

Enhancing India's soft power through the prism of Buddhism

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May 12, 2024

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India's cultural diplomacy is taking centre-stage, with Buddhism emerging as a key tool in shaping global perceptions and enhancing the country's soft power. India has been strategically leveraging its rich Buddhist heritage to strengthen ties, particularly with South and Southeast Asian nations, and counter China's growing influence. By emphasising shared values and diversity, India aims to not only deepen diplomatic and economic relations but also position itself as a beacon of peace and stability in the region. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, India's nuanced approach underscores the importance of building trust and solidifying its role in Asia, specifically South and Southeast Asia.



A sculpture of the head of Gautam Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, on display at the gallery. The gallery is curated by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). Most of the objects retrieved are through the ministry of external affairs and other law enforcement agencies and are stored at the ASI's central antiquity collection (CAC) or other authorities. (Biplov Bhuyan / HT Photo)

In the realm of international relations, the concept of soft power has emerged as a potent tool for countries to wield influence and shape perceptions without resorting to coercive tactics. This is often referred to as soft hegemony, a concept used by western countries, especially the United States, to influence other cultures by subtly promoting their ideas and values through popular trends, particularly targeting the younger generation. Buddhism's

broad influence in Asia, combined with its core principle of advocating peaceful co-existence, positions it favourably for leveraging soft power in diplomatic endeavours. Scholar Arijit Mazumdar argues that Buddhism serves as a powerful symbol of India's peaceful and tolerant ethos, resonating with the predominantly Buddhist populations of Southeast Asia. India's promotion of Buddhist diplomacy is bolstered by historical roots, with Buddhism originating there, and the presence of significant sites like Bodh Gaya. Additionally, India's support for the Dalai Lama and Tibetan refugees enhances its image as a champion of the oppressed, contributing to its legitimacy in promoting Buddhist values globally. The country's foreign policy emphasises a non-military approach, including the Panchsheel Initiative and the Panchamrit Principles. One crucial aspect is Sanskriti evam Sabhyata, highlighting India's cultural connections with other nations to bolster its soft power strategy.

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The historical intertwining of Indian and Asian cultures through Buddhism provides a strong foundation for fostering mutual understanding and cooperation. The current government has fortified economic, cultural, and educational endeavours by prioritising India's Buddhist Legacy, exemplified by a \$15 million grant allocation aimed at fostering Buddhist relations with Sri Lanka in 2020 during the Virtual Bilateral Summit in September 2020. The Indian government has also provided an additional sum of ₹150 million to Sri Lanka to build houses in the Buddhist sacred town of the country. Prime Minister (PM) Modi's visit to Kyoto over Tokyo for his inaugural 2014 visit to Japan, followed by his meeting with then PM Shinzo Abe at To-ji temple, underscored India and Japan's shared Buddhist Heritage. Abe's portrayal of Buddhism as a binding "sutra" further accentuated their profound civilizational tie. India's stance on Buddhism also carries geopolitical implications, particularly in its rivalry with China. The presence of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan refugees in India underscores India's association with Tibetan Buddhism, which contrasts with China's efforts to assert control over Tibetan religious and cultural heritage.

By leveraging its connection to Buddhism, India aims to bolster its soft power and counter China's influence in the continent. The choice of Buddhism as a focal point for cultural diplomacy is further reinforced by the prevalence of the Theravada school of Buddhism in Southeast Asia, which has historical ties to India. Unlike the Mahayana school, which reflects Chinese influence, the Theravada tradition strengthens India's cultural bonds with the region, as evidenced by India's efforts to restore significant Buddhist monuments in countries like Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia.

The promotion of Buddhist tourism, akin to India's successful 'Incredible India' campaign, holds promise as a means of popularizing India's association with the faith on the global stage. Bodh Gaya's tourist season for 2023-24 commenced energetically, drawing over 76,000 individuals, comprising both domestic and international visitors.

Furthermore, in the field of academia, steps have been taken to revive Asian culture and foster unity. The revival of Nalanda University stands as India's paramount academic initiative, envisioned as a pan-Asian collaboration. Supported by multiple nations, it aims to elevate India's stature in Buddhism and academia, serving as a premier research hub. Under the scheme of Mera Gaon Meri Dharohar, financial assistance of Rs. 30 lakh per year is provided, which can further be increased to 1 crore to voluntary Buddhist/Tibetan organisations, including monasteries, involved in the propagation and scientific development of Buddhist and Tibetan culture.

The strategic deployment of Buddhism as a cornerstone of India's soft power diplomacy reflects a multifaceted approach aimed at bolstering its global influence and countering regional rivals. By leveraging historical, cultural, and religious ties, India seeks to foster mutual understanding, cooperation, and goodwill among nations. Through initiatives such as the promotion of Buddhist tourism and the revival of Nalanda University, India endeavours to assert its leadership in the realm of academia while simultaneously strengthening its cultural and diplomatic foothold. As the nexus between Buddhism, diplomacy, and geopolitics continues to evolve, India's commitment to nurturing its Buddhist legacy underscores its aspirations for greater regional and international prominence in the 21st century.

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