



RELIGION, CULTURE AND FOREIGN POLICY: A STUDY OF INDIA-NEPAL RELATIONS DURING THE MODI ERA (2014–2024)

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ABSTRACT

Since 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has actively employed India's religious and cultural heritage as instruments of its "*Neighborhood First*" foreign policy in Nepal. This paper examines India–Nepal relations (2014–2024) with special focus on the role of religious diplomacy and cultural initiatives under Modi. Drawing on official documents, speeches, media reports, and scholarly analyses, it reviews major visits (2014, 2018, 2022) and projects (Ramayana Circuit, Buddhist Circuit, pilgrimage routes, cultural festivals) that highlight shared Hindu and Buddhist heritage. The analysis considers both positive and contentious outcomes. On the positive side, joint initiatives (e.g. Ayodhya–Janakpur bus, Lumbini monastery, sister-city linkages) underscored common civilizational bonds and yielded economic and symbolic gains. However, critics point out that Modi's *religious diplomacy* often diverted attention from unresolved political issues (border disputes, transit rights, the 1950 Friendship Treaty, 2015 blockade). In Nepal's secular polity, excessive emphasis on Hindu symbolism (e.g. Modi's 2018 pilgrimage tour) raised fears of *Hindutva* influence and alienated some Nepali stakeholders. The paper concludes that while culture and faith remain important bonds, lasting partnership requires balancing soft-power gestures with concrete economic cooperation and respect for Nepal's political sensitivities.

KEYWORDS: India–Nepal relations; Modi foreign policy; religious diplomacy; Ramayana Circuit; Buddhist Circuit.

INTRODUCTION

India–Nepal relations are deeply rooted in centuries of shared history, culture, religion, and familial ties. Spanning an open 1,751 km border, the two countries describe their relations as a “*special relationship*” under the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship. With roughly 80% of Nepalis and 80% of Indians identifying as Hindu (and both countries having rich Buddhist heritage), religion and culture have long been potent touchstones in bilateral interactions. Nepal and India also maintain close people-to-people bonds: millions of Nepalis have lived, worked, or studied in India, and millions of Indian pilgrims visit Nepali temples (and vice versa) (*Embassy of India Kathmandu, Nepal, 2025*).

Since Narendra Modi became Prime Minister of India in 2014, New Delhi has placed renewed emphasis on cultural diplomacy and soft power to engage its neighbors under the rubric of “Neighborhood First”. Nepal has been a central focus of this policy. Modi’s government has touted India’s civilizational and religious commonalities with Nepal while inaugurating cross-border pilgrimage circuits, cultural festivals, educational chairs, and monument restorations. At the same time, bilateral ties have encountered several political flashpoints: Nepal’s new constitution (2015), the ensuing unofficial blockade, a contentious border map (2020), and growing Chinese engagement in Nepal. This paper asks: **How have religion and culture been leveraged as tools of foreign policy and soft power in India’s engagement with Nepal during 2014–2024, and with what outcomes?**

The study covers major events of the Modi era, notably the Prime Minister’s visits to Nepal (2014, 2016, 2018, 2022) and Nepalese leaders’ reciprocal visits to India. It highlights key initiatives such as the India–Nepal Ramayana Circuit (Janaki Temple to Ayodhya bus/train), the Buddhist Circuit (Lumbini development, Buddhist heritage center), joint cultural programmes (festivals, sister-city accords, yoga promotion) and people-to-people exchanges. The analysis draws on government joint statements, media reports, and expert commentary to assess both positive effects (revived goodwill, tourism, economic projects) and contentious aspects (domestic suspicion, overshadowing core issues). Section 2 reviews relevant literature and context; Section 3 explains the analytic approach; Section 4 presents detailed findings; Section 5 discusses implications; and Section 6 concludes.

Literature Review

Studies of India–Nepal relations have long noted the interplay of historical/cultural affinity and geopolitical rivalry. Scholars such as Ghimire (2000) emphasize the **deep-rooted ties** –

often described as “kinship and culture” – that bind the two societies (Mohan, 2014). The 1950 Treaty institutionalized a special partnership, granting mutual rights to travel, work, and reside across borders. However, Indian influence has also been viewed skeptically by Nepali nationalists; incidents like India’s support for or involvement in Nepali politics (e.g. support for democracy vs. monarchy) have periodically strained relations.

Recent literature on Modi’s Nepal policy highlights a **greater focus on soft power and cultural diplomacy**. In 2014 Modi’s “*Neighborhood First*” rhetoric raised hopes of closer ties, but setbacks such as the 2015 Madhesi protests and alleged cross-border blockade (over Nepal’s constitution) created deep mistrust (Pant, 2025). Commentators note that India’s response – imposing an economic squeeze – backfired, empowering nationalist leaders in Kathmandu (Oli) and driving Nepal to seek Chinese alternatives (**Ghimire & Pathak, 2022**). Under these circumstances, Indian strategists turned to “soft” measures. Raja Mohan (2014) argued that Modi rightly recognized *cultural and spiritual bonds* as foundations for partnership, suggesting religious tourism and “twinning” of pilgrimage cities (Ayodhya–Janakpur, Sarnath–Lumbini) as instruments of shared prosperity. Indeed, building connectivity around Hindu and Buddhist heritage sites was seen as a way to economically revitalize Himalayan border areas for mutual benefit.

Other analysts have studied Hindu and Buddhist diplomacy as competing tools in South Asia’s power dynamics. For example, Chhabra (2020) and Zhang (2022) note a contest between India and China over Buddhist heritage, with both seeking influence through patronage of pilgrimage circuits (Ghimire S. P., 2024). Modi’s government has actively promoted Buddhist soft power (e.g. UN-recognized Buddha Purnima celebrations, Buddhist circuit trains) alongside its outreach to Hindus. There is a growing literature on “religious nationalism” under Modi as well; studies by Shani (2021) and Saleem (2021) argue that Modi’s rhetoric often frames India in civilizational terms (pure Hindu *Vishwaguru*) and downplays secular pluralism (Ghimire, S. P., 2024). Critics such as Saleem (2023) suggest that conflating Hindu identity with national identity can alienate minorities. In the Nepal context, the role of Hindutva has been less studied, but some scholars warn that promoting Hindu themes (in a constitutionally secular Nepal) risks empowering extreme groups and undermining pluralist values (Ghimire, 2022).

Despite these debates, few in-depth studies specifically analyze Modi-era India–Nepal relations from the perspective of **religious and cultural diplomacy**. Our review finds that

much of the existing commentary is journalistic or policy commentary (e.g., strategic studies, editorials). The literature emphasizes two broad points: (1) India under Modi has consciously leveraged shared religion/culture as soft power; (2) Nepal's complex domestic politics and external pressures (China) create both opportunities and frictions for this strategy. No systematic academic treatment focusing on the interplay of culture, religion, and foreign policy in this bilateral relationship during 2014–2024 has appeared, to our knowledge. This paper fills that gap by compiling evidence from official and media sources about initiatives like the Ramayana Circuit and evaluating their strategic and social impacts.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, document- and discourse-analysis approach. We systematically collected data on India–Nepal engagements between 2014 and 2024, focusing on incidents where religion or culture was invoked. Primary sources include joint press statements and government releases (e.g. Ministry of External Affairs communiqués). We analyzed speeches and statements by leaders to identify themes of “religious affinity” or civilizational ties. Secondary sources include newspaper archives (The Kathmandu Post, The Indian Express, Times of India, etc.) and reputable think-tank analyses (Carnegie India, ORF, Diplomat). For example, contemporary reports on Modi's visits to Janakpur (2018) and Lumbini (2022) provide factual details on projects and rhetoric (Times of India, 2022). Scholarly and policy commentaries (e.g. South Asia Forum, Annapurna Express) offer evaluative perspectives on outcomes. We also examined available data on cross-border cultural events (festivals, sister-city agreements) and infrastructure (rail links, monastery construction). By triangulating these sources, we identify patterns in India's use of soft power in Nepal. The analysis is organized thematically: the first part reviews official visits and cultural initiatives; subsequent parts evaluate media narratives and domestic reactions. Limitations include reliance on English-language sources (possible bias) and the difficulty of accessing Nepali-language opinion. Nevertheless, this method allows a holistic assessment of how culture and faith have been mobilized in bilateral diplomacy, and how they have been received.

Analysis / Findings

4.1 Official Visits and Religious Motifs

Under Prime Minister Modi, India's engagement with Nepal has featured several high-profile visits marked by symbolic gestures. Modi's first official visit to Nepal (August 2014) came

immediately after his swearing-in (**The Kathmandu Post**, 2014). In Kathmandu, Modi addressed the Constituent Assembly, emphasizing “*deep friendship*” and “*deep-rooted... cultural ties*” between the two nations. The joint press statement from that visit stressed a “*broad spectrum of political, economic, social and cultural ties... deep-rooted at both government and peoples' levels*”(ibid). Though Modi did not travel beyond Kathmandu on his first visit, his pledge to prioritize neighboring countries marked a new phase of optimism in India–Nepal relations. By 2016–2018, Modi began to incorporate explicitly religious symbolism into his Nepal visits. In January 2018, Nepal's Prime Minister Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli invited Modi to Janakpur—the revered shrine believed to be the birthplace of Sita, consort of Lord Ram. Modi arrived at Janakpur's Janaki Mandir on May 11, 2018, spending about half an hour in prayer (Mohan, 2018). He was received warmly by local officials and offered water to the deity, conveying the message that “India's history and faith are incomplete without Nepal” (Kumar, 2018). Along with these religious gestures, the two leaders inaugurated tangible projects—the Janakpur–Ayodhya bus service and the formalization of a cross-border Ramayana Circuit. The Ramayana Circuit, as part of Modi's larger vision for religious tourism, linked sites in India and Nepal associated with the Hindu epic. As one report noted, “the two prime ministers will jointly initiate the Ayodhya Bus Service and the Ramayan Circuit” at the temple premises. The bus and railway links were meant to connect Janakpur (Nepal) with Ayodhya (India), making pilgrimages easier and more accessible.

Indian media heralded these announcements as a “*major thrust in the revival of the Ramayan Circuit*” and a way to highlight shared civilizational heritage(Mohan, 2018). The *Kathmandu Post* later reported that an Indian tourism train—the *Bharat Gaurav Ramayana Circuit*—began regular Delhi–Janakpur pilgrim service by 2022, following up on the 2018 agreement (The Kathmandu Post, 2022). In May 2022, Modi made another landmark visit to Lumbini, Nepal, on the occasion of Buddha Purnima (The Indian Express, 2022). Notably, this trip did not include Kathmandu. Modi landed by helicopter on a temporary helipad in Lumbini, deliberately avoiding the new Gautam Buddha International Airport—built with Chinese assistance, about 18 km away (Ghimire & Pathak, 2022). The symbolism was clear: Modi sought to reaffirm India's historical and spiritual connection with the Buddha's birthplace. He offered prayers at the Maya Devi temple, poured water on a Bodhi-tree sapling he had earlier gifted in 2014, and laid the foundation stone for the India International Centre for Buddhist Culture and Heritage. Several Memoranda of Understanding were also signed—the ICCR and

Lumbini Buddhist University agreed to establish a Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Chair for Buddhist Studies, IIT Madras and Kathmandu University announced a joint master's program, and Indian firms committed to new hydropower ventures (ibid).

Modi's speech at Lumbini emphasized that Buddha "*knows no geographical boundaries*" and recounted the two countries' "*ancient cultural and familial ties*", invoking mountain metaphors to describe their relationship. These actions were widely interpreted as an attempt to deploy Buddhism as soft power, countering China's presence in Nepal. Commentators noted that Modi's choice of date and place "*conveyed that the shared culture between India and Nepal is far more valuable than the money that China has been pouring into [Lumbini]*". Indeed, Indian Express opined that jointly promoting Lumbini in the Pan-Asian Buddhist circuit was a "*belated attempt[] to deploy Indian soft power*" and reclaim influence in its Himalayan neighbour (The Indian Express, 2022). Thus, Modi's visits were staged as pilgrimages to mutual sacred sites – Janakpur for Hindus, Lumbini for Buddhists – to reinforce a narrative of timeless brotherhood.

4.2 Thematic Initiatives: Hindu and Buddhist Circuits

A distinctive feature of Modi-era diplomacy has been the institutionalization of religious tourism circuits connecting India and Nepal. The **Ramayana Circuit** and the **Buddhist Circuit** have emerged as flagship initiatives. According to Kumar (2024), under Narendra Modi's "*Neighbourhood First*" policy, India's engagement with Nepal has placed significant emphasis on **cultural and religious diplomacy**. Ramayana Circuit: Rooted in the Hindu epic, the Ramayana Circuit connects pilgrimage destinations from Ayodhya (the birthplace of Rama in India) to Janakpur (birthplace of Sita in Nepal) and other related sites. Modi's Janakpur visit in 2018 was explicitly oriented around Ramayana symbolism. As noted above, Modi and Oli inaugurated joint projects on Sita's birthday, such as a bus route to Ayodhya and the planning of a tourist train. By 2022 the plan was realized: the Kathmandu Post reported that "India's Ramayana Circuit rail, named *Bharat Gaurav* tourist train, reached Janakpurdham... carrying 500 Indian pilgrims" (The Kathmandu Post, 2022). This first-ever rail link between New Delhi and Janakpur (via Ayodhya and other stops) was hailed as a milestone in cultural connectivity. These initiatives positioned Nepal as an integral part of a shared Hindu civilizational landscape. For instance, an Indian news story explained that sister-city agreements—Kathmandu–Varanasi, Lumbini–Bodhgaya, Janakpur–Ayodhya—were signed to "jointly promote Ramayana and Buddhist tourism circuits" (Times of India,

2022). Such arrangements highlight the bilateral consensus on celebrating and valorizing shared religious heritage. Supporters argue that promoting pilgrimage circuits can stimulate local economies on both sides of the border. As one analyst observed, “Modi’s real intent appears to be the use of soft power such as religion and culture” to deepen ties by showcasing sites “not widely known outside the country.” Indian officials have repeatedly presented religious tourism as a generator of employment and regional development. Modi himself has argued that religious tourism could become “the basis for rapid economic growth on both sides of the Himalayas” (Mohan, 2014). In this sense, Janakpur’s revival is not merely spiritual—it is also strategic. Similarly, cooperation around the Buddhist Circuit, especially given Buddhism’s origins in Lumbini, has aimed to connect and modernize key pilgrimage routes.

Indian media reported that talks would cover “*transnational Buddhist tourism circuit covering pilgrimage sites in Nepal, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh*”(ibid). Sister-city pacts like Lumbini (Nepal)–Bodh Gaya (India) were inked to cement this link. Modi laid the foundation of a Center for Buddhist Culture in Lumbini, with Indian funding, to serve international pilgrims(ibid). The BJP-led government in India has heavily promoted Buddhist heritage as soft power; Modi is building on previous schemes (like the Indian National Mission on Buddhist Circuit) to include Nepal’s sites. Expert observers note that India and Nepal “have also agreed to jointly promote Ramayana and Buddhist tourism circuits”, effectively creating two transnational heritage routes. These projects leverage Nepal’s unique religious assets (Buddha’s birthplace) to tie into India’s multi-religious soft-power strategy.

Collectively, these circuits demonstrate how religion and history have been reframed as instruments of diplomacy. Through them, India seeks not only to market Nepal’s sacred sites abroad but to embed Nepalese pilgrimage economies within Indian-led networks. Prime Minister Modi has repeatedly emphasized “*common cultural and religious ties*” between the nations during these initiatives (Sood, 2018). Critics of this approach, however, question whether framing bilateral relations in such terms overlooks more pressing needs (discussed below).

4.3 Cultural Programs and People-to-People Ties

Beyond grand state visits, Modi’s government has invested in sustained cultural outreach in Nepal. The Indian Embassy in Kathmandu and institutions like the Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre (SVCC) have organized festivals, exhibitions, and educational exchanges to

strengthen public goodwill. For instance, SVCC has sponsored *India-Nepal Cultural Festivals in Lumbini* (December 2023 and 2024) featuring artists, folk performances and handicraft fairs(*Embassy of India Kathmandu, Nepal*, 2025). Such events explicitly highlight shared art, music, and traditions. The embassy actively promotes yoga, Sanskrit, and Hindi-language programs in Nepali cities(ibid). Media exchanges have increased: familiarization tours and media workshops for Nepali journalists and influencers aim to disseminate positive narratives about India.

People-to-people ties are also buttressed through sister-city arrangements and civil society links. Notable agreements include pairing Kathmandu with Varanasi and Lumbini with Bodh Gaya, as well as Janakpur with Ayodhya. Nepalese academic and cultural institutions have received Indian support. For example, during Modi's 2022 Lumbini visit, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) signed MoUs with Kathmandu and Tribhuvan Universities to establish chairs in Indian Studies and Buddhist Studies(Ghimire & Pathak, 2022). Indian-funded chairs and research centers, often named after historical figures (e.g. Dr. Ambedkar Chair in Buddhism), symbolize intellectual collaboration. Along with this, sports diplomacy (particularly cricket) has emerged, with joint matches and training camps to connect youth audiences.

Officials routinely emphasize that bilateral rapport is underpinned by “*deep-rooted people-to-people contacts of kinship and culture*”. The Nepalese government acknowledges India as Nepal’s largest development partner, but also highlights the cultural affinity: during a 2024 New York meeting, both PMs expressed satisfaction at progress in “*diverse sectors, including development partnership, hydropower cooperation, and people-to-people ties*” (**Khanal**, 2025). Indian decision-makers hope that by institutionalizing cultural linkages (festivals, academic chairs, youth exchange programs), the youth in Nepal will see India not as a powerbroker, but as a familiar civilization.

However, some observers caution that heavy reliance on religious and cultural outreach may have diminishing returns. Nepali writer Pragya Ghimire notes that Modi’s 2022 “religious diplomacy” visit achieved continuity in dialogue and some development deals (hydropower, air links) but essentially diverted attention from “*important political and economic issues*” like the border disputes and Eminent Persons’ Group report (**Ghimire**, 2022). There is concern that overemphasis on temples and festivals could narrow Nepal’s foreign-policy

agenda to cultural symbolism, potentially neglecting Nepal's constitutional identity as a secular, multicultural republic(*ibid*).

4.4 Infrastructure, Development and Strategic Projects

Religion-themed diplomacy in the Modi era has often been accompanied by promises of concrete economic and infrastructure support. Critics and allies alike note that in Nepal, "*the real potential*" to strengthen ties lies in delivering on development projects (roads, rail, power) rather than pageantry(**The Indian Express**, 2022). In practice, India has stepped up its assistance during this period.

Large Indian grants and loans have also supported infrastructure in Nepal's Terai region—roads, petroleum pipelines, and broad-gauge railways. Several of these projects were showcased during Modi's prime ministerial visits. For instance, during the 2022 Lumbini trip, India and Nepal signed agreements for the 900 MW Arun-3 hydropower project, as well as new road and air routes (Ghimire, 2022; Ghimire & Pathak, 2022). Likewise, in 2018, Modi and Oli had jointly laid the foundation stone for the Arun-3 project via video link. Between 2014 and 2024, India pledged nearly \$35 billion toward Nepal's development—covering community projects (schools, hospitals) and key railway lines such as Jaynagar–Kurtha and Joghani–Biratnagar (Times of India, 2022). These efforts serve dual purposes: they fulfill India's long-standing commitments while producing visible results that both sides can cite as evidence of cooperation. As Ghimire and Pathak (2022) note, Modi's Lumbini visit involved six MoUs spanning cultural, educational, and technological collaboration. The *Indian Express* (2022) reported that Nepal's Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba also invited India to revive the stalled West Seti hydro project during the same visit. The editorial praised Modi's "deployment of soft power" but cautioned that "the real potential for turnaround in bilateral relations lies through the more mundane route of infrastructure projects." This sentiment reflects a common finding: symbolic gestures without follow-up projects (e.g. promised airports, high-voltage lines, economic corridors) breed cynicism.

Importantly, the Modi era saw India move from a sometimes-criticized position of unfulfilled commitments to a more proactive assistance role. For instance, after decades of delays, India completed the Motihari–Amlekhganj petroleum pipeline in 2019 and helped commission the Jaynagar–Kurtha rail link in 2022(*Embassy of India Kathmandu, Nepal, 2025*). On the eve of Modi's Lumbini visit, the Nepali media reported joint statements on new connectivity,

such as more hydro projects and airport upgrades, suggesting India's agenda extended beyond temples. The Modi government has thus framed material aid as part of its 'Neighbourhood First' promise – implicitly linking it to shared civilization by announcing (for example) that Indian firms would build a "Centre for Buddhist Culture" with grant assistance. In summary, religion-themed diplomacy in the Modi period has often been bundled with hard economics, aimed at fostering both goodwill and dependency.

4.5 Media Narratives and Perceptions

Media coverage reflects the mixed reception of India's religious-cultural diplomacy. Indian press coverage of Modi's Nepal visits has generally been positive, particularly when viewed against the backdrop of China's expanding presence in the Himalayan nation. The *Indian Express* editorial (May 2022), for instance, described Modi's trip to Lumbini as a demonstration of India's *soft power*, intended "to reclaim some space in India's Himalayan neighbour." The piece contrasted Modi's emphasis on cultural and spiritual outreach with China's more transactional approach, marked by investments in infrastructure such as the airport and monastery near Lumbini. It praised the focus on "shared culture... more valuable than the money China has been pouring in," reinforcing a nationalist narrative that India's civilizational connections with Nepal transcend geopolitical competition.

Similarly, *The Diplomat* (May 2022) observed that Modi's Buddhist diplomacy resonated simultaneously with domestic Hindu and Buddhist audiences, seeking to "attract the religious forces of Nepal." The article implied that shared faith might serve as a bridge to overcome political mistrust between the two neighbours. Several Indian media outlets have echoed this sentiment, framing Modi's cultural diplomacy as a strategic counterbalance to Chinese influence. Swaran Singh, a professor of international relations at Jawaharlal Nehru University, was quoted as saying that India's deep "historical bonds" with Nepal represent a form of engagement that China simply "cannot replicate" (Adhikari, 2018).

In contrast, coverage in Nepal and international media has been more measured. An *Al Jazeera* feature by Adhikari (2018), titled "*India's Modi uses cultural ties to mend ties with Nepal*," acknowledged the goodwill behind Modi's initiatives but also pointed out that their practical impact remained limited. The article characterized Modi's Janakpur visit as "high on style and low on substance," capturing a recurrent theme in Nepali commentary—that symbolic gestures, while powerful, must eventually translate into tangible outcomes.

Nepali commentators share this view: Pragya Ghimire (Annapurna Express, 2022) described Modi's Lumbini trip as "religious diplomacy" and noted it "*overshadowed important political and economic issues, including border disputes and... the outstanding EPG report*". Ghimire acknowledged some immediate benefits (reaffirming Buddha's birthplace and signing investment agreements), but questioned whether Nepal should continue to engage in such faith-based diplomacy, given its constitutional identity as a secular pluralist state. This reflects a broader media narrative in Nepal: while the public reveres Hindu/Buddhist symbols, there is wariness about foreign policymakers using religion to shape Kathmandu's agenda.

Notably, Nepali politicians have at times leveraged religious nationalism themselves. For instance, following India's territorial claim map in May 2020, Nepal's parliament unanimously adopted a new map including disputed areas, framing it as a matter of "*national pride and religion*" (Patel, 2020). Such controversies have fuelled scepticism: the USC Public Diplomacy blog written by Patel (2020), bluntly stated that despite "ancient and cultural ties", India–Nepal relations were "diluted by mistrust" over border issues, and critiqued India for failing to use its "*cultural diplomacy*" to smooth tensions. In sum, media narratives fluctuate between highlighting the emotional allure of shared faith (supporting soft power) and warning that undercurrents of nationalism and realpolitik may undermine the cultural outreach.

DISCUSSION

The period 2014–2024 shows a deliberate Indian strategy: projecting religion and culture as bridge-building tools with Nepal. This soft-power focus has yielded some clear positives. First, it has generated renewed goodwill among many Nepalese constituencies. Pilgrims and devotees have appreciated Indian attention to their sacred sites; the Janakpur-Ayodhya bus and rail service and Modi's personal pilgrimages made headlines in Nepal and India alike, suggesting a sense of respect for Nepali religious heritage. The Lumbini initiatives – including Modi's public affirmation that the Buddha was born in Nepal and India's funding of a monastery – were widely welcomed in Kathmandu as reaffirming a key Nepali claim. By emphasizing shared festivals (e.g. joint Buddha's birthday prayers) and cultural events, the two sides have bolstered a narrative of brotherhood. These actions align with India's broader diaspora and cultural diplomacy, tapping into powerful emotional ties. Economically, both nations have attempted to capitalize on religious tourism: new pilgrims to Janakpur and

Lumbini generate business for hotels, guides, and artisans on both sides. The Indian media's optimistic spin – calling the relationship "*as stable as the Himalayas*" (Modi, 2022) – reflects how, in India, these cultural gestures are seen as a way to "rejuvenate historical ties".

Second, some concrete cooperation agreements have indeed followed these engagements. As the literature suggested, Modi's visits always included development MoUs: jointly developing hydro projects, cross-border energy trade, and infrastructure. By packaging aid with ritual diplomacy, India has reset stalled agendas. For example, after years of delay, Arun-3 power was revived; more trade corridor projects (oil pipelines, rail lines) were operationalized during this time. Analysts note that under Modi, India granted Nepal a record *\$1 billion* credit line for reconstruction (post-earthquake) and completed dozens of Nepali high-impact projects (Times of India, 2022). By coupling this with cultural messaging, India sought to remind Nepalis of its indispensability. This may help explain why Nepal's multi-party elites have remained willing to engage India even as Kathmandu courts Beijing. The Modi era also saw more high-level exchanges than usual: as of 2025 there had been at least 17 head-of-government/state visits on each side (Khanal, 2025), demonstrating that channels of dialogue have been kept open despite disputes. The strategic intent was clear – India wants Nepal as a friendly buffer against Chinese expansion, and shared religion was one of the levers to pull.

Yet the approach has also raised several concerns. A chief critique is that *symbolic* religio-cultural diplomacy can be a superficial salve that leaves core disputes unresolved. Many Nepalese activists and intellectuals remind that the 1950 Treaty issues (the equal-rights clause, transit arrangements), boundary demarcations (Kalapani/Lipulekh), and hydropower revenue-sharing remain unresolved. These are existential issues for Nepal's sovereignty and economy. Critics argue that by focusing on temples and rituals, India sometimes avoids addressing the harder political questions. An *Annapurna Express* analysis asked pointedly whether India's religio-cultural overtures have "trumped" more pressing policy concerns. After Modi's Lumbini visit, some Nepalis privately remarked that Chinese diplomats viewed Nepal's situation as one of "diplomatic surplus"—two great powers competing for influence—but noted that Indian gestures had not prevented unilateral acts such as the publication of a new political map. In 2020, when Nepal issued a map including territories claimed by India, Indian commentators observed the irony: "The two countries bound by ancient cultural ties now find their relationship weakened by mistrust." This highlights a

broader truth: without progress on concrete grievances, cultural affinity alone cannot rebuild trust.

Domestic perceptions within Nepal add further complexity. While many Nepalis cherish Hindu and Buddhist heritage, their 2015 constitution enshrines secularism, and nationalist movements remain wary of overt religious politics. Some Nepali critics view Modi's pilgrimage diplomacy as an extension of Hindutva politics—an assertion of Hindu primacy that could alienate Muslim or indigenous communities. The *Carnegie* analysis (2014) noted Nepalese liberals' concern that Modi's rise might "saffronize" Indian foreign policy and embolden monarchist or Hindu revivalist forces in Nepal.

Modi himself took care to endorse Nepal's republican constitution and distance from the monarchy (e.g. refusing to meet ex-King Gyanendra), but suspicions linger. Indeed, conservative Hindu parties in Nepal briefly revived calls for a Hindu state in the late 2010s, reflecting how religion in politics remains contentious. The *Annapurna Express* (2022) asked whether "religious diplomacy" is appropriate for a secular republic like Nepal. Mixing religion with diplomacy risks being interpreted as interference or cultural paternalism. Such perceptions have occasionally sparked nationalist backlash. During the 2015 blockade, Nepali leaders accused India of meddling on behalf of the Madhesi Hindus, while later cartographic disputes deepened mistrust. Even in ordinary times, Nepali social media has mocked Indian temple diplomacy as outdated. While many appreciate Modi's cultural outreach, others caution that it should not overshadow Nepal's distinct identity and priorities.

Finally, there is a distinctly diplomatic dimension. Beijing is fully aware of Modi's cultural strategy and has crafted its own response. China has intensified several projects in Lumbini—including an airport, highway, and monastery—apparently to counter India's presence. *The Diplomat* observes that India "finally" established its foothold in Lumbini after years of Chinese encroachment, suggesting that New Delhi's soft-power initiatives were partly reactive. This **cultural incursion by China** has implications for India's influence—culturally, politically, and strategically—in Nepal.

It threatens to erode India's traditional soft-power advantage, shift regional alignments, and influence border and security dynamics. Thus, regional competition risks turning ostensibly benign cultural gestures into moves on a strategic chessboard. Some analysts even accuse India of instrumentalizing religion for geopolitical ends—a view echoed by commentator

Swaran Singh, who argues that Modi's religion-centric visits were "aimed at shoring up Hindu support at home" while countering China. Even if partly driven by domestic politics, such moves undeniably shape Nepal's perception of India's intentions.

In sum, the Modi-era strategy of weaving religion and culture into foreign policy has yielded mixed results. It has made diplomacy more visible and emotionally resonant and has supported certain development goals. Shared pilgrimages and cultural events have kept a sense of civilizational friendship alive. Yet, without parallel progress on border disputes or treaty issues, religious diplomacy alone cannot ensure lasting harmony. The approach also risks inadvertently inflaming religious or nationalist sensitivities.

As one Indian strategist put it, "*India will have every reason to be concerned if Modi's personal faith or the Hindu organizations associated with his party... begin to influence the nation's foreign policy*" (Mohan, 2014); to date India has sought to reassure that this is not the case. For Nepal, the key issue is ensuring that such cultural ties bolster rather than undermine its secular, multi-ethnic social fabric. Both capitals thus face a balancing act: leveraging ancient bonds for modern partnership, without letting religious sentiment override political pragmatism or domestic diversity.

CONCLUSION

Over the Modi decade (2014–2024), India's engagement with Nepal has been significantly shaped by a **culture-and-religion-centric** approach. This study finds that India systematically wove shared Hindu and Buddhist motifs into its diplomacy with Kathmandu, from high-profile visits to joint heritage projects. Initiatives such as the Ramayana and Buddhist Circuits, cross-border cultural festivals, and academic collaborations illustrate New Delhi's faith in civilizational soft power. These efforts have generated goodwill, strengthened tourism networks, and provided momentum for new economic cooperation—from railways and pipelines to hydropower projects. In official and media discourse, Indian leaders consistently invoke shared faith and culture as enduring foundations of friendship. However, as this paper argues, there are limits. Cultural diplomacy can enrich statecraft, but it cannot replace substantive engagement on political and strategic issues. Many in Nepal were disappointed when temple visits failed to resolve core disputes such as border delineation or trade. By 2024, bilateral trust still bore the scars of earlier crises—the 2015 blockade, the 2020 map controversy—suggesting that ritual gestures have finite power. Moreover, overtly religious diplomacy poses dilemmas in plural societies. In Nepal's secular and ethnically

diverse context, emphasizing Hindu or Buddhist narratives too heavily risks alienating secular or minority communities. Finally, if cultural diplomacy is perceived as a substitute rather than a supplement to genuine cooperation, it can open space for rivals like China. Indeed, several analysts suggest India's reassertion in Lumbini was a reactive measure to Beijing's expanding footprint.

Policy Implications: A balanced approach is needed—one that sustains cultural ties while addressing Nepal's practical concerns. Infrastructure development, people-to-people engagement, and regular high-level political dialogue must go hand in hand. Only then can the spiritual dimension of diplomacy complement, rather than overshadow, the substantive foundation of India–Nepal relations. India could, for example, actively facilitate resolution of treaty and connectivity questions (as Modi promised to do in his speeches) while working jointly to promote Nepali tourism. For Nepal, engaging constructively with Indian overtures requires caution – accepting the heritage linkages but insisting on reciprocation and respect for sovereignty. Both governments should invest in dialogue channels (e.g. fast-track border talks, cultural exchange bodies) to ensure religious diplomacy does not slip into hyperbole or cold war-style rivalry.

In closing, India–Nepal relations in the Modi era illustrate the promise and perils of civilizational diplomacy. Their shared heritage of Hinduism and Buddhism provides genuine common ground, and leveraging that can indeed build bridges. But lasting friendship will depend more on delivering tangible mutual benefits and upholding the principles of equality and independence that Nepal's leaders emphasize. As the Indian Foreign Secretary noted in **Times of India** (2022), rapid successive visits reflect closeness and an “upward trajectory” in partnership. The challenge ahead is to sustain that momentum by aligning sentiment with substance, nurturing not just shared temples and legends but also shared prosperity and trust.

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