



Cultural and People-to-People Relations between Nepal and India

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Executive Summary

Nepal, a landlocked country bordered by India on its eastern, southern, and western sides, shares its frontier with the Indian states of Sikkim, West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand. The ancient ties between the two nations have fostered multifaceted geographical, historical, cultural, and economic relationships.

The Nepal-India border is dotted with numerous settlements on both sides, closely intertwined. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, border security measures have been consistently enforced, though their implementation varies by location. It is understood that India adjusts the intensity of surveillance based on its perceived security risks in specific areas. Following the Pulwama attack, vigilance along the open border with Nepal has increased. As both governments tighten security arrangements, these measures are gradually impacting the daily lives of border communities.

Nepal is affected by India's relations with its other neighbors, primarily Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, as has been speculated in the past. However, what specific impacts arise from which issues? How do Indian public discourse, social media outbursts, and exchanges of comments influence Nepal's border regions? There is a lack of concrete studies to guide policymakers let alone meaningful public discourse on these matters.

There is little foresight on either side regarding what considerations should guide

border management. Since the pandemic, there has been a growing demand to ease movement in the "Seemanchal" (border region). Except for designated checkpoints, restrictions have been imposed on four-wheeled vehicles and local public transport crossing open border areas. This has made livelihoods more challenging for local communities. Previously, the general sentiment favored relaxed border crossings, but in the changed circumstances, even with security checks in place, there is a recognized need to restore the old rhythm of local vehicle movement.

"Border banenge aman (shanti) ke nishaan, dono mitra Nepal-Hindustan" (Borders will become symbols of peace, both friends Nepal-India) – this slogan resonates in the hearts of residents on both sides. But what can mere slogans achieve? The present and future of border residents are shaped by the decisions of the capitals of both nations. Some believe that if the media works with the intent to resolve and explain the issues of Nepal-India border residents rather than sensationalizing them, it could bring light to the darkness.

When one country takes action and it sparks concern in a neighbor, it becomes geopolitics. Similarly, when one country engages with another and a third country shows interest, that too is geopolitics. This is why India-Pakistan tensions have repercussions that reach Nepal's borders.

1. Introduction

The relationship between Nepal and India is unparalleled in the global context. If someone asks when this relationship began, it is difficult to pinpoint an exact date. Unlike relations with other friendly nations, which often start with diplomatic engagements on a specific date, the Nepal-India relationship cannot be dated in such a manner. Fundamentally, this relationship has been sustained by religious, cultural, social, political, and economic traditions. It is rooted in shared social and cultural values and norms. Emotionally speaking, it is often said that the Nepal-India relationship is as lofty as the peak of “Sagarmatha” (Mount Everest) and as deep as the Indian Ocean.

After India gained independence from British rule in 1947, and a few years later Nepal transitioned from Rana rule to democracy, a new chapter of physical cooperation between the two nations began. From the era of Ram and Sita to the modern world, the treaty signed on July 31, 1950, forms the foundation of contemporary Nepal-India relations. At the people’s level, Nepal and India are considered nations with a “vishisht” (special) relationship. Over time, this bond has only grown stronger. It can undoubtedly be described as a natural expression of people-to-people friendship.

While many things can be exchanged, neighbors cannot. Nepal is not only geographically but also in terms of its concerns largely surrounded by India. The Nepal-India relationship endures due to its historical uniqueness but making it more pragmatic and mature requires multifaceted people-to-people interactions alongside other factors.

Undoubtedly, territory is vital for a state, but even more important are the people living within its borders. Without people, borders are meaningless. Leadership must demonstrate the ability to take risks to protect the interests of its citizens. Managing the diversity of communities within a state’s territory is a fundamental responsibility of governance. Without this, borders are merely lines drawn on paper. Geography creates a distinction between the “center” and the “borderlands”. In the era of kings and monarchs, the center was prioritized, while border regions were often seen merely as sources of tax revenue. In some cases, the center has historically exerted a form of persistent dominance and disdain toward border areas. This creates underlying internal crises that threaten the continuity of governance and management. A liberal democratic system prioritizes borderland residents as much as those in the center. Occasionally, border issues may seem like obstacles to a state’s ambitions, but a state sensitive to its borderlands avoids intractable crises.

In Nepal’s case, it is connected to India on three sides. Its northern relationship with China (Tibet) is also ancient. The 1816 Treaty of Sugauli established the current borders, later incorporating new territories. This treaty also clarified the Nepal-India boundary. Settlements have existed along the “dashgaja” (no-man’s-land) separating the two countries since time immemorial. Open border has been a unique feature of this relationship. In some places, intertwined settlements have rendered the dashgaja practically symbolic, yet the local inhabitants uphold their sovereignty. The borderline signifies a distinct identity.

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2. Seemanchal: more than 'borders'

When a language lacks a term to express a concept, it is usually for one of the two reasons. First, the concept may be imaginary and do not exist in reality. The communities along international borders have historically been so socially, economically, and culturally integrated that they often fail to notice when political boundaries gradually erode other ties. They remain entangled in the web of the past. Second, the condition exists, but the central authority is reluctant to name it. The history of traditions along the border is ancient and rooted in “lived experiences”.

My challenge was to find a single, easily understandable term that encapsulates the multifaceted (cultural, social, economic, environmental) aspects of the Nepal-India border. The term “Seemanchal” retains the political boundary and the distinct citizenship it implies, but it lacks the barbed wire of division. Most importantly, it evokes no fear when crossing back and forth.

Just as necessity is the mother of invention, the concept of “Seemanchal” has been crafted to ensure the service, dignity, and prosperity of residents on both sides of the Nepal-India border. “Seemanchal” refers to the region that, though divided by an international boundary, has a present and future that are inseparable. In simple terms, it embodies the interdependent dimensions of border areas that maintain a distinct identity separate from the “center”.

“Seemanchal” respects the international boundary while acknowledging the existence

of the people living in these areas. The concept of a “border” reinforces the central authority’s perspective, where the boundary becomes a line of separation. However, “Seemanchal” emphasizes citizen-friendly border management. While treaties between two nations define the border, “Seemanchal” infuses warmth into the relationship. The notion of a “border” can provoke suspicion and conflict between nations, but “Seemanchal” fosters trust and confidence. Where a border is seen by the center as the end of its jurisdiction, “Seemanchal” perceives it as the beginning of a nation’s sovereignty. It recognizes both political and cultural identities.

When a state appears weak, it is the residents of “Seemanchal” who safeguard the border. Here, people have shaped history, though history has rarely had the time to document their stories.

Despite the reluctance of “Seemanchal” residents, securitization is intensifying on both sides of the border. Yet, our traditional relationships remain intact. At times, we have neither been able to cling to tradition nor develop a new foundation or standard for relations. There is a clear need for research and study to forge relationships in a new way, and grassroots dialogue is equally essential. For Nepalis whose farmland lies across the border, who cross to graze livestock or shop, daily life continues, but discomfort is also growing. The border remains open, but opportunities for local residents are shrinking. The border holds meaning because it adds a unique element to Nepal-India people-to-people relations. For “Seemanchal,” this border is not merely a drawn political line; it is also a symbol of paradoxical strength.

Nepal's government has committed that its territory will not be used against another country. India harbors concerns that Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) might use Nepali territory for activities against it. Similarly, there is apprehension that Chinese activities reaching the southern border could nurture anti-India actions. Misunderstandings have led Indian media to publish sensationalized news and analyses, sowing doubts among Indian border residents. In recent years, some organizations on the Indian side have raised concerns about changing demographic patterns in Nepal's border areas, the construction of buildings linked to specific religious institutions, the rise in religious ceremonies, and the alleged sheltering of infiltrators.

3. Cross-border People-to-People Ties (Borderland Relations)

Residents on both sides of the Nepal-India border have begun to hesitate even to point out the issues they face at the border. After all, they must live there. Just as small aquatic creatures avoid confronting crocodiles, it's wiser to stay silent. But when the water reaches the nose, there's no choice but to cry out.

Perhaps the solution lies in the initiative of "Seemanchal" residents themselves. Who better understands the closeness fostered by an open border than they do? That's why they have started discussing local relationships. Dialogues have begun between places like Rajbiraj-Kunauli, Birgunj-Raxaul, and Nepalganj-Rupaidiha. Those living across the border are the closest of neighbors.

Centuries ago, these areas were part of the same political geography. State boundaries shifted over time. The Treaty of Sugauli and the acquisition of western Terai lands a few decades later roughly fixed this borderline, defining the sovereignty of the region's residents. Yet, it is undeniable that deep, ancient, and historical ties exist between people on both sides. Building on this foundation, mutual grassroots dialogue has started near the "dashgaja" (no-man's land).

As border movement has become cumbersome, residents on both sides have been deeply hurt, and a wound is evident. No efforts to apply a balm are visible. "Seemanchal" residents are, after all, kindred citizens. Yes, their political identities have changed, but there is a deep mutual affection among the common people. The wound's root lies not at the border but in the "center". A game is being played to fulfill political interests by exploiting the border differently. To put it plainly, Kathmandu and Delhi are not addressing the psychological needs of "Seemanchal". A local poignantly remarked, "Bairang bho Seemanchal" (Seemanchal has become desolate).

Undoubtedly, the complex understanding of "security" has thickened the presence of security forces at the border. This system evolves with new procedures, changing month after month, year after year. What happened yesterday is gone today, and what exists today may not be tomorrow. Ultimately, neither Kathmandu nor Delhi has clarified what form this will take. It's possible an unspoken understanding exists between these centers. In modern state systems, "security concerns" are a mythical belief wielded at the rulers' discretion.

Two perspectives prevail here: “A good fence makes a good neighbor,” leading to border management based on this mindset, and the mythologizing of open border relations. Both approaches ultimately harm “Seemanchal” residents.

Whether Nepali or Indian, the common people are troubled and distressed yet harbor no enmity. Their love is so deep that they constantly strive to prove the border’s falsehood. This is why emotions spill over in local dialogues. Residents on both sides advocate for seamless movement. Such public aspirations, seen in East and West Germany three and a half decades ago, led to the fall of the Berlin Wall. The grumbling in both capitals, devoid of self-reflection, is not the ground reality of “Seemanchal” but a narrative crafted by strategists. However, the initiation of grassroots dialogue validates the need for citizen-led efforts to rejuvenate relations. Both sides feel the necessity to nurture and expand this with utmost sensitivity. Cross-border dialogues must spread with full sensitivity.

These dialogues often reveal suspicion, anger, and helplessness. Nepal’s dominant politics merely negotiates between the two centers. The desire to tighten border movement stems from so-called nationalist forces. King Mahendra sowed seeds of division, hostility, and discrimination among “Seemanchal” residents. He altered the demographic makeup of border areas, enforcing a rigid notion of “Nepaliness” that pushed millions of Nepalis outside the boundaries of citizenship and nationality. In the name of border security, conspiracies labeled certain communities with distinct attire and languages as “Indians within Nepal’s borders”.

Others were brought from elsewhere to settle near the border, while locals were marginalized in border guarding, treated as “others”. Thus, new settlers in border areas have different perspectives on cross-border relations. In India, too, post-partition, refugees were settled in specific border areas. New settlers have fostered a new understanding of “Seemanchal” relations, while locals exhibit a distinct resonance. They are no longer willing to be confined within the narrow boundaries of border security but feel powerless before the “center”. Ultimately, it is the center that decides the processes to be adopted at the border.

A border is never entirely natural; it is shaped and utilized by the state to suit its interests. However, if cross-border relationships remain interactive, they exert moral pressure on the “centers” to correct their trump cards. Currently, borders are instilling fear rather than confidence among nearby residents. Ordinary people hesitate to cross back and forth hastily. Marital ties are increasingly becoming exceptions rather than the norm. Consequently, in mutual dialogues, the Wagah-Attari border emerges as a symbolic reference. Is our fate being steered toward such a managed arrangement? Personal conversations reveal emotions that are not fully conveyed in public forums. In India, there is fear that commenting on national security might invite backlash, while in Nepal, criticizing the center over border movement risks unraveling the mask of “rastriyata” (nationalism). The trend of gauging “Seemanchal” relations through the lens of abstract security fears has become a pitfall in the path of wholesome relations.

In Nepal, concerns about cross-border issues are raised, but they are rarely echoed on the other side. The utility of an open border, as understood here, is not reflected structurally there. In India, the responsibility for managing the international border is often deflected to “Delhi”. Here, too, it has not become a resonant political voice. Nepal’s provincial assemblies or federal parliament, connected to Indian states, have not amplified border-related public concerns. These issues sporadically surface in social-economic platforms and media. Until public aspirations are expressed with equal intensity on both sides, the cycle of ordinary people feeling humiliated, insecure, and isolated at the border will not cease.

Future local dialogues must address five “S” themes to find peace. First, ‘Sapanaharuko Sajhapan’ (shared dreams)—how will cities, markets, and settlements on both sides evolve, and how will open border interdependence contribute? Second, ‘Samarthyako pahichaan’ (recognizing strengths)—each side has its unique heritage, temperament, and potential; how can these be developed complementarily? Third, ‘Samuhik vivek’ (collective wisdom)—speaking out against undesirable elements or activities. Previously, if someone from across the border obtained dual citizenship in Nepal, it was seen as solely Nepal’s problem; later, India recognized the need to bring such cases under legal scrutiny. Failing to expose unnatural activities or trends in border areas prompts states to impose their own measures. “Seemanchal” residents must take special responsibility to dispel legitimate state concerns. Fourth, ‘Samanwayko pahal’ coordinated initiatives—encompassing infrastructure development, disaster management, crime control, and cultural-

economic collaboration. Fifth, ‘Shaant border’ a peaceful border—leveraging the open border’s uniqueness to foster respected, prosperous, and secure citizens. The open border is not used solely by border residents, but those living closest naturally have greater stakes. They must not be treated like “bairang chithi” (blank letters) by their respective centers.

Why are we not guided by the mantra of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who, during his visit to Nepal’s Constituent Assembly on August 3, 2014, said, “We must make borders into bridges and not have them as barriers”?

4. Connectivity and Empowerment of People

A border does not merely divide; it also defines its surrounding residents. A border does not only separate; it connects. A border can be good or bad. Good because it evokes a sense of a nation’s existence; bad because it divides cultural communities.

Relations between the two sovereign nations are determined by their centers. Thus, international relations are inter-state relations. Only states are members of the United Nations. State representatives shape bilateral ties. Nepal-India relations, too, are state-to-state relations. Beyond the state level, relations are forged through professions, kinship, culture, religion, and language. Another potent factor shaping Nepal-India relations is the interdependence between one city and another, one place and another. This reality cannot be ignored in understanding Nepal-India ties. We are

defined not by our borders but by our bonds. Yet, the state remains the overarching umbrella. State-to-state relations rest on fundamental principles, influenced by geography, community, economy, politics, religion, culture, and history. A state's desired relationship with another is clarified by its adopted idea of connectivity.

Nepal and India share a revolutionary bond. Nepali citizens supported India's independence struggle and its subsequent milestones. Similarly, Indian citizens have backed Nepal's people's movements. Connectivity between Nepal and India extends beyond border residents. It is not confined to specific geographies or communities. The open border and dense marital ties make Nepal-India relations unique. The open border has made both countries safe destinations for employment and business. It has facilitated access to education and healthcare. Eco-tourism and religious tourism are uncovering new avenues. Cross-border financial transactions have become smoother.

5. Current Challenges of Cultural and People-to-People Ties

- Nepal-India youth friendship connectivity has not expanded sufficiently.
- There are no shared grassroots understanding of natural and human-induced disasters.

- Lack of structured dialogue between provinces and municipalities on specific issues.
- Nepal-India relations are multilayered, but state perspectives dominate dialogues.
- Academic efforts to explore new dimensions of relations are lacking.
- Large projects in Nepal with Indian partnerships face an uncondusive environment.
- Joint efforts against terrorism have slowed.

6. Conclusion

Experience underscores that Nepal-India relations are uniquely significant for both nations. They must be guided by a realistic understanding of each other's aspirations and needs, driven not by today's propaganda but by farsightedness. History cannot be fought, nor can geographical realities be altered. Credibility is the strength of international relations-it must be earned, preserved, and continually enhanced. Building mutual trust stems from recognizing each other's national interests, aspirations, and needs with restraint and prudence. A clearly defined relationship is the reliable cornerstone of trust.

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