



Analysis on Cultural Ties between India and Nepal from Ancient to Contemporary Times

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Abstract

Cultural relations is the foundation of India-Nepal ties. Pashupatinath, Muktinath, Janakpurdham and Lumbini in Nepal and Char Dham, Varanasi, Ayodhya and Bodhgaya in India are some of the pilgrimages which play an instrumental role in keeping the people of the nations together.

Cultural relations also include the initiatives like Conservation of Monuments in Pashupatinath Temple complex, Kathmandu.

MoU between Nepal Academy of Music and Drama and Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi is the MoU that has showcased the consideration for mutual understanding between academicians, music writers, directors through the exchange of delegation relating to various fine arts and cultural issues and art exhibition and exchange program on a reciprocal basis. Nepal-Bharat Library is another milestone in cooperation between the nations which was founded in 1951 in Kathmandu and has been regarded as the first foreign library in Nepal. Above examples are a testimony to the relations between the two nations. People of India and Nepal are heavily dependent on each other due to the cultural as well as economical aspects. Based on the linguistic and ritualistic similarities many communities from across the borders enjoy the familiarity with one another. On the other hand, the distinction between the two nations has created a kind of identity crisis among the people living on borders. Nonetheless, the paper explores the complexity of the cultural relations between the two countries with such proximity.

Key words: India- Nepal Ties, Cultural Connectedness, Diaspora, Identity Crisis.

Introduction

The cultural heritage of any two nations build a foundation for bilateral relations to function smoothly. India-Nepal relations are not just based on government-to-government relations but also people play an important role especially with the non-state actors. As people take initiatives themselves to indulge in activities together which makes the cultural relations between the nations a never-ending saga. Also, the heritage sites have been made more accessible for tourism for Indians and Nepalese tourists due to SAARC consideration.

The Government of India has also taken initiatives to promote people-to-people contacts in the fields of art & culture, academics and media include cultural programmes, symposia and events organized in partnership with different local bodies of Nepal, as well as conferences and seminars in Hindi. Initiatives like these help with the spread of the Indian language abroad. Familiarization visits to India by Nepalese journalists and short-term training in India for Nepalese journalists/officials in the field of print & electronic media and archaeology are also arranged so that media can convey or advertise opportunities to collaborate with India. Also, a lot of assistance is provided by India for establishing stronger bilateral relations that includes establishing an e-library system across Nepal.

The Swami Vivekananda Centre for Indian Culture

The Swami Vivekananda Centre for Indian Culture was set up in Kathmandu in August 2007 which could be seen as an initiative of GOI to promote Indian culture to Nepali people. A lot of events have been done in the past with the thought of goodwill. The Nepal-Bharat Library was founded in 1951 in Kathmandu, also considered as the first foreign library in Nepal. Sole purpose of the library is to enhance the cultural relations and information exchange between India and Nepal.

Another Foundation which works for cooperation between the nations is B.P. Koirala India-Nepal Foundation. The B.P. Koirala India-Nepal Foundation was set up in 1991 through an MoU signed between the Governments of India and Nepal. The objective of this foundation is to foster educational, cultural, scientific and technical cooperation

between India and Nepal and to promote mutual understanding and cooperation through sharing of knowledge and professional talents in academic pursuits and technical specialization.¹

Cultural Connectedness between the people of India and Nepal

Diaspora

The population of Indians is around 6 lakh, who are living or domiciled in Nepal.² These mostly include businessmen and traders who have been living in Nepal for a long time, professionals like doctors, engineers, IT personnel. Also, labor class including seasonal or migratory construction workers visit or migrate there. ICA i.e. an Indian Citizens Association of Nepal was formed on 14 September 1990. ICA is the only association which deals with resident Indian citizens in Nepal with branches at Pokhara, Damak and Bhairahawa, and provides a platform to resident Indian citizens to discuss any matter of concern or any matter that might have an interest for them.

India and Nepal have extended visa-free entry in their respective territories to each other's nationals. Nearly eight million Nepalese citizens live and work in India and around 6 Lakh Indians reside in Nepal³. Indians account for about 30% of foreign tourists in Nepal. With a view to strengthen people to people exchanges, sister city agreements have been signed (Kathmandu-Varanasi, Lumbini-Bodhgaya, Janakpur-Ayodhya) & India-Nepal Ramayana Circuit have been launched. This explains that an open and free border has made the migration easy which clearly has opened a plethora of opportunities for people across the borders. They freely travel to and engage with each other's nation for better opportunities including expanding business.

India-Nepal open borders are responsible for kin and relatives across the borders. Especially from the bordering states of India like Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Sikkim and other states. These ties are also popularly known as 'Roti-Beti ka Rishta'⁴ due to the trade and familial ties across the borders. Not only the familial relations but

¹ India-Nepal Bilateral Relations - Ministry of External Affairs. (n.d.). https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Nepal_Bilateral_Brief_Feb_2020.pdf

² India-Nepal Bilateral Relations - Ministry of External Affairs. (n.d.). https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Nepal_Bilateral_Brief_Feb_2020.pdf (pg 5)


³ India-Nepal relations - ministry of external affairs. (n.d.-b). https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Nepal_July_2014_.pdf

⁴ Manchanda, R. (2001), "Whose Nepal—Whose India: Of diasporas and transnational identities", India International Centre Quarterly, Vol. 28(3), Pp47–56. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23005559>

people from India and Nepal share their religious beliefs majorly Hinduism and Buddhism. Similarly, there have been a lot of similarities between the cultures, like the languages spoken can't have perfect boundaries. Hence, Maithili, Hindi or even Bhojpuri is spoken in the bordering regions of both the nations, which shows the cultural assimilation across the borders.

Collaborations between the governments to promote cultures across nations

MoUs/Agreements that have been signed between India and Nepal to promote cultural relations are as follows:⁵

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- (i) Sahitya Kala Akademi (India) and Nepal Academy
 - (ii) Doordarshan (India) and Nepal TV
 - (iii) Press Council of India and Press Council of Nepal
 - (iv) Lalit Kala Akademi (India) and Nepal Academy of Fine Arts
 - (v) GoI and Government of Nepal for cooperation on youth affairs
 - (vi) Sangeet Natak Akademi (India) and Nepal Academy of Music & Drama, and
 - (vii) GoI and Government of Nepal for twinning of sister cities Kathmandu-Varanasi, Lumbini-Bodhgaya and Janakpur-Ayodhya.

Religious Affinity

Hinduism and Buddhism are one of the most significant connections between India and Nepal. After the independence of India, it has also become a part of cultural diplomacy for both the nations. Cultural influence has always been cost effective and its impacts are non-tangible.

⁵ India-Nepal Bilateral Relations - Ministry of External Affairs. (n.d.).
https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Nepal_2022.pdf

Indians and Nepalis are so closely and strongly interlinked by social life and cultural tradition that nobody can imagine separating them from one another. Both the nations have made great contributions in order to have enriching religious and cultural heritage in the region, and beyond. Lord Buddha, born in Nepal, has left his footprints not only in South Asia but all over the world. Sita has been seen as the daughter of Nepal, who was married to Ram, the crown prince of Ayodhya in India, has made a special place in the hearts of Hindus living in India as well as Nepal.

Pilgrimage

The tourist attractions in both the countries have been evident, a significant pilgrimage could be Char Dham of India which has been an aspiration of Hindus to visit in their lifetimes. The official report given by the website of the Nepalese Embassy has shown that there is religious affinity between India and Nepal.

The char dham yatra or the visit of four dhams in India, i.e. Badrinath/Kedarnath in Uttarakhand, Jagannath (Puri) in Orissa, Rameshwaram in Tamilnadu, and Dwarka in Gujarat has been the life-time aspiration of almost all Hindus due to their religious beliefs, has showcased a testimony of a long-lasting cultural ties. Some places in India have been considered as sacred sites by Nepalese people include Haridwar, Rishikesh, Varanasi, Gaya, Vaishnodevi, and many more. In the same way a lot of sites are popular amongst the Indians to visit in Nepal. There are some well accepted must visits religious destinations for Indians like Pashupatinath in Kathmandu, Lumbini (the birth place of Buddha) in Rupandehi district, Ram-Janaki temple in Janakpur (the birth place of Janak and Sita), and many more. Aforementioned sites have remained popular irrespective of any political situation that occurred in the region.

Buddhism

Buddhism has played a major role in the cultural connectedness between both the nations especially after the spread of Vajrayana school of thought of Buddhism. The origin of Buddhism is believed to have started with Siddhartha Gautam also known as Buddha who was born in Lumbini which is in present day Nepal. The enlightenment however occurred to him in Bodh Gaya is a fact well accepted which is also the reason why India and Nepal cultural ties have remained strong. The Newar society of Nepal adapted this religion and preserved a mass of Buddhist Sanskrit manuscripts which could have been lost due to Turkish invasion. So, from north India the manuscripts that arrived were preserved as there were many Indian monk scholars who came to Nepal on their way to Tibet. The destruction

of Buddhist centers became a major reason for many to flee to Nepal who were later given shelter by Newari people of Nepal. Later, this became the one of the main reasons for the mutual respect shared between India and Nepal as the religious sentiments were involved.

Nepali-Bengali Cultural Similarities

A lot of Bengalis went to Nepal as doctors, engineers and teachers where they trained the Nepali people so that they could fill the space of professionals. There has been a natural affinity between Bengalis and Nepalis in terms of linguistic similarities as well as the worshiping of Goddess in both the communities. Dakshin Kali, Bhadra Kali, Taleju Bhavani have been worshiped in both the regions. There are a lot of shrines of Goddess Kali and Durga present in the Kathmandu Valley. The festival of Dashain and Durga Puja has dominated the ritual calendar of Nepali and Bengali people. Both these festivals are a celebration of the worship of Goddess. Bengali people decorate pandals in this season which has been a long community festive season whereas Nepali people have seen this as a family affair.

Origin of Sikh Heritage in Nepal

Guru Nanak Dev Ji is believed to have meditated in six places in Kathmandu and small shrines. He meditated at a location where Singha Durbar presently stands. Also, there is a lore that goes back to 1515,⁶ when King Jay Jagat Malla came to Gyaneshwor Mahadev to seek blessings from Nanak ji to get rid of the diseases and drought from which citizens were suffering. Guru Nanak Dev is said to have healed the people from the diseases and ended the drought miraculously by bringing out a holy spring from a small stone down the temple. The aforementioned holy spring known as Gyan Dhara is also one of the reasons why Sikh community resides there with pride and with the historical connection to their religion.

The second contact of Sikhism with Nepali people was at a very unexpected place which was a battlefield. Maharaja Ranjit Singh met Amar Singh Thapa in Kangra. In 1861, Rani Jind Kaur who was the last Queen of Punjab left

⁶ □□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□, □□□□□ Embassy of India Kathmandu, Nepal. Embassy of India, Kathmandu, Nepal. (n.d.). <https://www.indembkathmandu.gov.in/>

Nepal after staying there for 11 years, laid the foundation for Sikh community in Nepalgunj. In recent times, the Sikh families that stayed with her became a sizable community.

The 1947 partition which proved to be a painful incident in the lives of many, especially Punjabis, a lot of families moved from Punjab to Nepal. Hence, there were several Sikh families that came during the period of 1947-1957 in Nepalgunj.⁷ Today most of these families have successful businesses and are considered as a respectable sect of Nepali society.

FOSWAL

FOSWAL (Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature) is a Non-Governmental Organization that works on collaborating with artists, writers and intellectuals from across the borders to talk about the issues persisting in their specific society.⁸ The aforementioned organization is a prime example of people-to-people interaction with common sensitivities and common concerns for any kind of socio-political issue.

Movies

Movies have played a major role in connecting people across the borders. A lot of artists have transcended borders with their artistry like Nepali actress Manisha Koirala, who has done a lot of Hindi films. Music composers like Shanti Thatal, an Indian, who have been credited for a lot of Nepali songs. She has also been accepted as the first female music composer of Nepali Film Industry. Films that release in India, especially Bollywood films, also get released in Nepali theaters. A good case study of the people-to-people relations could be seen in the Film 'Sam Bahadur' that shows how 'Bahadur' was the favorite title of General Manekshaw who was a very significant figure at the time he served in the military. The incident mentioned above in the life of General Manekshaw showcased the attachment he had for the Gorkha regiment of the Indian Army. Another film, 'Saino' released in 1987 could be seen as a film that had a collaboration of Indian and Nepali artists. Hence, the love for cinema has been shared between the two nations.

⁷ □□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□, □□□□□ Embassy of India Kathmandu, Nepal. Embassy of India, Kathmandu, Nepal. (n.d.). <https://www.indembkathmandu.gov.in/>

⁸ Cosmic. (n.d.). Home. Saarc. <http://www.foundationsaarcwriters.com/>

The Identity Crisis Amongst the People

Multiple communities like the Marwari and Sikh community migrated from India to live a stable life in Nepal. They faced a lot of issues while integrating into the true 'Nepali' identity. People who lived in Terai regions of Nepal have often been thought of as people who came from India. Which means they are thought to be people of origin of India but in reality, these people have an ancestry of over 3000 years ago in Nepal. They have had the notion that only a 'Parbatiya' can be a true Nepali.⁹

The people from transnational communities share kin, economic and religious activities across the borders. The elites of both the countries made citizenship a touchstone of belonging or not of the communities. The Indians from the Marwadi community made a strategy of family dispersal as their business model. They migrated to Nepal for more business opportunities. The Sikhs from Jammu and Kashmir in the 50s moved to Nepal to establish their business there. Some of them now hold their Nepali nationality with pride. They came and built Gurudwaras for setting their roots in the new land.

Politics of multi-party democracy in Nepal and building of the nation-state, citizenship has become a site for the discriminatory politics of inclusion and exclusion. This politics has been centered around discriminatory policies over the identity of the discriminated dark, dhoti-wearing and Hindi-speaking Madhesia from the plain.¹⁰

The politics of Nepal have had some elites whose beliefs are somewhat anti-Indian in nature. So, after democracy came into Nepal, they had some discriminatory policies which were advertised to play the politics of inclusion and exclusion. People who have looked like Indians have had to face discrimination not only by their governments in their policies but rather the society also did not look at them as equals. The upper caste elites who were in power, sat in Kathmandu making policies but they didn't try to understand the reality of Madhesi people or for that matter

⁹ Manchanda, R. (2001). Whose Nepal—Whose India: Of diasporas and transnational identities. *India International Centre Quarterly*, 28(3), 47–56. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23005559>

¹⁰ Manchanda, R. (2001). Whose Nepal—Whose India: Of diasporas and transnational identities. *India International Centre Quarterly*, 28(3), 47–56. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23005559>

people living in the borders. In Nepali imagination, the elites or people living in mountains did not consider Madhesi as their fellow citizens which created a problem for them making them isolated due to discrimination.

In case of other controversies, rumors have also led to fuel anti-Indian sentiments in Nepal. In 2000, there was a controversy in which Hritik Roshan, an Indian Bollywood actor, was accused of derogatory remarks about Nepal which didn't go well with the citizens. That led to massive protests as well as vandalization of "Indian properties".

¹¹This yet again proved that Madhesi were not completely accepted in the Nepali community even after being there for generations as their homes were also vandalized as they were thought to be "Indians".

The huge chunk of Sikh community has resided in Nepal who also happen to build 7-8 Gurudwaras. Their openness led them to trade there which has not been easy at all as the multiparty system discriminated against them. Hence, some of them came back to Jammu and Kashmir, others stayed there. The ones who stayed became a part of Nepali community but even after many years of setting up their trade they got discriminated against. ¹²The case of Rupy International School is believed to be an unfortunate one as one day the school got attacked by nationalist radical left students of the All Nepal Revolutionary Students association, affiliated to the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). This incident shocked not only the people of Sikh community but also the other Nepali friends of the family as they thought of the Rupy's family equivalent to a Nepali family i.e. their own.

The aforementioned incidents have been a testimony that sometimes the differences have taken over the similarities. Also, this has showcased time and again that India-Nepal ties are complex in nature and should be considered very important due to the people-to-people connection involved in the ties.

¹¹ TNN / Dec 28, 2000. (n.d.). *Nepal seeks apology from Hrithik - Times of India*. The Times of India.

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/nepal-seeks-apology-from-hrithik/articleshow/13943716.cms?from=mdr>

¹² Thapliyal, S. (2012). India and Nepal Treaty of 1950: The Continuing Discourse. *India Quarterly*, 68(2), 119–133.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/45072541>

Conclusion

The research article is an attempt to highlight the people-to-people connection between the two nations i.e. India and Nepal. In a highly globalized world, it is extremely crucial to look for the opportunities globally but at the same time our neighbors should not be ignored. India-Nepal relations have always been important from the perspective of national security as well as regional stability. So, cultural cooperations amongst people and governments creates trust between nations. These amicable relations help in building foreign policies that are mutually beneficial.

This article critically examines the layers of cultural relations between India and Nepal. Which goes from people-to-people directly to the governments themselves. Also, the speciality is the involvement of the non-State actors like NGOs and the cinematic impacts which have influenced relations positively. Along with the positive impacts, this article explores the criticisms related to identity crisis amongst people and how they deal with it. The article explores the identity crisis and discrimination faced by people of certain communities. Which shows that a lot of work needs to be done by the Nepali Government and make inclusive policies rather than playing politics based on communities.

In the modern era the more we focus on soft power the better it is for the nations. India-Nepal diplomatic relations can be explored and experimented more due to the geographical and cultural proximities. A lot of Marwadis have their business in Kathmandu and a lot of Nepali citizens and students come to India for better employment opportunities as well as educational possibilities. This also helps the governments not take drastic steps as the people across both the nations might get significantly impacted. The stability is necessary and in order to maintain stability more schemes can be introduced in future. The NGOs can be acknowledged and encouraged for their works in the field of maintaining cultural affinity among people across the nations. Cultural structures can be used to strengthen the present times we live in. Hence, both the governments and people of both the nations should be open for more cultural ideas and exchanges.

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