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## Indian Foreign Policy And Soft Power: From Buddhist Perspective Of Culture And Heritage

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### Abstract

This paper presents the foreign policy of India regarding soft power from the perspective of the Buddhist philosophy of Cultural heritage in the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which has milestone diplomacy especially the regime of Prime Minister Mr. Narender Modi. India is in a position to claim legitimacy, which it's, promotes Buddhist diplomacy. There is expanding engagement with its Asian countries based on Buddhist philosophy potentially, a large aspect of national interest namely, the Fast Neighborhood policy and Act East policy. From the historical aspect, India hosted the international Buddhist conference in Sanchi that was attended by over three thousand Buddhist nuns, monks, and historians. At that time, this was one of the largest gatherings of Buddhist preachers and followers in the world. Now, Modi's current Government is placing a strong engagement in the use of soft power values in Indian foreign policy. One of the more novel manifestations of these initiatives has been engagement in Buddhist diplomacy. The Buddhist faith due to its emphasis on peaceful coexistence and its wide pan-Asian presence lenses itself well to soft power diplomacy. The science spirituality, art, and faith that developed over millennia in the subcontinent found their way across other regions, earning India a considerable amount of soft power. Thus, it is within this context that one can understand the efforts of the Indian government at incorporating Buddhist heritage form a basis for further diplomatic, economic cultural and strategic links within its foreign policy. This paper will attempt to explore the values of soft power and the principles of Buddhist philosophy affecting foreign policy in the changing international Buddhist environment.

**Keywords:** Foreign policy, Diplomacy Buddhism Philosophy, Soft Power, Buddhist, Heritage.

**Introduction:**

The resurgence of Buddhism in the wake of World War II is largely responsible for its potential usefulness in foreign policy. With an internationalist perspective, the faith's resurgence aimed to transcend existing geographic and denominational barriers. This was made easier by the establishment of multiple organizations and the holding of multiple councils and conferences in the decades following the war, which focused on international collaboration between different Buddhist sects. In the wake of Sri Lanka's independence, a meeting was held, and the World Fellowship of Buddhists was established.<sup>1</sup>

More than 3,000 Buddhist nuns, monks, and historians attended the 1952 International Buddhist Conference held in Sanchi, India, during Jawaharlal Nehru's prime ministership. This was one of the world's biggest assemblies of Buddhist lecturers and adherents at the time.<sup>2</sup> In 1954, the Sixth Buddhist Council convened in Burma.<sup>3</sup> The practice of calling councils and conferences has persisted over the decades, bolstering Buddhism's international network. After the Second World War ended, numerous former Soviet states, including Japan and South Korea, recovered and started to embrace their Buddhist past. This trend also spread to other parts of East Asia throughout the Cold War.<sup>4</sup> Currently, 97% of all Buddhists worldwide reside in Asia, and several nations, including Bhutan, Myanmar, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, view Buddhism as fundamental to their national identities and values.<sup>5</sup>

This background helps to explain the Indian government's attempts to use the Buddhist legacy as a foundation for additional diplomatic, commercial, cultural, and geopolitical ties in its foreign policy. The potential of Buddhism for Indian foreign policy stems from its well-established transnational network and the significant influence Buddhism has on millions of people worldwide. With its emphasis on non-coercive force, the religion's pan-Asian presence, significance for regional national identities, and benign reputation make it a perfect fit for soft power diplomacy.

**Indian Buddhism:**

Even though the amount of Buddhists living in India is tiny, the country can legitimately promote Buddhist diplomacy for several reasons. First, the unique historical legitimacy of the Buddhist faith comes from its origins in India. Second, India is home to several Buddhist pilgrimage sites, including Sarnath, Nalanda, and Bodh Gaya. Third, due to the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan parliament in exile's presence in Dharamshala during their abortive uprising against China, India has fostered a reputation as a champion of the

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<sup>1</sup> Juyan Zhang, "Revival of Buddhism after the WWII". *Buddhist Diplomacy: History and Status Quo*, (Los Angeles: Figueroa Press, 2012) 23, Research Gate.

<sup>2</sup> Suresh K. Sharma and Usha Sharma, "The Great Sanchi Congregation." *Cultural and Religious Heritage of India: Buddhism*, (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2004) 287, Google Books.

<sup>3</sup> Juyan Zhang, "Revival of Buddhism after the WWII". *Buddhist Diplomacy: History and Status Quo*, (Los Angeles: Figueroa Press, 2012), 23, Research Gate.

<sup>4</sup> Juyan Zhang, "Revival of Buddhism after the WWII". *Buddhist Diplomacy: History and Status Quo*, (Los Angeles: Figueroa Press, 2012), 23, Research Gate.

<sup>5</sup> P. Stobdan, "As China Pushes for a 'Buddhist' Globalisation, India Isn't Making the Most of Its Legacy." *The Wire*, May 15, 2017. <https://thewire.in/133670/india-china-buddhist/>

oppressed.<sup>6</sup> India is well-positioned to expand ties with other Buddhist nations and foster dialogue amongst the many streams of this religion due to its historical ties to Theravada Buddhism as well as its ties to Tibetan Buddhism. Successfully leveraging these associations with other Buddhist countries could have an impact beyond the realm of cultural diplomacy, and aid in other areas of foreign policy as well. Interestingly, the relationship between Buddhism and state diplomacy is not a new one and dates back to the days of Emperor Ashoka, who following his adoption of the religion began the practice of Dharmvijaya or conquest through Dharma.<sup>7</sup> Strengthening Buddhist-based ties with Asian countries may contribute to the government's overarching goals, such as the “Act East” and “Neighborhood First” policies.

### **Buddhist Heritage in India**

Fundamentally, on his diplomatic trips, Prime Minister Modi has made it a point to include Buddhism. Speaking at official foreign visits to China and Sri Lanka, among other places, Modi has made a point of highlighting our common Buddhist past. Furthermore, the prime minister schedules one day during international visits to Buddhist monasteries wherever feasible. Speaking at several domestic gatherings, Modi has praised the value of Buddhism for the advancement of both India and the global community.<sup>8</sup> The Dalai Lama and China's Competition in Buddhist diplomacy, as in most other areas of political importance, China has become a rival to India. China's ambition to increase its control over Asian culture is fuelled by its Buddhist background, even if it may be the most powerful nation in Asia in terms of its military and economy. This is demonstrated by the way China is expanding its political and economic clout throughout the continent through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's efforts to spread Buddhism are in part at odds with the Communist Party's and the Chinese government's professed atheism. It is also incompatible with China's Cultural Revolution persecution of Buddhists. However, it has made religion a key component of its soft power strategy for the continent, seeing the previously noted potential that religion possesses in the field of diplomacy. Due to its historical ties to the religion and the fact that it is home to the greatest concentration of Buddhists worldwide, the Chinese government actively promotes Buddhism. The Dalai Lama dispute is the most notable example of the rivalry between China and India in the field of Buddhist diplomacy.

In the eyes of the international Buddhist community, India has improved due to the presence of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile in Dharamshala, North India. This has caused tension between the two nations, though, as the Chinese government believes that the Dalai Lama and his supporters pose a challenge to Chinese sovereignty and are hence of an “anti-China splitter nature”. To commemorate the 2,600th anniversary of the Buddha's enlightenment, for instance, India played host to the Global Buddhist Congregation in 2011. Given that it was India's first significant Buddhist conference in more than 50 years, it was extremely

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<sup>6</sup> Rishika Chauhan, “Modi and Buddhism: Between Culture and Faith Based Diplomacy.” *ORF Occasional Papers*, (November 2015) p, 4-5.

<sup>7</sup> Juyan Zhang, 'Early dissemination of Buddhism from India to the world'. *Buddhist Diplomacy: History and Status Quo*, (Los Angeles: Figueroa Press, 2012), 9-10, Research Gate.

<sup>8</sup> Rishika Chauhan, “Modi and Buddhism: Between Culture and Faith Based Diplomacy.” *ORF Occasional Papers*, (November 2015);p, 2-7.

significant for the country's efforts at Buddhist diplomacy. The Dalai Lama was not allowed to participate in boundary talks with India, which the Chinese cancelled the following month.<sup>9</sup> There were also two such events at the beginning of 2017. The Dalai Lama received an invitation to Rajgir, Bihar, in March to speak at a seminar titled "Buddhism in the 21st Century." The Chinese government denounced this move and demanded that India "respect China's core concerns and avoid China-India relations from being further disrupted and undermined."<sup>10</sup> When the Dalai Lama travelled to Tawang in April, it was a significant location for Buddhists since it was the birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama.<sup>11</sup> Chinese people got concerned about his visit because they believed it would have an impact on the Dalai Lama's reincarnation issue. According to the State Administration for Religious Affairs regulations from 2007, the Chinese government has given itself the authority to approve the next Dalai Lama, just as it had done with the Panchen Lama. This means that the Chinese government will disregard the current Dalai Lama's decision and will continue to consolidate its control over Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>12</sup>

### **Religious Tourism in India and Culture:**

One area of growth that shows a lot of promise is the widespread practice of religious tourism. Even though seven of the eight most important Buddhist sites in the world are currently located in India, less than 1% of all Buddhist tourists go there. Thailand and Indonesia, two countries in Southeast Asia, were the main destinations for this kind of travel.<sup>13</sup> To address this issue and emphasize India's significance in the Buddhist community, the Ministry of Tourism is pushing several cross-border tourism routes.

The Ministry of Culture announced in a news release in March 2015 that a Buddhist tourism circuit has been identified, which would take visitors to several locations in Nepal, including 'Lumbini' and 'Kapilavastu'.<sup>14</sup> Larger and more ambitious in scope, the joint statement issued after the 2016 BIMSTEC Leaders' Retreat included plans to establish a Buddhist circuit in the area.<sup>15</sup>

### **Academic Enterprises:**

As was previously indicated, the international conferences and councils that were held to promote communication amongst members across national and sectarian barriers were major factors in the resurgence

<sup>9</sup> Rishika Chauhan, "Modi and Buddhism: Between Culture and Faith Based Diplomacy." *ORF Occasional Papers*, November 2015, pp. 10.

<sup>10</sup> China Warns India over Invite to Dalai Lama to Buddhist Meet." *The Economic Times*, March 20, 2017, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/china-slams-india-for-inviting-dalai-lama-to-buddhist-seminar/articleshow/57731676.cms>

<sup>11</sup> G. Parthasarathy, "When the Dalai Lama Visited Tawang." *The Hindu Business Line*, April 19, 2017, <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/columns/g-parthasarathy/when-the-dalai-lama-visited-tawang/article9650537.ece>

<sup>12</sup> Tshering Chonzom Bhutia, "The Politics of Reincarnation: India, China, and the Dalai Lama." *The Diplomat*, April 20, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/04/the-politics-of-reincarnation-india-china-and-tibet/>

<sup>13</sup> Divya A., "On the Anvil, Trans-National Buddhist Circuit from India to Nepal." *The Indian Express*, May 31, 2016, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/ministry-of-tourism-buddhist-circuit-trans-national-tourist-circuit-nepal-sri-lanka-2826631/>

<sup>14</sup> Buddhist Circuits Identified by the Ministry of Tourism." *Press Information Bureau*, Government of India, March 4, 2015, <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=116398>

<sup>15</sup> "BIMSTEC Leaders' Retreat 2016 Outcome Document." *Press Information Bureau*, Government of India, October 17, 2016, <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=151717>

of Buddhism. Several conferences that attract large audiences worldwide have been held to capitalize on this trend. One such conference was “Buddhism in the 21st Century,” which was held in Rajgir in 2017. Over 240 delegates from 39 nations attended the “5<sup>th</sup> International Buddhist Conclave,” which the Ministry of Tourism hosted in Varanasi in October 2016.<sup>16</sup>

The proposed tourism circuits were given additional momentum by the business discussions between domestic and international tour operators that were on the schedule for the conclave.<sup>17</sup> Prime Minister Modi personally launched the "Hindu-Buddhist Initiative on Conflict Avoidance" in 2015, which was arranged at Bodh Gaya by the Tokyo Foundation and the Vivekananda International Foundation. The focus placed on the relationship between Buddhism and Hinduism, which was portrayed as one of growth and mutual benefit rather than hostility, made this conference especially significant.<sup>18</sup> The establishment of Nalanda University, which was started by the previous UPA government and is currently being run by the incumbent, is the most significant academic endeavour to date. Ambassador P. Stobdan described the university's founding as "the centrepiece of Asian civilization, to focus on the process of Asian renaissance, for reconnecting Asian people and societies, and for reconstructing Asian values and ethos for the long-term benefit of Asia, and indeed the world." The university's launch was a pan-Asian initiative that was funded by numerous countries.<sup>19</sup>

To elevate India's standing in the Buddhist academic community and put it at the forefront of the global Buddhist order, a prosperous, first-rate research institute would be highly beneficial. Nevertheless, it doesn't appear likely that this will open very soon given the obstacles caused by ineffectiveness and domestic politics. As late as 2016, not even a foundation stone had been laid for the 455-acre complex, even though work was supposed to start in 2012.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the academic programs run out of a temporary campus have been hampered by political pressure on professors who were teaching courses that were considered “problematic.”<sup>21</sup> The Dalai Lama's absence from the university is among its most obvious flaws, as their participation in this kind of initiative would seem inevitable. Despite being a highly debated initiative with substantial international funding, all hopes of the old centre of learning being successfully revived have been dashed by the absence of full-time faculty and adequate facilities. China, on the other hand, recognized an opportunity and established Nalanda University, often referred to as the Nanhai Buddhist College, within its Hainan Province. With 220 students expected to enrol, academic sessions here started in 2017 and included relationships with Buddhist

<sup>16</sup> “International Buddhist Conclave Open Session in Sarnath.” *The Times of India*, October 5, 2016, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/varanasi/International-Buddhist-conclave-opensession-in-Sarnath/articleshow/54685864.cms>

<sup>17</sup> M/o Tourism Organizes '5th International Buddhist Conclave' in Varanasi-Sarnath from 2nd to 6th October 2016.” *Press Information Bureau*, Government of India, October 1, 2016. <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=151333>

<sup>18</sup> “PM Stresses Need to Shift from Ideology to Philosophy.” *The Hindu*, September 3, 2015, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/intolerant-nonstate-actors-unleashing-barbaricviolence-on-innocent-people-modi/article7611348.ece>

<sup>19</sup> P. Stobdan, “Asia's Buddhist Connectivity and India's Role.” Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis, February 19, 2016. [https://idsa.in/issuebrief/asia-buddhist-connectivity-and-indias-role\\_pstobdan\\_190216](https://idsa.in/issuebrief/asia-buddhist-connectivity-and-indias-role_pstobdan_190216)

<sup>20</sup> Devirupa Mitra, “Nalanda University Campus Construction Likely to Be Delayed as MEA Claims 'Anomalies' in Tender.” *The Wire*, May 23, 2016, <https://thewire.in/37927/nalanda-university-campus-construction-likely-to-be-delayed-as-mea-claims-anomalies-in-tender>

<sup>21</sup> Shreya Roy Chowdhury, “It Is a Closed Place: Why Students Are Quitting Nalanda University.” *Scroll.in*, October 28, 2017, <https://scroll.in/article/854841/it-is-a-closed-place-why-students-are-leaving-nalanda-university>

centres in Sri Lanka, Nepal, Thailand, and Cambodia.<sup>22</sup> Theoretically, by allowing for shared cultural growth rather than the export of cultural items, India's diverse approach to soft power diplomacy has broadened the definition of soft power rhetoric. But when it comes to actual results, the Indian government's use of Buddhist diplomacy fell short. "Buddhism was India's ancient geopolitical tool that could still be employed to meet the challenges of the new millennium," stated Ambassador P. Stobdan in an interview.<sup>23</sup> Although this fact has been acknowledged in government speech, there hasn't been much effort taken into really capitalizing on it. One area where the Indian government has shown decisiveness is by refusing to budge in the face of China's demands over the Dalai Lama in 2017. However, because it is a short-term issue and doesn't require much ongoing government work, this may be the easiest area in which decisive action can be taken. In terms of the Dalai Lama, the most crucial thing to do would be to include him closely in the establishment of Nalanda University, but there is no sign that this would occur. Given that the present Dalai Lama's presence confers a significant deal of power, India's attitude to China's choice of the next Dalai Lama will be crucial in the years to come. The Modi administration needs to go beyond token visits to Buddhist shrines and temples; going on official trips is only going to get you so far. What India currently has going for it is a wealth of resources in the form of holy places, the Dalai Lama's presence, international goodwill, and good intentions. Regarding global endeavours, the administration must moreover guarantee that its endeavours are not limited to Tibetan Buddhism alone, and deliberately endeavour to establish linkages with, Effectively reviving the Nalanda University project and promoting Buddhist studies in reputable universities around the nation are necessary to guarantee that a wide range of ideas beyond Tibetan Buddhism is introduced and that the Nalanda project is not the only organization tasked with producing Buddhist scholarship. Studying old languages such as "Pali," which is the language used to write various Buddhist texts, is also essential to the overall advancement of Buddhist scholarship. Entire schools of Buddhism, like Nagarjuna Buddhism, have not been thoroughly studied in academic research, which broadens the field of study that should be promoted and funded.

For India's affiliation with Buddhism to gain international traction, Buddhist tourism needs to be promoted in a manner similar to the "Incredible India" campaign. Apart from advertising, effective management of tourism destinations is also essential. This was inspired by the Kumbh Mela's successful organizing, which led to a 2013 case study published in the Harvard Business Review on the event's efficient management.<sup>24</sup> The current government has demonstrated sufficient intent to strengthen India's standing among Buddhist nations, but the key task remains ensuring effective implementation. This would significantly impede China's progress, fortify its ties with Asian nations, and assist it in advancing toward its aspirations to become a regional and global power.

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<sup>22</sup> Yatish Yadav, "Soft Power: China Gets Its Own Nalanda University, Shames India." *The New Indian Express*, June, 5, 2017, <http://www.newindianexpress.com/thesundaystandard/2017/jun/04/china-gets-its-own-nalanda-shames-india-1612588.html>

<sup>23</sup> In Conversation with Ambassador P. Stobdan". *Research Ladakh*. July 16 2017, <http://www.reachladakh.com/in-conversation-with-ambassador-p-stobdan/1763.html>

<sup>24</sup> Tarun Khanna, "Studying India's Maha Kumbh Mela Festival." *Harvard Business Review*, Harvard University, January 25, 2013.

## Buddhist Tourism: Global Perspective:

India is a global treasure trove of civilizations, philosophies, religions, and history. India is one of the most sought-after travel destinations because of the widespread interest in seeing and experiencing these resources. As a tourist commodity, Buddhist pilgrimages have enormous potential and are important for generating livelihoods, integrating politics, and enabling the economy. From the Ganges valley, from when Buddhist tourism originated and expanded throughout the nation and the world, one may notice the national setting of this industry. From the standpoint of tourism, the Indian subcontinent offers the “historical,” or more genuine, product because it is home to Buddha's travels and the first stages of the development of “ethics and thought,” whereas the rest of South Asia concentrates more on Buddha. Therefore, the Indian Subcontinent has a stronger advantage in terms of product positioning, even while the rest of Asia gets a peek at the “new Buddhism.” Although the political and geographical makeups of the countries that make up the Indian subcontinent vary, the main members are India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka. Meanwhile, the Buddhist legacy in other countries continues to flourish despite the socio-political unrest that surrounds them.

### Conclusions:

However, examining the various Buddhist schools and the physiographic and sociological differences within them. The Buddhist tradition not only offers a strong economic tie-up but also unites these diverse cultures into a unified fabric of regional cooperation, supporting cultural engagement, peace, and solidarity. This is particularly relevant now as India's Look East Policy is materializing into various action-oriented deliverables. For the 450 million practising Buddhists as well as tourists drawn to the Buddhist Circuit for its rich history, culture, and customs,

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