single dominant factor. It is the resultant of social, economic and institutional incentives. The top three factors are the open border, price differentials and established informal networks which create irresistible structural circumstances for informal trade.

Conclusion

The findings of the study reveal that food grains, petroleum products, vegetables and fertilisers dominate the informal trade basket due to specific policy distortions on either side of the border. The findings also reveal that foot-carrying and bicycle transport account for over half of informal trade which highlights its livelihood significance for poor border communities. The findings establish that informal trade at the Raxaul-Birgunj border is not an isolated phenomenon but a structurally embedded economic activity driven by the confluence of various factors. These factors consist of open border, price differentials, regulatory arbitrage, institutional informality and deep socio-cultural ties. The open border creates the enabling conditions within which economic and institutional incentives produce persistent informal flows. The study suggests that trade facilitation reforms should prioritise the simplification of customs procedures and requirements for marginalized and small scale traders. Bilateral price monitoring mechanisms should be established to identify and address the tariff and subsidy differentials. The establishment of dedicated small-trader facilitation counters and simplified border crossing infrastructure at Raxaul-Birgunj is recommended. Formalisation of the carrier economy would reduce vulnerability while expanding the formal trade base. These measures would reduce the structural incentives for informality without disrupting the livelihoods that depend on it.

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