



## **Nepal-India Relations: Exploring the Dichotomy between 'Big Brother' and 'Brotherhood'**

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### **Abstract**

The historical relationship between Nepal and India is deeply rooted in their geographic proximity and shared elements such as religion, culture, language, and socio-economic interests. While Nepal borders both China and India, its closeness with India is accentuated by these shared attributes and mutual opportunities. The two countries share an open border of around 1,780 kilometers along Nepal's eastern, western, and southern regions. Despite India's larger size, population, and more advanced economic development, Nepal maintains its sovereignty and equal status as an independent nation. However, India's role is often perceived as that of a "big brother" to Nepal, reflecting the disparity in size and influence. Nonetheless, all sovereign nations, regardless of their geographic or economic differences, are regarded as equals in status. In an era defined by globalization, scientific advancements, and technological progress, Nepal aspires to build a strong relationship with India based on mutual friendship and economic cooperation, particularly through foreign investment and the exchange of technology. While occasional tensions arise, usually from the Indian side, they have not escalated into major conflicts and are unlikely to do so. It is widely understood that while friendships may fluctuate, the bond between neighbors remains constant. This article examines the various aspects and dynamics of Nepal-India relations within this context.

**Keywords:** Open Border, encroachment, sovereignty, big brother & brotherhood

### **1. Introduction**

Nepal and India are distinct nations with independent histories and positive relations. Historically, Nepal consisted of smaller regions known as the Baise and Chaubise Rajya until King Prithvi Narayan Shah unified the country into a larger, unified Nepal. In contrast, India gained its independence from British colonial rule in 1947. The two countries share a border



of approximately 1,780 kilometers, which passes through Indian states such as West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Arunachal Pradesh. Both Nepal and pre-colonial India were once fragmented into multiple kingdoms and territories before becoming the countries they are today.

In addition to historical factors, the geographical proximity between Nepal and India has played a significant role in shaping their relationship. (Muni, 1950, p.5). After India gained independence in 1947, Nepal adopted a democratic political system with the support of Indian democratic leaders, rather than aligning with the Quit India movement. Numerous events, sectors, and socio-cultural ties have helped to foster a strong relationship between the two countries. A key feature of this relationship is the open border, which allows for smooth economic and social exchanges between their people. However, in recent years, India's actions have become more contentious, particularly in relation to border disputes and issues involving the governments of both nations.

## **2. Objectives**

This study aims to underscore the significance of the Nepal-India relationship. As a close neighbor of India, Nepal faces both opportunities and challenges in its bilateral relations. The open border between the two nations is a unique feature of their neighborhood ties, facilitating economic and social interaction. However, border encroachments pose growing challenges to Nepal's national sovereignty and security. In this context, the primary objective of this article is to examine the bilateral relations between Nepal and India, while also addressing unresolved controversies and territorial disputes.

## **3. Method**

This paper employs an explanatory and qualitative approach, conducting an in-depth review and analysis of existing secondary data from a wide range of sources, including government documents, academic publications, research papers, and reports from international organizations. By synthesizing this diverse information, the paper seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of Nepal-India relations. Furthermore, the gathered data will highlight some of India's unexpected and contentious actions in its dealings with Nepal, providing a nuanced perspective on the diplomatic and socio-political dynamics between the two countries.

## **4. India as an Immediate Neighbor**

India is Nepal's closest neighboring country, sharing an extensive border of approximately 1,770 kilometers. This border runs along Nepal's southern boundary and India's northern edge, spanning the Indian states of Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, and Sikkim.

The relationship between India and Nepal is historically and culturally significant, with strong economic, social, and political ties. India is becoming an increasingly visible, powerful and influential state within the global system (Ogden, 2014.p.1). Nations become vulnerable when they concentrate on safeguarding and reinforcing their national identity, a phase that can be easily exploited by powerful neighboring countries. In Nepal, the identity shaped by its colonial past is influenced by the notion that its relationships with other states are historically unique



and exceptional. These concepts are frequently highlighted in discussions surrounding a new paradigm of foreign relations, particularly emphasizing the "neighborhood first" policy.

The characteristics of the new paradigm of foreign policy advanced by India's Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi are beautifully explained in *The Modi Doctrine: New Paradigms in India's Foreign Policy* (in Ganguly, Chauthaiwale, & Sinha 2016). However, the implementation of such a foreign policy raises questions about the new paradigm and whether it stirs sentiments among the populations of neighboring countries. When examining the implications of this new approach, it appears that the "neighborhood first" policy may manifest as unexpected attitudes and behaviors toward these neighboring nations.

First India's Prime Minister Mr. Modi intended to provoke China by inviting representatives' from Taiwan and Tibet in his public ceremony to celebrate his victory. Second Mr. Modi engaged India in war-like practice by imposing the blockade against Nepal since September 2015 for a couple of months (Dhakal, 2018.p.6).

As a key political and economic force in South Asia, the largest country in the region is steadily emerging as a significant player on both Asian and global platforms in the twenty-first century. Gaining insight into the interests and principles that drive its international interactions has become increasingly important, particularly in relation to global governance, finance, environmental policies, and the developing multipolar system. Despite notable diplomatic achievements and occasional strategic challenges, a closer examination of Indian foreign policy reveals the progression of a significant post-colonial nation determined to position itself as a major power in the future. As the part of this narrative, India is also a power that is in the midst of a fundamental transition- politically, economically and diplomatically –as her leaders carve a distinctive pathway and position for their state within the international system (Ogden, 2014.p.2).

In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad (1990) examines the duality of human nature, suggesting that individuals possess both dark and compassionate aspects. Similarly, the ruling elites in New Delhi exhibit their compassionate side, often showing a willingness to assist their Nepali "brothers" in times of crisis, such as providing humanitarian aid during the major earthquakes that struck Nepal in April and May 2015. This benevolence is often articulated through the geographical, cultural, economic, and political connections that India shares with Nepal. Geographically, India provides Nepal with easier access to the wider world. Politically, the leaders in New Delhi are frequently consulted by their counterparts in Kathmandu for guidance on various matters. These Indian elites readily offer their advice when requested. Economically, India publicly demonstrates its commitment to supporting Nepal's development. Culturally, the residents living along the Indo-Nepal border in the east, south, and west of Nepal feel more at ease interacting with their counterparts across the border. This people-to-people interaction is often characterized by the term *roti-beti*, which signifies cultural proximity, dependency, and a shared human bond, reflecting the closeness between the two nations.

### **India's Perception to Nepal**

On December 6, 1950, Nehru made the strongest statement yet on his government's views when he told Parliament: ***"From time immemorial, the Himalayas have provided us with magnificent frontiers..... We can not allow that barrier to be penetrated because it is also***



*the principle barrier to India". Therefore, much as we appreciate the independence of Nepal, we can not allow anything to go wrong in Nepal or permit that barrier to be closed or weakened, because that would be a risk to our own security(Rose,1971,p.192).*

A notable trend in international relations is the resurgence of geopolitics, driven by the emergence of new powers across various regions and the formation of regional and geographical blocs among developing countries. For Nepal, this resurgence is particularly evident with the rise of India and China as influential neighbors. During the five-month blockade at the Indo-Nepal border, Nepal received no external support. Similarly, in the context of Saudi Arabia's bombing of neighboring Yemen, which has impacted hospitals and schools, there has been minimal response or intervention from other nations. When Qatar is facing a naval- blockade from its neighbors, no outside power has come to help it escape the situation. That is because geopolitics leave the bigger powers in the region without any challenge from other global powers (Acharya, 2019, p.48).Geography plays an important role in a country's survival, independence, security, foreign policy and identity.

In *The Revenge of Geography* (2013), Robert Kaplan discusses the significance of geography in politics, international relations, and foreign policy. He asserts that geography is fundamental to comprehending a nation, emphasizing the necessity of examining maps to understand power dynamics and international relations. Kaplan further contends that geography plays a decisive role in shaping key outcomes in international relations. Additionally, the level of economic development and the nature of economic interactions with neighboring countries are crucial geopolitical factors. While Nepal is classified as a least developed country, both India and China are considered middle-income nations experiencing rapid economic growth in recent years. Nepal trade is heavily dependent upon India. Its open border with India has allowed cross-border movement of population, fostering cultural links. People have moved across the continuum of the land between the two countries without any hindrance (Acharya, 2019, p.49). Another geopolitical parameter is the abundance of natural resources, mainly Nepal's water resources that can generate huge amounts of energy, which attracts the investors and governments of neighboring countries and beyond .All of the Nepali rivers flow in to India. If exploited well, these rivers can provide power, irrigation and flood control benefits of both Nepal and India. There is already big interest of the Indian and Chinese companies for investing in big hydropower projects in Nepal. This can also attract geopolitical tension and competition between them. Nepal cannot escape its geopolitical realities. It must adjust the rise of India and china with their emergence as major players in global politics and economy.

Nepal is often understood to "India-locked" as the country is surrounded by India from three sides and landlockedness has also restricted Nepal's strategic choice and increased dependence upon India. Nepal's position as a landlocked country has some time been used "punish" it, the last time during five -month long blockade at the India –Nepal border following the adoption of the country's new constitution in September 2015.Transit through China has started to become a possibility especially after Nepal signed transit treaty with China in 2016.The Himalaya no longer seem to constitute big barriers as they once did. Landlockedness can



become an asset, especially if Nepal can turn itself in to a "land-linked" economy. Though Nepal's becoming a transit economy between India and China is a difficult proposition due to the geopolitical complexities associated with it, Nepal must seek to enhance its economic benefits exploiting the benefits of its location between two fast growing powers in its neighborhood (Acharya, 2019, pp.49-50).

In 1975, King Birendra declared Nepal as a Zone of Peace (ZOP), which received support from around the world, though it received cold feet from India. According the proposal, Nepal would adhere to the policy of peace, on-alignment and peaceful co-existence, would never resort to the use or threat of force, which might endanger the peace and security of other countries but India rejected this proposal saying it did not stand in conformity with the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship. Through this proposal, Nepal engaged with 116 countries, which actually supported this. Until then, Nepal did not have diplomatic relations with many of them. It eventually wrecked Nepal's relations with India leading to an economic blockade (Acharya, 2019, p.87).

After Nepal adopted a new constitution in September 2015, it faced a five month long "unannounced blockade" at the Indo-Nepal border. India's explicit displeasure on Nepal's new constitution and its support to the Madheshi demands were publicly conveyed to Nepal at various levels. Though India kept denying having a role in the blockade and attributed the same to agitation of Madheshi parties, Nepal's government called it an "unannounced blockade" inferring that the tightening of the border was responsible for the blockade against landlocked Nepal. This is not only violated the bilateral trade and transit treaties between India and Nepal, it is also violated the transit rights of the land locked countries for unrestricted access to and from the sea. This is also humanitarian suffering in Nepal which was already reeling from the April 2015 earthquake that devastated the country merely six months earlier. As a result trade and transit through India almost came to a standstill and Nepal faced acute shortage of fuel and essential supplies including life-saving medicines. The "blockade" did not get the international attention because many of Nepal's development partners and friendly countries chose to remain silent owing to their relations with India. Though everyone knew what really happened, they did not have the audacity to speak for Nepal. Even the cry for humanitarian suffering due to shortage of fuel and medicine did not get international media. This was perhaps the most traumatic experience that Nepal has faced in recent memory on account of its being a landlocked country. But this was not the first time that Nepal had faced such difficulty. Nepal had faced a similar blockade for eighteen months in 1989-90 following the failure to renew the trade and transit treaties with India (Acharya, 2019a, p.644).

### **Nepal -India Socio-Economic Interface**

India is a lower riparian nation in relation to Nepal, as Nepal's land is situated at a higher elevation. Consequently, all rivers, streams, and tributaries in Nepal naturally flow towards India. India has independently constructed afflux bunds on both sides of major rivers to protect its people, property, settlements, and land. However, these narrow afflux bunds often lead to





waterlogging in Nepal's villages and farmlands each year. The water logging has led to soil erosion, destruction of huge property, reduction of agriculture, and famine (Panta, 2019, p.112). The exploitation of Nepal's water resources for the mutual benefit of Nepal and India appears to be a key issue. India has remained as a pro-active investor in Nepal's water resources, and its ongoing interests could help India secure one of the main sources to meet its growing energy demand (Subedee, 2012, p.65). Trade between Nepal and India is extensive, with India serving as Nepal's largest trading partner. According to the Trade and Export Promotion Centre (TEPC) of Nepal, India represented over 64% of Nepal's total trade in 2022. This trade relationship is regulated by the Indo-Nepal Treaty of Trade and Transit, which grants Nepal access to Indian markets and transit facilities for its goods.

Nepal's exports to India primarily consist of agricultural products, textiles, and handicrafts, whereas its imports from India are mainly petroleum products, machinery, and consumer goods. Despite these strong trade connections, Nepal experiences a significant trade deficit with India, which presents challenges for its economy.

India serves as a significant source of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Nepal, with investments spanning multiple sectors, including manufacturing, banking, tourism, and hydropower. The investment environment is influenced by bilateral agreements, such as the Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement (BIPPA), which aims to safeguard and encourage investments between the two nations.

Labor migration is another crucial element of the economic relationship between Nepal and India, with many Nepali workers moving to India in search of employment opportunities. This migration is made possible by the open border policy that permits free movement of people. Remittances sent home by Nepali workers in India are essential to Nepal's economy, significantly contributing to household incomes and national GDP. However, labor migration also brings challenges, including issues of labor exploitation and social integration.

The economic interface between the two countries encounters several obstacles, such as trade imbalances, regulatory hurdles, and infrastructure deficits. To address these challenges, both governments must collaborate to enhance bilateral cooperation and create a favorable environment for economic activities. Opportunities for strengthening economic ties include improving cross-border infrastructure, promoting joint ventures in key sectors, and simplifying trade and investment regulations. By bolstering economic cooperation, both Nepal and India can achieve sustainable growth and development. The economic relationship between Nepal and India is vital for the progress of both nations. By capitalizing on their geographical proximity and historical connections, the two countries can forge a strong economic partnership. Tackling current challenges and exploring new avenues for cooperation will be essential for maximizing the advantages of their economic relationship.

### **Relation of 'Big Brother' or 'Brotherhood'?**

India is in a dilemma in its policy towards Nepal. Chinese expansive and aggressive initiatives on the one hand and Nepal's problems of adjustment on the other has created some sort of paranoia in India and Nepal (Baral, 2018, p.14). There is no doubt that Nepal and India both



are close neighbor but many incident like Lipulake dispute, economic blockade, not responding EPG report and anti-secular intension towards Nepal are major controversial area as incidents. Few month before a new political map released by India has sparked controversy in Nepal as it places Kalapani within its own territory. The Government of Nepal has objected to the inclusion of Kalapani within Indian Territory, and rightly so. The Foreign Ministry said that the two countries had agreed to resolve border disputes through consultation between their respective foreign secretaries. India's latest step is clearly against the agreement and is a breach of good faith.

But this is not the first time that encroachment at Lipulekh and Kalapani has been criticized (Rijal, November 19, 2019). In *Kathmandu Dilemma* by Ranjit Ray (2021) who was the former ambassador to Nepal describes various aspects of Nepal-India relations on his books. He says "On 20 May 2020, Nepal published a map showing a new external boundary with India. About 335 sq.km of Indian Territory, including Kalapani, the Lipulake Pass and Limpiyadhura was added to Nepal". It seems that India did not accept the reality of Historical evidence and provision of Sugauli treaty 1816. In many bi-lateral issues shows that Indian hegemony towards Nepal still increasing up. India wants to keep a close watch over Chinese movements on the border, and Kalapani seems to be strategically the best point to do so. India had built check posts at 17 places within Nepali territory in the 1950s, all of which were removed in the 1970s except the one at Kalapani in the northwest. Its national mapping authority has been including Kalapani and areas south of Lipulekh Pass since then. But Nepal has firm proof to show that Lipulekh, Kalapani and Limpiyadhura belong to it. The maps published by the then British Survey of India in 1827 and 1856 clearly show how these areas have been accepted as part of Nepal. Limpiyadhura in the north-western corner of Nepal has been accepted as the origin of the Mahakali River as per Article 5 of the Sugauli Treaty of 1816 (Rijal, 2019). National unity and independence, territorial integrity, people's sovereignty and national security are the most important priorities for any sovereign and independent country. Nepal is located between two giant nuclear countries and rising global powers-China and India. Nepal's foreign policy continues to be affected by its geo-strategic location between China and India and its attempt to maintain best of relations and a virtual balance between these powerful neighbors (YN, Khanal as cited in Subedi, 2010, p.72). Nepal made serious efforts during the reign of both in its foreign policy, establishing bilateral diplomatic relations with other countries and joining various multilateral and regional organizations. During his Coronation address in 1975, the King Birendra proposed that Nepal be declared a Zone of Peace (Subedi, 2010, p.73).

Nepal has experienced three economic blockades of varying magnitudes from India, within a period of almost two to three decades (Bhattarai, 2018, p.39). Bhattarai evaluate that if we honestly and bluntly evaluate the consequences of these blockades, it could be said that each episode compelled Nepal to shift its dependence towards its northern neighbor, China. Second, it led to further fueling of anti-Indian sentiment among the Nepali population. The last of these blockades, in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake, was particularly hard-hitting one for



the Nepali people and our economy (Bhattarai, 2018, p.39). Many India leader of opposition as well ruling party of India were not agree on this incident. An influential leader of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Subramaniam Swami said that the economic embargo enforced by the Indian government shortly after Nepal chose to promulgate new constitution against New Delhi's advice in 2015 was a “foolish thing” the BJP government did on the advice of bureaucrats ( Swami, July 29, 2019 ). On the one hand socio-economic relations are deeply rooted in grass root level which is called *roti-beti* relation from both side in official forum. The open border has naturally promoted social and cultural interaction among the nationals of both sides through matrimonial relationship as well. It is fact that India is closed and nearest neighbor. Many developmental infrastructures are contracting by Indian government and many mega project are pipe line.

India is increasingly becoming a prominent and influential actor on the global stage. As the largest nation in South Asia, it is emerging as a significant political and economic powerhouse in both Asia and the world during the twenty-first century. As this rise continues, it is essential to comprehend the interests and principles that shape India's international engagements, especially concerning global governance, finance, environmental regulation, and the evolving multipolar system. India's foreign policy, characterized by notable diplomatic achievements as well as considerable strategic challenges, illustrates the path of a major post-colonial state seeking to assert itself as a great power.

Suwedi (2022) mainly focuses on Nepal-India relations in general and does not touch upon the open border issue. Although his research is an important document on the bilateral relationship, it addresses the current issues /debates between the two countries and India's “big-brother” attitude to Nepal.

## **Conclusion**

Nepal and India share a close and longstanding relationship across various issues. Their cultural, social, and economic ties are significant and cannot be overlooked by either government. However, many Nepali citizens remain dissatisfied with the unequal provisions of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship signed in 1950. Currently, there is a desire in Nepal to reevaluate this treaty, which contains imbalanced clauses established during the reign of the Shah dynasty. As a sovereign nation, Nepal believes it is essential to review the treaty to protect the mutual interests of both countries and to maintain a productive bilateral relationship.

Cooperation on mutual security concerns, particularly regarding the open border, is a key aspect of Nepal-India relations. The Nepalese government has consistently assured India that its territory will not be used for activities detrimental to Indian interests, and Nepal expects similar commitments from India. There are established bilateral mechanisms to address security issues, including cross-border crime, and to enhance communication between bordering districts to facilitate information exchange. India has emphasized the importance of strengthening the legal framework to tackle shared cross-border security challenges. Additionally, India has generously supported Nepal's security infrastructure, capacity building, and training programs. However, issues such as economic blockades, territorial disputes, and





political interference undermine the spirit of friendship that should exist between sovereign states. In this context, it is crucial to redefine and reassess the Peace and Friendship Treaty of 1950 to foster a better future for both nations and their peoples.

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