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## *Issue Brief*

# Asia's Buddhist Connectivity and India's Role

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February 19, 2016

## **S***ummary*

The essence of Buddhist influence lies in co-optive power, allowing nations to pursue interests without being explicitly adversarial. India's domestic performance (democracy and pluralism) and external pursuit (independent and non-aligned foreign policy) have their underpinning in the Buddhist doctrine of Madhyamika. These principles have increased India's global credibility as a non-threatening power. Modi has certainly understood the challenge of building Buddhist connectivity that bonds India together with the rest of Asia.

India's Buddhist diplomacy, which caught the spotlight during the last one and a half years, needs a carefully scrutiny. There is no doubt that Buddhism is one of the most intriguing philosophical products that originated in India some 2600 years back, though this profound Indic philosophical tradition has never been viewed as a religion in the theistic sense or in the context of being a faith. But the fact remains that it has remained a powerful *integrated philosophical whole, encompassing all facets of both spiritual and material culture that have guided humanity for centuries.*

Sir Edwin Arnold, in his book *The Light of Asia* (1879), recorded that Buddhism has influenced millions for over 26 centuries and the spatial dimension of its dominions extended "from Nepal and Ceylon over the whole Eastern Peninsula to China, Japan, Tibet, Central Asia, Siberia, and even Swedish Lapland."

*For all these centuries, Buddhism remained as the solid foundation for societal and cultural transformation in Asia. It still remains a key anchor for Asian identity and a phenomenon of unprecedented Pan-Asian importance, especially in terms of spiritual connectivity among nations with enduring impact. The following points are important to explain this phenomenon.*

### Transmission of Buddhism

Buddhism travelled from India in myriad directions along the web of trans-Asian overland and maritime trade networks. The fabled Silk Route across Central Asia became the main corridor along which Buddhist philosophical ideas including medicine, astronomy, mathematics, artistic and architectural styles, the art of diplomacy and statecraft, etc., were transmitted to China and beyond while also connecting various Asian spots cutting across races, regions, ethnicities, languages, genders and cultures.

In fact, Buddhism and trade had become synonymous; merchants, traders and artisans actively financed monastic institutions. They assisted monks and pilgrims who played a vital role in connecting their journey to distant Asian regions with the spread of the philosophy they practiced. Thousands of monasteries, dotted across the Eurasian Continent, had ensured peace and prosperity.

Scholars from across Asia came to study in renowned Indian universities such as Nalanda and Takshashila and took home with them Buddhist teachings, texts and relics. Interestingly, even kings and monarchs reached out to each other through Buddhist channels while sending missionaries and exchanging gifts of translated texts and relics as valuable diplomatic tools. There were also instances of kings going to war to take control of relics.

Buddhism reached its zenith in China in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century. It continued to thrive due to constant two-way exchange of trade and commerce with India until the Arab conquests of Bactria (Afghanistan-Central Asia). The subsequent destruction of monasteries during the 12 and 13<sup>th</sup> Centuries resulted in the decline of trade, and by its implications, caused a complete disruption in India-China ties. Fortunately, the rest of Asia, including Korea and Japan, received Buddhism either from China or directly from India through maritime trade.

Importantly, Buddhism spread far and wide without any use of force or coercive action. Monks and missionaries only applied peaceful methods and style that were suited to local conditions, but without at the same time compromising upon the essential points of wisdom. A study by the Centre on Public Diplomacy (CPD) titled *Buddhist Diplomacy: History and Status Quo* examines in detail how monks and disciples used public diplomacy methods to spread Buddhism across Asia.

With the passage of time, Buddhism took an indigenous form in all parts of Asia and gradually became less dependent on India. Scores of research findings are emerging about how a process of localisation of Buddhist tenets led to 'Buddhist globalisation.'

## Buddhism and Asian Values

Undoubtedly, Buddhism provided the foundation for the adoption of culture, thoughts, idioms and common spiritual beliefs and practices among people in India, China, Japan, Korea and in other parts of Asia. In fact, Buddhism became the single most important factor for infusing the hitherto ill-defined "Asia" with a cultural coherence, providing a channel for the flow of ideas and interactive relationships. Through the movement of ideas, commodities and peoples, Buddhism integrated myriad societies and regions, effectively interweaving them into a common culture of ethical values especially among the social and political elites in Asia.

In fact, the ideals of Buddhism continue to intersect with the political and economic contexts of many Asian nations with a combined population now of 1.6 billion, or 22 percent of the world's population, according to some latest estimates. Indeed, Buddhist culture is the root from which several Asian nations draw their national identities and political and social heritages. In many countries, Buddhism is embedded into their "nationalistic" thinking and actions such as in Sri Lanka. It is a strong unifying force in Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and Cambodia. Certainly, Buddhism is an intensifying factor for Asian emotional bonding and connectivity. Asia aside, Buddhism has been able to generate a spiritual awakening elsewhere in the world and influenced a stream of philosophical traditions world over.

The history of Asian narratives explains how, at one level, Buddhism fulfilled the people's quest for religious beliefs, and at yet another level, enabled people to connect to higher values of spiritualism without abandoning their faith or religion.

At the core of Buddhism lies the idea of exploring the potential of an individual for realizing perfection towards the goal of attaining enlightenment. This philosophical virtue contributed to the foundation of democratic culture in many Asian societies.

The core ethics of Buddhism, which stress on the nature of interdependence and interconnection, allowed every society to absorb changes and reform itself including at the political level – all accepted as an interdependent phenomenon and mutually inclusive in nature. This value drew Asian societies towards adaptation and cooperation, and these still drive them towards accepting a cooperative culture.

Buddhism and democracy have thus found compatibility on the Asian scene for the people to live in an atmosphere of harmony and equality. The diversity of Asian value systems today reflects how the culture of inclusiveness and tolerance has protected Asian cohesion at various turns of history.

The Buddhist emphasis on the need for consensus, practiced in the monastic order of *Sangha* where decisions are taken through a collective discourse, also impacted Asian societies. Similarly, the *Vinaya* rules for monastic community infused a culture of democratic traditions. Above all, Buddhist virtues provided individuals the greatest opportunity to realize their potential and yet also cultivate a sense of universal responsibility.

Buddhism allowed people to positively react to modernity and change. A majority of Asian societies and nations, including Japan, India and China, experienced modernity without completely emulating Western value systems. They have accepted basic Western values as well as economic and technological skills and other necessary modern requirements within the realm of their traditional culture and values.

One of the most profound impacts of Buddhism on Asia has been the infusion of non-conflicting philosophic traditions. Buddhist principles allowed societies and nations to seek transformation without being in a conflictual situation. In fact, this tradition is at the root of the emerging democracy in Asia. The recent political transition in Myanmar demonstrated how Buddhist values impact political process among Asian people.

The long experience achieved through Buddhist traditions ultimately created an atmosphere of peace in Asia. Since Buddhism is not a religion in the dogmatic sense, it created a space for flexibility allowing one to think beyond fixed ideas to seek actions for consequences and change. It provided the template for people to realise the need for transforming self and societies irrespective of race, nationality or gender.

The benign nature of Buddhism also influenced the Islamic tradition in Asia. In fact, despite all the prejudices, Asian history is full of Buddhist-Muslim friendly interactions and cooperation. These were not without advantage to Asian connectivity. Many Asian societies have internalized Buddhist principles without having to adopt a Buddhist identity. The tradition of *Sufism*, for example, is a product of the long-drawn intensive interface between Buddhism and Islam that still has a tremendous capacity to entail positive influence on a large section of humanity, especially when Islam is currently passing through a critical phase.

Today, innumerable traits of Buddhist connectivity, in all their intensity and complexity, continue to manifest in the popular realm of Asian cultural, spiritual, social and economic lives. Clearly, there is a great deal to learn from Asian experiences of tolerant culture to make it more relevant to our future lives. They have more relevance now against the backdrop of the emerging pattern of disputes and conflicts in various global theatres manifesting through terrorism and sectarian violence. In an era of a globalized and free market economy, it becomes more imperative for the world to adopt to a flexible and dynamic system that is in practice in Asia. It is here that the Asian experience, with its spirit of freedom,

equality, cooperation and prosperity of all nations, can form a new alternative model for a 21<sup>st</sup> Century world order.

### India's Buddhist Connectivity

For India, Buddhism lies at the core of its identity as a cradle of wisdom and provided the country with a unique image of being an embracer and enlightener rather than being a conqueror. A high profile Chinese Ambassador, Hu Shih, had said "India conquered and dominated China culturally for 20 centuries without ever having to send a single soldier across her border." In a way, Ambassador Hu Shih's words reflect the soul binding links between the two nations. In a rare admission, even the *China daily* recently commented that it was a "narrative of the sustained conquests of hearts and minds for such a long time."

Though Buddhism declined in India after the fifth and sixth centuries, its principles form the core values of Indian foreign policy. In fact, the intrinsic nature of Buddhist principles provides India a global persona of benign international influence.

The essence of Buddhist influence lies in co-optive power, allowing nations to pursue interests without being explicitly adversarial. India's domestic performance (democracy and pluralism) and external pursuit (independent and non-aligned foreign policy) have their underpinning in the Buddhist doctrine of *Madhyamika*.

These principles have increased India's global credibility as a non-threatening power. The recent strategic embrace of India by major world powers, including in the globally contested field of nuclear cooperation, is driven not merely by the contingency of inter-state relations, but more because of India's irrefutable historical personality record and its unique appeal.

*Buddhism* is once again making a comeback and its growing popularity is linked to the peaceful nature of its philosophy and to its geographic spread. Over 98 per cent of the world's Buddhist population lives in the Asia-Pacific region. Their number is still growing, with over 14 countries in Asia having more than 50 per cent Buddhist population, and seven of these having over 90 per cent population practicing Buddhism.

It is already a catalyst not for meeting the spiritual quest but is also proving as a currency of well-being and prosperity to millions in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Southeast Asian countries and even in China.

In fact, a new pattern of intra-Asian connections is fast re-emerging with profound implications for the Asian renaissance in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and India seems to have taken note of that with great interest.

Buddhism has already gained prominence in India's diplomacy for fostering deeper engagement with ASEAN countries as part of the 'Look East' and now "Act East" policy. In fact, Buddhism is also fast becoming a brand symbol of rising India. The country is sitting atop a millennia-old tourist mine. Numerous Buddhist sites in India, directly linked to the spiritual destinies of millions in Asia, could form a part

of Buddha-Industry, which, in turn, could transform the lives of millions, providing lucrative career options to a large youth component.

### **Nalanda: A New Hope**

Much of the Buddhist diplomacy so far has involved the loaning of relics, gifting of statues, and hosting conferences for monks. The only forward-looking initiative is the collaborative project for reviving the past glory of Nalanda University from where all major Asian Buddhist schools trace their lineages.

This Pan-Asia Nalanda project is meant to be 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. India has an opportunity once again to play a key role in this. However, re-conceptualising Nalanda seems to be a major problem as the University is still unable to lay a sound footing despite several countries supporting the initiative.

### **Struggle for Asian Buddhist Leadership**

The Nalanda project could certainly open the prospects of Asian convergence, but there are signs that Buddhism is becoming a serious source of competition rather than an area of convergence between China and India. This is mainly to do with political leverages that are associated with Buddhism, which allows major powers to enlarge their scope of communications and build emotional connects with countries across the Asian continent that share the same heritage.

For example, China has been lately projecting itself as the main patron and sponsor of the Buddhist world. Beijing is drawing on its vast cultural resources for establishing cultural links with Buddhist institutions throughout Asia. In fact, since 2009, China has been forcefully evoking Buddhism as a means to underpin its "peaceful rise" and as a soft power advocacy for boosting China's global and regional influence.

There are fears that China will wield its Buddhist influence alongside its hard power (military threats) to impact on other nations' political and economic security. For example, there have been cases in the context of recent and current attempts by China to build psychological connections through Buddha's tooth diplomacy to win the hearts and minds of people in Myanmar, Sri Lanka and other Southeast Asian countries. This is being viewed as an attempt to edge in on India's traditional sphere of influence. In fact, many suspect that the underlying objective behind China's gigantic infrastructure project, the "One Belt-One Road" (OBOR) initiative, has an underpinning of fostering its cultural connectivity with Asia.

Clearly, India sees China deriving geopolitical benefits from its Buddhist links. As a result, India too has begun to rival China by undertaking several counter measures, for example, by sponsoring Buddhist conferences, stepping up the playing of the Tibetan card and checkmating Chinese Buddhist influence in India's neighbourhood.

Approaching Buddhism from the narrow prism of its political utility by the two countries is not a good idea and goes against the very essence of Buddhist thought. It is unlikely to be helpful for India, China and above all for building an Asian Century.

### Modi's Buddhist Diplomacy

Fortunately, Prime Minister Modi's placing of Buddhism at the centre of India's diplomatic initiatives is a creative idea. In fact, he has *shown a much greater propensity to use Buddhism even* to strike directly at the spiritual linkage with China. It seems both Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping have evidently acknowledged that the shared spiritual heritage could potentially bring back the traditional depth of India-China relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. For the two nations needlessly locked in a territorial dispute, working on Buddhist connectivity may prove to be a game changer, especially for changing the future India-China narrative.

Clearly, this is a huge and challenging initiative undertaken with a high degree sincerity and trust by the two leaders, but there is a *risk of* this gentle philosophy becoming a pawn in India-China rivalry. Clearly, the Indian establishment working on *such a conceptual play seems to be confronted with a strange dilemma – whether to employ Buddhism to re-establish India's Asian connectivity or employ it as a means to contain China.*

Essentially, any struggle over leadership of Buddhism also means struggle of leadership for peace, and by itself is not a bad thing. In fact, there may not be, in reality, any strategic rivalry over Buddhism. Instead, there may be ulterior political motives behind steering such a rivalry simply to thwart any move towards India-China Buddhist congruity.

But India does not need to compete with China over Buddhism. Most Asian countries will continue to look towards India as their spiritual home and they always rely on India's guidance in times of difficulty. The answer, therefore, lies not in seeking rivalry with China but in building India's own Buddhist profile and capability, which not only means openly embracing the Buddhist world, but finding creative ways to win over the hearts and minds of the swelling Chinese Buddhist population now estimated to have grown to one billion or 80 percent of the country's population. While this figure may be exaggerated, nevertheless, with the sudden re-embracing of Buddhism, China has now over 28,000 Buddhist monasteries, 16,000 temples and 240,000 Buddhist monks and nuns.

India needs to start thinking about seeking a greater transformation in China from authoritarianism to embrace the culture of Buddhism and the impact such a change may entail for enduring relations between India and China.

It seems that Modi so far is walking on Harsha's road map of appropriating Buddha to reach out to the new generation of Chinese people. On the 2015 Buddha Purnima day, Modi joined the Chinese microblogging site, Weibo, to connect with Chinese youth.



## Time to Fix Up

To be sure, Buddhism could become a catalyst for building greater interaction within the Asian community. India will have to do nothing to prove anything new, because Buddha himself remains a more powerful brand than anything else to pull sufficient global attraction with enormous benefit for the country. The country just needs to end its apathy towards its heritage of global significance, which is lying largely unattended. It has to simply utilise the Buddhist heritage circuits, improve connectivity and infrastructure so that they could tap millions of Asian pilgrims annually. Most of all, India needs to raise its own capabilities to comprehend the Asian cultural complexities and foster a sense of responsibility towards deepening linkages with the Asian population.

Modi has certainly understood the challenge of building Buddhist connectivity that bonds India together with the rest of Asia. As Modi learnt to grapple with the challenges of playing diplomacy, he seems to have realized that Buddhism can still bring benefits to India in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. While leading the Buddha Purnima prayers in May 2015, Modi said that "the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will be Asia's century and without Buddha, this cannot be Asia's century."

The present government's policy has shown subtlety, indicating a more potent and tangible component in pursuing this goal. There is a definite shift in India's East Asia policy. Steps have been taken to restore India's Buddhist legacies and links with other Buddhist nations. Besides, India has decided to participate in two China-led initiatives – the New Development Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Bank – that are meant to expand Asian infrastructure links.

Clearly, Modi is steering Buddhism rather passionately, but his efforts risk failure if it remains confined to achieving the limited goals of organising events, holding conferences and seminar gatherings of academics and monks. Employing Buddhist diplomacy should include more than lip service and posturing.



## About the Authors



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