

Diplomatic Practices in Nepal-Japan Relations: A Comparative Study Based on Regime Change

Sharmila THAPA*

Introduction

Long before diplomatic relations were established between Japan and Nepal, the people of these two countries established connections and friendship a century ago when the Zen Buddhist scholar Ekai Kawaguchi arrived in Nepal on 26 January 1899, and stayed for two and a half years to study the sacred place Lumbini where Lord Buddha was born and to collect Buddhist manuscripts. After his visit, eight Nepalese students visited Japan in 1902 for the first time to study agriculture, mining, papermaking, and mechanical engineering. Since their return to Nepal, there was a long period of time during which Nepali students did not travel to Japan, but this practice was revived in 1958 with the Japanese government's MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) Scholarship [Barua 2002]. Dr Eizaburo Nishibori, who received an audience with King Mahendra in 1952, visited Nepal in order to receive permission for a Japanese expedition team to climb Mt. Manaslu. During the coronation of the late HM King

Mahendra on 28 July 1966, Ambassador Seijiro Yoshizawa attended on behalf of the government, and that served to spark the late King Mahendra's strong desire to establish diplomatic relations with Japan. As a result, diplomatic relations were finally established on 1 September 1956. Their Excellencies, Mr Seijiro Yoshizawa and Mr Daman Shumsher Rana became the first ambassadors of their respective countries [Embassy of Japan 2003].

Nepalese diaspora in Japan has been rapidly increasing in recent years, and I find this trend inspiring. Likewise, Mr Mahendra Bahadur Pandey, who was an academic before entering politics and was Foreign Minister of Nepal in 2014, said, "Japanese, too claim that Nepalese pressure in Japan is significantly increasing. They said that Nepali citizens are coming with a student's visa, and later on, they open a restaurant and stay longer." In the context of Nepal-Japan relations, public diplomacy is little different. Most Nepalese go to Japan as labourers, while people from Japan are mostly experts and researchers (personal communication, March 4, 2018).

* Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University

To date, very little research has been conducted on Nepal-Japan relations. In most of the literature, the researchers, as well as academics, argue that maintaining mutual trust and confidence with India and China has so far become the top priority of Nepal's foreign policy. Therefore, most of the government of Nepal leans only towards these two countries. Thus, as a researcher, I cannot disregard Nepal's geopolitical realities, but I still feel the need to address some questions through this research. Is Nepal's foreign policy truly neighbour-centric? If not, since Nepal has already established bilateral and multilateral relations with many countries, why has it not moved towards improving or establishing good relations with distant countries such as Japan, South East Asian countries, or Middle Eastern countries? Nepal's foreign policy seems underdeveloped in terms of dealing with countries beyond its immediate region.

The Rationale of Fieldwork

I am frequently asked why I have chosen to study Nepal-Japan relations. Even though the question seems quite simple, it is difficult to answer. Although I constantly rethink my proposed research topic, I hope to be able to provide a reliable and accurate answer to this question by the time I complete my PhD dissertation.

I went to Nepal a few months ago (2 February to 19 March 2018) to conduct research

in Nepal-Japan relations from the perspective of diplomatic practices. As per my plan, I conducted in-depth interviews with nine key individuals. Among them, there were diplomats, former foreign ministers, journalists, professionals, and academics. For these interviews, I developed a set of questionnaires based on diplomatic qualities, such as former diplomacy, current diplomacy, and public/citizen diplomacy to acquire knowledge on which type and in what ways diplomatic practices would be conducted between the developed and developing countries.

Before I left Japan, I thought I would be able to directly and easily access sources once I reached Nepal, but I found that it was a tough task because most of the old files and records, written documents, and even libraries—all the sources that a researcher



Photo 1. Central Library, Tribhuvan University

relies upon—had been scattered or stolen mainly due to the collapse of the building during the earthquake and technological insufficiency materials could not find in proper order in the library and national archives. In fact, very few records or literature were available. When I entered the central library at Tribhuvan University, the great earthquake of 2015 had done me and other researchers a great disservice, but luckily I found one bookshelf containing books related to Japan. Additionally, the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Japanese Embassy, and JICA-Nepal helped me acquire the data and related published materials that I needed.

I want to explore Nepalese activities in Japan. In 1987, it was reported that there were 248 Nepali citizens in Japan, whereas in 2016, there were 67,470 Nepali citizens, the sixth largest migrant group after Chinese, Korean, Filipino, Vietnamese, and Brazilian groups. Also, large numbers of Nepali students choose Japan as their destination for further study. Masako Tanaka, from Sophia University, Tokyo who is conducting research on Nepali migrants, argued that the increasing number of Nepalese in Japan is creating a so-called, “parallel society” that is isolated from and/or has difficulty integrating with the host community [Tanaka 2018]. Similarly,

the foreign student advisor at the Japanese Embassy in Kathmandu, Mr Harendra B. Barua, said that there are currently around 80 thousand Nepali citizens in Japan, and stated, “It would have been impossible to predict how many of them return home with skill and knowledge of Japanese culture and modernization. We can also now see ‘*Nekon-Jasai*’¹⁾ in Nepal” (personal communication, February 23, 2018). Japan has been a good friend to Nepal for a century, and its cooperation with Nepal is meaningful, which is being given and received without any political entanglement. But, since the mysterious royal massacre in 2001 and major political changes in Nepal, the government and the role of politicians and the diplomats’ involvement in Japan-Nepal relations have been deteriorating. This has served to increase my interest in conducting research in Nepal-Japan relations. This study has been done, taking three eras of diplomatic practices of Nepal, which are as follows; Panchayat era (1960-90), Constitutional Monarchical era (1990-2006) and Republican era (2006 onward).

Diplomatic Practices in the Panchayat Regime (1960-1990)

From the 1960s until around 1990, direct leadership was provided by an absolute

1) *Nekon-Jasai* means “Nepalese Spirit-Japanese skill and knowledge.” This is a variation on ‘*Wakon-Yosai*,’ which means “Western technology or knowledge with Japanese spirit” and describes how Japan introduced Western technology and knowledge in the Meiji era for the industrialization and economic development of Japan.



Photo 2. Interviewing the Former Minister for Foreign Affairs of Nepal, Mr Mahendra Bahadur Pandey



Photo 3. With the foreign student advisor Mr Harendra B. Barua at the Japanese Embassy in Kathmandu

monarchy in Nepal, in which sovereignty was exercised by the King alone and which used to be understood mainly in three perspectives: the politics of a guided democracy, a party-less system, and an authoritarian system. The regime was based on the principle of “development first” and “democracy later” [Pradhan 2015: 14-15]. Former Minister Pandey said, “Diplomacy is a continuous process. It’s not true that when a regime changes it starts from zero; the regime’s nature will structure it. To satisfy their national interests and gain support in an international arena, democratic countries support every regime,

whether it be autocratic or democratic; a ruler has their own interest, how to extend their regime, so they are always thinking about how to balance external power” (personal communication, March 9, 2018).

Similarly, during the Panchayat Regime, King Mahendra and King Birendra had given top priority to Nepal’s relations with Japan. Ram Kumar Dahal, a professor of political science at Tribhuvan University, said that Nepal and Japan relations were/are cordial, founded on mutual trust and respect, and involved friendly bonded countries. The exchange of state visits by the members of the royal families made relations stronger during those days (personal communication, March 11, 2018).

In this regard, then King Mahendra and Queen Ratna made their first state visit to Japan in 1960 and then again in 1970 to attend Osaka Expo ‘70. Likewise, the present Emperor and Empress Akihito and Michiko visited Nepal in 1960 and again in 1975 to attend the coronation ceremony of King Birendra. During the first visit, both the Emperor and the King received the highest commendation from each of the countries: the “Grand Order of the Chrysanthemum of the Moon” (Japan) and the “Most Glorious Order of the Ojaswi Rayanja” (Nepal)². King Birendra was so inspired by the Japanese education system that he chose to study at Tokyo University in 1967. Bam Dev Sigdel,

an economist who studies the Japanese economy, said that Nepal had supported Japan in matters of trade, investment, and the peace process in 1960, 1970, and 1980, e.g. the Lebanon crisis, the Korean War, and the Arab-Egypt-Israel War (personal communication, February 27, 2018). In the same way, Japan also fully supported Nepal's proposal (made by King Birendra) to declare Nepal as "a Zone of Peace" in 1975 [Sharma 2010: 189-191]. Along with the royal visits, many officials, such as ministers and parliamentarians, made visits during the 1960s and 1990s.

Diplomatic Practices between Nepal-Japan in from 1990 to 2006

Since the restoration of the multiparty democratic system with the constitutional monarchy in 1990, Nepal's relations with Japan have been made or directed by the elected head of the government, unlike when they were made directly by the King, such as before 1990. In this regard, Prof Dahal said that when Nepal started practising democracy post-1990, new actors such as the private sector and civil societies of both countries became the stakeholders in foreign policy instead of the state alone. Moreover, Khadga Khatri Chhetri (KC), who is not only an expert on foreign policy and diplomacy

but is also known as a Nepal-Japan expert in Nepal, said that Nepal and Japan had enjoyed the best diplomatic practices from 1980 to 2006. This was largely possible due to the identical political structures (monarchy) and their styles and interests in both countries. Due to the similarity of their political regimes, the economic boom in Japan, and the positive popular perception of both countries, the bilateral relations between Nepal and Japan were at their peak during those days (personal communication, March 9, 2018).

The first non-royal high-level visit from Japan to Nepal during this period was in 2000 by then Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori. He expressed his desire to continue Japan's support in socio-economic development.



Photo 4. A Postal Stamp of Rev. Ekai Kawaguchi

2) "Ojaswi rajanya" was an order of knighthood of Nepal. In English the term 'ojaswi' means bright or brave and 'rajanya' means kinsmen of the *rajan* (king).

In 2002, former PM Ryutaro Hashimoto visited Nepal and was the first such official to stay in the heart of Nepal, overseeing various developmental projects in different sectors: health, education, sports, tourism, and children's health. A postal stamp of Rev. Ekai Kawaguchi was also released in 2002. During this period, a very few bilateral high-level visits were hosted by both countries. In contrast, the personal attachment and engagement between the two royal families have gradually deteriorated since the abolishment of the monarchy in Nepal in 2006. The attraction toward Nepalese royalty in Japan has significantly waned after the royal massacre in 2001, where almost all prominent royals were massacred; however, then Crown Prince Paras and his spouse visited Japan even after Gyandendra became the King of Nepal. Despite this, during the period from 1990 to 2006, there was only one high-level government visit: then Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala's visit to Japan in 1998.

Diplomatic Practices between Nepal and Japan after 2006

There has not been a significant paradigm shift in Nepal-Japan diplomatic relations even after the abolishment of the 239-year-old monarchy in 2008. Psychologically, the Japanese government and its citizens might have opined that there would be a political vacuum after the abolishment of the monarchy in

Nepal. However, unlike during the Maoist Insurgency (1996-2006) and the Royal coup (2005-2006), bilateral relations between Nepal and Japan gradually resumed normality, as Japan supported the peace-making and peacebuilding processes of Nepal through the UNMIN (United Nations Mission in Nepal), election support, and resumption of foreign aid, which was discontinued in 2002. (KC, personal communication, March 9, 2018).

Madan Kumar Bhattarai, a former HE Ambassador of Nepal to Japan (2011-15), also said that diplomatic practices between Nepal and Japan remain effective all the time. During Panchayat and post-panchayat, along with the people, the relations between two royal families provided a strong base to strengthen bilateral relation. However, after the end of monarchy people to people relation through cultural exchange and sport exchange has become the tool of bilateral relations. He said, "though diplomats were selected from elites or their relatives they were educated and qualified. And one thing is that they were very serious in selecting ambassadors/diplomats for Japan. But in recent days, the trend has changed; non-diplomats are made diplomats and sent." He also shared his experience when he was here as an ambassador and expressed a vote of thanks to the Japanese mountaineering team members, such as Junko Tabei, Yuichiro Miura, and other ordinary citizens who have not only expressed

their feelings but also helped by collecting the largest amount of money to provide to the victims of the earthquake in Nepal (personal communication, March 6, 2018). The same kind of sympathy was shown by Nepali citizens when they provided five thousand blankets and food to the Japanese people who were victimized by the earthquake and subsequent tsunami on 11 March 2011 [Bagale 2011]. According to Jun Sakuma, a chief representative of JICA Nepal, during and after the great earthquake that struck Nepal on 25 April 2015, they had extended assistance towards reconstruction and rehabilitation with a “Build Back Better” concept to support the earthquake victims. Not only this, but the JICA has also been granted loan assistance for a project to construct ‘Nagdhunga Tunnel,’ which will be the first tunnel in Nepal (personal communication, March 7, 2018).

Observations

After preliminary fieldwork, I learned how to dig deeper to extract authentic answers to my research questions. It is assumed that to generate an accurate picture, scattered records and documents must be stitched together into a bundle. With the answers provided by the

respondents and the available documents and literature, this fieldwork revealed that the way of conducting diplomacy between these two countries consistently remains open and liberal due to sovereign equality and non-interference in each other’s internal affairs. It is accurately observed that people-to-people relations have been consistently at a high level even before and after the establishment of diplomatic relations. The exchange of people and culture has become a tool with which to conduct diplomacy.

References

- Bagale, K. 2011. Nepal-Japan Relations, *Nepal Council of World Affairs (NCWA)*. Annual Journal 2010-2011: 47-50.
- Barua, H. B. 2002. *Pioneer Nepali Students in Japan: A Century Ago*. Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point.
- Embassy of Japan. 2003. *Japan-Nepal Relations*. Kathmandu: Japan Resource Center.
- Pradhan, Sunil. 2015. *Politics in Nepal: Monarchy, Democracy and Governance*. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Sharma, J. 2010. *Nepal-Japan Relations: Time for Strategic Partnership*. Kathmandu: Modern Printing Press.
- Tanaka, Masako. 2018. Extension of Nepalese Society in Japan? A Recent Trend of Migration from Nepal to Japan. PowerPoint presentation on 23rd March Embassy of Japan, Kathmandu.