

BUDDHISM: INDIA'S SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY

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1. Introduction

Looking at the nature of religiosity in the international politics especially the dichotomy of western v/s non-western ideology based on the 'securitization thesis' (Heywood, 2014, p.195), religion appears as dysfunctional and destructive entity in some cases. However, on its positive aspect, religion has strong and constructive potentials in generating "a powerful sense of social solidarity, connecting people to one another at a thick or deep level, as opposed to the thin connectedness that is conventional in modern societies" (Ibid, p.197). Significantly, religion as a cultural soft power has optimum capability to maintain healthy relations with the other states. Soft power is considered as one of the crucial means to ensure the accomplishment of desired objectives/interests without applying force/hard power. According to Joseph Nye, (2004, p.5) "this soft power - getting others to want the outcomes that you want - co-opts people rather than coerces them." In other words, soft power as "the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment" (Nye 2008, p.94). He emphasized three major sources of soft power; culture, political values and foreign policy, through which host country set the priorities of its foreign policy towards other nations. While interpreting America's foreign policy, he integrated culture as a mode of soft power that indicates the ability to manipulate the other state's behaviour. Therefore, soft power is an ability to upsurge the requisite conduct and renovate it into the outcomes (Nye 2004, p.5). Further, Nye (1990, p.167) said, "if a state can make its power seem legitimate in the eyes of others, it will encounter less resistance to its wishes, if its culture and ideology are attractive, others will more willingly follow." Moreover, Gallarotti (2011) stated that soft power fetching significant and the useful power in world affairs, which depicted as the prerequisite to target to willingly do what soft state would want them to do, therefore, there is minimum frictions and clashes of interest in the procedure of soft power.

In fact, globalisation has brought immense shifts in the states approaches towards

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the external affairs. So, the impact of globalisation also did not spare the religion. It has disseminated the religious practices across the border, through which the people of various states came to know about the religious and cultural beliefs of numerous states, and even they occasionally celebrate various festivals and commemorations of other religions. Significantly, the Diaspora plays crucial role in connecting these people and their religions and cultures. As mentioned by Steiner (2011, p.1), Casanova (1994) labelled this practice as 'Religious De-privatisation' which complements the idea of soft power, in which religion also attracts the nations towards the host nations without any threat and monetary sources. Therefore, by prolonging Nye's concept of soft power, Haynes (2007) analysed that the religion affects international relations theory and obliging to sustain peaceful role of power in world politics. In fact, in the context of religion as soft power, it has argued that religious soft power is a variable that should not be overlooked. However, this is not to suggest that religious soft power is always the most influential factor in foreign policy. But it does underline how in each of the regional countries, domestic structures and processes throw up politically influential religious actors that seek to influence international outcomes, although they are by no means guaranteed success. They are, however, likely to be most successful when religious soft power works together with 'secular' hard power (Haynes, 2014, pp.345-346).

Buddhist Diplomacy in South Asia

India has been globally recognized for its great civilization and glorious religious culture. Historically, India also has civilizational bonds with Iran, Rome, South East Asian countries and others in the world from very long time. As a result, several foreign travelers, traders and religious immigrants had been attracted towards India. In the Southeast Asian countries, the existence of the Indian culture and religions is apparent; for example, Angkor Wat temple in Cambodia, Worship place or Pagodas in Myanmar, Laos and Thailand and also the existence of various Sanskrit words in Indonesian language are evident of the Indian religious culture (Ramachandran, 2007). Among others, India has two foremost religions especially Hinduism and Buddhism that enhanced India's global image. These two adorable religions contain Indian civilizational values, languages, architectures, art and culture that have been helpful to produce harmonious relations amongst Asian countries. In this context, the Southeast Asian countries are recognized as India's "civilizational neighbors" (Purushothamam, 2010). India's soft power includes culture, religion, cinema-music-dance, education-literature, yoga, diaspora, ayurveda, sports-IPL, cuisines, IT-software etc. Therefore, looking at these cultural links and by learning the significance of India's soft power potentials, the government of India pondered on taking forward religious diplomacy. In fact, despite India being the Hindu majority nation, government failed in pushing Hinduism

forward as a means of soft power in its foreign policy. However, government of the day conceived the idea of Buddhism as a means of its soft power foreign policy aiming to procure its national interests with the Buddhist countries in and beyond the South Asian region. Earlier, the governments in India marginalized the significance of Buddhism in domestic politics and the international domain as well.

India is the land of Buddha and it has constructive engagement with the Buddhist world. The Buddhist monks and researchers have transformed Buddhist philosophy from India to China, Japan and many other Southeast Asian countries. Buddhist universities offered healthy platform for the dissemination of Buddhist ideas in Asia and beyond. Buddhism emerged globally as an influential religion that believes righteous tenants such as Equality, Liberty, Justice, peace, non-violence, tolerance and humanism. These values endorse cultural and civilizational ties among Asian countries including India. According to Amartya Sen (2005, p.13), "Buddhism should be given 'considerable credit' for their commitment to discussion and dialogue as a means of social progress and suggests that this is the reason India has remained a robust, non-western democracy." Buddhism is closely associated with national identity and cultural heritage of Indian civilization that presents richness of Indian culture. Buddhism as a religious diplomacy deeply projects India's soft power especially in South and Southeast Asian countries. About 97 percent of the world's Buddhist population lives in Asian continent, but India has just about 0.7 percent Buddhist followers of the total population of India.

The Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi visited several Asian countries and projected Buddhism as the strength of Indian culture there. He stated that teachings of Buddha have inspired various states to encourage human's moral development and peaceful foundation of nation building aiming to advance cultural or civilizational bridges across Asia. Modi stated that the "21st century will be Asia's century... Without Buddha this century cannot be Asia's century" (Aurora, 2015). Accordingly, Modi demonstrated Buddhism as India's adorable way to connect Asia on a religious parameter. In fact, Modi believes in Hinduism, a majoritarian religion in India, but in outside world, he glorifies the ideals of Buddhism as India's strength to accomplish the foreign policy objectives, especially from the Buddhist countries. During his address at Mahabodhi temple in 2015, Modi presented Buddha as an Indian diplomat, and Buddhism as a tool of diplomacy to establish cultural or religious connectivity.

Modi has accentuated on Buddhist values, culture or beliefs in his speeches during his visits in various Buddhist countries and tried to portrait India as richest Buddhist inheritance. By and large, Modi endorses Buddhist values for resolving wars and conflicts

and tried to establish world peace by upholding the teaching of Lord Buddha. So, after taking oath as Prime Minister of India in 2014, Modi initially visited Buddhist South Asian countries to connect Buddhist heritage in view of building strong relationship. Bhutan, which is recognized for being deeply associated with Buddhist religious philosophy, was the first country in India's neighbourhood which Modi visited. According to historical evidence, Buddhism was said to be taken from India to Bhutan by the Indian saint, Swami Padmasambhava at 8th century (Buddhism, 2022). Consequently, Buddhism developed constructive bond between India and Bhutan as both the countries have strong religious linkages and bilateral relationship. It is believed that "with India's centrality to Buddhist thought, Bhutan considers the shared spiritual heritage between the two states as an unchanging constant in their old age-relationship and compliments India for their greatest gifts of Buddhism to its people" (Sharma, 2020). Therefore, Modi believed Bhutan as a 'natural choice' for his first visit outside of India to extend India's soft power diplomacy by focusing largely on rich religious, cultural or spiritual connections. Bhutan's Foreign Minister Tandi Doraji believed Buddhism as significant factor to maintain Bhutan and India's relationship. In this context, therefore, he said, "The close bonds of friendship we enjoy today, have roots in our deep connection" (Buddhism, 2022).

Subsequently, during his first visit to Nepal in August 2014, Modi addressed the members of constituent assembly of Nepal stating that how Buddhism plays remarkable role to uphold the productive relations between India and Nepal, and he further urged to shift the track from 'Yuddha' (War) to the track of 'Buddha'. Further, in view of consolidating India-Nepal engagement and keeping India's national interests in tact, Modi paid his fifth official visit to Nepal and first of its kind to Lumbini on May 16, 2022 on the auspicious occasion of Buddha Purnima. Along with the Prime Minister of Nepal, Modi visited the Mayadevi temple which is supposed to be the birth place of Lord Buddha and attended prayers which were conducted as per Buddhist rituals. He also visited historical Ashokan Pillar and also watered the holy Bodhi tree there. Both the Prime Ministers participated in the 'Shilanyas' ceremony aiming for the construction of the India International Centre for Buddhist Culture and Heritage at a plot in Lumbini. The plot is belonged to the International Buddhist Confederation (IBC) based in New Delhi. Besides, after the 'Shilanyas', both the Prime Ministers also "unveiled a model of the Buddhist centre, which is envisaged as a Net-Zero compliant world-class facility that would house prayer halls, meditation centre, library, exhibition hall, cafeteria and other amenities and would be open to Buddhist pilgrims and tourists from around the world" (MEA, 2022).

Modi's visit to Lumbini aimed at pushing of soft power to the centre stage of Indo-

Nepal relations. In fact, the other countries like China, US, Canada, France, Germany and Thailand already, almost a decade earlier, have built their cultural centres in Lumbini as an instrument of promoting Buddhist philosophy. Factually, China had offered to build Lumbini as a world peace centre at a cost of three billion dollars. Therefore, looking at China's evident interests in Lumbini, Modi-led India also realised the significance of soft power by building a one billion costs Buddhist Cultural Centre there which would take three years for its completion. This has been India's first attempt to build strong cultural linkages with Nepal's Buddhist Heritage sites. Furthermore, India's Ministry of Tourism has collaborated with Nepal for the building of a Transnational Buddhist tourist Circuit to trace the footsteps of Buddha that beginning from Lumbini to Kushinagar as its destination (Ghimire & Divya, 2022, pp.1-2). Both the governments also signed a MoU which includes the B. R. Ambedkar Chair for Buddhist Studies in Lumbini Buddhist University. During his presence in Lumbini, Modi expressed that the two countries of "Buddha's birth and enlightenment together have an obligation to work for the entire humanity," and also highlighted the relations between two countries "as ancient as the ocean and as stable as the Himalayas." By and large, Modi's visit to Lumbini has envisaged "a successful deployment of India's Soft Power to repair bilateral ties that were under stress" (Road to Kathmandu, 2022, p.6). His visit was "to convey that the shared culture between India and Nepal is far more valuable than the money that China has been pouring into the birthplace of the Buddha," and it has also stated that "if the Modi government's early reliance on a Hindu connect to win influence in Nepal did not have the desired effect, the carefully chosen date and destination of Modi's fifth visit to Nepal...was a push to make up for lost time and opportunity with another shared religion" (Ibid).

Furthermore, China's cultural presence in Lumbini near the Indian border compelled India to think differently from its traditional outlook towards Nepal. Therefore, though India made delayed efforts through Buddhist Cultural Circuit, New Delhi is looking for claiming of some space in Nepal by deploying its soft power. Modi's 'Cultural Visit' to Nepal, as many believed, was "India's late awakening from a deep diplomatic slumber", as "Delhi has been indifferent to the deep inroads that China has been taking in Nepal" (Ghimire, 2022, p.6). The major problem in bilateral relationship has been India's failure in completing bilaterally agreed infrastructural projects in Nepal. However, at present both the countries looking forward for the improvised bilateral relations. Modi's effective efforts in repairing the damages in bilateral ties are seemingly commendable. Significantly, Buddhism emerged as the main shared religion, over others, for this development. However, it has critically opined

that Modi's visit to Nepal may offer India a cultural space, but it does not provide any certainty or guarantee that New Delhi would be able to push back its deeply entrenched competitors like China and other western powers in Nepal (Ibid).

India and Sri Lanka are also connected by a chain of Buddhism. Buddhism is immensely flourished in Sri Lanka as compare to India. And consequently, by learning the significance of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, among its neighbours, India has strategically improved its bilateral relationship with Sri Lanka also. During his official visit to Sri Lanka in 2015, while delivering his speech at the platform of Colombo's 'Mahabodhi Society of Sri Lanka', Modi emphasized that 'Buddha unites us all'. This visit aimed at building strong historical and religious connections between two countries and the visit was a significant initiative towards strengthening India's religious soft power policy. Subsequently, after this visit, Modi smartly adopted Buddhist way as a strategic idea to move further for healthy engagement with Sri Lanka. However, China again made India uncomfortably loaded with the security concerns in Sri Lanka. Given its geo-political and strategic significance, China, at greater extent, has brought Sri Lanka under its sphere of influence in South Asia that created multiple hurdles and posed challenges to India's interests in South Asia and Indian Ocean. As a result, China's presence in the region has also hampered congeniality of India-Sri Lanka relations. Therefore, to improve bilateral relationship between India and Sri Lanka, Modi government believed in the method of religious diplomacy among others. However, during the prevailing economic and humanitarian crises in Sri Lanka, India has emerged as the most trustworthy partner in providing required multifaceted assistance to Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka also learnt the significance of the neighbours like India during the prevailing difficulties. Earlier, during a virtual bilateral summit between Narendra Modi and Mahinda Rajapaksa (Former President) which was held on September 26, 2020, both the leaders urged to strengthen bilateral relationship by means of Buddhism among others. In view of promoting healthy cultural connect between both the countries, Modi announced US\$15 million for the enhancement of Buddhist connections, cooperation and engagement between them. Furthermore, in view of cementing cultural ties, the airport of Kushinagar (Uttar Pradesh) was acknowledged as transnational airport by the Indian union cabinet on June 24, 2020, in which Bhutan, Cambodia, Japan, Laos, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Republic of Korea, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam's diplomats attended inauguration ceremony of Kushinagar airport. The Sri Lankan Youth and Sports Minister Namal Rajapaksa attended this function with the Sri Lankan aircraft mostly winged for Buddhist Monks. Significantly, this inauguration ceremony renewed the relationship between India and Sri Lanka by the Buddhist soft diplomacy, which has been held helpful to move towards the Atmanirbhar

Bharat. Modi believed that India's project of Atmanirbhar Bharat (Self Dependent India) was majorly influenced by the ideals of Buddha. Linking with this, he said, "when a person is himself enlightened, he gives light to the entire world" (Roche, 2021).

Buddhism and Act East Policy

Buddhism significantly became an integral part of India's Act East Policy that aiming to re-invigorate strategic connectivity with the Asian Buddhist countries. "By doing this, India is not just building ties with East Asian countries, but sending out a message to the world about its cultural power, and ability to fulfil commitments with allies by respecting and supporting their faiths" (Venugopal, 2022). In this direction, beyond South Asia, Buddhism as a soft power has always been very significant element in flourishing Indo-Japan friendship. Modi's first official visit, beyond South Asia, to Buddhist country was Japan. In September 2014, along with the then Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Modi formally visited very famous Buddhist Toji Temple of Kyoto and also visited the 'University of the Sacred Heart, Tokyo'. While addressing the students gathering in this university, Modi said that India was the place of Lord Buddha, who survived for peace, and disseminated the philosophy of peace around the world. Further, Modi lectured India-Japan sixth SAMVAD conference on December 21, 2020 and anticipated accessibility to the digital library of traditional to modern Buddhist literature in multiple translated versions intending for the Buddhist research scholars. In this context, Modi stated, "this forum has done great work to ensure promote the ideas and ideals of Lord Buddha, especially among the youth" (India-Japan SAMVAD conference, 2020). In fact, on strongly consolidated cultural/religious ties between two countries, Japanese philosopher Hajima Nakamura stated, "without Indian influence, Japanese culture could not be what it is today" (Chandra & Sahay, 2020, p.38).

Furthermore, Vietnam is also most significant country in terms of connectivity and India's Act East Policy and even Vietnam has also reaffirmed its support to India's role in regional and international platforms. During his visit to Vietnam, Modi projected Buddhist way as a solution to establish world peace and harmony among people throughout his visit to Hanoi on September 3, 2016. Positively responding India's cultural connect, Vietnam also have facilitated the Indian Cultural Centre in Hanoi. Besides, upgrading 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership', among others, for cementing cultural connectivity, India also pledged to grant annual scholarship to Vietnamese students for further Masters/Doctoral courses on innovative Buddhist educations for the enhancement of the Buddhist teachings, by which Vietnamese students would avail more knowledge of Buddhist principles that would be accommodating to generate religious or educational relationships between India and Vietnam (Chaudhury, 2016). India also provided 'Sangh Dana' (donation) to Sri Lankan,

Japanese and Vietnamese Buddhist monks, and invited Vietnamese Buddhist monks to visit India. Modi is the first prime minister who reached Pagoda temple of Vietnam (a Buddhist worship spot) aiming at establishing friendly relations.

Besides, Mongolia has also emerged as one of the states on the radar of India's Buddhist diplomacy. Earlier, due to geopolitical constraints, New Delhi remained inactive in reaching towards Mongolia, which has been sandwiched between China and Russia. As a result, Mongolia has always looked at India as its spiritual neighbour because of Buddhism. Significantly, with the leadership change and a pragmatic foreign policy approach, Modi became the first Prime Minister of India who visited Mongolia in May, 2015 and gifted Bodhi Tree (sapling) to the chief abbot Hamba Lama of the Gandan monastery in Ulaanbaatar. Moreover, in June, 2022, Indian Union Minister, Kiren Rijju visited Mongolia with four holy relics of Buddha for the exposition as a part of celebrations of Buddha Purnima in Mongolia. The Relics of Buddha have great importance in Buddhism as they are believed to be the most scared for the Buddhist temples. Therefore, this development exhibits that by giving Buddha's relics to Mongolia (having more than 50 percent of Buddhist population), India has also made efforts to connect by means of soft power. In fact, India's Buddhist outreach to Mongolia aimed at strengthening New Delhi's position to compete with China and also to counter China's influence in its neighbourhood.

Buddhist Tourism

Tourism has been the integral part of the economy of every country. Therefore, in view of boosting economy, the governments make optimum efforts to promote tourism industry. India also has not stayed behind. Among others, religious tourism has been emerged as one of the significant aspects of Indian tourist industry. As he assumed office, Modi has focused much on it by unprecedented way. He significantly learnt the constructive outcomes of the application of religious tourism in its foreign policy. Therefore, among others, the Modi administration advantageously sponsored Buddhist tourism to explore the significance of Buddhism, in view of extending commercial trade and business. According to Modi, India is incomplete in the absence of Buddhist philosophy, so to disseminate Buddhist values and morals, he supported Buddhist tours and travels that aiming to enhance Indian economic growth. By focusing on cultural tourism, according to Raja Mohan (2015, p.182), India has believed "tourism as an important means to promote economic growth and create jobs. Religious tourism could be the basis for rapid economic growth on both sides." India has around eight momentous tourist places related to Buddhism. However, most significantly, Bodhgaya (Bihar), headquarter of Buddhism, is very famous around the world. This place is known for Buddha's Enlightenment, and considered as significant Buddhist tourist spot in

the world. The Mahabodhi temple has developed appropriate traveller's facilities for the Buddhist tourist in view of enhancing Buddhist tourism and the larger connectivity among Buddhist states. Besides, Sarnath and Kushinagar (Uttar Pradesh) are well known for Buddha's first Sermon and Mahaparinirvana (last breath) respectively. In fact, India has recently launched campaign to explore Buddhist tourism as trans-state venture to portrait its image as vital terminus of Buddhism in the world that demonstrates as an incredible effort of the Modi administration in an explicit term of soft power. In this context, Mohan (2015, pp.182-183) said, "In his outreach to the leaders in the subcontinent and Asia - from Nepal to Japan and China to Myanmar - Modi has projected Buddhism as one of India's bridges to these nations...the PM has put Buddhism at the heart of India's vigorous diplomacy." Thus, Buddhist philosophy and tourism have been contributing constructively for forming India's cordial relations with the Buddhist nations. In other words, by giving its global and scientific outlook, Buddhism has potentially emerged as a crucial religion to bind the Buddhist people around the world. As a result, the states appear in a mutual bond of cooperation and peaceful approach towards each other abiding by the principles of Buddhism. However, it has reported that despite seven major Buddhist tourist sites, India receives very few Buddhist tourists as compared to the other South-East Asian Buddhist countries like Thailand and Indonesia. Therefore, to increase Buddhist tourism, India needs to ponder constructively.

China's Cultural Challenge

China adequately focused on Buddhism to endorse its Buddhist diplomacy and played various cultural cards for achieving its national interest. By learning the significance of its 18 percent Buddhist population, China predominantly extended its soft power (Buddhist) diplomacy towards the Buddhist countries. It has believed that after the end of China's Cultural Revolution, Chinese government adopted "a new relatively tolerant attitude toward Chinese Buddhism" (Ramachandran, 2014). China consistently tried to portrait Buddhism as its peculiar cultural or religious asset that would be accommodating to begin its hegemonic status quo over cultural dimension of the Asian region. "China today boasts the richest collection of Buddhist heritage sites" (Parthasarathy, 2015).

Arguably, both India and China are strong powers in Asia and are engaged in applying cultural/religious calibre to influence international relations given their myriad national interests. Both are indulged in attracting the Asian countries by means of soft power diplomacy. In South Asia, China emerged as the toughest competitor of India in influencing its neighbours. So, India has been assuming antagonistic tactic in the direction of positioning Buddhist legacy to compete with China and aiming at giving religious and cultural gift to the

world. In fact, India often promotes its cultural leverages for improving its relations with other nations, and in the contemporary foreign affairs, Buddhism has been used as the communication strategy towards the Buddhist neighbours in South Asia and beyond. In this context, it has observed that "by reaffirming India's historical leadership of the Buddhist world and projecting its Buddhist links in the region, Delhi is evidently trying to counter efforts by China to extend its sphere of influence", and, in fact, Chinese President Jinping had proactively played "the Buddhist card" and Beijing has been continuing optimum efforts furthering its agenda through "the world fellowship of Buddhists" (The Buddhist Route, 2015). Factually, the Indo-China rivalry on the Buddhist legacy is not new, however, the growing China's might and aggressive posture in South and Southeast Asia have compelled India to look and act in this region. Therefore, government of India has been profoundly focusing on the Buddhist temples, philosophy, teachings and tourism in view of connecting with the world. In other words, India has been trying optimum efforts to disseminate its cultural heritage. As it strategically forecasted by the analysts, with the increasing soft power capabilities, India seems to be able to compete with China at the global platform. Even, despite China's major Buddhist population, India has not initiated Buddhist diplomacy towards China adequately and even vice versa because of traditional rivalry and competition. However, despite prolonged rivalry, China and India competition in executing Buddhist soft power policy is "constructive as it has resuscitated the great history of Sino-Indian Buddhist exchange that was interrupted in modern era" (Zhang, 2012).

Conclusion

Given Modi's efforts on execution of soft power diplomacy having minimal leverages, Bharat Karnad (2018, p.108) argued that "whether the prime minister likes it or not, hard power has been the only basis for achieving great power and even the Vishwa Guru status he hankers...for modern India, which has been still taking baby steps in great power politics, Modi would be better off having the Ashoka-on-the-make as model and act as Ashoka of the Buddhist persuasion." India's religious diplomacy has not resulted fruitful so far especially in South Asia. Modi personally acknowledges his beliefs in Hinduism. Unfortunately, he remained unsuccessful in providing due respect and recognition to Buddhism and also failed to integrating and disseminating Buddhist philosophy and principles in Indian society. Buddhist diplomacy towards Sri Lanka could not de-proximate Sri Lanka-China relations. Though India has been providing required assistance to Sri Lanka in its economic crisis, but the enamoured relationship between Sri Lanka and China is very overt. Recently, despite India's concerns, Sri Lanka permitted the entry of China's Yang Wang (YW) - 5 spy ship in its water. This development demonstrated that despite India's whole hearted assistance

and strategic inclination towards the Island country, Sri Lanka has no option other than to stay under the influence of China given legal agreement between them. Sri Lanka has been completely trapped in China's shrewd and strategic net. Moreover, China's influence in Nepal has also been widened. China entrenched its Buddhist cultural roots before India could do. Given this, India's pangs of Sri Lanka-China and Nepal-China proximity will be permanent as long as China dominates the influence on India's closed neighbours in South Asia. By and large, given China's Buddhist diplomacy seems more constructive and effective which marginalizes India's Buddhist diplomacy in South Asia and beyond especially in the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asian region.

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