



Significance of South Asian Cultural Studies in the Context of Nepal’s and India’s Historical Relations

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Abstract

This paper analyses a critical discourse of Professor S. D. Muni’s multifaceted career as a scholar, diplomat, and observer of South Asian cultural affairs. Muni, a former Indian ambassador to Laos and an expert on India-Nepal relations, offers a reflective overview of political developments in Nepal, Sri Lanka, and India’s foreign policy apparatus. The primary method of the paper depicts Muni’s personal meetings with scholars, leaders, militants, and policymakers. Muni critiques the erosion of meaningful institutional ties and laments the growing disconnect between India and Nepal, two friendly nations historically linked by cultural and ancestral bonds. His memoir *Dabbling* as a secondary method narrates his evolution from a modest upbringing and early struggles as a school teacher to his emergence as a respected diplomat, emphasizing pivotal moments such as his role in facilitating dialogue during Nepal’s Maoist insurgency as well as constitutional debate and its promulgation. Muni’s commentary extends to broader geopolitical themes, including India’s neighborhood policy, the influence of external actors in Nepal, and the spiritual and political implications of secularism. He, along with fellow scholars, advocates for a renewed, cooperative bilateral framework that acknowledges shared histories while addressing contemporary challenges. In conclusion, this study concludes the importance of pragmatic diplomacy rooted in mutual respect, regional solidarity, and the human dimension of leadership.

Keywords: Historical, Cultural, Ancestral Relations, Regional Solidarity, Scholars’ Human Dimension

Original Research Article

INTRODUCTION

S.D. Muni, a scholar of South Asian studies and professor emeritus at Jawaharlal Nehru University, a participant in Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues, and a former Indian ambassador to Laos, provides us with a bird eye view of some South Asian events (Sudha Ramachandran (2024). Drawing on Muni’s interactions with leaders, politicians, officials, militants and academics, he provides deep insights into Nepal’s democracy, Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict and the Indian foreign policy establishment. His most recent book is titled *Dabbling*. He candidly mentions his meeting with India’s contemporary leaders, and his affiliation with the Indian International Center has contributed to fostering positive development. A veteran observer, he understands how numerous organizations, both domestic and international, have worked for the benefit of India and its people.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This paper begins by exploring personal knowledge

as a primary source. In examining the purpose of life, individuals ultimately derive secondary sources that inform the construction of narrative methodologies grounded in cultural and geopolitical themes within scholarly and diplomatic discourse. These individuals thus engage with humanistic issues at both the national and international levels. This study is grounded in the methods of *Constructivism* in international relations, which emphasizes the role of identity, ideas, and human agency in shaping state behavior. Constructivism values cultural, historical, and ideational elements in foreign policymaking. S. D. Muni’s career, as both a scholar and a diplomat, reflects this theory through his emphasis on cultural ties, interpersonal diplomacy, and shared heritage between India and Nepal. His engagement with political leaders, academics, and militants illustrates how social interactions, rather than material interests alone, influence bilateral relations. Additionally, *Track II diplomacy*—informal dialogues that complement official diplomatic efforts—serves as a key lens through which Muni’s efforts are interpreted, especially his role in bridging the

Maoists and mainstream politics during Nepal's constitutional crisis. His memoir, *Dabbling*, also supports *Narrative Theory*, wherein personal stories become political tools for identity formation and diplomatic strategy. The human-centric focus advocated by Muni and scholars like Prof. Lok Raj Baral suggests a normative approach to foreign policy—one that calls for empathy, mutual respect, and cultural understanding in international cooperation. Thus, this framework supports diplomacy as a socially constructed, relational, and ethical practice.

JUSTIFICATION OF ISSUES

Unlike today's proliferation of "think tanks," earlier institutions maintained closer, more personal connections; now, even universities are losing touch with human relationships, and problems are accumulating at every level of society. Politically, economically, geographically, militarily, and educationally, Nepal and India no longer engage as closely as they once did. Despite their shared heritage—what is affectionately called "Beti-roti" relations—the two nations now pursue development in largely separate spheres. In Muni's view, this divergence implies that Nepal and India have ceased to work together effectively.

S. D. Muni was born into a modest family, proving that not all Brahmin households are privileged. He began his career as a mathematics teacher at a lower secondary school but struggled with the subject. After earning his bachelor's degree in science, he switched to teaching science at the same level. Over time, he was promoted to senior teacher and held that position for two years. "I was posted to Ganganagar," Muni recalls, "and, almost by necessity, I began reading classical works by Plato, I. A. Richards, and Horace." He describes himself as an ordinary person whose path was shaped by destiny and circumstance.

While pursuing his M.A., he faced a choice between an essay-based examination and an oral ("viva") exam. Advised by senior colleagues that the viva would include challenging questions posed directly by the examiners, he opted for it and succeeded impressively. Muni's first teaching appointment was in Jaipur. Though he never kept a diary, he managed his classes efficiently and covered the curriculum in a remarkably short time.

S. D. Muni often shared his diplomatic anecdotes and made it a point to meet with his peers every Saturday. These gatherings formed a "think tank" of distinguished retirees among them was I. K. Gujaral who encouraged him to leave teaching and pursue a role in the Indian Foreign Service. Although he had no formal diplomatic training, the think tank's influence transformed his career from academia to diplomacy.

In India's Ministry of External Affairs, career diplomats and non-career appointees occupy separate tracks. Muni hoped that, within a year, one of his think-tank mentors would recommend him for a government posting. He credited his success to choosing the viva exam during his M.A. The rigorous oral defense convinced them that he had what it takes to serve as a diplomat, and he remains grateful for that pivotal decision.

He was delighted when he received an unexpected phone call appointing him as a special envoy to Sri Lanka. His latest book recounts many of his experiences there and throughout Southeast Asia, with two chapters devoted to Nepal. During that posting, Muni took delivery of a message from I. K. Gujaral and B. P. Koirala concerning Koirala's imminent release from jail and personally conveyed it to Girija Prasad Koirala aka 'Girja Babu'. As a special guest at Koirala Niwas, S. D. Muni hosted both B. P. Koirala and Pushpa Raj Koirala in turn. The story of how Muni, a non-career diplomat, wove himself into these friendships and professional relationships remains nothing short of remarkable.

Later, Baburam Bhattarai introduced Muni to Rishikesh Shah. Since then Muni has worked to establish a mutually beneficial role between the two countries. Although most people had neither met nor heard of him, a strong friendship had already taken root, an unexpectedly revolutionary development. When the Maoists realized, they could not win the hearts of the people through weapons and ammunition, they laid down their arms. At that critical moment, Muni helped bring together the Maoists and the Seven Party Alliance, then led by the Nepali Congress.

Going back to 1976, Surya Bahadur Thapa had taken the initiative to open a dialogue between the king and the emerging "messianic" democratic parties. Throughout all these shifts, India's role has remained one of remarkable consistency, far more so than Nepal's.

In 2015, Madhesh was effectively blockaded at the India–Nepal border amid protests over Nepal's new constitution. To break the deadlock, Madhesh's leaders needed to engage both the federal government in Kathmandu and key international partners. The Maoist movement in Nepal drew heavily on Chinese ideology, and its fighters procured arms and ammunition from both China and India. During the insurgency, the appeal of a narrow Hindutva identity weakened as the Maoists gained popular support through their revolutionary rhetoric.

King Gyanendra Shah deployed approximately forty-two thousand troops to suppress the Maoist insurgency. Realizing that India would never back their cause, the Maoists felt increasingly isolated and vulnerable. During this period, they repeatedly petitioned India, stating that if their demands were met, they would support the establishment of a new Nepal in deference to Indian wishes.

This vision was ultimately recognized under the Modi government, although the Maoist conflict had persisted since Dr. Manmohan Singh's tenure. At one point, Prime Minister Singh even advised King Gyanendra against attempting a coup. Throughout these turbulent years, India remained committed to supporting Nepal's sovereignty. Rooted in their shared history under the British Empire, India's long-standing policy of peace and harmony has always favored a stable and independent Nepal. Nepalese diplomats and politicians rushed to promulgate the new constitution. Yet this document runs fundamentally counter to the will and customary practices of the Nepali people. International actors present in Nepal have pursued their own agendas, championing a secularist ideology that has become another source of turmoil. Many among these

external communities aim to extend Christianity's reach and view Nepal's secular designation as a strategic foothold for advancing their hold on Nepali soil.

This predicament arose from Nepali leaders' own haste and unprepared agenda. In their haste, Nepalese diplomats and politicians became further ensnared in an international quagmire of conflicting agendas. Many of these leaders are active proponents of Christian secularism, a movement notably championed by the European Union, which bears significant responsibility for its rise in Nepal. Consequently, Nepal-India relations have suffered under the counterproductive policies of Nepalese political and career diplomats.

S.D. Muni argues that, at their core, both Nepal and India should collaborate on a shared neighborhood policy, one that reinforces their mutual image and interests across South and Southeast Asia.

Dr. Manmohan Singh sought to appease King Gyanendra Shah, offering guidelines which the king politely received but promptly ignored once he returned home, pursuing his own agenda. Throughout his reign, the king's rhetoric to India consistently framed the monarchy as the Hindu bulwark for a peaceful Nepal.

Going back to 1976, Surya Bahadur Thapa and B. P. Koirala were both in India. Thapa was in dialogue with Jayaprakash Narayan while the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi served as Prime Minister. It was Indira Gandhi who cautioned King Birendra (then crown prince) against arresting Koirala. The king ultimately disregarded this advice committing what many saw as a grave error. Later, under the king's influence and without a popular referendum, Koirala accepted a "guided" democratic system proposed by the monarch, a concession that proved disastrous for Nepal's fledgling democracy. By manipulating the process, the king effectively subverted the referendum system, turning B. P. Koirala's democratic efforts into a dismal failure.

Decades later, in 2015, the Nepali people rose again in the Second People's Movement (Janandolan II), demanding true constitutional reform and an end to monarchical overreach.

India has played a transformational role at every critical juncture in Nepal's history, from the Rana regime through King Mahendra's coup, serving as a powerful and groundbreaking force in the region. Today, India's neighborhood policy continues to reflect these enduring ties. Beyond Nepal, India supported Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's independence movement against Pakistan, took an active interest in Sri Lanka's Tamil issues, and, during the Cold War, positioned itself as a leading center for Non-Aligned Movement. Even in literary circles, India's influence resonates: E. M. Forster's 1924 novel *A Passage to India*, while not a political tract, explores human connection and often aspires for poetic effect, reflecting the complex interplay of cultures between Britain and the subcontinent.

E. M. Forster's novel *A Passage to India* is structured into three distinct seasonal sections—winter, summer (the "hot weather"), and the monsoon (the "rainy" section)—and its most famous set-piece, the Marabar Caves, exemplifies the author's poetic intentions. Politics, of course, weaves through

the narrative: British-era tensions under the Raj frame is the story's backdrop. When Forster revisited India in 1949, he found a nation transformed by independence and partition.

In the early 1950s, Indian politicians frequently questioned Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru about Western attitudes toward India's non-alignment policy. Nehru, with characteristic candor, dismissed their concerns as driven by "dollar-dust" thinking. Between 1954 and 1955 as the USSR and China emerged as global military powers, many diplomatic analysts hailed Nehru's balanced, non-aligned approach as a model for peaceful coexistence. Yet Nehru's faith in non-alignment suffered a setback in 1962, when he had not anticipated the outbreak of the Sino-Indian War.

In 2015, the Madhesh Andolan ignited a revolutionary push to secure space in Nepal's constitution. Just as the Chinese had earlier unleashed their own Cultural Revolution, democratic forces in South Asia recognized that fundamental change was urgently needed to serve the people of today. It was Madhesh people's argument that they all belonged to multicultural societies, and without timely reform, minority groups would risk marginalization.

For example, Bangladesh emerged from Pakistan as a separate nation through its own struggle, and in Sri Lanka the Tamil Tigers formed as a distinct group to assert minority rights. These varied movements share a common thread: a collective striving for better social and political accommodation in diverse societies.

Through the lessons of the 1962 India-China war emerged three distinct doctrinal visions, each formulated by a renowned Indian diplomat:

1. I. K. Gujral's Doctrine
2. Atal Bihari Vajpayee's Doctrine
3. Jawaharlal Nehru's Doctrine

Gujral, though a seasoned politician, opposed empowering non-career diplomats who could resort to armed struggle. Muni illustrates this point with numerous examples from regions like Rolpa, Dolpa, and Madhesh, where disenfranchised groups resorted to violence to force social change. Nancy J. Powell, the United States Ambassador to India from April 2012 to May 2014, similarly argued that India preferred to see the monarchy endure; she noted how major parties shifted both their leadership and political platforms over time. For instance, Sikkim, once an independent kingdom, is now a peaceful Indian state.

Meanwhile, figures such as Kaji Lendup Dorje criticized B. P. Koirala's inept handling of Darjeeling's politics, and Muni reminds us that suggesting Nepal-India cooperation could still yield mutual benefits. He also highlights that "all leaders are human beings," a lesson underscored by Surya Bahadur Thapa's close rapport with Indira Gandhi between 1965 and 1968, with Rishikesh Shah acting as the palace's conduit for their exchanges.

Nepal's 2015 Constitution was hurriedly promulgated in the opinion of Nepalese diplomats and politicians. India, however, advised the Seven-Party Alliance to take additional time for careful review and research. The palace, keen on preserving

monarchical prerogatives, received and acted upon messages that championed both Nepali rights and the continuation of the monarchy, reflecting India's awareness that Western institutions often pursued their own strategic interests rather than genuine development under local supervision.

Despite India's advocacy for a sovereign, stable Nepal, the 2015 constitution leaned heavily toward external agendas favoring secularism, a development that international actors, especially certain Western and religious organizations, supported as part of a broader effort to extend Christian influence in the region. Today, Nepal faces the challenge of navigating this international maneuver which many regard as a threat to its future independence and cultural integrity.

In this context, scholars and diplomats like Prof. Dr. Lok Raj Baral from Nepal and Prof. S.D. Muni from India argue that the most urgent solution lies in strengthening a true neighborhood policy, one built on mutual understanding, respect for sovereignty, and the recognition that, in Muni's words and arguments, "all leaders are human beings, not of super human stature" This bilateral approach, they contend, is the surest path to a win-win partnership between the two friendly nations.

CONCLUSION

The life and work of S.D. Muni deal with a compelling lens through which to understand the evolving dynamics of Nepal-India relationships and friendships bring the broader South Asian geopolitical landscape. As both a scholar and a diplomat, Muni's experiences reflect a deep engagement with the cultural, political, and ideological currents that have shaped the region. His trajectory—from a modest Brahmin background and a teacher of science to a respected academic and special envoy—illustrates how personal determination and intellectual curiosity can lead to transformative contributions in diplomacy. Through his writings and interventions, Muni emphasizes the importance of a neighborhood policy grounded in mutual respect, shared heritage, and practical cooperation. He critiques the increasing disconnect between India and Nepal, despite their historical, religious, and familial bonds, and calls attention to the dangers of foreign interference, especially the rise of Western-driven secular agendas in Nepal's constitution-making process.

Muni's accounts of interactions with key figures like Indian leaders like I.K. Gujral to Nepali politicians such as B.P. Koirala reveal the nuanced, often fragile nature of diplomacy in South Asia. His role in bridging gaps during Nepal's Maoist insurgency and constitutional crisis underscores India's consistent yet complex involvement in its neighbor's political evolution. Muni and other scholars like Prof. Lok Raj Baral, advocate for a people-centric bilateralism. They assert that

India and Nepal must move beyond ideological entrenchment and recognize their shared interests through policies that foster cooperation, stability, and regional solidarity, acknowledging that leadership, at its core, is a human endeavor.

SCOPE FOR FURTHER STUDY

This research, further, explores the unexamined influence of informal diplomacy and Track II dialogues initiated by non-career diplomats like S. D. Muni in shaping regional geopolitics. Comparative studies between Muni's people-centric diplomatic approach and conventional state-led diplomacy could yield insights into evolving South Asian foreign policies. Imposing the bizarre or inexplicable impact of the Western secular ideologies on Nepal's constitutional process and identity politics remains a contentious issue like the issue of civil ideological wars in the nation. But the deeper exploration of India-Nepal relations through cultural diplomacy, shared heritage narratives, and grassroots engagement could enrich academic discourse. Muni's role in mediating ideological conflicts offers fertile ground for interdisciplinary studies bridging political science, history, and cultural studies.

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