

Revisiting the 'Homeland' Through a Transnational Lens¹

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Abstract

In this paper, we bring our individual and collective memories of Nepal to reflect upon how we imagine, remember, and perform the diasporic nationalism while living abroad. We argue that diasporic nationalism is often framed by the homeland's historical dimensions and through an imagined and identificatory relation to the homeland. In doing so, we bring our learning experiences during high school in Nepal and critically zero in on how these curriculums taught us only a single narrative of Nepal-India relation by grossly neglecting the other side of the narrative. To deconstruct such a grand narrative, we critically analyze the other side of the narrative, which reveals the Nepal-India relation as a 'paradox' between closeness and detachment. We discuss cross-border controversies in which the Indian hegemony of perpetuating colonial ideas overpowers Nepal through political and geopolitical intervention. We conclude the paper with our remarks to mitigate animosities and rebuild the fractured relationship between the two nations.

Keywords: *Diasporic nationalism, homeland, Nepal-India relation, hegemony, grand narrative*

Background

Born, raised, and educated in Nepal and currently living and working in Canada, several images resurface our minds as we reflect on the homeland. Two of the most recurring refrains, deeply embedded in our memories and those that the textbooks during

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our formative high-school years in Nepal had implanted into the minds, pertain to Nepal's national historical past in relation to colonization and its friendly ties with neighbouring India. The first is the notion that in the past, even when the British Empire colonized India from 1858 until the Indian independence in 1947, Nepal remained an independent sovereign country and has never been a colony of the British Empire. Nepal was portrayed then, and even today, as the Shangri-La country, described by the phrase '*sundar, shanta, vishal,*' which literally means 'beautiful, peaceful, and great' and as the land of the 'brave Gurkhas.'

The second image that the school curricula constantly inculcated into the tender minds of the children was a portrayal of the Nepal-India relations as the cordial and coexisting ones that preceded even the origin of the modern nation-states. The history books are awash with the narratives that proudly present both Nepal and India as places where the ancient Hindu and Buddhist philosophies originated, and where the same Sanskrit language provided the roots of the Nepali and the Hindi language. As high school students, we learned, and many continue to be taught about, such grand narratives that portray the territory of present-day Nepal and India as once a vast swath of culturally integrated land known as the *Bharat Khanda*² as described in the ancient *Vedas*³ and the *Puranas*⁴.

As individuals pursuing teaching and research in western academia, as we reflect upon these grand narratives, we are confronted with a number of questions: Controversial though it may sound, was Nepal indeed never 'colonized' as portrayed in the dominant historical narratives? Do such narratives, on the contrary, conceal and erase the other forms

² Bharat Khanda is a term used in Hindu texts, including the Vedas, the Mahabharata, the Ramayana and the Puranic, for the geography that includes boundaries of present-day Nepal, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India.

³The Vedas, meaning "knowledge," are the oldest texts of Hinduism. They are derived from the ancient Indo-Aryan culture of the Indian Subcontinent and began as an oral tradition that was passed down through generations before finally being written in Vedic Sanskrit between 1500 and 500 BCE (Before Common Era).

⁴The Puranas are Hindu religious texts that narrate the history of the Universe from creation to destruction and the genealogies of kings, heroes, sages, and deities. Some of the Puranas are discourses on cosmology, geography and Hindu philosophy.

of coloniality, rather than just the political, that Nepal and the Nepali peoples went through in the past and have continued to do so as varied forms and manifestations? Was Nepal what Michael Herzfeld (2002) calls a ‘crypto-colonial’ country that clung to a nationalist discourse of independence and has continued to do so, despite its total political, economic, and cultural subordination on the then British empire and on India since its post-coloniality? What does the ‘never colonized’ narrative have to do with the ordinary, more importantly, the grassroots peoples, as well as with the ruling elites? Similarly, as portrayed in the dominant discourses, has Nepal’s relations with India always been coexisting? We believe that these are crucial questions that need some exploration to re-historicize the historical relations between Nepal and India and understand and locate Nepal’s present geo-political and geo-economic positioning to carve out a future path for Nepal to take in the days ahead.

Indo-Nepal Discourse and the Border Issues

Geographically, Nepal is situated between India and China and has served admirably as a buffer between these two emerging powers of Asia. Nepal is a landlocked country, but more importantly, it is an ‘India-locked’ country. There is about 1,753 kilometres long border between Nepal and India (Jha, 2010). In the context of the geopolitical location that Nepal is in, any visions and dreams that the country envisages need to be scrutinized in the light of Nepal-India relations; however, Sino-Nepal relations are of no lesser significance.



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To begin with, we acknowledge that deep and abiding ties exist between Nepal and India, and these ties go far beyond the state-to-state political relations. Since time immemorial, social, cultural, religious, and economic relationships have existed between the peoples of the two countries (Karki & KC, 2020). Similarly, the porous border between the two countries is an example of the Nepal-India relations that go far beyond the political relations of the nation-states. The 1,770 km long border includes the Himalayan territories as well as the Indo-Gangetic Plain. The Indo-Nepal international border is one in the Indian subcontinent, which facilitates a mutual friendship between the two societies.

The current border was delimited after the Sugauli treaty of 1816 between Nepal and the British rulers. Following Indian independence, the current border was recognized as the border between Nepal and India. However, Nepal has been having quite endless and unsolved ruffles with India in light of the border dispute. Since long, despite cordial and amicable nexus as well as having almost airproof proximity in terms of culture, social values, and other traits, often Nepal has to present a gesture of unceremonious unwelcome and decent denial over India's highhanded stance on border issues, more precisely an act of an unethical encroachment.

The Indo-Nepal discourse would be incomplete without reviewing the land encroachment agenda. Regrettably, however, many of these positive aspects are diminished by the other side of the narrative, i.e., India's unwarranted intrusions in Nepal's sovereignty. In that spirit, we intend to fathom the whys and wherefores of India's latest instances of land grab in Nepal by revisiting its post-independence history. Nepal-India relation was contoured during the British colonial era in India – and was constituted through an ideological plinth built by the British colonial power – although Nepal never became a formal colony. India's independence was expected to usher Nepal-India relations into a fresh start built on the principles of equality, independence, sovereignty, and mutual benefit (Adhikari, 2018). We argue that India has seldom embraced it; nevertheless, India has a keen desire to establish hegemony by overwhelmingly interfering with Nepal's internal affairs, including the political, diplomatic, and even military.

On a few occasions, we had visited some places in Nepal where there were several unresolved border disputes between Nepal and India. Among them, the Mechi border, Nawalparasi (Susta), and Darchula (Kalapani) are the areas that remind us of the most. In the Mechi border, we found that the Masonry Boundary Pillar, locally known as Junge

Pillar, was missing from the original borderline. New border pillars were seen even within the premise of the Bhadrapur high School. As a result, about 27 hectares of Nepali land of Bhadrapur district were encroached by India. In Illam District, a large plot of land has been infringed upon and fenced by Indian technicians in the Nepali side of the No-man's land at Phatak, Pashupatinagar. In Taplejung District, India has encroached a large Nepali land in Timbapokhari - about 15 kilometres strip to the south from Mt. Kanchanjungha. We recall an incident of 2005 in which thousands of Indian villagers backed by the Indian border police force entered Nepali territory in Susta, destroyed sugarcane crops in more than ten hectares of land and maltreated men and women alike. Such encroachment has stirred violence and conflict in those areas. The pillars are the official boundary markers between the two countries. Unfortunately, many of these pillars have been uprooted and disappeared. This gives us the impression that the hardest slap on Nepal's sovereignty comes from the protracted border encroachments by the Indian force. Politically meaningful is India's silence on these issues while it keeps encroaching upon the disputed lands. Yet, India has many interests in Nepal and has gradually strengthened its political, diplomatic, economic, and cultural influence. We can argue that the main strategy is to keep Nepal dependent on India.

Scholars of international relations (Adhikari, 2018; Paudyal, 2014; Subedi, 1994) argue that most treaties and agreements⁵ signed between Nepal and India were unequal treaties and only serving Indian interests and aspirations. Because of such controversial and one-sided treaties, India influences Nepal's politics, economy, culture, security, media, and technology. India imposed more than a two-month-long blockade on Nepal in 2015. It was a tragic episode in Nepal-India relations – akin to the one in 1990 when India punished Nepal for buying weapons from China without India's consent. In September 2015, Nepal's popularly elected Constituent Assembly passed a new constitution by an overwhelming majority. Still, some socio-political groups protested against some aspects of the new constitution in the country's southern region. India supported these disgruntled groups of the south because India was not in favour of Nepal's new constitution. Ironically, India that boasts of being the largest democracy refused to accept the Nepali people's

⁵ Some of the main controversial bilateral treaties and agreements on water resources include the Peace and Friendship Treaty (1950), the Koshi Agreement (1954), the Gandak Treaty (1959), and the Mahakali Treaty (1996).

mandate and imposed the blockade in retaliation. At the time, Nepal was barely emerging from two devastating earthquakes that killed over 9,000 people and damaged nearly 600,000 houses. In this context, India's relation to Nepal is not paternalistic but hegemonic, exhibiting itself as the lawmaker of Nepal. By imposing the economic blockade, India wanted Nepal to amend the new constitution forcefully.

To look at the Nepal-India relations against this background, the Nepalis cannot be oblivious to the Indian hegemonic character. Doing so demands re-historicization of the relations between the two countries. There is also a need to differentiate the relations between the peoples of the two countries and those between the ruling elites. What is necessary is to dismantle the one dimensional taken-for-granted dominant discourses and pay attention to the ways in which the Nepal-India relations have been full of paradoxes. Nepal-India relation was contoured during the British colonial era in India – and was constituted through an ideological plinth built by the British colonial power – although Nepal never became a formal colony. India's independence was expected to usher Nepal-India relations into a fresh start built on the principles of equality, independence, sovereignty, and mutual benefit (Adhikari, 2018). We argue that India has seldom embraced it; nevertheless, India has a keen desire to establish hegemony by overwhelmingly interfering with Nepal's internal affairs, including the political, diplomatic, and even military.

As we reflect on the Nepali identity and nationhood and our relations with India from our current diasporic locations, we experience a similar paradox. To illustrate, at the 2019 International Metropolis Conference held in Ottawa, the capital city of Canada, we happened to engage in a conversation with some co-participants of the conference. In the course of introducing each other, we asked them if they knew where Buddha was born. When they said that he was born in India, we posed them a second question: Where does the Mt. Everest lie? One of our interlocutors said the Mt. Everest is located somewhere in the northern part of India, and one other person said that it lies in Tibet. On a different occasion, we had an opportunity to visit the Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Toronto. Inside the Mandir was a museum called the 'Heritage Museum,' where a picture of Mt. Everest hung against the wall in a frame. The caption of the photograph read: "The Mt. Everest is the Roof of India." Seeing this caption, we explained to a person at the front desk that the

statement written in the caption was wrong, and such a statement could give visitors false information. We haven't revisited the Mandir and don't know if this was corrected.

We quote these instances not to disparage their lack of general knowledge but to convey the ways in which the Nepali identity at the global level still remains grossly appropriated and misrepresented. As Edward Said (1994) argued, the question of representation is essentially a political issue, one that should be understood in a context that is 'primarily imperial.' Albeit different from the ways in which the Indian political hegemony manifests itself in the homeland, the Indian appropriation and misrepresentation of the Nepali identity and similar narratives can be observed to have travelled to the diasporas.

Representation of Transnational Meta-identity

The Indian hegemonic discourses have, however, remained unchallenged by the rapidly expanding Nepali diasporas across the world. The love for the nation harboured by diaspora and its manifestations is what Benedict Anderson calls "long-distance nationalism." As we reflect on the homeland, our diasporic memories, whether individual or collective, are the glues that cement the past and the present as well as the process of being and becoming. Nepal is our birthplace, our root, and our homeland, whereas Canada is our new home physically. Our history, heritage, and origin become integral parts of our identities fragmented by immigration, displacement, and diasporic living. These identities are always with us, explaining how we came to be ourselves; define our perspectives; help us negotiate our circumstances.

Diasporic subjects have only an "imaginary homeland" that exists in narratives and retained fragments of memory. On the other hand, immigrants will always be seen simultaneously as "insiders and outsiders" in their newfound homes. Their identities are reterritorialized or constructed across borders and boundaries based on their identities and positionalities, such as race, ethnicity, nationality, and citizenship. Simply put, they belong neither here nor there. While a certain elasticity of belonging and identification is undeniable, mobility itself, whether in the form of travelers to the homeland or a circular mode of living, does not guarantee a stable multiplicity of national and ethnic identities in the post-migration period. Individuals who try to straddle cultures and nations,

patriarchally defined, may find themselves evicted from both sides of the border instead of availing themselves easily, as transnationalists imply, of multiple belongings.

The Nepali immigrants in Canada look at the “South Asian” identifier with some sort of ambivalence. On the one hand, the Nepali immigrants resist this “homogenizing” identity that often underrepresents their own distinct meta-identity. On the other hand, they become complicit with the larger Indian diaspora to seek social, cultural, and political power. Nepal’s transnational meta-identity finds itself confronted with the challenge of simultaneously contesting and being complicit with the larger Indian diaspora by performing solidarity and difference, and resistance and complicity.

Strengthening Nepal-India Relation

As discussed above, there are several cracks in Nepal-India relations, becoming increasingly more noticeable than ever before. One of the major issues is the border dispute. This dispute has divided not only the people of the two countries but also the national policies. Both countries must have a dialogue at the diplomatic level to address this issue, come to a mutual consensus, mitigate animosities, and rebuild the fractured relation. Both nations should promptly address the conflicting issues of the 1950 treaty and subsequent treaties/agreements signed after that if they contradict with national interests of either state. Any controversial treaties and agreements need to be revised and must be fair for both nations.

Similarly, we must acknowledge that the open and unregulated border system has increased border encroachment and unprecedented violence and crime at the border in Nepali land. This demands a permanent solution through dialogue, discussion, and mutual understanding between the two nations. Nepal is in such a complex geopolitical location that other powers, including China and the West, are having their foothold firmly grounded in Nepal. So, there is no conducive environment to take Nepal-India relations to the new height. A solution can only be made through mutual understanding, discussion, and consensus of the two nations.

Nepali political leaders must revisit the nation’s foreign policy to maintain a balanced relationship with neighbouring countries and across the globe. Thus, we conclude with this remark, Nepali citizens are the citizens of a sovereign nation, and India should

not be at the cost of their sovereignty and dignity. India must stop its hegemonic interests in Nepal's internal affairs and internalize that Nepal is an independent and sovereign country, letting Nepal decide its internal affairs.

Conclusion

To conclude, we have reflected on our personal and collective memories of the dominant historical narrative implanted in Nepal during our high school years. We reflect on diasporic nationalism, which we believe is often framed by the homeland's historical dimensions and recollected through an imagined and identificatory relation to the homeland while living abroad. We reflected on our learning experiences during high school education and critically zeroed in on how those curriculums taught us only a single narrative of Nepal-India relation (i.e., as a seamlessly permeable transcending the real politik) while grossly neglecting the other side of the narrative. Our narratives revealed that the Nepal-India relation is a 'paradox' between closeness and detachment. Although portrayed otherwise in the historical texts, the Indo-Nepal relations are indeed mired into the quicksand of the Indian hegemony and not merely on its bilateral fraternity. Positioning the Nepal-India relations at the heart of this reflexive paper, we reflect upon how a single uncritical narrative not only risks the danger of creating stereotypes but also leaves it incomplete and misleading. We reflected on some historical evidence to explain India's hegemony in the broad spectrum of Nepal's sovereignty and independence. The paper focuses on the issue of cross-border controversies to demonstrate how India overpowers colonial hegemony through political and geo-political intervention in Nepal. We conclude the paper with our remarks to mitigate animosities and rebuild the fractured relationship between the two nations.

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