

## Next Door Nepal: The sherpa's quest

Tactically, or genuinely, [Narendra Modi](#) appeared more a devout Hindu than the prime minister of a powerful country during his visit to Nepal that concluded on May 12. After worshipping at the Ram Janaki Mandir in the ancient city of Mithila on Friday and attending a massive civic reception in his honour, Modi flew to Kathmandu and conducted diplomacy with a clear agenda. By the time he returned to India, Modi's message to the Himalayan nation was loud and clear: India is willing to make amends for the past and change the ways it conducts diplomacy. The message also was that it's important for India to check Nepal from getting closer to China. However, it is too early to surmise what Modi has achieved in this respect.

The Indian PM had reasons to give the impression of being a pilgrim. He was aware of the hardships faced by people in Nepal in the five months in 2015-2016, when India imposed an economic blockade on the country. That action dented Modi's image in Nepal. The police seized some posters that said, "You are welcome Mr Modi but we have not forgotten blockade". One such banner was displayed at the office of the Bibekesheel Sajha Party. The top rebel Maoist leader, C P Gajurel, was arrested before the Indian PM's visit.

Prime Minister K P Oli, perceived as anti-India and pro-China during the blockade and after it, ensured that Modi's visit was trouble free. Oli has turned out, at least on the surface, to be India's friend-in need in its quest to bring Nepal back into its fold. Modi did not directly talk about the blockade nor did he showed any remorse for it, but in an oblique reference to that episode, he said, "Man may come and go, but Nepal-India relations will remain for ever."

Modi also delivered a message to his constituency at home when he wrote, "Jai Siya Ram" at the bottom of a message in the temple's visitor book. On Saturday, he flew down from Kathmandu to Muktinath temple in Jomsom. The locals are angry because the Indian PM entered the temple's sanctum sanctorum — against established convention — and because he was photographed and his visit was telecast live — also prohibited. However, Modi managed to convey that every act by a politician has a political message.

Oli and Modi "laid the foundation" of the nearly-Rs 6,000 crore Arun III hydropower project through a remote system. Other than this 900-MW project, the other promises he made were a reiteration of India's past assurances. Such assurances have rarely been matched by time-bound action. These promises include those pertaining to additional airspace over the Indian skies for Nepal's aircrafts, the long-pending construction of postal roads in Tarai and expediting work on the detailed reports of the Mahakali project that the two sides signed in 1996. But the emphasis during Modi's visit, like during Oli's visit to Delhi last month, was on linking Raxaul in Bihar with Kathmandu by rail. Many think this is a move to counter, even stall, the Shigatse-Kyrong-Kathmandu Chinese railway plan.

"We are at the base camp now. India is ready to play the role of a Sherpa guide, taking the expeditionists from the base camp right up to the peak of Mt Everest," the Indian PM said at a gathering in Kathmandu, where he was publicly felicitated. This indicates that India would be assisting Nepal in projects prioritised by the latter. In Janakpur, Modi made it clear that the Rs 100 crore he had promised for the province's development would come via Kathmandu — not directly from Delhi.

No visit by an Indian PM to Nepal has ever remained free from controversy. Such visits always give rise to apprehensions about the impact they will have on the country's domestic politics. A tweet by BJP parliamentarian Kirti Azad saying that Modi should "get Janakpur back in India", while the Indian PM was still in Nepal, created quite a flutter in the host country. Azad claimed that

Janakpur was given by the British to Nepal for 200 years — a claim not backed by historical evidence. Nepali Congress Vice-President Bimalendra Nidhi responded by saying that Azad should be declared an “enemy of the nation”. In Janakpur, Chief Minister Mohammad Lalbabu Raut complained to Modi that Nepal’s constitution was discriminatory towards the Madhesis. Some people attending Modi’s public felicitation held placards demanding, “Free Madhes”.

A day after Modi flew back home, Oli admitted in parliament that some “lapses” during the visit did not fit well within “national interest” parameters. It was a tough task for him to witness helplessly the arrest and harassment of the people who had echoed the sentiments that Oli himself had raised during his earlier tenure as prime minister. His anti-India stance helped him regain power. Oli also knows that power demands skillful compromise. But will that work in his favour?

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