

Strategies for Addressing Bilateral Issues between India and Nepal from the Buddhist Perspective

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Summary

Nepal and India have a long *sanatanī* historical relationship. Owing to the cultural similarity found in the Indus Valley civilization, some Nepalese scholars believe that the relationship can be traced back to at least 4000 years ago. After the time of the Mahajanpada era (6th century BCE), Buddhism started influencing the relationship, giving it a new dimension. In course of time, India lost its great Buddhist tradition, whereas Nepal has continued it in parallel with the Hindu tradition. Thus, there is a basic difference between Nepalese and Indian perspectives on our relationship. The Nepalese see the relationship with both Hindu and Buddhist eyes, whereas the Indians do not see the relationship from the Buddhist perspective. Another neighboring country to Nepal is China, and there are bilateral issues between them. In this case, Nepal and China have been trying to sort out disputes using their major soft power of Buddhism and its culture. Thus, there are fewer problems. On the other hand, the Modi government has been using Buddhism as soft power but as the minor part of Hinduism. In this presentation, I am going to discuss the Strategies for addressing 4 major bilateral issues between India and Nepal from the Buddhist perspective (namely 1. Territorial disputes; 2. Water resource management; 3. Security concerns; and 4. Trust deficit).

Keywords: *Nepal–India bilateral issues · Harappan Civilization · Buddhist soft power · water resources*

Introduction

Nepal and India maintain an open border with free movement for living, working, intermarriage and religious retirement (*kṣetrāvāsa*). The *roti-beṇi* (marriage) tradition allows citizens to cross without visas. Approximately 700,000 Indian nationals live and work in Nepal, while around 8 million Nepalese reside in India, including 32,000 Gurkha soldiers in the Indian Army (Kumar, 2024).

The 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship continues the legacy of the 1816 Sugauli Treaty, granting special status to each other's citizens and institutionalizing bilateral interdependence (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2025a; 2025b).

Historical Background

The 14th-century *Gopālarāja Vaṃśāvali* describes Kathmandu's transformation from forest to settled land as such "It (the Kathmandu Valley) was at first covered with a dense forest. Thereafter, Gautama and other sages came to live here" (Vajracarya, Malla 121). "Thereafter, the Gopalas originated (*babhūvaḥ*). Thereafter, the hoard of cows of a Gopala (cowherd) named Nepa, resident of Golaka (the Pashupatinath Temple area, Kathmandu), arrived from Mālākhā" (Vajracarya, Malla 25). We do not know actually, where Mālākhā is. Scholars like Sudarshan Raj Tiwari, in his book, *The Brick and the Bull* (2002) believes that a shared heritage of the use of backed bricks and terracotta bull figurines of Nepal and the Harappan Civilization show a long-standing exchange of culture between the two countries, Nepal and India. The mention of Mālākhā in the *Gopālarāja Vaṃśāvali*, could be ancient Melukhkha or Meluhha, the 4000 years old Indus or Harappan civilization's name in Mesopotamian texts. Furthermore, Gautam V. Vajracharya mentions a verity of the best milk-giving cow called *bahubrī* is depicted in the inscriptions and coins of Nepal (Vajracharya, Gautam V. 25). The Vedic-style humpback cow seems to be native Indian with long horn and a (soft) hanging skin under the neck are similar to the depiction of cow on the seals of the Harappan civilization (Rao 24).

Both countries belong to ancient Jambudvīpa (Bharatakhanda), sharing social, religious, cultural, and linguistic traits. The fragmented principalities of ancient and medieval India and Nepal have followed both the Hindu and Buddhist faith. When the East India Company of India and the Shah dynasty in Nepal, the both rulers were expanding their territories, there was a war between the two countries which was called the Anglo-Nepalese War (1 November 1814 – 4 March 1816). Nepal lost this war and the Treaty of Sugauli was signed in 1816, which set modern borders and paved the way of the present-day active the Treaty of peace and friendship - 1950 between Nepal and India.

Buddhism as Soft Power

Prince Siddhartha of Kapilavastu (Nepal) renounced his palace c. 534 BCE and attained enlightenment at Bodhgaya (India) by c. 528 BCE. His free movement from Nepal to India searching for knowledge and preaching his dharma was a great historical event of that time. His teachings and monastic culture constitute the "soft power of Buddhism". Early texts such as the *Mūlasarvāstivādinayavastu*, written by the Sarvastivadins probably during the time of King Kaniska I, in 2nd cen. CE, recount that Ānanda visited his Shakya relatives in Kathmandu on the Buddha's command (Levi, 1989–1990) and the mention of Buddhist monasteries and Mahāsāṃghikas in the Licchavi inscriptions of Nepal show Buddhism's early influence in Nepal since then.

Indian kings-Ashoka (273-232 BCE), Menander (c. 155-130 BCE), Kanishka (c. 127-150), Harṣavardhana (606-647 CE), and Dharmapāla (770-810 CE) -and Nepali rulers like Vṛṣadeva (early 4th cen.), Shivadeva (590-604/613 CE) and Aṃśuvarma (605- 620 CE) employed Buddhism to legitimize rule and cultivate regional influence. Ashoka's *dharma vijaya* campaigns reached Kashmir, Nepal, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and so on (Kaushalyayan, 2000; Shastri, 1996).

King Kanishka used this power to influence sending his mission to Kashgar, Tibet, China and Japan. King Harshvardhana and Dharmapala both used the title "Lord of Uttarāpatha" using the Buddhist soft power of India in the areas of Uttarāpatha i.e. Nepal, Tibet, China, Japan, Korea and other parts of that area. The Nepalese kings had also used the Buddhist soft power to consolidate their political power in the region. Nepal's northern neighbor Tibet, China was also much influenced from Buddhism and its soft power through Nepal.

Declining Indian Buddhist Soft Power

From the 12th century onward, Muslim and Mughal rule curtailed India's Buddhist heritage. Nevertheless, Buddhist nonviolence informed the Panchsheel principles in the 1954 India-Tibet agreement, inspiring the Non-Aligned Movement's 1961 founding in Belgrade (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2025c). After the 1962 India-China war, Buddhist diplomacy waned until the Modi government re-emphasized Buddha as an Indian icon saying, "Buddha was born in India" which implied Buddhism being integrated as a part of Hinduism. Nepalese protested against the statement of PM Modi. In this regard, the Newars of the Kathmandu valley as well as other Hindus of Nepal respect Buddhism as a tantric religion similar to the Hindu Tantra.

Buddhist-Inspired Strategies for Bilateral Issues

1. Territorial Disputes

The 1,751 km India-Nepal border defined by the Sugauli Treaty (1816) remains contested around Kalapani. Article 5 of the 1816 Sugauli Treaty states that Nepal would give up territorial claims towards the west of river Kali. Nepal's claim of the territory east of the Kali River is based on the Limpiyadhura origin, whereas India disclaims it saying the river takes the name Kali near Kalapani area not from Limpiyadhura. In this way, The Kalapani dispute is created for a territory of a 372-sq km area at the China-Nepal-India tri-junction.

Recently, a 161 year-long Ram Mandir territorial conflict between the Hindu and Muslim was sorted out peacefully in India. Therefore, there is a hope that the issue can also be solved with the appropriate dialogue between Nepal and India in the similar manner of judgement.

The Buddha discouraged territorial wars, intervening three times in conflicts between Kapilavastu and Kōśala. Emulating his farsight, both nations could establish a "Buddhist Schengen" for pilgrimage routes to Lumbinī, Bodhgayā, Sarnath, and Kuśinagara, fostering shared heritage and mutual respect.

2. Water-Resource Management

Flooding during the rainy season from the Koshi, Gandaki, and Karnali rivers strains India-Nepal relations. The treaty of the Koshi barrage was not fully successful to solve the problems of either side. The Buddha settled water disputes nonviolently between Kapilavastu and Kōliya, prioritizing human life over resources. The Buddha *vacana* is clear in this regard - "No war for water dispute (is allowed). Human blood is more important than water". He was in favor of dialogue when the water dispute of the Rohini River occurred between the two countries,

Kapilavastu and Koliya. Modern flood-mitigation technologies and equitable treaties-reinforced by ongoing dialogue-can honor this tradition.

3. Security Concerns

The Himalayas once protected Nepal and India from northern invasions. Nepal being a buffer zone between the two giant countries, India and China, has played a vital role to protect them from each other. Today, scientific advances erode natural barriers, raising security issues between them. There are bilateral security issues between the two countries, Nepal and China too. In this case, Nepal and China have been trying to sort out the disputes using their soft power of Buddhism. The result is better.

The security concerns of the three countries can be sorted out through the tripartite dialogue using the soft power of Buddhism. Thereafter, the traditional “Buddhist Schengen route” to pilgrimage the Kailasha Mountain and the Manasarovar Lake of Tibet via Nepal can be reopened. This was the ancient route used by the great Buddhist teacher Atishā Dipaṅkara Śrījñāna, from Bodhagaya of India to Tibet, China via Svayambhu and Mustang of Nepal in the 12th century. This way a tripartite Buddhist way of dialogue-including reopening the ancient Kailāśa–Mānasarovara pilgrimage route-could strengthen trust and cultural ties across borders.

4. Trust Deficit

India’s 2015 economic blockade and the recruitment policy changes under Agnipath undermined Nepalese trust. Nepal is a landlocked country surrounded by India in the east, south and in the west. In the north, there is the Tibetan plateau of China with high altitude tracks that was not helpful to transport the daily used goods. Nepal has suffered India’s four economic blocked in the past (Bhattarai 2018) which have brought economic and humanitarian crisis in Nepal. In addition, new Agnipath recruitment scheme has affected the long legacy of the Gurkha soldiers' cooperation in the Indian Army. Buddhism’s emphasis on refuge and compassion can guide policies that respect free movement and livelihood between the two countries. Joint cultural and academic exchanges can rebuild confidence.

Conclusion

Despite predominantly Hindu populations, Nepalese and Indians share Buddhist values of nonviolence, peace, and compassion too, because it is also in our DNA. Applying Buddhist soft power (which we have almost forgotten) - through pilgrimage access, cooperative resource management, academic exchange, cultural diplomacy, and open borders-offers realistic pathways to resolve lingering bilateral challenges.

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