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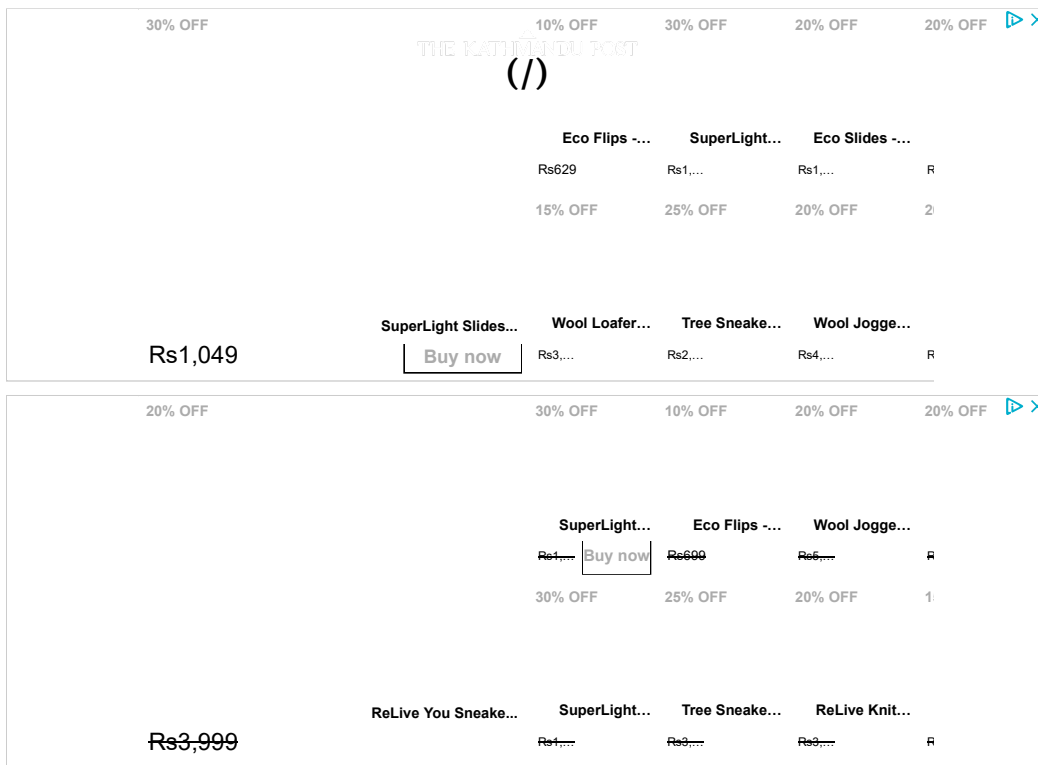
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OPINION (/OPINION)

A reset for India and Nepal

Foreign relations among culturally similar states cannot be left to raw emotions and one-upmanship games





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Nepali Prime Minister KP Oli’s official visit to India from February 19 to 24 is an opportune moment to reset fractured bilateral relations and restart on a promising path for sub-regional cooperation in South Asia. It can pave the way for normalisation and restoration of faith and trust that had dissipated in recent months, and bring back a different paradigm of integration and shared prosperity that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi espouses.

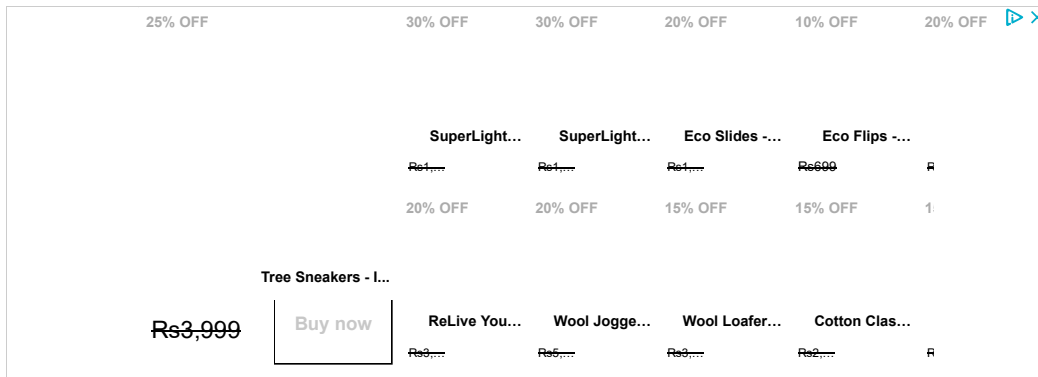
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Much to the disappointment of well-wishers of Nepal in India, and admirers of India in Nepal, ties had hit a low over the constitution that was adopted in September 2015, the subsequent agitation of the Madhesis, and the humanitarian and economic crisis resulting from stoppage of supplies along the India-Nepal border which was labelled by many Nepalis as a deliberate blockade by New Delhi.

Continuation of tradition

Thanks to Oli’s acceptance of Modi’s invitation and his continuation of the tradition of Nepali prime ministers making India their first natural destination after assuming office, the bitterness that erupted as a result of the unfortunate sequence of events of late last year is now being gradually overcome.

In India, there was a guessing game on the symbolic question of whether Oli would choose to visit Beijing ahead of New Delhi and the strategic repercussions in such a case. The fact that the Nepali prime minister scheduled a week-long engagement in India first, with an agenda encompassing many dimensions of relations with Nepal's inseparable southern neighbour, speaks volumes about the diplomatic repair work and constant engagement that has gone on behind the scenes.



Diplomatic history is rife with instances of tempers fraying in the heat of the moment, when allegations fly and every action by one side is taken amiss by the other. In those times, many leaders become blinded to the long-term interdependence and the symbiotic links that bind two nations together and tend to focus on the immediate tensions for narrow political gains. This was the delicate condition of Nepal and India when the Madhesi issue was at its peak.

Nepali elites interpreted India to be blackmailing them, and Indian elites believed that they were being scapegoated for Nepal's inability to resolve their intramural ethnic fissures and counterclaims. In Oli's own words, many "misunderstandings" crept up with India surrounding the constitutional logjam.

Return to normalcy

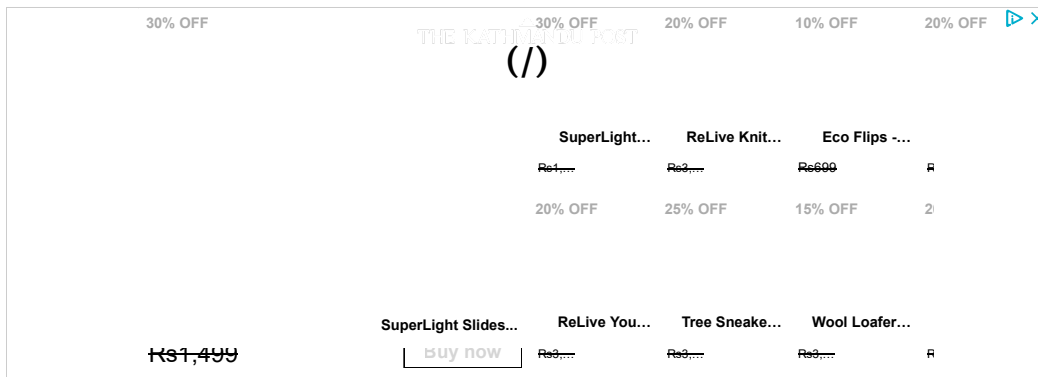
Thankfully, with constitutional amendments having been implemented to accommodate the Madhesi grievances, and India also revisiting its earlier stance of appearing one-sided in its approach to social divisions in Nepal, the stage is set for us to return to the harmony and liberal co-prosperity agenda that is central to Modi's approach to India's neighbours. It is pointless to keep debating as to which side 'won' or 'lost' from the recent confrontation, who blinked and who held his ground etc. Foreign relations, especially among geographically contiguous and culturally similar states, cannot be left to raw emotions and one-upmanship games.

A certain maturity of thought, modesty in words and perspective in action are

necessary to step back from brinkmanship and to coordinate policies for mutual

welfare of the two societies that benefit from friendly relations.

At the South Asian Games held in Assam earlier this month, Modi reiterated his vision for the subcontinent as a connected entity that benefits economically from closer integration and reduction of malice. "All South Asian countries are partners in our journey towards development. My vision for South Asia is the same as my vision for India—Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikaas", he said. By referring to his Hindi slogan, which has mainly been seen as applying only to domestic governance within India, as a driver of his neighbourhood policy, Modi is essentially trying to remind the world about his core principles which enthralled Nepal when he took office. As a supreme pragmatist who believes in the centrality of commercial diplomacy, Modi's invitation to Nepal and the rest of India's neighbours can be paraphrased as 'let us focus on economic growth and mutually beneficial trade, investment and connectivity, and keep the political prejudices and difficult psychological baggage aside.'



Oli is also on the same wavelength now, as illustrated by his constructive talk about there being only “minor problems” with India and that he wanted to “move in a new direction” with a “focus on inviting Indian investment in Nepal.” Among the items on Oli’s wish list are Indian assistance to complete construction of two hydroelectric power projects worth \$1 billion, laying cross-border electric transmission lines, road building in the Terai areas, construction of a second airport and a state-of-the-art hospital, technical education schools and a university. Oli’s large delegation to India includes Nepali businesspersons, and he will be in Mumbai to appeal to Indian investors. India’s commitment worth \$1 billion for the post-earthquake reconstruction in Nepal will also be fine-tuned in the form of more concrete projects during this path-breaking visit, which suits Modi’s flair for economic diplomacy.

Material and non-material relations

Given how oversensitive Nepal-India relations became in the last six months, the consensus on both sides to concentrate on economics and deliver the dividends of friendly neighbourhood to our people is a much-needed salve to calm down the nerves. Modi has articulated a plan for building a sub-regional trade block called BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal) that would construct roads and corridors for free movement of goods and services. It is India’s version of China’s ‘One Belt, One Road’ (OBOR) initiative, although on a smaller scale.

Nepal has reasons to believe it can counterbalance Indian pressures by joining OBOR. Like any small state sandwiched between two competing giants, Nepali foreign policy has tried to play off India against China and maximise maneuvering leverage for its own interests. Modi is not insecure about this ploy and understands its logic. But he is hoping that Nepali elites of all partisan hues realise the tremendous economic potential of the BBIN idea when it fully materialises.

If Nepal wants to have the Chinese cake and eat the Indian one too, it is not a loss for Modi because he is confident of the geographical and cultural affinities between India and Nepal that no other power can destroy. When Modi wore orange robes and performed prayers at the Pashupatinath Temple in August 2014, the cultural

diplomatic advantage was clearly with India. If Modi enables Oli’s quest to set up an Ayurveda University in Nepal, again he would be reinforcing the non-materialistic bonds that make Nepal so dear and special to India.

When the fracas around the constitution was peaking last year, there was consternation in Nepal around ‘who is the real Modi?’, viz. the one who had initially won all hearts including those of the communists and the Maoists, or the one who was painted as a diabolical ‘Big Brother’ using strong-arm tactics to trample Nepali sovereignty. Dire circumstances and political crises generate stark negative stereotypes and make people forget the essence of the other side. The truth is that Modi is different from previous Indian leaders in getting the smallest of countries to feel comfortable due to his egalitarian mindset. He can motor entire South Asia out of chronic underdevelopment if there are willing partners in neighbouring countries.

As Oli and Modi make up, it is helpful to recap what the latter told the Nepali Parliament two years ago: India is a ‘HIT’ partner that can help with highways, information technology and transmission lines. The more Nepal and India move away from overly politicised mudslinging that hurts both countries into a quieter mode of partnering for modernisation, the better the prospects for foreign policy living up to people’s expectations.

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