

India-Nepal, time to turn the page

PM Modi's visit to Nepal will significantly improve ties after they hit the 'Madhesi' trough in 2015



PRATIM RANJAN BOSE

When Nepalese Prime Minister KP Oli receives Prime Minister Narendra Modi at Janakpur on Friday, the mythical birthplace of Sita at the Madhesi heartland of province-2 in the plains of Nepal, history will come a full circle.

Modi was the first Indian PM to visit Nepal after a gap of 17 years in 2014. The upcoming visit will be his third, also a record for any major leader. Most importantly, this is the first time any top Indian leader will start a Nepal tour from a city other than Kathmandu.

The visit is of significance for more than one reason. For those in Janakpur and around, it is an opportunity to put the city on the world tourism map as Modi will kick-off the Ramayana circuit. The two PMs will also inaugurate a bus service between Janakpur and Ayodhya (UP), the mythical birthplace of Rama.

The Nepal government is keen to tap this tourism potential. Once a dusty city, the famous Mithila paintings now adorn the walls of Janakpur to greet Modi.

But for Modi and Oli this will also be an opportunity to bury the hatchet and give India-Nepal relations a renewed push. After his successful first visit to Kathmandu in August 2014, an upbeat Modi wanted to visit Janakpur on the sidelines of the SAARC summit in November 2014.

He was refused the opportunity by the then ruling coalition of Nepali Congress and Oli's Communist Party of Nepal (unified Marxist-Leninist). Many suspected

the CPN(UML)'s hand behind the fiasco.

In the following year, India-Nepal relations hit a low over the promulgation of the constitution and the Madhesi agitation. Oli, who assumed power in October 2015, emerged as the most popular leader of Nepal, accusing Delhi of enforcing a nearly six-month-long 'blockade' between end 2015 and early 2016, in support of Madhesis.

Change of stance

Since then, lot of things have changed on both sides.

Modi's strong intention to recapture the lost ground in the neighbourhood yielded mixed results, thanks to the China factor. If New Delhi made strategic advances in Bangladesh and Myanmar; peace and tranquillity was broken in Bhutan and Maldives.

Meanwhile Oli scripted a comfortable win for the Leftist coalition in the first election in Nepal after the promulgation of the Constitution; riding on his anti-India and pro-China tilt. He became the Prime Minister for the second time in February this year.

But just when voters expected him to step up the anti-India policy stance; Oli changed his tack.

In April, the Nepalese PM made his first foreign tour to India. Apart from entering a host of bilateral agreements, including the ambitious river transport deal; Oli promised cooperation for India-sponsored projects.

This was an important step as Indian projects had suffered during Oli's first term between October 2015 and August 2016 and China had taken advantage of that.

New Delhi, however, continued its development cooperation commitments as was evident in the rising graph of electricity exports from India over the last four years. India now meets a lion's share of 750-800-MW peak shortage in



Auspicious beginning A view of Janaki Mandir where Prime Minister Narendra Modi is scheduled to visit on Friday. REUTERS

Nepal.

In his second term, Oli has made concerted efforts to improve ties. In the last few months his government cleared hurdles for the ₹5,723-crore Arun-III (900MW) hydel project. On Wednesday, the Satluj Jal Vidyut Nigam Ltd got the much awaited generation license and on Friday both the leaders will lay the foundation stone for the project.

Nepal has also promised all cooperation to India's plan to build a rail link to Kathmandu. A survey will be launched soon in this regard. India-sponsored Raxaul-Birgaunj integrated check-post became operational last month. Work has also started for the laying of an oil pipeline to Nepal.

"There is a definite acceleration of Indian projects," said Vijay Karna, a former Ambassador of Nepal and Professor at Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu. He puts particular emphasis on the scheduled foundation stone laying for India-sponsored Police Academy near Kathmandu.

Power brings prudence

It is interesting to see why Oli made this U-turn, given that he was voted

to power promising to shun dependence on India and turning more towards China. China is not only building scores of hydro-electric projects, airports and other infrastructure but also investing heavily in opinion building in Nepal.

Unofficial estimates suggest, there are at least half a dozen institutes in Nepal researching on China-centric issues and delegations of journalists, businessmen, academicians etc are visiting China almost on a weekly basis.

Some Nepalese commentators believe the change in stance was inevitable as non-cooperation with India would hinder Nepal's growth prospects. Power, they say, has made Oli prudent.

While official statistics suggest 60 per cent of Nepal's imports are from India (and the rest through India), many senior Nepalese officials question the reliability of this data. According to them, India meets no less than 75 per cent of Nepal's goods and services needs.

Indian officials suspect that a major part of the third country imports are way above the consumption potential of Nepal and is routed to India through the long

unfenced border and gold tops this list. The dependence is highest in services. The Nepalese enjoy equal rights to Indian citizens. They not only join the Indian Army; but also the civil services.

True, India gains immensely from this deep cooperation. But as a small nation that suffered from political instability for decades and that is largely dependent on remittances; rocking the boat may prove disastrous.

Some commentators also suspect a Chinese hand behind Nepal's thaw in relations with India. Beijing can connect Kathmandu by rail from the Northern border but the Belt and Road will be incomplete, if not unviable, until India grants connectivity.

Mixed reaction

Whatever the reasons, the visit is very carefully designed.

For Modi it is apparently a pilgrimage tour, mixed with some business. Apart from Janakpur in the Southern plains, he will visit Muktinath to offer prayers, which is close to the Chinese border and a sacred place for both Hindus and Buddhists.

His last stop is at Kathmandu for business. He will also address a public meeting here for making a popular connect. Nihar Nayak of the Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis in Delhi welcomes the visit as an opportunity to recalibrate India-Nepal relations.

However, Nepalese intellectuals are a divided lot. Leftist and ultra nationalists are livid at Oli's volte face. As usual the blame is passed on Modi and India. Those trotting the middle path, like Uddhab Pyakurel of Kathmandu University feel the hype is unnecessary as Nepalese are still deeply anguished by the 'Indian blockade' in 2015.

But many others believe that Oli might showcase Modi's visit, coming soon after his trip to Delhi, as Nepal's rising importance in the subcontinent. For both sides, it seems to be a marriage of convenience.