India-Nepal Relations over the Years

What is the issue?

- Relations between India and Nepal are currently strained with Nepal's Parliament approving a new map with Indian territories included.
- In this context, here is a look at how India-Nepal relations have evolved over the years, making it a "special" one.

How have differences been dealt with in the past?

- In 1960s, a road was built to connect Nepal with Tibet.
- On India's concerns, King Mahendra of Nepal convincingly assured India that the road had only “developmental significance and no strategic significance at all”.
- In the 1980s, China had won a contract under a global tender to build the 210-km Kohalpur Banbasa Road closer to the Indian border.
- After the then Indian PM Rajiv Gandhi raised security concerns over this, King Birendra annulled the contract that China had won.
- King Birendra also handed the task over to India.
- The accounts of Bishwabandhu Thapa, Nepal's Home Minister in 1962 provide insights to the Kalapani issue.
- According to him, King Mahendra gave the Kalapani location temporarily to India on PM Jawaharlal Nehru’s request.
- This was following India’s setback in the war with China.
- [However, this is not in line with India’s official perception.
- Former Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran recently remarked that both Monarchs Mahendra and Birendra thrived on a diet of anti-Indian nationalism.]
- According to Punya Prasad Oli, a former Director General of Nepal’s survey department, King Birendra had asked him not to make an issue of the Kalapani dispute in the 1970s.
- All these are seen as instances of Nepali rulers maintaining a delicate balance in relations with its two giant neighbours, India and China.
- But eventually, they favoured India, whenever India and China’s interests have clashed.

What was the turning point to this?

- A 12-point understanding among Nepal's eight political parties including Maoists was signed in November 2005 in Delhi.
- This scripted the ouster of the monarchy in Nepal.
- India was for long a factor, and to a large extent the sole external actor, in Nepal's internal politics.
- Gradually, India openly took the lead role in transforming Nepal into a secular republic from a Hindu kingdom.
- But, this set off events leading to India losing its influence and allies in Nepal.
- The monarchy was suspended and was subsequently abolished in 2008.
- It was eventually declared as a secular country.
- All these were followed by Nepal's journey towards federalism.

What did the global forces' intervention mean?

- The European Union emphasized on the 'right to conversion' being incorporated as a fundamental right in the new Constitution.
- The EU took a very open stance that secularism will have no meaning without this right.
- This led to resentment among the majority population about this "imposed secularism".
- Other radical agenda got overshadowed as the civil-society-new-power axis and international stakeholders simply dismissed these as regressive forces.
- The EU and the US had begun to emerge as India's allies in Nepal's transition after 2005-06.
- These began supporting radical federalism based on ethnicity, higher autonomy and with the right to self-determination that initially Maoists had backed.
- China was worried about the combined presence of India, US and EU in Nepal and their influence on internal politics.
- It thus began increasing its presence and investment in Nepal.
- China targeted tourism, post-earthquake reconstruction, trade and energy.
- It showed that its interest in Nepal was no less than India's or its allies put together.
- Political parties backed by India in the 2005-06 movement continue to be in power in Nepal.
- However, they have visibly become more and more distant from New Delhi.
- The Maoists are now part of the ruling NCP (Nepal Communist Party) headed jointly by Oli and Prachanda.
- They are no longer under Indian influence.

How has India's role in Nepal evolved?

- The Nepali Congress was formed in India in the early 20th century.
- Many of its leaders participated in India's freedom struggle.
- They were with an idea that an independent and democratic India would help establish democracy back home.
- The party consistently took the lead role in the movement for a multi-party democracy with constitutional monarchy.
- But despite this, it was often branded "pro-India" by Communists given their close ties with Indian National Congress and socialists.
- However, following the 12-point agreement, the Nepali Congress was forced to accept the lead role of Maoists (Communists) in the political arena.
- They agreed to dispense with constitutional monarchy.
- But notably, they had all along said that monarchy represented "forces of nationalism" and "symbol of unity in diversity".
- Besides the monarchy, Nepali Congress and in the recent past Madhes parties to some extent, the only other institutional ally that India has had is the Nepal army.
- The chief of each national army has enjoyed the status of Honorary General of the other side, on a reciprocal basis since 1950.
- The NCP leader Oli refused to accept India's invitation for a state visit in April 2006, during a blockade.
- Back then, it was the armies of both sides that did the homework for lifting the blockade.
- Oli became a nationalist and gained much popularity due to the blockade in 2006.

How has India's approach transformed?

- During major face-offs, three trade embargos since the 1970s and sensitive security issues, India and Nepal have succeeded in ending the crises.
- They did it directly or by using back channels including Indian royalty and even shankaracharyas when Nepal was a Hindu nation.
- But over the years, India's focus on Nepal appears driven more by security concerns and threat perception.
- Promoting a soft power-based approach like in the past has seen a shift.

What is the realisation with the current happenings?

- In the current spell of dispute, India has once again begun 'valuing' common civilisational, cultural, historic and people-to-people ties.
- On the other hand, India's old allies are now regretting having aligned with the Maoists.
- The Nepali Congress feels its time to review the 12-point agreement and restore a lead role in Nepali politics.

- Despite all, it is Oli who is dictating India-Nepal relations now.

Source: Indian Express

