

India and Indians

Friends of two different kinds



DINESH WAGLE

Sometimes, I wonder why the official Nepal-India relationship doesn't become as friendly and earthy as the down-to-earth friendship I enjoy with some Indians here in Delhi. Why doesn't the bond between the two countries become as affectionate and emotional as the bond itself? The bond being that of roti aur beti (bread and daughter) that has brought families across the open border closer together.

It seems friendship between the two nationals is not the same as the relationship between their respective countries. The diplomacy is ruthless, heartless and, in the words of a former Indian diplomat who was talking about Indo-Nepali relationship in Delhi a few weeks ago, immoral. Otherwise, a prime minister, in a nationally televised address, wouldn't have complained about foreign intervention albeit without naming the country (but who doesn't know the name!). And his finance minister wouldn't have angrily told an Indian channel the story, in his own words, of the intervention of Delhi's bureaucracy in Nepali affairs.



On a personal level, for instance, I never complain about such intervention in my relationship with Indians. Instead, we treat each other with respect and equality. Uncle Mehra, my landlord, loans me money without hesitation when I ask him. So do I. Apart from the usual rent, when he asks me for additional money as a loan, I give him the money promptly without a question. But reports that say India is not even selling Indian currency to Nepal when the latter wants to buy it by paying for it in dollars dishearten me as a Nepali citizen. Almost all the Indians I meet on the street -- from university students to chiawallas, from journalists to professionals -- are friendly. But then, why is there so much anger and dissatisfaction among Nepalis with the Indian establishment and the people who come to power in Delhi? This, I feel, must be one of the biggest paradoxes in the Indo-Nepal relationship. Last week, I was having a very nice conversation with an Indian friend of mine over tea and a weird thought came to my mind: What would happen if this man reaches an influential position in South Block? Would he change the situation or would the situation change him? I can't help it, but such questions keep coming to me these days every time I meet a new, friendly and talented Indian.

This past week, Nepal was making the headlines in the Indian media because of what happened in the corridors of power in Kathmandu. In those headlines (and the stories under them) was reflected, partly, the lack of in-depth knowledge about Nepali affairs among Indians. And those that

were well informed about the ground reality criticized their own government's policy in Nepal. For various reasons, I believe Nepalis have better knowledge about India than Indians have about Nepal. The geopolitical reality and our relatively insignificant economic size make India more important to us than we are to them. No grievances. The wide and deep presence of the Indian media in Nepal means we get to know almost every aspect of cultural, social and political India while the Nepali media has almost zero presence in India. That means Indians have to rely on their own media to get information about Nepal. And the media here limits itself to major political developments that occur only once in a while. I can't remember coming across any social and cultural stories from Nepal in the Indian media in years. Such apathy means the Indian public is less informed about Nepali society.

Still Nepal and India enjoy a nice and close people-to-people relationship. Barring some exceptions, the Indian people think very positively about Nepal and I have found many people in Delhi who have come from all over India and think that their country shouldn't poke its nose into Nepali affairs. In the recent incident, not only the politically motivated opposition Bharatiya Janata Party but many independent articles criticized their government's handling of the Nepal situation though the minister of state for external affairs defended Official India by saying that they had not intervened in Nepali affairs. But the truth was highlighted in the Indian media that talked about the Indian ambassador "who behaved in a vice-regal fashion" in Nepal, "virtually camped" in the official residence of the prime minister of Nepal during the crisis and continued parleying with various political leaders to influence their decisions. One headline said: "India blunders in Nepal again."

I think the excessive "China-phobia" in some Indian quarters is harming the official Indo-Nepal relationship. Nothing is more unfounded and baseless than the Indian notion that China will win the "influence war" in Nepal which will undermine the security of India. That feeling comes because of lack of geopolitical and, to be precise, Himalayan understanding. Yes, the Nepali people do have a roti aur beti relationship with China as well, but that is insignificant compared to what we have with India that borders us on three more accessible sides. Plus, the cultural and linguistic similarity, frequency of communication and the feeling of proximity with India is beyond compare to what we have with China. There is even a saying: "Delhi door nahi" (Delhi is not far), but Beijing is. And those similarities and ties have not been created because we wanted to create them. And they won't go away just because one of us, or say China, wants them to disappear. They have not been established by South Block either. They are our natural bond, just like the Himalaya with China that were there and will remain there for ever.

I don't think I will stop watching Shah Rukh Khan flicks or Sachin Tendulkar's batting and start learning Mandarin just because China builds a hydropower dam in Nepal. Yes, I will be thankful to that neighbour, and I certainly want them to help us more in our efforts to come out of poverty, but that won't affect my relationship with India. Why can't India offer more help in our economic progress instead of trying to destabilize our political and government structure to counter the so-called growing Chinese influence? Those who treat us with respect obviously get respect. For some, such interpretations might come as over simplistic; but that's how Nepalis feel. That's how I feel. Official India doesn't seem to see that reality, let alone understand it.

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Who'd be female under Islamic law?

In Muslim states, violence against women is validated. A dark age is upon us.

YASMIN ALIBHAI-BROWN

I am a Muslim woman and, like my late mother, free, independent, sensuous, educated, liberal, contrary and confrontational when provoked, both feminine and feminist. I style and colour my hair, wear lovely things and perfumes, appear on public platforms with men who are not related to me, shake their hands, embrace some I know well, take care of my family.

I defend Muslims persecuted by their enemies and their own kith and kin. I pray, fast, give to charity and try to be a decent human being. I also drink wine and do not lie about that, unlike so many other "good" Muslims. I am the kind of Muslim woman who maddens reactionary Muslim men and their asinine female followers. What a badge of honour.

Female oppression in Islamic countries is manifestly getting worse. Islam, as practiced by millions today, has lost

hunger strike. Over in Saudi Arabia, an eight-year-old child has just divorced a 50-year-old man. Her father, no doubt a very devout man, sold his daughter for about £9,000.

I have been reading *Disfigured*, the story of Rania Al-Baz, a Saudi TV anchor, the first woman to have such a job, who was so badly beaten up by her abusive husband that she had to have 13 operations to re-make her once gorgeous face. Domestic violence destroys females in all countries, but in Muslim states, it is validated by laws and values. As Al-Baz writes, "It is appalling to realise that a woman cannot walk down the street without men staring at her openly. For them she is nothing but a body without a mind, something that moves and does not think. Women are banned from studying law, from civil engineering and from the sacrosanct area of oil."

Small optimistic signs do periodically appear in this harsh desert, says Quanta A Ahmed, a doctor who worked in Saudi

because they must, I guess, even though they can see the brute forces lining up on the horizon ready to crush them by any means necessary. This country has spread its anti-female Wahabi Islam across the globe, its second most important export after oil.

In Afghanistan Ayman Udas was a singer and songwriter who wore lipstick and appeared on TV, defying her family. She was a divorced mother of two who had remarried. Ten days after this she was shot dead, allegedly by her brothers, who must think they are upright moral upholders with places reserved in paradise. In March President Karzai gave monstrous tribal leaders what they demanded, absolute control over wives by husbands and the right to rape them on the marital bed. Protests by brave women in that country and international outrage has forced him to step back from this commitment but there is concern that he is too weak to hold out, and once again women will become the personal and political playthings of men.

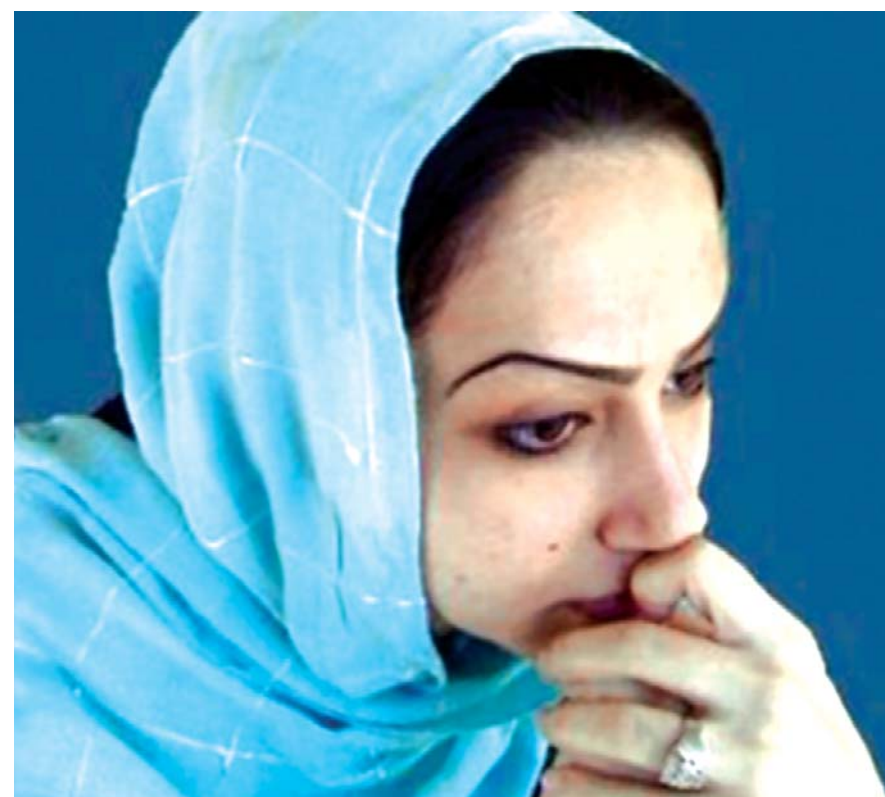
Let's to Pakistan then shall we, the country that once elected a woman head of state. The divinely beautiful Swat Valley has, for reasons of political expediency, been handed over to the Taliban, and there they have blown up over a hundred schools for girls and regularly flog young females on the streets. The girls are shrouded and forbidden to scream because the female voice has the potential to arouse desire. Or pity perhaps.

I am aware that my words will help confirm the pernicious prejudices that fester in the minds of those who despise Islam. Yet to conceal or excuse the violations would be to condone and encourage them. There have been enlightened times when some Muslim civilisations honoured and cherished females. This is not one of them. Across the West - for a host of reasons - millions of Muslims are embracing backward practices. In the UK young girls - some so young that they are still in push chairs - are covered up in hijabs. Disgracefully, there are always vocal Muslim women who seek to justify honour killings, forced marriages, inequality, polygamy and childhood betrothals. Why are large numbers of Muslim men so terrorised by the female body and spirit? Why do Muslim women encourage this savage paranoia?

I look out of my study at the common and see a wife fully burkaed on a sunny day. She sits still. Her children and husband run around, laughing, playing cricket. She sits still, dead, buried, a ghost. She is complicit in her own degradation, as are countless others. Their acquiescence in a free democracy is a crime against their sisters who have no such choices in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Al-Baz says: "I am a disruptive presence because I give women ideas." Me too. To transgress against diehard obscurantists and their unholy rules is an inescapable sacred duty. Yet how pathetic that sounds. Progressive believers tilt at windmills driven by ferocious winds of self-righteousness. Our arms and legs weaken and we are brought to our knees. I fear there is only worse to come.

The Independent



Iranian painter Delara Darabi, 22, who was hanged despite being given a temporary stay of execution by the chief justice of Iran

its compassion and integrity and is entering one of the darkest of dark ages. Here is this month's short list of unbearable stories (imagine how many more there are which will never be known):

Iranian painter Delara Darabi, only 22 and in prison since she was 17, accused of murdering an elderly relative, was hanged last week even though she had been given a temporary stay of execution by the chief justice of the country. She phoned her mother on the day of her hanging to beg for help and the phone was snatched by a prison official who told them: "We will easily execute your daughter and there's nothing you can do about it." Her paintings reveal the cruelty to which she was subjected.

Meanwhile Roxana Saberi, a 32-year-old broadcast journalist whose father is Iranian, is incarcerated in Tehran's Evin prison, accused of spying for the US. She denies this and says she has been framed because she was seen buying a bottle of wine. This intelligent, beautiful and defiant woman is on

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Arabia and then wrote her account, *In the Land of Invisible Women*. She describes the love she finds between some husbands and wives, idealists who think better rights will come one day.

That faith in the future is echoed by Norah al-Faiz, the Deputy Minister for Women's Education, chosen in this week's Time magazine list of the world's most influential people. They hope

Letters to the editor

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Two wrongs

The Maoists have left the government because they are against President Yadav's unconstitutional interference in the cabinet's decision to sack the Army chief ("Prime Minister calls it a day", May 5, Page 1). However, the party should also know that it unilaterally decided the fate of the Army chief and violated the norm of consensus. This was a mistake. President Yadav then committed another blunder when he scrapped the decision of the government in whom the executive power lies. He should have shown some patience because two wrongs do not make a right.

Pratik Khanal
Institute of Medicine, Maharajgunj

Political crisis

I wholeheartedly agree with UNMIN chief Karin Landgren that the creation of "multiple power centres" has threatened Nepal's peace process ("UNMIN concerned", May 7, Page 1). The abrupt resignation of Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal has brought the huge

task of building a new Nepal to a standstill. I really can't understand how leaders can be so reckless in an emergency. The prime minister should not have committed a political suicide for the sake of such a tiny issue. What was the meaning of their decade-long struggle if things were to end like this? Why were hundreds and thousands of lives sacrificed in the name of revolution?

Shiva Neupane
Melbourne, Australia

Biased piece

I found Khagendra Sharma's piece rather objectionable ("Right fine mess", May 8, Page 6). Besides his false familiarity with ex-King Gyanendra's halitosis (i.e. if he actually suffers from it), he is an apologist for the Maoists. Why has he completely ignored the fact that the ouster of CoAS Katakawa was a unilateral Maoist decision, not supported by any of the coalition government partners? At the level of pettiness, why does he refer to the CoAS as "Rookmangud" while referring to the others as PM and President? He clearly gives

away his bias. I would suggest that your OpEd pieces be of a higher journalistic and intellectual capacity.

Puran B. Lama
Kathmandu

Tiring games

The game of horse trading and political arithmetic has begun after the prime minister's resignation ("Exercise to form govt on", May 8, Page 1). Leaders are now doing all the exercise to grab the premier post. The Maoists quit the government in the name of civilian supremacy whereas in reality their own desire for supremacy was quashed by the coalition partners and the main opposition party. Now the Nepali Congress is projecting itself as a "saint" vis-a-vis those fighting for the top post whereas in reality GP Koirala does not want anyone from outside his coterie to become prime minister lest another Sher Bahadur Deuba rises to challenge his supremacy in the party. These political games have only disturbed and confounded the common people. This sorry state of our country is not due to the scarcity of resources, but due to

the scarcity of visionary leaders.

Chanakya Nepal
New Baneshwor

Girls and boys

Kabi Adhikari has rightly pointed out that many families in our society still prefer a boy over a girl ("Baby girl", May 7, Page 6). This applies not only to people in the villages but also educated people in the city. Unless and until there is equality for women in all aspects of society, I think many people will continue with this mindset. For that, we must generate awareness about gender equality in every nook and corner of the country.

Om Prakash Baral (Shushil)
Dhapaasi, Kathmandu

Civilian supremacy

I think, it is imperative to generate awareness among people about what indeed is meant by civilian supremacy and how it should be interpreted, exercised and built into our system, and

more so in a fluid and unstable situation like this. The time has come for all of us to seriously raise the intellectual and informed debate on this issue so that the current controversies and confusions can be cleared well in time and without further damage to our fragile peace process. I also think that the fundamental underpinnings of such a debate must be the universally accepted norms and principles of democracy, freedom and rule of law. There is no denying that the interpretation and pursuit of civil supremacy is possible only in a democratic political dispensation, which permits all shades of views and opinions without prejudices.

To me personally, the exercise of civil supremacy by any democratically elected government must, therefore, be understood first and foremost, within the ambit of the constitution and other laws of the land. Sticking to one's gun in the name of protecting and upholding principles of civil supremacy without committed demonstration of, and respect for, the universally accepted norms and standards of democracy and rule of law will only heighten the risks of undermining and eroding the very notion of civil supremacy.

Gopal Thapa
By email