

# Growing Influence of Buddhism in Shaping India's Diplomatic Outreach

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## **ABSTRACT**

The administration headed by Prime Minister Modi is giving significant importance to the role of soft power as part of India's diplomatic strategies. A unique aspect of this focus is the country's active engagement in diplomacy centered on Buddhism. Given Buddhism's principles of non-violence and its broad appeal across Asia, it serves as an effective tool for diplomatic influence. This summary aims to scrutinize India's efforts to capitalize on its long-standing and contemporary ties with Buddhism, while also contrasting these endeavors with similar diplomatic activities carried out by China.

**KEYWORDS:** Buddhism, diplomacy, Soft power, activities

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Ever since the term "soft power" was introduced by Joseph Nye in the late 20th century, it has increasingly found a place in global diplomatic dialogues. Nye suggested that a country's influence on the global stage is no longer solely dependent on its military capabilities but also on softer forms of power that encourage peaceful interactions.

Since gaining independence, India has largely avoided relying on military strength to conduct its international affairs. Inspired by the Panchsheel principles of its first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, India has championed the idea of peaceful global interactions. While India's global standing has evolved, and ambitions to become a great power have become more vocal, the focus on peaceful diplomacy remains a cornerstone in the nation's foreign policy.

This overview delves into a specific aspect of India's soft power outreach, namely its diplomatic initiatives rooted in its historical ties to Buddhism. The analysis starts by fitting this Buddhist diplomatic strategy into the broader theoretical framework of soft power. It discusses how and why Buddhism makes for a good diplomatic asset and how India is uniquely positioned to harness this asset. It also compares India's initiatives in this sphere with those of China.

The analysis is predicated on the belief that soft power can serve as a valuable instrument to achieve foreign policy goals, despite ongoing debates about its effectiveness.

## **II. BACKGROUND**

As for the background of India's soft power, Daya Kishan Thussu's book "Communicating India's Soft Power: Buddha to Bollywood" notes that India's ancient civilization has contributed several major religions to the world and absorbed many into its own social structure over time. This rich history allows contemporary India to build religious and faith-based alliances worldwide.

Currently, the BJP-led government follows the Panchamrit principles in shaping its foreign policy. One of these principles focuses on cultural and civilizational links, aiming to use India's historical cultural connections as a soft power asset.

The Indian model of soft power differs from Nye's original concept, which was more focused on exportable assets. For example, America's soft power assets like MTV, Coca-Cola, and its democratic values are readily exportable. In contrast, India's approach leans on shared religious and cultural history to build diplomatic relationships.

It's worth questioning whether this strategy is better categorized under the broader term "cultural diplomacy" rather than soft power.

India's use of religious links for diplomatic ends isn't limited to Buddhism. During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's notable visit to Israel in 2017, India's historical ties to Judaism were highlighted. Similarly, India has sought to engage with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, citing its substantial Muslim population. This overview, however, focuses on Buddhism due to its particular promise as a soft power resource.

### **III. WHY BUDDHISM?**

The modern global relevance of Buddhism in diplomacy can be traced back to the post-World War II era. During this time, there was a noticeable resurgence in Buddhist practices and philosophies, characterized by an international focus and efforts to transcend sectarian and geographic divisions. Institutions were formed, and multiple conferences were convened to promote transnational unity among various Buddhist traditions. One such early gathering was in newly-independent Sri Lanka, which led to the establishment of the World Fellowship of Buddhists. Following suit, India hosted an International Buddhist Conference in Sanchi in 1952, under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Over the years, these efforts have fortified a robust global network centered around Buddhism.

Buddhism's foothold strengthened not only in traditionally Buddhist countries but also in nations recovering from the war. For instance, in East Asia, countries like Japan and South Korea turned toward their Buddhist roots for cultural rejuvenation. Nowadays, a majority of Buddhists reside in Asia, and nations such as Bhutan, Myanmar, Thailand, and Sri Lanka consider Buddhism integral to their national identity.

Given this backdrop, it becomes easier to comprehend why the Indian government has been so keen on leveraging its Buddhist heritage as a cornerstone of its international policy. Buddhism's extensive international network and its significant influence on millions globally make it a prime candidate for India's soft power strategy. The religion's emphasis on peace and compassion, along with its extensive presence across Asia, fits well with diplomatic efforts that aim to exercise influence without coercion.

### **IV. WHY INDIA**

India holds a special status in the Buddhist world for several reasons. First and foremost, it is the birthplace of Buddhism, lending it a unique historical credibility. Secondly, the country houses numerous sites that are vital to the Buddhist faith, such as Bodhi Gaya, Sarnath, and Nalanda. Moreover, India has carved out a reputation as a sanctuary for the oppressed, exemplified by its sheltering of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile in Dharamshala. Besides its ties to Tibetan Buddhism, India's historical connections to Theravada Buddhism put it in a good position to engage diplomatically with various Buddhist nations.

Capitalizing on these unique assets can help India in ways that extend beyond cultural diplomacy. The interplay between statecraft and Buddhism has historical precedents, going back to the time of Emperor Ashoka who, after adopting Buddhism, initiated a policy of "dharma-vijaya," or "conquest through righteousness." By fostering relationships with other Asian nations through the lens of Buddhism, India has the opportunity to dovetail these efforts into broader policy aims like the 'Neighbourhood First' and the 'Act East' policies.

### **V. AVENUES OF DEPLOYMENT OF BUDDHIST HERITAGE**

#### **Symbolic Gestures**

In the realm of international diplomacy, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi has consistently incorporated elements of Buddhism into his official visits and speeches. During international tours, including those to nations like Sri Lanka and China, he often highlights the shared cultural and religious connections rooted in Buddhism. Moreover, Prime Minister Modi often dedicates part of his trip abroad to exploring local Buddhist temples and has repeatedly emphasized Buddhism's significance for both India's and the world's development in various domestic addresses.

#### **Competing with China in Buddhist Diplomacy**

India is not alone in using Buddhism as a tool for diplomacy; it faces stiff competition from China, a powerful player in both economic and military terms in Asia. Beijing's active promotion of its Buddhist heritage serves as a key facet of its strategy to expand its cultural and political influence in the region. This is even integrated into China's broader international plans, like the Belt and Road Initiative.

Curiously, China's efforts to promote Buddhism can seem contradictory given the Communist Party's avowedly atheistic doctrine and its historical mistreatment of Buddhists, notably during the Cultural Revolution. Yet, recognizing the diplomatic potential of the religion, China continues to endorse Buddhism, citing its deep historical roots in the country and the fact that China hosts the world's largest population of Buddhists.

#### **The Dalai Lama: A Focal Point of India-China Tensions**

One critical issue that accentuates the India-China rivalry in Buddhist diplomacy centers on the Dalai Lama. Hosting the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile in Dharamshala enhances India's standing within the global Buddhist community. However, China perceives the Dalai Lama as a separatist threat, creating friction between the two countries. For instance, when India held the Global Buddhist Congregation in 2011, China reacted negatively to the Dalai Lama's participation and consequently cancelled scheduled border talks. Similar incidents transpired in 2017 when the Dalai Lama participated in events in India, further aggravating China-India relations.

### **The Role of Religious Tourism**

Tourism based on religious interests is an underexplored avenue that offers tremendous potential for India. Despite housing seven of the world's eight key Buddhist sites, India captures less than 1% of the worldwide Buddhist tourism market, lagging behind Southeast Asian countries like Thailand and Indonesia.

To enhance its prominence within the global Buddhist community, India's Ministry of Tourism has been developing international tourist circuits focused on Buddhist landmarks. Notably, a 2015 press release from the Ministry of Culture indicated plans for a tourist circuit that would include essential Buddhist locations in Nepal. Additionally, the 2016 BIMSTEC Leaders' Retreat included discussions on organizing a regional Buddhist tourism circuit.

Buddhism has become an increasingly important element in India's international strategy, both as a form of cultural diplomacy and as a way to strengthen geopolitical alliances. However, the country faces competition, notably from China, in leveraging this shared cultural heritage for diplomatic gains.

### **Academic Initiatives**

Earlier discussions touched upon how the renewed interest in Buddhism has gained momentum, thanks in part to a series of international gatherings. These forums have served as platforms for dialogue among adherents from varying cultural and national backgrounds. Events like the 'Buddhism in the 21st Century' conference held in Rajgir, India, in 2017 have been pivotal in attracting worldwide attention. In addition, significant get-togethers like the 5th International Buddhist Conclave, which occurred in Varanasi in October 2016, played an essential role in bringing together more than 240 people from nearly 40 countries. This particular conclave also served to enhance tourism opportunities by facilitating discussions between international and local tour operators.

Another noteworthy event was the 'Hindu-Buddhist Initiative on Conflict Avoidance,' which took place in Bodh Gaya in 2015. It was noteworthy not only for its high-profile inauguration by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi but also for highlighting the positive interplay between Hinduism and Buddhism. The meeting served as a statement of collaborative growth rather than a platform for divisive issues.

Nalanda University has been among the most ambitious academic projects aimed at rejuvenating Buddhist studies and culture. Initiated by an earlier government and carried forward by the current administration, this project aimed to serve as a cornerstone for Asian civilization. Drawing financial support from several countries, it was intended to foster a cultural reawakening across Asia, bridging diverse societies while reinforcing shared values for the benefit of both the continent and the world at large.

However, the project has been stalled by bureaucratic delays and political complexities. Although plans were in place to commence the construction of a sprawling 455-acre campus as far back as 2012, progress has been disappointingly slow. As late as 2016, ground had not been broken for the foundation. Adding to the issues were administrative complications and the controversial nature of some academic programs, which were subject to political pressures. One conspicuous gap in the project has been the absence of the Dalai Lama, whose involvement would unquestionably add substantial credibility.

In contrast, China has capitalized on this vacuum by establishing its version of a Buddhist academic institution, the Nanhai Buddhist College in Hainan Province. This institution kicked off its academic activities in 2017, offering enrollment to 220 students and forming alliances with Buddhist centers in countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal, Thailand, and Cambodia.

In summation, while the renewed focus on Buddhism has been fortified through international events, academic endeavors like Nalanda University have not met the lofty expectations due to a variety of hurdles. Meanwhile, China has successfully moved into this space, underlining the need for more effective planning and implementation from other stakeholders in the Buddhist world.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

When it comes to the realm of soft power diplomacy, India has significantly diversified its approach by emphasizing mutual cultural growth rather than just exporting its own culture. However, the track record suggests that India has not fully leveraged this in terms of Buddhist diplomacy. Experts, including Ambassador P. Stobdan, have pointed out that Buddhism could serve as an effective geopolitical instrument for India, as it has done in the past. Although the government appears to agree with this assessment, their actions have not yet lived up to the rhetoric.

One area where the Indian government has shown resolve is in its dealings with China, particularly concerning the Dalai Lama's status. This stance, although commendable, is somewhat low-hanging fruit; it is more of a short-term solution and doesn't require a prolonged commitment. A more impactful move would be to integrate the Dalai Lama into significant initiatives like the redevelopment of Nalanda University, although there's no evidence this is in the pipeline. The way India handles the succession of the next Dalai Lama could have far-reaching implications, considering the aura and authority that surround the current Dalai Lama. Mere symbolic gestures such as visiting temples during official trips won't suffice. India is blessed with an array of resources that

include pilgrimage sites, the residence of the Dalai Lama, and international goodwill. To make the most of these assets, India needs to broaden its focus beyond just Tibetan Buddhism and engage with other Buddhist traditions. Rejuvenating projects like Nalanda University, promoting Buddhist studies in existing educational institutions, and encouraging the study of ancient languages like Pali can contribute to a more comprehensive approach to Buddhist academia. Multiple Buddhist philosophical schools, including Nagarjuna Buddhism, remain relatively untapped, suggesting a wide array of research opportunities.

Additionally, there's a need to boost Buddhist tourism by taking cues from successful initiatives like the 'Incredible India' campaign. Properly managing tourist destinations is also critical, and one can find inspiration in how events like the Kumbh Mela have been successfully organized, even becoming subjects of academic case studies.

Given the clear intention to solidify India's role in the Buddhist world, the current government's challenge lies in effective implementation. Success in this arena would not only strengthen India's relationship with its Asian neighbors but also contribute to its broader ambitions, both regionally and globally. It could also serve as a counterbalance to China's growing influence.

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