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Buddhism: India's soft power projection tool

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Why in News: There is much significance to India having hosted a two-day global Buddhist summit which was organised by the Ministry of Culture in collaboration with the International Buddhist Confederation.

Spread of Buddhism

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.

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.

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.

In 1954, the Sixth Buddhist Council was convened in Burma. 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.

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

India's effort in Buddhist diplomacy

The Indian government has been actively investing in its Buddhist diplomacy efforts, with a focus on promoting tourism through the development of the "Buddhist tourist circuit".

Additionally, Prime Minister has made it a point to visit Buddhist sites during his Southeast and East Asian visits.

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By hosting such a high-profile event, the Indian government hopes to demonstrate its commitment to preserving and promoting Buddhist culture and heritage, as well as strengthening ties with the global Buddhist community.

With its strong historical and cultural ties to Buddhism, India is well-positioned to play a leading role in shaping the discourse around Buddhist issues on the global stage.

Against the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine crisis, Prime minister said, “India has not given ‘Yuddha’ to the world but ‘Buddha’.”

This resonates with his earlier statement of his telling the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, that ‘this is not the era of war’.

The Delhi summit’s theme, “Responses to Contemporary Challenges: Philosophy to Praxis”, also highlights India’s attempts to provide an alternative to contested global politics, with morality as the guiding principle.

Buddhist diplomacy has the potential to promote regional cohesion, given that nearly 97% of the global Buddhist population is based in Asia.

During the Cold War, China effectively used Buddhist diplomacy to engage with its neighbouring countries, and it continues to employ this approach to gain legitimacy for its Belt and Road Initiative.

As India and China compete to dominate the Buddhist heritage as a tool for soft power, India holds an advantage due to the faith’s origins in the country.

However, despite being home to a number of key Buddhist sites, such as Bodhgaya, Sarnath, and Kushinagar, India has struggled to attract Buddhist tourists, who tend to favour sites in Thailand and Cambodia.

Guiding principle of India’s Buddhism diplomacy

India’s efforts to position itself as a great power committed to cooperation rather than coercion are rooted in its deep historical and cultural ties to the region.

The current government’s guiding principles for foreign policy, Panchamrit principles include “Sanskriti Evam Sabhyata” which means cultural and civilizational links, which were highlighted during the Delhi summit, which saw a diverse group of 171 foreign delegates from South Korea, Thailand, Cambodia, Japan, and Taiwan, along with 150 delegates from Indian Buddhist organisations.

Also in attendance were prominent scholars, sangha leaders, and dharma practitioners.

Through such efforts, India hopes to reinforce its image as a responsible global power committed to peaceful cooperation and regional stability.

By laying an emphasis on cultural and civilisational ties, India seeks to promote greater understanding and cooperation between nations and to demonstrate the unique role it can play in shaping the region’s future.

India recognises the importance of Buddhism as a means of conducting public diplomacy and has utilised it to its advantage.

However, to maintain its edge over China, more action is needed. China is actively seeking to exert control over the appointment of the next Dalai Lama, which would be a blow to India’s efforts to project its soft power through Buddhism. India must act to ensure that it remains a key player in the global Buddhist community.

To further strengthen its Buddhist diplomacy, India should continue promoting Buddhism at the highest levels of government, while also organising cultural events to showcase the country’s rich Buddhist history.

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) could play a significant role in promoting such events within and outside India.

Additionally, India should work to strengthen its ties with key Buddhist institutions and leaders around the world. The Delhi summit was a step in the right direction, providing a valuable opportunity for cultural exchange and the sharing of ideas.

Conclusion

India also needs to utilise the reach of Bollywood in promoting its Buddhist heritage. China, with its influence over Hollywood, has completely dominated the narrative around Buddhism through cinema. In contrast, India is behind in this domain; there have not been any efforts made through cinema. India's G-20 presidency this year could be used to promote Buddhist diplomacy on a bigger scale through various cultural meetings, especially as Buddhist teachings align with the motto of India's G-20 presidency, 'One Earth, One Family, One Future'. As Buddha was the first diplomat of peace, his teachings of peace and cooperation in these tough times can become the guiding light of Indian diplomacy on the world stage.