

# Projection of “Dibya Upadesh” of Prithvi Narayan Shah: Lessons for Small State Diplomacy in Contemporary World Affairs

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## Abstract

*The narratives of small state diplomacy are not a recent phenomenon in international relations and world affairs. The projection of state like Nepal in classical era as 'sandwich' between two giant economy was classical reflection of it. Nepal has always observed and followed the balanced foreign policy with neighbours and also with external entities and it was a clear idea in Dibya Upadesh of late King Prithvi Narayan Shah which is still relevant and contextual. The small state diplomacy has been a subject of contestation and a discourse to locate the role of small state in international relations and foreign affairs. The collective growth of small states seems challenging in contemporary affairs. Nepal is projected as a small state qualifying all criteria to be considered or defined as small state. The diplomatic move played in past was literally an articulated step for presenting power of small states in world affairs. The reflection in Upadesh is also an ancient depiction of it. This paper has analysed the projection of Nepal as small state and its relevancy in contemporary world affairs.*

**Key Words:** Projection, Small States, Diplomacy, World Affairs, Lesson, Relations

## Introduction

There is no single agreement on the definition of a small state (Crowards 2002, Cooper and Shaw 2009). Some define small state in absolute terms based on population size (population of 10-15 million for developed states and population of 20-30 million for developing ones), geographical area, power and GNP/GDP (Goetschel 1998, Vital 1967) and some define it in relative terms based on its relation to other states (Mosser 2001); usually, small state is defined in contradiction to the big state (Cooper and Shaw 2009). The idea of perception is another criterion set for defining small states. Hey (2003a, p. 4) states that “small states are defined as they themselves and others define them.” Thürer (1998, p. 33) provides two perceptions on how small states perceive themselves. On one hand, small states perceive themselves as being in “prison” and on another, they perceive themselves as “beautiful,” as the slogan says, “Small is

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beautiful” (Schumacher 2013) due to its structure that makes it organized, flexible and people can get benefit from “everybody know everybody syndrome” (Schmidle 2001).

The constructivist argument that small state defines itself in relation to the others in meeting its own interest (Goetschel 1998) incorporates the relative definition of small state from the psychological dimension. But Von Däniken (1998) finds no indicators helpful in differentiating between a small and large state as the meaning of small simply provides a descriptive and statistical understanding rather than political. Unlike other authors who challenge the definition of small states, Maass (2009) finds no problem in having more than one definition of small states as he claims that such disagreements over definition have benefited the area of small state studies by providing it conceptual flexibility in both research designs and variations among actual small states in the world. The projection of Nepal as small states is narrated in different ways and mostly the academic work also satisfies the content/features to be considered as small states. The geopolitical position of Nepal in world affairs and contribution made for shaping the international politics and world affairs also justify the role of small states and narratives. The perception developed towards the small states also matters for shaping the diplomatic attitude and relation with the other state.

The role of perception holds the cognitive frame in explaining the behaviour of small states in world politics. It is a perceived thought in international relations that small states survive under the umbrella of large states, in a system to compensate for its power deficit. Nepal’s foreign policy projection and narrates as 'strategy for survival' also disclaims the intention as seen in most of the small states related literature. Small state is viewed as a “suboptimal participants in the international system” due to their lack of “real independence” in defending themselves (Hagalin 2005, p. 1, Cooper and Shaw 2009). The interest of small states is often taken for granted or their individual voices are not properly presented in the international system hence the collective voice is needed among the small states because most of us share similar problem and have faced similar identity crisis in the international forum. Vital (1967) differentiates between a state in terms of their capabilities to influence or to positioned themselves in the world affairs. Since the end of WWI, small states are usually perceived as irritants among large powers in international relation. The priorities of these small states were not considered as real subject matters of world politics hence narrated as disturbing factor for the world peace and stability. They have been recognized playing the role of “ambiguous-non-functional pseudo communities”: the “third world”, the “underdeveloped” or the “Afro-Asian states” in world politics (Rose 1971, p. xiv). Neumann and Gstöhlkt (2004, p. 15) state that small states are often treated as “objects, not subjects of international relation”. The subject-object correlation in the world politics is also not well supporting to preach the existence of small state and their

contribution for the world affairs. The received wisdom in IR is that small state is always seen inferior to larger powers. But a state can be small and big at the same time depending on the context of power (Goetschel 1998, Hirsch 1976), i.e. countries focus on specific issue area looking at the context in which they find themselves. Hänggi (1998, p. 84) states, “the situation of smallness or weakness can change over time and can differ from one aspect of smallness to another.” The strategic frame is significant in reflecting the relation between small and greater powers. The constructivists argue the existence and context relatively define the power and relation of the states.

The received perception is that if a small state is close to a large state (geographical proximity), the small state becomes economically dependent on large state trapping itself into geopolitical vulnerability. The economic status of the small states would be influenced by attachment with the large states and their economy. There is positive correlation between the small states' economy in the global affairs. In other words, greater powers tend to interfere with the domestic policies of smaller states. Despite structural constraints that limit small states' space, they adopt various strategies to participate in the system. Cooper and Shaw (2009, p. 2) argue that “what small states lack in structural clout they can make up through a creative agency.” Small states, as Cooper and Shaw say, adopt principles of non-interference as a part of their diplomatic culture and small states must follow the underlining principles of non-interference in the political affairs of the states. Realizing that they lack in economic influence, small states choose to use their sovereignty to move forward (Prasad 2009). For the security and independent existence of small states in the system, principles for small states have been introduced which implies that “small states can enhance their external reach and maintain their independence at the same time; they are entitled to participate in all types of decision-making process; they can maintain core values of their foreign and security policy; and they cannot be forced to take part in activities they found incompatible” (Goetschel 1998, p. 22). But in practice, all of these principles rarely get executed and thus small states adopt strategies like defensive isolationism, strategies of adaptation, “active foreign policy” (Goetschel 1998, p. 23) to ensure the independence and survival in the system.

It is clear that small isolated states are not weak which challenges scholars like Mosser who used the term ‘small’ and ‘weak’ interchangeably. Small states thus transform their vulnerable situation by adapting to their external environment, resisting and reshaping it. Mathisen (1971) finds the significant role of small powers in the strategies of great powers. In contrast to Mathisen who only sees the role of small powers in great power strategies, Fox looks at the reciprocal ways in which great powers also play a significant role in serving the purposes of some small states. Taking the example of five small states in WWII, Fox (1959) argues that small states sought to resist the strong pressure of great powers even in crisis period by 1) making great powers realize that the

use of force would be too expensive in terms of benefit sought and thus, there was no requirement for the use of force to satisfy their requirements; 2) easily escaping from the attention of great powers due to their less significance in great powers' priority list that makes the diplomatic task more easier for small power leaders (Baillie 1998); 3) emphasizing on respect for their dignity to compensate for their military inferiority; 4) employing tactics to ride out the storm represented by a particular crisis; 5) waiting for correct timing, and 6) forming outright alliance (drawing upon the power of one side to oppose the other) (Fox 1959).

Alliance building is one of the important strategies of a small state. A small state usually serves as a buffer state between great powers and their best strategy to ensure security are "either to balance or bandwagon among the great powers in the system" (Mosser 2001, p. 63). As small states are more susceptible to risk, small states' decision to join alliances and take refuge in them (Reiter 2001) can be observed as their strategy towards survival in the world politics. Small states join alliances if the benefits of joining outweigh the cost. In joining alliances, the small state gets into the trap of being "entrapped" when their dependence on the alliance is greater, or "abandoned" when their ties with the alliances are looser. History has shown that these states usually choose "neutrality" or "hide" as a strategy to escape out of this trap (Gärtner 2001, p. 2).

The small states imply that small states have been so far studied at international level, and not at domestic level. From the lens of the strategic frame, scholars like Snyder, Handle, Fox, Schweller and Walt see domestic political theories only significant foreign policies of great powers but not of small states. Wolfers and Rosenau also examined structural/systemic level factors in studying small state foreign policy as they find domestic politics significant only in explaining the great power foreign policy due to a lower level of external threat faced by great powers in comparison to small states. But Elman (1995) argues that domestic politics matters in explaining foreign policy outcomes. It is said that statesman on small states needs to be more concerned about external constraints than great power leadership due to less 'margin of time and error' and greater effects of anarchy on small states. But Elman's argument makes one think that domestic politics mediates the foreign policy of a state. Thus, the internal politics and external policies become an integral part of the small power leadership. The next chapter has explained about the small states' narratives and relevancy with Nepal.

### ***Dibya Upadesh of Prithvi Narayan Shah and Small States Narratives***

In January 1775, the legacy of Prithvi Narayan Shah was introduced in the form of a text called *Dibya Upadesh*. The work on *Dibya Upadesh* (it is considered as divine messages/teaching given by founding figure of modern Nepal) was edited by Yogi Narharinath in 2016 BS (1959 AD) in Nepali-Devanagari script and transliterated by Ludwig Stiller in

English (Stiller 1968, Narharinath 1959). This is the basis on which *Dibya Upadesh* has been evaluated in this research paper. *Dibya Upadesh*, the teachings of Prithvi Narayan Shah, was delivered by him at his death bed to his successors and citizens of Nepal to educate the countrymen about his journey in Nepal's unification and the necessary duty that a countryman should follow to ensure the survival and security of Nepal from external threats after his death. Despite its significance in reframing diplomatic practices which can be employed in affecting policies of small states, and leadership of Prithvi Narayan Shah and his role in mediating the domestic politics and external policies, this text has been “too little known and too little appreciated” (Stiller 1968, p. iii).

After unification, Nepal found itself geographically situated between two powerful neighbors, Tibet and East India Company. In *Dibya Upadesh*, Prithvi Narayan Shah calls Nepal as “a gourd between two rocks,” (Stiller 1968, p. 47) which holds a fragile position in international relations due to complex problem from the north and the south, plus difficulty posed as a result of opposing spheres of influence and the expansionist policy of the East India Company (Stiller 1968). Prithvi Narayan Shah well understood Nepal's relation with its neighbors.

As a small state, Rose (1971) finds Nepal's foreign policy different from that of its neighbors as it is more concerned about its survival. Trapped between two powers, Nepal cognitively accepted its greater proximity to East India Company due to its stronger cultural and economic ties with India than Tibet. Rose (1971, p. 17) argues, “the imbalance in Kathmandu's perception of India and China determines Nepal's perception towards its neighbors.” Thus, the role of perception as shaped by Prithvi Narayan Shah played a significant role in determining Nepal's foreign policy.

Prithvi Narayan Shah's dealings with his neighbors can also be studied under the strategic frame. In an attempt to substitute the old Malla coins from circulation with the new Shah coins, Prithvi Narayan Shah adopted the strategy of bargaining to persuade Tibet but he did not succeed as Tibet refused his substitution terms, which ultimately led to the closure of Nepal-Tibet relation for five years and later Nepal-Tibet war after his death (Stiller 1968), thereby leading to the transformation in Nepal's relation with its northern neighbor. Calculating the benefits sought and costs that Nepal might have to pay if it further engaged Tibet, Prithvi Narayan Shah decided to turn towards East India Company to maximize Nepal's interest. In dealing with East India Company, he chose to bargain to accelerate his expansionist policy further. When the governor of the East India Company requested Prithvi Narayan Shah to assist him in blocking the route the sanyasi rebellion (an obstacle for the British at the beginning of their rule in Bengal) used for their escape to the jungles of Nepal, he responded to the governor's request by suggesting that he be allowed to extend his dominions up to the River Gandak. Thus, it is argued that the sanyasi were blocked as per some agreement made (Stiller 1968).

The role of Prithvi Narayan Shah in shaping external policy was associated with domestic politics. Bozeman (1994, p.5) argues that “present day International relations are by definition intercultural relations political systems that are grounded in cultures.” Ideas travel from one place to another in the course of interaction at international level. Like Italian Machiavelli, as Bozeman says, it can be argued that Prithvi Narayan Shah’s monarchy was also influenced by the Kautilya’s Saptang theory, which states that seven core elements make state: *swamin* (the ruler), *amatya* (the minister), *janapada* (the people), *durga* (the fortress), *kosa* (the treasury), *danda* (executive power), *mitra* (allied state). These elements were rationally interconnected and were central in endowing order to the state (Modelski 1964, Liebig 2013). A study by Narharinath (1959) showed that Shah in *Dibya Upadesh* (treatise on government) calls Nepal as “a garden with 36 species of flower, or jaat (caste), organized into four varnas (sects)” (Hepburn 2002, p. 616) to promote the idea of inclusiveness and fraternity among Nepalese. But as a pragmatist and a system theorist, he explained the meaning of statecraft which related the ideas of state to the foreign policy of the state.

As Shah’s relation was tilted more towards India due to closure of communication from Tibetan, this dissertation will explain his role at domestic level in shaping Nepal’s relation with India. In dealing with the East India Company, Prithvi Narayan Shah advocated for an economic protectionism, thereby showing a firm opposition toward Company’s attempt as he was suspicious of their move (Stiller 1968, Shakya 2013). Shah advocated for building forts that would provide a defensive assistance while fighting. *Dibya Upadesh* further highlights on Shah’s isolationist policy as a calculated act. Prithvi Narayan Shah says, “Do not let the merchants of India come up from the border. If the merchants of India come to our border, they will leave the people poor” (Stiller 1968, p. 43). Shah’s words convey that opening of state to foreigners may emerge as a threat to Nepal’s culture and give space to foreign agents to conspire against Nepal. He stresses this idea when he further adds in his teaching, “They (singers and dancers of India) take away the secrets of your country and deceive the poor. Let no one even practice ragas...If this is done, your country will be protected” (Stiller 1968, p. 46). Thus, Shah’s isolationist policy in holding influence of external powers is significant as it determined Nepal’s behavior with the Company. But Stiller (1968) argues that it proved to be a harmful policy to Nepal’s development. To understand whether or not isolationist policy led to positive or negative transformation both in domestic and external politics, the concept of small state is crucial in understanding the role of a statesman in choosing certain policy options over another.

### **Niche Diplomacy of Prithvi Narayan Shah and Small State Reflection**

In *Dibya Upadesh*, Shah’s dealings with his neighbors highlight his conduct of astute diplomacy. The text extracts the insights on Shah’s economic diplomacy (Dahal 1998).

As a statesman of a small state, Shah recognized the asymmetric size which Nepal shared with its neighbors. He viewed himself invisible, unrecognized and less powerful as compared to his bigger counterparts due to lack of hard power resources and limited information both in quantity and quality. To make up for state's constraints, Shah took an approach of niche diplomacy (Henrikson 2005), and trade became the main area of his focus. It can be argued that Shah's practice of niche diplomacy in dealing with his neighbor is useful in advancing the literature on small state diplomacy.

For instance, in order to outmaneuver the Valley, during his campaign, he cut valley's trade links with the Tibet and Principalities by sealing off the northern and western passes, which eventually disrupted the Tibetan trade and strained the valley's economy, on one hand, and on the other hand, prevented any of the *Chaubisi (twenty four)* from sending troops to the direct assistance of the kings of the valley (Stiller 1973, 1993). In this diplomatic step taken by Shah, Gorkha gained an opportunity to traffic in Tibetan Gold and Silver, thereby leaving the valley's economy vulnerable. Moreover, the imposition of an economic blockade on the valley restricted the contact of trade between India and China, as the other route to India-China trade was not much effective (Stiller 1973). His adoption of isolationist (literally squeezing the diplomatic space) policy during the unification process left the valley helpless and more vulnerable to Gorkha's attack, the result of which was the unification of Nepal and Prithvi Narayan Shah henceforth was perceived as the conqueror of unified Nepal. After the unification, trade became the central area in determining Shah's relation with his neighbors. Nepal went into a disagreement with Tibet over monetary exchange issue that resulted in the closure of Nepal-Tibet relation and Shah tilted towards East India Company. Perceiving the strong presence of powerful India, Shah advocated in *Dibya Upadesh* to avoid dealings with the merchants of India and foreign agents as they will leave people poor and make a conspiracy against Nepal. In short, Shah's behavior with his neighbors over the area of trade throws light on the isolationist policy in influencing the neighbors, thereby managing the external environment.

### ***Dibya Upadesh: Influenced by Kautilya's Arthashastra?***

In dealing with his neighbors, Shah was more inclined towards the Company and adopted specific strategies which suited his condition. As stated earlier Bozeman's argument on the migration of idea could have worked in the case of Nepal too. Kautilya in *Arthashastra* emphasized the importance of wealth of a nation (i.e. territory of states and its people engaged in occupation), the duty of a ruler to protect the nation (securing border), maintaining law and order within the state and to protect its people from external threats (Rangarajan 1987). All these have been articulated by Shah in *Dibya Upadesh*. For instance, *Dibya Upadesh* clearly highlights the fear of Shah about the proximity of Muglan (India) and his strategy to choose a peaceful method, i.e.

isolationist policy, to maintain secrecy and wealth of the country and thus safeguard the poor from being deceived by singers and dancers of India (Stiller 1968). Based on the similarities between Shah's pro-active diplomacy and prescriptions on foreign policy as suggested in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, it is argued that Kautilya's theory of foreign policy is significant in guiding the external policies of Nepal.

Kautilya's *Arthashastra* that is stated as a relevant text for today's India (Liebig 2013) is significant in reflecting on the relevance of *Dibya Upadesh* for today's Nepal. Rangarajan (1987) argues that Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is significant in the contemporary world as nations follow the teachings of *Shashtra* in actual practice still today. As the nature of human beings and behavior of states remain the same, the relevance of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* pertains in this 21<sup>st</sup> century until an effective supra-national authority is recognized. Influenced by *Arthashastra*, Shah's *Dibya Upadesh* holds its importance in contemporary Nepal as the value of this text has moved beyond merely historical interest and reflects its relevance in the present context as well. Shah's advocacy on battle formations or punishment rules might hold its meaning back in the historical context, but his insistence on the approaches to foreign policy and the necessity of seven power factors (*Prakriti*) in maintaining order in the society has still significant role in present context (Liebig 2013). As emphasized by Kautilya, Shah's main emphasis on the economy of a state in *Dibya Upadesh*, highlights the necessity of this text in making the nation self-reliant, that would ultimately support the national image and national identity in the international system. The value of independence and sovereignty laid by Shah's *Dibya Upadesh* holds its applicability in the context of a small state like Nepal in dealing with its demanding neighbors.

There are striking similarities between the suggestion on the internal ordering of the state, which Kautilya suggests, and ways and means through which a leader should adapt to his foreign policies. For instance, the seven elements: the king, council of ministers, territory and people, forts, treasury, army and ally made up Shah's state, which determined the direction of state's foreign policy in moving the state from inferior to superior position (Modelski 1964). In this research paper the only external element, is taken to be significant in leading the discussion on Shah's foreign policy. Thus, Prithvi Narayan Shah's strategy can be well thought and planned when Gorkha entered into an agreement with Lamjung by negotiating a peace treaty that ensured the security of Gorkha in advancing towards the campaign goal. In his dealing with the East India Company after the unification, Shah purchased peace by giving the Company surety about his action. Shah then waited for a favorable chance and pursued his interest in taking the Bijayapur *jagirs* for granted by making a strong claim through communication and negotiation (Stiller 1968). In addition, Shah saw an opportunity of pursuing his expansionist interest by entering into some agreement with the East India



Company over their demand for the sanyasi blockade. '*Samdhi*' (peace), thus became an instrument of foreign policy for Shah in pursuing state's interest and accommodating the neighbor's demands.

'*Vigraha*,' (war/hostility) the other instrument of Kautilya's foreign policy explains Shah's relation with his neighbors, keeping the internal elements into consideration. '*Mantra Yuddha*' (diplomatic offensive) and fighting a battle (Rangarajan 1987) were the strategies adopted by Shah in his indulgement in the war in the context of foreign policy. He fought many battles in his journey of Nepal unification keeping cost-benefit analysis into mind. Army and people comprised the main part of Shah's state before and after unification, *Dibya Upadesh* includes. During unification, the army recruitment strategy, characterized by "martial race theory," (Vandervort 2012, p. 85) formed the military strength of Gorkha which was perceived as less compared to the neighbors. *Kosadanda*, the treasury, and the army, formed the military might of a state (Rangarajan 1987). The role of people was significant in supporting army's survival during the campaign through the means of Gorkha's agriculture. The acquisition of land became the motivating factor for the army and the citizens to support Shah in his campaign of unification that included wars, both undeclared and secret (Stiller 1968, Rangarajan 1987). In the process of the campaign, he imposed undeclared war by using secret agents and occult practice on those who made a conspiracy against him (Stiller 1968). Gorkha's attack on Nuwakot and Kirtipur was done secretly, thereby taking over them. Fort, the internal element that makes up state, also had significance in supporting and winning the war. The fort built by Shah on Shivapuri not only assisted Shah in fighting the battle with Jayaprakash Malla of Kathmandu valley but also established a relation of competition over the fort between the two kings. Even in directing the British force into the hills, the garrison was withdrawn from the fort at Sindhuli that left the British and their Indian sepoy's vulnerable, resulting in the victory of Gorkha (Stiller 1968).

Diplomatic invasion, on the other hand, became an important instrument of Gorkha's foreign policy in maintaining balance with *Chaubisi* in the West as Gorkha perceived itself economically and militarily weak for going into war with Lamjung alliance. As a small state, '*Mantra yudhha*' policy (Rangarajan 1987) was also the instrument for Nepal in dealing with the Company and Tibet and transforming the external environment. Shah viewed the external issue of sanyasi rebellion and the internal issue of Bijayapur affair as a means to pursue his interest through the diplomatic offense. Kautilya's method of foreign policy, *Asana* (staying quite) and *Yana* (preparing for war) are instructive in guiding the diplomacy of a small state. Gorkha prepared to go to war with his neighbors due to domestic pressure to acquire land. Nepal, on the other hand, chose the policy to remain quiet and handled the situation diplomatically and peacefully by adopting the isolationist policy in dealing with India and Tibet.

As survival becomes the primary concern for a small state, Shah adopted ‘*samasrya*’ (alliance building) as a method of foreign policy (Rangarajan 1987) either by choosing the strategy of bandwagoning or balancing the neighbors. Shah formed an alliance with Lamjung to avoid interference in Gorkha’s unification campaign and joined Kaski (weaker side) to increase its influence within the alliance. After getting avoided by Tibet, Nepal’s tilting towards India was the reflection on Shah’s foreign policy towards ensuring Nepal’s survival. Shah made relation with Lamjung alliances and harassed the king of the valley by taking over the kingdoms surrounding the valley. Although Shah followed the six-fold methods of foreign policy, as a king of a small state, accommodation, protection, and double policy mainly remained the main policy in his relation to the neighbors.

### **Conclusion**

Shah had little opportunity to participate in decision-making affecting the country’s status in the external environment and thus he focused on a particular sector, i.e. trade, in dealing with his neighbours. The notion of smallness associated with Shah’s state helped it to escape the eyes of great powers easily and thus Shah could easily take forward his diplomatic task of focusing on the niche diplomacy to meet the demands of his state. Despite lacking in structural power, Shah’s state, without itself being a victim of the war, managed to resist the strong pressure of great power by adopting different tactics and strategies in changing the external environment. Thus, the role of the strategic, cognitive and strategic frame is associated in reflecting the similarities between *Dibya Upadesh* and literature on small state diplomacy. As highlighted by literature on small state diplomacy, *Dibya Upadesh* reflects the fact that small states can have space in determining external environment through the employment of creative tactics in overcoming the great powers’ pressure on them. Hence, the small states diplomacy as projected by Nepal is mostly relevant to other states. The role and existence of small states in the contemporary affairs make more sense to deal with the world affairs and realization is more needed.

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