

The Rising Role of Buddhism in India's Soft Power Strategy

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ABSTRACT The Modi-led government is placing a strong accent on the use of soft power in India's 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 co-existence and its wide pan-Asian presence, lends itself well to soft-power diplomacy. This brief will examine India's attempts at leveraging its historical and present-day associations with the faith, alongside similar attempts by the Chinese state.

INTRODUCTION

Since the time 'soft power' was conceptualised by Joseph Nye in the 1990s, the idea has gained more traction in foreign-policy discussions across the world. In recognition of the changing nature of international relations and a turn (at least in rhetoric) towards peaceful global interaction, Nye posited that conventional hard-power tactics predicated on military might would no longer be the sole

factor in determining the degree to which a nation commanded power in the international system.¹

Post-independence, India has always been cognizant of the need to not make military power the basis of the country's foreign policy. From the time of Jawaharlal Nehru's Panchsheel principles, India has been guided

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by the ideals of peaceful co-existence. Though India's position in the international system has evolved significantly since—and today the rhetoric of India's great-power aspirations is increasingly heard—ideas that advocate for non-coercive power projection are still important to foreign-policy formulations.

This brief studies one particular facet of Indian soft power projection: the leveraging of India's historical associations with the Buddhist faith in diplomacy and foreign policy. First, the brief locates this form of soft power projection within theoretical models of soft power. It then seeks to understand why Buddhism in particular lends itself to this form of soft power projection, and explains why India is in a favourable position to exploit this. Initiatives undertaken by India within the realm of Buddhist diplomacy shall then be examined in the context of competition with China's own efforts at Buddhist diplomacy. The brief concludes with a qualitative review of these efforts and offers recommendations for future action.

This brief rests upon the assumption that soft power is a useful tool that can be employed in the fulfilment of foreign-policy objectives. The reason this must be stated is because there is a debate as to the potency of soft power; while this is a fruitful conversation that deserves to be engaged with, it is not the aim of this brief.

BACKGROUND TO INDIA'S SOFT POWER

In his book, *Communicating India's Soft Power: Buddha to Bollywood*, Daya Kishan Thussu noted that the 'Indic civilisation', as he and others have termed it, has given birth to a

number of major religions in the world and over time has assimilated into its social fabric numerous others. Sciences, 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' long before the term itself was coined.² Owing to this, present-day India is well poised to draw upon religious and faith-based associations with countries across the globe.

The present BJP government adopted the Panchamrit principles to guide its foreign policy, in actively promoting India's image as a rising global power. The fifth of these five principles is *sanskriti evam sabhyata* (cultural and civilisational links), which expresses the government's desire to leverage India's rich historical cultural links with other countries as a part of its non-coercive soft power strategy.³

This form of soft power projection is an aberration with respect to Nye's conception of soft power, which was predicated on the possession of something that could be exported to other countries. When one looks at the experience of the US, for example, it is understandable that Nye would come to this conclusion, for the US' soft power was based on its export of not only commercial products such as MTV, Coca Cola and McDonalds, but also 'values' including democracy. Certain aspects of Indian soft power, such as Bollywood and Yoga, follow a similar model. The particular aspect of soft power discussed in this brief, however, relies not on the export of a cultural product, but on promoting certain shared religious and cultural associations, thereby creating a mutually erected platform upon which further relations are based.

Although such efforts are popularly studied under the ambit of soft power, it would do well to question whether it would be better to simply call them “attempts at cultural diplomacy”.

Examples of religious associations being used to augment foreign policy are not restricted to Buddhism. For instance, around the time of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's historic visit to Israel in July 2017, observers made constant references to India's history with Judaism and its reputation for being a safe haven for Jews at a time of their prosecution in their native lands.⁴ Meanwhile, with respect to Islam, India has sought membership to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) on the grounds that it has the second largest Muslim population in the world.⁵ This brief elects to devote attention to Buddhism as it possesses the greatest potential for soft power usage, for reasons that will be discussed in the following section.

WHY BUDDHISM?

Buddhism's potential utility in foreign policy is derived to a large extent from the manner in which the faith was revived in the aftermath of the Second World War. The revival of the faith had a decidedly internationalist outlook to it, and focused on transgressing extant sectarian and geographical boundaries. This was facilitated by the foundation of a number of organisations and the convening of numerous councils and conferences in the decades after the war that emphasised on transnational cooperation amongst various sects of Buddhism. This began with a conference organised in newly independent Sri Lanka, where the World Fellowship of Buddhists was

founded.⁶ In 1952, under the prime ministership of Jawaharlal Nehru, India hosted the International Buddhist Conference in Sanchi that was attended by over 3,000 Buddhist nuns, monks, and historians. At that time, this was one of the largest gatherings of Buddhist preachers and followers in the world.⁷ In 1954, the Sixth Buddhist Council was convened in Burma.⁸ In the decades since, the tradition of holding conferences and convening councils has continued, strengthening the global network of Buddhism.

In East Asia, Japan and South Korea began embracing their Buddhist heritage as they recovered in the decades following the end of the Second World War, as did a number of former members of the Soviet Union after the Cold War.⁹ Today, 97 percent of the world's Buddhist population lives in the Asian continent, and a number of countries such as Bhutan, Myanmar, Thailand, and Sri Lanka conceive of Buddhism as intrinsic to their national values and identity.¹⁰

It is within this context that one can understand the efforts of the Indian government at incorporating Buddhist heritage in order to form a basis for further diplomatic, economic, cultural, and strategic associations within its foreign policy. The established transnational network for Buddhism, and the important role played by the faith in the lives of millions across the world, is what allows it to possess potential for Indian foreign policy. The pan-Asian presence of the religion and its importance for national identities in the region, coupled with its image as a peaceful religion makes it ideal for soft

power diplomacy, with its focus on non-coercive power.

WHY INDIA?

Despite the fact that it is host to a relatively small population of Buddhists in terms of proportion, India is in a position to claim legitimacy in its promotion of Buddhist diplomacy for a number of reasons. First, the Buddhist faith originated in India, therefore granting it singular historical legitimacy. Second, India has numerous sites of importance to the Buddhist faith, such as Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, and Nalanda. Third, India has nurtured an image of being a protector of the persecuted because of the presence of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan parliament-in-exile in the city of Dharamshala following their failed insurrection against China.¹¹ In addition to ties with Tibetan Buddhism, historical links to Theravada Buddhism means that India is in a good position to further relations with other Buddhist countries and create conversation between multiple streams of this faith.

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 *dharmavijaya* or conquest through *Dharma*.¹² Deepening ties with Asian nations on the basis of Buddhism could potentially feed into larger policy objectives of the government, namely, the 'Neighbourhood First' policy, and the 'Act East' policy.

AVENUES OF DEPLOYMENT OF BUDDHIST HERITAGE

Symbolic Gestures

At the most basic level, Prime Minister Modi has made it a point to make Buddhism a regular feature of his diplomatic visits. In speeches made on official international visits such as to Sri Lanka and China, among others, Modi has made a conscious effort to emphasise shared Buddhist heritage. Additionally, on trips to foreign countries, the prime minister reserves one day for visits to Buddhist temples wherever possible. Modi has often spoken at a number of occasions domestically, where he has hailed the importance of the Buddhist faith for the development of both India and the world.¹³

The Dalai Lama and Competition with China

As in most other areas of political significance, India has found competition from China in the realm of Buddhist diplomacy. Even though China may be the strongest country in Asia in terms of economy and military, the projection of its Buddhist heritage feeds into its desire of furthering its influence over cultural life in Asia. This can also be seen in how China is using the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to further its politico-economic reach in the continent.

China's attempts at popularisation and projection of Buddhism are somewhat at odds with the avowedly godless nature of the Communist Party and the Chinese state. It is also anathema to China's persecution of Buddhists during the Cultural Revolution. However, in recognition of the

aforementioned potential that the religion holds in the area of diplomacy, it has made it a crucial part of its soft power strategy for the continent. The Chinese state promotes the religion on the grounds of its historical association, and the fact that it also possesses the largest Buddhist population of any country in the world.

The most prominent manifestation of India and China's rivalry in the sphere of Buddhist diplomacy relates to the issue of the Dalai Lama. The presence of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile in Dharamshala in North India has bolstered India's image in the global Buddhist community. However, given that the Chinese state regards the Dalai Lama and his followers to be of an "anti-China splittist nature" that threatens Chinese sovereignty, this has been a source of contention between the two countries.¹⁴ In 2011 for example, India hosted the Global Buddhist Congregation to mark the 2,600th anniversary of the Buddha's enlightenment. The event was the first major Buddhist conference held by India in over 50 years, and therefore of crucial importance for India's Buddhist diplomacy efforts. The Dalai Lama's participation in the event was objected to strongly by the Chinese, who cancelled border talks with India that were scheduled for the same month.¹⁵

Two similar incidents occurred early in 2017 as well. In March, the Dalai Lama was invited to inaugurate a seminar on 'Buddhism in the 21st Century' in Rajgir, Bihar. This act was condemned by the Chinese state who urged India to "respect China's core concerns and avoid China-India relations from being further disrupted and undermined".¹⁶ In April,

when the Dalai Lama visited Tawang, an important site for Buddhists as it was where the sixth Dalai Lama was born,¹⁷ his visit became a cause for concern for the Chinese, as many saw it affecting the issue of the Dalai Lama's reincarnation. The Chinese government, as per their 2007 State Administration for Religious Affairs regulations, has granted to itself the power of approving the next Dalai Lama (in a similar manner to what they had done to the Panchen Lama), thereby ignoring the choice of the present Dalai Lama and further strengthening their control over Tibetan Buddhism.¹⁸

Religious Tourism

The popular practice of religious tourism has been identified as an avenue of expansion that holds great promise. Though India is currently home to seven of the eight most significant Buddhist sites in the world, it receives less than one percent of global Buddhist tourism. South East Asian nations such as Thailand and Indonesia were the prime recipients of such tourism.¹⁹

To remedy this and further project the importance of India in the Buddhist world, the Ministry of Tourism is promoting a number of tourist circuits that transgress national borders. A press release from the Ministry of Culture in March 2015 noted the identification of a Buddhist tourist circuit that would involve visits to various sites in Nepal, such as Lumbini and Kapilavastu.²⁰ On a larger and more ambitious scale, the joint statement released following the BIMSTEC Leaders' Retreat in 2016 contained within it provisions for the organisation of a Buddhist circuit within the region.²¹

Academic Initiatives

As mentioned earlier, the revival of Buddhism was buoyed by the international conferences organised and councils convened that facilitated interaction between members across sectarian and national boundaries. To capitalise on this trend, a number of conferences that draw global audiences are organised, such as the previously mentioned 'Buddhism in the 21st Century' conference that took place at Rajgir in 2017. In October 2016, the '5th International Buddhist Conclave' was organised in Varanasi by the Ministry of Tourism, which was attended by over 240 delegates from 39 countries.²² The agenda for the conclave included business meetings between tour international and domestic tour operators, giving further impetus to the proposed tourist circuits.²³ In 2015, the 'Hindu-Buddhist Initiative on Conflict Avoidance' was organised by the Vivekananda International Foundation and the Tokyo Foundation in Bodh Gaya, and inaugurated by Prime Minister Modi himself.²⁴ This conference was of particular importance because of the emphasis laid on the relationship shared by Hinduism and Buddhism, which was projected as one of mutual benefit and growth instead of one of antagonism.

The most important project in the domain of academia to have been undertaken is that of the Nalanda University, begun by the previous UPA government and continued by the incumbent. The launch of the university was a pan-Asian initiative that was funded by numerous countries and envisioned, in the words of Ambassador P. Stobdan, as "the

centre-piece 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."²⁵ The establishment of a successful, world-class research institution would go a long way in placing India at the helm of the world Buddhist order, and improving India's stature in the Buddhist academic community. However, with domestic politics and inefficiency hobbling the project, this does not seem likely to be opened any time soon. Despite construction of the 455-acre campus having been slated to begin in 2012, as late as 2016, not even a foundation stone had been laid.²⁶ Further, the academic programmes that are being conducted out of a temporary campus have been plagued by political pressures on professors who were offering courses that were deemed 'problematic'.²⁷ One of the most glaring shortcomings in the university establishment is the lack of involvement of the Dalai Lama, whose presence in such a project would have been assumed to be certain.

Evidently, though this is a much discussed project with a significant amount of international investment, the lack of full-time faculty and proper infrastructure has plagued any hope of successful revival of the ancient centre of learning. China, meanwhile, saw an opportunity for itself and launched its own Nalanda University, also known as the Nanhai Buddhist College, in its Hainan Province. Academic sessions here began in 2017, with 220 students set to enrol, and with partnerships with Buddhist centres in Sri Lanka, Nepal, Thailand and Cambodia.²⁸

CONCLUSION

Theoretically speaking, the variety of India's soft power diplomacy has expanded the scope of soft power rhetoric, by allowing for shared cultural development instead of the export of cultural products. However, in the realm of practical outputs the Indian government is found wanting when it comes to Buddhist diplomacy. Ambassador P. Stobdan said in an interview that "Buddhism was India's ancient geopolitical tool that could still be employed to meet the challenges of the new millennium."²⁹ While there has been a definite acknowledgement of this fact in government rhetoric, the effort has not been put in to truly capitalise on this.

One aspect in which the Indian government has been decisive is in standing its ground against China's demands in 2017 regarding the Dalai Lama. This however, is perhaps the easiest of areas for decisive action to be taken for it is short-term in nature and requires little sustained effort on the part of the government. The most important move to be made with respect to the Dalai Lama would be to involve him closely with the development of the Nalanda University, though there is no indication that this will happen. What will be crucial in the coming years is India's response to the Chinese appointment of the next Dalai Lama, given that a great deal of authority is derived from the presence of the current Dalai Lama.

The Modi government must move beyond mere tokenism – visiting temples and Buddhist shrines on official tours can take one only so far. What India has in its favour at the

moment is an abundance of resources by way of pilgrimage sites, the presence of the Dalai Lama, and international goodwill, as well as the right intentions. In terms of initiatives on the international level, the government must also ensure that it does not direct its efforts solely at Tibetan Buddhism, and make directed attempts at promoting connections with other Buddhist schools of thought. Effective revitalisation of the Nalanda University project and encouragement of Buddhist studies in well-established universities across the country must take place, to ensure that a diverse variety of thought that goes beyond just Tibetan Buddhism is brought in and that it is not only the duty on the Nalanda project to produce Buddhist scholarship. The study of ancient languages like Pali in which a number of Buddhist texts have been written would also be necessary for the holistic development of Buddhist academia. Entire schools of Buddhist thought, such as Nagarjuna Buddhism, remain largely unexplored in academic study, further expanding the scope for research to be encouraged and funded.

The promotion of Buddhist tourism reminiscent of the 'Incredible India' campaign is required to popularise India's association with the faith internationally. In addition to advertisement, proper management of tourist sites is a must. Inspiration for this can be taken from the effective management of the Kumbh Mela, which due to its successful organisation became the subject of a Harvard Business Review case study in 2013.³⁰

Having displayed adequate intent to bolster India's position in the Buddhist world,

the present government faces the crucial challenge of effective execution. This would go a long way in countering the rise of China, strengthening its relations with Asian countries, and helping it further down the path of its regional and global power ambitions. [ORF](#)

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