



Research Article

The Power of Youth: Redefining India-Nepal Relations Through the Lens of a New Generation

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Abstract

Youth play a pivotal role in shaping India-Nepal relations, serving as catalysts for cultural diplomacy, policy advocacy, and addressing shared socio-economic and environmental challenges. Their contributions span digital engagement, grassroots activism, and innovation-driven initiatives, reflecting their potential to redefine bilateral ties. Despite facing structural barriers such as limited representation, digital inequities, and the impact of rising nationalistic sentiments, young people continue to bridge divides and foster collaboration. This study underscores the importance of youth-led initiatives in technology, climate action, and cultural exchanges while advocating for the strategic involvement of governments, NGOs, and educational institutions. Engaging youth effectively can pave the way for sustained peace, economic growth, and enriched cultural ties between India and Nepal.

Keywords: Youth engagement; India-Nepal relations; Cultural diplomacy; Policy advocacy; Bilateral collaboration.

Introduction

India and Nepal share a unique relationship characterized by deep-rooted historical and cultural connections. The bonds between these two nations date back to ancient times, which is evident in the shared religious and cultural heritage. In the Ramayana, an Indian epic, Lord Rama of Ayodhya marries Goddess Sita, who hails from Janakpur, a region in present-day Nepal. The Kirat warriors were

significant participants in the Mahabharata, another ancient Indian epic, highlighting early cultural exchanges (Mathur, 2023). By the 6th century BC, the Magadh and Shakya republics straddled the areas now forming the India-Nepal border. Prince Siddhartha, later known as the Buddha, was born in Lumbini, Nepal, and achieved enlightenment in Sarnath, near Varanasi, indicating the deep historical ties between the regions (Devi, 2011).

Varanasi has historically been a hub for Nepali intellectuals and political exiles. In the 19th century, King Rajendra of Nepal chose Varanasi as his place of exile, cementing the city's importance as a cultural and spiritual center for Nepali pilgrims. The city's influence extended into the political realm; for instance, K.P. Bhattarai, a prominent Nepali political figure, was born in Varanasi and played an active role in both the Indian independence movement and the anti-Rana regime struggle in Nepal (Jain, 1998).

Research Problem

The bilateral relationship between India and Nepal, deeply rooted in shared cultural and historical heritage, faces contemporary challenges due to underexplored youth engagement. Despite the growing youth demographic and their active role in digital advocacy, cultural diplomacy, and policy activism, the potential of this demographic in shaping the future of bilateral ties remains underutilized. There is a pressing need to examine how youth can transform this historically framed relationship into one that reflects modern realities and addresses shared socio-economic and environmental challenges.

Research Objective

To analyze and highlight the transformative role of youth in redefining India-Nepal relations, focusing on their influence in cultural diplomacy, digital activism, and socio-political engagement. The study seeks to propose actionable strategies for leveraging youth-led initiatives to address contemporary bilateral challenges and foster long-term cooperation and mutual growth.

Research Paper Statement

Empowered by digital tools, entrepreneurial ventures, and active policy engagement, the youth of India and Nepal are emerging as a pivotal force in reshaping bilateral relations, fostering innovative collaborations, and addressing shared challenges, thereby redefining the traditional dynamics of their partnership (Devi, 2011).

Historical Context: Traditional Dynamics of India-Nepal Relations

In this section, we explore the historical evolution of India-Nepal relations, focusing on early diplomatic ties, political agreements, and the limited role of youth engagement in shaping bilateral dynamics.

Early Diplomatic Ties: The modern relationship between India and Nepal began taking shape in the late 18th century, influenced by the formation of a militaristic society led by the Gurkhas. The Gurkhas, descendants of Indian Rajput princes fleeing Muslim rule, settled in Nepal's central and western hills, intermarrying with indigenous communities and creating a strong, martial culture. Under the leadership of Prithvi Narayan Shah, the Gurkhas expanded their territory significantly, capturing the Kathmandu Valley by 1769. This conquest marked a pivotal moment, as it secured

control over key trade routes linking Tibet and India, enhancing Nepal's strategic importance in the region (Majumdar, 1971).

The relationship between Nepal and the British East India Company began with conflict. In 1767, the East India Company dispatched an expedition to support King Jayprakash Malla against the Gurkhas, but the expedition was repelled, marking the start of a complex diplomatic engagement. The strategic position of Nepal, situated between British India and Tibet, made it a region of significant interest, resulting in rising tensions and eventual conflict (Majumdar, 1971).

Political Relations and Treaties: The early 19th century saw increasing political instability in Nepal, culminating in the Anglo-Nepalese War of 1814-1816. This conflict was driven by British concerns over Nepal's territorial expansion and control of vital trade routes. The war ended with Nepal's defeat and the signing of the Treaty of Sugauli in 1815, which drastically altered Nepal's territorial boundaries. The treaty forced Nepal to cede significant lands, including parts of the Terai region, and restricted its sovereignty, making it heavily reliant on British mediation for foreign policy matters (Thapliyal, 1998).

The Treaty of Sugauli effectively positioned Nepal as a buffer state between British India and Tibet, limiting its capacity for independent diplomacy. This dynamic set the stage for the emergence of the Rana dynasty, which dominated Nepal's politics through autocratic rule, aligning closely with British interests. The Ranas maintained power by fostering a cautious alliance with the British, evident in the military support offered by Jang Bahadur Rana during the Indian Rebellion of 1857 (Tyagi, 1971).

The signing of the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship between India and Nepal marked a significant milestone in shaping post-colonial relations. The treaty, influenced by the geopolitical context of India's independence and the rise of Communist China, facilitated free movement and cooperation in defense and foreign policy matters. However, its provisions have been contentious, particularly regarding economic integration and security obligations, as Nepal voiced concerns over perceived unequal advantages (Karki & Paudel, 2015).

Youth Engagement Historically: Historically, youth participation in shaping India-Nepal relations was minimal and largely influenced by state-led initiatives. During the Rana regime (1846-1951), civic engagement was tightly controlled, limiting opportunities for youth-led political activism. The political structure under the Ranas focused on maintaining stability through autocratic rule and alliances with the British, leaving little room for grassroots youth involvement (Majumdar, 1971).

The democratic transition in Nepal during the 1990s marked a shift, opening political space for greater youth engagement. The 1990 People's Movement, supported by pro-democracy factions, was a key moment where youth activism played a significant role in the push towards a constitutional monarchy and a multiparty system. India supported this transition, aligning with its broader strategy of promoting regional stability. However, youth-led violence and radicalization during the subsequent Maoist insurgency reflected the complex role of young people in political movements, often driven by socio-economic grievances and disillusionment with the political status quo (Jaiswal, 2015; Bhattarai, 2015).

The Maoist insurgency (1996-2006) highlighted a new phase of youth involvement, as disaffected young people became a driving force in the armed struggle. The insurgents framed violence as a necessary tool for societal transformation, mobilizing a significant portion of the youth population, particularly those marginalized by caste and class dynamics. This period underscored the potential of youth as both a source of political change and a challenge to traditional power structures (Shrestha & Subedi, 2022).

The Rise of a New Generation: Demographics and Influence

Demographic Analysis: The youth demographic forms a significant part of the population in both India and Nepal, highlighting its potential as a transformative socio-political force. In India, approximately 65% of the population is under the age of 35, making it one of the youngest countries globally. The median age in India is around 28.4 years, while in Nepal, it is approximately 24 years (Shrestha & Subedi, 2021). In Nepal, youth aged 15-29 years make up about 27% of the total population, demonstrating the demographic strength of young people (Dutta, 2023).

These statistics emphasize the substantial potential of youth to influence both domestic and foreign policy. The large youth population in both countries, combined with increasing access to education and digital tools, positions the younger generation as a key stakeholder in shaping the future trajectory of India-Nepal relations (Jaiswal, 2015). The rise of educated and digitally connected youth has opened new avenues for cross-border dialogue and collaboration, shifting the focus from traditional diplomacy to a more grassroots, people-driven approach (Bhattarai, 2015).

Changing Attitudes and Aspirations: The attitudes and aspirations of the younger generation in India and Nepal are significantly different from those of previous generations. The youth today are more globally minded, influenced by the rise of social media, the digital economy, and increasing exposure to global culture (Shrestha & Subedi, 2022). Unlike their predecessors, who were primarily focused on

economic stability and job security, today's youth prioritize innovation, entrepreneurship, and social impact.

Globalization and access to technology have played a critical role in shaping these aspirations. Indian and Nepali youth are now connected to a global network, giving them exposure to diverse perspectives and opportunities. The growing trend of youth entrepreneurship is evident, with a surge in start-ups across both countries focusing on technology, social enterprises, and sustainable business models (Karki & Paudel, 2015). In Nepal, youth-led tech initiatives are addressing local challenges such as digital payment solutions and e-commerce, contributing to the broader digital economy (Dutta, 2023).

Moreover, the younger generation is increasingly vocal about issues such as climate change, gender equality, and social justice. This marks a departure from the more conservative, hierarchical views held by older generations, indicating a shift towards a more progressive and inclusive mindset. This transformation is crucial for India-Nepal relations, as youth-driven values promote greater regional cooperation, focusing on shared challenges rather than historical disputes (Jaiswal, 2015).

Youth as Agents of Change: The role of youth as agents of change is becoming more pronounced in both India and Nepal, particularly in driving social movements, entrepreneurship, and policy advocacy. In India, movements such as the Digital India campaign have seen strong youth participation, advocating for increased digital literacy and internet access across rural and urban areas (Bhattarai, 2015). In Nepal, youth-led initiatives have been pivotal in disaster response efforts, particularly following the 2015 earthquake, where young volunteers coordinated relief efforts and mobilized resources using social media platforms (Shrestha & Subedi, 2022).

Entrepreneurship is another area where youth are making significant contributions. In both countries, there has been a noticeable increase in start-ups focused on sustainability, technology, and social impact. Nepali youth are increasingly venturing into sectors such as renewable energy, agriculture technology, and digital solutions, addressing local needs while creating economic opportunities (Dutta, 2023). Indian youth are similarly driving innovation in fields like fintech, health tech, and e-commerce, contributing to the country's status as a global tech hub (Karki & Paudel, 2015).

Additionally, the younger generation has become more involved in policy advocacy, pushing for reforms in education, employment, and environmental policies. In Nepal, youth organizations have been at the forefront of campaigns advocating for political transparency and anti-corruption measures. In India, youth-driven environmental movements like the Fridays for Future campaign have

gained momentum, emphasizing the need for sustainable development policies (Jaiswal, 2015). These efforts showcase the proactive role of youth in shaping the socio-political landscape of both countries, transcending traditional barriers and fostering a collaborative spirit.

Digital Activism and Social Media: A New Platform for Youth-Led Diplomacy

The Power of Connectivity: Social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have become powerful tools for youth in India and Nepal to express opinions, mobilize support, and influence diplomatic narratives. In Nepal, the government officially embraced digital diplomacy in 2015 with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs launching a Twitter account to streamline communication. Despite these advancements, digital diplomacy in Nepal remains underutilized, primarily focusing on basic announcements rather than leveraging the full potential of social media for advocacy and public engagement (Shrestha, 2022).

India, on the other hand, has actively harnessed social media for diplomatic engagement. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and Indian diplomats have a significant online presence, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's social media outreach playing a key role in popularizing India's foreign policy. Former External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj's use of Twitter to address citizens' concerns set a precedent for responsiveness and accessibility, exemplified during crises such as Operation Rahat in Yemen (The Evolution of India's Twitter Diplomacy, 2021).

Platforms like 'X' (formerly Twitter) have become battlegrounds for debates on issues like the territorial disputes over Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura. Social media posts by Nepali youth accusing India of territorial encroachment reflect the increasing politicization of online discourse. Similarly, Indian youth use platforms like Instagram to counter-narratives and advocate nationalistic viewpoints. These interactions underscore the role of social media as both a diplomatic tool and a space for public contestation of geopolitical issues.

Case Studies

Social media-driven campaigns have demonstrated the potential of youth to influence public opinion and diplomatic discourse. Some notable examples include:

1. #SaveLumbini Campaign:

Nepali youth initiated the #SaveLumbini campaign on Twitter and Instagram in response to what they perceived as efforts by certain Indian organizations to appropriate Lumbini, the birthplace of Gautama Buddha, into India's historical narrative. The campaign gained traction internationally, drawing support from cultural and Buddhist communities worldwide. Young Nepali activists used

digital platforms to highlight Lumbini's significance and emphasized its recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage site. This movement reinforced Nepal's cultural identity while fostering awareness of shared heritage between India and Nepal (Shrestha, 2022).

2. Digital Activism Post-2015 Earthquake:

Following the devastating 2015 earthquake in Nepal, youth-led social media campaigns like #NepalEarthquakeRelief and #RebuildNepal mobilized global support. Nepali youth coordinated relief efforts by sharing real-time information, fundraising through platforms like GoFundMe, and disseminating updates on disaster-affected areas via Twitter and Facebook. Indian social media users also contributed, spreading awareness and organizing aid through hashtags like #StandWithNepal. This collaborative digital activism showcased the potential of youth-driven platforms to transcend national boundaries and foster people-to-people diplomacy during crises (Syed Akbaruddin, 2021).

3. Online Campaign Against Border Blockades (2015-2016):

During the unofficial Indian blockade of Nepal from 2015 to 2016, youth from both countries took to Twitter to express their views. Nepali youth used hashtags like #BackOffIndia to criticize the blockade, which disrupted the supply of essential goods. They also shared firsthand accounts of hardships caused by the blockade. Indian youth responded with hashtags like #NepalMisguided, attempting to counter allegations and highlight the complexity of the issue. Although these campaigns amplified tensions, they also underscored how digital platforms serve as forums for public opinion and international advocacy (Shrestha, 2022).

4. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) Debate:

The Indian Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) sparked debates among Nepali youth on platforms like Twitter and Instagram. Many Nepali students studying in India used hashtags such as #StopCAA to voice concerns about the legislation's implications for Nepalese migrants in India. This digital activism gained traction in India, leading to discussions about the broader impact of the CAA on India-Nepal relations. The youth-led discourse reflected the power of social media in bringing attention to transnational legislative issues (Syed Akbaruddin, 2021).

5. Youth Response to Kalapani Border Dispute:

The Kalapani border dispute in 2020 ignited intense social media activism. Nepali youth organized campaigns on platforms like Twitter using hashtags such as #KalapaniIsNepal to assert Nepal's territorial claims. They shared historical maps and documents to support their position, engaging in debates with Indian users who responded with #KalapaniIsIndia. While the campaigns highlighted entrenched nationalistic sentiments, they also brought public attention to the importance of historical

context and diplomatic resolution in border disputes (Palki Sharma, 2020).

6. Promoting Cultural Ties Through Digital Platforms:

Youth in both India and Nepal have utilized social media to promote cultural exchanges. For instance, Indian and Nepali students organized virtual events during the COVID-19 pandemic, sharing stories of common festivals like Dashain and Diwali using hashtags such as #DashainDiwaliTogether. Platforms like Instagram became spaces for showcasing traditional music, art, and food, reinforcing cultural ties and fostering mutual understanding between the two nations (Shrestha, 2022).

7. Environmental Advocacy:

Save the Himalayas: Youth activists from both India and Nepal have united on platforms like Twitter under hashtags such as #SaveHimalayas and #ProtectEverest to advocate for environmental conservation in the Himalayan region. These campaigns have focused on issues like melting glaciers, deforestation, and pollution in shared ecosystems. By tagging policymakers and environmental organizations, these youth-driven campaigns have drawn international attention to the urgency of preserving Himalayan biodiversity (India Today, 2019).

8. Advocacy for Equal Representation in Diaspora Engagement:

Nepali youth living in India used platforms like LinkedIn and Twitter to advocate for stronger diaspora engagement policies under hashtags like #NepaliDiasporaMatters. They pushed for greater representation in bilateral initiatives and consular services, emphasizing their contributions to India's economy and culture. These campaigns gained momentum, prompting Nepali diplomatic missions in India to consider youth perspectives in policy dialogues (Shrestha, 2022).

Challenges and Opportunities

While social media offers immense opportunities for fostering people-to-people diplomacy, it also presents significant challenges:

1. Misinformation and Polarization:

Social media's decentralized nature allows misinformation to spread rapidly, often intensifying disputes. For instance, during the Kalapani border dispute, exaggerated claims on both sides fueled nationalistic sentiments, deepening divisions rather than fostering dialogue (The Evolution of India's Twitter Diplomacy, 2021).

2. Empowering Youth Diplomacy:

Digital platforms provide opportunities for youth to engage in diplomacy directly, bypassing traditional barriers. Initiatives like Nepal's "Digital Nepal" strategy and India's increasing use of social media for public diplomacy highlight the potential to enhance bilateral engagement if effectively implemented (Shrestha, 2022).

Limited Reach and Digital Divide: In Nepal, digital diplomacy remains constrained by limited technological infrastructure and a digital divide between urban and rural areas. Without improved access and capacity-building, the full potential of social media for diplomacy will remain untapped (Madhavji Shrestha, 2022).

Public Diplomacy vs. Propaganda: While digital platforms democratize diplomatic discourse, they also blur the lines between public diplomacy and propaganda. Youth activism, while vibrant, often lacks the nuance of formal diplomatic engagement, highlighting the need for strategic education and training in digital diplomacy (Syed Akbaruddin, 2021).

Despite these challenges, social media continues to play a transformative role in redefining how youth in India and Nepal engage with bilateral issues. By fostering cultural exchange, addressing misconceptions, and amplifying grassroots voices, digital platforms hold the potential to bridge gaps and build mutual understanding between the two nations.

Youth in Cultural Diplomacy: Reviving Historical Ties

1. Cultural Exchange Programs: Cultural exchange programs have been instrumental in fostering mutual understanding between Indian and Nepali youth. Institutions like the B.P. Koirala India-Nepal Foundation, established in 1991, actively promote student exchange programs, academic collaborations, and cultural projects. For example, the foundation organizes events that bring together young scholars and cultural ambassadors from both countries, creating opportunities for dialogue and learning (Sharma & Raman, 2024).

Nepali students have historically sought education in Indian institutions, such as Banaras Hindu University (BHU), which has provided scholarships and facilitated cultural and academic exchanges. India annually offers around 3,000 scholarships to Nepali students for undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral programs. These initiatives not only enhance educational ties but also create a network of culturally aware professionals who continue to strengthen bilateral relations (Bagul, 2023).

Cultural festivals such as the recent India-Nepal Cultural Festival in Lumbini showcased joint performances by Indian and Nepali artists, including traditional dances, Bharatnatyam, and musical recitals. Such events highlight the shared cultural heritage and provide a platform for youth to collaborate and celebrate their traditions (<https://theprint.in/world/india-nepal-cultural-festival-celebrating-shared-culture-and-heritage-inaugurated-in-lumbini>).

2. Religious Tourism and Heritage Preservation: Religious tourism is a cornerstone of cultural diplomacy between India and Nepal. Sister-city agreements, such as

Kathmandu-Varanasi and Lumbini-Bodhgaya, and initiatives like the India-Nepal Ramayana Circuit, enable pilgrims to explore shared religious sites, fostering a deeper cultural connection. These circuits are particularly popular among youth, who increasingly engage in heritage tourism to understand their cultural roots (Mathur, 2023).

In Lumbini, the birthplace of Buddha, Indian and Nepali youth are actively involved in preserving religious heritage. Collaborative initiatives, such as the Lumbini Development Trust and the Buddhist Circuit Project, emphasize the restoration of historical sites, including the Maya Devi Temple and Ashoka Pillar. Events like the Sand Mandala Drawing Art Exhibition, organized in Lumbini, highlight the involvement of young artists in preserving and promoting Buddhist traditions (Nyaupane, 2009).

Indian youth also participate in the promotion of religious tourism through festivals like Yoga Day, which is celebrated in Nepal as part of India's soft power diplomacy. Similarly, Nepali youth contribute to preserving and promoting Hindu heritage sites such as the Pashupatinath Temple, attracting Indian pilgrims and fostering cultural tourism (Bagul, 2023).

Soft Power Dynamics: The younger generation plays a significant role in advancing soft power diplomacy through arts, music, and digital content. Collaborative efforts by organizations like the Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature (FOSWAL) facilitate cross-border artistic exchanges. Nepali artists like Manisha Koirala and musicians such as Sukarma Band bridge cultural gaps through their contributions to cinema and music, which resonate deeply with audiences in both countries (Sharma & Raman, 2024).

Social media platforms are increasingly being used by youth to promote shared cultural narratives. Platforms like Instagram and YouTube are filled with content celebrating joint festivals such as Dashain and Diwali, showcasing traditional music, food, and art. These digital efforts amplify cultural diplomacy and make heritage accessible to global audiences (Bagul, 2023).

Furthermore, film and media collaborations, such as the Bollywood-Nepali co-production *Saino*, demonstrate the potential of creative industries to strengthen ties. The popularity of Bollywood in Nepal and the increasing influence of Nepali cinema in India exemplify the role of youth in driving soft power initiatives. Cultural programs, like the Cham Dance by Thiksey Monastery artists, also highlight the fusion of Indian and Nepali traditions, fostering mutual respect and admiration (<https://www.indembkathmandu.gov.in/media-detail/26>).

Youth in Politics and Policy Advocacy: Shaping the Future of Bilateral Relations

Political Engagement: Youth engagement in politics has been a transformative force in both India and Nepal, significantly shaping the political landscape. In Nepal, youth movements such as the 1990 People's Movement (Jana Andolan I) and the 2006 People's Movement (Jana Andolan II) were instrumental in toppling authoritarian regimes and establishing democratic governance. These movements demonstrated the power of collective youth action in bringing systemic political change, such as the abolition of monarchy and the adoption of a federal democratic constitution in 2015 (Acharya, 2024).

In India, youth engagement has evolved through grassroots initiatives, such as campaigns addressing agrarian distress, unemployment, and climate change. The Indian Youth Climate Network (IYCN) exemplifies youth-driven political advocacy, addressing environmental issues and shaping policy discussions. Similarly, digital platforms have become significant for mobilizing young voters and influencing policy debates, as seen in the VoteForChange campaign during municipal elections in Bangalore (Dhar, 2021).

Despite these successes, youth representation in formal politics remains limited. In Nepal, only 5% of parliamentarians are under 40, despite youth making up 40% of the population (Shakya, 2022). Similarly, in India, the average age of parliamentarians is 53, highlighting the need for structural reforms to encourage youth participation (Verma, 2024).

Youth-Led Organizations and Movements: Youth-led organizations in both countries have been pivotal in addressing cross-border and domestic issues. In Nepal, the Sano Sansar Initiative has empowered young people to advocate for environmental conservation and educational access. Programs like the Little Doctors' Program and Kathmandu Debates have fostered leadership skills and raised awareness about critical issues, ensuring youth are actively engaged in societal development (Aryal, 2023).

In India, organizations such as the Indian Youth Climate Network (IYCN) and grassroots movements like Kisan Mitra have tackled climate change and agrarian crises. The IYCN has leveraged partnerships and public awareness campaigns to promote sustainable practices and policies, engaging thousands of young people across the country. Similarly, Save the Children Nepal has collaborated with youth to address climate challenges, including initiatives like the Panini Se Dur Janakpur campaign to reduce plastic waste and the Shift Captain campaign to raise awareness in schools (The Annapurna Express, 2024).

These organizations highlight the ability of youth-led initiatives to address global challenges like climate change,

social justice, and education reform, often with innovative and scalable solutions.

Influence on Policymaker: Youth activism has had a tangible impact on policymaking, often holding governments accountable and driving reforms. In Nepal, the “Enough is Enough” campaign during the COVID-19 pandemic mobilized digital activism to demand transparency and better governance. The movement demonstrated the ability of young people to influence public discourse and compel government action on urgent issues (Acharya, 2024).

In India, youth-driven campaigns addressing climate change and unemployment have pressured policymakers to prioritize these issues. Advocacy for youth representation, such as quotas in political bodies and the establishment of youth advisory boards, has gained traction. Additionally, grassroots initiatives like Kisan Mitra have informed agricultural policies by providing on-the-ground insights into rural challenges (Dhar, 2021).

The growing presence of independent young candidates in elections has also disrupted traditional political structures. In Nepal’s 2022 local elections, 31% of candidates were under 40, reflecting a shift toward younger leadership. The election of Balendra Shah as Kathmandu’s mayor highlighted the potential of independent youth candidates to influence governance and inspire similar movements (Shakya, 2022).

Challenges and Limitations of Youth Influence

Structural Barriers: Youth in both India and Nepal face significant structural barriers that limit their ability to influence politics and policymaking effectively. In Nepal, youth representation in parliament is only 5%, far below the global average of 13.5% (Shakya, 2022). This disparity arises from restrictive legal provisions requiring candidates to be at least 25 years old for provincial and federal elections, effectively sidelining younger voices (Rana, 2024). Additionally, the lack of mentorship programs and professional development opportunities discourages many young individuals from pursuing leadership roles in formal political structures (Sharma, 2022). In India, entrenched power structures dominated by older elites further restrict youth from accessing political networks and decision-making platforms. Age restrictions, coupled with high campaign costs and financial constraints, disproportionately exclude youth from less affluent backgrounds, limiting their participation in electoral politics (Ravindra, 2024).

Economic challenges exacerbate the marginalization of youth in both nations. Nepal’s youth unemployment rate stands at 19%, far higher than the 2.7% national average, leading to widespread migration and a “brain drain” that deprives the country of skilled professionals (Shakya,

2022). Similarly, in India, socioeconomic disparities hinder marginalized youth from engaging in political dialogues and accessing quality education, leaving many unable to influence policymaking meaningfully (Ravindra, 2024).

Digital Divide: The digital divide remains a critical obstacle to broader youth participation, particularly in rural areas of India and Nepal. In Nepal, only 54.88% of the population has internet access, with significant urban-rural disparities (Joshi, 2024). This divide limits educational and economic opportunities for rural youth, hindering their ability to engage in digital activism and civic participation effectively. For instance, rural communities often lack consistent electricity and infrastructure, further restricting access to digital tools (Gajurel, 2023).

In India, the digital divide is similarly pronounced, with only 24% of rural households having internet connectivity compared to 66% in urban areas (Ravindranath & Sundarakumar, 2021). Women in rural areas face even greater barriers due to social norms and limited access to technology, deepening gender inequities in digital engagement (NIIT Foundation Blog, 2024). While programs like Digital India aim to bridge this gap, challenges such as affordability, linguistic diversity, and a lack of digital literacy remain significant hurdles (Sindakis & Showkat, 2024).

Bridging the digital divide requires targeted investments in infrastructure, digital literacy programs, and affordable internet access. Collaborative efforts between governments, NGOs, and private sectors can empower rural youth to harness digital tools for education, employment, and activism (Gajurel, 2023).

Nationalistic Sentiments: Rising nationalism in both India and Nepal poses a unique challenge to fostering constructive dialogue among youth. In Nepal, Hindu nationalism, influenced by India’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has polarized communities and heightened tensions between pro-Hindu and secular groups (Bowes, 2023). Social media platforms have amplified nationalist rhetoric, spread disinformation, and fueled real-world violence. For example, Islamophobic narratives circulated online in Janakpur led to significant communal unrest (Bowes, 2023).

Nationalistic sentiments also discourage cross-border collaboration between Indian and Nepali youth by fostering divisive ideologies. In India, digital advocacy and youth movements are often constrained by governmental crackdowns on dissent, as seen in the arrest of climate activist Disha Ravi, which created a chilling effect on youth activism (Dhar, 2021). Such environments hinder the ability of youth from both countries to engage in open, constructive discourse on shared challenges such as climate change and regional stability.

To counter these effects, fostering inclusive policies and promoting intergenerational and cross-border dialogue are crucial. Social media platforms must also take greater responsibility for moderating harmful content to prevent the escalation of nationalist rhetoric and its impact on youth interactions (Bowes, 2023).

Future Directions: Harnessing the Power of Youth for Stronger Bilateral Relations

Policy Recommendations: To effectively harness the power of youth for strengthening India-Nepal relations, a multifaceted approach involving governments, NGOs, and educational institutions is essential. Governments in both nations should implement youth-centric policies, such as establishing bilateral youth councils to encourage dialogue and shared projects. Initiatives like the Emerging Leaders Academy (ELA) in Nepal, which focuses on leadership training, can serve as models for joint programs (Niazi, 2023). Regular bilateral youth summits can also facilitate knowledge exchange, promote cultural understanding, and address shared challenges.

NGOs can play a pivotal role by creating platforms for youth collaboration on critical issues like climate action and sustainable development. Programs like the Indian Youth Climate Network (IYCN) and Nepal's Sano Sansar Initiative, which focus on environmental conservation and youth empowerment, provide blueprints for similar cross-border efforts (MYREPUBLICA.com). Educational institutions can foster collaboration through exchange programs, joint research projects, and curriculum reforms emphasizing global citizenship. These institutions should focus on interdisciplinary education, equipping youth with skills in technology, leadership, and diplomacy to address transnational challenges effectively (Rana, 2024).

Opportunities for Joint Initiatives: Several domains offer promising opportunities for collaborative youth-led initiatives:

1. **Climate Action:** Youth from India and Nepal can jointly address environmental challenges such as deforestation, glacial melting, and pollution in shared ecosystems like the Himalayas and Ganga-Brahmaputra basin. Programs like Nepal's Kayapalat Initiative and India's Digital India campaign can align efforts to leverage technology for environmental monitoring and advocacy (Joshi, 2024; Gajurel, 2023).
2. **Start-Up Ecosystems:** Both countries can collaborate to nurture entrepreneurship by creating cross-border start-up incubators, providing seed funding, and facilitating mentorship programs. Nepal's rising tech-driven youth sector and India's robust start-up ecosystem offer complementary

strengths that can foster innovation in agriculture, fintech, and clean energy (Ravindra, 2024).

3. **Technology-Driven Projects:** Joint digital literacy campaigns can bridge the digital divide, particularly in rural areas, fostering broader youth participation in governance and development. By aligning efforts, both nations can address the digital and gender divides in underserved communities. Programs like NIIT Foundation's Digital Bus Program can be expanded into Nepal, offering mobile digital literacy training (Gajurel, 2023).
4. **Cultural and Heritage Preservation:** India and Nepal share rich cultural and religious heritage, including Buddhism and Hinduism. Collaborative projects to promote tourism circuits like the Ramayana Circuit and Buddhist Circuit can serve as avenues for cultural diplomacy and youth involvement, fostering economic growth and mutual understanding (Sharma, 2022).

The Road Ahead: The vision for a youth-driven future in India-Nepal relations is one of sustained peace, cultural enrichment, and economic growth. Youth engagement can bridge historical divides and foster mutual respect, creating resilient bilateral ties. A coordinated effort to empower youth with education, technology, and leadership opportunities will ensure that their voices shape policies that transcend traditional diplomatic boundaries.

Both nations should prioritize the creation of institutional frameworks that enable youth to contribute meaningfully to decision-making processes. Through joint initiatives in climate action, entrepreneurship, and technology, young leaders can address shared challenges and unlock untapped potential. By fostering collaboration, India and Nepal can exemplify the transformative power of youth-driven diplomacy in achieving regional stability and prosperity (Shakya, 2022; Chomal, 2024).

Results

The research underscores the vital importance of young people in reshaping India-Nepal relations through cultural diplomacy, online advocacy, and engagement in policymaking. The findings suggest that initiatives driven by youth in areas such as technology, climate action, and entrepreneurship considerably strengthen bilateral connections. The analysis reveals a distinct demographic advantage, with youth constituting the majority in both nations, presenting a unique chance for grassroots diplomacy and cooperative development. Digital activism has emerged as a significant force in shaping public perceptions and swaying policy discussions across borders. Furthermore, youth-led programs for cultural exchange and

efforts in heritage preservation have shown concrete effects on mutual understanding and the continuity of culture.

Discussion

The results highlight that engaging youth is not just an afterthought, but rather a crucial element in the relationship between India and Nepal today. The incorporation of digital platforms, social movements, and entrepreneurial activities indicates a significant shift from conventional state-centered diplomacy to approaches that prioritize individuals. Nevertheless, the research also highlights existing structural obstacles, such as insufficient youth representation in official political arenas, economic disparities, and the ongoing digital divide that restrict their full capabilities. Tackling these challenges demands institutional reforms, collaborative efforts across borders, and policy strategies that enable young individuals to act as key players in joint decision-making processes. The findings further indicate that initiatives led by youth can alleviate the adverse impacts of escalating nationalist sentiments by promoting dialogue and shared cultural values. The relationship between historical connections and current youth-centric diplomacy suggests that a cohesive strategy that blends tradition and innovation can enhance enduring bilateral relations.

Conclusion

Youth have emerged as a transformative force in redefining the dynamics of India-Nepal relations, demonstrating their potential across various spheres such as digital advocacy, cultural diplomacy, and collaborative policy efforts. This paper highlighted how young people in both countries have leveraged technology, entrepreneurship, and cross-border initiatives to build bridges and address mutual challenges. Their active involvement in areas like climate action, social movements, and innovation showcases their ability to transcend traditional barriers and foster deeper understanding and collaboration.

Reiterating the central argument, the active engagement of youth is not just a supplement but a cornerstone for shaping the future of bilateral relations. Their energy, creativity, and global outlook make them uniquely positioned to address contemporary challenges, ranging from economic disparities to environmental sustainability. By empowering the younger generation,

India and Nepal can not only strengthen their ties but also contribute to regional stability and progress.

The onus now lies with policymakers, educational institutions, and civil society to actively engage this demographic in decision-making and collaborative projects. Governments should institutionalize youth-focused policies, NGOs must amplify youth-led grassroots initiatives, and academic institutions should expand exchange programs to foster mutual learning. The

involvement of youth is a path toward sustained peace, cultural enrichment, and economic growth. It is a call to action for all stakeholders to prioritize and harness the potential of youth, ensuring that the future of India-Nepal relations is built on the foundation of shared aspirations and innovative solutions.

Conflict of Interest

Author declares no conflict of the present research publication.

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