

# India's shift to soft power in Nepal: a case study of the borderland city of Birgunj.

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# Chapter 11

## India's Shift to Soft Power in Nepal: A Case Study of the Borderland City of Birgunj

Suraj Paneru

**Abstract** A variety of factors influenced India's shift from hard power to soft power diplomacy in Nepal. The factors that influenced the Indian economic blockade on Nepal in 2015 and the interaction between the agent of power (India) and the subject of power (Nepali) are examined through a case study of the borderland city of Birgunj. It is argued that India shifted from hard power to soft power diplomacy in Nepal after the 'unofficial' border blockade imposed by India over Nepal for five months in 2015. The five key factors that influenced the shift from hard power to soft power policy are (1) the internationalisation of Nepal's conflict; (2) the opening of border transits and construction of roads to China; (3) the trade agreement and signing of Chinese One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative by Nepal; (4) change in interpretation and recipient of activities of official Indian governmental and bureaucratic structures by the subject of power (Madhesi ethnic Nepali) and (5) contemporary political situation in India. The Borderland city of Birgunj is used to discuss these factors.

**Keywords** Hard and soft power Economic blockade Borderland · Birgunj · Nepal · India

### 11.1 Introduction

According to Das (2016a), borderlands do not indicate a fixed topographical site between two selected locales (nations, societies, cultures). However, an interstitial zone of displacement and deterritorialization shapes the identity of the hybridized subject. Evans-Pritchard (1940), as cited by Das (2016a), states that 'borders' are traceable to analysing social and territorial borders. These definitions indicate that the concept of borderland is more concerned with the people and their interaction in the natural and built environment of the location than a political border between countries. The term *borderland* indicates an urban area and its inhabitants forming a political boundary between two countries.

Nepal has three topographic regions: mountains (the Himalayan range), hills (the Shivalik range) and the Terai or Madhes (the southern plains). Amongst the different narratives about the origin of Madhes, the most accepted version is that it stands for ‘Madhya-desh’, a region between hills and plains (Nayak 2011). The Madhesh region of Nepal borders India. Hence, the inhabitants of Madhesh are often called Madheshi. These ethnic Nepali, mainly living in province-2 of Nepal’s current federal structure, share close cultural, linguistic and family ties with the bordering Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar (Figs. 11.1 and 11.2).

The inhabitants of the borderland Madhesh, in particular, are targeted as the subject of power, using both hard and later soft power by India to influence and to implement its multi-dynamic interests in Nepal. *Soft power* is ‘Getting others to want what you want’. Soft power is also referred to as ‘inducing others to do what they otherwise would not do’, which is referred to as ‘framing and setting agenda’ and ‘shaping others’ preferences’ (Nye 2011) cited by Cheskin (2017). Soft power focuses on shared political values, peaceful conflict management and economic cooperation to achieve standard solutions. On the other hand, hard power focuses on military intervention, coercive diplomacy and economic sanction (Wagner 2005). In other words, hard power is ‘making others do what you want’.

The theoretical discussion on borderlands (Brunet-Jailly 2005) refers to the borderland cities in South Asia as stated in Banerjee and Chen (2013) and Das (2016b) and on soft power refers to Cheskin (2017), Wagner (2005) and Purushothaman (2010). The case study of the borderland city of Birgunj focuses on four analytical lenses to study the borderland proposed by Brunet-Jailly (2005). First, various archival data, news, articles and government archives are analysed and presented for the chapter’s argument. The primary data source is government websites, archival data, and newspaper articles.

Finally, the conclusion is drawn based on the theoretical discussion and case study. The discussion and conclusion focus on the factors that helped clarify the intent of the Indian Hard power during the 2015 Indian blockade and the key factors that influenced the shift from hard power to soft power diplomacy in Nepal. This helps to explain better the use of hard and soft power in the Nepal and South Asia borderlands.

## 11.2 Indian Hard Power Diplomacy in Nepal: A Regional Bully?

India often exercises ‘regional bully’ for its power ambitions, which applies to the practice of hard power and regional hegemony in South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries. It is still technically at war with Pakistan (Schofield 2010). It used military intervention in then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) for the benefit of liberating from West Pakistan in 1971 (Marwah 1979) as well as intervening in Sri Lanka in 1987 (Pfaffenberger 1988). India ingested Sikkim’s



Fig. 11.1 Nepal reference map showing China and India. *Source* OCHA, United Nations

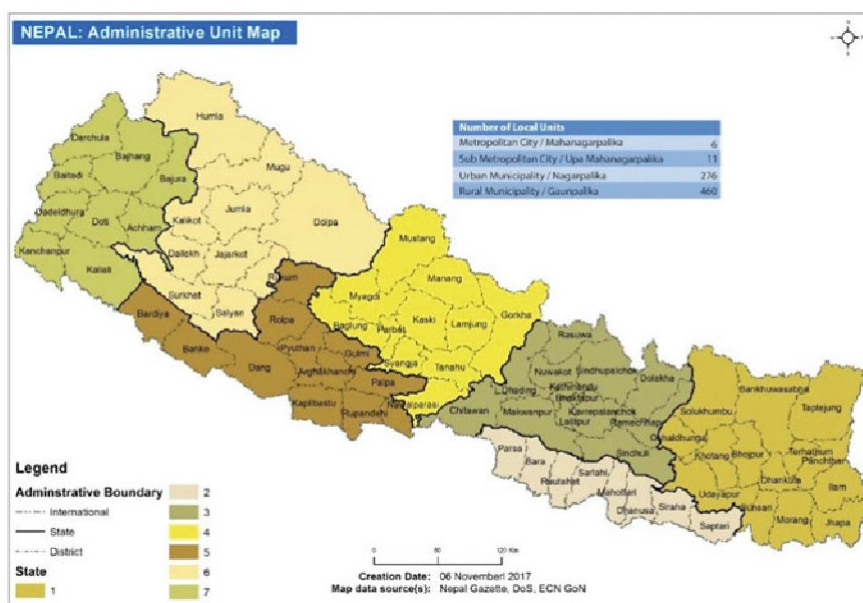


Fig. 11.2 Nepal administrative unit map. *Source* Government of Nepal

Himalayan kingdom into its Union in 1975 (Gupta 1975) and boasted a ‘guiding role’ in another Himalayan kingdom—Bhutan, for external relations (Appadorai 1982).

Modern-Day India and Nepal’s formal diplomatic relationship is primarily defined by Hindu religious ties and the Treaty of Peace and Friendship (Government of India 2018b). The treaty has ten articles, amongst which, articles 4 and 7 directly apply to the people and cities, particularly the borderland cities. Article 4 ensures that ‘The two Governments agree to appoint Consuls-General, Consuls, Vice-Consuls and other consular agents, who shall reside in towns, ports and other places in each other’s territory as may be agreed to’ and Article 7 of the treaty states that ‘the nationals of one country in the territories of the other the same privileges in the matter of residence, ownership of property, participation in trade and commerce, movement and other privileges of a similar nature’ (Government of India 2018b). Furthermore, article 5 of the treaty indicates that ‘arrangement (to import arms, ammunition or warlike material for Nepal) shall be worked out by the two Governments’, which can be easily classified as a diplomatic hard power strategy (Wagner 2005).

According to Wagner (2005), India used hard power to maintain the regional hegemony since Indira Gandhi’s rule, often labelled the ‘Indira doctrine’. India’s South Asian strategy’s main point was that the neighbouring countries were considered part of India’s national security. Therefore, domestic conflicts of neighbouring countries should only be solved with India’s help, not by outside powers or international organizations.

Indian use of hard power in Nepal has always cohered diplomatic measures, border blockades and economic sanctions and not direct military intervention. Although the focus is the 2015 border blockade, it is essential to mention India's previous hard power policy on Nepal. Before 2015 India had imposed a blockade in 1970 for building the Araniko Highway connecting Kathmandu with Tibet and a second time in 1989 for purchasing arms from China (The Kathmandu Post 2015). In addition, in 1989, India closed 13 transit points out of 15 in Nepal, leaving Raxaul and Jogbani open (Garver 1991).

The India-Nepal diplomatic row over Nepal's new constitution and 2015 border blockade has never been officially publicized by the Indian and Nepalese governments when India has consistently denied its involvement in the blockade (Ojha 2015). However, from the historical context and documents, it can be found that India's primary concerns include its security (Murthy 1999), access to Nepal's water resources for the provision of irrigation and electricity for its vast population (Upreti 1993; Gyawali 2002); dissatisfaction over Nepal leaving Hindu state status for the secular state (Majumder 2015); and persistent fear of losing ground in Nepal to China (Jain 1959; Shneiderman 2013) in Nepal's new political structure.

### 11.3 Birgunj: The City that Brought a Nation to a Standstill

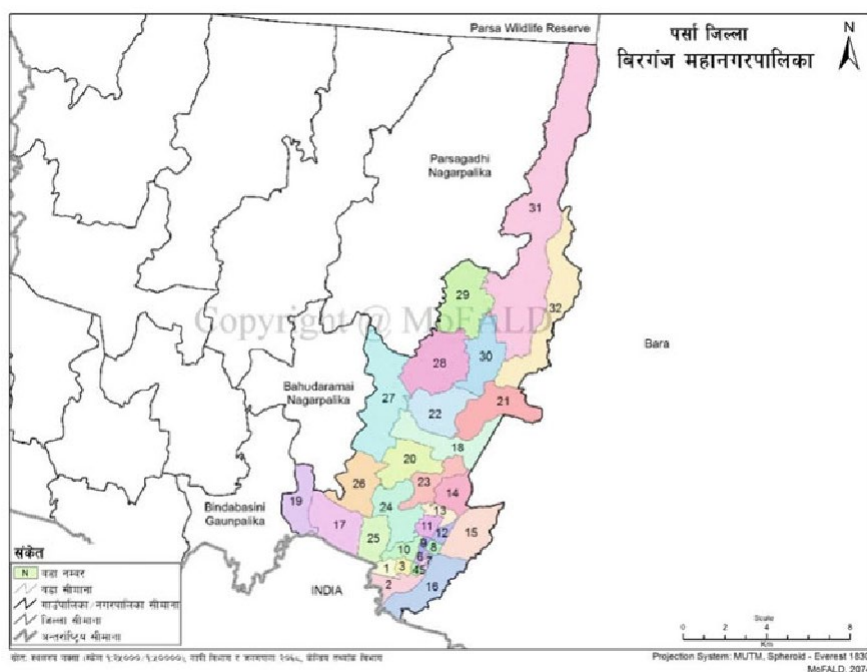
This section looks at the case of Birgunj, which lies in southern Nepal, north of which is attached to the city of Raxaul of the Indian state of Bihar. The key factors permitting Indian hard power in this borderland city of Nepal are analysed in this section. The following four analytical lenses are used to study borderland Birgunj, as proposed by Brunet-Jailly (2005):

- Market forces and trade flows
- Policy activities of multiple levels of government on adjacent borders
- The political clout of borderland communities
- The specific culture of borderland communities (Fig. 11.3)

Rana Prime Minister Bir Samser established the settlement in Birgunj in the late 1880s (Birgunj Metropolitan City 2018). Therefore, it has most trading communities and is just a few metres from the Indian city of Raxaul. Birgunj lies north of Raxaul on the border of the Indian state of Bihar and is an entry point to Nepal from the Indian cities of Patna and Kolkata, also known as the 'Gateway to Nepal'.

Nepal's new constitution was promulgated on 20th September 2015. However, that hardly satisfied the Madheshis and Tharus forming 70% of Nepal's Terai (southern plains) population (Jha 2015). The dissatisfaction soon turned into a tense movement known as Madhesh Movement and escalated to the death of over 50 people. During the Madhesh Movement, this border city, which is currently in province-2 of Nepal's new federal structure, came into the centre stage of negotiation between the Madheshi ethnic people of Nepal, the Nepal government, and the Indian government. The





**Fig. 11.3** Map of Birgunj Metropolitan City. *Source* Birgunj Metropolitan City

Madheshi protests occupied the bridge connecting Birgunj and Raxaul, blocking the vehicles and other trade flows (Fig. 11.4).

The protesters were staging a similar protest on other transits, but they were not as effective as the protest in Birgunj. From the scale of trade flow and type of goods coming in from India through Birgunj, it can be understood that the blockade's effect would have been more negligible if it was the case of any other transit than Birgunj. Trade between India and Nepal through Birgunj accounted for 158,030 million Indian Rupees (approximately £1,776 million), the most extensive trade compared to other transits between the two countries (Land Port Authority of India 2018). The second-largest transit Jogbani—Biratnagar, traded only 53,070 million Indian Rupees in the same term. India's four main imports using Birgunj transit are petroleum, motor vehicles, iron and steel and medicines. As Nepal is entirely dependent on India for petroleum, the blockade for five months after the catastrophic Nepal earthquake (Goda et al. 2015) almost brought the country to a standstill. Apart from petroleum, the shortage of day-to-day goods such as medicine and rice brought the crisis on a humanitarian level in many sectors, including Nepal's public health (Lamichhane 2015).

Another critical factor permitting Indian hard power effectively from this borderland city was the Consulate General of India located in Birgunj. The consulate general's role in Birgunj was widely criticized in Nepali media as provoking and



**Fig. 11.4** Nepal-India border gate (Shankaracharya Gate) in Birgunj. *Source* The Kathmandu Post

facilitating the border protest. However, the consulate general denied the criticism (Business Standard 2015). On the other hand, Nepal Police and Nepali state presence in the borderland had been negative; the authorities were condemned for using excessive force during the protest (Sharma 2015), which eventually fuelled the protest and helped implement Indian hard power citizens of Birgunj and surrounding area.

The southern borderland's regional politics in Nepal is determined by this ethnic clout known as Madheshis. The Madheshi parties focused on regional issues and identity-based politics and started the protest in early 2007. The 2015 protest was ignited after the new constitution did not address their demand for more inclusive and 'democratic' rights. Their strong presence in the borderland city was the right environment for India to 'make Madheshi do what it wanted'. In other words, India implemented its hard power tactics by utilizing the Madheshi parties and their protest.

Moreover, the Madheshi parties (the subject of power) received the Indian (source of power) instructions to utilize it to their benefit to pressure the Nepal government for a constitutional amendment.

Birgunj, having close cultural and linguistic ties with the neighbouring Indian city of Raxaul, was another factor that helped the blockade become more successful in Birgunj. People on both sides of the border speak Bhojpuri; cross-border marriage is expected and has a strong cultural and economic bond (Birgunj Metropolitan City 2018). This added the sympathy of the people of the Indian city of Raxaul to the protestors on the other side. During the protest, the protesters often took refuge in Raxaul when chased by Nepal police.

Three built heritages of Birgunj, Sirsiya Bridge, Nepal-India border gate, and clock tower became a persistent symbol of protest during the Madhesh Movement. The Nepal-India border gate in Birgunj, also known as Shankaracharya Gate, symbolizes





**Fig. 11.5** The clock tower of Birgunj and protesters. *Source* My Republica

strong Hindu religious ties. The distance between Shankaracharya Gate and the Sirsiya Bridge is approximately 450 m. The clock tower (Ghantaghar) is another 3 km from the Gate. The protestors utilized the space between these three built heritages as a protest zone to block the movement between the two countries. Protestors also utilized the Sirsiya Bridge to run towards Raxaul in Nepal, police firing their tear gas and rubber bullets. The other place of continuous protest was the iconic clock tower of Birgunj, also known as Ghantaghar. The protesters used the clock tower; the Ukrainians used Maidan Nezalezhnosti during pro-EU protests (Oliynyk 2015). When looked closely, these natural and built environments of Birgunj provided a perfect environment for the blockade to last longer (Fig. 11.5).

The final factor that helped the blockade last longer and became effective was the reactionary forces active at the border. Since India and Nepal have different policies and governments, the goods' market price varies across borders. Moreover, some ever-present gangs and smugglers smuggle goods such as petroleum, rice, and sugar from Nepal to India and vice-versa. These smugglers react rapidly to any event of political unrest, natural disaster or other change that can benefit them. During the economic blockade, petrol and other essentials were still available on the black market for people who could afford a higher price (Kazmin 2015). Therefore, the gangs could smuggle petroleum and essential supplies to Nepal in the black market by prolonging the protest. The nexus of smugglers with politicians on both sides of the border is so substantial and evident that it was also one reason for the prolonged blockade.

Along with the four analytical lenses to study borderland proposed by Brunet-Jailly (2005), from the case study of Birgunj, the following two more analytical lenses to study borderland city can be identified:

- The natural and built environment

- Reactionary forces

The case study gives insight into what happened in the borderland city of Birgunj during the protest. However, this protest had international attention and lasted five months, changing the India-Nepal-China relationship significantly. India's excessive use of hard power in the Madhesh Movement cover had many consequences and forced India to change its policy towards Nepal. This is discussed in the following section.

## 11.4 Indian Soft Power Diplomacy in Nepal: A New Beginning?

Soft power focuses on shared political values, peaceful conflict management, and economic cooperation to achieve standard solutions. 'Getting others to want what you want' is soft power (Wagner 2005). India used coercive diplomacy in full force from its Kathmandu Embassy and Consulate General in Birgunj, followed by the five-month blockade, which became provocative and led to more Chinese influence in Nepal. The 2015 economic blockade had a clear message from Nepal that if the southern border (with India) is closed, the Northern border (with China) will open. India used the hard power Indira doctrine, primarily defined by the treaty of 1950 on Nepal until 2015. However, the border blockade, Birgunj was the epicentre, ironically helped India's Nepal diplomacy transition, almost entirely from hard power to soft power diplomacy. In light of the 2015 border blockade, the following section looks at the key factors influencing the change.

## 11.5 Internationalization of Nepal's Conflict

The foundation for the Indian soft power in Nepal was laid back in 2007 when the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) was established on 23 January 2007 to monitor the disarmament of Maoist rebels and the preparations for Constituent Assembly elections in Nepal. The involvement of the UN in Maoist fighters (People's Liberation Army) cantonment in Nepal's peace process (Martin 2012) inflicted a substantial change in Indian power policy in Nepal. The Indira doctrine that 'Domestic conflicts of neighbouring countries should only be solved with India's help and not by the interference of outside powers or international organizations' was denied by the Maoists demanding UN involvement in the peace process to end the decade-long war in Nepal.

The internationalization of the peace process forced the change in Indian power in Nepal in the coming years. Since the Madhesh Movement's roots can be traced back to the Maoist war and the awakening of ethnic dimensions in Nepali politics (Kantha 2010), the internationalization of Nepal's Madhesh Movement also

became inevitable. Madhesh Movement also became internationalized due to its liberal values, such as the demand for secularism, inclusion and gender equality, which are not ideal in the Indian bureaucratic structure dominated by traditional Hindu nationalistic values.

## 11.6 India-China Rivalry

Nepal shares centuries-old cultural, religious and family connections with China, similar to its ties with India. The Nepali capital of Kathmandu has a centuries-old trade relationship with China, which has fuelled a significant exchange of cultural, gastronomical, architectural and religious mix between the two countries. The strong Chinese Tibetan influence is everywhere in Kathmandu, from ancient temples to modern centres, typical local food to modern restaurants, and images of Buddhist stupas to Hindu temples. Similarly, Arniko, a Nepali architect's profound contribution to Chinese art and architecture, can still be witnessed today in Beijing's iconic Miaoying Temple designed by the Nepali Architect called Araniko (Bhandari 2017). Cross-border marriage between Nepali and Chinese (Tibetan) is still common and can be traced back to the thirteenth century. Princess Bhrikuti of Nepal was married to Tibetan King Songsten Gampo (Koon 2015), who brought Buddhism to Tibet.

China-India rivalry in Nepal and South Asia (Garver 1991) means they often compete to influence neighbouring countries. When India imposed a border blockade in 2015, the Nepalese government led by Prime Minister Khadga Prashad Sharma Oli opened the northern border to China. The Chinese and Nepali governments agreed to conclude a commercial deal on the supply of petroleum products from China to Nepal, ending the Indian monopoly on the Nepali petroleum market (Reuters 2016). The Chinese government sent convoys of oil tankers to fuel choked Nepal during the blockade backing the Nepal government's decision (Cabinet Decision of 17 March 2016, 2016) to import oil and gas from China, surpassing the Indian monopoly. In a further move to counter India's coercive hard power policy, Nepal signed China's One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR), marking Nepal's official move to become part of Beijing's ambitious plan to revive ancient Silk Road trade routes (Giri 2017). These events made India rethink its rigid power policy, losing ground to China in Nepal.

## 11.7 India's Contemporary Political Situation

In India, 80% of the population are Hindus (Government of India 2018a); in Nepal, 81.3% are Hindu (Government of Nepal 2018), sharing major religious significance between the two countries. The 'char dham' (four abodes) in India, Pashupatinath and Muktinath in Nepal and Mt. Kailash in Tibet (China) are considered the most important holy places for Hindus. India and Nepal also are connected through Major

Hindu Religious texts, Ramayana and Mahabharata. The chronicles of Ramayana describe that goddess Sita of the present-day Nepali borderland city of Janakpur was married to the god Ram of the present-day Indian city of Ayodhya; the marriage is still remembered at the Hindu festival of Ram Navami every year through five days of the marriage ceremony between two cities. Siddhartha Gautama, widely known as the Buddha, was born in Lumbini, in present-day Nepal, and later gained enlightenment in the present-day Indian city of Bodhgaya.

India's ruling party BJP, which has Hindu-nationalist agenda, wants to utilize Hindu religious stunts such as visiting Pashupatinath, Muktinath and Janakpur of Nepal as a tool to influence Indian voters. After the blockade ended in February 2016 (Pokhrel 2016), major cities across Nepal started to lobby for the provincial capital. In province-2, Birgunj was the most anticipated city because of its proven political strength during the Madhesh Movement and commercial importance.

However, Janakpur, another Nepali city 123 km (76 mi) south-east of Kathmandu close to the Nepal-India border, was well-positioned for Indian attention due to its religious significance and the city leaders' close ties to Kathmandu. Therefore, India favoured Janakpur leaving Birgunj alone in the race for the provincial capital of Nepal's new federal structure. Eventually, the city of Birgunj, the Madhesh Movement's epicentre and the city that brought Nepal to a standstill, lost a bid to become the provincial capital. Thus, Janakpur was made the provincial capital of province-2, the new federal structure of Nepal (DD News 2018). India's move has essential symbolic meaning; it values Nepal's Hindu religious ties over other relations. To make this point further clear, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Janakpur in May 2018 (Jha 2018) and said that 'Without Nepal, India's faith is incomplete. Without Nepal, India's history is incomplete. Without Nepal, India's dhams (temples) are incomplete. Without Nepal, our Ram is incomplete' (Kumar 2018). This move by the Indian PM was branded as a 'desperate move to rebuild his image' (Bhattarai 2018) damaged by the blockade. Nevertheless, this move also suggests that India is now pursuing soft power diplomacy in Nepal and targeting a broader Nepali audience as its subject of power whilst also focusing on the regional Madheshi forces.

## 11.8 Perception of India's Power and Influence in Madhesh

Understanding the Russian soft power in the Baltic States (Simons 2015) has focused on interpreting and reciprocating official Russian governmental and bureaucratic structures by citizens of the Baltic States. (Cheskin 2017) has used a structural perspective to study Russian soft power in Ukraine. Both chapters investigate the people's perspective or the perspective of the targeted audience as the audience of influence. These studies help understand India's interactions (agent of power) and Madheshi (the subject of power).

Although India was using hard power in a border blockade, it was covered by soft power, influencing Madhesh Movement to Indian use until the Madheshi political forces changed in Indian influence. As the long blockade weakened the Madhesh

Movement itself, the Madheshi forces changed their political tactics. This led to the interpretation and reciprocation of official Indian governmental and bureaucratic structures by Madheshi political forces. Madheshis were India's targeted subject of power during the border blockade, but the Madhesh Movement came from an internal force within Nepali society; the United Democratic Madheshi Front. The Madheshi political parties representing regional forces in Nepal started to interpret the Indian governmental and bureaucratic influences to benefit the Indians. The movement's liberal values, such as secularism, inclusion and gender equality contradicted the Indian Hindu-nationalist values. This forced the Indian government to opt for soft power to influence broader Nepali society rather than the regional force.

## 11.9 Conclusion

From the discussion above, the five key factors that compelled the shift of Indian diplomacy from hard power to soft power can be listed below:

- Internationalization of Nepal's conflict
- Opening border transits and construction of roads to China
- Trade agreement and signing of Chinese One Belt One Road (OBOR)
- The contemporary political situation in India
- Change in the interpretation of activities of official Indian governmental and bureaucratic structures by the subject of power

From the consequences of the 2015 border blockade, India has realized the failure of its hard power diplomacy in Nepal and shifted to the soft power policy. Wagner (2005, 2006) argues that India's soft power strategy in South Asia started in the 1990s, and India's focus increased to intergovernmental cooperation, negotiated settlements and economic collaborations. However, in Nepal's case, the tangible shift from hard power to soft power policy can only be seen after the 2015 blockade, ironically the extreme show of India's coercive diplomacy and hard power strategy.

In the case of Southeast Asia, Purushothaman (2010) states that India's sources of soft power are 'not being alarming' and 'unique advantage of not having a border dispute with neighbouring countries. Purushothaman further states the 'culture', language and 'land where Buddha preached', Bollywood movies and music as India's soft power sources in the region. However, in the case of Nepal, the Border is disputed (Kansakar 2012), the use of the Hindi language is largely unpopular (Khatry 2016), Bollywood movies are very popular but also equally controversial (ABC News 2000), Buddha is often contested by both countries (Skar 1995) as Buddha was born in present-day Nepal and lived most of his life preaching in present-day India. The soft power sources like cross-border marriage, cultural ties, Bhojpuri and Maithili linguistic ties are mainly limited to the Madheshi community. They do not appeal to the whole Nepali society.

It can be observed that India has limited sources of soft power in Nepal, which are not controversial and can appeal to broader Nepali society. Therefore, India is keen

on focusing on the Hindu religious tie as the primary source of its soft power, demonstrated in PM Modi's Janakpur address and his emphasis on Ramayana Circuit (DD News 2018). India favours religiously significant Janakpur strategically, and effective commercial Birgunj indicates India's shift from hard power to a soft power policy. It can be concluded that India's shift from hard power to soft power diplomacy is the result of the systematic strike on India's Indira Doctrine in Nepal by Maoists through the involvement of UNMIN, growing Chinese influence in the region, change in perception of India's power and influence in Madhesh and realization of the negative consequences of 2015 border blockade.

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## 11 India's Shift to Soft Power in Nepal: A Case Study ...

211

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