Different Aspects of Bhutan-Nepal Relationship

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Abstract
Bhutan and Nepal, two sovereign nations located in the central Himalayas, share similar geographical complexities, population dynamics, religious heterogeneity, cultural beliefs, and global challenges. They are compared here for being the neighbours with the same neighbours, and similar challenges. There are limited publications on the in-depth study of the relationship between the two nations. There are records of historical friendship, cross migration, and exchange visits and favours. Bilateral relationships date back to ancient days, and written records are available after the 8th Century AD when Guru Padmasambhava visited Bhutan and Nepal and connected the two countries with religion and migration of people. Bhutan's Dharmaraja visited Nepal to seek friendship and started the organised migration of Nepalese artisan and farmers adopting them as subjects. Nepal's social, legal, and political systems were replicated in Bhutan. Nepal, from time to time, offered heaven to Bhutanese exiles. Those interactions, as well as trade and tourism, have brought the rulers and governments' representatives face to face with winces or smiles. Although the two nations entered a diplomatic relationship in 1983, they do not have embassies in each other's countries and are officiated by their embassies in New Delhi. They have remained good friends on both domestic and international fronts. Both the countries are founding members of SAARC and active members of international and regional organisations like UNO, NAM, and BIMSTEC. This article highlights the geopolitical commonalities and that in the future will provide knowledge to theorise the emblematic relationships.

Keywords: Buddhism, Hinduism, independence, landlocked, sovereignty, trade

Introduction

Bhutan and Nepal, two independent sovereign countries in the Himalayas share several commonalities and are often compared. There are no records of both the countries when they appeared as distinct entities and when they were first named. The two countries got their recognition in the present context and boundaries after the British (East India Company) in India started targeting them for their colonial expansion. Nepal fought the British on several fronts, had a decisive war in 1815 that ended with the Treaty of Sugauli- 1815 by which Nepal lost almost 28 percent of its land (Shrestha, 2003). Similarly, Bhutan fought against the British- India in

1864-65, had a treaty of Sinchula in 1865 that took away almost 15 percent of Bhutan's land (Rennie, 1866). The wars and treaties with the British gave international recognition of the present context to fighting counting.

Historically, the people of Bhutan and Nepal cross-migrated to the extent that the population mix-up has become similar in the two countries. The area of Nepal is almost four times bigger than Bhutan's and its population is 30 times larger (Country Economy, 2021).

In medieval period, Buddhism connected the two countries. Guru Padmasambhava reached Bhutan, through Nepal (Aris, 1979). There are speculations and myths that Guru took with him a large population from Khotang, Nepal, and settled them in Jaakar, Bhutan. The descendent of those people believe and practice that they visit their ancestral land (Halesi-Khotang) at least once in their lifetime. Many people make this pilgrim- the practice supports the myth.

During the Muslim invasion of Nepal, Buddhist scholars from Kathmandu Valley fled to Bhutan to save and preserve their religious traditions. The outlooks of several monasteries in Bhutan appear as replicas of Nepalese temples that support the claims.

Modern Bhutan was unified in the Seventeenth Century of Dharma Raja Ngawang Namgyal and his successors. One century later, Prithvi Narayan Shah and his successors unified Nepal. There were interactions between rulers of the two countries in those times. The friendship and trust between the two countries, the interaction between the rulers and people were exemplary and friendly until the Nepal Tibet War (1792) in which the Bhutan side chose to remain non-aligned and the Nepalese side suspected Bhutan of supporting Tibet.

In the twentieth century, there were cordial relationships and exchange of visits between the royal family members that cemented the friendships between them. In the meantime, Nepal has transitioned from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy to people's republic whereas, Bhutan has been following Nepal's steps and has transitioned from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy. At present, both governments are working towards impressing each other with goodwill exchanges and visits.

Methodology

During the preparation of this article several policy documents, treaties, books, constitutions, and published literature were referred to. Limited literature is available on Bhutan's and Nepal's foreign policies. The qualitative research design was included to analyse data from secondary sources. Pieces of literature obtained from printed books and online libraries were arranged in chronological order. Discussions with Bhutanese and Nepalese historians, scholars, and writers were carried out to clarify perplexing issues related to foreign relations.

Results

Nepal is four times larger than Bhutan in the area and 30 times in population and Nepal generates 12 times higher GDP than Bhutan (Table 1).

Both Bhutan and Nepal share a long history of co-existence and learning from each other. There have been similar systems in both countries. Bhutan was an absolute monarchy for 100 years starting from 1907 AD and the system was reformed to a constitutional monarchy.

Nepal was under an absolute monarchy since 1768, had transient change from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy with a multi-party democratic system for 10 years between 1951 and 1960, which in turn was replaced by a uni-party system under a monarchy for thirty years. Then in 1990, multiparty democracy was restored, with a constitutional monarch as the head of the state through people's movement. In 2006, the constitutional hereditary monarchy was replaced with a federal democratic republic form of government (Table 3).

Table 1. Comparison between Bhutan and Nepal according to the area, population, and political changes

Traits	*Bhutan*	*Nepal*
Absolute monarchy	1907- 2007	Until 1950, 1961-1990
Constitutional monarchy	2008- present	1951-1960; 1990-2006
Republic	NA	2006- present
Area (before)	47,000 sq. km (2007)	147,181 sq. km (2020)
Area at present	38,500 sq. km	147,516 sq. km
Population	<1,000,000	30,000,000
GDP	$7.701 billion	$94 billion

Although people of similar phenotypes and believes live in the two countries; 75 percent of the population are Buddhist followed by 23 percent Hindus in Bhutan; in Nepal, there are 81 percent Hindus followed by 9 percent Buddhists, 4 percent Muslims, 3 percent Kirats, and less than 2 percent Christians. People who follow other religions are minorities in both countries (Table 2).

Table 2 .Demographic comparison according to religion (percent of the total population)

Religion	*Bhutan*	*Nepal*
Buddhism	74.8	9.0
Hinduism	22.6	81.3
Islam	0.4	4.4
Christianity	0.5	1.4
Bon or other indigenous faith	1.9	NA
Kirat	NA	3.1
Prakriti	NA	0.5
Others	NA	0.3

Although the two countries seemed to have more contracts than similarities, they have been sharing history, tradition, demography, and political systems since ancient times.

Early People of Bhutan and Nepal

The earliest group of people to own distinct identity in the Himalayan belt were the Kirat people. Their earliest civilization was along the Himalayan belt- the region that includes Southeast Asia, parts of India, and the whole of Nepal and Bhutan- as early as 30,000 BC (Chemjong, 1948). Their descendants moved in different directions. They lived before any religion came into existence. They ruled over the South-central Himalayas for about 1,225 years (800 BC– 300 AD). At least 29 to 32 Kirat kings, who ruled the region, are mentioned in the history of Nepal (Devi, 2011).

While it is generally mentioned that Kirat people moved from Nepal to Bhutan (Tamang, 1998) and (Wright, 1877), DNA and paleontological studies are yet to verify if the movements were from west to east, east to west of both the ways

Bhutan and Nepal in Medieval History

King Asoka (reigned 268 - 232 BC) of the Mauryan Dynasty of Bihar and Odisha ascended the throne in 272 BC. Ashoka led several wars to unify Mauryan Empire. After the decisive bloody battle of Kalinga, there were two dilemmas: First was the need for a strategy for the continuation of the unified empire with the victors and vanquished, rulers and the ruled in one kingdom; all the suppressed forces had to be subdued for good. The second was Emperor Ashoka's guilt of wars. The solution was the adoption of Buddhism - winning over enemies without wars. Youths were diverted from war to religion- all on state expenses. People were controlled on the line of Buddha's teachings of non-violence and peaceful coexistence enforced on them. However, the prerogatives to the monks who lived-in state-run monasteries were expensive burdens. King Ashoka sent the monks to different countries in a different direction as missionaries. These Buddhist missionaries had a good impact on the people of Sri Lanka and Tibet.

Buddhism got well established in Sri Lanka and Tibet. In the latter, it evolved as Tibetan Buddhism. Twenty years after his coronation, he visited the birthplace of Buddha at Rummin Dei in the Nepalese Terai. Commemoration of his visit, and inscribed stone pillars, three of which still exist, one each at Gotihawa, Lumbini, and Niglisagar. His inscription at Lumbini marks the spot where Buddha was born.

While Siddhartha Gautam was born in Nepal, his teaching in the name of Buddhism reached to Bhutan first through the teaching of Guru Padmasambhava and later Tibetans, who followed different sects of Buddhism and fought with each other, carried the practices with them when they fled from Tibet and reached the southern side of the Himalayas. Buddhism reached Bhutan after the seventh century AD (Hoernle & Stark, 1903).

Between 100 BC and 100 AD, distinct groups of people began to exercise their communal existence in the Himalayas between Iran and Nepal. They had their prominence in the western front of Nepal as early as the first millennium BC. They had a distinct complexion, language, custom, and costume. There were two factions within the Khas group- Khas Brahmin and Khas Rajputs (Bista, 1991).

Around the same time, most people living in the land which is modern-day Bhutan were Kirats or the people of the Kirat tribe or the Monpas. Their belief was Bon,

an intermix of Animism and Shamanism. The rise of power centres began to change the regional political scenario.

Zhanzhung began to rule in Central Tibet after 305 AD, Lichhavis in Nepal after 319 AD, Guptas in Bihar after 329 AD, and Kamarupa in Assam after 354 AD, there were friendships and battles between the rulers and population mixed up. Religion was both a binding and a dividing factor.

Guru Padmasambhava

Guru Padmasambhava began accepting kings' daughters and wives as his consorts wherever he went. Princes Mandarava, the daughter of Shastradhara- the king of Zohar, Sakya Devi, an orphan princess, and Kalashiddhi, an orphan weaver of Nepal, Yeshe Tsogyal. The queen of the King Trisong Detsen of Tibet and Mangala (Tashi Khyidren in local language) a daughter of King of Sindhu of PD Bhutan were some of his popular consorts (khandro.net, 2021).

While in Nepal he lived with his Nepalese consort in the cave of Maratika in Halese (Khotang, Nepal), visited Muktinath, Pharping, and several other places.

He visited Tibet at the invitation of the king there to suppress the opposition (demons). He was invited to Bhutan to subdue the opposition there too. He took the people from the Halesi area of Nepal to Bhutan to resolve the dispute with force and wisdom. He is regarded as the protecting deity of Bhutan and the mantra 'Om Mani Padme Hun' meaning 'Salute to the lotus born,' is written in almost any place that is feasible to write (Ngagyur Nyingma Institute , 2021).

King Sindhha invited Guru Padmasambhava to mediate a conflict and cure him of disease. Guru Padmasambhava, who was invited to Bhutan by king Sindhha, introduced Buddhism there. King Sindhha Bhutan must have been a powerful person to invite or accept the Saint Padmasambhava or the Jewel teacher and to have his name written in the history.

The Guru, a Buddhist scholar, and a magician travelled via Khotang in Nepal, Kalimpong in India; Pasakha, Sarbang, and Byakar (Bumthang) of Bhutan. Around the time of that event, an organized migration took place from Nepal to Bhutan. People from Nepal's Khotang migrated in large numbers to Bumthang.

Muslim Influence

In the 14th century, Muslim invaders destroyed the temples and chaityas of Nepal (modern-day Kathmandu). The custodian of Baudhanath Chaitya fled to Bhutan with a prototype of the temple carved out of a plant part. It was later replicated as Chorten Kora Chaitya in Tashiyangtse and Chein Devi Chaitya in Tongsa. The prototype made from plant had shrunken thus affecting the size of the new temples constructed in Bhutan to be smaller.

Khens were the rulers of Cooch Bihar, and their rule extended to Assam and Bhutan (Mukherjee, 2011). Mughals defeated Khens who dispersed in the neighboring areas and many of them in the wilderness of Bhutan. Today, their descendants live in the Shemgang and Mongar districts of Bhutan (Bisht, 2008) as one of the neglected tribes in Bhutan (United Nations Development Program, 2020), (Global Data Lab, 2021).

Soon after the demise of the Khen Kingdom of Bengal, King Kulamandan Kha, who began a new kingship in western Nepal (even though there is no evidence linking the Khens and khas, they appeared one after the other in adjacent places) was conferred the title of Shah by Yuan rulers. King Kulamandan Kha Shah's grandson Dravya Shah played away a running competition held to select a local ruler in Gorkha. He won a cross-country marathon organised to select an able leader, became the king of Gorkha and retained the position throughout his life, and inherited it to his dynasty for good. Shah dynasty began its rule in the Himalayas.

Unrest in Tibet- Tibetans fled to the south of the Himalayas

Towards the end of the sixteenth century, Tibet was divided into principalities ruled by different sects of Buddhists. They enforced principles of a sect upon the followers and rulers of other sects that led to frequent wars and displacement. The most powerful were the Tsang rulers of Karmapa Sect, Lhasa rulers headed by Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama both followers of Gelug sect, and U rulers in East Central Tibet. The Mongol forces often came down to release their supremacy and bring order among the fighting groups. A 21-year-old Ngawang Namgyal, the grandson of the prince-abbot of the Ralung monastery, was declared the reincarnation of the famous Drukpa scholar Kunkhyen Pema Karpo (1527–92) and heir to the Ralung monastery. A meeting between King Choing Dorji and Ngawang Namgyal was arranged in Tsang capital Shigatse in 1614. The

conversation between the king and Ngawang Namgyal resulted in no outcome for the lack of respect for the king (Aris, 1979).

Ngawang Namgyal returned to Ralung where his followers were attacked by Karmapa Lama and his followers. Ngawang Namgyal and his companions fled to Bhutan in 1616 AD (Aris, 1979). Once in Bhutan, the Tibetans led by Ngawang Namgyel fought and displaced the locals and began their absolute rule, named himself 'Dharmaraja' and the country 'Druk-Yul.'

Political Exchanges between Bhutan and Nepal

Dharmaraja Ngawang Namgyel visited Gorkha and Kathmandu in 1624. He learned the political system of Gorkha and realized the necessity to duplicate it in Druk Yul or Bhutan. He also adopted the *Mana-pathi* measurement system. He visited Swayambhunath, met king Laxmi Narasingha Malla of Kirtipur, took Nepalese artists to replicate Nepalese monasteries and fortresses, Buddhism, economic and political system (Dhakal, 2003). Taken from Nepal and Gorkha, resettled people had to teach and maintain the Gorkha's system introduced in Druk Yul. In 1640 AD, Shabdrung visited Gorkha, met Dambar Shah, and took back with him Gorkha people consisting of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishya, and Sudras-led by Bisan Thapa Magar and settled them at Western Bhutan and Duars. Since then, every Dharmaraja (each Dharmaraja was chosen on the principle of reincarnation) began to visit the Gorkha Kingdom (Dhakal, 2003).

After the Khas Kingdom disintegrated into Baise (22) and Chaubise (24) mini-states, there was an intermingling of different groups of people. The tribals, indigenous, and immigrants began to cohabit PD Nepal with their distinct shades of practices and beliefs. There were Khas, Magars, Gurungs, and Bhotes in the hills; Bhoksa, Mithils, Bhojpuri people in the plains in the west of Nepal. Newars and Khas people lived in the central region. Kirat people like Rai, Limbhu, Sunar, Jirel, Lepcha, Bantawa, Meche, Dhimal, etc dwelled from PD Nepal to PD Bhutan. A large chunk of Gorkali people was already in Bhutan.

In 1768 Gorkha army led by Prithvi Narayan Shah invaded Nepal (modern-day Kathmandu Valley). After the successful capture of several kingdoms and fiefdoms, the United Kingdom was named Nepal. It (King was from Gorkha and the name of the country was Nepal) must have been done to give a long-term satisfactory logic to both the rulers and the ruled ones. The people accepted the king of Gorkha as their king and had the name of their country Nepal. Thereafter,

Gorkha and Nepal were used synonymously until 1951 AD when the word 'Gorkha' was replaced with 'Nepal' and the adjective 'Gorkhali' with 'Nepali.'

Story repeated with Bhutan after the British came in contact. The rulers of Druk Yul and the people of Bhutan accepted the cross identity. Drukpas ruled over Bhutan. After the formation of the Monarchy in 1907, the Drukpas began to retain both the identities of the Drukpas and the Bhutanese to the extent that today Bhutanese and Drukpas are taken synonymous with each other.

Bhutan's Neutrality in Nepal-Tibet War

In 1792, Nepalese soldiers attacked Tashi-Lhunpo Monastery in Tibet that led to the second Nepal-Tibet War. Tibetans appealed to China for assistance. The Nepalese reached out to the British for help. The Chinese army blocked the Tibet-Bhutan passes to block possible British entry. In 1792-1793 a joint Chinese-Tibetan force invaded Nepal. Bhutanese rulers had a fear of meeting Nepal's fate. The Chinese Commander Fu Kang-an requested the leaders in Punakha to assist him in the war against Nepal. Punakha refused to assist the Chinese and chose to remain neutral. Bhutanese rulers' neutrality was perceived as negative by both the Nepalese and the Chinese leaders (Mathou, 2004).

In Nepal-Tibet War 1855, Nepalese Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana led the war. Nepal needed British support to win Tibetan forces that were supported by China. Thereafter, Nepal and British soldiers began supporting each other. British employed the Nepalese soldiers- called Gurkhas outside Nepal- to suppress the Sepoy Rebellion in India in 1857-58.

The 1962 China -India war had a long-term effect on both Bhutan and Nepal. Bhutan chose to remain neutral, did not allow its soil to use by India against China. But injured Indian soldiers were rescued and pulled into Bhutan for first aid.

On contrary, Nepal was safe from China-India War as the actual battle took place at the Arunachal-China border east of Bhutan and in Askai Cho in the Ladak region. However, 30 soldiers of the first battalion of the eighth Gorkha Rifles Regiment led by Major Dhan Sing Thapa fought against 600 Chinese soldiers. The Chinese side repeated announcements that Gorkhas being Nepalese, and friends of China should not support India (Gupta, 2020). The Gorkhas remained loyal to India.

India built 17 barracks and checkpoints along Nepal's northern border (Editorial, 2020), including at the Kalapani check post (Sharma, 2020) that sprouted cartographic horn locking between India and Nepal in 2021.

Burma War and Bhutan-Nepal Connection

By 1820 AD the Kingdom of Ahom had covered a greater part of Bhutan. The first Burma war broke out in 1823 when the Burmese invaded India from Manipur and Chittagong. British In India stationed Nepalese (Gurkha) soldiers along the Indo-Burma border. The Nepalese soldiers frequented the land between Nepal and Burma (Gurkha Rifles, 2021). It encouraged the Nepalese people to resettle in those areas. In 1828 AD when Druk Yul and Bhutan amalgamated and got present shape Gorkha people were the dominant people in Bhutan.

British in India and their liberal policies on the movement of people encourage flexible out-migration from Nepal. The country outside Nepal where Nepalese people resettled was called Muglan. People from all over Nepal migrated in all directions. It opened a path for the new waves of Nepali migrants from Nepal eastward to Sikkim, Darjeeling, Assam to Bhutan.

Between 1865 and 1880 youth from Nepal were preferred by the British as their sepoys and coolies. Viceroy Lawrence encouraged the settlement of Gorkha soldiers along the border of its country. Several Gorkhali families were encouraged to migrate to northeast India. Limbu from Panchthar, Rai from Khotang, Sunuwar from Ilam, Gurung from Taplejung, Pradhan from Dharan, reached Duars and Bhutan, singles or in nuclear families. They first went as soldiers and settled in North-east India and Bhutan. They were followed by Mishra, Pyakurel, Timsina, from Taplejung, Acharya, Rijal, Dabadi, Khanal, from Panchthar; Katwal, Thulung, Kulung, from Khotang. The flow of Nepalese from mountains of Nepal to Bhutan and Assam continued in pulses until the end of the second world war, after which back migration started.

Dorji family- that later became hereditary prime ministerial family in Bhutan- supported by Pradhan and Gurung Families of Bhutan invited and resettled Nepalese people in Southern Bhutan for cash revenues. There was an Earthquake and a sequence of after-shocks that disturbed the water supply system, both natural and people constructed. In some places in the mountains, people had to walk for days to fetch a pail of water. It was followed by a long spell of drought. The only welcome news was that new places were opened for settlement in Bhootang-

modern-day Bhutan. Mass Caravan from started from hills of Nepal ended in Bhutan and Northeast India.

Influence of Post-Independent India on Bhutan and Nepal

On 25 January 1947, the Nepalese in exile in India and dissatisfied Ranas with the support of Indians established Nepali National Congress. India began to involve in Nepal issues as its patron. The government of India signed the treaties of peace and friendship, individually with Bhutan on 8 August 1949 (Ministry of External Affairs, 1949), and with Nepal on 31 July 1950 (Ministry of External Affairs, 1950). While the treaties recognized the independence of the Himalayan kingdoms, it was only after the Indo-Sino war and membership to the United Nations Organisation that their sovereignties got recognition.

Gorkha Dissident Movements-1952 in Bhutan

Inspired by the activism of Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League (ABGL) led by Damber Singh Gurung in India, the Gorkalis in Bhutan, in 1947, led by JC Gurung and SB Gurung of Dagana Bhutan organised a political movement under the banner of 'Jai Gorkha' (Sinha, 2001).

The movement was followed by the formation of Bhutan State Congress in line with the Indian National Congress (Sinha, 2001). Mahasur Basnet Chhetri from Bhutan approached the prime minister of Nepal Matrika Prasad Koirala seeking support for the political movement in Bhutan. Jigme Palden Dorji the hereditary prime minister or Kumar Sahib, and Mahasur Chhetri were *Miths* (arranged friends). Dorji led armed troops to crush the movement by the Bhutan State Congress. They raided Mahasur's house and found pamphlets calling for democratic struggle in Bhutan. He was proven guilty of treason and arrested. A cow was slaughtered to make a leather sack. He was put into it and thrown alive into the River Sunkosh on 8 March 1951 (Gulati, 2003).

Girija Prasad Koirala's Bhutan Link

Girija Prasad Koirala had contested for the chairmanship in Morang Congress and lost the election mainly because his brother BP Koirala did not support him. Deceived Girija Prasad left for Bhutan to work for the establishment of democracy there (Panday, 2014).

On 22 March 1954, several batches of people were sent from India to Bhutan. Hundreds of protestors were intercepted outside Sarbang gate on the border

between Bhutan and India. There were onlookers too. A group led by Pasang Sherpa of Muktisena (freedom fighters group working for Nepali Congress) entered Bhutan forcibly, without much resistance, to hand over the list of demands to the Maharaja of Bhutan. Sherpa was a Buddhist Nepali of Tibetan origin, selected perhaps because he could talk the language of the Drukpa King. Jung Bahadur Pradhan one of the commissioners of Bhutan had brought with him soldiers and muscular youths from Chirang to control the protest. Pradhan ordered the Bhutan State Militia to shoot at the demonstrators. There was indiscriminate shooting, many fled beyond the border, at least 25 demonstrators succumbed to the bullet and another 17 were injured critically. Others were arrested and taken to prison (Dhakal & Strawn, 1994).

Kunwar Indrajeet Singh's Influence on Nepali Diaspora

In Nepal Kunwar Indrajeet Singh (Dr. K I Singh), who had worked in India and the Japanese occupied areas of Burma during 1932-34, became Prime Minister for four months. He had initiated an extensive land redistribution scheme in the early 1950s. He created a Liaison office in the foreign ministry to look after the condition of the millions of Nepalese diaspora domiciled in India, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Burma7. The Nepalese government called Nepalese Diaspora to return to Nepal to assist in the nation-building. The call from Nepal affected Bhutan. The King had to retain the people of Nepali descent and depend on them for taxes and food supply internally and ward off aggressive Chinese army from the border. More people were needed. The Bhutanese people of Nepali descent had to be made the part and parcel of the nation for its secure future.

In 1959 China took over Tibet and thousands of Tibetans fled to Bhutan, Nepal, and India. Bhutan closed border with Tibet and truncated all relations with China. Nepal continued to treat both China and India as equal and equidistant friends. Bhutan declared that India was enough as a friend. Bhutan needed a big population to survive in strength and to win membership status in the UNO. The government of Bhutan granted citizenships to all people living in Bhutan on condition that they severed their links with the Gorkha rulers (National Assembly of Bhutan, 1958).

Changes of Medium of Instructions in Schools in Bhutan and Nepal

The government of Bhutan removed Hindi as the medium of instruction from schools and introduced English medium education. Dzongkha was in its infancy was introduced as a compulsory subject in schools all over the country and Nepali language was taught as a compulsory subject to the non-Drukpa students in five

southern districts where the population was of Nepali speakers. The teaching and learning in Nepali Language continued until 1990 when the government declared Nepali language a threat to the development of Dzongkha language and removed it from the school curriculum.

Around the same time, Nepal removed Hindi from the school curriculum and replaced it with Awadhi, Bhojpuri, Maithili, Tharu languages. Nepali (and not Gorkhali) language was made compulsory throughout the country. English was introduced as an international language. Other ethnic and local languages and dialects such as Nepal, Tamang, Rai, Sherpa, etc. were neither banned nor encouraged. It continued until 1990, after which Sanskrit and a few local languages were sporadically introduced in the schools. After the 2015 declaration of republic, local and ethnic languages were given mandatory spaces in nation's print and broadcasts.

Exchanges of High-level Visits

There have been high-level exchange visits between Bhutan and Nepal. During the coronation of King Jigme Singye Wangchuck in 1974 Prince Gyanendra Shah had represented the Nepalese royal family. In 1956, during the coronation of King Mahendra, a prince of Bhutan had represented the country.

In 1964, the hereditary Prime Minister of Bhutan Jigme Palden Dorji was assassinated. Palden's brother, sister, sister, and friends fled to Nepal, remained as guests to the Ranas and Shahs there; others who fled with him took political asylum in Nepal.

Finally, on 3 June 1983 Bhutan and Nepal entered a diplomatic relationship. Both the kingdoms concurrently accredited their resident ambassadors to India in the additional roles. The RGoB further connected the two kingdoms with 'Druk Air'- the country's flag carrier (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021).

On October 5 and 6, 1988 the Nepalese Maharaja Birendra Bikram Shah, Queen Aishwarya Shah, and Prince Nirajan Shah visited Bhutan. While the Nepalese royal family was being welcomed in Thimphu, the people in Nepal were on the street demanding democracy and constitutional changes. In Bhutan, the royal family was aware of the wave of democracy reaching Bhutan soon. The rulers in Bhutan were planning for a population design to make a majority in their favor; they probably informed the Nepalese King about the upcoming depopulation exercise they were

mulling over. There wasn't a long wait. As the RGoB started systemic categorization and expulsion of its citizens, the call for democracy and human rights started in Bhutan.

Bhutan's Religious and Educational links with Nepal

There is a legend that links the Halesi Mahadev site in Nepal to the Maharaja of Bhutan. Bhutan's third Maharaja Jigme Dorji Wangchuck had a daughter but no male heir to the throne. A gardener- a Nepali man working for the royal couple suggested visiting Nepal and praying to Halesi Mahadev. After a prayer to Halesi Mahadev by the royalties, an heir to the throne was born- Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who later became the king. The royal couple had vowed to an elaborate ceremony in return for the gift. The promise was long pending. Maharaja Jigme Singye Wangchuck visited Nepal to attend the third SAARC summit in November 1987. Maharaja took the time to visit Halesi Mahadev in Khotang in central Nepal (Panday, 2014).

In November 1989, the King of Bhutan sent Om Pradhan to convince the leaders in Kathmandu not to support the Bhutanese dissidents. Pradhan had maintained close ties with the palace and bureaucrats in both Thimphu and Kathmandu. He revived Bhutan-Nepal Friendship Association (Druk-Bel Thuendrel Tshogpa). T. Tobgyel, the minister for social service and communications was the president of the association. The vice president was Om Pradhan, and the secretary-general was Rinzin Dorji, secretary of the special commission for cultural affairs. Nepal-Bhutan friendship and cultural society were formed back in 1969 during the visit of Bhutanese Prince Namgyal Wangchuck who represented the Maharaja during the wedding ceremony of Maharaja Birendra Bikram Shah of Nepal (Pradhan, 2012) and (Kuensel, 1989).

Bhutan used to send scholars to Nepal for higher studies under the Colombo plan and SAARC plans. The exchange visit of Buddhist Scholars between Bhutan and Nepal has been a long tradition. Bhutanese monks continue to visit Syawambhu and Kapan monasteries for higher education. Lumbini, Syawambhunath, Pasupatiath, Baudhanath, Halesi, and Kapan monasteries are the most visited religious sites by Bhutanese tourists.

On the Ides of December 2010, a Twin Otter belonging to Tara Air of Nepal took off from Lamidanda near Halesi for Kathmandu. It crashed on the way. There were twenty-two people including three members of the crew and 19 passengers.

Of the 19 passengers, 18 were Bhutanese Nationals who had boarded the plane in disguise as Nepalese (INAS, 2010). The easy guise reveals the undistinguishable similarities between the people of the two countries.

Eviction of Bhutanese Citizens of Nepalese Descent

A large population of Nepalese farmers and artisans were invited to Bhutan to secure its southern belt and pay taxes in cash. State-sponsored migration took place from Nepal to Bhutan. Instead of availing of promised welfare and support the resettled people and their descendants perceived discrimination against them. There were tussles in the decades of 1940, 1950, and 1990.

Between 1984 and 1988, the RGoB dived in plans to reduce the population of Bhutanese citizens who were unlike the ruling Drukpas. Their first target was the Bhutanese citizens of Nepalese descent. The RGoB started systemic categorization and eviction of citizens and coercive acculturation of those who were uncombable. Through the 'One nation one people policy' policy the Drukpa government declared Drukpa culture as the singular national culture and dictated the people to accept it after shunning their own. College students resisted, and they were soon followed by professionals and trainees of other institutes and bureaucrats. The dissent was controlled by arrest, incarceration, torture (many succumbed to torture), and eviction along with all the family members. Publications such as 'Bhutan we want Justice' (in English) and '*Bhutan Hamro Manav Adhikar Khoi*' (in Nepali) were circulated en mass consequently ending in the arrest of the readers, holders, and writers of such literature (Rizal, 2018).

At that time, India had imposed an economic blockade on Nepal that eased the RGoB to comb out its citizens of Nepalese descent. When Democracy was declared in Nepal, the Drukpa rulers were evicting its citizens of Nepalese descent and their sympathizers and supporters from other tribes. In the 1990s, a large population was exiled from Bhutan. Most of those exiled population entered Nepal seeking refuge.

The eviction that started in 1989 peaked in 1992, stopped after US senators led by Tom Lanthus wrote to the King of Bhutan asking him to stop further eviction as if there was a premeditated understanding on the number of people to be evicted.

People evicted from Bhutan reached Nepal, where they were without a roof and support for a long time. They became refugees and their sympathizers were

Nepalese leaders who had returned from exile and their cadres**.** Between January 1991 and April 1993; 84 thousand Bhutanese reached Nepal as refugees. There were 15 rounds of bilateral talks between Bhutan and Nepal as the exercise to repatriate the refugees to Bhutan. In ten years between 1993 and 2003, there were agreements to categorize the refugees into four categories, refugees of a camp were scanned and categorized. When it was time to repatriate the refugees who had passed the verification, the Bhutanese delegation provoked a scuffle, escaped from the agreement, and left the exercise inconclusive. The governments of the two countries held several rounds of talks to solve the problem. The negotiations lingered indefinitely until eight western countries led by the government of the USA, decided to take them away to their countries, leaving a nominal number for the two countries to solve amicably. The burden of the Bhutanese refugees on Nepal has reduced but the problem remains unsolved until today.

The United States, supported by the government of Australia, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, and the U K, resettled the majority of the refugees to their countries leaving less than 10 thousand on the share of the Bhutan and Nepal to absorb them.

Nepal-fear Triggered Reforms in Bhutan

The 2001 massacre in the royal palace in Kathmandu shocked the world and trembled the royal palace in Thimphu. Prince Jigme Kesar in Thimphu was nearing the age of the accused Prince Dipendra of Nepal. In addition, Prince Kesar has 10 siblings of almost the same age. People were calling for democracy for several decades followed by a series of dissident movements. The king had threatened to abdicate the throne if he failed to solve the dissident movement and he failed.

The reigning king chose to officially step down from the throne and promote one of his sons to ascend on the throne. Between 1998 and 2008, a constitution was drafted and promulgated. Ban that used to be on the formation of political parties was lifted, and chosen political parties were invited to contest elections. Thimphu learned the lessons of Kathmandu and took precautions. Since 2008, Bhutan has had periodic elections. There were elections in 2008, 2013, and 2018 where new parties won the election each time. In Nepal, there are frequent changes in political systems and elections. Bhutan remains a constitutional monarchy with a centralized government but Nepal has embarked on a federal system with seven provinces and three tiers of governments.

Bhutan and Nepal's Common Memberships

Both Bhutan and Nepal are members of several international and regional bodies (Table 3). Three countries, namely India, Bangladesh, and Kuwait have their embassies and 14 countries have their consuls in Bhutan. It has diplomatic relations with 54 countries (Sibbal, 2020) and the European Union, and embassies in eight countries (MOFA-Bhutan, 2021).

Thirty-one countries have residential embassies in Nepal, and it has its embassies in 25 countries, four permanent missions to the UN, and offices of consulate generals in 25 cities (Ministery of Foreign Affairs, 2021). Both Bhutan and Nepal are founding members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). Nepal acceded to WTO in 2004 and Bhutan is dallying becoming its member. It has observer status since 1998 (World Trade Organisation, 2021).

Table 3. Comparison of activeness in joining international organisations and institutions

Membership	**Bhutan**	**Nepal**
United Nations Organisation	1971	1956
Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation	1997	1997
South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation	1985	1985
Non-Aligned Movement	1961	1973
World Trade Organisation	Pursuing	2004
World Bank	1981	1961
Asian Development Bank	1982	1966
International Monetary Fund	1981	1961
International Fund for Agricultural Development	1981	1978
Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank	NA	2015

Bhutan Nepal Trade and Transit

Bhutan–Nepal trade remains modest in scale. Bhutan exported roughly twice as much to Nepal as Nepal exported to Bhutan in recent years, with Bhutan's exports around US$8–9 million and Nepal's exports around US$4 million in 2022–2023.

Bilateral merchandise flows are small but measurable. Nepal exported about US$3.99 million to Bhutan in 2022, led by slag/dross, non-knit women's suits, and iron structures, while Bhutan exported about US$8.73 million to Nepal in 2022, dominated by gypsum and related mineral products (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, n.d.). These figures imply a trade balance in favour of Bhutan on direct bilateral shipments, although both countries route much commerce through India, which affects recorded bilateral totals.

More recent national compilations and customs records confirm the commodity focus and the limited overall scale. Bhutan's official trade yearbook records gypsum, salt, earth, stone products, and certain manufactured mineral products among top exports, and it explicitly records trade in electricity separately while showing that trade with countries other than India constitutes a small share of total external trade (Department of Revenue & Customs, RGoB, 2023). Bhutan's 2022 trade publication highlights the concentration of exports in a few HS categories and the administrative practice of quarterly validation of regional data, which helps explain year-to-year stability in reported bilateral values.

UN COMTRADE-based aggregations and market trackers show continuity into 2023. Trading Economics reports Bhutan's exports to Nepal at approximately US$8.65 million in 2023, with the bulk still classified under 'salt, sulphur, earth, stone, plaster, lime and cement' (gypsum and related HS headings) and smaller shipments of pumps, surveying equipment, and iron and steel products (TradingEconomics, 2025). Growth rates are uneven. OEC notes that Nepal's exports to Bhutan rose from roughly US$538k in 2017 to about US$3.99M in 2022 (an annualised rate near 49.3%), while Bhutan's exports to Nepal showed modest growth over the same period.

Logistics and policy context matter. Both countries are landlocked and depend heavily on Indian transit routes, which increases transport costs and complicates direct bilateral trade expansion. Official Bhutanese statistics and external trade databases both point to geography and transit dependence as primary constraints on scaling direct Bhutan–Nepal commerce. Any meaningful increase in bilateral trade would require improved cross-border connectivity, clearer transit

arrangements through India, and targeted facilitation for the mineral and light-manufacturing product lines that currently dominate exchanges.

Conclusion

Both Bhutan and Nepal have passed through similar socio-eco-political changes. They have learned from and depended on each other. The movement of people between the two countries is seldom difficult to restrain as they share the same phenotype, language, and culture. The people of the two countries share many similarities. The two countries can reap more benefits from each other through cooperation and healthy competition than by neglecting each other. There are several areas where one can complement the need of the other. The written histories show that Bhutan has learned more from Nepal than the other way round, there is a need for further research and discourse to better understand the historical relationship between the two countries.

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