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PERSPECTIVES

READ. THINK. DELIVER.

Shaurya Kshatri
Kathmandu



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Each time an international leader visits or a regional summit comes about, security concerns disrupt the daily routine in Kathmandu much to the dismay of the general public. This is precisely what happened when traffic in the City was thrown out of gear for the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) summit. The main boulevards were made virtually empty with no evidence of the lively street culture, no crowds of people or the occasional cows lingering around. The City had come to a standstill while foreign dignitaries and their cavalcade of several vehicles passed through the vacant roads.

A HUGE STEP TOWARDS DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

The fourth BIMSTEC summit successfully came to a close after a commitment by the seven member countries to reinvigor-

The cost of diplomacy

SHOULD THE GENERAL PUBLIC ALWAYS BEAR THE BRUNT OF STRINGENT SECURITY AND TRAFFIC PROTOCOL DURING THE TIME OF FOREIGN DIPLOMATIC CONVENTIONS?

ate the BIMSTEC process. With the effective organisation of the summit, Nepal has entered a new phase of international diplomacy, amplifying its ability and reliability in carrying out such mega events. There will be more international heads of state who would want to visit the country and it goes without saying that their security should be of paramount importance.

Having hosted the 18th SAARC summit and just recently fourth BIMSTEC, there is no doubt that the country will be conducting more such gatherings in the future. So does this mean that every time an event such as this takes place the general public has got to bear the brunt of stringent security and traffic measures?

CHALLENGES POSED

In any case people in Kathmandu are used to traffic jams. Increasing number of vehicles, road repairs and frayed tempers mean that driving in the Capital is a nightmare even at the best of times. So it should come as no surprise that the traffic closures of last week were met with quite a bit of disapproval. Usually at the airport, the presence of top VVIPs upset other flights. When the President of India, Pranab Mukherjee had visited Nepal in 2016, the number of delays and cancellations were enormous. However, as Raj Kumar Chhetri, General Manager at Tribhuvan

International Airport, says, "Compared to that time the airport has done quite a decent job in managing timings." Although from 8:15 am to 10:15 am on August 30, flights were disrupted due to visits of dignitaries from India, Bangladesh and Thailand, there were no cancellations and very few delays, claims Chhetri.

"Organising an event of such calibre is no small feat. It requires extensive planning. The head of states are our guests and their safety and comfort should always be the highest of our priority," says Ram Babu Dhakal, Coordinator, fourth BIMSTEC Summit Secretariat. According to Dhakal, in any country whenever there is a mass gathering of such important leaders, there will definitely be a few inconveniences to deal with. He adds, "Guests are equivalent to gods. That is what our culture says and we Nepalis are known to be hospitable and patient. However, having said that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as the traffic authority did try their best to cause as little inconvenience to commuters as possible." To limit delegate's movement and to stop restricting the locals time and again, both the summit and the stay were organised at the same venue.

Given today's global and political scenarios, concerns about safety are not unwarranted. Hundreds of security personnel

were deployed in the streets of Kathmandu, mainly in the road leading from Tribhuvan International Airport to Soaltee Crowne Plaza. There were choppers flying overhead, roads sealed off and a long trail of people spending some harrowing moments waiting for the dignitaries and their convoys to pass. But besides the inconvenience to the normal public, imagine the nightmare for the security personnel as they secured so many roads, and many other buildings on the route.

While security arrangements are appreciated, citizens should also be able to travel undisturbed. Make no mistake, the traffic police and the government both did an exceptional job in bringing the fourth BIMSTEC into fruition. However, as most daily commuters would agree, it could have been done better.

THE WAY AHEAD

Nepal is now a federal democratic republic with seven different states. So every time an international convention is planned in the nation, the burden should not always fall on Kathmandu. Shifting international summits outside the City will help reduce pressure on regular traffic. Dhakal feels that there is a dire need for an international convention centre in Nepal. "Even in the Capital we

do not yet have a well-equipped international convention centre. If we can have such facilities built in multiple parts of the country, then obviously we can lift some of the burden that falls upon the Capital," he states.

However, distributing such programmes across the country will not be quite realistic given that as of now there is only one international airport in Nepal. Hopefully, the completion of the airports at Bhairahawa and Pokhara will prove to relieve some of the pressures of entertaining foreign delegates and conferences that fall on Kathmandu. Deepak Raj Joshi, the CEO of Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) says, "Conferences like BIMSTEC help in promoting the tourism in our country. They put the nation in the media limelight. Perhaps with the Bhairahawa Airport, which is scheduled to be finished by June next year, we will be able to hold global conferences more often."

With Visit Nepal 2020 right around the corner, NTB was also involved in BIMSTEC to promote the country's tourism. "We had showcased a few videos and even distributed pictorial books to the delegates demonstrating the natural beauty, culture and people of Nepal," shares Joshi. He reveals that there will soon be a ministerial meeting with the tourism ministers of the seven participating members of the BIMSTEC.

In order to 'show' the real Nepal, there had been plans to take all the leaders out on a trip. "Unfortunately, as a result of continuous downpour, the road conditions and obviously the busy schedule it couldn't happen," confides Dhakal. Many have expressed disappointment with the road department for not planning ahead with repair and maintenance. "In broad day light and that too under heavy traffic, the potholes were getting fixed just a couple of days before the summit," complains one disgruntled taxi driver.

Superintendent of Police (SP), Rajkumar Lamsal, says, "During such moments of huge national and international concern, we do not want to take any chances. And sometimes that may put the common man/woman in discomfort. But that is the norm the world over. It might be

sad, but it's definitely true." The traffic personnel do not have any choice but to follow the protocol. He adds, "I am glad that the citizens of Nepal understood this and supported Nepal police in this regard." The works done by the Nepal traffic police is commendable but that doesn't mean that there isn't any room for improvements. Commuters spent hours trying to negotiate jams caused by the diversions made for the convoys. Maybe in the future we can make it less

troublesome for the locals.

One of the ways of doing that might be by recommending predetermined routes for VIP movements and using electronic display boards to warn people about possible congestions. The government should consider creation of helipads wherever possible to reduce road travel by VIPs. Although the idea might seem a little farfetched and expensive, it's nothing compared to the recurrent loss of hours on major roads.

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