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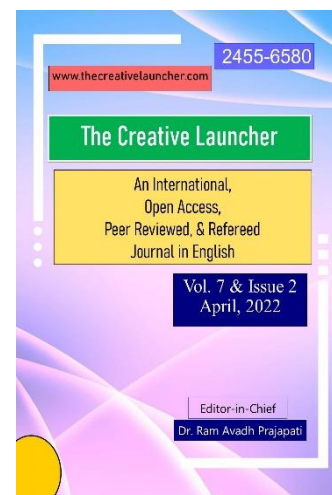
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☞ Research Article

Resurgence of Buddhism in Indian and Chinese Diplomacy

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Abstract

In this globalized and information age, it requires to move ahead with the time and bring required changes in the methods of diplomacy. Both India and China are trying to make use of their status as ancient and rich civilizations for the revival of age-old linkages based on cultural and religious exchanges. Both the countries are preaching the lessons of Peace and Harmony in their foreign policy and trying to make use of the Buddhist wave as cultural diplomacy. The resurgence of Buddhism led to the use of Buddhism as a cultural bridge between countries and has become the need of the hour. Moreover, as Asia is a highly religious region both India and China are making their Buddhist links a tool of cultural diplomacy. This paper would analyze

how India and China are making use of Buddhism as an instrument of cultural diplomacy in a competitive manner. As both the countries are planning to gain an upper hand in the region, keeping their advantages and constraints in mind, the paper would highlight their prospects and constraints in using Buddhism and Spiritual diplomacy as a soft power for their political end.

Keywords: Buddhism, Cultural Diplomacy, Spiritual Diplomacy, Soft Power

Introduction

Today's world of the growing significance of cultural diplomacy and soft power has led to the revival of Buddhism, and both India, as well as China, are reclaiming their rights on the centrality of Buddhist core values to connect with the Buddhist world, to propagate an impression of its peaceful, harmonious rise promoting global peace and harmony. The following two news clippings from leading Indian and Chinese newspapers clearly reflect the resurgence of Buddhist Diplomacy by the present governments in their respective foreign policies. As per a report of the leading Newspaper, The Telegraph, "The Narendra Modi government has decided to make India's Buddhism links the centerpiece of its cultural diplomacy thrust through a blitzkrieg of novel projects after the Prime Minister feted East Asian leaders through his first year in office with references to this religious bridge." (Kasturi Charu Sudan, 2015)

According to the report of the leading Chinese newspaper Global times: "Even though the Communist Party of China is officially atheist, and the central government was once wary of religion, subtle signs and increasing activities show there is a changing attitude towards religion in order to unite China and its neighbors." (Chen Lijun, 2015)

In this globalized and information age, it requires to move ahead with the time and bring timely changes in the methods of diplomacy. Both India and China are trying to make use of their status as ancient and rich civilizations for the revival of age-old linkages based on cultural and religious exchanges. Both the countries are preaching the lessons of Peace and Harmony in their foreign policy and trying to make use of the Buddhist wave as cultural diplomacy. The global resurgence of Buddhism led to the use of Buddhism as a cultural bridge between countries and has become the need of the hour. Moreover, as Asia is a highly religious region both India and China are making their Buddhist links a tool of cultural diplomacy.

Indian government's neighborhood policy is recognizing the spiritual and cultural linkages as a strong foundation for connecting and constructing a partnership with its neighboring and other Asian countries and Buddhism plays a significant role in reviving its cultural and religious links with civilizational partners. Contrary to the Indian situation, although the atheist notion of the Socialist Communist leadership throws a major challenge to the newly emerged concept of its Cultural and Religious diplomacy; however, under the present Chinese government's ambitious project of the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI), religious faith is actively used as a diplomatic and political tool in the race of gaining an upper hand at the regional and global level.

As per the report of Chinese official media, Global Times Published on May 04, 2015, "In March 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping stood in the offices of the United Nations

Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Paris, and extolled the profound impact Buddhism has had on China." The supreme leader of the officially atheist nation, the Peoples Republic of China, and its Communist Party did admit that "Buddhism originated in ancient India," but then again with his further remarks he tries to emphasize the important position of Buddhism in China: "After it was introduced into China, the religion went through an extended period of integrated development with the indigenous Confucianism and Taoism and finally became the Buddhism with Chinese characteristics, thus making a deep impact on the religious belief, philosophy, literature, art, etiquette, and customs of the Chinese people." In the socialist-communist and atheist state where religion was once disdained as "poison or opium for people" during Mao's era, such bold and admiring statements for religion that too by the state head showed a sweeping change in the social and political ideologies towards the role of religion at the domestic and foreign policy level. (Chen Lijun, 2015)

This paper would analyze how India and China are playing the role of Buddhism as an instrument of cultural diplomacy in a competitive manner. As both the countries are planning to gain an upper hand in the region, keeping their advantages and constraints in mind, the paper would highlight their prospects and constraints in using Buddhism and Spiritual diplomacy as a soft power for their political end.

Introduction to Buddhism and its global resurgence:

Buddhism was founded in Northern India by Siddhartha Gautama (approximately 563 – 460 BCE) and has expanded throughout much of the Far East. After Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, it is believed to be the world's fourth-largest religion. According to the facts collected from the online database ('Related Pew Research Reports Buddhist Population by Percentage Worldwide', 2016):

Buddhism began in India 2,500 years ago and remains the dominant world religion in the East. There are more than 360 million followers of Buddhism worldwide and over a million American Buddhists today. Buddhist concepts have also been influential on western culture in general, particularly in the areas of meditation and nonviolence. (Global Times).

Power of Buddhism:

Buddhism is not just a religion but an Asian identity, a spiritual connectivity with the potential of connecting different civilizations and communities along the globe.

As said by Hu Shih, a high-profile Chinese scholar and diplomat: "India conquered and dominated China culturally for 20 centuries without ever having to send a single soldier across her border." Ambassador Hu Shi's statements, in some ways, symbolise the two countries' soul ties. Due to Buddhism and other philosophical thoughts emerged in India, India was highly regarded in the Peoples republic of China and Chinese used to see India as a holy place or heaven.

Overview of Buddhism in world today:

In his book *The Light of Asia* (1879), Sir Edwin Arnold stated that across the globe, millions have been influenced by Buddhism for over 26 centuries. According to the data collected by the "Pew- Templeton Project of Global Religious Futures":

As of 2010, there were about 488 million Buddhists around the world, representing 7% of the world's total population. Buddhists are expected to remain very heavily concentrated in the Asia-Pacific region, where 99% of Buddhists lived in 2010 and a similarly high proportion (98%) is projected to reside in 2050. Between 2010 and 2050, the most rapid Buddhist population growth, in percentage terms, is projected to occur in the Middle East and North Africa.

Later there emerged Mahayana, Theravada and Vajrayana or Tibetan Buddhism as three major streams of Buddhism. The Mahayana Buddhism is practiced in East Asian countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam. Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Laos, and Cambodia are among the countries in South and Southeast Asia that practice Theravada Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhism is the smallest of the three branches, with followers in the Himalayan regions of Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, and Mongolia.

As per the “Pew- Templeton Project of Global Religious Futures”:

Theravada Buddhism, prominent in Southeast Asia, is atheistic and philosophical in nature and focuses on the monastic life and meditation as means to liberation. Mahayana Buddhism, prominent in China and Japan, incorporates several deities, celestial beings, and other traditional religious elements. In Mahayana, the path to liberation may include religious ritual, devotion, meditation, or a combination of these elements. Zen, Nichiren, Tendai, and Pure Land are the major forms of Mahayana Buddhism.

India: the cradle of Buddhism:

Around 2600 years back, Buddhism originated in India and got spread in all directions throughout the world. Buddhism expanded to Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and China via the historic Silk Road, and from China it spread to all East and South Asian countries.

Scholars from all over Asia travelled to study at renowned Indian institutions like Nalanda and Takshashila, bringing Buddhist teachings, writings, and relics back with them and translated in their own languages. It would be interesting to know that, with the contribution of present Indian government, the reestablishment of Nalanda University has worked for the revival of Buddhism and has attracted many scholars from around the globe.

Reasons for decline of Buddhism in India:

Buddhism which once had become spread in every face of India got declined in the last half of first millennium AD. Scholars argue the following reasons behind its downfall:

1) Over the years of accumulation, the monasteries became the endowments of wealth and they became detached from the everyday life of common people.

2) For the common Indians following Hinduism, Buddhism was a part of Hinduism and Buddha was worshiped as a God among various Hindu Gods. Hinduism considered Gautama Buddha as an Avatar of God Vishnu.

3) As the Buddhists lived in separate communities, Buddhism didn't become a part of everyday life in India.

4) Muslim conquest to India during twelfth century (1192) destroyed the Buddhist monasteries, executed the monks and forced the Buddhist followers to convert into Islam.

Overview of Buddhism in China today:

Following the economic reforms of 1978, for the next three decades China experienced unprecedented economic growth, lifting hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. Several critiques, however, argue that as the country became wealthier, majority of population lost its moral compass, leaving its citizens feeling disoriented. For spiritual solace, many people started turning to religion.

The slogan “building a harmonious society” has been used by the Chinese government since 2004 to characterise a country that combines economic progress with social stability. Since 2012, when came into power, Xi has promoted a programme known as the Chinese dream, which prioritises the promotion of traditional Chinese culture for the aim of national rejuvenation. In both local and international politics, religion is becoming a more powerful factor. China has more than 100 million individuals who follow various religions, according to Wang Zuoran, director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs. This is a significant change from the Cultural Revolution. In China, there are 28,000 Buddhist monasteries, 16,000 temples, and 240,000 Buddhist monks and nuns. However, for Chinese officials, religion has always been a source of anxiety. China is regularly accused by Western countries of infringing on the human right to religious freedom. “For China's diplomacy, religion used to be a thorny topic. The UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva (now the Human Rights Council) witnessed bitter confrontations over religious freedom and human rights between China and Western countries”, according to a State Council official from the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office.

However, Chinese diplomats now see religion as an asset that may help improve relations with neighbours, rather than a liability. In his latest diplomatic initiatives, Xi, for example, has placed a high value on it. China is now investing billions of dollars in the "One Belt, One Road" plan, which aims to build roads, railroads, ports, and economic linkages between Southeast, South, and Central Asia and Eastern Europe. Xi paid a visit to South Korea in July 2017, where he lauded Kim Gyo-gak, an ancient Korean royal who lived in China for 75 years and practised Buddhism. He visited Sri Lanka in September 2017 and spoke on the thousand-year bond that Buddhism has forged between the two countries. When he landed in Nalanda, India, his visit was publicised. Nalanda, is the site of the legendary Chinese monk Xuanzang's journey during the Tang Dynasty (618-907).

Buddhist forums in India (Revival of Buddhism):

- The maiden International Tripitaka Chanting Ceremony was held at Bodhgaya in 2006, under the auspices of the Light of the Buddhadharma Foundation.
- A group named the Global Buddhist Congregation (GBC) helped in uniting the representatives of a variety of Buddhist traditions together in one overarching body in November 2011 with the backing of the Indian government. The GBC in New Delhi attracted around 900 patriarchs, supreme patriarchs, and high-ranking monks from diverse Buddhist traditions from around the world, making it one of the greatest gatherings of Buddhist leaders since King Asoka (268–232 BCE).

- The heads of Buddhist groups in attendance agreed that a centralised authority was needed to interpret matters relating to Buddhism, particularly the preservation of distinct sects' traditions and practises. The International Buddhist Confederation was formed as a result of the meeting to achieve these goals by encouraging research and popularising Buddhist practices and traditions.
- At December 2013, the ninth International Tripitaka Chanting Ceremony was held in Bodhgaya, bringing together 3000 monks and an estimated 2000 laity pilgrims representing the Theravada Buddhist tradition from Southeast Asia. This assembly was the culmination of a 1,000-year tradition of monks reciting from the Buddha's earliest recorded teachings, known as the Pali Tripitaka, under the fabled Bodhi tree. (Ron Purser, Sep. 09, 2013, "Reviving Buddhism in India")
- In March 2017, India hosted a Buddhist conference in Nalanda with the goal of bringing all Buddhist lamas into the fold. The conference, which was hosted by the Indian Ministry of Culture, brought together notable Buddhist monks from over thirty nations, including Bangladesh, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam. India's reputation in the Buddhist community was anticipated to improve as a result of the Nalanda summit.

Buddhist forums in China:

- China controls the World Buddhist Sangha Council founded in Sri Lanka in 1966.
- From April 13 to 16, 2006, the World Buddhist Forum (世界佛教论坛) was held in Hangzhou and Zhoushan, Zhejiang Province, China. As per the article of BBC News of 13th April 2006, "It was the first major international religious conference in China since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. This was the Communist China's first International religious gathering." The forum drew almost 1,000 monks and scholars from 37 nations and regions, who gave lectures or participated in discussions on the theme "A harmonious world begins in the mind".
- In his March 2017 report, Jayadev Ranade highlights three following events conducted in Wuxi (Jiangsu Province) in 2009, Hong Kong in April 2012, and Wuxi again in 2015, arguing that these forums attempted to examine the constructive role of religious ideas in tackling global challenges.
- The World Fellowship of Buddhists meet was also held there in 2014. The Chinese are assisting the Buddhist institutions in Theravada and Mahayana countries to repair, renovate, and revive them. Beijing also promoted significant international events such as the United Nations Vesak Day, which was held in Sri Lanka.

Buddhism as a soft power tool to connect with other Buddhist countries:

P. Stobdan argues that:

Becoming a guardian of Buddhism is helping Xi successfully promote China as an acceptable world power with a soft image. Buddhist globalisation helps Beijing push its economic projects – religious diplomacy makes it easier for China to win economic and infrastructural projects in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Nepal and elsewhere" (P. Stobdan, 2017).

Mention of Buddhism at national and international platforms:

Even kings and monarchs used Buddhist avenues to communicate with one another, sending missionaries and exchanging gifts of translated books and relics as useful diplomatic tools. There have also been cases where rulers have gone to war to seize relics. Learning from the history, today's China and India have started using the core ideas of Buddhist philosophy as well as the Buddhist texts and relics as state gifts to bridge the gap with Buddhist diplomacy. For example, we have repeated instances of Indian Prime Minister Modi presenting the sapling of a sacred Banyan tree, a symbol of the Maharishi tree of India reflecting the Buddhist message of peace to connect with Buddhist countries.

Buddhist Globalisation:

After the concept of Economic globalisation, the newly developed concept is Buddhist globalization highlighting the symbolic power of Buddhism used as a soft power in the present growing interdependent world.

Wide spread of Buddhism along the world without any military or coercive force if hard power is a great example of relevance of Buddhism as a strong instrument of soft power. According to Ambassador P. Stobdan (Senior Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses in New Delhi), a study published by the Centre for Public Diplomacy (CPD) titled "Buddhist Diplomacy: History and Status Quo" explores how Buddhism was propagated across Asia by monks and followers using public diplomacy strategies. After getting spread to the oriental culture through peaceful means, Buddhism gradually got assimilated with the local trends and practices that made it wider acceptable as a global religion with local traits.

Indian use of Buddhist diplomacy with Buddhist countries:

The world perception of India as country of peaceful rise is because of the Buddhist ideology associated with India. The Indian government's "Look East" and "Act East" Policies with ASEAN and other East Asian countries are also well connected with the India's Buddhism connect. The older concepts of "Non alignment" and "Panchasheel" had also reflected the core ideology of Buddhism. The Indian government has made Buddhism a part of its bilateral diplomacy efforts since Prime Minister Narendra Modi assumed office in 2014.

In his article for Carnegie India, Jayadeva Ranade has highlighted that the importance of Buddhism was stressed during Modi's diplomatic visits and his agenda with Japan:

In August 2014, besides visiting two ancient Buddhist temples in Japan, Prime Minister Modi also mentioned the term Buddhism in the joint statement after a subsequent visit to Japan in November 2016. Private organizations have been involved in these efforts as well. In September 2015, for example, the International Buddhist Confederation, the Vivekananda International Foundation, and the Tokyo Foundation put together a joint Buddhist and Hindu three-day conclave on conflict avoidance and environment consciousness. (Ranade, J., 2017).

Jayadev Ranade has also highlighted the role of Buddhism in India's diplomatic ties with Mongolia:

It is worth noting that since the Mongol ruler Altan Khan first conferred the title of Dalai Lama on the Gelug monk Sonam Gyatso in the late sixteenth century, subsequent Dalai Lamas have looked to the Mongol rulers for support. Mongolia's unique link to the Dalai

Lama lends special significance to Prime Minister Modi's visit to Ulaanbaatar in May 2015. Modi's visit involved numerous references to India and Mongolia's shared Buddhist connection. Two examples were his speech to the Mongolian parliament, which mentioned the Buddha and Buddhism seven times, his visit to the Gandantegchinlen monastery. (Ranade, J., 2017).

Similar stress on the ancient cultural and religious ties through Buddhism was given with the diplomatic engagements with other neighboring and South Asian and South East Asian countries witnessing age old connections with ancient India.

Chinese use of Buddhist diplomacy:

OBOR and Buddhism:

The present Chinese leadership perhaps learnt from the core ethics of Buddhism i.e., interdependence and interconnect to the other countries.

Nepal is one of China's bordering countries where Buddhism is being used to gain regional influence. The almost 20,000 Tibetans who live in Nepal are the primary reason for China's interest in the country. In addition, a number of Tibetans dwell on the northern outskirts of Nepal, on the Tibetan border. China is concerned that what it refers to as hostile foreign forces—a veiled allusion to the United States and India—might use Nepal as a base to cause unrest in Tibet. China's influence in Nepal has grown, and its embassy now works directly with Nepalese authorities to limit Tibetan residents' activities. Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha, is located in Nepal, close across the border from India, and is of particular interest to China.

As argued by Jayadev Ranade:

China's interest in Lumbini first became public in June 2011, when a Chinese government-sponsored nongovernmental organization (NGO), the Asia Pacific Exchange and Cooperation Foundation (APECF), proposed a \$3 billion plan to develop Lumbini to the Nepalese government. The plans included hotels, an airport, and a Chinese-managed Buddhist university and seminary. Xiao Wunan, a senior CCP cadre who till his retirement late last year was a deputy director in China's National Development and Reform Commission in western China, was executive vice president of the foundation. The appointment of Pushpa Kamal Dahal, better known as Prachanda, who is the current Nepalese prime minister, as vice chairman of the APECF, emphasized China's interest in Nepal. While the APECF's proposal has been kept in limbo, the Nepalese government is unwilling to reject China's proposal. The establishment of the Greater Lumbini National Development Directive Committee under the chairmanship of Prachanda is indicative of this. To canvass support for the development of Lumbini, Chinese government-sponsored NGOs have since tried to co-opt prominent Nepal politicians and have appointed Madhav Kumar Nepal and Sujata Koirala to boards of Chinese NGOs. In 2013, the Buddhist Association of China, whose vice-president is the Beijing-selected Panchen Lama, announced plans to take over coordination of the Lumbini project. While more limited in its scope as compared to the APECF proposal, efforts have not moved beyond the planning stages. (Ranade, J., 2017).

Buddhism in current China–India diplomacy:

As in the changing global as well as geopolitical situation, both the rising powers of Asia are trying to increase their influence through their soft power and cultural diplomacy, Buddhism has emerged as an important tool for to serve the purpose. Besides other pan-Indian countries, China was also a major oriental civilization that came in contact with India through the spread of Buddhism. With the global and regional resurgence of Buddhism, besides the countries have started paying attention to their age-old cultural and religious ties through Buddhism, they have also started connecting to the non-tangible links like Buddhist ideology for connecting the people across continents and move towards a harmonious and peaceful world. Both India and China have shown a competitive approach towards revival of Buddhism seeking attention and influence in other Asian countries.

Future prospects:

In present global scenario, China and India are in the competition of becoming the brand ambassador of Buddhism. We have already witnessed from the above-mentioned examples that how both India and China are trying to attract the world, especially the Asian Buddhist countries by playing their cards of Buddhism. Xi's transformation into a Buddhist guardian is assisting him in effectively promoting China as a respectable world power with a benign image. Buddhist globalisation aids Beijing's economic projects, and religious diplomacy assists China win economic and infrastructure projects in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and other countries. As argued by P. Stobdan, China is running far ahead India in the race of making the use of Buddhism to spread its influence:

China's latest initiative, the OBOR, is also nothing but the 'political geography of Buddhism'. Nepal is proposing to link the OBOR with Buddha's birthplace, Lumbini. Pakistan is reviving the 'Gandhara trail' to link the Lahore, Taxila and Peshawar networks. Taxila relics are being sent to Sri Lanka for a public exposition during the Vesak month. If Sri Lankan monks visit Taxila to celebrate purnima, top Bhutanese monks visit the Saidu Sharif monastery in Swat Valley (the birthplace of Guru Padmasambava)" (P. Stobdan, 2017).

In both India and China, Buddhism is also liked with the latent potential of the tourism industry as well as other sectors.

Limitations and Challenges for China:

- 1) Religious freedom in atheist China!
- 2) Contradictory with the socialist nature of society.
- 3) Tibetan separatist Buddhist threat.

Limitations of India:

- 1) Decline of Buddhism in India, with comprising hardly 1% of total population.
- 2) Buddhism considered as a part of Hindu culture and religion.
- 3) Improper care and protection of the Buddhist sites, heritages and museums.

Conclusions:

Even if not as a religious practice but still as a spiritual connect and philosophical thought it has created a great influence on the people of western countries without abandoning their own faith or religion.

As per my understanding, playing of Buddhism card by the Socialist People's Republic of China does not intend to support the religious freedom in China. Of course, they just want to use it as a point of cultural coherence and a solid bridge to connect a strong bonding with the Buddhist nations of East and South East Asia. Although, with its economic and strategic strengths and making use of its global infrastructure initiatives, the growing super power China intends to hijack the Indian treasure of Buddhist diplomacy, it is also facing its own limitations of domestic issues of human rights, separatism as well as the Communist party's control on the religious rights of people which pulls China's hefty investments towards the impression of party propaganda and raises a doubt on the intention on the authoritative government. On the other hand, even being a late riser and facing the domestic tussle between Hinduism and Buddhism, India still enjoys the upper hand over China simply because of being the land of origin of Buddhism and due to its natural spiritual connect with peoples of different Buddhist countries.

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