

## **WE DON'T HAVE TO MEDDLE IN NEPAL**

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Geography and history seem to have combined to make Nepal strategically very important for India. While geographically Nepal has the status of a buffer state between India and Tibet, its long border with India has remained open under the dictates of political history. Evidently, the British were so impressed by the Gorkhas during the Anglo-Nepalese wars that in the Treaty of Saguali that was signed in 1814 at the end of their last war, they were treated by them with consideration and regard not generally reserved for the vanquished. The Treaty, in fact, ushered in an era of nearly a century and a half of abiding friendship between Nepal and British India. India's security concerns arose from the fact that the 1750-km long border between the two that was, consequently, thrown open, provided Nepal easy access to India's "heart-land", which could be misused by India's enemies by acquiring political influence in Nepal. Indian interests in the political developments in Nepal are, therefore, understandable. The history of Indo-Nepalese relations since Indian Independence as traced below would, however, show that the manner in which India has been meddling in the internal affairs of Nepal has done more harm than good to the Indian cause.

In order to maintain the atmosphere of goodwill and friendliness with Nepal after Independence, while the border were left as wide open as before, India entered into a tripartite agreement with Nepal, (along with Britain), on recruitment of Gorkhas in the Indian Army. Though at that time there was no real or perceived threat to India's security through Nepal, it had been appreciated that any political instability in Nepal could pose such a threat. India had, consequently, kept up a political vigil over the long drawn-out battle between the forces of tradition and modernity. In practical terms it was a struggle between the dictatorial powers enjoyed by the Ranas as hereditary Prime Ministers and the various political parties trying to democratize the system. The Indian sympathies naturally lay with the political parties but in order to divest the Ranas of their powers it was necessary for the same to be restored to the King first. India, therefore, seems to have, tacitly, sided with the King during this period. That was also the time when, with China occupying Tibet in 1950 and the Sino-Indian relations beginning to deteriorate, India had begun to sense a live threat to its security through Nepal. India hastened to sign a formal Treaty of Friendship with Nepal in 1950, making common cause of the perceived threat to the security of the two countries.

After the King regained his powers in 1951 the Indian moral support to the political movement for democratizing the system became more pronounced. Pressure was mounted on the King to hold elections based on universal adult franchise for installing a democratically elected Government in Nepal. The King finally yielded to the demand in 1959 when elections were held and the first democratically elected government in Nepal under BP Koirala came into being. All seemed to have ended well till just 18 months later when the King took every one by surprise by dismissing the Koirala Government and usurping absolute power. The country was given a new Constitution envisaging a party-less Panchayat system. The rationale provided by the King was that Westminster model of democracy did not suit the genius of his people. Subsequent events were to show that the King was not very wrong in his assessment and had good backing of his people. The

Indian Government's over-reaction in protesting vehemently over the King's move was not only un-diplomatic but also divorced from reality in that the position of the King in Nepal had not been correctly assessed. The tirade against the King was to cause the first breach in the otherwise

cordial relations between the two countries. As if to shame the anti-monarchy ideologues in India and Nepal, the system introduced by the King worked remarkably well and gave Nepal the much-needed political stability during the next fifteen years or so. Political peace was then disturbed only by students' demonstrations against the Panchayat system in the late 1970s. The movement had, evidently, been started under impetus provided by the Indian Socialists who had come to power in Delhi in 1977 as constituents of the Janata Party, and with whom BP Koirala had been close for the past three decades or so. This Indian interference in Nepal's internal affairs, even though unofficial, led to further deterioration in Indo-Nepalese relations. Fortunately the Janata Government was quick to realise the dangerous consequences that could result from antagonising the King who, apparently, continued to have a tremendous hold over his people. In 1979 Mr A B Vajpayee rushed to Nepal for "mending fences with the Himalayan Kingdom". This led the king to declare a referendum for the people in 1980 to choose between the Panchayat system and the multi-party parliamentary system. The result was a convincing (55-45) victory for the former. The political parties accepted defeat gracefully and adopted the policy of reconciliation. The King responded by introducing the 3rd amendment to the Constitution stipulating universal adult franchise but continuing to limit the arena of the contestants to that ordained by the Panchayat system. This, however, failed to satisfy the political parties and they beyond the elections held in 1981. The movement for restoration of democracy that was then to continue all through the 1980s seems to have had open support of the Congress Government that had replaced the Janata at New Delhi, leading once again to a sharp fall in the Indo-Nepalese relations.

Prime Minister V P Singh's decision in the beginning of 1990 not to meddle in the internal affairs of Nepal was a welcome change from the policy pursued by the previous Indian Governments. The decision resulted in the King becoming more responsive to friendly advice and suggestions from India. He agreed to the re-introduction of democracy in Nepal and in November that year he was able to promulgate the Nepalese Constitution drafted by a committee constituting representatives of various political parties and the monarchy. The new Constitution was to the satisfaction of all the political parties except the communists who were, apparently, working to a plan with ulterior motives. These motives ultimately manifested themselves in the form of the Maoist terrorist movement raging in Nepal since 1995.

After witnessing the dismal performance of the popular Government in containing the Maoist movement for ten years the King has once again dismissed the elected Government this year. There can be no two opinions about the popular Government's inept handling of the threat posed by the Maoist movement. The Maoist movement in its present stage is, indeed, full of ominous portends and the King may not have been totally unjustified in sacking the Government in the interest of Nepal's security. And yet India has reacted strongly against the action of the King. So much so that it has decided to withhold military aid to Nepal till the King restores democracy in his kingdom. Considering that India's security is closely linked with that of Nepal and the adverse effect that it could have on the morale of Gorkha Regiments of the Indian Army the Indian decision would, appear to be most imprudent. A "vibrant democracy" may be an answer to Maoist ideology, but can vibrant democracy be had for the asking at short notice.

It would appear that in formulating its Nepal policy, India has been more obsessed with a self-imposed moral obligation of upholding democracy in Nepal than securing its national interests. The political strength of monarchy in Nepal has, apparently, been grossly under estimated and the damage that the King-bashing is doing to the people to people relations between the two countries is not being fully appreciated, even as Nepali nationalism is becoming increasingly

synonymous with anti-Indianism. The China factor that has now opened up new options for Nepal does not seem to be taken into account and preferential treatment expected of Nepal, vis-à-vis India, continues to be taken for granted