



India's Buddhist Diplomacy: Redefining Soft Power in a Multipolar World

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Abstract : An international order is not exclusively material. Ideational aspects also form an important part of it, as argued by Robert Cox. Historically, different great powers have combined their military and economic strength with ideas, like Catholic Christianity for the Spanish empire, Islam for the Ottomans, the English language and legal institutions for the British empire and the American Dream along with democracy for the United States of America. In the current changing times, as American hegemony declines, a diverse plethora of powers are emerging, and also asserting themselves at the ideational level. In this regard, this article analyses India's Buddhist Diplomacy as another of this ideational pillar, arguing that it goes beyond soft power and in fact is a civilizational link with different Asian nations.

IndexTerms – India, Buddhism, Buddhist Diplomacy, Soft Power, Multipolarity

I. INTRODUCTION

There is much debate about whether the 21st century will get to witness a multipolar world order. The presumed unipolarity of the current international system, with the US at its sole hegemon, has been under question for a considerable time now. In the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR, it was assumed that US dominance of the international system, both materially or ideationally, would remain unchallenged. However, this was not the case, with several developments adding instability and unpredictability to the world. This includes larger geo-economic contests such as the rise of China in the international system, the security issues due to the rise of terrorism across the world, the return of inter-state armed conflicts such as those between Russia and Ukraine as well as Azerbaijan and Armenia, the economic disruptions of COVID 19 – all have raised serious questions about the tensions that are rife within the current international system. International systems are not solely created, sustained, and contested at the material level. Often, the genesis and destruction of international systems happens in a complex process that switches forth between ideational and material. According to Robert Cox, structures and frameworks in the world order can be best considered as a configuration of forces. Thus, any international system is created out of the interaction of three forms of forces – material capabilities, ideas, and institutions (Cox, 1981, pp. 135-136). Changes in the material also subsequently reflected in the ideational realm such as ideology, culture, and religion. Examples of these are plenty from history. The Ottoman empire, which apart from its gunpowder and janissaries, was as much supported through Islam. If the gold from Latin America propelled the material strength of the Spanish empire, Catholic Christianity was its ideational pillar. The Soviet Union similarly used to promote Communism, while maintaining links with various Communist Parties across the world. The British empire inadvertently ended up globalising the English language, along with sports such as cricket and football. The United States, with its global influence, dwarfs all of these with its global brand of products, Hollywood, TV shows, popular music – all propagating the American Dream.

With a growing economy, a significant military, and a large population, India's role has been increasing in the 21st century. With this, not only is India now economically and strategically more important, but is also now increasingly making an impact in the ideational front. The new five pillars of Indian foreign policy cultural aspects are samman (dignity), samvad (dialogue), samriddhi (prosperity), suraksha (security) and sanskriti evam sabhyata (cultural and civilizational linkages), which are all linked with India's broader economic and political goals (Mukherjee, 2019). Within the new five pillars framework of India's foreign policy, Buddhist Diplomacy thus lies within the sanskriti evam sabhyata (or culture and civilizational links) pillar, where the vision comprises of leveraging India's rich historical cultural links in a non-coercive manner (Kishwar, 2018, p.2). Thus, Buddhist Diplomacy is one of the avenues through which these ideas are being expressed. Considered both a religion and a philosophy, Buddhism originated in India and was spread around the world through voluntary means. This makes Buddhism an important cultural resource for India, given that India was its land of origin.

II. BUDDHISM: A BRIEF HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY

Buddhism came into being when Siddhartha Gautama renounced his life as a prince, found enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree and became the Buddha, meaning the Enlightened One. Preaching the Four Noble Truths, he founded a community of monastics as well as lay people, guiding them towards a quest for inner peace and social equality. Contrary to popular perceptions of being completely aloof from the material world and politics, Buddhism has always been involved in matters of war and peace, often in favour of the former against the latter. The first instance occurred during Buddha's time itself. One example is when King Pasenadi of Kosala had captured King Ajatashatru of Magadha, the Buddha himself persuaded the former to release the latter. Then in another time, the Buddha persuaded King Ajatashatru to not invade the Vajji Republic on the grounds that the Vajjians, if they were virtuous, would never be conquered and thus, the invasion was held off. However, the most significant development was when Emperor Ashoka, remorseful after his war against the Kingdom of Kalinga, adapted Buddhism as a state religion. Consequently, Ashoka not only spread the teachings of Buddha within the boundaries of his empire, but also sent missions to various nations abroad, giving genesis to Theravada Buddhist communities (Zhang, 2012, p.7-9). Despite these efforts, it took five hundred years after the Buddha's Nirvana for Buddhism to truly emerge as a world religion. Mahayana Buddhism began to emerge in India especially among the Indo-Greek kingdoms that extended to Central Asia. Consequently, Buddhism also began to travel along the Silk Road as Buddhist scholars and monks travelled alongside the trading caravans. The biggest result of this was the penetration of China, Korea, and Japan by Buddhism from flourishing Central Asian Buddhist centres such as Gandhar and Khotan (Conze, 1993, pp.49-51). Over the course of time Buddhism became a significant and culturally rooted system of beliefs and practices across a wide variety of Asia. With patronage and support, Buddhism propelled the creation of sophisticated art, aided in a cross-cultural generation of literature in multiple languages, birthed monasteries such as Nalanda and Udayapuri in India or Samye in Tibet where monks across Asia learned and discoursed together. In Southeast and East Asia, Buddhism either thrived as an independent religion or was practiced alongside other religions. Today, Buddhism is practiced across the world, with a significant number of followers being in the Global South. It is the majority religion in Cambodia, Thailand, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Mongolia. It is a culturally (and numerically) significant religion that is practised in hybridity with other faiths in China, Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam. There are cultural and architectural legacies of Buddhism in the remaining countries of Southeast Asia such as Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. Overall, Buddhism has had a vast historical and geographical sweep. This period of high tide was then followed by a phase of decline. In the medieval era, the rise of Islam wiped out Buddhism in some parts of Asia such as Afghanistan, and the modern day Central Asian republics. In India, the land of its origin, Hindu revival under Adi Shankaracharya occurred, and Buddhism was absorbed into Hinduism while the Buddha was reinterpreted as an avatar of Vishnu.

Throughout its history, Buddhism entered new nations and regions not to contest with the local religions or cultures as a rival claimant, but as a supplement. It did not demand full submission from people of non-Buddhist background. Thus, Buddhism intertwined seamlessly with Nat worship in current day Myanmar, with Bon religion in Tibet, with Shintoism in Japan, and with Confucianism and Taoism in China. Even in places like Sri Lanka and Thailand, where it formed the dominant religion, folk traditions were made part, rather than being destroyed (Kitagawa, 1962).

In the modern era, Buddhism had to contend with drastic change. With the arrival of European colonialism and imperialism, there were large scale changes to the economies, politics, and societies across the Buddhist world in Asia. The traditional modes of governance were disrupted as colonial exploitation also brought modern modes of travel and communication. Buddhism, which had become over-reliant on the support of the monarchy and aristocracy, found new political forces to contend with – scientific rationalism, nationalism, communism, Christianity, etc, often violently. This disestablishment transformed the relationship between the monastics and the lay communities just as when a new middle class was growing in Asia. This led to the creation of new wave of lay reformers and activists which attempted to revive Buddhism through activities like social reform, education, agitation for political rights, etc. In Sri Lanka and China, Buddhists responded to Christian missionaries and adopted their methods of using the printing press, education, and lay associations. Organizations such as the Soka Gakkai International and individual reformers such as BR Ambedkar rose to address different issues (Reynolds and Hallisey, 2005, p.1099). As anti-colonial movements arose in Asia, Buddhist revivalism also took form. In India, the Buddhist revival movement in its early stage coincided with the movement in Sri Lanka. Anagarika Dharmapala, the Sinhalese Buddhist reformer and moderniser, founded the Maha Bodhi Society in order to return the Maha Bodhi Temple at Bodhi Gaya to Buddhist control from a Shaivite sect that earlier had full control of the site. While the aggressive approach and the legal route failed, the same revivalist groups later lobbied and negotiated with political parties such as the Indian National Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha. At the Inter-Asian Conference of March 1947, Buddhist delegates from all the different Buddhist nations had combined to form an All-Asia Buddhist convention and lobbied Prime Minister Nehru regarding Buddhist control over the site. The later solution, brought through the Bihar Assembly, was to bring a joint committee, taking into account both Hindu and Buddhist joint spiritual heritage at the temple site (Trevithick, 2006, p.199). Thus, India's Buddhist Diplomacy predates independence, as it took place in the backdrop of various anti-colonialist movements as they were expected to later transition to independent rule. The attempts to revive Buddhism always had an internationalist bent towards it, wherein the focus was on transcending the differences across nations and sects. It's traditional pan-Asian presence coupled with its popular image as a peaceful religion has been key factors in India's new prioritization of Buddhism for diplomatic engagement (Kishwar, 2018, pp.3-4).

III. INDIA'S BUDDHIST DIPLOMACY: THE TWO MAJOR PHASES

There are two phases in India's Buddhist Diplomacy. The first phase, just after independence, was marked by the emphasis on Soft Power and Non-Alignment. It began on the eve of independence and lasted till the war with China in 1962, under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, although he was not the only personality to be involved. The second phase, which focusses on civilizational linkage, has been undertaken under Prime Minister Modi, although the process started earlier under the Manmohan Singh-led UPA government.

III.-A. FIRST PHASE: SOFT POWER AND NON-ALIGNMENT

Within the field of International Relations, one of the most prominent concepts to understand the influence in the ideational realm is soft power. According to Joseph Nye, soft power is the means for a country to obtain the required results not through threats of military force or economic sanction. Instead, the exercise in soft power involves attaining the necessary results by shaping the preferences of others by virtue of attractiveness of intangible assets. This can be many – culture, political values, institutions, policies, etc. that are perceived to be legitimate and carrying a certain moral authority. Soft power, thus, is co-optive and not coercive (Nye, 1995, pp. 5-7). The first scholar in International Relations to account for Buddhism as a form of soft power was none other than Nye himself. Writing in terms of Japan's soft power, Nye had pointed out popular culture was not the only source of soft power, traditional culture could also be very well providing the same, giving the example of Zen Buddhism and the martial arts (Nye, 1995, p. 86).

Buddhism has been a historical example of soft power too, and has actively played a role in creating broader affinities with India. India's influence and affinity reflects in Tibetan Buddhism in the style of the Tibetan script, the architecture of its monasteries, etc. Historical evidence confirms that Indian Buddhist monks played a significant role, working alongside their Tibetan students, to spread Buddhism (Huber, 2008, p. 44). In this process, debates were an important feature during the different stages of the spread of Buddhism in Tibet. One important example is the Great Debate in Samye Monastery, where Kamalashila the Indian Buddhist defeated the Chinese Moheyan, paving way for Emperor Trisong Detsen to choose Indian Buddhist monks in formalising Buddhism in Tibet. Alongside, other learned masters such as Padmasambhava and Atisha all played important roles which added up to ultimately create a more India-influenced Vajrayana Buddhism in Tibet which embedded itself within the existing local religious customs and culture. Thus Buddhism has been a historic example in soft power in that sense (Bahuguna, 2025).

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The 1956 celebrations also had a major impact on the relations between India and China, especially over Tibet. In the 1950s, as China took over and began to rule Tibet while attempting to transform it, an increasing number of Tibetans gradually began to arrive in India. The Dalai Lama, who had been invited by the Maha Bodhi Society, also attended the Buddha Jayanti celebrations as an important dignitary. He journeyed to Ajanta, Sarnath, Nalanda, and Bodhi Gaya. Despite the stated religious nature of his visit, it gradually assumed political dimensions as the Panchen Lama had not been invited without Chinese pressure (Huber, 2008, pp. 344-346). By 1959, the distrust between China and the Tibetan people had grown to a full rebellion. The uprisings in the region of Kham grew in popular support and reached Central Tibet and even Lhasa. The culmination of this was the 1959 uprising, in which the Chinese state cracked down on Tibet heavily. The Dalai Lama, fearing for his life, had no option but to seek asylum in India. This worsened the relations between India and China, which were already strained because of their underlying issues at the border, resulting in the India China war of 1962 and showed that soft power alone was not enough for Buddhist Diplomacy. For the next coming decades, while India did play host to the Tibetan government in exile, India's own active role in Buddhist Diplomacy was sidelined for many decades.

III.-B. SECOND PHASE: FROM SOFT POWER TO CIVILISATIONAL LINKAGE

The next stage in India's Buddhist Diplomacy took place much later in the twenty-first century in a complicated geopolitical and geo-economic context. India's post Nehru years were marked by domestic instability and a difficult security situation given that the 1962 war against China had been difficult. This was followed by another war, brought upon by Pakistan in 1965, and the untimely death of Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri. As a response, Indian foreign policy turned inward. Only after domestic politics had been stabilized that India was able to strengthen militarily, inflicting a heavy blow to Pakistan in the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation war, and then undertaking its nuclear project with the nuclear explosion test and integrated Sikkim into the Indian Union (Muni and Mishra, 2019, pp.115-116).

The twenty-first century brought forth a different era from the bipolar world of the Cold War. In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed, leaving the United States of America as the world's sole superpower. More and more nations embraced America's main political tenets such as democracy and free market. Scholars such as Francis Fukuyama argued that this was the "end of history" where all the possible economic and socio-political progress had been completed, and that democracy along with the free market were the best values. Yet, Fukuyama would turn out to be incorrect as the transition was not uniform, and did not translate into an era of peace and stability. The dissolution of USSR and Yugoslavia left behind power and ideological vacuums, causing new set of ethnic and religious conflicts. On the ideational and ideological front, not all the post-Communist spaces transitioned into market democracies. In some places, the gaps were filled by extreme nationalists or by global Islamist terror organizations such as Al Qaeda or Lashkar-e-Taiba. Within the larger system, the locus of global economic activities shifted from Europe to Asia with the rise of India and China as both the countries decisions to liberalise their market had resulted in huge economic growth, and with their growth, the Global South's economic output and trade too began to increase. With this, the wider process of easternisation was now underway. As Asian nations grew, they increasingly begun to reassert their history, heritage, and identity (Rachman, 2016. p.29). Overall, the world is a lot more complex now. Even with the United States as the strongest power in the system, it does not necessarily mean that the rest of the world is passive receiver of American economic policies, political values, and its culture. The Global South is now attempting to turn their recently won independence into scripting their own stories of growth and revitalisation.

At the ideational level, this meant an increased importance of concepts and knowledge from Asia. Buddhism too began to go global. Post World War II, the pain left behind by destruction led to many people, especially in the West, look for alternative lifestyles. As a result, Buddhism began to flourish in Europe and America. Books on Buddhism, translations of the canon, meditation groups increased, leading to the popularity of a multitude of traditions such as Zen Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Soka Gakkai

movement, Vipassana movement, etc. (Baumann, 2001, pp. 16-19). It was within this context that China too began to tap into the historical legacies of Buddhism after the death of Mao Zedong. During Mao's time, the state had a hostile attitude towards religion and culture. During the Cultural Revolution, China's Buddhist heritage, as well as Tibetan Buddhism in total, faced untold destruction at the hands of the party. It was only after the death of Mao that China relaxed its strong restrictions on religion, also encouraging certain religions to grow and prosper, including Buddhism. As such, China attempted to improve diplomatic relations with other Asian nations using Buddhism (Laliberté, 2011, pp. 114-117). In the 2000s, as China increasingly began to perceive itself as a world power, China's Buddhist Diplomacy went global. In 2006, China organised its first ever major conference on religion, the World Buddhist Forum and in 2008, China established the Zhonghua temple at Lumbini, the birthplace of Lord Buddha. Under Xi Jinping, Buddhism was thus brought under the Belt and Road Initiative (Ashiwa and Wank, 2020, p. 4).

While the importance of Buddhism has always been there in the Indian psyche and the consideration of policymakers in India, a grand vision had been missing. Nehru's approach, while useful, failed to institutionalise the revival of Buddhism. In the larger scheme of things, Buddhism is a lot more than soft power. Firstly, the discourse of soft power itself as a concept has been embedded in the American and British experience, focussing on consumerism and popular culture. Secondly, it has the "national branding" as a focus idea, where the flow of ideas is one sided. Buddhism is far more in its nature. According to Scott Thomas (2000), there are six ways that religion influences international affairs. This includes (1) religion as an ideology, (2) religion as a form of ideology, (3) transnational religious movements, (4) religion as a form of soft power, (5) religious movements as transnational actors and (6) religion as civilization or culture area where religion and culture influence large geographical stretches that are loosely bound, where people's thought and behaviour is shaped not just by nationalism but also their culture (Thomas, 2000, p. 11).

The latter most point is the main change that occurred when India resumed their dormant Buddhist Diplomacy. One of the earliest steps in the 21st century was the idea of reviving the Nalanda University. This idea was floated by India at the 2nd East Asia Summit in 2007 while in the 4th East Asia Summit in 2009, more nations came in support and decided to provide funding and other forms of support (Association of South East Asian Nations, 2009). The university began taking students in 2014 with funding support from many countries, including China. Interestingly, as India's Nalanda project faced multiple issues, China backed out from the project and instead, opened its own Buddhist university in 2017 (Yadav, 2017). Apart from this, the Manmohan Singh-led UPA government also undertook agreements for the restoration of Buddhist sites and temples – the Wat Phou temple complex in 2007, the Ananda temple in 2010, and also laid the groundwork for My Son temple in Vietnam, which was signed in 2014 (Iwanek, 2014). Many of these tasks continued well after the new government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party under Prime Minister Modi was voted into power.

Buddhist Diplomacy received a new impetus under the Modi government. At the individual level too, Prime Minister Modi has also been an active promoter of Buddhism especially in the choice of location, event, and context. This has included bringing back state-backed celebrations and lending the gravity of the office of the Prime Minister to Buddhist festivals, including the Buddha Jayanti or Vesak Day celebrations (in 2015, 2017, 2018, 2020, 2021, and 2022), Ashadha Purnima or Dhamma Chakra Day (in 2020 and 2021), and Abhidhamma Day (in 2021). Along with this, the Prime Minister has stressed the importance of Lord Buddha as a peacebuilder, often using the quote *Yuddh se Buddh ki ore* or 'from war to Lord Buddha' (Press Information Bureau, 2023). Modi has also visited multiple Buddhist sites in the course of his diplomatic tours. This has included the To-ji temple in Kyoto in Japan, Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka, Da Xingshan temple in China, the Ganda monastery in Ulan Bator in Mongolia, the Quan Su Pagoda in Vietnam, the Shwedagon Pagoda and the Ananda temple in Myanmar (Hall, 2019, p.90). Symbolism and invocation have been a crucial aspect of PM Modi's Buddhist push.

The important policy change, however, has been the creation and revitalisation of existing institutions. While India has had a plethora of Buddhist groups across region and purpose, there was an overriding need to have an umbrella institution that could thus co-ordinate the various Buddhist activities whether they are conferences, conclaves, dignitary pilgrimage visits, charity, relief work, education, discourses, into a single body. For this purpose, the International Buddhist Confederation was founded in 2014 and recognised by the Ministry of Culture. The IBC was not just placed to steer the redevelopment of pilgrimage sites, but also has the provisions to have foreign chapters to expand its scope of activities (IBC Newsletter, 2014, p.1). Furthermore in 2015, the government appointed Lokesh Chandra, a renowned scholar of religion, as the President of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations for the express purpose of turning Buddhism into an important arm of India's cultural diplomacy, mostly through a blitz of exhibitions, conferences, and seminars (Kasturi, 2015). The creation of the Samvad Conference was another important step in this direction. The Samvad series of conferences were launched by the Prime Ministers of India and Japan together when the former visited Japan in 2014. The first Samvad conference held in New Delhi and including scholars and leaders from all across Asia, and has been held multiple times ever since (Gupta, 2018). The Samvad Conference is now very much on its way to be fully institutionalised as a cultural forum. On May 16, 2022, the Prime Minister laid the foundation stone for the construction of the India International Centre for Buddhist Culture and Heritage at Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha, accompanied by his Nepalese counterpart Sher Bahadur Deuba (Poudel, 2022).

India also hosted the first conference on Buddhism with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in March 2023 (Sibal, 2023). The most notable aspect of the SCO conference is that it was the first of its kind where states such as Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan acknowledged their Buddhist pasts.

India also faces a larger geopolitical challenge in its Buddhist Diplomacy, especially in the context of China. The World Buddhist Forum gatherings have now become regular, incorporating a large number of scholars, monks, officials, etc. Another aspect of these gatherings has been to increase the public profile of the party-appointed Panchen Lama, and gradually exclude the Dalai Lama, who China brands as a dangerous separatist. Over the years, China has attempted to remove the Dalai Lama's presence by wielding their influence, sometimes with near coercion. Myanmar, South Korea, Vietnam – have not allowed the Dalai Lama to visit (Ranade, 2017, pp.2-3). In the case of Mongolia, after the 2016 visit, China had cancelled all meetings with Mongolian officials, especially at a time when Mongolia had been dealing with financial problems and had also been seeking a loan from China (Wong, 2016). These measures, which attempt to influence decisions through pressure and manipulation, have been termed as "sharp power" (Walker, 2018, pp.11-12). China's twin usage of soft power and sharp power is unprecedented, with the only closest historical example being the imperial Japanese government's attempts to use Buddhism among its Asian colonial subjects and to legitimise the invasion of nations in the name of uniting Buddhism (Ashiwa and Wank, 2020, pp.6-7). This represents a new challenge to India's Buddhist Diplomacy, to prevent the institutional hijacking of the monastic lineages of the Dalai Lama. The Tibetan Buddhist leader has now left the hunt for his successor in the wake of his death at the hand of his chosen trust. China has insisted that the title

of the Dalai Lama would be considered illegitimate unless conferred by the Chinese government. This increases the chances that China would appoint their own spiritual leader, which might end up creating two successor Dalai Lamas, one backed by Beijing and the other by Dharamshala (McConnell, 2013, p.166).

IV. CONCLUSION

Overall, India's Buddhist Diplomacy holds tremendous potential despite having a mixed record. The next challenge for the India is to further streamline the institutions that are necessary for India's Buddhist Diplomacy. Nehru, for all his active efforts towards Buddhist Diplomacy, failed to do so, with the entire enterprise being abandoned in the wake of his passing. With much more economic power than before, India can now pursue foreign policy projects that it was unable to do before. Buddhism simultaneously has national, pan-Asian, and global dimensions. Therefore, informed policy making will have to keep this interplay in mind and answer critical questions – what does Buddhist Diplomacy achieve?

Firstly, it helps the economy. Historically, Buddhism has always been a positive presence for economic activities. It eased the transaction of business along the Silk Route, or the Himalayan caravans between Tibet and the upper Himalayan regions of India. The revival of Buddhism has helped in reshaping pilgrimage and tourist spots in India. As visiting Buddhist pilgrims spend on local transport, lodgings, accommodations, food, and other services, this can provide a boost to the local economies of the sites of pilgrimage. It also helps create a positive reception of the said Buddhist nations among the Indian populace, which then can translate into economic cooperation, trade, investment, etc. Similarly, Indians interested in Buddhism are also likely to visit other Buddhist nations. Indian tourists have been growing, and as a result, many nations have waived visa fees, including Vietnam, Sri Lanka, and Thailand (Chaturvedi, 2023). A heightened interest in Buddhism will also ensure that this tourism revenues go to places other than the regular tourist areas, thus aiding the cultural life of the people hosting the tourists. Furthermore, this economic boost can also be shared. For example, a more robust tourism and pilgrimage infrastructure can also help improve connectivity with Nepal's Lumbini and boost Nepal's economy too with economic spillovers (Bahuguna, 2024, p. 546)

Secondly, Buddhism can provide a means to improve people-to-people contacts. Sites such as Bodh Gaya and Sarnath can serve as pan-Buddhist melting pot where fresh connections and relationships can be forged. Apart from this, spaces for interaction can strengthen bonds between India and the rest of the Buddhist world. Whether they are physical spaces such as universities, monasteries, or other educational institutions, or online spaces such as social media, new modes of engagement can be evolved organically. Within the vast world of Buddhist practitioners, we can find people from all countries, many of the them from the Global South. Exposure to newer ideas and people from the Buddhist world will create empowered Indians.

Thirdly, Buddhism also has important regional implications, especially for India's Northeast. The region borders Bhutan and Myanmar, both Buddhist majority nations. Plus, it is connected to long standing centres of Buddhism such as Sikkim, Kalimpong and Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh. Close to the region are the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, also populated by Buddhists. A system that facilitates affordable tourism and pilgrimage could have positive spillovers for the rest of the region. It could, furthermore, form an important part of India's Act East Policy, under which the Northeast region was to be developed as a gateway to Southeast Asia.

Finally, Buddhism serves as an important indigenous knowledge system. It helps India propound a different idea of a world order that is marked by Buddhist ideas of interconnection and the overcoming of suffering. Buddhism, by virtue of its historical overlaps with various other cultures such as Hinduism, Shintoism, Confucianism, Daoism, Tengrism, and other folk cultures, creates the space for newer forms of co-operation and identity. When done right, Buddhist Diplomacy can empower other nations of the Global South. For long, the Global North has been the active centre for development and articulation of knowledge with the Global South being the passive receivers. A revival of theories and practices rooted in the Buddhist tradition empowers not just the nations where Buddhists form majorities or sizeable populations, but the idea of inter-being can create the space wherein the Global South can be the creators of knowledge and narratives themselves. Furthermore, when China seeks to appropriate Buddhism for its own end, it becomes more important for India to promote narratives that offer cooperation and harmony within the diverse forms of Buddhism. By being the land of birth and rebirth of Buddhism, India can become the central hub of many sects and traditions of Buddhism. In a world moving towards multipolarity, Buddhism as a knowledge system holds the potential to give revive forgotten civilizational linkages and thus, in the process, create newer ones.

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