Interview on Jan 27th, 2012

Interviewer: Dr. Reena Marwah

Interview of Mr. Ramesh Nath Pandey, senior diplomat and former Foreign Minister of Nepal, followed by interview of his son Mr. Nishchal N. Pandey.

Mr. Nishchal N. Pandey is Director, Centre for South Asian Studies, Kathmandu. A well-known academic from Nepal, he was Executive Director, Deputy Executive Director and Research and Documentation Officer of the Kathmandu based Institute of Foreign Affairs where he worked for 8 years (1998-2006). He was also advisor to the National Planning Commission, taskforce member to draft the ninth five-year plan of the Nepal government and sub-editor of ‘The Rising Nepal’ daily.

Mr. Ramesh Nath Pandey was born in 1944 in Kathmandu, Nepal. He served as Minister 6 times in various capacities last position being Foreign Minister in 2005-06. He was member of the Nepalese delegation to the United Nations in 1962, 1968 and leader of the delegation in 2005. He was also imprisoned for three and a half years when he was a journalist prior to joining politics.

Q. When did you become interested in China?

It is very natural to have an interest in neighboring countries. In Nepal, we have keen interest on China and it is common to find Nepalese reading and watching about various developments taking place in our northern neighbor. In fact, as a journalist I used to write a lot about China. I have visited China many times. My first visit to China was in 1973. I remember that visit in particular. That time we had crossed the border between Hong Kong (the then British colony) and China. When we came out of the train we were asked by the local authorities to carry our luggage and walk. This was referred to as ‘No Man’s land’. We walked for about 5 minutes before we entered Mainland China. I was very excited to see China. I wanted to see China for myself, because I had only read about it in papers and books. That time it was very difficult for me to find out the difference
between man and woman as all were wearing the same dress, grey Mao's dress and had the same hairstyle. The language, of course, one could not understand.

Q. Please describe this first visit and I am sure you remember this very clearly.

Yes, I do have several memories of this visit. When we reached Beijing, it was terribly cold, I was a member of the delegation led by King Birendra.

On arrival in Beijing, we felt the terrible cold winds and there was snowfall too. When we came out of the aircraft, Premier Zhou Enlai was there to receive the King. He struck me as a very humble person. We met the Chinese Premier later, during the state banquet. There were more than 1500-2000 guests in the banquet. After all the ceremonies and speeches were over, Premier Zhou Enlai came from the main table and visited every table and proposed a toast to each member of the Nepalese delegation. On the third day, there was an official meeting between our delegation and the official Chinese delegation. We were waiting for the King to arrive so that we could all enter together. Premier Zhou Enlai greeted us at the gate. He was the only Chinese Prime Minister who had visited Nepal twice and one visit to Pokhara also. While I was standing at the gate, an official told me that Premier Zhou En Lai wanted to speak to me. I used this opportunity to invite him to Nepal. He said that he would come to Nepal for the third time, if he could come crossing the Himalayas. This was his desire.

Q. I am sure you have several other memories to share with us, especially as you were very welcome to China.

I represented my country many times at the United Nations General Assembly and UNGA's special session of the head of governments in 2005. I will relate some more of my first memories of China. When I was minister of Tourism, from 1984-86, I was in China, to sign an agreement, between China, Nepal and Japan. There was a plan for a joint Mount Everest expedition. There was going to be a live telecast to climb Mt. Everest from both sides- both the North and the South. I signed the
agreement with my Chinese and Japanese counterparts. In that meeting with the Chinese Vice-Premier Wang Li, I requested him that Kathmandu could be made ‘The Gateway of Tibet’ and urged him to open the Kathmandu-Tibet airway.

Q. You have played a key role then in bringing China closer to Nepal?

My proposal was to initiate air services between Kathmandu and Tibet. Chinese Vice-Premier however said that would not be possible. At that time, there was only one airport in Lhasa for military purpose. I reminded him that the idea had first been initiated by Premier Zhou Enlai in 1973. I told him of his desire of wanting to come to Nepal over the Himalayas. He agreed and today Kathmandu is the only foreign city to have direct air link with Tibet. This has helped our tourism industry tremendously.

Another memory was that when I was in Beijing, they took us to a department store. There were not many of them and they were all crowded but in total silence. Many people were buying things. We went to one corner of one of the shops. Then a Chinese official pushed a small button and the floor started moving slowly.

All of a sudden an open space appeared in the floor and we were taken to a floor before below the one we were standing at. There was an underground air raid center. We were informed that this had been done for safety purposes as it was suspected that China would be attacked by some external forces. In fact, there was a threat of a nuclear attack. So they had constructed an air raid center that was a restricted area. I had heard of this earlier but saw it for the first time. In those days there were a lot of articles that were written about China and the changes taking place in China.

When I came down, I saw a beautiful hall. There was place for a thousand people to eat and even reach a village by bicycle. There was full provision for food and amenities in the underground area. There was even a small health post there. I was asked to sign the visitor’s book and give my remarks. People had talked about two Chinas. There were
actually two Chinas, one below and one above the ground. There was a full village below; you could even bi-cycle there.

Q. So these were difficult times for China. Do you recall any other experience of your visit to China?

There is another experience I would like to relate. I had learnt that people were honest and that one would never lose anything as people were law abiding in China. I thought I would test this myself. Thus, when I was checking out from my hotel, I decided to leave behind my shirt with a five dollar bill in the pocket. This was kept under the bed. I packed the rest of my luggage and we were ready to leave the hotel. We reached Nanking from Beijing. In Nanking, when I reached my room, a Chinese came to me and said that there was a packet for me. It was very common in those days to receive gifts from the Chinese. In fact, we also would often receive gifts from the hotel where we would stay.

The packet that was brought to me, however was not a gift. It was my very own shirt with the five dollar note inside the pocket that had been brought. I am not sure however whether this happens to everybody visiting China nowadays too.

The second time I visited China was immediately after the death of Mao Tse Tung. During this visit too, the Premier Hua Go Fung hosted a banquet at the Great Hall of the People. This time it was different. There were not more than 100 guests who were invited at the banquet. Mao’s wife was also present. The Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping was the actual leader. There was a clear indication that the Chinese had started the process of economic reforms.

In my third or fourth visit, when I reached Beijing, I was provided hospitality at a very good hotel. The deputy foreign minister hosted a lunch for me in the Friendship Hotel. A new building had been added to the earlier building, a perfect combination of the past and present.
Was your experience in this visit quite different from the earlier visits?

Well, the infrastructure development, change in the life style of the people, were clearly visible. Western culture had come to the youth. The environment was different. China was modernizing and the society had become more open. Some difference was evident in the above ways but otherwise things were quite similar.

Q. When was your last visit to China? Any special memories?

My last visit was in 2005. I visited China twice in 2005 as Foreign Minister of Nepal. There was a program for me in Shaanxi Province and this is special to me.

I would like to relate a story about Kathmandu valley.

The story is that Kathmandu valley was a big lake. Then Manjushree, a Chinese Saint came from China. He said that it is such a beautiful place and thought that it would be very good that people should live here. It is then that Manjushree (considered the founder of the Kathmandu Valley), came on a lotus to see the valley but saw a big lake and nothing else. With his magic sword, he cut the southern wall of the hills and the water of the lake then drained to the south. Kathmandu valley then became habitable.

At Shanxi province, there is hilltop called Wu Tai Shan, Buddhist Mountain of the north, Sacred to Manjushree, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom. There is a five feet tall statue of Manjushree in Shaanxi Province, which was brought by me in an aircraft of Nepal Airlines as a gift for the people of Shanxi.

During my entire life, officially I have visited so many countries. I have travelled extensively within Nepal too. In 2005, there were hundreds of people to receive me when I reached Shaanxi for the program. I have never ever received such a warm reception. They were all folding their hands and worshipping Manjushree’s statue. They performed a religious ceremony while worshipping the statue. They also told me that every year, in
August the statue would be taken to all the villages and it would be brought back to the temple. Religion has started to become an important part of life for many Chinese.

Q. You said you visited China twice in 2005.

Yes, after a few months, I again visited China for the Boao summit. I was invited to visit the Buddhist monastery and give a speech there. There were hundreds of people there. I saw that there were young girls, wearing beautiful dresses hiding their mobiles near their ear and chanting the Buddha. That is the difference now. Religion has already been embraced by China.

In 2006, a senior central leader of China visited Nepal. His request from Beijing was that I should be at the airport to greet him. He wanted to go immediately to Lumbini and his request was that I should accompany him. When we visited Lumbini, I was amazed to see how he worshipped Buddha. In 1973, this would be unimaginable. It has now become a practice for people from China to come to Lumbini. There is a keen interest, possibly among the Chinese leaders and people. When I visit China, there is a keen interest in both the historical and religious aspects of Buddhism. These days Lumbini is a favourite destination for Chinese tourists too.

There are several among the Chinese who are religious and like to visit Buddhist sites. Of course, they do desire money and power too.

Q. What about China studies in Nepal? Are academics studying China through language?

One way is to study books and the other is to have experience by yourself. To have an experience is important. For a Nepalese, it is very easy to visit India and meet relatives and friends. However not many people in Nepal have visited China. For studying China, it is important that one visits China and that would be a great learning experience.
Q. What in your opinion, is the real change that has been experienced in China as a result of economic reforms and opening up?

My own experience is that there has been tremendous change in China. What is worth admiration is that the pace of change in China is very systematic. They plan for the future and have developed a long term vision- of at least building for the next 20-30 years. The way they have built their infrastructure including their hotels, roads and railway network takes into account the long term. They have built much more than their present requirements. There is a consistency in the way the Chinese think and move ahead as an economic power. There has also been a consistency under the Chinese leadership of their policies towards Nepal. There is consistency from the time of Mao to President Hu Jintao but of course there is a lot more to do in the economic front and for taking the relations to the level of the younger generation.

Q. Do you believe in the current scenario, when China is a rising power, Nepal will still be considered as being of great significance?

Yes, I have had the opportunity of having a one to one meeting with President Hu Jintao. He was very candid in the meeting and readily agreed to some requests made from our side. It was very easy to negotiate with him. He also shared with me some of his experiences while he was in Tibet.

Q. The Chinese, you believe are quick in taking decisions?

Yes, I believe so that they are very quick in taking decisions and their decisions are very positive. There is a personal touch as well. In 2005, November I was in New York to participate in the United Nations General assembly. One day, I was coming out from the Hall to the lobby. The same time President Hu Jintao was entering the Hall. I was surprised when he held my hand and took me back to the hall. He made me sit in the seat of the Chinese delegation. We started to talk while several
others watched us. In Jakarta when I met the Chinese **foreign** minister, he too was very friendly and cordial.

**Q. There has been tremendous change in China’s influence in the world from the time when Nepal established diplomatic ties with China?**

When Nepal established diplomatic relations, China was a poor country. It did not have diplomatic relations with many countries. The visits by **world** leaders were also very few. Now China is a global power and they have friends everywhere and have global interests. Nepal is just one small neighbor. The question that looms large for us in Nepal is: Will China remain the same with Nepal? Will that personal behavior continue to be as warm as it was? Will they continue to behave the same or will there be a change in their attitude? It was a model relationship between a big and small neighbor. But to be honest I do not have any answer to what the future course of our relations will be like.

**Q. So your major concern for the moment is whether China will remain the same as it has been, now that it is fast becoming a superpower. You are now concerned whether China Nepal relations will remain the same! Would you like to comment on the Visit of Wen Jiabao. The fact that it was a four hour visit on January 14, 2012; but of course it is a visit and of strategic importance.**

The visit of **Wen Jiabao** to Nepal last year was possible only because of the interest of the Chinese in Nepal and to tell the Nepalese people that we are still in their strategic radar. In fact, the visit proved that the Nepalese government was not able to conduct this visit properly. For the first time in the history of Nepal, 4470 persons including the military were used for the security of this visit. The Chinese Premier came only for four hours. Due to the political uncertainty, the government had to very careful and extra cautious during his visit.
When I recall the second visit of the first Chinese Prime Minister, I remember that he even spent a night in Pokhara. He was the only foreign prime minister who had been outside Kathmandu. This time Nepal was not equipped to handle the visit of the premier of a big and powerful country.

Q. The question comes why he came at all. What was the need for him to visit Nepal?

There were a lot of questions being asked by the international community as well. His original plan was to visit Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The earlier visit was postponed and a number of questions were raised both in Nepal and outside Nepal regarding the interest of China. Has China turned cold towards Nepal was a question being asked by the people of Nepal. In my view, Nepal is still important in the strategic radar of China.

Q. What about the 2008 uprising of the Tibetans?

In Nepal, we have Tibetan refugees for a very long time and our policy is based on humanitarian grounds. Both China and India have become global powers and thus, naturally they are rival powers but close economic partners too. They do not want to do anything that will create any problem and so there are several high level visits and exchanges among both countries. They have coordination but at the same time they have strategic competition. In my view, India and China have done everything to stabilize their relations. They have differences at a bilateral level, but they do share a common platform on some important international issues. We, in Nepal see ourselves as a part of a large triangle. Nepal has an open border with India and a very long border with China. Nepal is in between India and China and will continue to be of strategic relevance both for India and China. Despite their sharp differences, they are treading cautiously and do not want to do anything that will not allow them to become global powers.
Q. How do you see Nepal in the next five years?

It is not how much Nepal can get from both the countries but foremost is we need internal stability to reap that advantage. We need to stabilize Nepal first as there are opportunities for us. But the danger is that if Nepal fails to stabilize itself and fails to get trust of both neighbors, then we will become a hotspot for both - If our two big neighbors lose confidence in our ability then they will have to take more interest in our affairs to protect their own inherent interests. That will be terrible for Nepal. We must have a stable politics but that seems to be a tall order.

Q. What role do you visualize for China as observer of SAARC? Do you think China will become a full member of SAARC?

China is a neighbor of SAARC. If we can have USA, Mauritius and Australia as an Observers of SAARC, then why not China? In fact, the number of observers is more than the number of members. In SAARC we have to create an atmosphere of trust. I think it is moving in the right direction. Now India has changed its policy considerably and is taking the viewpoints of smaller neighbors into account. India seems to becoming cautious towards the sensitivities of smaller neighbors. Once we can build up SAARC with relationship of trust among the countries, we can move forward with the SAARC agenda. However, the time has not come for China to become a member of SAARC. India has a much larger role to play in SAARC but the smaller countries must also play their part as without cooperation, not much progress can be achieved.

Q. Coming back again to the question of China studies in Nepal. Does Nepal give importance to developing scholarship on China?

Mr Nishchal N. Pandey would you like to come in at this point?

Yes, sure. We do have a number of scholars from Nepal visiting Universities in China. Sichuan University invites scholars from Nepal. In Nepal, Kathmandu University has a
Confucius center. Our scholars are invited to many think-tanks and centers that are increasingly being established in Chinese universities.

Q. What about the young students? Are they studying the language?

Yes, several students in Nepal are studying Mandarin, mainly because of the inflow of Chinese tourists to Nepal. It then becomes very easy for them to get jobs as interpreters and translators. Chinese tourists that come here have peculiar interests. They are growing in numbers and this growth in numbers is higher than any from any other country. So a number of new Chinese restaurants are also being opened. Tourism industry is an important foreign currency earner for Nepal.

Q. The increasing connectivity between Nepal and China through Tibet is then bringing a large inflow of tourists?

Yes, from Kathmandu to Khasa it is a four hours drive. Khasa is thriving because of Nepalese tourists going there. Youngsters even go to Khasa for weekend parties. Khasa has a number of restaurants and pubs and a thriving night life.

You will be surprised to learn that Nepal has more air connections with China than even with India, though of course the number of flights in one day from India is much higher. There are air services between Kathmandu – Lhasa, Kathmandu – Guangzhou; Kathmandu – Hong Kong; Kathmandu – Shanghai; Kathmandu – Kunming. With India, Kathmandu is connected with four cities by air : Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai and Varanasi. Kathmandu does not have air connectivity with even big cities like Bangalore or Chennai which should be a priority for the Nepal government.

Whenever there are internal issues, China periodically stops European and American tourists going to Lhasa from Nepal and this sometimes impacts on Nepal’s tourism. A number of tourists from Europe and other countries want to visit Kathmandu, Pokhara and then want to go to Lhasa.
Q. What about trade between India and China through Nepal? You have written about this.

The Kodari highway which was constructed in 1962 is the easiest connection between North India and Tibet. It links Khasa (Zangmu) town of Tibet with Kathmandu. Nepal can gain from India China trade through the Khasa trade route bifurcating to U.P and Bihar from the Dhulikhel-Sindhuli road constructed through Japanese assistance. Moreover, when the Golmud-Lhasa-Xigaze railway is extended to the Nepal border, a new vista of opportunity will open up for the three countries in terms of trade and tourism. It will be a win-win situation for all three countries. We want to benefit from rising India and rising China but our two neighbors too need to understand that our relations with one is not at the cost of the other.

Shanti ghee goes to Tibet. Pan Parag and Indian cement is very much in demand in Tibet. So is fish. Trade in goods from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal through Nepal can really thrive. The entire Tibet market can be open for India through Nepal. How to go about is problematic as we do not want that Nepal becomes a dumping ground for these two big neighboring countries. We also need to be careful that that a train does not only bring affordable goods, it also brings small arms, HIV AIDS and drugs.

Q. Nepal is precariously situated between Tibet and India and is home to several Tibetan refugees. How does China deal with this issue?

China has been strong with Nepal in dealing with Tibetan unrest. China is also making infrastructure projects in Nepal. Apartments in Nepal are being built with Chinese contractors. Bureaucrats prefer to get aid from China as there are no riders for the aid. The international convention hall which for 4 years was used by our constituent assembly is built by the Chinese. Moreover they are helping to build hospitals and other infrastructure projects as well.
China is ready to provide Nepal with all kinds of assistance. We have 20,000 to 25,000 Tibetan refugees. Many of the Tibetans who are now in Switzerland or other parts of Europe and USA went from Nepal. Some of the Tibetans in Nepal are very well off as they are running their own businesses. It is sad that most of the time international human rights organizations do not appreciate how much Nepali people have done to our Tibetan brethren for their comfortable and safe living in Nepal and only publicize negative stories of our handling of the refugee issue.

Thank you very much for the interview.