

# India–Nepal Relations: Connecting from Somnath to Pashupatinath

**Key Words:** *Indo, Nepal Relatio coltural Dplo- mancy, Narendra Modi & Nepal, Hin- duism as an instrument of cultural diplomacy,*

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*Indo-Nepal relations have always been characterised in different Manners. Though Nepal is more close to India due to its geographical proximity and historical legacy and cultural affinity, yet its relation with India is hove Not been smooth due to various aspect of India Nepal relation This article is based on personal experiences and observations of contributor during his stay in Nepal for the purpose of academic fild visit. This article explores the hypothesis of cultural diplomacy of Indo - Nepal relation proposed by India's P.M. Sri Narendra Modi.*

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Being a landlocked and small state, Nepal's relations with India have always been characterised as relations between unequal neighbours. In fact, both geo-strategic considerations and the location of Nepal have decided Nepal's destiny. It is sandwiched between two powerful neighbours, who tend to be hostile towards each other. As far as Nepal is concerned, India has always had an edge over China, due to its geographical proximity and more importantly— historical legacy and cultural affinity with Nepal. Unfortunately, the last three decades have witnessed that India-Nepal relations have not been smooth due to a number of factors— in particular 1988–89 when the Indian government declared an 'Economic blockade' against Nepal and compelled it to accept India's terms and conditions. As a result, the Nepalese perception towards India became somewhat inimical despite the fact that it is dependent upon India for its access to the world. In addition to this, India's indirect support and sympathy to the Maoist Movement in Nepal further strained the relationship between the two. Even during bilateral dialogues or negotiations, when the Nepalese side was represented by the Head of the Government or the Head of the State, the Indian side was always represented either by the Indian diplomats or the Secretaries of respective Ministries. This gives an impression of not only India's diplomatic apathy towards Nepal but also the undermining of the political authorities in Nepal. Hence, Nepal contested India's role in its political process.

The last elections of Nepal in 2013 rejected the radical politics of the Maoists, set the new political mood for democracy and also changed the attitude of Nepalese political leaders towards India. As a result, there were a series of meetings, deliberations, seminars and workshops conducted and organised between the elected representatives of Nepal and the right-wing cultural organisations, interest groups and political parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party which was then the opposition party in the Indian Parliament. The main objective of this Bharat–Nepal Sahyog Manch (India–Nepal Cooperation Forum) was to improve the relationship between the two neighbours and cement a further friendship based on common religion and culture. Primarily, an ideology of 'Hindutva' became a basis between the two nations. Therefore, the Nepalese were anxious to know the

results of Indian elections and Narendra Modi's Prime Ministership. This anxiety could be seen in the light of the altering of Nepal's character from a Theocratic to Secular state which de-recognised Hinduism as official religion of the state.

The decision of declaring Nepal as a secular state was a big blow to Nepal's unique identity as it was the only Hindu state in the world. But it was not a sudden decision. During the Jan Andolan II Maoists started influencing youths who had been victims of the Hindu-dominated society and also from the rural area and belonged to either Janjatis or lower strata of the Hindu society. So when Maoists came to power they declared Nepal as a "Secular" state. With the new character of a secular state, many non-state actors particularly the international funding agencies and donor countries became active in propagating Christianity while providing economic assistance to improve socio-economic conditions, free education and medical facilities and resources for livelihood. As a result, the majority of Janjatis and Dalits embraced Christianity with the help of these international and local Non-Governmental Organisations whose presence in Nepal is just to protect human rights. In other words, in the name of human rights many non-state actors became allegedly involved in the conversion programme and the Nepalese government could not do much to prevent this as many departments and ministries were dependent upon the funds given by these INGOs. The Nepalese government found itself in a pincer-like situation and possibly expected Indian assistance in this regard. But the secular leadership in India did not pay any heed to this call. So, the BJP's victory in the elections with a thumping majority and Modi's candidature for the Indian Prime Ministership perhaps raised hopes of Nepalese statesmen and people who have seen in him a Hindu saviour. As a result, Nepal as a nation welcomed Modi and congratulated him through putting his photographs and posters all over Nepal. Particularly, political parties and organisations whose ideology is based on right-wing Hinduism came openly in support of Modi and organised processions and appealed to the newly elected Members of the Constituent Assembly of Nepal to reverse the earlier decision of a secular state and once again declare Nepal a Hindu state.

Knowing the fact about Nepal's over-enthusiasm about BJP's victory and India's thousands of years-old religious and cultural associations with Nepal, it was expected that Modi's first official

foreign visit would be Nepal. (this could be one of the reasons that while physically he was in Bhutan, mentally he was in Nepal; it revealed in his ex-tempo speech when he spoke Nepal instead of Bhutan.) But being a shrewd statesman, Modi chose Bhutan over Nepal. It has served many purposes. Firstly, being a political leader of a political party which has "Hindutva" ideology and more so being a Prime Minister, his visit to Nepal would be criticised by all his opponents inside and outside of the country. While doing so, he avoided the giving of any wrong message to other neighbouring states of the region. Secondly, choosing Bhutan would help India to remove the ill-feelings which Bhutan must have developed against India due to an abrupt withdrawal of the various subsidies during its second parliamentary elections in July 2013. Thirdly, the visit to Bhutan indirectly helped India to inculcate confidence among the other neighbouring states that small neighbours also matter to India.

Modi used Hinduism as an instrument of cultural diplomacy vis-à-vis Nepal. Saffronising himself on the sacred Monday at the Pashupatinath temple in Kathmandu was not a mere gesture but it was a very calculative move which had a different meaning altogether. When the Head of the Government can mould himself into a Hindu cult-figure, it signifies that his people and the nation too are ready to cast themselves to reinforce the age-old relations with Nepal. To understand from Modi's speech in the Parliament of Nepal, he did not leave any opportunity to elaborate India-Nepal relations which are basically guided by Hindu religion and its rich cultural traditions and heritage preserved by Nepal. He connected himself as a link to this cultural relationship while mentioning that he belongs to Somnath (Gujarat) and reached to Pashupatinath (Kathmandu) via Kashi Vishwanath (Varanasi) for the attainment of spiritual bliss. In his deliberations, he spoke often about the Hindu religious texts and scriptures— Rigveda, Vedas and Upanishads. He cited many Hindu mythological references to prove his point of cultural affinity between India and Nepal. It implies that India will always respect Nepal's religious sentiments and is also concerned with its cultural ethos while underpinning its independent political entity and will do the best to support Nepal's economic development. In other words, while using cultural diplomacy Modi gave a strong message to those INGOs and funding agencies which are involved in converting Nepalese into Christianity in the name

of human rights and development assistance. At the political level, Modi's visit should be seen as contending the Chinese influence in Nepal and restricting Nepal from further leaning towards China. However, Modi and his government should not use only Hinduism as an instrument of cultural diplomacy but also see the potentials of other religions' cultural traits and links with other countries. For example, Buddhism too has a strong linkage with other immediate neighbours like Bhutan, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. In fact, with the legacy of Buddhism and the Hindu civilisation, India can connect with countries other than South Asia—particularly, in the South East Asian region namely, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and the Indo-China region of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Culturally, linguistically, and ethnically these countries are more akin to Hinduism and Buddhism than their newly embraced respective religions. Politically, it will also help India to maintain and counterbalance the power equations not only in South Asia but also in the whole of Asia.

On the contentious issue of revision of 1950 Treaty between India and Nepal, Modi government took a leap forward from the earlier government. Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj during her visit in July 2014 promised to address each other's concerns and interest with regard to political stability and economic prosperity of Nepal. In continuation, during Mod's visit India proposed Information and Technology connectivity between the two countries. Concessional loans worth \$ 1 billion to build power plants and roads were given to Nepal. India also gave a grant of NRs 69 million grants to Nepal to supply iodated salt to control iodine deficiency diseases in Nepal. In addition to this, knowing Nepal's rich water resources both the countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding amending the ToR (Terms of References) on the Pancheshwor Multiple Project to carry forward the work on the Pancheshwar Development Authority in Nepal. Another agreement was signed on cooperation between Nepal Television and Doordarshan, the state-owned television stations of both the countries. It will help both India and Nepal to establish the right perceptions and create conducive atmosphere for healthy relations.

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issues. By choosing India as its best friend and making China a trusted ally, it is possible for Nepal to maximize its gains and redefine the principles of Game Theory at the same time.

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