

A 'pilgrimage' to Nepal

Last week, [Narendra Modi visited Nepal](#), his third since he became Prime Minister in 2014. Each of the visits has been markedly different, in terms of both atmospherics and outcomes. This is due to the political backdrop against which it took place, reflecting the evolving Nepali domestic political transition from a centralised monarchy to a federal republic and the complex nature of India-Nepal relations. Nepali Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli was in Delhi from April 6-8. Mr. Modi's return visit coming within a month (May 11-12) was not just good neighbourliness but more a realisation that the relationship had deteriorated in recent years and there was an urgent need to arrest the slide.

Nepal's importance

After coming to power, Nepal was among Mr. [Modi's first destinations abroad](#) (August, 2014), in keeping with his 'neighbourhood first' policy. A bilateral visit to Nepal was long overdue, the last one being in 1997. Part of the reason was Nepal's ongoing political transition — a Maoist insurgency in Nepal which lasted from the mid-1990s till 2005, a delicate peace process which was mid-wifed by India and a new constitution-drafting exercise that began in 2008. Meanwhile, every Nepali Prime Minister had visited India, some more than once, leading Nepali commentators to conclude that Nepal did not rank high in Delhi's foreign policy priorities. Mr. Modi's visit was a successful exercise in correcting this perception.

He addressed the Constituent Assembly, the only foreign leader to have done so, touching all the thorny issues in the relationship and hitting the right notes. He spoke about respecting Nepali sovereignty, reiterated readiness to revise the 1950 Friendship Treaty in line with Nepali wishes, offered encouragement for the constitution-drafting process while wisely refraining from any suggestions, offered generous terms for power purchase and announced a billion-dollar line of credit on generous terms. A long joint statement was issued, highlighting (HIT – Highways, Information ways and Transmission ways) connectivity projects with clear timelines. Political parties and civil society were unanimous in concluding that a new chapter in India-Nepal relations was being opened.

Less than four months later, Mr. Modi was back in Nepal, this time for the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit. In the run-up to the visit, he had indicated an interest in visiting Janakpur, Lumbini and Muktinath. The Nepali authorities were lukewarm. Somewhat disappointed, the Indian side agreed to limit the visit only to Kathmandu. The reasons cited by Nepali authorities were security and logistical difficulties. The real reason was that the deadline for finalising the constitution was less than two months away and the political climate was heating up. Public gatherings in Janakpur and Lumbini (both are close to the India-Nepal border) were bound to attract large crowds from both countries and Mr. Modi's oratory could have unwelcome political reverberations.

During his visit when he spoke about the need for the spirit of consensus to guide the constitution-drafting so that it could become an instrument to fulfil the aspirations of all Nepali citizens, it was criticised as gratuitous advice and even described by some as interference in Nepal's internal affairs. The August honeymoon was over.

The problem lies in the fractured politics of Nepal. Traditionally, hill elites (Bahuns and Chhetris) who constitute 29% of the population have ruled Nepal. This is as true today as during the monarchy for the leadership of the three main political parties — Nepali Congress (NC), United Marxist-Leninist (UML) and the Maoists — is drawn from the same elites. The Madhesis constitute 35% but have traditionally been marginalised, live in the Terai areas bordering India and share

close ties (*roti-beti ka rishta*) with their kin across the border. This is why Mr. Modi's remarks in November 2014 generated criticism.

Nationalism, anti-Indianism

Relations with India often become an issue in Nepal's domestic politics as politicians seek to don the mantle of Nepali nationalism which invariably carries within it a grain of anti-Indianism. During the monarchy, the King would emerge as a staunch nationalist when he wanted to crack down on pro-democratic forces and the NC would be painted in pro-Indian colours. The monarchy has given way to a republic but old habits die hard. India's desire to play favourites also contributes to it, particularly when different elements in India convey different messages.

Following the 2013 election, an NC-UML coalition emerged with NC leader Sushil Koirala becoming Prime Minister on the understanding that he would hand over the reins to Mr. Oli, the UML leader, after the constitution was adopted. Mr. Oli was understandably impatient and finally the constitution was promulgated in September 2015 even as the Terai was erupting in protests. Having belatedly realised the implications, India cautioned against haste but this was seen in Kathmandu as blatant encouragement for the growing Madhesi agitation which claimed 45 lives.

Life in the Terai came to a standstill. Mr. Oli blamed India for imposing an economic blockade which was causing acute shortages of essentials such as petrol, diesel, liquefied petroleum gas and medical supplies. India blamed the deteriorating security environment which made the transporters reluctant to cross over and advised Mr. Oli to address Madhesi concerns. Relations took a nosedive. Eventually, a constitutional amendment was adopted and the movement of goods across the border returned to normal. But trust had been breached. In addition, the blockade had unleashed a wave of resentment against India.

A new beginning

In 2017, the first elections under the new constitution were held for the national parliament, the seven newly created provincial assemblies and the local bodies (town municipalities and village council). Riding the nationalist wave and projecting himself as the only leader who had stood up to India, Mr. Oli again emerged as Prime Minister, but stronger than before as UML also scored impressive victories in the provincial and local body elections.

Mr. Modi realised that the political landscape was shifting. China was now keen to expand its presence in the region with ambitious projects. Following a couple of phone calls and an invitation personally conveyed by Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj, Mr. Oli made India his first foreign destination and Mr. Modi has reciprocated with a quick return visit. Janakpur and Muktinath were included in the itinerary and a confident Mr. Oli received Mr. Modi in Janakpur.

The visit was high on symbolism, less so on substance. Mr. Modi described it as a visit by the 'Prime Pilgrim'. With prayers offered in Janaki Mandir, Muktinath and Pashupatinath, the focus was on religious and cultural commonalities. A bus service between Janakpur and Ayodhya was inaugurated.

The joint statement is short. Only one of the earlier commitments, the 900 MW Arun III hydel project, has progressed and both Prime Ministers jointly laid its foundation stone. Of the four planned Integrated Check Posts, one is now functional after over a decade.

The 2018 statement prioritises cooperation in agriculture, inland water-ways, a survey for a railway line from Raxaul to Kathmandu and increasing air connectivity. The 2014 announcements included a railway services agreement, additional air links connecting Lucknow, Pokhara and Nepalgunj in

six months, setting up of the Pancheshwar Development Authority to complete the detailed project report in a year, concluding an MoU for the Nepal Police Academy, pledge of \$1 billion (increased by another \$1 billion after the 2015 earthquake) and creating a Buddhist circuit connecting Lumbini with Sarnath and Bodh Gaya. Most of these have remained announcements. With China stepping up its game in Nepal, this is no longer a tenable situation.

A pilgrimage is part expiation and part a new beginning. The first may have been achieved but a new beginning based on the principles of "equality, mutual trust, respect and mutual benefit", phrases that Mr. Oli now insists on including in every joint statement, will require time, avoiding mixed messaging and a sustained effort by India in ensuring implementation of long-pending economic cooperation projects.

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