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Religious Tourism as Soft Power: Strengthening India's Outreach to Southeast Asia

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The 25-ft Great Buddha Statue at Daijyokyo Temple, Bodh Gaya. / Photo: Mihir Bhonsale

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ABSTRACT

A diverse culture, its vibrant democracy, and a non-aligned foreign policy have traditionally been pillars of India's soft power. With Southeast Asia, in particular, which India considers an important region, the country derives its soft power from a shared culture that has been nurtured over the course of more than two millennia. Buddhism is part of this historic engagement, and there is a constant flow of pilgrims from the Southeast Asian countries to India even today. This special report examines the role of religious tourism in India's soft power projection in Southeast Asia by analysing travel patterns to Buddhist sites in the Indo-Nepal plains and Buddhist heritage trails in Northeast India. It reviews government initiatives — both national and international — towards promoting Buddhist circuits, and provides suggestions for improvement.

INTRODUCTION

Global connectivity has rendered soft power more relevant than ever. Joseph N. Nye defined soft power as “the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment.”¹ Nye identified three sources of this ‘attractive’ power for a country: culture (in places it is attractive to others), political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policy (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority).²

India's soft power is often discussed in the context of its attractiveness through its culture, democracy as a political system, Bollywood (the popular name of the Mumbai film industry), and a value-based foreign policy.³ India's early attempts at soft power projection include the formation of a Public Diplomacy Division within the Ministry of External Affairs in 2006 and the launch of the ‘Incredible India!’ tourism campaign in 2002.⁴ Recent soft-power diplomacy successes include the United Nations’ proclamation of 21 June as International Yoga Day, with unanimous support from 175 countries.⁵

India's soft power perhaps has greater resonance with Southeast Asia. India and Southeast Asia—over the two millennia that they have had civilisational contact—share many complementarities in religion and culture, as seen in language, lifestyle, food, art, and architecture. The spread of Buddhism to Southeast Asia was, and continues to be an important aspect of this shared culture. India's modern-day relations with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) have branched out into various areas of cooperation with

immense strategic and economic significance. ASEAN is India's fourth largest trading partner and India is ASEAN's sixth largest trade partner.⁶ India's 'Act East Policy' covers economic, political, strategic, and cultural initiatives to engage with the Asia-Pacific region.⁷

This special report describes the potential of religious tourism to enhance India's soft power projection in Southeast Asia. It employs the descriptive analytical method of research, using sources such as official and non-official documents, field visits to the locations, and interviews with stakeholders. Studying existing trends, the report examines the possibilities of religious tourism in the country's Northeast. The report also reviews initiatives taken by the union and state governments towards boosting religious tourism, and gives suggestions for improving India's soft power projection in Southeast Asia.

SOFT POWER AND TOURISM

Tourism plays an important role in enhancing a country's soft power.⁸ It connects people and places and immerses visitors in other cultures.⁹ It also helps communicate cultural and governance attributes that make a country admirable.¹⁰ The success of inbound tourism is often seen as a key measurement of a nation's soft power¹¹ and international rankings based on soft power tend to use tourism as one of their measures.¹² For example, the Portland's *The Soft Power 30- A Global Ranking of Soft Power 2018 Report* under its 'culture' sub-index uses measures like the annual number of international tourists visiting a country, and other indicators like the country's music industry, and sporting prowess.¹³ Perceptions of how welcoming countries are to foreigners are also used to measure success.¹⁴ India fails to feature among the top 30 countries with the strongest soft powers in the Portland's report. Various described as a model soft power, it would seem that India makes poor use of it.¹⁵ In the ranking category of 'Asia Soft Power 10', introduced for the first time in the Portland's 2018 Report, India was ranked eighth.¹⁶

In tourism rankings, India was 26th in the world in international tourist arrivals in 2017, with a share of 1.15 percent.¹⁷ In 2017, India earned US\$ 27.31 billion in foreign exchange from tourism with an annual growth rate of 19.1 percent, while its share in World Tourism Receipts was 2.05 percent.¹⁸ Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTA) in India in 2017 was 10.04 million, which marked an annual growth rate of about 14 percent from 8.80 million in 2016.¹⁹ Southeast Asia (8.22 million) in 2017 had the fourth highest share of foreign tourist

arrivals in 2017 (Appendix 1). The share of Foreign Tourist Arrivals from top 15 source countries was 75.35 percent (Appendix 2). Amongst the countries in the South East Asian region, Malaysia (3.21 percent) was the sixth highest in number of arrivals while Singapore (1.75 percent) was 13th in the top 15 source countries of arrivals in 2017.

In foreign tourist visits to states and union territories, the state of Maharashtra (18.9 percent) topped in the year 2017 followed by Tamil Nadu (Appendix 3). The top 10 Indian states saw 87.6 percent of all foreign tourist visits, suggesting a near monopoly.²⁰

The Asia-Pacific region (which includes India and the Southeast Asian countries) saw the highest growth (9 percent) in the number of International Tourist Arrivals in 2017.²¹ It is estimated that out of the 600 million religious and spiritual voyages undertaken worldwide, 50 percent were to Asia.²² Amongst the religions that spread from India to other countries, Buddhism has the maximum potential for attracting tourists from abroad. This is because, while born in India, Buddhism has most of its adherents outside the country's borders; 97 percent of the world's Buddhists are concentrated in East and Southeast Asia.²³

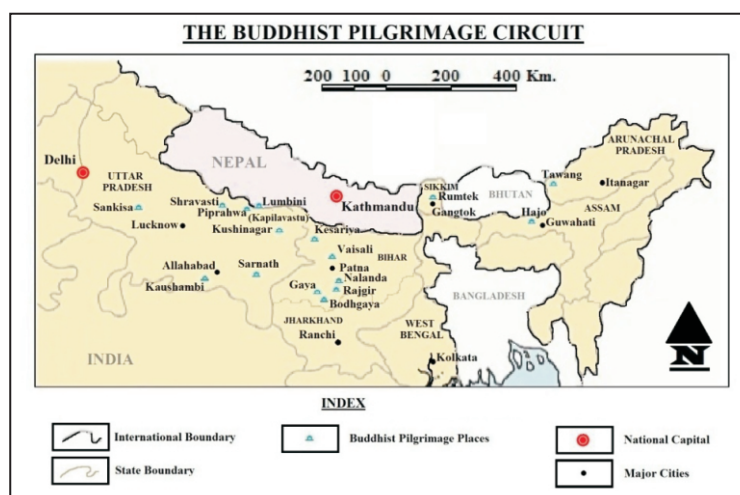
PROMOTING THE TRANSNATIONAL BUDDHIST CIRCUIT

A tourist circuit is defined as a route with at least three major tourist destinations that are distinct and apart, with well-defined entry and exit points. It could be limited to a state or region or be transnational, covering more than one state or union territory, with a dominant theme or sub-theme.²⁴ For the purpose of this report, the transnational Buddhist tourist circuit covers India and Nepal.

A tourist circuiting Buddhist religious sites in both countries would require between seven to 15 days.²⁵ The seven-day tour covers at least six to seven destinations that include Bodh Gaya (where Buddha attained enlightenment under the Sal tree), Rajgir, Nalanda, Kushinagar, Lumbini, Shravasti and Sarnath. The 15-day tour generally includes the 12 destinations in Table 1.

Well-preserved sites (Table 1) are a feature of the transnational Buddhist circuit and form its main attraction. Festivals and ritual ceremonies serve as attractions, drawing international visitors to the transnational Buddhist Circuit. Prominent among these is the Kalachakra Puja held in January every year when His Holiness the Dalai Lama holds the initiation rituals for followers worldwide.

Figure 1: Map of the Transnational Buddhist Circuit



Source: Prepared by Jaya Thakur based on "Top Travels and Tours (P) Ltd.- Buddhist Pilgrimage Circuit, www.buddhisttrain.com, http://www.buddhisttrain.com/images/buddhist_map_big.jpg

Table 1: Destination-wise Significance and Major Sites of the Transnational Buddhist Circuit

Destination	Significance	Major Religious Sites
Lumbini	Birth of Sakyamuni Buddha	Mayadevi Temple*, Tilaurakot, Devdaha.
Kapilvastu (Piprahwa)	Buddha's father Suddhodana's palace	Stupa and Museum where Buddha's ashes lie buried.
Rajgir	Monsoon Retreat for 12 years	Saptaparni Caves, Vishwa Shanti Stupa.
Bodh Gaya	Enlightenment under Bodhi tree	Mahabodhi Temple*, Pragbodhi Caves.
Sarnath	Turned the Wheel of Law	Deer park, Stupas erected by Ashoka.
Shravasti	Favourite rainy retreat	Jetavana Monastery, KacchiKuthi and PakkiKuthi.
Nalanda	Ancient university where Buddha preached	Remains of the NalandaVihar*.
Sankisa	Descended from heaven through a ladder of gold	Shrine marking the descent.
Kesariya	Delivered the Kalama Sutta	Stupa commemorating Kalama Sutta
Kaushambi	Spent sixth and ninth year after enlightenment	
Vaishali	First halt after becoming an ascetic	Stupa and Ashokan pillar.
Kushinagara	Mahaparinirvana	Nirvana Stupa.
*UNESCO World Heritage Sites		

Source: Based on "Getaways to Sacred Sites" in Swati Mitra ed. "Walking with the Buddha-Buddhist Pilgrimages in India" (New Delhi: Goodearth Publications, 2009)

The presence of a number of monasteries of countries following Mahayana and Theravada traditions along the circuit are a major draw among international visitors. In the temple town of Bodh Gaya alone, about 58 monasteries have been mentioned on the Bodh Gaya Temple Management Committee website.²⁶ Besides visiting places related to the Buddha's life, tourists visiting the circuit also go to nearby destinations like the Taj Mahal in Agra, Ajanta-Ellora caves in Maharashtra, and Khajuraho and Sanchi in the state of Madhya Pradesh.²⁷

A variety of accommodation options are available for religious tourists at destinations within the Buddhist Circuit. However, at destinations such as Rajgir, Nalanda, and Shravasti there is a paucity of hotels, so visitors only stop at these destinations for a few hours before proceeding to other destinations. Also, destinations along the circuit, notably Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, Rajgir, Nalanda, and Kushinagar require attention to cleanliness, facilities, and safety. Bomb blasts in Bodh Gaya in 2013 and 2018 were a serious security lapse, indicating a need for appropriate safety measures.²⁸

The transnational Buddhist circuit spreads across the Indo-Nepal plains and is connected by road, rail, and air to Agra, Delhi, and Varanasi. Road transport remains the most popular mode of transport for tourists within the Buddhist Circuit (for distances between destinations see Appendix 4).²⁹ The lack of wayside amenities along several stretches of the transnational circuit including washrooms, petrol pumps, eateries, inns, as well as signages and milestones, causes inconvenience to tourists.

Bodh Gaya, Patna, Sarnath, and Kushinagar have railheads nearby. However, owing to the railways allotting fewer number of trains originating or terminating from these railway stations, most trains are scheduled to arrive or depart from these stations at odd hours, causing inconvenience for tourists. This author, too, faced difficulties in arranging for conveyance in the morning to Bodh Gaya (approximately 16 km from the rail station) during a field visit.³⁰

The Indian Railways Catering and Tourism Corporation (IRCTC) runs the Buddhist Circuit special train known as the Mahaparinirvan Express along the 'Footsteps of Buddha' with a 7 nights-8 days package tour starting from New Delhi railway station. The train runs throughout the tourist season, and is scheduled from September to March for the year 2019-20.³¹ The international airports at Gaya and Varanasi and the domestic airport at Patna receive tourists as well. During the tourist season from October to March, the Gaya international airport receives flights from many Southeast Asian countries.

The closest airport to Lumbini is the Gautam Buddha Airport at Bhairahawa, with flights to national capital, Kathmandu. The Kushinagar air-strip is currently being upgraded to a full-fledged airport.³² Today the closest airport to Kushinagar is the Gorakhpur Airport about 52 kilometres away.

Flow of tourists to the circuit

The Buddhist circuit attracts tourists from across the world. Sarnath, where Buddha turned the Wheel of Law, received the highest number of Foreign Tourist Visits between 2015 and 2018 followed by Gaya, and Bodh Gaya (See Table 2 for data on foreign tourist visits to the Buddhist Circuit.)

The data suggests that the 11 Buddhist destinations contribute a considerable share (6.46 percent) in the nationwide foreign tourist visits. This inbound flow also features prominently in Uttar Pradesh's 35.56 million annual foreign tourist visits and Bihar's 10.82 million, making these states the third highest and ninth highest, respectively, in numbers of foreign tourist visits in the country in 2017.³³ Lumbini in Nepal is the most visited pilgrimage by foreigners in Nepal.³⁴ Table 3 lists the year-wise number of foreign tourist visits to Lumbini. Sri Lanka (59,959), Thailand (26,677), Myanmar (25,333), China (18,460), Vietnam (7,193), S. Korea (6,493), Germany (2,270), Cambodia (2,072), Malaysia (1,878) and France (1,849) placed in the top ten out of 108 countries' nationals who visited Lumbini in 2018.³⁵ This breakdown shows that Southeast and East Asia are significant sources of inbound tourism for attractions in the Buddhist circuit.

The Bhairahawa-Nautanwa/Sunauli border checkpost on the Indo-Nepal border serves as a transit for a large number of third-country tourists visiting Lumbini. This border transit point had a proportional share of 84 percent (1,50,841) in the number of tourist arrivals by land entry points in Nepal in 2017 (1,79,641).³⁶ This number exceeds the number of foreign tourist visits to Lumbini (1,44,756) in 2017 and is indicative of the high proportion of the number of third-country tourists transiting from India to visit Nepal's Lumbini. The preference for the land route is due to the cost advantage over taking a direct flight to Bhairahawa or Kathmandu in Nepal. Moreover, the hotel industry in the Terai plains of Nepal that covers Lumbini depends on supplies from India.

The tourist season in the Buddhist Circuit lasts from October to March. (See Figure 2. For detailed numbers refer to Appendix 5).

Table 2: Number and percentage share of Foreign Tourist Visits to destinations along the Buddhist Circuit

Destination	2015	2016	2017	2018
Gaya	2,38,617	2,88,914	3,13,817	3,26,228
Bodh Gaya	2,36,539	2,41,514	2,83,116	2,70,787
Rajgir	1,66,610	1,70,334	1,69,444	1,59,976
Nalanda	1,39,066	1,45,339	1,63,390	1,60,091
Vaishali	88,871	1,00,307	90,993	94,532
Sarnath	3,88,102	4,09,242	4,30,682	4,35,752
Kushinagar	68,830	73,514	76,221	80,147
Kapilvastu (Piprahwa)	30,820	31,213	32,064	32,791
Shravasti	1,00,070	1,06,013	1,37,184	1,49,304
Kaushambi	14,229	15,390	15,621	15,659
Sankisa	26,332	27,860	26,901	27,012
Total	1,498,086	1,609,640	1,739,433	1,752,279
No. of Foreign Tourist Visits (FTVs) to all States/UTs	23.33 million	24.71 million	26.89 million	N.A.
Percent Share of FTVs to Buddhist destinations against no. of all FTVs to all States/UTs	6.39%	6.51%	6.46 %	N.A.

Source: Compiled based on:

1. "The Indian and Foreign tourist visits in important tourist places of Uttar Pradesh in year 2014 to 2018", UP Tourism, <http://uptourism.gov.in/site/writereaddata/siteContent/201904301103477607uptourism.pdf>
2. "Annual Tourist Visits Statistics- 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017", UP Tourism <http://uptourism.gov.in/site/writereaddata/siteContent/Tourist%20Arrival%202013%20to%202017.pdf>;
3. "Statistics of Foreign Tourist Visits to the State of Bihar (Year- 2015 January to December)", Bihar Tourism, http://www.bihartourism.gov.in/data/Tourist_Data/Staticts2015.pdf
4. "Statistics of Foreign Tourist Visits to the State of Bihar (Year- 2016 January to December)", Bihar Tourism, http://www.bihartourism.gov.in/data/Tourist_Data/2016.pdf;
5. India Tourism Statistics 2018, Ministry of Tourism Government of India, <http://tourism.gov.in/sites/default/files/Other/India%20Tourism%20Statistics%202018.pdf>

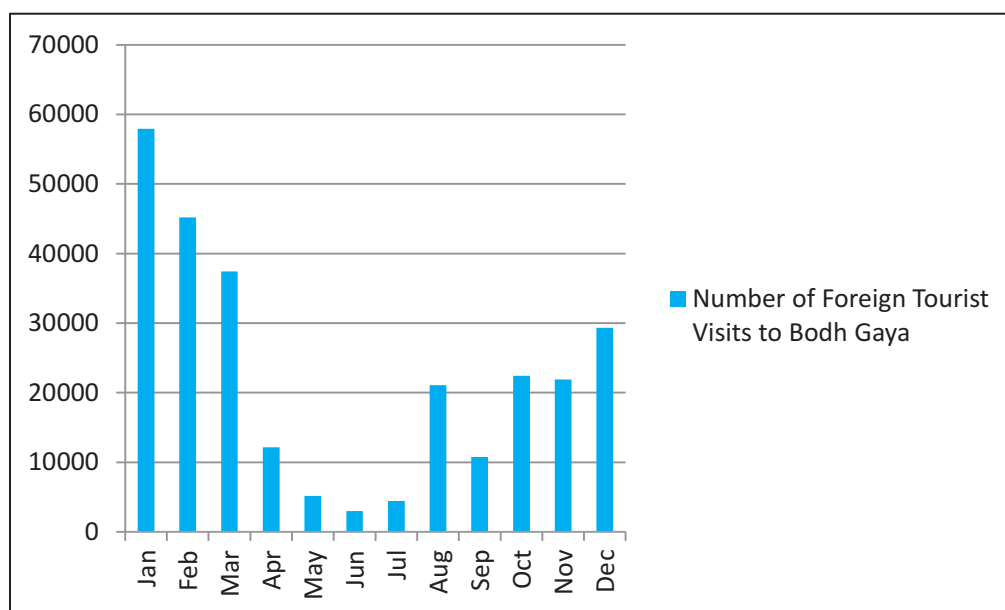
Table 3: Number of Foreign Tourist Visits to Lumbini, Nepal*

Year	Number of Visits
2014	1,00,000
2015	1,29,180
2016	1,36,254
2017	1,44,756
2018	1,69,904

*Foreign Tourists excludes visits by Indian nationals

Source: Information, Public Relations and Hospitality Section, Lumbini Development Trust; <http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/news/2018-01-13/lumbini-saw-more-than-155m-tourists-in-2017.htm>; <http://tourism.gov.np/files/statistics/2.pdf>

Figure 2: Foreign Visits to Bodh Gaya in 2018 by Month



Source: Based on “Statistics of Domestic and Foreign Tourist Visit to the state of Bihar (Year-2018 January to December)”, Bihar Tourism, http://www.bihartourism.gov.in/data/Tourist_Data/Monthly%20Staticts%20-2018.pdf

The above figure and Appendix 5 indicate that January saw the highest tourist footfall. The summer months from April to July received the lowest number of international visitors. The high frequency of visits in the month of January in Bodh Gaya could be due to the Kalchakra Puja, which is popular among foreign tourists. Bodh Gaya has also received many high-ranking dignitaries including several heads of state.

Table 4: Visits by dignitaries from Southeast Asian Countries to Bodh Gaya

Name	Designation	Month and Year
Nguyen Tan Dung	Former Prime Minister of Vietnam	October 2014
Tshering Tobgay	Former Prime Minister of Bhutan	January 2015
MathripalaSirisena	President of Sri Lanka	June 2015
Prayut Chan-o-cha	Prime Minister of Thailand	June 2016
U Thin Kyaw	Former President of Myanmar	August 2016
Min Aung Hlaing	Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of Myanmar	July 2017

Source: Author's own

February was the preferred month for Lumbini visits.³⁷ The seasonal variation in footfall implies that Buddha Purnima or Vesak Day, commemorating three important events in the Buddha's life — his birth, enlightenment, and death — that took place on the same full moon time in

summer is unsuitable for foreign tourists. Among dignitaries that visited Lumbini in 2018 was the President of Myanmar, U Win Myint in August, Sri Lankan President Mathripala Sirisena in September and the Queen Mother of Bhutan, Her Majesty Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck.³⁸

Planning for the transnational Buddhist circuit

Five 'Pan-India Mega Circuits' have been identified by the Union Ministry of Tourism to showcase India as a land of Buddha and a destination for spiritual and religious tourism.³⁹ The union Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of External Affairs have collaborated for promoting theme-wise tourist circuits worldwide, thus replacing the earlier practice of promoting state-wise circuits through Indian missions.⁴⁰

In July 2014, the central government launched a strategy for integrated tourism development titled, "Investing in the Buddhist Circuit - Enhancing the spiritual, environmental, social and economic value of the places visited by the Buddha in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, India (2014-2018)."⁴¹ This strategy document is a result of collaboration between the ministry, the State Governments of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the private sector, Buddhist monasteries and sects, and the World Bank Group.⁴² It recommended a public investment of INR 500 crore in infrastructure and site improvements and a private sector investment of INR 500 crore for the same duration.⁴³ The strategy document also categorises target markets into four categories — budget pilgrims, comfort pilgrims, budget explorers, and high-end explorers.

Table 5: Segment-wise Source Markets for Buddhist Circuit spread in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar

Segment	Source Markets
Budget Pilgrims	Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Himalayan Buddhists, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, Bhutan, Tibetan Refugees
Comfort Pilgrims	Japan, Korea, Thailand, Singapore, China, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia
Budget Explorers	UK, Germany, France, the Benelux, Southeast Asia, Australia
Comfort Explorers	North America, UK, Germany, France, China, Japan, Australia, South Africa and Brazil

Source: "Investing in The Buddhist Circuit- Enhancing the spiritual, environmental, social and economic value of the places visited by the Buddha in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, India", Incredible India- International Finance Corporation, <https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/2bdd4697-6d7f-4f78-bca0-269aa100b25a/Buddhist+Circuit+Tourism+Strategy+Final.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=kC1uny1>

The transnational Buddhist circuit is already well-established amongst Buddhist pilgrims. Thus, attracting comfort pilgrims and budget explorers from source markets like Japan, Korea, Thailand, Singapore, China, Myanmar, Malaysia, and Indonesia is of utmost importance. Focus on products centred on meditation and wellness could also help increase the time spent at locations within the circuit.⁴⁴

Based on the strategy for integrated tourism development adopted by the union government, three Buddhist Circuits have been taken up for development and promotion with private stakeholders. Similarly, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have also identified Buddhist Circuits for development and promotion. The central government has provisioned for a cultural-and-convention centre being built on a 10-acre plot at Bodh Gaya under the Swadesh Darshan scheme.⁴⁵ This project is expected to host national and international cultural events and functions aimed at boosting religious tourism at Bodh Gaya.⁴⁶ In Uttar Pradesh the destinations identified under the Scheme are Sravasti, Kapilvastu, Kushinagar and common facilities at other destinations. A sum of INR 99.97 crore has already been sanctioned for this development.⁴⁷

Since 2004, the central government has been organising the International Buddhist Conclave (IBC) to showcase Buddhist heritage in India, boost tourism to Buddhist sites in the country, and cultivate friendly ties with countries and communities interested in Buddhism.⁴⁸

The tourism policies of the state governments of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Sikkim (relevant to this report) have identified religious tourism as a key strategy for growth in tourism.⁴⁹ However, there is a lack of clarity on how the concerned states propose to improve footfall. Additionally, paucity of data pertaining to foreign tourist visits to states constrains tourism planning and adoption of effective strategies. State departments of tourism responsible for collating data pertaining to foreign tourist visits need to publish the top ten source countries visiting religious destinations within the state. The state tourism departments lack coordination with other departments (like Public Works Departments) that are responsible for construction and maintenance of roads. States could thus create dedicated task forces that are extra-departmental but still capable of coordinating between various departments for developing tourism.⁵⁰

BUDDHIST HERITAGE IN INDIA'S NORTHEAST

Besides the sites included in Buddhist Circuit 1 and Circuit 2, the government is also showcasing the Buddhist heritage of the country through Circuit 3, i.e., Buddhist Heritage Trails or State Circuits that covers Buddhist tourist destinations across 12 states (Appendix 6).

The third Buddhist Circuit includes the monasteries in Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. India's Northeast is important for this report, as it is relevant to the country's soft power projection in Southeast Asia. The region features a mix of religions, age-old traditions, and monasteries. Both Hinayana and Tibetan Buddhism are found in the Northeast. The Buddhist Heritage Trail or State Buddhist Circuits of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim include the Tawang Monastery, built in the 17th century. The monastic circuit in Sikkim includes the Enchay Monastery, an important seat of the Nyingmapa tradition and Rumtek monastery, a seat of the Kagyud order, two among the four sects of Tibetan Buddhism.

At present, the Northeastern region receives fewer tourists than many other parts of India. In 2017, Arunachal Pradesh had a share of 0.03 percent in the number of foreign tourist visits to states and union territories, while Sikkim had a 0.18 percent share.⁵¹ A major reason for the low numbers of tourist visits is because of the 'Protected Areas' regime that covers the entire states of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland; while the state of Sikkim is partially in Protected Area and partly in Restricted Area.⁵² Foreign tourists visiting either these states need to obtain a permit that is issued only for group travel of two or more persons and valid for specific tourist circuits or routes, given for a maximum of 30 days.⁵³ Moreover, there is also a lack of tourist infrastructure including roads, hotels, and wayside amenities. In spite of these constraints, the Union Ministry of Tourism organises the annual International Tourism Mart, an event in the Northeast highlighting the tourism potential of the region in the domestic and international markets.⁵⁴ It has been held in Agartala, Guwahati, Tawang, Shillong, Gangtok, and Imphal.

Udan, the Regional Connectivity Scheme of the Union Ministry of Civil Aviation, has sought to connect the capital city of Assam, Guwahati through direct flights with international destinations — Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), Dhaka (Bangladesh), Kathmandu (Nepal), Bangkok (Thailand), Singapore, and Yangon (Myanmar).⁵⁵ The construction of the Pakyong Greenfield airport, 13 kilometres from Sikkim's capital Gangtok, will be a boon for travellers to the state.⁵⁶

Sharing a land border with five countries, India's Northeastern region is expected to benefit from opening international borders for the movement of people. The signing of a land border crossing agreement with Myanmar in May 2018 is expected to facilitate movement across the international border and encourage tourism and people-to-people linkages.⁵⁷ Once ready, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral highway that starts from Manipur in India, passes through Myanmar, and connects Mae Sot in Thailand, would establish India's road connectivity with South East Asia.⁵⁸

Last-mile connectivity to tourist sites remains a major challenge, requiring investment in infrastructure by both state and union governments. There is a need for the private sector to invest in the regional hospitality sector.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND OVERSEAS MARKETING

The Union Ministry of Tourism has eight offices worldwide, which manage the country's overseas marketing of tourism destinations through activities such as road shows and festivals. The office in Singapore covers promotions and marketing of India's tourist sites to ASEAN countries, Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and other Island nations in the Pacific. Road shows that generally comprise presentations and business meetings are held throughout the ASEAN region. A single office catering to such a geographically vast and culturally diverse region makes the jurisdiction of India Tourism offices insufficient. There is a need for increasing the number of tourism offices and adopting a country-specific approach for promotion. For example, in 2017, Sikkim's state tourism department had decided to hold road shows in Thailand for promoting its destinations.⁵⁹ The state has been actively promoting destinations like Tathagata Tsal or Buddha Park at Rabong in South Sikkim that has a 137.2 feet statue of Lord Buddha where the Nineteenth Supreme Patriarch of the Kingdom of Thailand had offered 'the most precious relics' (Ringsel) of Lord Buddha.⁶⁰

India has a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with ASEAN with a four-fold objective of facilitating tourist visits, strengthening partnerships, enhancing mutual assistance for human resource development in the tourism sector, and exploring avenues for cooperation and information-sharing.⁶¹ India holds two joint working group meetings with the ASEAN bloc every year besides exchanging information, data on tourism, best practices, statistics, and future possibilities.⁶²

The South Asia Sub-regional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) vision statement adopted by the finance ministers of members states in its New Delhi

summit in April 2017 called for positioning SASEC as a tourist destination through joint development of tourism products, joint marketing, standardisation of services and facilities, and seamless accessibility.⁶³ Developing theme-based tourist circuits between two or more SASEC countries has also been proposed. Religious destinations, particularly those connected with Buddhism and Hinduism, have been identified as a potential theme for the joint development of circuits.⁶⁴

India leads the tourism sector in the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).⁶⁵ Tourism cooperation under BIMSTEC is focused on joint promotion and marketing, capacity building in the tourism industry, development and sharing of industry standards, and common branding and development of BIMSTEC-specific tourism products.⁶⁶ The tour operators' meeting recommended the formulation of a common marketing strategy such as creation of a BIMSTEC brand for tourism, to develop a common website for promotion, to hold annual BIMSTEC travel mart/conclave, to develop and share a common safety protocols for adventure tourism, to enhance Public-Private Partnership for promotion of Tourism in BIMSTEC, and to hold a BIMSTEC Annual Convention on Tourism. A welcome step is the cooperation in tourism sector within BIMSTEC member nations that include four Buddhist-majority countries — Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and Thailand. A common entry visa for travel within the BIMSTEC region could be one way forward for promoting intra-regional travel.

While steps have been taken in terms of identifying themes and areas for cooperation in tourism between India and Southeast Asian countries, agreements and MoUs do not necessarily translate into actionable steps. For example, it has been over a decade since the Asian Development Bank and SASEC's Tourism Working Group proposed a Tourism Development Plan.⁶⁷ The Plan that was released in December 2004 had suggested joint promotion of Buddhist Circuits and Ecotourism circuits.⁶⁸ However, this is a task that is yet to fructify.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING RELIGIOUS TOURISM

To nurture a favourable ecosystem for religious tourism, better coordination between the elements of the system is needed. A multi-pronged approach focusing on product enhancement, bettering connectivity, and creative promotion and marketing of products could help achieve an effective strategy for inbound tourism based on themes and destinations covered in this report.

The transnational Buddhist Circuit transcends both national and state borders and since tourism is a state subject in India, there should be various levels of interaction and coordination at the international and sub-national level. Moreover, synergy is required between state tourism departments, the Union Ministry of Tourism, and the larger tourism industry to accommodate the interests of all stakeholders. Trans-boundary tourist circuits presently have to contend with different administrative structures, dissimilar governance practices, divergent laws, and varying resource capacities.

To circumvent the disadvantage of Buddha Purnima or Vesak Day falling in the lean summer season, India could organise a permanent annual event commemorating Buddha Jayanti, inviting religious leaders from Southeast Asian countries. The government must also encourage organisations like the Indian Association of Tour Operators (IATO) and Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) to hold conferences in destinations within the transnational Buddhist Circuit. This would help popularise the circuit among more tour operators who are not currently offering travel packages with the Buddhist Circuit itinerary.⁶⁹

Civil society needs to help spread awareness among locals through programmes on heritage awareness and conservation. Heritage walks and related events could also help tourism stakeholders spread awareness and aid conservation efforts.


The transnational nature of the Buddhist Circuit necessitates a greater level of coordination between India and Nepal. Lumbini, Buddha's birthplace, is an inalienable part of the circuit following the life story of Buddha. Improving connectivity between Lumbini and other destinations in the transnational circuit is important. The proposed Lumbini-Kushinagar rail link will be crucial in this respect.⁷⁰ A religious tourist embarking on a visit to the 'Footsteps of Buddha' circuit or 'Retracing the Footsteps of Buddha' circuit must also be encouraged to visit the Buddhist Heritage trails or state circuits in the Northeast. Kolkata—which has attractions like the Indian Museum that are listed under the Buddhist Heritage trails—could serve as a link between the two contiguous circuits located in Eastern and Northeastern region of India. Kolkata is well connected by rail, road, and air to Bodh Gaya and Varanasi, and Buddhist heritage destinations in India's Northeast and has air links with many destinations in Southeast Asia.

India also needs to embrace the opportunities presented by the North-South Economic Corridor of the countries of the Mekong region. This will encourage travel to the north of Myanmar and to Southern China, which may in turn lead to more interest in neighbouring areas including India's northeast.

CONCLUSION

The interdependence between India and Nepal for religious tourism through the transnational Buddhist circuit is a driver for enhancing Indo-Nepal bilateral relations. This circuit provides an opportunity for augmenting neighbourhood ties, particularly with Southeast Asia. Visits from tourists and dignitaries from these countries contribute towards building strong people-to-people and state-to-state relations. Religious tourism leads to the diffusion of Indian culture in the Southeast Asian neighbourhood and creates a special place for India in the minds of foreign tourists. Through better people-to-people connectivity, India can also reach out to larger audiences within Southeast Asia, creating a consensus for better political and trade relations.

Tourism complements India-ASEAN Free Trade Agreements in goods and services. The ten ASEAN[#] and six Indo-Pacific^{\$} countries are looking to implement the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). With world tourism trends indicating that the Asia Pacific region records the highest number of foreign tourist arrivals, the conclusion of RCEP is likely to intensify tourist activities within the region.

Tourism is one of the drivers of physical connectivity between India and ASEAN. One of the stated objectives of India's land border crossing agreement with Myanmar is to promote tourism. Besides boosting religious tourism, opening of the land border transit points with Myanmar also serves as a means for promoting and developing cross-border ethnic linkages. Buddhism and tourism present many avenues of cooperation to help maintain peace and harmony among countries, and help build India's soft power projection. 

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Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam

\$ Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea

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ANNEXURE**Annex 1: Region-wise Foreign Tourist Arrivals in India in 2017**

Region	No. of Foreign Tourist Arrivals	Percent
North America	17,12,358	17.06
Central and South America	92,067	0.92
Western Europe	21,33,673	21.26
Eastern Europe	4,72,872	4.71
Africa	3,18,023	3.17
West Asia	4,57,760	4.56
South Asia	29,51,665	29.41
South East Asia	8,24,575	8.22
East Asia	6,63,295	6.61
Australasia	3,86,059	3.85
Not Classified elsewhere	23,456	0.23
Total	1,00,35,803	100

Source: Government of India- Ministry of Tourism Market Research Division, "India Tourism Statistics, 2018", <http://tourism.gov.in/sites/default/files/Other/India%20Tourism%20Statistics%202018.pdf>

Annex 2: Top 15 Source Countries for FTAs in India during 2017

Rank in 2017	Country	FTAs in India in 2017	Percent Share
1	Bangladesh	21,56,557	21.49
2	United States	13,76,919	13.72
3	United Kingdom	9,86,296	9.86
4	Canada	3,35,439	3.34
5	Australia	3,86,059	3.23
6	Malaysia	3,22,126	3.21
7	Sri Lanka	3,03,590	3.03
8	Russian Federation	2,78,904	2.78
9	Germany	2,69,380	2.68
10	France	2,49,620	2.49
11	China	2,47,235	2.46
12	Japan	2,22,527	2.22
13	Singapore	1,75,852	1.75
14	Nepal	1,64,018	1.63
15	Afghanistan	1,49,176	1.49
Total		75,61,882	75.35 %

Source: Government of India- Ministry of Tourism Market Research Division, "India Tourism Statistics, 2018", <http://tourism.gov.in/sites/default/files/Other/India%20Tourism%20Statistics%202018.pdf>

Annex 3: Share of Top 10 States/UTs in Number of Foreign Tourist Visits in 2017

Rank	State/Union Territory	Foreign Tourist Visits	Percentage Share
1	Maharashtra	50,78,514	18.9
2	Tamil Nadu	48,60,455	18.1
3	Uttar Pradesh	35,56,204	13.2
4	Delhi	27,40,502	10.2
5	Rajasthan	16,09,963	6.0
6	West Bengal	15,74,915	5.9
7	Punjab	11,08,635	4.1
8	Kerala	10,91,870	4.1
9	Bihar	10,82,705	4.0
10	Goa	8,42,220	3.1
	Total of Top 10	23545983	87.6
	Others	3340655	12.4
	Grand Total	26886638	100

Source: "India- Tourism Statistics at a glance-2018",
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Annex 4: Road Distance and Time Required between Destinations

Destinations	Distance in Km	Approx time taken in hrs.
Bodh Gaya – Varanasi	255	5
Bodh Gaya- Rajgir- Nalanda	90	2.30
Rajgir- Patna	110	4
Patna- Vaishali	54	2
Vaishali- Kushinagar	175	6
Kushinagar- Shravasti	250	6
Kushinagar- Lumbini	180	5
Kushinagar- Varanasi via Gorakhpur	270	7
Lucknow- Varanasi	320	6
Shravasti- Varanasi	305	7
Shravasti- Lucknow	165	5
Lucknow- Sankisa	250	6

Source: "Investing in The Buddhist Circuit- Enhancing the spiritual, environmental, social and economic value of the places visited by the Buddha in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, India", Incredible India- International Finance Corporation, <https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/2bdd4697-6d7f-4f78-bca0-269aa100b25a/Buddhist+Circuit+Tourism+Strategy+Final.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=kC1uny1>

Annex 5: Month-wise Number of Foreign Tourist Visits to Bodh Gaya in 2018

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
No.	57928	45178	37424	12152	5147	3008	4435	21095	10774	22433	21885	29328	270787

Source: "Statistics of Domestic and Foreign Tourist Visit to the state of Bihar (Year-2018 January to December)", Bihar Tourism, http://www.bihartourism.gov.in/data/Tourist_Data/Monthly%20Statitics%20-2018.pdf

Annex 6: Buddhist Heritage Trails or State Buddhist Circuits listed for Development and Promotion by the Union Ministry of Tourism

No.	State	Destinations
i.	Jammu and Kashmir	Ladakh, Srinagar (Harwan, Parihaspora) and Jammu (Ambaran).
ii.	Himachal Pradesh	Himachal Pradesh - Dharamshala, Spiti, Kinnaur and Lahaul.
iii.	Punjab	Sanghon.
iv.	Haryana	Jind (Assan), Yamunanagar(Sugh).
v.	Maharashtra	Aurangabad (Ajanta, Ellora, Pithalkora Caves), Pune (Karla Caves), Mumbai (Kanheri Caves), Pune (Bhaja Caves) and Nashik (Pandavleni Caves).
vi.	Andhra Pradesh	Amravati, Nagarjunakonda, Vizag (Borra Caves, Salihundum Caves).
vii.	Madhya Pradesh	Sanchi, Satdhara, Andher, Son ari, Murulkurd.
viii.	Odisha	Dhauri, Ratnagiri, Lalitgiri, Udaygiri, Langudi, Khandagiri.
ix.	Chhattisgarh	Sirpur.
x.	West Bengal	Kolkata (Indian Museum)
xi.	Sikkim	Rumtek, Enchay and other Monasteries.
xii.	Arunachal Pradesh	Tawang and Bomdila

Source: "3Buddhist Circuits identified by the Ministry of Tourism- 4 March 2015", Press Information Bureau-Government of India- Ministry of Tourism, , <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=116398>



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