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### **State Visit of the Prime Minister of Nepal to India: Media and Public Perception**

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#### **Abstract**

This study delves into the media representation and public perception towards official visits by Nepali Prime Minister to India, analyzing Indian media outlets' framing of power dynamics, strategic messaging, perception management, economic interests, and regional dynamics in Nepal-India relations. As part of the study methodology, the researcher deliberately chose seven prominent Indian online media sites and examined the contents these platforms produced about the state visit of the prime minister of Nepal to India on multiple occasions. The study also analyzes the language, rhetoric, and framing used by media outlets while reporting on the state visit. It employs critical and agenda setting theory in international relations to uncover underlying power structures and ideologies in media coverage and agenda-setting theory to examine how media narratives influence public opinion and policy priorities. The analysis reveals a complex interplay of interests, strategies, and perceptions shaping the evolving Nepal-India relationship, highlighting the multifaceted nature of international relations. The study finds that the media coverage reflects a nuanced understanding of power dynamics between Nepal and India, highlighting the strategic maneuvers of Nepali leaders to convey messages of cooperation, reorientation of foreign policy, and correction of perceived images, especially concerning China. This demonstrates how leaders strategically navigate international relations to shape perceptions and relationships.

**Keywords:** Nepal-India relations, Media representation, Power dynamics, Strategic messaging, Perception management

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## Introduction

"A state visit is the highest level of international visit, and its purpose is to confirm the good relationship between the countries concerned. It refers to an official visit made by a head of state, such as a president or prime minister, to another country at the invitation of the host country's government" (Oruta, 2024). These visits are significant diplomatic events aimed at strengthening bilateral relations, discussing key issues, signing agreements, and promoting mutual understanding between the two nations. The state visit is the highest rank in the category of foreign visits and is accorded only to people serving as heads of state. State Visits are precisely planned with most focus on diplomatic protocols and formal ceremonies.

"Nepal and India enjoy excellent bilateral ties. Founded on the age-old connection of history, culture, tradition and religion, these relations are close, comprehensive and multidimensional and are pronounced more in political, social, cultural, religious and economic engagements with each other. To add up the formal flavor to such historic relations, the two countries established diplomatic relations on 17 June 1947" (MOFA, 2024). The open border between the two countries allows for the free movement of people and goods. The Treaty of Peace and Friendship, signed in 1950, is a pivotal document in Nepal-India relations. It establishes close ties between the two nations, including military assistance, and grants citizens of both countries the right to live and work in each other's territory. Political relations have experienced both cooperation and tension over the years. Nepal has often sought to balance its relationships with India and China, sometimes leading to diplomatic challenges.

Both countries engage in diplomatic dialogues and high-level visits to address issues and strengthen their relationship. Diplomatic efforts go on to manage disagreements and enhance cooperation. Nepal and India share a multifaceted relationship with historical, economic, cultural, and political dimensions. While they have shared interests and significant ties, they have also faced challenges and occasional tensions. Managing this complex relationship requires diplomacy, negotiation, and an understanding of each other's concerns and interests.

Diplomatic interactions between Nepal and India have a rich history spanning various levels. A visit by the Prime Minister of Nepal holds significant importance within both countries, garnering considerable attention from the media. India's substantial economic and political sway in Nepal is evident, with its influence dominating. In the

ongoing legacy of Nepal-India relations, the visit of Nepal's Prime Minister to India is widely recognized and highly esteemed.

In such a context, the state visit of the Nepalese Prime Minister to India receives considerable attention and discussion in both Nepali and Indian media channels. Particularly, how Indian media interpret the visit attracts significant public interest in both in Nepal and India. This amplifies awareness of India's influence in Nepal through its state machinery and media presence. Different media outlets and public figures in India interpret the state visits of various Nepalese Prime Ministers to India on different occasions inconsistently. The framing and portrayal of these visits vary across Indian media platforms. In such a setting, how the visit is portrayed by various Indian media outlets plays crucial factor in forming the public opinion of the power dynamics in Nepal-India relations.

Media outlets typically provide extensive coverage of state visits, especially when they involve significant political figures or events. They report on the details of the visit, including the agenda, meetings, speeches, and any agreements or announcements made during the visit. Media coverage plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of the leader and their diplomatic efforts during the visit. State visits often serve as platforms for public diplomacy, where leaders aim to build or strengthen relationships with other countries and their citizens.

Media coverage can amplify the messages and gestures of goodwill conveyed during these visits, influencing public opinion in both the host and visiting countries. Media outlets also provide analysis and commentary on the significance and implications of state visits. This includes assessments of the outcomes of meetings, analysis of the diplomatic messages conveyed, and discussions of the broader geopolitical context surrounding the visit.

State visits may also attract criticism and scrutiny from the media, particularly if there are controversies or disagreements surrounding the visit. Journalists may investigate issues such as the cost of the visit, human rights concerns, or the political implications of certain agreements or statements made during the visit. State visits often involve press conferences and interviews with the visiting leader, providing an opportunity for direct communication with the media. These interactions can shape media narratives and influence public opinion both during and after the visit.

This study concentrates on the role of social constructs, such as perceptions and interpretations, in shaping reality. The researcher tries to explore how individuals and

media outlets construct meaning from the state visit of Prime Minister of Nepal to India. This study mainly examines the power dynamics in media representation and public discourse related to the state visit. The researcher analyzes how certain narratives are privileged or marginalized.

The study mainly examines how different media outlets represent the state visit. How is the visit framed? Is it portrayed as a diplomatic success, a contentious event, or something else? Are there any recurring storylines or narratives in the coverage? Look for persuasive techniques, emotional appeals, or any attempts to legitimize or delegitimize the visit.

### **Research Methodology**

The study includes the content cum thematic analysis as a qualitative research method that involves systematically analyzing media content, such as news articles or social media posts, to identify patterns, themes, and sentiments related to the state visit. The researcher purposefully selected seven prominent online media outlets in India and analyzed the content published on these platforms regarding the state visit of the Nepalese Prime Minister to India on multiple occasions. The study also analyzes the language, rhetoric, and framing used by media outlets when reporting on the state visit. The study examines the state visit to India made by the four contemporary prime ministers of Nepal, Dr. Baburam Bhattarai, Mr. K.P. Sharma Oli, Mr. Shushil Koirala Mr. Puspakamal Dahal Prachand, and Mr. Sher Bahadur Deuba, on multiple occasions.

### **Critical Theory of Role of Media in International Relations**

"Critical theories seek to question what had hereto been taken as natural, by showing the historically constructed character of social institutions, and by uncovering the patterns of oppression and domination masked by these universalistic conceits" (George & Campbell, 1990, p. 271; Hoffman, 1987, p. 233 cited in MacMillan, 2004, p. 5). "The goal for critical theories becomes to unearth the historical steps that lead to the constitution of certain forms of knowledge and practices and their modes of acceptability, not to attempt to uncover some unalterable truth regarding the essence of specific objects" (Foucault, 1990, p. 47). Critical theorists recognize that media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perception. They investigate how media coverage of state visits can be manipulated or controlled by those in power to control narratives, create specific images, or distract from underlying issues. Media serve as a tool of propaganda or as a check on

government actions. The state visits are framed in the media to promote certain ideological narratives or to reinforce the dominant ideology of the government.

According to Gramsci (2009) media is one of the key ideological apparatuses that help in maintaining and reinforcing the dominant ideology. In this case, Indian media can be seen as an ideological apparatus that disseminates the information about the state visit in a way that aligns with the interests of the Indian state. Critical theory, when applied to the study of the role of media in international relations, refers to an approach that seeks to analyze and critique the ways in which media influences and shapes international politics, power dynamics, and global communication.

Media reinforces or challenges the existing power structures and dominant ideologies. Its representations, discourses, and narratives may serve the interests of powerful actors, such as states, corporations, or political elites, and these representations may perpetuate inequalities and injustices in the global arena.

Critical theory in the study of media's role in international relations offers a multidimensional and critical perspective that aims to uncover the underlying power dynamics, ideologies, and inequalities embedded in media systems and their impact on global politics and communication. It encourages a critical examination of media practices and structures to foster a more informed and equitable understanding of international relations.

### **Agenda Setting Theory**

Cook et al. (1983, p. 17) define agenda setting as “the process by which problems become salient as political issues meriting the attention of the polity.” In this definition, the media’s capacity to set the agenda of public policy is based on a temporal sequence of events in which the news media report on an event, which in turn influences the public perception of the importance of this particular event and the issues related to it, which in turn serves to influence how public policy makers react to that particular issue.

Referring specifically to the framing of a media narrative, argue that “the media’s agenda sets the public’s agenda” defining agenda setting as “a theory about the transfer of salience from the mass media’s picture of the world to those in our heads.” McQuail (1987, p. 276) describes this theory as a “plausible but unproven idea” and this is arguably because it remains impossible to measure the response of the individual and the structural system to the angle of a particular message because interpretation is such a subjective phenomenon.

Agenda-setting theory is based on the idea that the media's selection and presentation of news stories can shape public perceptions and influence the political agenda. In the realm of international relations, this theory highlights the media's power to shape public understanding of global events and the potential impact this can have on the behavior of governments and the course of international affairs. This theory is applied to analyze how media coverage impacts international diplomacy, conflict resolution, and foreign policy decisions.

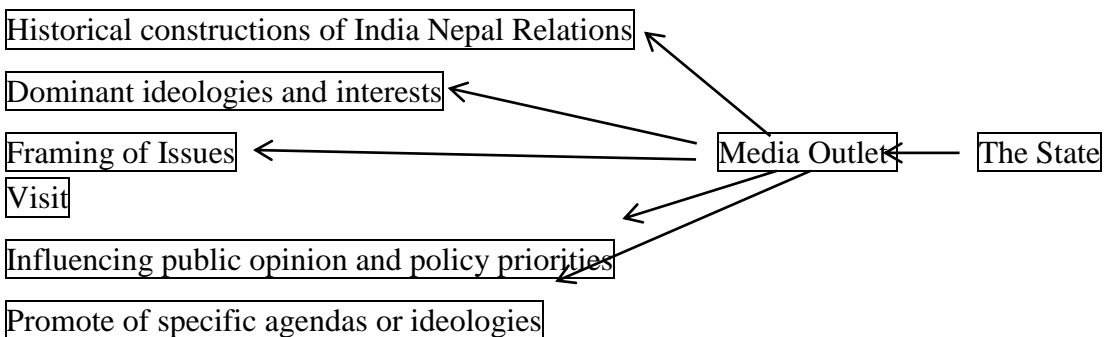
The historical constructions and power dynamics within media systems highlights how it actively constructs and shapes understanding of reality, including international events. In the context of Indian media outlet, a historical construction on Nepal India relations is evident on the several occasions of Nepal PMs State Visit to India.

Media is seen as an ideological apparatus that reinforces dominant ideologies and interests. Media reinforces or challenges the existing power structures and dominant ideologies. Its representations, discourses, and narratives may serve the interests of powerful actors, such as states, corporations, or political elites. In the case of Indian Media outlet a dominant ideology of Nepal as a sphere of influence is persistently presented on the different occasion of Nepal's PM state visit to India.

The media's agenda-setting role can influence public opinion, which in turn can shape government policies. Policymakers often respond to public sentiment, making media coverage of international events crucial in shaping foreign policy decisions.

The state visits are framed in the media to promote certain ideological narratives or to reinforce the dominant ideology of the government. The public's perception of these visits is influenced by their own ideological beliefs and biases.

**Conceptual Framework**



## **Result and Discussion**

### **The State Visit of Nepalese Prime Ministers Nepal's to India and Indian Media Outlet**

This section examines and evaluates how Indian media outlets represented, framed, and narrated official visit of Prime Ministers Dr. Baburam Bhattarai, ShushilKoirala, Puspakamal Dahal 'Prachand', K.P. Sharma Oli and Sher BahaurDeuba. The rationale behind selecting these prime ministers' visits is that they come within the contemporary period while Nepali politics is in flux and transition from the constituent assembly's constitution-making process to its implementation.

### **The Official Visit of Prime Minister Dr. Baburam Bhattarai**

Amid the series of government transitions from 2008 to 2011, a new political accord was established in November 2011 that aided in resuming the transition process. Under the leadership of the Maoist leader Dr. Baburam Bhattarai, a coalition government was formed with the capacity and political will to handle critical unresolved peace process concerns.

Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai paid Official visit to India from 20-23 October 2011. During the PM's visit, Nepal and India signed two major agreements, including Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement (BIPPA). According to the terms of BIPPA, investments from either country in the territory of the other country are to be accorded national treatment (NT) and most favoured nation (MFN) treatment.

On the occasion of Prime Minister Bhattarai's state visit, a notable Indian news agency, TOI (2011), delved into the concept of power dynamics between nations and individuals in its write-up. The text characterizes Bhattarai as the "moderate face of the Maoists." This can be viewed as an example of how political actors may adopt certain personas or strategies to navigate the international arena. The sentence also alludes to the internal political dynamics in Nepal. Bhattarai's approach is contrasted with that of his predecessor, Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda. This highlights the internal power struggles and differing approaches within the Nepalese political landscape. Bhattarai is depicted as someone who focuses on performance rather than rhetoric.

The sentence also mentions that the opponents of Dr. Bhattarai in Nepal and a section of the opposition are not hopeful of his success during the India visit. This reflects the dynamics of domestic politics and how external actions can have implications for a leader's standing at home. The text provides insights into the interplay of power,

perception, and performance in international politics, particularly in the context of Nepal-India relations and the dynamics of Nepalese domestic politics.

A career diplomat, Satish (2011) India's Permanent Representative to the UN Office portrayed the visit of Dr. Bhattarai to India as a positive, although not a "game changer." This implies that do not have brought about a dramatic shift in relations, it has still had beneficial effects. The paragraph concludes by noting that India favors the evolution of Nepalese politics on a consensual and inclusive basis.

India sought a solemn promise and assurance from the Nepali PM to drive the Nepali politics as very Indian perception of democracy during the Visit. Beside these media coverages on PM Bhattari's visit, the reputed newspapers in India such as the Hindustan Times, The Hindu, Financial Times, gave priority to Bhattarai's ideas and communicated public information about Indian choice in Nepal's politics.

In a nutshell, the interplay of power, perception, and performance in international politics was evident during Bhattarai's state visit, shedding light on the complexities of Nepalese domestic politics and India's stance on inclusive political evolution in Nepal. Moreover, the media coverage from prominent Indian newspapers underscored the importance of Bhattarai's ideas and India's role in shaping Nepalese politics.

### **The Official Visit of Prime Minister Mr. Sushil Koirala**

After the dissolution of constituent assembly the new constituent assembly was held November 19, 2013. The Legislative-Parliament elected Sushil Koirala of the Nepali Congress as the Prime Minister three months after the election. Koirala, leading a 13-member delegation, paid visit to New Delhi for attending the swearing-in ceremony of Indian Prime Minister-elect Narendra Modi.

NDTV (2014) quotes the conversation between PM Mr Modi and PM Koirala during the visit. It projects Mr. Modi, as the Prime Minister of India, holds a position of power. His statement indicates a willingness to work with the Nepalese leadership. This suggests a hierarchical relationship, with India having a dominant role due to its larger size and economic influence. The relationship between these two countries has been characterized by a history of power imbalances, including periods of Indian influence over Nepal.

This statement may be seen as continuing a legacy of unequal power relations between the two nations. The mention of strengthening bilateral cooperation in sectors like trade, investment, hydropower, agriculture, and agro-processing reflects economic



interests. It can be questioned that such cooperation benefits both countries equally or if it disproportionately favors India, potentially perpetuating economic inequalities.

The choice of words, such as "forge" and "strengthen," indicates an intention to shape the relationship in a certain way. This sort of framing influences public perception and policy decisions. This statement indicates the power dynamics, historical context, economic interests, environmental and cultural implications, rhetoric, inclusivity, and language choices to uncover underlying ideologies and potential social implications in the relationship between Nepal and India. Modi's dialogue highlights power dynamics and economic interests, raising questions about equality in bilateral cooperation. Language choices reveal underlying ideologies and potential social implications in Nepal-India relations.

### **The Official Visit of Prime Minister Mr. K.P Oli**

The constitution of Nepal was promulgated by the constituent assembly on 3rd Ashoj 2072 BS during the government of PM Shushil Koirala, and responsibility for its implementation passed on to his successor, K.P. Oli, who was chosen as Nepal's Prime Minister during a period of bilateral crisis between Nepal and India, during which India placed an undeclared blockade on Nepal for over four months. Mr. K.P Oli paid a three-day visit to India from April 6, 2018.

Upon his visit Chaudhary (2015) in the Indian news agency entitled "The Economic Times" states that Nepal's Prime Minister KP Oli's visit to India contributed to reinforcing India's position as a significant player in Nepal's affairs, despite China's efforts to involve Nepal in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This implies that India aims to maintain and strengthen its influence in the region, countering China's attempts. The PM Oli's visit has been seen as a means of undermining the developing closeness and cooperation between India and Nepal in the aftermath of the blockade.

In a way, the blockade solidified the political ties between China and Nepal. India always appears to be cognizant of Nepal's closeness to China. The text makes the case that the visit was successful in preventing China from gaining a stronger foothold in Nepal. The primary goal of the text is to deflect attention from Nepal's developing relations with China by launching the upcoming development projects in partnership with India. The narration of the visit signifies that the media outlet is found framing it as per the power dynamics developed over the course of period. Coming to the visit of PM Oli the media framing is found to be fluctuating and changing serving the Indian interest in Nepal.

In the context of visit of PM Oli, the Bureau (2018) states that visit provides an opportunity to the two sides to review wide-ranging cooperative partnership, and to progress it further for the benefit of the two peoples. The Prime Ministers of India Narendra Modi and K.P. Sharma Oli recognized the untapped potential of inland waterways to contribute towards overall economic development of the region.

The two Prime Ministers took the landmark decision to develop the inland waterways for the movement of cargo, within the framework of trade and transit arrangements, providing additional access to sea for Nepal. The Prime Minister of Nepal K.P. Sharma Oli, noted the enormous impact the additional connectivity would have on the growth of business and economy of Nepal. It implies an assessment of past agreements and actions to identify areas of improvement or adjustment, which aligns with a critical perspective that questions existing power dynamics and structures.

The recognition of inland waterways' potential for economic development reflects an agenda-setting aspect. It signifies the prioritization of specific issues or projects (inland waterways in this case) on the international agenda, potentially leading to policy changes or collaborative efforts to develop these resources. The decision to develop inland waterways within trade and transit arrangements indicates a shift in policy focus, emphasizing economic cooperation and infrastructure development. This aligns with both critical and agenda-setting theories, as it involves redefining relationships (critical) and setting priorities for action (agenda-setting).

The acknowledgment of the impact of enhanced connectivity on Nepal's business and economy underscores the practical implications of policy decisions, highlighting their potential benefits and consequences, which is relevant from a critical perspective that considers the real-world effects of international actions.

Oli's visit to India reinforced India's influence amidst China's Belt and Road Initiative efforts, aiming to counter China's influence in Nepal. Media framing fluctuates, serving Indian interests. The visit focused on reviewing cooperation and prioritizing inland waterways for economic development, indicating a shift in policy focus and potential benefits for Nepal's economy.

### **The Official Visit of the Prime Minister Mr. Pushpa Kamal Dahal**

The Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, paid a four day official visit on September 15, 2016 accompanied replacing CPN-UML leader K P Sharma Oli whose 9-month rule (Oct. 2015 to July 2016). This was marked by a sense of open confrontation

with New Delhi at a level never witnessed in recent times. Singh and Sahay (2016) projects the over 100 strong delegation of the Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal as a deliberate effort to convey a comprehensive and diverse representation of Nepal's interests and capabilities to India, indicating a desire for multifaceted cooperation beyond just diplomatic channels.

The visit is projected as a strong message" being conveyed to India implying a reevaluation or reorientation of Nepal's foreign policy under the new coalition government. This reflects a critical approach to international relations, where governments actively shape and reshape their strategies and alliances based on perceived needs and opportunities. The deliberate choice to visit India before China, along with the mention of correcting the PM's perceived pro-China image, is significant in terms of agenda-setting. It signals a shift in priorities and optics, aiming to influence how Nepal is perceived by the major powers like India and China. This strategic maneuvering aligns with both critical analysis (redefining foreign policy directions) and agenda-setting (shaping international perceptions).

Prime Minister Dahal's visit to India marked a shift from Oli's confrontational stance, aiming for multifaceted cooperation and signaling a reevaluation of Nepal's foreign policy. The delegation's size and choice of visit before China highlight strategic maneuvering to influence perceptions and set new priorities, reflecting critical analysis and agenda-setting in international relations.

### **The Official Visit of Prime Ministers Mr. Sher Bahadur Deuba**

The Prime Minister Mr. Sher Bahadur Deuba paid a three-day Official Visit to India from 01 to 03 April 2022. Deuba, Prime Minister of Nepal, and Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, held a bilateral delegation-level talk at Hyderabad House in New Delhi. "The two Prime Ministers discussed promoting connectivity and infrastructure through building of roads, railways, pipelines, transmission lines and air services. During the meeting, the Prime Minister of Nepal requested the Prime Minister of India for the additional air entry routes from Mahendranagar, Nepalgunj and Janakpur" (MOFA, 2022).

EOI (2022) states that Indian relationship with Nepal is one of the main pillars of its 'Neighborhood First' policy. The visit of Prime Minister of Nepal to India will contribute in further cementing the traditional and age-old ties of friendship and cooperation between the two countries. The expansive and productive talks between the two Prime Ministers provided high-level direction and gave shape to a robust agenda for

bilateral cooperation in multiple sectors, particularly those related to energy and connectivity.

AP (2022) mentions that Sher Bahadur Deuba met Narendra Modi in his first foreign trip since becoming Nepal's prime minister last year after the fall of a Communist government in Kathmandu. It highlights the prioritization of specific issues and the shaping of public perceptions regarding Nepal-India relations and regional dynamics. The text underscores the tradition and expectation for Nepalese prime ministers to visit India early in their tenure, emphasizing the importance of this visit in setting the agenda for bilateral relations. As per AP (2022) the visit is framed as an opportunity for Deuba to renew relations with Indian leaders and for India to regain its influence, indicating an agenda-setting focus on improving bilateral ties and addressing perceived challenges to India's influence.

The tradition of Nepalese prime ministers visiting India underscores the historical political and economic influence that India has maintained over Nepal, reflecting hegemonic relations. The narrative of India losing influence to China and the strategic efforts to counter Beijing's initiatives suggest a critical analysis of power struggles, regional hegemony, and the use of aid and alliances as tools for influence. The visit is portrayed as part of a larger strategy for both Nepal and India to assert their interests, regain influence, and navigate the complex geopolitical landscape, reflecting critical perspectives on state agency and strategic maneuvering in international relations.

Prime Minister Deuba's visit to India focused on enhancing connectivity and infrastructure, reflecting the importance of Nepal-India relations under India's 'Neighborhood First' policy. The visit, framed as renewing ties and regaining influence, sets the agenda for bilateral cooperation, highlighting historical and strategic aspects of Nepal-India relations. The narrative reflects critical analysis of power dynamics and strategic maneuvering in the region.

The media coverage reflects the hierarchical relationship between Nepal and India, emphasizing India's dominant position due to its size and economic influence. The strategic messaging during these visits, such as portraying leaders like Baburam Bhattarai as moderate faces or emphasizing economic cooperation, aims to manage perceptions and shape policy decisions.

The media narratives highlight how external actions, such as official visits, can impact a leader's standing domestically. For instance, Bhattarai's visit faced skepticism

from some quarters in Nepal, showcasing the interplay of power, perception, and performance in international politics. The focus on bilateral agreements and economic cooperation, such as the BIPPA agreement and discussions on inland waterways, indicates the prioritization of specific issues on the international agenda. This aligns with agenda-setting theory, where leaders strategically shape priorities and policies.

The media coverage also considers the practical implications of policy decisions, such as the impact of enhanced connectivity on Nepal's economy. This critical perspective evaluates past agreements and actions, questioning existing power structures and identifying areas for improvement or adjustment.

### **Conclusion**

The media coverage reflects a nuanced understanding of power dynamics between Nepal and India, highlighting the strategic maneuvers of Nepali leaders to convey messages of cooperation, reorientation of foreign policy, and correction of perceived images, especially concerning China. This demonstrates how leaders strategically navigate international relations to shape perceptions and relationships. The emphasis on economic cooperation, investment agreements, and infrastructure development underscores the practical implications of international relations. It highlights how policy decisions impact economic growth, business opportunities, and overall bilateral relations, aligning with critical perspectives that consider the tangible effects of international actions.

The media narratives also reveal strategic maneuvering by both Nepal and India to maintain or enhance their influence in the region, counterbalance external powers, and strengthen bilateral ties. This reflects a complex interplay of interests, strategies, and perceptions in shaping the Nepal-India relationship. In nutshell, these visits provide insights into the multifaceted nature of international relations, encompassing strategic messaging, power dynamics, economic interests, and perception management, all of which contribute to shaping the evolving dynamics between Nepal and India.

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