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Nepal-Japan Relations and Implications for Nepal

Suresh Malla*

Abstract

Nepal-Japan relations are crucial for both countries. The socio-cultural relations between Nepal and Japan are rooted in over a century of friendship. Nepal-Japan relations are significant and provide a rationale for studying them in the contemporary foreign policy of Nepal, given Japan's increasing role in economic development and cultural prosperity. As Japanese aid to Nepal has no political agenda, it also supports Nepal's cultural development. This article is intended to highlight Nepal's socio-cultural relations with Japan. This research deals with Nepal-Japan relations as significant for cultural development. Based on secondary sources and employing descriptive and analytical methodologies, this study examines the historical evolution, political foundations, economic and educational cooperation, and socio-cultural dimensions of Nepal–Japan relations. It highlights both similarities and dissimilarities between the two nations while identifying emerging opportunities for enhanced bilateral cooperation. The study concludes that Nepal–Japan relations represent a stable, multidimensional partnership with strong potential for further expansion in political, economic, educational, and cultural spheres.

Keywords: Nepal–Japan relations, economic development, socio-cultural relations, education, similarities and dissimilarities

Introduction

Nepal's relations with Japan are one of the important aspects of contemporary Nepali foreign policy. Nepal has maintained good friendly relations with countries of the world, including Japan. As Japan is the third-largest economic power in the world, Nepal's relationship with Japan is one of the important aspects of its foreign policy and diplomacy. In the context of the 21st century, it is essential to view Nepal's relations with Japan in a more realistic and practical manner based on the aspirations and expectations of the people in both countries in the changed national, regional, and global context. Japan is one of the few countries in the world that has played a significant role in the economic development of Nepal in several ways, including providing a large amount of

* Dr. Malla is the President of Nepal Council of World Affairs.

economic aid and assistance to Nepal. Japan's economic support to Nepal is without any political interest attached to it.

Japan holds a unique position and distinctive characteristics in the contemporary world. Efforts have been made here to explore its role in further promoting and strengthening existing bilateral relations, so that new areas of cooperation can be identified and developed (Malla, 2014). Democratic peace theory believes that democracies do not go to war with each other (Aryal et al., 2010). Nepal and Japan believe in cooperation, negotiation, compromise, and peaceful conflict resolution globally. Both countries apply these same values in dealing with other democracies.

The political and diplomatic relations between the two countries have always been cordial since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1956. Both countries have shared common political aspirations in many sectors, including a firm commitment to the principle of peaceful coexistence, sovereign equality of states, and faith in the UN. In international relations, both countries have also shared a common approach on most issues, including the restructuring of the United Nations (UN). The two countries have shared common views in many areas and intend to strengthen good, friendly relations based on mutual understanding and respecting each other's aspirations, interests, and needs (MoFA, 2025). The political relations between the two countries, during the periods of King Mahendra and King Birendra, have always been very cordial. Such relations during the short reign of King Gyanendra and later under the current republican era have also been marked as excellent ones (Malla, 2014).

Nepal-Japan friendship was strengthened during the time when B. P. Koirala was the Prime Minister of Nepal (Adhikari, 2010). So, it may be said that the foundation of the developmental relations of Nepal with Japan was laid by Koirala. As a result, Nepal was able to receive support from Japan for infrastructure development in Nepal. The support from Japan continued since then, and Nepal was able to build one of its dream projects in development. Nepal continued to get kind support from Japan. The foundation stone of the BP Highway was laid by the then Minister for Physical Planning and Works Dr. Suresh Malla and the then Ambassador of Japan to Nepal (Kunihiro, 2015).

Nepal and Japan are members of a number of regional and international organizations, including the UN, the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank. Nepal and Japan established diplomatic relations in 1956. In 1968, the Embassy of Japan was established in Nepal, which strengthened the existing ties of friendship between the two countries (Pandey, 2005). The Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) office was also established in Kathmandu in 1978, which played a very significant role in the socio-economic development of Nepal. Japan has also been supporting Nepal in its socio-economic development since 1969. It is one of the major donors of Nepal, playing

a significant role in the socio-economic development of the country. In the present context, the Japanese aid and assistance have covered almost all aspects and dimensions of the Nepali economy. The Japanese loan assistance and grant assistance started in Nepal in 1969 and 1970, respectively. Since 1970 onwards, Japan has started providing Technical Cooperation with the dispatch of Japan Overseas Volunteers (JOCVs) (JICA, 2025).

As one of the countries in the world with a Buddhist tradition and culture, Japan has always demonstrated the most liberal attitude towards Nepal and its people. The socio-cultural relations between the two countries are also gradually becoming closer. Nepal, as the birthplace of Lord Buddha, is a pilgrimage center for all Japanese people. The religious and cultural relations between the two countries are also particularly notable. Japan has also played a significant role in the beautification of Lumbini by constructing beautiful statues of Lord Buddha (Lumbini Development Trust, 2020).

Japan is one of the most advanced and prosperous countries in the world. Its strong education system and remarkable progress in science and technology have attracted people from all corners of the globe. The Japanese way of life, along with its rich and diverse culture, natural beauty, and many geographical and socio-cultural attractions, adds to its appeal in today's world. In the last few years, the educational relationships between the two countries have also been particularly notable and are gradually becoming warmer. Through JICA and direct grants, Japan has helped to build and rebuild many schools, especially after the 2015 earthquake. Japan has also provided money for the School Sector Development Program to improve school management, teaching quality, and the learning environment for students (JICA, 2023).

Japan has played a very significant role in the development of human resources in Nepal by providing financial support to the students who are pursuing higher education in different universities in Japan. The Japanese government also provides scholarships for Nepali students and teachers to study in Japan (TIT, 2025). It also supports teacher training and helps improve skills and knowledge. Japan's support focuses on better classrooms, increasing student attendance, and improving the quality of education for the long term without any political conditions. Because of this sincere support, Japan has become one of Nepal's most trusted partners in education. Besides government-level formal relations, the people-to-people informal relations are also substantially increasing in the contemporary world.

Methodology

This article is primarily based on secondary sources, which include published and unpublished research, journals, periodicals, books, research reports, and official websites. In the course of analyzing collected secondary data, a descriptive and an

analytical approach were adopted. The political relations between the two countries have been analyzed from historical perspectives following the descriptive and analytical approach.

According to Creswell (2023), the descriptive research approach is a systematic method used to gather information about existing conditions, detailing the characteristics of a population, situation, or phenomenon. So, this study focuses on analyzing the socio-cultural perspectives of Nepal-Japan relations. The primary goal is to provide a detailed description of the socio-cultural phenomenon of Nepal's relations with Japan.

Similarities and Dissimilarities between Nepal and Japan

Nepal and Japan have many similarities, commonalities in several dimensions, including in similarities in history and characters, as well as dissimilarities in the dimensions of geography, politics, economy, and socio-culture (Kaminaga, 2015). Geographically, Japan is a country of islands. Economically speaking, Japan is an advanced country (next to the US and China) and is one of the industrialized nations with rich mineral/natural resources. Politically, Japan has a multiparty parliamentary system with the oldest and most respected institution of monarchy in the world.

There is a constitutional provision of an independent judiciary, and Japan has nearly seven principal political parties operating within the political and constitutional framework (Kishimoto, 1997). The Constitution of Japan (1947) clearly states, “We, the Japanese people, acting through our duly elected representatives in the National Diet, determined that we shall secure for ourselves and our posterity the fruits of peaceful cooperation with all nations and the blessings of liberty throughout this land, and resolved that never again shall we be visited with the horrors of war through the action of government, do proclaim that sovereign power resides with the people” (Ministry of Justice, Japan, 1946).

The Constitution of Japan (1947) reflects Japan's democratic and pacifist principles after World War II. It expresses the core values on which modern Japan is founded. “We, the Japanese people” clearly establishes the principle of popular sovereignty. This new constitution shifts ultimate authority to the people. The government derives its legitimacy from citizens, and political power is exercised “through our duly elected representatives in the National Diet.” (Ministry of Justice, Japan, 1946). This confirms Japan as a representative democracy where elected officials act on behalf of the people. Moreover, the commitment to “secure for ourselves and our posterity the fruits of peaceful cooperation with all nations” highlights Japan's dedication to internationalism and global peace. This principle is also employed by Nepal.

After experiencing militarism and aggressive expansion before and during World War II, Japan renounced such policies. The emphasis on cooperation rather than conflict reflects a deliberate transformation of national identity—from imperial power to peaceful partner in the international community. Furthermore, the phrase “the blessings of liberty throughout this land” underscores the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms. The Constitution guarantees civil liberties, human rights, and democratic values. It suggests that liberty is not a privilege granted by the state but a right to be protected and enjoyed by all citizens. Similarly, the commitment “never again shall we be visited with the horrors of war through the action of government” expresses strong pacifism. This idea is further institutionalized in Article 9 of the Constitution, where Japan renounces war as a sovereign right and rejects the use of force to settle international disputes (Matsui, 2011). This reflects the collective determination to prevent the return of militarism and authoritarian rule. Finally, the declaration that “sovereign power resides with the people” is the core democratic principle of the Constitution. It firmly rejects absolute monarchy and establishes constitutional governance, accountability, and the rule of law. These values reflect the national interest of Japan that matches the core values of Nepal as well.

There are several dissimilarities between the two countries. Politically, Japan is a stable democracy and is heading towards a process of political modernization. Nepal is still in a transitional period, attempting to institutionalize democratic politics, human rights, and civil liberties. Socially speaking, the Japanese society is one of the modern, westernized, and cultured societies internalizing the global social values into practice. Nepali society is more traditional and transitional, struggling to become modern. Economically, Japan is the third largest economic superpower in the world, whereas Nepal is one of the least developed countries in the world, attempting to become a developing country of the world within a few decades.

Geographically, Japan is an island country in the Pacific, having different geographic, climatic, and ecological features. Nepal is a landlocked country facing several problems in practice. Socio-culturally, religiously, ethnically, and linguistically, both countries have many dissimilarities. Historically, both countries have different but unique characteristics and experiences.

Socio-cultural Factors in Nepal-Japan Relations

The socio-cultural factors play a crucial role in international relations. Based on Nepal-Japan relations, the social and cultural relations significantly have an impact on bilateral relations. According to Dunchak (2024), the modern globalized sphere requires well-established and diverse perspectives to interact effectively in an interconnected world. The socio-cultural characteristics of nations also play significant roles in shaping,

conditioning, and determining socio-cultural relations between two nations. The understanding of socio-cultural characteristics between the two nations would help to understand the nature of existing relations and also to explore new areas of cooperation in the future.

Basically, the concept of culture, as UNESCO defines it, is a set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional factors of society or a social group, and it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, tradition, and beliefs (UNESCO, 2025). In brief, culture studies the spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional characteristics of society or social groups. In addition to these factors, it also studies the art, literature, lifestyles, traditional values, beliefs, and norms of social groups, their living styles.

The society and its values, norms, and characteristics are not static. They are always changing according to time, need, and situation. The society tries to change, transform, and modernize itself, crossing the traditional and transitional stages. The modernization (in most cases understood as westernization) and transformation process, thus, become important aspects of social changes in every society. The concept transformation, as Marsch (1967, p. 30) views, can be understood as “the emergence of new forms of integration, evolutionary upgrading and increasingly adaptive capacity of societies.”

Japan is one of the few countries in the world that has been blessed with a rich nature, showing a great variety throughout the seasons. Japan, during different periods of history, has adopted culture from foreign countries besides developing its own culture rooted in the sensibility nurtured by the colors of nature. Japan is rich in cultural heritage.

Japan has a rich cultural heritage that has attracted the whole world (Karan, 2005). Japan, a rich country in the Far East, has been blessed with rich nature and astonishing cultural properties. The country holds more than twenty sites recognized by UNESCO as World Heritage Sites, many of which are supported by Japan’s diverse natural environment and its four-season climate (Agency for Cultural Affairs, 2023). Among the sites of historical cultural heritage, there exist many buildings influenced by the unique sensitivities of the Japanese people, reflecting great insights into the roots of the rich cultures of Japan. In line with UNESCO’s wishes to protect and preserve such heritage sites considered to be of universal value to humanity, Japan is preserving these sites for future generations, intending to share them with people all over the world (InfoJapan, 2014).

Culturally, Japan is regarded as one of the richest countries in the world. Japan has a long history of cultural development. Its culture is rich and diverse, going back to 10000 BC when the Jomon people settled in this country (Henshall, 2012). It has unique social

customs attracting the world at large. It has its unique characteristics related to art, religion, ceremony, music, traditional clothing, etiquette, literature and language, and pop culture.

Nepal too has certain specific socio-cultural characteristics and is regarded as one of the countries with rich socio-cultural heritages. Every ethnic group in Nepal has a rich socio-cultural heritage, which is found in very few countries in the world. The Newari and Mithila cultures, in particular, are regarded as the richest cultures in the world, having some unique features. In Japanese society, some specific and unique characteristics are found in several areas, including the criteria of group formation, the internal structure of the criteria of group formation, and the characteristics and value orientation of Japanese men (Nakane, 1972).

Cultural change is a continuous process over time. It is the process through which a society changes from one form to another. It includes changes that may happen slowly or quickly in a society's political system, family and social institutions, and patterns of settlement. It also involves changes in beliefs and values, tools and technology, and the way goods are produced and used in the economy. In a broad sense, cultural change is a major force in human civilization. It happens everywhere and all the time (Acharya, 2000).

Conclusion

Nepal and Japan have strong cultural ties. Both countries are connected with their diverse cultural phenomena from the late 19th century. Nepal is the birthplace of Lord Buddha, and Japan has been deeply influenced by Mahayana Buddhism. This shared spiritual background has created mutual respect between the two countries. These historical links have led to close people-to-people relations. Many Japanese tourists visit Lumbini and the Himalayas, while Nepal hosts Japanese cultural programs like ikebana flower arrangement, tea ceremonies, and traditional music. There are also educational exchanges between the two countries. As a result, Nepal and Japan enjoy a strong friendship. They better understand each other's values, discipline, and harmony.

Japan has been a true and selfless friend to Nepal for many decades. The government and people of Japan have continuously supported Nepal in areas such as education, health, infrastructure, disaster management, and rural development without any political or economic interest. Japan's assistance is focused on the welfare of the Nepali people, capacity building, and long-term sustainable development. Whether it is building schools, hospitals, roads, or supporting after earthquakes and natural disasters, Japan has always stood by Nepal as a reliable development partner. This shows that Japan supports Nepal with a spirit of friendship, cooperation, and mutual respect rather than self-interest. Furthermore, Japan is Nepal's most impartial and reliable friend. It has

always helped Nepal based on friendship, mutual respect, developmental assistance, and humanitarian concern. Japan has supported Nepal in many areas, such as infrastructure, education, health, environment, and disaster management. It never interferes in Nepal's internal affairs. Japan's support is always transparent, fair, and focused on Nepal's long-term development — not for any political or economic benefit.

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