
Strengthening Nepal's Soft Power through Local Government Initiatives: People-to-people and Sister City Ties

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the efforts of local government of Nepal that persuading global powers towards Nepal by strengthening soft power through initiatives like sister city ties and visit Bharatpur campaign within bilateral relations. By analyzing the network environment of people-to-people relations and Sister-City ties established by Bharatpur Metropolitan City of Nepal, this study seeks to extract creations, dynamics, and intricacies of local-level relations in terms of soft power and public diplomacy. Besides, this study discusses the city diplomacy and people-to-people connection initiatives created opportunities and its role in economy and tourism promotion. Initiatives of Bharatpur like establishing Sister-city relations and visit campaigns are analyzed as crucial soft power efforts by means of cultural exchanges, collaborations, partnerships, and public diplomacy linked to international relations of Nepal alike Japan in this study. Using qualitative approach based on empirical secondary data and proposive method, this study has tried to answers how initiatives of Bharatpur impacting Nepal's image in people-to-people ties at micro-level in cities like Japan. In addition, aspects of Nepal's soft power resources and instruments linked to public and tourism diplomacy are studied. To understand the research findings soft power and public diplomacy perspectives in bilateral relations with reference to soft power superpowers Japan and small power Nepal is used as reference. Findings suggest that the local soft power efforts like Sister-City Relations and Visit Bharatpur 2024 campaigns remain as key soft power initiatives that leverage the economic activities, tourism promotion and cultural exchanges in grass-root level in bilateral relations.

Keywords: Soft power, city diplomacy, sister city ties, people-to-people relations.

Introduction

Cities are iconic mean to build image and branding of the nation (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009). The relationship between cities and the soft power of nations is a multifaceted and evolving area of study that highlights how urban centers serve as significant assets in the projection of national influence in international level. In the international politics, soft power is the ability to co-opt rather than coerce with means of persuasion and attraction (Nye, 2004). It helps preparing the preferences of others through appeal, attraction, openness, kindness and softness. Soft power refers to the ability to attract and influence others through cultural appeal, political values, and

policies rather than coercion or payment (Nye, 2019). Scholars have used diplomacy as soft power resource in international relations. "A country's soft power rests on its resources of culture, values, and policies" (Nye, 2008, p. 94). Nye (2008) mentions literature, arts and cultures of nation are noticeable soft power resources in international relations.

Ohnesorge (2020) has given taxonomy of soft power which includes resources; culture, values, policies and personalities, instruments; public and personal diplomacy, receptions; attractions, apathy and repulsion, and outcomes; compliance, neutrality and opposition as measuring indicators. In this reference, city diplomacies as subset of public and personal diplomacy are considered as soft power instruments to attain goals from bilateral relations. Similarly, Ohnesorge (2022) summarizes that the soft power is a relatively new phenomenon in international relations heavily dependent on resources like education and educational exchanges under public diplomacy, culture, foreign and domestic policies, reputation, innovations, engagement, preferences, community unity, and institutional support. Further, public diplomacy and city diplomacy facilitates inter-cultural communication and flourishes cordial relationship among the bilateral partners.

The soft power of nation and their branding help them to enlarge political economy, creates models of good governance and bridges for diplomatic mediation to address problems in multilateral and bilateral fora (Stringer, 2013; Timilsana, 2024). This concept is particularly relevant in the context of cities, which often act as the frontline representatives of their nations in the global arena. Sevin (2021) emphasizes that cities generate soft power through their diplomatic practices and communicative strategies, establishing a taxonomy that categorizes cities as soft power assets. Cities enhance their soft power through various strategies, including city branding, cultural diplomacy, education exchange, tourism promotion, sport diplomacy, waste management, transportation system, climate change mitigation program and hosting of international events. This is also true in the context of Nepal's cities as well particularly to the Metropolitan City like Bharatpur.

Bharatpur Metropolitan City lies in southern central Nepal with its cultural, educational, healthcare, environmental, and social influence within Nepal and beyond. These aspects contribute to its ability to attract visitors, investments, and positive attention that enhancing its reputation and influence across the globe in addition to the country with persuasive means. Bharatpur is the second largest city of Nepal with 369,268 populations and 432.95 square k.m. area (National Statistics office, 2023; Bharatpur Metropolitan City, 2024). Bharatpur has made reputation of speedy urbanized city in Nepal.

Cultural heritage and diversity including Devghat Dham pilgrimage site for Hindus, ethnic and cultural diversity including Tharu, Brahmin, Chhetri, Newar, and Gurung communities are fostering a rich cultural environment of Bharatpur as its identity attraction. Besides, Bharatpur has been developing its identity as an educational and medical hub in the region (Devkota, 2023; Shrestha, 2019). Mainly, Agriculture and Forestry University (AFU), Chitwan Medical College, Bharatpur College of Engineering, Birendra Multiple Campus, Saptagandaki Multiple Campus, Balkumari College, Narayani Polytechnic Institute and other institutions attract students from across Nepal and neighboring countries. Indeed, these institutions have been contributing to build reputation of metropolitan city as a center of higher education and research, enhancing its intellectual influence in the area. Chitwan district as well as Bharatpur metropolitan city is also a remarkable hub for tourism, agriculture and animal farming in Nepal (Lamichhane, 2023). Indeed, Sauraha located in courtyard of Chitwan National Park has served as attractive tourist destination in Nepal. Similarly, chitwan is publicly recognized as capital of poultry farming and mustard production in Nepal.

Further, healthcare excellence including B.P. Koirala Memorial Cancer Hospital (BPKMCH), Chitwan Medical College Teaching Hospital (CMCTH), College of Medical Sciences, Bharatpur Hospital, Lotus Naturopathy Hospital and Research Centre, Bharatpur Eye Hospital, and other healthcare facilities position Bharatpur as a healthcare hub that promoting medical tourism and research. "In the early 2000s following the successful operation of the B.P. Koirala Memorial Cancer Hospital in Bharatpur, Bharatpur was envisioned as Medical City" (Dixit, et. al., 2018, p. 124). Furthermore, environmental stewardship, including the proximity of Chitwan National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, has served as a natural gift to Bharatpur's commitments to biodiversity conservation and green initiatives, such as community forestry programs and eco-tourism, leads Bharatpur towards promoting environmental sustainability. In this connection, tourism and hospitality are potential sectors for economic activities and gateways to explore cultural and natural heritages of Bharatpur. Bharatpur is a major destination for both domestic and international tourists as Chitwan National Park located in the courtyard of Bharatpur. In this national park along with in community forests the king of the jungle the Bengal Tiger, one-horned rhinoceros, Leopard, Sloth Bear, Gaur and four Horne antelope are visible to the tourists as major attractions (Regmi, 2024; Puri, 2019). Thus hospitality sector including eco-resorts, hotels, and cultural experiences in Bharatpur, contributes to soft power of nation as well by showcasing natural beauty and cultural richness within it.

Bharatpur metropolitan city is also well known for its social harmony, with different

ethnic and religious communities like indigenous and migrant community with Hindu, Buddha, Muslim culture living peacefully. Furthermore, the geographical location of Bharatpur is strategically important as a connecting point between the hilly regions and the Terai plains to enhance economic activities and manage migrants' psychology. Bharatpur Metropolitan plays role as a transportation and media hub increase its regional influence, making it a key economic and logistical center. Huge media presence, air and road connectivity in Bharatpur are helping to expose and amplify achievements and cultural significance. This city is attractive destination and fast growing because of physical, accessibility, social, economic and environmental factors (Lamichhane, 2022). Thus, Bharatpur Metropolitan City has positioned itself as a leading city in Nepal, influencing not only its immediate surroundings but also contributing to the nation's development and international image.

In this background, the authority of Bharatpur Metropolitan city has been initiating to build sister city relationships with diversely located cities in the globe and signed Memorandum of Understanding for global cooperation. Besides, it has initiated a Visit Bharatpur-2024 campaign targeting to promote economic activities and tourism. In this context, it is required to analyzing the network environment and shared achievement on the dynamics and intricacies of paradiplomatic engagement in sister city mechanism of local governments of Nepal like Bharatpur Metropolitan under the bilateral relations. Besides, it is tried to exploring the impact and perception of tourism campaign like visit Bharatpur-2024 generally in economic activities and particularly in people-to-people relations. So, city diplomacy is applied as soft power instrument to explore educational exchanges, cultural exchange, tourism promotion, collaborations, and partnerships fostering bilateral relations in light of welfare of business community and shared interests of cities engaged in sister city relations. So, this study has taken place in this form.

Objectives

The main objective of this study is to explore the public diplomacy initiatives of local government that strengthening Nepal's soft power in international relations. Further it is to outline the suggestive measure for effective public diplomacy means like visit Bharatpur and sister city ties as prospective soft power strategies of local governments of Nepal to strengthen Nepal's soft power and robust bilateral cooperation.

Research Question

To attain aforementioned objectives, the study has set following key research questions. What is the status of public diplomacy initiatives like Visit Bharatpur

campaign and sister city ties as soft power of local level government Bharatpur Metropolitan of Nepal in international relations? Why and how initiatives like people-to-people relations and sister city ties of local level government plans, advances, and become successful to strengthening Nepal's soft power?

Methods and Materials

This study provides a summary of the systemic discourse and qualitative research technique used in the analysis of secondary literature that has been gathered from various sources. Using the theoretical frameworks of soft power, public diplomacy, city diplomacy, people-to-people relations, and sister city ties that are compatible with the strong bilateral relationship between local level governments of Nepal like Bharatpur metropolitan and its sister city counterparts, the researcher explores city diplomacy as a crucial soft power tool. Further, this is connected to gaining a practical understanding of the sister city relations in light of the shifting dynamics and increasing trends of cultural exchanges, education collaboration, waste management and tourism promotion. It has tried to analyze innovating initiative of local level government like people-to-people connection and visit Bharatpur 2024 campaign targeting tourism promotion and economic development in addition to strengthening Nepal's soft power. In sum, using qualitative approach based on empirical secondary data, this study examines sister city ties and city diplomacy as Nepal's soft power strengthening instrument implemented by local level governments like Bharatpur Metropolitan of Nepal in international relations. Purposively, this study is limited to study about soft initiatives like people-to-people connection, sister city ties, and city diplomacy between cities in different countries and particularly confine in the relations of Bharatpur Metropolitan only. Furthermore, the study is limited on the recent Bharatpur-Yokosuka city ties made by Bharatpur Metropolitan of Nepal and Yokosuka City of Japan in the year 2023 and Visit Bharatpur 2024 campaign.

Results and Discussion

Articulating city diplomacy as soft Power strengthening Instrument of Local Governments

City diplomacy as a subset of public diplomacy in international relations has gained remarkable existence since the last two decades of the 20th Century (Gutiérrez-Camps, 2013). City diplomacy also may term as municipal diplomacy, citizens diplomacy, and city-to-city diplomacy (Musch, et. al., 2008). "City diplomacy refers to the activities and relationships between cities and other subnational entities to achieve political, economic, and cultural objectives. City diplomacy can include relationships between

cities within the same country or between cities in different countries” (Diplo, 2021, p.1). The development of city diplomacy is not new concept in globe arena. Hou and Fu (2021) there are three stages of city diplomacy development. Firstly, people-to-people diplomacy (1919-1980), followed by initiative diplomacy (1980-2001), and the third is city diplomacy (2001-). They further mentions that the Global Forum established in 2001 and the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) founded in 2004 are international mechanism to link cities in international networks. Thus, City diplomacy is a form of soft power of a city which refers to the use of cultural exchanges, collaborations, tourism promotion and technology transfer initiatives as a strategic tool attracting or engaging other cities of same country or cities of other country to foster positive relations.

Likewise, city diplomacy is soft power instrument of city or a local level government which promote global image, strengthen cultural ties, and builds mutual understanding to robust bilateral relations between the cities under the foreign policy framework of the home country. In the context of Nepal, any local level government has legal obligation to receive approval from province level government and federal government before to sign any agreement or MOU or establishing sister city relations with the foreign cities (Shrestha, 2020). However, relationships under city diplomacy is considered a consequence of soft power of a local level government or metropolitans like Bharatpur because it involves non-coercive influence and the ability to shape the preferences and behaviors of others through attraction and persuasion, rather than force or payment. Cultural exchanges, tourism promotion, knowledge sharing in waste management, economic partnerships, branding and identity, networking and alliances as people-to-people ties are soft power activities that Bharatpur has made commitment to perform majorly under sister city relationships and city diplomacy (TRN online, 2024). Indeed, city's capacity and performance to build sister city relationship to expose local level in international arena are consequence of soft power potentials within them. Thus, city diplomacy and initiatives for people-to-people connections like tourism promotion campaign, organizing events, Visit Bharatpur campaign, sister city ties from local governments are strengthening soft powers and robust bilateral relations.

Soft Power Connection in Nepal-Japan Relations

Japan is a soft power superpower ranked first in 2023 and second in 2024 in Asia and ranked 4th in global soft power ranking whereas Nepal ranked 91st in 2023 and 105th in 2024 the global soft power ranking (Brand Finance, 2023; Brand Finance, 2024). Even though they have asymmetric soft power rankings their bilateral ties are grown on the basis of soft powers.

Long before diplomatic relations were established between Japan and Nepal, the people of these two countries established connections whence the Zen Buddhist scholar Ekai Kawaguchi arrived in Nepal on 26 January 1899 and stayed for two and a half years to collect Buddhist manuscripts and to study the sacred place Lumbini where Lord Buddha was born (Thapa, 2018). According to MOFA (2023), the relationship of Nepal with Japan became formal with the establishment of diplomatic relations on 01 September 1956. The relations between the two countries are marked by friendliness, goodwill and cooperation. Nepal established its embassy in Tokyo in 1965 and Japan established its embassy in Kathmandu in 1967. Japan has maintained bilateral and multilateral relations to the countries and organizations located in diverse geographical sectors of the world.

According to Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFAJ, 2021), Japan has established 196 embassies overseas, 85 consulate generals, 11 permanent missions and 18 multilateral missions all over the world. Similarly, there are 186 embassies, 41 missions, the permanent general mission of Palestine and 261 general consulates in the territory of Japan. Similarly, Japan has mentioned 1831 sister city or village relations across the countries in the world including Nepal (CLAIR, 2017). These diplomatic engagements are active to fulfill her foreign policy goals of own priorities.

According to diplomatic blue book (2020), Japan pursues diplomacy with a focus on: (1) further strengthening the Japan-U.S. Alliance, the cornerstone of Japan's foreign policy; (2) tackling outstanding issues of concern regarding North Korea; (3) diplomacy with neighboring countries, such as China, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and Russia; (4) addressing the increasingly tense situation in the Middle East; (5) economic diplomacy in which Japan will lead efforts to establish new common rules; and (6) addressing global issues. Correspondingly, Cono (2019) mention that Japan will continue to support Nepal in four key areas: (1) Recovery from the earthquake and disaster resilient nation-building; (2) Social and economic infrastructure development; (3) Poverty reduction and improvement of quality of life; (4) Enhancement of governance and development of basic framework of democracy. Thus, the soft power superpower of Asia; Japan engaged in huge diplomatic relationship to safeguard her national interests and address own priorities in bilateral relation with Nepal. From these diplomatic engagement and bilateral priorities, it is easy to explore that the relation between Nepal-Japan is mainly footed on soft power connections and are rooted from federal level to local levels by means of formal to public diplomacy and people-to-people connection.

Practices of sister city relations of Local Government of Nepal, Japan and Other

The status of sister city relations and their mobilization enhance and expose the

metropolitan city in the international arena. This is common phenomena in international system. For instance, Tokyo, the largest city of the world by population has been engaged in sister city relations with twelve cities from New York to London from 1960 to 2015 (Florian, 2024; Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2018). Kyoto has made nine sister city relations amid 1958 to 1996 and Nagoya-shi has made seven such relations (Kyoto Prefecture, n.d.; Council of Local Authorities for International Relations-CLAIR, 2017). In the context of successful reference of city diplomacies of Japan across the world, the relationship with Nepali cities are yet to explore.

Nepali cities like Kathmandu, Pokhara, Bharatpur, and others have also established sister city relationships with various cities across the globe. Nepal's metropolitan cities Kathmandu, Pokhara and Bharatpur has established sister city relations with fourteen, ten and seven foreign cities respectively. According to information officer of Bharatpur Metropolitan city, Bharatpur has signed six sister city and friendship city relations. Similarly, Bayside Council, Australia, City of Sevastopol, Russia, Muscat, Oman, Grobbendonk City, Belgium, Changsha City, China, Voronezh city, Russia, and Leicester city, UK are under consideration for establishment of sister city relations with Bharatpur. *Table 1* reveals the detail of sister city relations of Bharatpur Metropolitan city, Nepal.

Table 1

Sister city relationships of Bharatpur Metropolitan Nepal

S.N.	Local Government/City of Foreign Country	Relationship Status	Date
1.	Xining Municipality, China	Friendship City Relation	2016
2.	Geermu (Golmud City), China	Sister City Relation	2017
3.	Siping City, Jilin Province of China	Sister City Relation	2018
4.	Shigatse City, China	City Relation	2023
5.	Yokosuka city, Japan	Sister City Relation	2023
6.	Chongqing City, China	Sister City Relation	2024

Source: Information provided by information officer of Bharatpur Metropolitan; 2024.

Furthermore, Nepal and Japan share several sister city relationships that foster cultural, educational, and economic exchanges. These relations have been facilitating historical connections, cultural similarities, or shared interests in tourism and development. Sister village relation between Tukuche, Nepal and Toga, Japan was established on the commonality of agriculture root of buckwheat. Pokhara, Nepal –

Komagane, Japan both cities are known for their attractive natural mountain landscapes and this commonality offers a shared interest emphasizing cultural exchanges, tourism promotion, and educational collaboration. Similarly, Kathmandu, Nepal – Matsumoto, Japan both share a focus on preserving historical and cultural heritage (Embassy of Japan in Nepal, 2014). Consequently, this relationship has been encouraging tourism promotion, cultural festivals, and educational exchanges. *Table 2* reveals the sister city relations made by Nepali and Japanese sister city relationships.

Table 2 *Sister city relationships between Nepal and Japan*

S.N.	Local Government/City of Nepal	Local Government/city of Japan	Date
1.	Tukuche, Mustang District	Nanto-shi, Toyama Prefecture	1989
2.	Kathmandu, Kathmandu District	Matsumoto-shi, Nagano Prefecture	2002
3.	Pokhara, Kaski District	Komagane-shi, Nagano Prefecture	2001
4.	Namche, Solukhumbu District	Aoki-mura, Nagano Prefecture	

Source: Council of Local Authorities for International Relations; 2017.

Bharatpur Metropolitan City of Nepal recently has established sister-city relationships with Yokosuka City in Japan. This relationship was marked by Bharatpur's mayor, Renu Dahal, during a visit to Japan in 2023 (Republica, 2023). Yokosuka city is situated nearby Tokyo, Japan and Bharatpur is located nearby Kathmandu in Nepal. The collaboration has agreed to promote tourism, cultural exchange, and mutual development between the two cities. As part of this relationship, Bharatpur has invited Japanese representatives to participate in the *Visit Bharatpur Year 2024* campaign, which focuses on promoting tourism under the slogan *Tourism for Conservation, Bharatpur for Tourism*. However, the assessment of status of Japanese tourists' arrival in Bharatpur in response of invitation of Mayor and visit Bharatpur campaign will be feasible after the completion of campaign.

In connection to the efforts of campaign, Non-Residence Nepali Association (NRNA), Japan-Nepal Development Forum, Japan international cooperation agency (JICA), and various local-level collaborations exist between Japanese NGOs, educational institutions, and Nepali cities focusing on disaster management, sustainable development, and educational programs. These relationships highlight the mutual respect and cooperation in grass root levels and among people-to-people connection between Japan and Nepal, with a focus on cultural heritage, tourism, and sustainable development. In this context the tourism and economic activities campaign of Bharatpur metropolitan either by sister city networks or by campaigns like Visit Bharatpur 2024 are essential to leverage from the multifaceted relationship between Nepal and Japan.

Tourism Promotion Trends and Visit Bharatpur-2024

There are diverse practices in tourism promotion by various nations and cities in the world. For instance, *Nationwide campaign* of China, *Expo Taiwan* campaign of Taiwan in Singapore, *Visit Thailand 2022* campaign of Thailand, *Wonderful Indonesia* campaign of Indonesia are diverse initiatives targeting tourism promotion (Xinhua, 2024; Strong, 2024; NATTA News, 2022; Adams, 2018).

Similarly, Japan has implemented several tourism promotion campaigns like *Japan Endless Discovery*, *Inbound Tourism Recovery Post-COVID*, and *Osaka-Kansai Expo 2025*, etcetera to attract international and domestic visitors, with a focus on sustainable tourism, regional revitalization, and digital transformation (Japan Tourism Agency, 2024). As a host of such campaigns, the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) have been promoting Japan's cultural heritage, nature, and modern attractions to attract international tourists, with a particular focus on promoting regional areas beyond major cities like Tokyo, Kyoto, and Osaka (JETRO, n.d.). Besides, Japan has emphasized to send tourists towards lesser-known destinations to prevent over-tourism in popular spots. In addition, Japan has been implementing digital solutions in tourism sector such as centralized booking systems, digital maps, and real-time congestion information. The over-tourism status and its management policy in Japan exposes its successful implementation of long tourism plan within it. Which indeed is an exemplary campaign for the nations like Nepal. If observe closely to these successful campaigns of tourism promotion, then Nepali cities and local government authorities could implement those experiences for their tourism promotion.

In this connection, Nepal has made various tourism promotion plan like visit Nepal 2020. Badal (2019) explains that the visit Nepal 2020 campaign was planned targeting creation of one million tourism related jobs in Nepal with the advancement of nature and culture, and adventure diversities opportunities of major tourism development, decentralization of Nepalese tourism, and investment opportunities in Nepal. However, COVID-19 pandemic and other obstacles impacted negatively in that campaign. Currently Bharatpur Metropolitan city of Nepal has initiated same sort of campaign named *Visit Bharatpur 2024*. This campaign has assumed to play a crucial role in the image building and branding of Bharatpur Metropolitan City in the nation as well as in global arena by strategically positioning it as a prominent cultural, ecological, educational, health service and economic hub and a tourist destination in Nepal.

Visit Bharatpur 2024 campaign was inaugurated by prime minister Puspa Kamal Dahal "Prachanda" together with three former prime ministers Khadga Prasad Oli, Sher Bahadur Deuba and Madhav Kumar Nepal on March 1st, 2024 with a special ceremony at the bank of Narayani river (Editorial, 2024). Further this editorial

mentions that the Bharatpur Visit year campaign has announced plan to promote more than 50 destinations during campaign from Sauraha in Ratnanagar Municipality to Someshwar Gadhi in Madi Municipality, Parewakot in Rapti, Kumroz in Khairhani, Sinte Waterfall in Kalika, Maulakalika in Gaindakot, Siraichuli in Ichchhakamana and so on. So the campaign has not limited within the boundaries of Bharatpur Metropolitan rather included surrounding districts and municipalities. It is a huge campaign that has included 29 subcommittees with more than 4100 members as campaigner targeting 200,000 foreign tourists in the year (Saurahaonline, 2024).

In addition, Bharatpur has partnered with Chongqing in China, aiming to enhance cooperation in infrastructure development, tourism, and people-to-people connections amid *Visit Bharatpur-2024* campaign. Bharatpur has made this sister city relations during the International Friendship Cities Cooperation Conference hosted by the Chongqing Municipal Government in Chongqing, China. Bharatpur metropolitan Mayor Renu Dahal herself had visited Europe and Japan for the publicity of the campaign *Visit Bharatpur 2024* (Khabarhub, 2024). Further, the khabarhub mentions that “Mayor Dahal has also extended invitations to mayors of different European cities” (Khabarhub, 2024, para. 6). Similarly, Bharatpur metropolitan had invited the Government of Japan to visit Bharatpur 2024 (RSS, 2024). These all efforts exhibit the priority given to the campaign by this metropolitan authority.

The initiative of Bharatpur Metropolitan to build sister city relations aggressively or the visit Bharatpur tourism campaigns have been contributing to enhance this city's identity in global arena. Firstly, these efforts are promoting Bharatpur as a tourist destination by emphasizing its proximity to Chitwan National Park, a globally recognized eco-tourism site, to attract both domestic and international tourists. It is also showcasing the city as a gateway to one of Nepal's most biodiverse regions and strengthening Bharatpur's brand as a leading eco-tourism destination in Nepal.

Secondly, the active and conservation friendly initiations as reflected in slogan of Bharatpur, in one hand has been positioning it as a sustainable and environment friendly city, on the other it has been contributing the sustainable and community-based tourism commitment of Nepal. The conservation friendly slogan “*Tourism for Conservation, Bharatpur for Tourism*” of visit Bharatpur campaign exposes the city brand with sustainability and environmental consciousness within nation and across the world. The highlighted eco-friendly tourism practices and conservation initiatives has been positioning Bharatpur as a responsible city preserving natural resources. The metropolitan has started conservation campaigns in natural cites like community forests around Chitwan National Park, maintain tourism roots, wildlife protection infrastructures, and cleaning tourism destinations as a preparation part of Visit

Bharatpur 2024 (Media, 2024). Besides, Bharatpur has facilitated community-based tourism programs before and during the campaign that involve local ethnic groups, like the Tharu community, that emphasizes of city towards inclusiveness of multisector community in the campaign.

Thirdly, the initiatives of Bharatpur has added values to strengthening its international relations and recognition. As mentioned above, sister-city relations with Yokosuka, Japan, and Chongqing, China and partnerships with organizations like the Non-Resident Nepali Association (NRNA) in course of Visit Bharatpur 2024 campaign have elevated Bharatpur's profile on the international stage. Besides, these collaborations not only have promoted international image but also has made ground to attract foreign investments and cultural exchanges for contributing economic activities and tourism promotion.

Lastly, the initiative of Bharatpur Metropolitan during campaign has created positive circumstance to boost economic image. Events like trade expose and business summits during the Visit Bharatpur campaign are designed to expose infrastructure, healthcare, and educational facilities in Bharatpur, and to strengthen its economic brand (Sapkota, 2024). Furthermore, the campaign has been showcasing and exposed key tourist destinations in Bharatpur, Chitwan, Nepal. They are Chitwan National Park, Ganeshthan Temple, Devghat, Bishajari lake, Batuli pokhari, Tinkhole Monastery, Bageshwori Temple, Harihar Temple, Narayani River Bank, Rapti River, Diyalo Palace, Sauraha, Kalika Temple, Golaghat, Kasara, Sinte Waterfall, Maulakalika Temple, Jor Kusum Park and Bikrambaba.

Thus, promoting Bharatpur as a prime tourist destination, establishing it as an eco-friendly sustainable tourism landmark, enhancing international networks by sister city companion and exposing it as a vibrant economic hub in Nepal are the key achievements of Visit Bharatpur 2024 campaign.

Appraisal of Sister-city Initiatives and Visit Bharatpur Campaign

Soft power initiatives as city diplomacy of Bharatpur metropolitan has made multifaceted impact in grass root level of tourism development and economic activities. It has mobilized large number of civil society members as campaigners (more than 4100 members) under 29 subcommittees in its territory and abroad. This huge presence of people-to-people networks has formed positive ownership towards the campaign. Bharatpur-Yokosuka, Bharatpur-Shigatse, and Bharatpur-Chongqing sister city relations are the evidences of efforts to promote tourism by means of bilateral and international relations. Indeed, this initiatives are ambitious and innovative efforts of local government of Nepal to connect it to soft power superpowers like Japan and China.

Further, collaboration via sister city ties with cities of foreign countries is expected to strengthening soft powers of Nepal in international arena.

This ambitious campaign has also targeted to position Bharatpur as a key tourism hub within Nepal and internationally, increase tourist arrivals and stay duration by showcasing multiple destinations, and drive socio-economic change through eco-friendly and sustainable tourism (Tourismmail, 2023). Besides, Bharatpur has emphasized to send tourists towards multiple destinations to increase stay duration. Through the campaign, Bharatpur has planned to balance tourism growth with environmental conservation and community well-being, positioning itself as a leading sustainable travel destination in Nepal.

The campaign has exposed key new attractive destinations of Bharatpur for tourists such as Diyalo Bangala, Batuli Pokhari, Umbrella Street, Ganeshtandham in addition to Chitwan National Park, Devghat, and Sauraha. It has helped to enhance natural beauties and cultural significance including the scenic views and boating activity opportunity in Narayani and Rapti Rivers. However, poor infrastructure, lack of investment and inadequate international networks it is yet too difficult to accomplish all targets of *Visit Bharatpur 2024* campaign as announced in course of preparation and inauguration.

Conclusion

Soft power initiatives of local level government of Nepal like Visit Bharatpur 2024 to promote people-to-people relations and city diplomacy via sister city ties are noticeable constructive efforts to exposing cities like Bharatpur in national and international arena. Bharatpur as a local level government of Nepal has been accomplishing efforts to position herself within country or international as an economic, cultural, education and healthcare hub in Nepal by means of city diplomacy, public diplomacy, sister city ties and tourism campaigns. Political values, appealing culture and policies shape soft power, which enables governments to employ public diplomacies like city diplomacy as a prominent component in bilateral relation which Bharatpur also has practiced in course of soft initiatives. Even though these efforts are in very initial stages in the context of Bharatpur, the initiatives of Bharatpur are ambitious and 'punch above one's weight' status as it has tried to connect Nepal with soft power superpowers like Japan on the capacity and brave initiation of local level governments from Nepal. It is noteworthy that the high ranked soft power superpower Japan and low ranked Nepal has crossed more than seven decades in formal diplomatic relations and it is the time of multifaceted engagement with exchange of visits, cultural exchanges, tourism promotion cooperation, and many more in federal as well as in local levels of governments. In this

connection, the effort of sister-city ties and visit Bharatpur 2024 campaigns for people-to-people relations of Bharatpur with the cities in soft power superpower like Japan is remarkable. Similarly, it is concluded that the local soft power efforts like Sister-City Relations and Visit Bharatpur 2024 campaigns remain as key soft power initiatives that leverage the economic activities, tourism promotion and cultural exchanges in grass-root level in bilateral relations.. Nonetheless, the future prospect of city ties and tourism promotion demands the huge agreement networks between the cities in Nepal and abroad. Nepali diaspora organized under NRNA and formal diplomatic mechanism of Nepal should consider the role of public diplomacy and city diplomacy for future prospects in the area.

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