

## Faith and diplomacy: on the India-Nepal relationship

When he visited India for the Agra Summit in 2001, Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf added religious stops to the trip — perhaps with a domestic constituency in mind and perhaps hoping for some luck too. His itinerary included a visit to the Nizamuddin dargah on his first day in Delhi and to the Ajmer dargah on his way back. But the visit to Ajmer never took place as the Summit was extended and then collapsed. In 2005, Mr. Musharraf took no chances and began his trip to India by first going to Ajmer.

Similarly, after an aborted attempt to visit Janakpur in November 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will begin his visit to Nepal on Friday by first landing in Janakpur, before he heads to Kathmandu for talks. He will also visit Muktinath in Mustang, which was on his itinerary in November 2014, but was cancelled at the last minute. Mr. Modi's disappointment over his inability to travel to both these places was palpable when he landed in Kathmandu, officials say. Shortly after landing, he gave a stern speech indicating that there was a lack of consensus-building on the Nepali Constitution. "That came as a shock to us, as just three months earlier, in our Parliament, he had clearly said that building the constitution was Nepal's job alone," said a close adviser to then Nepal Prime Minister Sushil Koirala.

What led to the cancellation of the Janakpur visit remains a mystery. The most obvious reason seemed to be the protests by the opposition in Nepal over Mr. Modi's plans to address a public rally in Janakpur. Another issue was that Mr. Modi had wanted to drive to Janakpur by road through the Birgunj-Raxaul checkpoint, and there was fear that his convoy would be accompanied by crowds overrunning the open border. Accusing the government of giving up Nepal's "sovereignty", the Maoists even threatened a parallel rally, leading to new security concerns. Indian officials say they felt snubbed when all this was conveyed to them and Mr. Modi decided to call off his pilgrimage plans. When the four-month-long economic blockade happened at the Raxaul border in 2015, many in the Nepali establishment held the bitterness of the past year responsible for it. New Delhi always disclaimed responsibility for enforcing the blockade, but the Nepali perception was fuelled by the fact that the last time Nepal had faced a blockade, in 1989, it had come after another disastrous diplomatic incident, when Sonia Gandhi was not allowed to enter Kathmandu's Pashupatinath temple by its orthodox priests, who said only Hindus could enter. Mixing personal faith with bilateral diplomacy makes for good optics when all goes well, but when bilateral ties suffer, it gets personal all too quickly.

Much has changed in four years. This time, officials say it was Nepal Prime Minister Khadga Prasad Oli who reminded Mr. Modi, during a phone call after the Nepal elections, that he should visit Janakpur at the earliest. Mr. Modi will — by helicopter, not by road across the border. Through this gesture, both leaders are signalling the closing of a bitter chapter in India-Nepal ties.

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When a child faces brutality, in or outside the family, society's contract with its own spirit is violated

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