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ABSTRACT

India has always been shy of adding a religious tint to its foreign policy. In the last decade, however, the aspiring global power began engaging in what has come to be called 'Buddhist diplomacy' in its outreach to countries in the South, East and Southeast Asia. The prime minister is diligently pursuing India's 'Buddhist agenda' and taking it beyond its borders, emphasising the Indian and Hindu links with Buddhism. Concurrently, another Asian power is following the same strategy: China. Equipped with copious resources and matchless investment potential, China is also projecting itself as a nation with rich Buddhist heritage and is similarly attempting to connect with its Asian neighbours with large Buddhist populations. Buddhism has thus begun to emerge as a potential new arena for both cooperation and rivalry between India and China. While India has many advantages over China in integrating Buddhism into its national soft power strategy, it also has significant limitations of its own.

INTRODUCTION

Since assuming office in May 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has paid special attention to developing and promoting India's soft power. After considerable focus on "emigrants, intellectuals, and yogis",¹ Modi has set his eyes on Buddhism. In involving religion with foreign policy, the Indian prime minister's intrepid zeal is easily discernable, especially as independent India has not been known to give overt emphasis on religion in the conduct of its foreign policy.

Though Modi's administration would like to stress that India's indulgence in Buddhism is not a religious exercise but a cultural one,² the prime minister has in fact taken an audacious approach in linking Buddhism and Hinduism. While attempting to build on India's soft power and providing an impetus to his government's "Look East, Act East" policy through the promotion of Buddhism, Modi is not ignoring the larger Hindu focused Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) agenda but aligning it with his pursuit. While Modi's engagement with Buddhism cannot be called merely a cultural enterprise, it is not excessively immersed in religion, either. Modi's Buddhist initiative can best be described as an amalgamation of cultural and faith-based diplomacy.

Modi has enunciated India's Buddhist heritage and Hindu disposition in the same breath. In September 2015, for instance, at a conference called 'Samvad: Hindu-Buddhist Initiative on Conflict Avoidance and Environment Consciousness', Modi emphasised that his government was "doing everything possible to give an impetus to this Buddhist heritage across India, and India is taking the lead in boosting the Buddhist heritage across Asia".³ At the same time, he sought to call attention to the similarities between the traditional philosophies of Hinduism and Buddhism. A thought he echoed at Bodh Gaya a day after the conference, though this time arguing that Hindu philosophy was a "beneficiary of the advent and the teachings of Lord Buddha", and "enlightenment which Buddha attained in Bodh Gaya lit the light of enlightenment in Hinduism".⁴

The prime minister has also taken his Buddhist agenda beyond India's borders. During his May 2015 visit to China, Mongolia and South Korea, Modi's agenda was about more than enhancing political and economic ties. Rather, with that visit, Modi sought to draw on India's rich Buddhist heritage and connect with the three Asian countries along the thread of such common bond. Besides the three Asian countries, Modi has also used Buddhism to connect with Japan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bhutan.

As India is where the Buddha achieved enlightenment, delivered his first sermon, and died, the country has an undeniable command of importance among the followers of the religion. China, too, in the last few decades has harped on its Buddhist heritage to connect with surrounding Buddhist countries. Being home to the largest Buddhist population in the world and having huge investments in the neighbourhood, China's prominence is

certainly rising in countries with Buddhist populations. Nonetheless, given China's domestic constraints it is certain to face challenges in employing Buddhism as soft power; India, on the other hand, can reap quick rewards by ending its prolonged neglect of its Buddhist heritage and recognising its advantages even as it hurdles various limitations.

This paper seeks to explain cultural diplomacy and the relatively recent growth of faith-based diplomacy. It examines India's Buddhist diplomacy, describing as well China's attempts to enhance its own brand. The essay concludes with an assessment of the challenges being faced by the Indian prime minister in boosting the country's soft power and Asia policy through Buddhism.

CULTURAL DIPLOMACY, SOFT POWER, AND RELIGION-BASED DIPLOMACY

'Culture' is taken to be one of the three important elements of a country's soft power.⁵ Acknowledging that public diplomacy is not "culture free", cultural diplomacy has been called the "linchpin" of public diplomacy.⁶ Defined as "the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding",⁷ cultural diplomacy is considered a "new concept", but an "old phenomenon" in international relations.⁸ Countries like the US may have intensely invested in efforts to promote cultural diplomacy, but their "awakening to culture" came in late compared to countries like India, where culture has always played an important role.⁹ Cultural diplomacy is not new to India. Its modern nationalism has been shaped by the rich self-discovery of its cultural heritage as well as global reach. India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru understood the importance of cultural diplomacy and set up the Indian Council for Cultural Relations in 1950 to project India's civilisational heritage. Following Independence, however, India was unable to "make the most of its cultural ties to the Asian region". Its cultural diplomacy failed to strike a chord and came to be viewed as "gauche" in Asia. It was in the early 1990s that India's engagement in the region acquired a pragmatic outlook, relying on contemporary art forms as well as heritage to promote cultural diplomacy.¹⁰

The world of diplomacy took on a new dimension following the September 2001 terrorist attacks in the US: Religion made its way to diplomacy, and since then, a number of diplomatic initiatives have been categorised by experts under the heading of “faith or religion based diplomacy”. This diplomacy is embedded in religion—its texts, practices and traditions. Practitioners of such faith-based diplomacy may take from secular expertise in conflict resolution, political science and philosophy, or even experience in national security, diplomacy, community development and similar disciplines. Their essential orientation is their faith.¹¹ India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi appears to be focusing on Buddhism to enhance India's soft power. Modi's initiatives come close to faith- or religion-based diplomacy, while his Buddhist message has cultural underpinnings. Certainly, Modi seems to be adding a religious undertone to his Buddhist diplomacy.

BUDDHISM AND INDIA: POWER OF HERITAGE

Buddhism was founded in the late 6th century B.C.E. in India. It then spread to Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bhutan, most Southeast Asian countries, China, South Korea and Japan, often adapting to and blending in with the traditions of its host.¹² While China is believed to have the largest number of Buddhists in the world, most of the populations in Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, Bhutan and Sri Lanka follow Buddhism. In India, according to the 2011 census, there are some 7,955,207 Buddhists, comprising 0.8 percent of the population.¹³ The followers of Buddhism are among the six religion minorities which have been accorded the “National Minority” status.

Though India cannot boast of a large Buddhist population, its position among the followers of Buddhism is unique. India is not only the place where the religion was founded, but also upholds the tradition of Buddhist learning and hosts the 14th Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibet, forced into exile by China. Although born in Nepal, it was in India that the Buddha achieved enlightenment, delivered his first sermon, and died. These important places in the Buddha's life—Bodh Gaya in Bihar, and Sarnath and Kushinagar in Uttar Pradesh—have long been prominent pilgrimage centers for Buddhists around the world. According to estimates, one of every six visitors to India visits Bodh Gaya, and many of them also travel to other sites of Buddhist

pilgrimage.¹⁴ Every year a sizeable Buddhist population particularly from Southeast Asia visit the revered sites. According to a 2005 Department of Tourism report, “almost 75%” of the foreign tourists who visited Bihar that year belonged to countries with large Buddhist populations.¹⁵ Recognising this relevance, in 2007 India hosted a delegation of 100 Buddhist pilgrims from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam.¹⁶

Bodh Gaya has around 47 Buddhist temples; in the entire state of Bihar, there are some 1,600 accredited Buddhist sites. Mahabodhi Temple Complex at Bodh Gaya was recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2002. The Buddhist monuments at Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh—built in the 2nd and 1st centuries, B.C. are known to be the oldest Buddhist sanctuaries in the world and were inscribed as UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1989.¹⁷ Sarnath, Kushinagar, Sravasti and Kausambi are important pilgrimage sites in Uttar Pradesh. Ellora and Ajanta caves in Maharashtra, also UNESCO World Heritage Sites, have more than a few Buddhist rock-cut temples. Several Buddhist monuments and sites also exist in the states of Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, and Odisha.

Among Buddhist devotees, Dharamsala and Bodh Gaya are renowned for their Buddhist teaching and meditation institutes. Mcleodganj in Himachal Pradesh, the seat of the 14th Dalai Lama, is considered as the center of Buddhist activities and often welcomes visits from eminent personalities from various parts of the world. According to estimates by the Central Tibetan Administration, out of the total 128,014 Tibetans living in exile, about 94,203 are in India.¹⁸ A number of Buddhists that came to India with the Dalai Lama in 1959 have settled in Mcleodganj.

There is no doubt that India's long association with Buddhism is recognised and respected the world over. After India's independence, the British returned to the newly formed Indian government the relics of two of the Buddha's most famous disciples, Mogallana and Sariputta. Discovered and excavated by British archaeologist Sir Alexander Cunningham at Sanchi in 1851, these relics were then taken to England and exhibited at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.¹⁹

On 26 January 1950 at the inauguration of India's first president, his seat was adorned by a figure of Lord Buddha.²⁰ Then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru organised the International Buddhist Conference in Sanchi in

November 1952—one of the biggest gatherings of Buddhist followers and preachers in the world, helping India claim its position as a Buddhist leader. In 1956, at the celebrations of the 2500th birth anniversary of the Buddha, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, then vice president of India said, “While the teaching of the Buddha assumed distinctive forms in the other' countries of the world in conformity with their own traditions, here, in the home of the Buddha it has entered into and become an integral part of our culture”.²¹

India's leverage over Southeast Asia on account of its Buddhist heritage and the prospect of establishing this influence as steady soft power has been recognised. In 1970s Bandopadhyaya emphasised, “India is original home of Buddhism and the land of pilgrimage for Buddhists from all over the world, India has to take note of the existence of Buddhist states and populations in Southeast and East Asia”.²² With such rich heritage has come immense responsibility. For example, analysts believe that the fear of negative reaction from Buddhist populations in Southeast Asia, Japan and Sri Lanka, played a role in influencing India's decision to grant political asylum to the Dalai Lama in 1959—even at the cost of antagonising China and “almost certainly” intensifying the Sino-Indian border conflict.²³

MODI AND BUDDHISM

Prime Minister Modi has taken a keen interest in exploring India's Buddhist link and promoting its Buddhist heritage. The 2014 election manifesto of Modi's BJP proclaimed, “India's contribution to the march of civilization goes back to several thousand years before the Christian era. From the Vedas to Upanishads and Gautam - the Buddha”.²⁴ There is some evidence that Modi has been interested in Buddhism from when he was the chief minister of Gujarat. During his term, the Gujarat government was intensely involved in the restoration and development of Buddhist sites. It is believed to be Modi's idea, for example, to conduct archeological excavations in his hometown Vadnagar, where the Gujarat State Archeological Department would eventually discover the ruins of a Buddhist monastery in 2009. It was also at his insistence that the International Buddhist Heritage Seminar was organised in Vadodara in January 2010, wherein the Dalai Lama participated along with around 500 Lamas, 350 academics and 200 followers of the

religion. During the event, Modi voiced his intent to construct more Buddhist sites in Gujarat.²⁵

From a review of the prime minister's recorded statements during visits and interactions with state leaders of largely Buddhist nations, it is evident that Modi is employing Buddhism to connect with these countries. In May 2014, for instance, during his first telephonic conversation with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, Modi mentioned Hiuen Tsang, a 7th-century Chinese traveler who visited and wrote about the Buddhist monasteries in Vadnagar.²⁶ When Chinese President Xi Jinping visited India in September 2014, Hiuen Tsang and Vadnagar's Buddhist heritage were again brought up during talks in Ahmedabad. And when the prime minister visited China in May 2015 he again made the time to say, "Hiuen Tsang had visited my own home town in Gujarat. From his works, we know today that there was a Buddhist Monastery there. When Hiuen Tsang returned to China he brought with him Sanskrit scriptures and books of wisdom. The traditional systems of medicine of the two countries based on natural elements also have a lot in common".²⁷

In May 2015, before embarking on a six-day visit to China, Mongolia and South Korea, Modi underlined that the common bond in Asia was Buddhism. On 4 May 2015, speaking on the occasion of Buddh Poornima that marks the birth and death anniversary of Gautam Buddha, he stressed, "To get rid of war and violence (*yuddh*), the world will have to follow the message of Buddha". He also said, "The world has acknowledged that the 21st century will be Asia's century. While there could be difference of opinion on which country in Asia would emerge as the leader, it had been accepted that the century would belong to Asia. However if the message of Buddha is not followed this fate would not be achieved. By following Buddha's teachings of love and compassion (*karuna*), Asia could become an inspiration and guiding spirit for the world." Modi said that the Buddha gave importance to uniting people and emphasised on the power of unity (*sangathan*). He also stressed that during all his foreign visits, "one day is always set aside to visit a Buddhist temple".²⁸ As the Chief Minister of Gujarat, Modi visited Buddhist temples in China during his visit there.²⁹ Among the Buddhist temples that the PM has visited are Toji and Kinkakuji in Japan, Mahabodhi tree in Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka, Great Wild Goose pagoda in China, and Gandan Monastery in Mongolia.

The accounts of Modi's Buddhism-speak do not end there. In China in May 2015, Modi explained India's Buddhist link with its neighbour: "Two

thousand years ago, at the invitation of the Chinese Emperor Ming, two Indian monks came to China. They brought many Sanskrit scriptures on two white horses. They translated many Buddhist classics and scriptures into Chinese language. It is believed that they introduced Buddhism in China.” He said, “The serenity of Buddhism in Asian countries is the seed of their success. I strongly believe that this century belongs to Asia. And Buddhism will be a further unifying and catalysing force among the Asian countries. Your famous scholars like Fa Hien and Hiuen Tsang have taught many secrets of Chinese wisdom to Indians. In addition, they discovered many secrets within India itself”.³⁰

In Mongolia, Modi visited the Gandan Monastery and presented a Bodhi tree sapling to Hamba Lama, the head monk of the Buddhist temple. Before his visit, Modi had emphasised the cultural connections between India and Mongolia, as he said, “Democracy and Buddhism bind India with Mongolia – our spiritual friend”.³¹ In South Korea, the Buddhist heritage of the two countries was again underscored, with Modi saying, “We are also bound by the Buddhist traditions. A famous Korean visitor to India was Hyecho, a Buddhist monk who visited India in the eighth century to know the language and culture of the land of Buddha”.³²

There is Nepal, too. While addressing the Constituent Assembly of Nepal in August 2014, Modi said, “This is the land that gave birth to Lord Buddha, who held the whole world spellbound”.³³ During his visits to Nepal and Bhutan, Modi had promised grants for the development and maintenance of Buddhist sites in those countries. He had also discussed the possibility of offering tours of important Buddhist sites in ASEAN countries during the ASEAN-India summit in Myanmar in November 2014.³⁴

Modi's personal commitment to pushing India's Buddhist diplomacy was visible when in September 2015 the Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF) organised a global conference with the International Buddhist Federation and the Tokyo Foundation. The prime minister not only addressed the participants at VIF in New Delhi, but also joined around 100 delegates in Bodh Gaya where the last proceedings were conducted. Attended by delegates from 47 countries, the conclave was enthusiastically supported by the Indian and Japanese governments. Speaking particularly on conflict avoidance, environment consciousness and promotion of dialogue, Modi underlined

Asian complementarity and spoke of how “the world is taking note of Buddhism” and that this was a recognition of “historical Asian traditions and values, which can be used to shift the paradigm to conflict avoidance”.³⁵ The underlying theme of the conference appeared to be Hindu-Buddhist unity and complementarities, as Modi spoke extensively about Vedic literature and the philosophical similarities between Hinduism and Buddhism.

CHINA'S PARALLEL BUDDHIST DIPLOMACY

While India has been promoting its Buddhist heritage and investing in the development of Buddhist sites at home and overseas, China was doing the same, only at a grander scale, and beginning much earlier. In the last few decades both India and China have used the Buddhism-card to influence neighbours and gain prominence in the region. They have hosted conferences, financed the construction and development of religious sites, and exhibited sacred relics and artifacts in their neighbouring countries with Buddhist following. While China is attempting to reposition itself as the patron of Buddhism, India is trying to gain from its Buddhist heritage. Ever since China witnessed a religious revival in the 1980s the government has taken a keen interest in religions like Buddhism, which are considered non-threatening to the state's authority. Beijing has not shied away from using Buddhism as a diplomatic tool.

While Daoism is the only officially recognised religion in China, Buddhism is important to the country as it is not only practiced by a significant number of citizens but is also a political and foreign policy tool for the state to appease not only its own Buddhist citizens but its neighbours, too. China has been prudent enough to recognise Buddhism's economic potential and is using the religion to attract foreign investments primarily from Taiwan and Chinese settled abroad. Observers say that China is using Buddhism to “build a religious stage to sing the opera of [the] economy”.³⁶

China is actively portraying itself before the international community as a Buddhist nation. It is believed to be a strategy aimed at creating a common ground with the neighbours who are concerned about China's economic rise.³⁷ One of the ways of communicating its Buddhist orientation has been by

organising conferences and forums, including three World Buddhist Forums, in 2006, 2009 and 2012.

India, for its part, hosted the Global Buddhist Congregation in New Delhi in November 2011 to mark the 2,600th anniversary of the Buddha's enlightenment. The event led to a diplomatic row between India and China as the latter objected to the Dalai Lama's participation. The disagreement finally resulted in China cancelling border talks with India, scheduled for the same month.³⁸

To highlight their Buddhist inclinations both India and China are trying to rope in their neighbours. In September 2015, the Indian and Japanese governments supported an international conference organized by VIF in collaboration with the International Buddhist Federation and the Tokyo Foundation. There was not a single Chinese delegate among the participants from 47 countries.

Two transnational projects associated with Buddhism are currently making news in India. One is the construction of Nalanda University in Bihar, which started as a regional initiative under the East Asia Summit (EAS) and has now been completed. Concurrently, the government of Madhya Pradesh built a Buddhist University with the help of Sri Lanka and Bhutan. On 21 September 2012 Mahinda Rajapaksa, then the President of Sri Lanka laid the foundation stone for the construction of the University of Buddhist and Indic Studies at Sanchi, while Bhutan's Prime Minister, Jigmi Y Thinley attended as special guest. Dignitaries from Bhutan, Myanmar, Thailand, Japan, Cambodia, Mongolia and Nepal also attended the ceremony.³⁹

For Beijing, one of the most significant Buddhist projects abroad is the development of Lumbini, the birthplace of Gautam Buddha and the only Buddhist pilgrimage site outside India. In 2011 the Asia-Pacific Exchange and Cooperation Foundation (APECF), a Chinese NGO announced a \$3-billion aid to develop the sacred site, 250 km south-west of Kathmandu.⁴⁰ The NGO has reportedly signed an agreement with the China chapter of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) without consulting the Nepalese authorities. Citing growing Chinese investments in Nepal, and the fact that the site is merely about eight kilometers from India's border, some Indian analysts have expressed their fear of Nepal becoming another gem in China's "strings of pearls".⁴¹

In December 2012, an elaborate three-day conference of Buddhist scholars was organised in Yangon's Sitagu International Buddhist Academy. The conference, co-sponsored by India and Myanmar, was jointly inaugurated by India's Foreign Minister Salman Khurshid and Myanmar's Vice President U Sai Mauk. On the occasion a five-meter statue of the Buddha donated by then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was unveiled. While the move seemed aimed at enhancing cultural engagement with Myanmar, observers did not fail to notice that India's benevolence could only be a response to China's growing attempts to reach out to the country's Theravada Buddhists, who comprise 89 percent of the population.⁴² For in 2011 China had sent the Buddha's tooth relic preserved at Lingguang Si Temple in Beijing to Myanmar, bringing together large numbers of people to offer obeisance to the sacred remains. Within two months of the event a memorandum of understanding on establishing friendly relations between the Beijing Lingguang Temple and the Shwedagon Pagoda of Myanmar was signed. It was not the first time that the relic was sent to Myanmar; since the 1950s China has sent the relic four times to the country.

In August 2012, India highlighted its rich Buddhist heritage when it sent the sacred Kapilavastu relics, fragments of the Buddha's bones to Sri Lanka. The relics, first exhibited in the country in 1978 brought together thousands of devotees to offer prayers to the remains, making the event the biggest celebration in Sri Lanka in recent times. However, it cannot be forgotten that China is financing a \$100-million telecommunication tower, called the Lotus Tower, in Colombo, the cultural and industrial capital of Sri Lanka. The tower is designed to be the tallest structure in South Asia, shaped as a lotus, a Buddhist symbol of peace; it is also, according to some analysts, a manifestation of China's 'peaceful' rise.⁴³

ENLIVENING BUDDHISM IN INDIA

Though India has been trying to highlight its Buddhist legacy it has not been able to fully gain from such heritage and use it effectively as soft power. Despite the fact that three of the four main Buddhist pilgrimage sites are in India, none of them have adequate facilities for tourists: basic infrastructure like roads, hotels and international airports are primitive. While the presence

of these Buddhist sites in India gives the country an unmatched advantage over China, Lumbini's world-class development with Chinese funds can hugely offset this advantage. Moreover, the academic institutions of Buddhist study that India boasts of developing are either still facing bottlenecks or have fallen to mismanagement.

Viewing recent developments, it seems that New Delhi was rather late in realising the potential of its Buddhist legacy, relative to China which has taken remarkable interest in developing the few Buddhist sites on its territory and is also reaching out to its ASEAN neighbours, as well as Nepal and Sri Lanka. The development of Buddhist sacred and academic sites in India should remain high on the priority list of government authorities. Meanwhile, the Public Diplomacy division of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) can play an important role in helping India assert its Buddhist links by encouraging transnational academic exchanges and collaborations. Documentaries and films elucidating India's rich past and Buddhist connection can also aid India in enhancing its soft power.

Apart from academic collaboration, there is also enormous potential for partnership in the development sector. Though there have been such involvements, India can further encourage and call for foreign investments to develop its Buddhist sites. Such collaboration will not only benefit India but also enable its investing neighbour to gain goodwill among the Buddhists back home.

The plan to encourage Buddhist tourism by developing a "Buddhist Circuit" is an important initiative of the Ministry of Tourism along with the Bihar and Uttar Pradesh tourism departments and International Finance Corporation (World Bank Group). The planned circuit will be connecting Buddha's birthplace, Lumbini in Nepal to Varanasi, Shravasti and Kushinagar in Uttar Pradesh; and Bodh Gaya, Vaishali and Rajgir in Bihar. In the next phase, the Buddhist Tourist Circuit will cover 17 states, including Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Odisha.⁴⁴

Prime Minister Modi has taken constructive steps in the direction of promoting India's Buddhist heritage. During his visit to China, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the Indian Council for Cultural Relations and Fudan University on starting a Center for Gandhian and Indian Studies which would also focus on research on Buddhism and


ancient India-China contacts.⁴⁵ While Modi might be aware of the possibility of stepping on China's toes when furthering India's Buddhist diplomacy in Asia, he has constructively employed India's Buddhist heritage to connect with China as well. In September 2014, ahead of Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to India, Narendra Modi stressed, "Buddhism is a very strong bond between China and India".⁴⁶ He emphasised the same links in China in May 2015, while acknowledging, "Our relationship has been complex in recent decades. But, we have a historic responsibility to turn this relationship into a source of strength for each other and a force of good for the world".⁴⁷

LIMITATIONS TO MODI'S BUDDHIST DIPLOMACY

In spite of Modi's enthusiasm and the progressive steps he has taken, there are limitations and challenges that the prime minister faces in furthering his Buddhist diplomacy. As Modi highlighted in Bodh Gaya, in India Buddhism is often considered merely a derivative of Hinduism, and Gautam Buddha, a part of the Hindu pantheon. This was not the case, however, when Buddhism was founded in India. While Gautam Buddha was indeed Hindu and a prince, he opposed a number of Hindu practices and found little good in traditional Hinduism. Some evidence suggest that during the reign of King Ashoka and the Gupta dynasty there was a struggle between Hinduism and Buddhism to gain control of India.⁴⁸ In September 2015 in Bodh Gaya, Modi mentioned that the Buddha played an important role in the "enlightenment" of Hinduism.⁴⁹ Belonging to a party with Hindu nationalist inclinations, however, Modi treads carefully so as to not relegate Hinduism to second-fiddle while exalting Buddhism.

Analysts say that given his party's alliances and inclinations, overtly pushing a religion could have domestic political repercussions.⁵⁰ The domestic debate on secularism will also be brought up if the prime minister is perceived to be overstepping certain religious lines. While Modi runs the risk of overdoing and upsetting domestic constituencies, conversely there is also the debate about sustaining the government's interest in the topic. It has been argued that the Buddhist constituency in India is of no political significance, to begin with, and the "pressure" to pursue any form of Buddhist diplomacy emanates only from outside the country. The lack of emotional commitment

to the cause has also been cited to explain India's neglect of Buddhist diplomacy.⁵¹

Discussing the role of soft power in Indian foreign policy, David M. Malone has spoken of the time when India's cultural diplomacy was perceived as “gauche”. Laden with ideas of cultural superiority, it seemed to put forward the notion that some Southeast Asian countries were India's “cultural colonies”.⁵² While integrating Buddhism into a national soft power strategy, Narendra Modi will have to bear in mind the precedents, limitations and the challenges posed by such endeavour. Though Modi understands fairly well that religion can be connected to foreign policy, he must comprehend that his initiative has cultural as well as faith-based underpinnings and needs to be handled with the utmost political care and diplomatic competence. 

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