

CAPITALISING ON NEPAL'S SOFT POWER HERITAGE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

As Nepal forges ahead in the 21st century, linked to two Asian powers by thousands of years of shared cultures and histories, it is time for Nepal to capitalise on its heritage and look to the future. Nepal must claim and revitalise our shared histories of Hinduism and Buddhism, and create a soft power potential that emphasises traditional religious practices, natural and cultural heritage, and sustainability in a time of climate change. The paper argues that Nepal should anchor itself in the past - invoking the idea of a shared civilisation - and look to the future. The potential of religious and cultural tourism must be fully realised while being sustainable. Private sector entrepreneurship in culture must be encouraged, especially as culture itself - or the many cultures within Nepal - must be thought of as a tool to emphasise Nepal's soft power. Nepal stands to lose US\$ 460 million in the tourism sector alone due to the Covid-19 pandemic and it must diversify its tourism offerings if a recovery is desired. Building on a study of historical literature and contemporary trends in filmmaking, brand marketing and perception building, this paper argues that Nepal must invest in its culture and heritage to build an export policy around geographical indications (GIs), establish a new film production template, making it easier for foreign filmmaking companies to come to Nepal, and finally, reinvent its tourism policy in a world ravaged by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords : *Soft Power, Tourism, Religion, Buddhism, Cultural Heritage, Filmmaking, GI Tags*

Introduction

In November 1956, the Nepali Buddhist organisation, Dharmodaya Sabha, organised the fourth Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Kathmandu. Bhikkhu Amritananda (1961), the then president of Dharmodaya Sabha, wrote, "Not only was there a delegation from China, but also one from the Soviet Union. Thus the Buddhist friends of socialist countries, for the first time in the modern history of Buddhism, met and exchanged ideas among the Buddhists of different countries in the world."

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In turn, the Buddhist Association of China, the CCP-sanctioned official religious body, invited Nepali Buddhists to China. In July 1959, the Nepali Buddhist delegation visited the country. Bhikkhu Amritananda was suitably impressed by China's achievements. "People's China (sic) has produced everything that she needs for everyday life" (p. 8). The Nepali delegation was taken to several Buddhist shrines in Beijing, among which was a stupa that housed several relics of the Buddha. A Chinese Buddhist official told the Bhikkhu, the Nepali king, Mahendra, had gifted then Prime Minister Zhou Enlai with nearly fifty relics. Despite it being the early days of the bilateral relationship between the People's Republic of China and Nepal, the President of the Chinese Buddhist Association invoked the shared past of the two nations by telling the Bhikkhu, "Buddha was born in Nepal 2,500 years ago [and] China has received monks and artists from Nepal in the past" (p. 20).

The root of India-Nepal-Tibet-China cultural contact inevitably returns to Buddhist proliferation along existing trade routes along the Himalayas. If we regard the modern political boundaries as Nepal proper, the 5th century visit of Kapilvastu monk Buddhahadra to China is, perhaps, the first recorded instance of a Nepali visiting China (Manandhar, 2004). Tradition holds that Buddhahadra belonged to the same Sakya clan as Gautama Buddha, and he completed his Buddhist studies at the age of 17 and went to Kashmir, a Buddhist centre of learning at the time. There, a group of Chinese travellers requested a scholar travel back with them, and Buddhahadra was chosen, setting out in 406 CE and reaching three years later.

Nepali historian V.K. Manandhar suggests Buddhahadra was expelled from Chang'an, the ancient Chinese capital today known as Xi'an, in 410 CE after a religious dispute with another scholar named Kumarajiva. Buddhahadra settled in the mountainous district of Lu Shan with 40 disciples, and in 418 CE, he became a translator at Tao Chang Ssu Monastery in Chien-yeh, modern-day Nanjing, overseeing the more-than-hundred monks who translated Buddhist scriptures into Chinese (Manandhar, 2004).

Buddhahadra eventually died in China in 429 CE, at the age of 71, after spending 21 years in the country. However, by then, he had translated several Buddhist works into Chinese, including a few with Faxian, his contemporary. Manandhar emphasises Buddhahadra's importance to ancient trans-Himalayan contact by suggesting it was he who taught Chinese monks how to wear monastic robes in the style of the Indian plains, i.e., by baring one shoulder.

While Buddhahadra and Faxian, the 5th century Chinese Buddhist traveller, have often been regarded as the first cultural exchanges between the Nepali and Chinese civilisations, most recently by none other than Chinese President Xi Jinping himself in his op-ed published widely in Nepali newspapers before his state visit in October 2019, the resonance of these historical stories in the modern day is more relevant than ever. Nepal lies at the crucial juncture of Hinduism and Buddhism, and as our two neighbours - India and China - rise to become global powers in the 21st century, Nepal must reorient itself to look at how it can make the most of our shared cultural histories, while ensuring its cultural diplomacy remains an influential factor in its bilateral and multilateral relations and correspondingly raise the profile of its economic diplomacy and foreign trade policy.

The following paper will build on the aforementioned themes of religious heritage and the corresponding soft power, along with a study of historical literature and contemporary analyses, on how Nepal can capitalise on its culture, history and natural splendour to project itself as a nation full of opportunities in the 21st century. Drawing on various sources that break down how we can do so, it argues Nepal must capitalise on these opportunities to reinvent itself in the coming years, when economies around the world will seek to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic's debilitating effects.

Soft Power in the 21st century

One of the most important aspects of diplomacy in the 21st century is of 'soft power', an amorphous idea that collates all aspects of culture, history and public outreach (Nye, 1990). First put forth by American political scientist Joseph Nye, the concept came into vogue in the last decades of the 20th century with the realisation that while 'hard power' - military superiority - remains "the ultimate form of power", its use had become more costly. Although traditionalists still continue wishing for hard power as an ultimate expression of a state's power projection capabilities, the 'peaceful rise' of China - using trade and economic interdependence as primary force capabilities - has forced other powers to rethink this concept and veer towards the influence of soft power. As Nye wrote in 1990, "Although force may sometimes play a role, traditional instruments of power are rarely sufficient to deal with the new dilemmas of world politics. New power resources, such as the capacity for effective communication and for developing and using multilateral institutions, may prove more relevant" (p. 164). Further, "if a state can make its power seem legitimate in the eyes of others, it will encounter less resistance to its wishes. If its culture and ideology are attractive, others will more willingly follow" (p. 167).

Increasingly, nations battle each other not with the threat of military superiority, but over the control of ideas, ideologies and narratives. Consider the Covid-19 pandemic, and the war for its narrative. While the US and China each fling barbs at each other over the origins of the virus, China has expanded its soft power diplomacy - through the use of medical aid and a hitherto lesser-known visibility on global social media channels - at a time when the US is reeling under the pandemic. New strains are being seen on traditional relationships. According to Gordon (2020), “Trump’s failure to lead a coordinated global response, together with his practice of berating, belittling, and bullying the United States’ closest and wealthiest allies, has, remarkably, allowed many to view China as a more responsible global leader than the United States”. At the same time, Beijing is moving quickly to fill in the void left by the US’ inward approach. Campbell and Doshi (2020) write, “Beijing understands that if it is seen as leading, and Washington is seen as unable or unwilling to do so, this perception could fundamentally alter the United States’ position in global politics and the contest for leadership in the twenty-first century”.

There is little doubt that the world will emerge from the pandemic with new lessons. More importantly, new contours will reshape alignments and positions - all without the use of coercion or force. Although hard power - the ability of a state to coerce another to its will through its military strength or the perception of its use - remains important, it is increasingly clear soft power will be as influential, if not more, in a world that remains globalised even as its people begin to believe in isolationism.

Further, states like ours cannot compete with other powers in military terms - even if territorial acquisition is, in the short term, an extremely costly measure for any power (for example, Russia and its international isolation post the Crimean acquisition). Thus, in the absence of hard military power, Nepal must rely on soft power to convince other nations of its goodwill and to raise its profile among several nations competing for the attention (and markets) of the world. To do so, it needs to build a ‘brand’ for itself that goes beyond traditional outlooks and perceptions of the country, which incorporates its heritage as part of its economic policy through the use of various measures. And finally, it needs to communicate this message to global audiences, in a language they will understand and through means they can access.

This means thinking beyond the traditionalist mindset of current policymaking; it would mean thinking about soft power from the perspective of a brand and its image, even if a ‘brand’ is traditionally associated with a consumer ‘product’. However, there are several examples of a country or its products

being associated with a particular idea of exclusivity, such as Swiss chocolates (or banking), South Korean TV dramas and popular culture, and French wine. The governments of these respective states incorporate their global image as part of their cultural and trade diplomacy, as we will see - in other words, using private sector brand-building and communication strategies to achieve a state's objectives. While tourism has been predicated on such a brand - think Kerala as 'God's own country' or Dubai's positioning as a shopping destination that saw more than 16 million visitors in 2019 - it is now evident diplomacy must go hand in hand with a state's economic and foreign trade objectives as well as a desire to see its own idea of culture being propagated as widely as possible. Increasingly, it is clear our neighbouring states are in a soft power tussle of their own. This is particularly relevant in the case of Buddhism. While India wishes to claim Buddhism's values as its own, China would also like to be identified with the religion, considering it has the world's largest number of practitioners. In between, while our political establishment has consistently maintained 'Buddha was born in Nepal', there has been little work towards claiming the Buddhist story as a Nepali one, despite several comparative advantages that allow it to do so. While the greater Buddhist circuit - the three major sites of Sarnath, Bodh Gaya and Kushinagara, and the smaller sites of Sravasti and Pipraha - has been utilised by India to push it as a tourism vehicle (Bhonsale, 2019), Nepal has put little development into Lumbini, perhaps one of the most important religious sites globally, despite the town attracting around 170,000 foreign visitors in 2018. In comparison, Bodh Gaya, in neighbouring Bihar, was visited by around 270,000 foreign visitors, while Sarnath, near Varanasi, was visited by 435,000 visitors the same year (Bhonsale, 2019). This indicates that Lumbini remains severely underutilised as a tourist destination even for foreign visitors who go to Buddhist sites in India.

Further, even as Nepal remains an important site for Hindu and Buddhist pilgrimage, the tourism industry is susceptible to global supply shocks - apart from the pandemic, which is a 'Black Swan' event. By itself, tourism cannot elaborate on, or build upon, a nation's soft power. The thinking that tourists will automatically come if one builds a hotel needs to be expelled; instead, what is required is for Nepal to shape the narrative about itself. It needs to tell the world its story. It needs to build upon its cultural and natural heritage, and not rely on them only. Above all, it needs to think 'out of the box'.

This paper builds upon Nepal's heritage and current position in global affairs to push forth the idea that its position as the meeting point of two grand Asian civilisations must be harnessed to realise its soft power potential. It provides

a few suggestions as to how to think about culture, religion, geography and history in the 21st century, even as it seeks to identify a convergence between policymaking and private sector initiatives. Nepal's greatest weapon in the realm of public diplomacy is its culture. It must look to its past and build upon it for the future. And finally, cultural diplomacy will remain key, but only policymaking at home will help us realise it.

'Shikar' diplomacy

Nepali diplomacy was, in fact, skilled at projecting soft power, especially in the absence of hard military power that could seriously affect colonial territorial expansions of the British imperial era (Mulmi, 2018). Between the end of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century, despite the Rana autocracy and xenophobia, Nepal had excellent relations with European colonial powers. One example of this lies in the number of high-profile visits to Nepal by European dignitaries. For sure, these visits did not advance Nepali interests but Rana interests, motivated as the autocracy was for its own survival. But the visits raised Nepal's profile several notches and also played a part in the Rana insistence that Nepal was a separate sovereign kingdom unlike the princely states of British India.

It was against this background that some of the most massive shikar campaigns the subcontinent has ever seen were held in the Nepali Terai, with no one but the Ranas who put up a "bigger 'big shoot' or offered a more spectacular hunting 'bag'" (Mulmi, 2017). These shikars were not just a display of 'manhood' or 'heroic' skills with the gun, but also diplomatically useful. As anthropologist Mark Liechty (2019) writes, "With game stocks dwindling elsewhere, Nepal's Terai lowlands acquired almost mythical status among British hunting elites" (p. 102).

In 1876, a year before Jung Bahadur, the first Rana prime minister of Nepal, would pass away, Prince Albert Edward, the heir to the British throne, was on a state visit to India. He visited what was then known as Naya Muluk on a shikar trip. Stone (1877) writes, "seven hundred elephants were employed in beating the jungle, and the Prince shot no fewer than six tigers [in one day]" (p. 619). The hunt had been organised in what was then called 'Naya Muluk', a strip of Terai flatlands the British had returned to Nepal in gratitude in 1860 and today encompassing the districts of Kailali, Banke, Bardiya and Kanchanpur. The 700 elephants crossed the Sharda (or Mahakali) River in single file in the grasslands of what is today the Shuklaphanta National Park, and the prince went out with a pack of tame elephants to try to capture a wild one.

Soon after, other members of the royal family such the Duke of Portland (in

1884) and Prince Albert Victor, the Prince of Wales' oldest son (in 1889-90), came to Nepal for organised shikars. In March 1893 came another royal visitor, Prince Franz Ferdinand of Austria, perhaps the first non-British royalty to participate in a Nepali hunting expedition. Then in 1901, the Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, came for a shikar expedition, and Chandra Shumsher hosted him. Political scientist Leo Rose (1971) writes of the visit:

“What these two brilliant and ambitious men discussed in their meetings in the Terai in April can only be conjectured... On June 26, 1901, about two months after his return to Kathmandu from the Terai, Chandra staged a successful coup d'etat. Dev Shumsher was obliged to resign and eventually was allowed to proceed to India. Recognition of Chandra's seizure of power came almost immediately from Calcutta, arousing even deeper Nepali suspicions concerning the nature of the Terai talks between Curzon and the new prime minister” (pp. 152-153).

More high-profile visitors would follow: in 1911, King George the Fifth hunted in Chitwan; in 1938, Lord Linlithgow, Viceroy of India, would arrive. Such ‘shikar diplomacy’ continued till the Ranas were ousted, but even after their ouster, King Mahendra saw the potential in hunting as a potential revenue for the state until the dawn of environmental consciousness led to the ban on it. Although hunting cannot be a means for the future today, one must realise why Nepal became ‘the most sought-after hunting destination in the world’ (Liechty, p. 103). The shikars in the Nepali Terai matched with the Westerner's view of the Orient, and as the global elite began to view the Nepali Terai as an untouched virgin land that provided some of the best big game, a shikar invite from the Ranas became one of the most coveted prizes in this part of the world.

What Nepal's ‘shikar diplomacy’ tells us is that for nations like ours, hard power may achieve a sense of security in terms of sovereignty, but soft power goes much beyond military hardware in creating an image, a ‘brand’, that becomes a legacy. For, it is in ‘shikar diplomacy’ that one can trace the roots of adventure tourism in Nepal. From hosting dignitaries to rich Westerners willing to spend money on shoots in the Terai, Nepal moved to eco-tourism in the 1970s as part of a global consciousness towards environmental protection. With the creation of national parks like Chitwan, Nepal sought to shift its image away from a shikar paradise to one where conservation and environmentalism would now lead the way. It is this legacy that we still reap benefits from to this day. It is also why Nepal must take the lead in conservation, especially at a time of climate change.

Reactivating Buddhism's soft power

A 2017 study on the United Nations' Office in Geneva arrived at some most intriguing conclusions (Nisbett & Doeser, 2017). First, that while soft power is to 'stand out', cultural diplomacy means to 'reach out'. "Reaching out' is about displaying unity with others, building political solidarity, bringing countries closer together and sometimes acting as a bridge between other parties" (p.14). Similarly, soft power is often unidentifiable, or immeasurable. One cannot know the 'returns' on a particular sum invested in a soft power campaign immediately; instead, the gains accrue over a period of time. At the same time, its influence is undeniable, and culture is often a weapon to achieve diplomatic objectives.

Countries and cities around the world have invested in showcasing themselves as global cultural centres. For example, China was supposed to have 3,500 museums by 2015; instead, it had 3,866 by the end of 2012 itself. "The Mao Zedong generation was taught that China's traditional art was backward and not worth bothering about. Now young Chinese are interested in both traditional and contemporary art" (Economist, 2018). Further, China has increasingly been more vocal about its art treasures that are housed in museums across the world. In fact, "One of the country's most powerful corporate conglomerates, the state-run China Poly Group, launched a shadowy program aimed at locating and recovering lost art" (GQ, 2018). Nonetheless, China's efforts showcase the necessity of investing in culture as a tool for diplomacy - practice countries in the West have long followed. For example, the British Museum had 6.82 million visitors in 2015, while the Louvre in Paris had 9.6 million visitors in 2019.

This brings us to Nepal, where cultural spaces have not been seen as a weapon for soft power and diplomacy. However, just because they weren't seen as such in the past does not mean such a state of affairs needs to continue in the future. Culture, in fact, remains Nepal's most prized asset. But like most assets, it must be invested in if it is to grow and accrue benefits. Consider the following case study about Buddhist art and paraphernalia, a space Nepal has historically been known for, and can potentially be a global leader:

The first Buddhist art was aniconic, in that it portrayed the wheel of Dharma, Buddha's footprints, an empty throne or a Bodhi tree as representations of Siddhartha Gautama. With the Kushans, this changed. Although this early stage of Buddhist art has not been traced in Nepal, Banerjee (1972) holds that with Mathura as the centre of both political power as well as Kushan artistic tradition and the development of Mahayana Buddhism, the artistic sensibilities

spread to other parts of the subcontinent, such as in Nepal. Buddhism had long been prevalent in Nepal; several kings had bestowed grants upon monasteries to gain merit. Nepali artistic traditions were at first influenced by the Kushans and the Guptas, and subsequently by the art of the Palas of Bengal, a 'logical successor of Gupta art', under whose influence 'Buddhist art reached a new high of development' (p. 69). As Mary Slusser (1982) wrote, 'The Nepali style appears to continue the Buddhist tradition, especially as manifested in the murals in the distant caves of Ajanta... Despite the anarchic political milieu, the bronze casters and goldsmiths seem to have gone about their work in the foundries and shops. Many of them were Buddhist monks working in the viharas... The arrival of so many new deities of endless and complicated forms, together with the demand for them as cult objects, must have stimulated the metallurgist's skills and accelerated his production. In addition to the local market, from the tenth century on there was also an insatiable demand for cult objects in Tibet' (p. 50).

The Nepali religious art form is today one of Nepal's most underrated and invisible brands. While historically Nepal had been a source for artists and sculptors, today our art has mostly been restricted to the tourist districts - although we continue to cite Arniko as one of our greatest artists, and the pillar of historical Sino-Nepal relations. And despite increasing exports of sculptures and metal works from NPR 366 million in 2009-10 to NPR 1.22 billion in 2015-16, the industry is not adequately highlighted, nor its issues resolved via policymaking. Artists who can work with sculptures are increasingly rare to find, despite a willing global market.

One must understand why Nepal was considered, despite its overwhelming Hindu population, to be a Buddhist country in the era after the Second World War. After Communist China's takeover of Tibet, it was closed off to international visitors who saw it as a mythical Shangri-La, a utopian paradise that took Westerners away from the travails of modern capitalism. Since Tibet was closed off, the next best alternative was Nepal, which not only had a sizable population that practised the religion and its accoutrements, but it also was where Tibetan refugees established new monasteries replicating the ones in Tibet.

The use of GI tags to identify and market products as being unique to Nepal is essential in taking them to the global market. According to the World Intellectual Property Organisation, "a geographical indication right enables those who have the right to use the indication to prevent its use by a third party whose product does not conform to the applicable standards". With a GI and

sufficient oversight, Nepal will be able to implement the commercialisation and sale of Bodhichitta seeds and Limi Valley bowls with the same uniqueness as, say, tea from Darjeeling or champagne from the Champagne region of France. In fact, the GI tag can reap benefits beyond commercial revenue. In recent years, India has taken the lead in applying for GI tags for its many handicrafts and products. It currently possesses 618 GI tags for products as diverse as Madhubani paintings to Mysore silk. However, Nepal does not have a single GI-associated product it can sell, despite possessing hosts of them. The khukuri, for instance, can be registered for one, so can Bhaktapur's 'curd of kings', the juju dhau. Madhu K. Marasini (2019) wrote, "A trade and development project, supported by the European Union, identified the value chain development of four Nepali products, namely, tea, coffee, Chyangra pashmina, and Lokta paper as GI. A report produced by the project recommends that five basic pillars have to be met for a functioning GI, namely, legal framework, proven geographic connection, producer organisations to lodge the GI application, a code of practice, and a guarantee system".

GI tags assure both buyers and sellers not just of premium value, but also of the product's originality and exclusiveness. For example, Bangladesh has recently acquired GI tags for the Hilsa fish, Jamdani sarees and the Khirsapat mango. The European Union estimated that agri-food and drink products registered under GI tags could bring in sales revenue worth 74.76 billion euros in 2017, and almost 15 per cent of all agri-food exports from the EU in that period were represented by geographical indications (European Commission, 2020).

This brings us back to our historical art processes, specifically the art of sculptures and the paubha, or what is known internationally as the thangka. While Nepali art forms populate museums, private homes and corporate offices globally, Nepal itself has never been able to fully realise its potential, not just in building a Nepali brand, but also in encouraging local industry, artisanship and employment. The bronze sculptures and paubhas that proudly tell the Nepali story of handicrafts and artisanship are simply showpieces in tourist shop windows. Instead, developing a proper market around them - through classification and standardisation of prices depending on the expertise of the work, ensuring local employment and tapping into their export potential - will allow Nepal to create a brand separate from other Buddhist markets. At the same time, there are several niche private sector developers who already make jewellery oriented around Nepali culture - Aamo and Kaligarh are two recent examples. Developing a unified policy that allows for interactions between the private sector and the public, and promotes Nepali artisanship as unique in

the world through exports, sales and special promotions, will create more than just a new brand; it will reinvigorate what Nepal has historically been known for: its craftwork. After all, even Kublai Khan had to import a Nepali artist to his court.

Becoming South Asia's New Zealand

One of the most fascinating examples of what Nepal stands for in the 21st century can be seen in the 2013 Chinese film *Up in the Wind*. In the film, Cheng Yumeng (played by Ni Ni) is a Shanghai food critic whose editor sends her to Nepal - 'practically the Switzerland in the East,' she says - for an issue on happiness. 'And what's more, Nepal's happiness index is really high,' her editor says.

Cheng is disappointed, to say the least. Because she has had to leave a trip to Italy behind for Nepal. Nonetheless, she puts up a brave face because she needs the job. And off she goes to Nepal with a Chinese tour group - a physical journey that transcends into a spiritual revelation, for Cheng has been living a lie all this while, a facade that erases her provincial past in the chrome and steel and glitz and glamour of Shanghai. Her parents named her Tianshuang - 'happy-go-lucky everyday' - but she changed it to Yumeng - after a mythical creature that cannot fly - because she cannot live up to the name's expectations, of being happy everyday. "Every time I pretend to be someone I am not, I pretend so that people can look up to me a little bit," she confesses. Ultimately, it is the tests she has to overcome in Nepal - mostly personal, but a few temporal, such as a protest, a power-cut - that allow her to embrace who she really is.

'Up in the Wind' becomes an advertisement for Nepali tourism in parts, and I came to it after Basu Tripathi, a former member of the Nepal Tourism Board who runs Adam Tours and Travels in Pokhara, told me the 2013 film was one of the reasons why the Chinese started to travel to Nepal in large numbers - specifically to paraglide like Cheng does at the end of the film - much like the 1999 Nepali-French production 'Caravan', which brought global focus on the Dolpo region. 'Because of [Caravan], there was great interest in travelling to Nepal in the European market. Unfortunately, we could not capitalise on it because of the Maoist war. Ultimately, the film is just an instrument. There are several factors to keep in mind for a tourist to come to Nepal. But what can definitely be said is that from the tourism point of view, Nepal's image in the Chinese market is positive'.

From *Up in the Wind*, we can learn that Nepal's image in the international travel market revolves around a few ideas. The first is the modern-day appeal

of its religious heritage. Beyond the temples and the monasteries, travellers to Nepal increasingly look towards practising yoga and meditation in the country. This leads us to enquire; can Nepal develop and market itself as a hub for the two, beyond the already existing centres in India? Nepal can do so, provided that there is a larger focus on developing the domestic spirituality and wellness industry. Yoga schools, meditation centres and alternative lifestyles that have emerged as counters to modern corporate lifestyles can be encouraged through an oriented government programme that pushes the Nepali brand.

The second lesson from the film is that the Nepali Himalayas will never lose their appeal, and increasingly, Nepal is seen as a hub for adventure tourism. This leads us to argue that while the industry must be promoted, and new spots discovered for such tourism, the government must ensure the implementation of a universal safety standard that foments the trust of travellers in these tourism activities. Further, Nepal must tap into the growing environmental consciousness once more, as it has done in the past. While adventure tourism must be developed as a brand, sustainability should always remain the focal point. Several tourist destinations across the world today suffer from overpopulation, Thailand's popular Maya beach and Ladakh being two examples. A surge in tourists have led to environmental degradation in these spots, and serious questions are being asked about whether tourism should focus on high value, low numbers, as Bhutan has done. This is something Nepal needs to think about urgently.

The third lesson, and perhaps equally important, is that Nepal's physical beauty must be invested in and marketed to beyond a crowd that comes to the country. To achieve this, we have to invest in a longer-term marketing programme that takes the Nepali brand abroad. There are several ways of achieving this: encouraging international media coverage through articles and documentaries is one. However, if we are to ensure a sustained interest in Nepal, one possibility is to encourage international feature films to shoot in Nepal. Apart from *Up in the Wind*, another example is the massive Hollywood production *Dr. Strange*, which was shot in Kathmandu, and brought in nearly US\$ 700 million in box office sales. Similarly, the Hollywood mountaineering blockbuster *Everest* was shot in bits in Nepal. Further, Nepal's historic association with iconic Bollywood films such as *Hare Ram Hare Krishna* continues to be evoked by those who know of the country.

The most prominent example of countries using mainstream films as part of their soft power potential is New Zealand, which turned the blockbuster *Lord of the Rings* sets into tourist locations; 18 per cent of all visitors in 2015 cited

the Hobbit trilogy as the reason for visiting the country. When the news broke that the Lord of the Ring web series, worth nearly US\$ 1 billion, would be shot in New Zealand, its Economic Development Minister Phil Twyford said, "This will be an ambitious production and having it based here will create a range of benefits, including jobs and significant overseas investment, which will unlock more opportunities to grow our creative and technology sectors."

To achieve this, Nepal must encourage foreign filmmaking production houses to see the country as a possible filming location. Locations must be identified and developed; adequate fiscal and investment policies must be devised so that local employment can be generated and production companies are interested. Two of the world's largest film industries - one by volume, the other by box office revenue - belong to India and China, respectively. We must capitalise on these. Nepal can become a premium filming destination for the world. But we must learn to think in the language of global cinema before we can do this. Similarly, Nepal must also pick up on the correlations between popular culture and diplomacy. As Weldes and Rowley have noted, "'world politics' looks broader and more complex than it did, shifting from a narrow focus on supra-/trans-/international state relations and practices to trans-border practices by powerful non-state actors, to increasingly seeing the sub-national/regional and hyper-local - the everyday, in fact - as globally and politically implicated," highlight different ways in which states utilise popular culture to further their diplomatic goals: through wartime and peacetime deployment of popular culture in other nations; through inter-country collaborations on popular culture; through popular culture representations of global geopolitics; through the politics of consumption; and through the understanding that culture flows work both ways (Weldes and Rowley, 2015).

Nepali tourism needs to evolve

Academic Mark Liechty brilliantly traces the history of Western fascination with Nepal in his book *Far Out: Countercultural Seekers and the Tourist Encounter in Nepal* (2019), and how it evolved over the years. The first 'regular' Western visitors to the country after the fall of the Ranas were diplomats or expats associated with aid agencies, such as those in the Peace Corps. King Mahendra's 1956 coronation is regarded as Nepal's 'coming out' event, in which the king wanted to showcase the country to the world as a sovereign nation in the post-Second World War global environment. However, "the [international] press were less taken by Mahendra's carefully presented 'Development Exhibitions' than by the sheer spectacle of the [coronation]: a combination of Victorian pomp and ceremony with inscrutable Eastern rituals

and exotic local people, set before the backdrop of Kathmandu's magnificent medieval architecture, blue sky and white Himalayan peaks" (p. 43). The ascent of Everest in 1953 paved the way for Nepal to emerge as a mountaineering destination, which soon evolved into adventure tourism, i.e., trekking.

The 1960s and 70s saw the arrival of thousands of Westerners who came to seek 'eastern wisdom'. As mentioned above, the allure of Tibetan Buddhism turned Nepal into an alternative Shangri-la, with hippies, beatniks and students of eastern religions making their way into the country. In the 1970s, King Birendra, in keeping with the times, turned Nepal away from such exoticism and promoted the country as an eco-tourism destination, replete with virgin mountain trails, lush national parks preserving endangered species and medieval architecture that was a gift to the world.

The worrying bit is, despite such policies and imaginations being framed in the 20th century, Nepal's tourism policy continues to revolve around the same ideas even in the 21st, more than 40 years after they were framed. The recent Visit Nepal Year campaign displayed this adequately. The Yeti sculptures, for example, should have been advertised outside Nepal's foreign missions across the world; they served little purpose here in Nepal. Similarly, what made the Visit Nepal Year 2020 different from the 1998 campaign? Very little. The focus on increasing tourist numbers, without paying adequate attention to why people would want to come to Nepal in the first place, will result in such ill-designed campaigns. Further, policymaking in Nepal is guided by the presence of 'experts', who are usually private sector operators with personal interests riding on the policy.

Finally, the Covid-19 pandemic has laid bare the necessity of diversification even within sectors such as tourism. According to the World Bank, the impact on Nepal's GDP due to losses in the sector arising out of the pandemic will be US\$ 460 million. More than 230,000 jobs are at risk, while 20,000 tour and trekking guides find themselves out of a job, and 2,600 trekking agencies have closed down (World Bank, 2020). The multilateral agency concluded that the sector will not see demand for at least six to nine months, and recovery will take twice this time. And after domestic tourism, the first market to rebound will be intra-regional tourism, thus making it imperative for Nepal to identify and focus on niche sectors within the tourism market that are attractive to travellers from India and China. The World Bank recommends "[d]iversifying products and services in the tourism industry is equally important to avoid dependence on a single activity or market" (page 12). Other recommendations are to provide new skills and innovation within the sector, upgrading

destination services, strict health and hygiene protocol implementation, and regional collaboration.

What Nepal needs to do is to realise what the country stands for in outsiders' imaginations. While the Western imagination of Nepal continues to be fuelled by the Himalayas and exoticism, closer home, Nepal becomes more of a spiritual paradise, as reflected in *Up in the Wind*, and a centre of pilgrimage, as thousands of Indian religious tourists who arrive annually think. Nepal must channel its soft power focus towards a few essentials to begin with to allow tourism to recover. Policymakers must also assimilate the belief that no sector operates on its own in a silo; developing the tourism sector around Nepal's cultural heritage also implies policymaking decisions that allow exports that emanate from Nepali heritage to prosper.

And finally, acquiring GI tags for unique Nepali products will bring in innovation and entrepreneurship in these sectors, helping Nepali economic diplomacy to reach new heights. It must also activate its regional organisational affiliations with SAARC and BIMSTEC to capitalise on its religious and cultural tourism potential; it must regain its legacy as the centre of arts in South Asia. As an Asian century dawns upon us once again, we must grab this opportunity with both hands.

Conclusion

As we've seen, the past holds various keys for Nepal in the future, as does the present. Located between two of the world's biggest nations by population, the 21st century portends an era where Nepal must project its soft power by capitalising on its various heritages. With tourism a major contributor to Nepal's GDP, the country must focus on what more it can offer. There is vast potential to develop Nepal as a location for international film industries, as seen by the success of recent films shot in the country. Similarly, there is great potential to develop ancillary industries and encourage existing private sector players in the fields of religious and cultural heritage. With Nepal's historical success in art and crafts, there is little doubt that it can once again capture this space in the future. With the ever-growing popularity of Buddhism, religious circuits must be nurtured and developed accordingly to meet visitor expectations. As we've seen from the numbers, Nepal still needs to play catch up even with its neighbouring countries. And finally, Nepal must develop and register various GI tags so that its unique products can be marketed in the global consumer market.

All of this requires policymaking that is attuned towards projecting Nepal's soft power and heritage in the international market. While tourism infrastructure

needs to be developed, policies that invite foreign film production companies via tax-breaks, subsidies and effective and transparent implementation will also allow the domestic film industry to become more competitive globally. Nepal also must begin the process of registering GI tags for products unique to the country, such as pashmina, yarsagumba, juju dhau, paubha, Limi Valley phuru bowls and khukuris. Let the world know that the Nepali khukuri is the best in the world, not just because of its craftsmanship, but also because of Nepal's rich history of Gurkha soldiers and their bravery. At the same time, policies must also encourage new and existing entrepreneurs in these sectors to look towards exporting their products. This will require a more accessible export policy that makes it easier for even smaller private sector enterprises to access the global market, possibly backed by effective banking policies for lending purposes.

To do so, policymakers must reach out to private sector individuals who are already operating in these respective sectors and understand current issues that hinder their growth. Beyond an expert group, this will require a broad vision that seeks to develop the Nepali brand in the global market. For, it is not sufficient for Nepal to be known simply as the land of Everest or as the land of Buddha, especially in a post-Covid world. Nepal needs to convey its stories via the products it can offer to the world. Only then can its soft power potential be fully realised.

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