

Book Review

**Ranjit Rae, *Kathmandu Dilemma: Resetting India-Nepal Ties*. Penguin, 2021, Rs.499,
pp.237.ISBN:978-0-670-09521-6 (Hardback)**

Reviewed by

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Volume II

Perspectives - A Peer-Reviewed, Bilingual, Interdisciplinary E-Journal

Janki Devi Memorial College

University of Delhi

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Kathmandu Dilemma: Resetting India-Nepal Ties, authored by Ranjit Rae, is an extremely engaging book on socio-political transformations in Nepal from an Indian perspective that divulges India's intricate relationship with Nepal. The author's professional engagement as a former ambassador to Nepal and his recollections enable the reader to get a ringside view of the domestic developments in Nepal. The cover design of the book depicting dark clouds over Himalayas, as the author mentioned, alludes to the state of relationship between India and Nepal with a lurking 'big northern neighbour behind the Himalayas'. The title of the book also suggests the intricacies involved in Nepal's approach to evolving a policy towards India.

The book underlines the impact of changing geopolitics on Nepal with a special reference to the role of China. It includes chapters on identity, nationalism, mutual perceptions, Maoist insurgency, constitution-making, boundary disputes, historical treaties, economic partnership between India and Nepal, co-operation in terms of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, civilizational connect, and the role of external factors including west in India-Nepal relations. The total of ten chapters included in the book is very well designed and organised. The content of the book is largely drawn on the author's personal recollections during his stint in Nepal.

Discussions on India-Nepal relationship invariably begin with the cultural link both the countries share with each other. Notwithstanding, contrary to popular belief, the factors that unite India and Nepal such as cultural factors separate both the countries. The factors such as

religion, culture and language have often become a point of contention in India-Nepal relations. The author begins the book by narrating the recent incident of a devastating earthquake that hit Nepal and the massive support given by India. Despite India's efforts, Nepal reacted to India with suspicion. In the book, the author narrates an interesting conversation with the prime minister of India and an intriguing question that PM asked him, 'why don't they like us?' (p.2); and the first chapter of the book is presented as an attempt to delve into this question that arises in the minds of those who are engaged with India-Nepal relations, especially from the vantage point of India. Nepal often asserts its identity as distinct from India as a means to ensure its independence and sovereignty. Nepal's recent attempts to claim Buddhist heritage, Ayodhya, legacy of Yoga, treatment of Hindi language, pride in being a non-colonised country unlike India, etc. are some of the instances of Nepal's claim to difference.

The author gives several other anecdotes that give the readers an understanding of the ways in which Kathmandu valley approaches India. One of the interesting highlights of the book is that the author has not shied away from mentioning the hierarchical social structure of Nepal based on caste and its interlink with culture and politics. This is also an aspect that distinguishes the author and the book from other major works on Nepal that are characterised by a sheer absence of discussions on the social realities of Nepal. The book gives an account of Nepalese nationalism that is not only defined by *pahadi* or hill aspirations, but also by other cultural factors as well. The 'modern Nepalese nationalism is very much a product of the mindset of the monarchy and the historical experience of Nepal, particularly under king Mahendra' (p.9).

Anti-India sentiment in Nepal has been created and recreated every time India got involved with the political changes in Nepal. India has a history of supporting the anti-Rana agitation, the popular aspiration for political change and democracy, the settlement of Maoist insurgency, and Madhesi issues. The author gives several instances from his personal experiences to reveal to the readers on 'Nepalese psychology' towards India. The anti-India sentiment in Nepal is

further increased by the rise of social media. While inquiring into the genesis of the anti-India sentiment in Nepal, the author also presents the reasons including the patronising attitude of Indian ambassadors. 'Anti-Indian nationalism' in Nepal is a fact of life and a significant factor in the relationship between India and Nepal (p.22).

Maoist insurgency in Nepal is a major development in the socio-political history of the country. At the time of political crisis and instability in the form of Maoist insurgency, India supported the twin pillar theory, backing multiparty democracy and constitutional monarchy. The prevailing view of the Indian government was to decimate the Maoists militarily. However, India was dismayed at the king's action of royal coup and his dismissal of political leaders. There was a transfer of political power within India as well while focusing on the imperative of having a broad national consensus between monarchy and political parties in Nepal. Eventually, India became suspicious of the king and supported the democratic forces in Nepal that culminated in a twelve-point agreement in Delhi (p.34). India stood for dialogue between political parties and the Maoists. The signing of a Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2006 earmarked the end of Maoist insurgency in Nepal.

The narratives on domestic developments in Nepal between 2006 and 2013 are not detailed in the book as the author left Nepal due to other professional assignments during the period. The author then abruptly starts with his stint in Nepal just prior to the conduct of Constituent Assembly II elections in Nepal. The democratic changes in Nepal catalysed the process of constitution-making. One of the biggest challenges of constitution-making is the inclusion of the aspirations of different communities including that of the Madhesis in Nepal. The agitation of community groups for representation made the political conditions in Nepal much more volatile. The political atmosphere on the Indian side also changed. A new government under the leadership of Narendra Modi was formed in 2014. He not only invited the SAARC leaders for his swearing ceremony, but also visited Nepal. Thus, India-Nepal relations reached an all-

time high (p.56) though Nepal was embroiled in an internal crisis of finalising a new constitution. The political mood in Nepal was vitiated as there were increasing protests and agitation from Madhesi communities for representation and rights in the new constitution. The author gives a comprehensive account of 'how India was unhappy with the manner in which the constitution was rushed through without making the necessary effort to take everyone on board' (p.78).

Nepal witnessed large-scale protests after the promulgation of the constitution. The book provides a comprehensive account of the post-constitution fallout. The role of India in Madhesi protests was misinterpreted and criticised by Nepal's ruling elite. Like the monarchists earlier, this time the leftists in Nepal played the China card. Consequently, there was an increasing role of China in Nepal. Though India favoured the redressal of the Madhesi issue, post-2017 saw a further evolution in India's policy. India's relationship with Nepal during COVID-19 was very volatile. Nepal's release of a new map claiming Indian territories also became a point of contention between both countries. This is interpreted as the Oli government's ploy to 'divert attention from his own domestic political problems' (p.124). Along with a detailed account of the disputed boundaries between India and Nepal, the book gives a comprehensive account of the issues that are potential irritants in the relationship such as the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship and the question of Gorkha recruitment into the Indian army.

Though several confrontations exist between the two countries, it is significant to note that an India-specific strategy is important for the overall economic growth of Nepal due to its geographical location. Adoption of appropriate economic policies can benefit both the countries to grow together. The humanitarian assistance and the disaster relief given by India to Nepal at the time of distress and the civilisational connect summed up as 'Roti-Beti Rishta' indicate the possibilities of cooperation. Though anti-India sentiment created for the political leverage by the ruling elite thrives in Nepal, people-to-people relationship remains robust.

Though the book gives a comprehensive account of the diplomatic exchanges and the state head's visits, some of the narratives looked trivial in a discussion on India-Nepal relationship, especially from a scholarly and academic vantage point. However, the author has succeeded in giving minute details on every domestic development within Nepal with an insight into the predicaments of the politicians of Nepal and the responses of India to political changes in Nepal. One highlight of the book is that the author gives insights into some of the indoor conversations that took place with the state's heads, which is impossible to find in any of the works of scholars or academicians as they don't have access to the opportunities that the author possesses as a diplomat. To sum up, this book promises the reader new insights into the complicated relationship between India and Nepal.

About the reviewer:

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