

India's Spiritual Linkages with ASEAN Countries: Analysing the Influence of Buddhism in the 21st Century

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63345/ijrhrs.net.v14.i4.5>

Jay Koche

PhD Scholar, Department of South and Central Asian Studies

Central University of Punjab

Bathinda, India

jaykoche23@gmail.com

Anjana V.S.

PhD Scholar, Department of South and Central Asian Studies

Central University of Punjab

Bathinda, India

anjanavs228@gmail.com

Ashish Kumar

PhD Scholar, Department of South and Central Asian Studies

Central University of Punjab

Bathinda, India

ashish.naryal01@gmail.com

Abstract— The article views Buddhism as a factor in the continuation of India-ASEAN relations, focusing on its role as a medium for cultural diplomacy and people-to-people interactions. The study embarks upon a historical account of the Buddhist linkages between India and Southeast Asia to demonstrate how Buddhism adapted to the local cultures. It then analyses contemporary initiatives such as pilgrimage tourism, cultural festivals, and institutional collaborations that leverage Buddhism to draw closer ties. The article also explores India's challenges in utilising Buddhism as a diplomatic tool, including religious diversity within ASEAN, geopolitical competition with China's Buddhist diplomacy, and the cultural sensitivities of secular governance in the region. A comparative analysis of India and China's approaches to Buddhist diplomacy underscores the need for India to articulate its historical legacy while addressing

contemporary strategic concerns. The findings suggest that Buddhism plays a tremendously strong pillar in India's cultural and spiritual diplomacy with ASEAN. To fully realise this potential, India must strengthen its multilateral engagements, enlarge Buddhist tourism circuits, and emphasise shared spiritual values. This study contributes to the broader discourses on soft power diplomacy and highlights Buddhism's enduring relevance as a bridge for transregional cooperation in a multipolar world.

Keywords— Soft Power, Cultural Diplomacy, Buddhist Diplomacy, India, ASEAN, China, Act East Policy

Introduction

India's historical, cultural, and spiritual ties with Southeast Asia are deeply intertwined with the spread of Buddhism.

This religious and philosophical tradition originated in the Indian subcontinent and profoundly shaped the socio-religious background of many ASEAN nations. As the birthplace of Buddhism, India has historically served as the spiritual nucleus from which Buddhist teachings, practices, and cultural traditions radiated outward, shaping the civilisations of regions that today form the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Reddy & Reddy, 2023). While Buddhism declined in India over the centuries, its influence remained strong in many parts of Southeast Asia, where it became deeply embedded in governance structures, artistic expressions, and the daily lives of the people. Today, as India seeks to revitalise its historical Buddhist connections, there is a renewed emphasis on leveraging this shared spiritual heritage to strengthen cultural and diplomatic ties with ASEAN nations (Dash, 2023). The origins of Buddhism can be traced back to the 4th-5th century BCE, when Siddhartha Gautama, later known as the Buddha, attained enlightenment and began disseminating his teachings on suffering, impermanence, and the path to liberation. As the land where Buddha lived and preached, India became the centre of Buddhist philosophy, monastic traditions, and scriptural developments. The early spread of Buddhism beyond India was facilitated by royal patronage, trade networks, and missionary efforts, particularly under the Mauryan emperor Ashoka (268-232 BCE). Ashoka's role in promoting Buddhism through inscriptions, dispatching emissaries, and establishing monasteries laid the foundations for its expansion beyond the Indian subcontinent (Zhang, 2012). Due to its geographic proximity and status as a hub of ancient maritime trade, Southeast Asia became a key recipient of Buddhist influence.

The transmission of Buddhism from India to Southeast Asia followed multiple channels, including land routes through the Indo-China corridor and maritime networks connecting the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea. Traders, monks, and scholars from India introduced Buddhist teachings, architectural styles, and scriptural traditions to Southeast Asian polities (Phan, 2023). Indian Buddhist texts,

particularly those in Pali and Sanskrit, were transmitted to local populations, influencing indigenous religious thoughts and institutional frameworks. Over time, local rulers adopted Buddhist principles in governance, viewing themselves as "Dharmarajas" or righteous kings, a concept deeply rooted in Indian political philosophy (Murphy & Lefferts, 2017). Integrating the Buddhist philosophy into law, ethics, and statecraft further reinforced the region's spiritual ties with India. Despite Southeast Asia's diverse cultural and religious traditions, Buddhism emerged as a unifying force across various polities. In Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos, Theravada Buddhism became the dominant tradition, with its monastic and scriptural practices closely linked to the Indian Pali Canon (Keyes, 2016). On the other hand, Vietnam absorbed Mahayana influences, which arrived through maritime exchanges linking India to China and beyond (Andaya, 2021). Even in Indonesia, where Hindu-Buddhist traditions flourished before the rise of Islam, the legacy of Indian Buddhism is evident in historical sites such as Borobudur, one of the largest Buddhist monuments in the world (Andujar, 2020). These enduring spiritual and cultural linkages highlight the depth of India's historical role in shaping ASEAN's Buddhist heritage.

In the modern era, Buddhism continues to serve as a bridge between India and ASEAN countries, facilitating cultural exchanges, academic collaborations, and diplomatic engagements. India's renewed interest in Buddhist diplomacy reflects its recognition of Buddhism's potential as a soft-power tool for strengthening regional ties. Initiatives such as advancing Buddhist tourism, restoring ancient Buddhist sites, and participating in international Buddhist forums demonstrate India's commitment to revitalising spiritual connections with ASEAN nations (Gupta et al., 2019). Pilgrimage routes to sacred Buddhist sites in India, such as Bodhi Gaya, Sarnath, and Kushinagar, attract thousands of Buddhist devotees from Southeast Asia, underscoring India's significance as a spiritual homeland for Buddhist-majority nations (Shinde, 2024). Additionally, institutions such as Nalanda University have been revived to foster Buddhist

studies and academic exchanges between India and ASEAN countries (Pinkney, 2015). India's Buddhist diplomacy also extends to its engagement with ASEAN at multilateral levels. Forums such as the International Buddhist Confederation (IBC) and the ASEAN-India Buddhist Conference provide platforms for dialogue and cooperation on shared religious and cultural heritage (PIB, 2024). The Indian government has actively supported Buddhist initiatives in ASEAN nations, including funding the restoration of temples (Kuzmenchuk & Xavier, 2025; Ministry of Culture, n.d.), facilitating Buddhist educational programmes, and hosting international Buddhist summits (PIB, 2025). These efforts align with India's broader strategy to enhance its cultural and diplomatic footprint in Southeast Asia, reinforcing historical ties while promoting people-to-people connectivity. Beyond cultural and spiritual dimensions, the resurgence of Buddhism in India-ASEAN relations also has geopolitical implications. The growing interest in Buddhist diplomacy reflects India's broader strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific, seeking to balance regional influence while fostering deeper connections with ASEAN nations (Kishwar, 2023). As Southeast Asia remains a region of strategic importance in global geopolitics, India's ability to leverage its Buddhist heritage to strengthen regional partnerships becomes increasingly relevant (Donnellon-May & Joshi, 2024). The cultural resonance of Buddhism offers a non-political and historically rooted avenue for India to expand its influence and reinforce its position as a key player in the region's evolving geopolitical landscape (Mahaseth & Khatoon, 2024). At the same time, ASEAN's Buddhist-majority nations have reciprocated India's outreach by actively engaging in Buddhist collaborations with Indian institutions. Buddhist monks frequently visit India for spiritual training and academic research, while Southeast Asian governments support initiatives to promote the conservation of Buddhist heritage and pilgrimage tourism (Shinde, 2025). These exchanges strengthen cultural diplomacy and contribute to the broader goal of fostering regional harmony and interfaith dialogue (Geary, 2024). The emphasis on Buddhist heritage as a shared civilisational link

underscores the enduring relevance of India's historical role in shaping Southeast Asia's religious and cultural identity.

Despite these positive developments, challenges remain in fully realising the potential of Buddhism as a diplomatic tool in India-ASEAN relations. While India has made significant strides in promoting Buddhist tourism and cultural exchanges, there is a need for greater institutional support and long-term investment in the preservation of Buddhist heritage. Additionally, the competition from other regional players, particularly China, which has been actively promoting Buddhist diplomacy, poses challenges to India's leadership in this domain (Scott, 2016). China's engagements with Buddhist-majority ASEAN nations, particularly through the influence of Tibetan Buddhism and the support for Buddhist infrastructure projects, underscore the need for India to enhance its Buddhist diplomatic initiatives to maintain its historical and cultural edge. Nevertheless, Buddhism remains a powerful symbol of India's historical and spiritual connections with ASEAN, offering a unique avenue for deepening bilateral and multilateral ties. As the 21st century unfolds, Buddhism's role in India-ASEAN relations will likely expand, driven by increased cultural exchanges, institutional collaborations, and diplomatic engagements. India's continued emphasis on Buddhist heritage and its active participation in regional Buddhist initiatives will be crucial in shaping the future trajectory of its relations with ASEAN's Buddhist-majority nations.

Theoretical Framework

The second aspect of power, which occurs when one country persuades other countries to want what it wants, may be referred to as co-optive or soft power, as opposed to hard or command power, which involves ordering others to do what it wants. Co-optive power, or getting others to want what you want, and soft power resources, such as cultural attraction, ideology, and international institutions, are not new (Nye, 1990). During the early post-war period, the Soviet Union benefited greatly from soft resources such as communist ideology, the myth of inevitability, and transnational

communist organisations. Several current trends are emphasising the importance of cooperative behaviour and soft power resources. Co-optive power is a country's ability to shape a situation so that other countries develop preferences or define their interests in ways that are consistent with its own (Nye, 1990). This power is typically derived from cultural and ideological attractions, as well as international regime rules and institutions. The United States wields more cooperative power than other countries. The success of Japan's manufacturing sector provides an important source of soft power, but the country's inward-oriented culture limits it. While Japan has been extremely successful in accepting foreign technology, it has been far less willing to accept foreigners. Cultural insensitivity has hampered Japan's relations with China. Many Japanese are concerned about their lack of "internationalisation" and inability to communicate a broader message (Nye, 1990). On the other hand, Western European countries derive soft power from democratic institutions, but America's relative openness to immigrants in comparison to Japan and Europe provides an additional source of strength. According to European scholar Ralf Dahrendorf, it is "relevant that millions of people all over the world would wish to live in the United States and that indeed people are prepared to risk their lives in order to get there." Maintaining this appeal is crucial (Nye, 1990).

Soft power refers to the ability to influence others' preferences, also known as "the second face of power." In the business world, smart executives understand that leadership entails not only issuing commands, but also leading by example and attracting others to do what you want (Nye, 2004). Managing a large organisation solely through commands is difficult. Soft power promotes cooperation through shared values and a sense of duty to achieve them, rather than using force or money. A country's soft power is primarily based on its culture, political values, and foreign policies, which are perceived as legitimate and have moral authority. Culture is the set of values and practices that provide meaning to a society (Nye, 2004). It has numerous manifestations. It is common to distinguish between high

culture, namely, literature, art, and education, which appeals to elites, and popular culture. Promoting universal values in a country's culture and policies creates a sense of attraction and duty, increasing the likelihood of achieving desired results. Some sceptics object to the concept of soft power because they define power as commands or active control. In their opinion, imitation or attraction are merely that, not power (Nye, 2004). Imitation is not always effective in shaping policy outcomes, and it does not always yield desirable results.

Therefore, Joseph Nye's concept of soft power seems an excellent theoretical framework for examining India's spiritual linkages with ASEAN nations, especially in light of Buddhism's influence in the twenty-first century. According to Nye, soft power is a nation's capacity to influence other people's preferences by attraction as opposed to coercion or force. It functioned through morally and legally sound foreign policy, political values, and culture. Soft power theory provides important insights into how India leverages this shared spiritual heritage to strengthen its diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties with ASEAN countries, given the historical diffusion of Buddhism from India to Southeast Asia and its ongoing appeal in the region.

Historical Foundation of India-ASEAN Buddhist Linkages

Buddhism, which originated in India in the 5th-6th century BCE with the teaching of Gautam Buddha, gradually spread beyond the Indian Subcontinent and found a stronghold in Southeast Asia. This transmission occurred through two major routes: maritime sea routes and overland routes, which facilitated not only religious dissemination but also cultural and economic exchanges. The movement of Buddhist monks, traders, and scholars played a significant role in this diffusion, leaving a lasting impact on Southeast Asia's religious and cultural landscape (Kitagawa, 2002).

The Maritime Silk Route, which connected India with Southeast Asia, China, and beyond, played a crucial role in

the spread of Buddhism. This network of trade routes allowed the movement of Buddhist ideas, texts, and relics alongside commercial goods. Indian traders, sailors, and monks carried Buddhist teaching from major coastal centres of India to the Kingdoms of Southeast Asia, where they were embraced and adapted into local tradition (Verma, 2021). Tamil Nadu was one of the major launching points for Buddhist missionary activities towards Southeast Asia. The region had flourishing ports like Kaveripattinam and Nagapattinam, which served as hubs for trade and religious exchange. Several inscriptions and archaeological remains indicate that South Indian traders, along with Buddhist monks, travelled to Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Indonesia, carrying Buddhist texts and relics. The Tamil merchant guilds known as Manigramam and Ayyavole played a significant role in establishing Buddhist contacts overseas (Krech & Steinicke, 2012). These merchant organisations facilitated long-distance trade, connecting South India with regions like Sumatra, Java, and the Malay Peninsula, where Buddhist teaching took root. Tamil inscription in Southeast Asia provides evidence of these cultural and religious exchanges, highlighting the role of South Indian traders in promoting Buddhism (Krech & Steinicke, 2012).

Odisha's Tamralipti, located in present-day West Bengal but historically part of Odisha's trade network, was an important centre for maritime trade and religious travel. Buddhist monks, including Faxian and Xuanzang from China, used Tamralipti as a major port from where monks embarked on journeys to Southeast Asia. Buddhist relics and scriptures were transported from Odisha to other parts of Asia, strengthening religious and cultural ties between India and Southeast Asia. The Buddhist influence in Odisha is evident in major sites such as Ratnagiri, Udayagiri, and Lalitgiri, which were thriving centres of Buddhist learning and pilgrimage (Saha et al., 2023). These sites played a crucial role in the transmission of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhist traditions to regions such as Java and Sumatra. Bengal's Chittagong and Samatata had active maritime connections with Myanmar and the Malay Peninsula. The Samatata

region, located in present-day Bangladesh, had a significant Buddhist influence, as seen in inscription and sculpture (Bhuyan, 2023). The Trade links between Chittagong and Myanmar facilitated Buddhist interaction, leading to the establishment of monastic communities in Southeast Asia. The Buddhist legacy of Bengal is further evident in sites like Mainamati and Paharpur, which were significant Buddhist monastic centres that influenced religious practices in Myanmar and Thailand. Bengal's Strategic location allowed it to serve as a gateway for Buddhism to reach the Burmese Kingdoms, where it is merged with local tradition to form a distinct Theravada Buddhist culture (Chakma, 2011).

Buddhism reached Myanmar through maritime roots via the Bay of Bengal. Indian merchants and monks travelling from Odisha, Bengal, and Tamil Nadu brought Theravada Buddhism, which was later reinforced by contacts with Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition. The early Mon people of Myanmar were among the first to embrace Buddhism, and by the 5th century CE, Buddhism had become well-established in the region. Indian-style stupas, with inscriptions in Pali and Sanskrit, demonstrated the deep Buddhist interaction between India and Myanmar via land routes. The city of Bagan, which flourished between the 9th and 13th centuries, became a major centre of Theravada Buddhism, influenced by Indian and Sri Lankan traditions. Bagan's thousands of Buddhist stupas and temples stand as a testament to the enduring legacy of Indian Buddhist influence in Myanmar (Bapat, 1956).

Indian traders and monks introduced Buddhist teaching to the Dharavati Kingdom, which flourished in present-day central Thailand between the 6th and 11th centuries. Theravada Buddhism gained prominence, particularly through exchange with the Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition. Indian influence reached Cambodia via the sea route, introducing both Hinduism and Buddhism. The Funan Kingdom (1st – 6th century CE) was one of the earliest Southeast Asian states to embrace Indian cultural and religious influences. By the 9th century, Buddhism had become a dominant force in

Cambodia, as seen in the construction of great Buddhist temples such as Angkor Wat, which later became a Buddhist site after being transformed from a Hindu to a Buddhist site. The Khmer Empire (9th-15th century CE) further solidified Buddhist influence in Cambodia, blending Mahayana and Theravada traditions into its religious landscape (Chairapravati,2000).

In Indonesia, Buddhism spread to Sumatra and Java through maritime trade. The Sri Vijaya Empire (7th-13th century CE) in Sumatra became a major centre of Mahayana Buddhism, with close ties to India and China. The famous Buddhist monastery at Borobudur, built in the 9th century, reflects strong Indian and Southeast Asian influences, indicating the depth of Buddhist transmission via the sea route. Srivijaya served as a key hub for Buddhist scholars travelling between India and China. A prominent Buddhist monk, like Atisha, who later played a significant role in Tibetan Buddhism, studied in Srivijaya before travelling to Tibet (Wiyanti, 2018).

In addition to maritime routes, Buddhism also spread through overland routes connecting India to Southeast Asia. These routes facilitated the movement of monks, scholars, and pilgrims, helping to establish monastic centres and propagate Buddhist teaching across the border. One of the most important land routes connecting India with Myanmar and Southeast Asia passes through Northeast India, particularly Assam and Manipur. Buddhist influences in this region are evident from ancient inscriptions and archaeological remains. Buddhist monks from India travelled through this route to reach Myanmar and beyond. Manipur's historical connection with Myanmar allowed the spread of Buddhist tradition, and the presence of Buddhist relics and inscriptions in Assam attests to its role as a transmission corridor (Sen, 2015).

The Pala Empire (8th - 12th century CE) in Bengal was a great patron of Mahayana Buddhism. This led to significant Buddhist exchanges between Bengal and Myanmar, particularly with the Pyu and Mon civilisation, which adopted the Indian Buddhist tradition. The Pala-period Nalanda and

Vikramashila monasteries trained Southeast Asian monks who carried Buddhist teaching back to their homelands. These monasteries attracted scholars from across Asia, fostering cross-cultural exchanges that enriched Buddhist philosophy and practice in Southeast Asia (Taufiq Elahi, 2018).

Buddhism also entered Southeast Asia from China via Yunnan (Southwest China). Chinese Buddhist travellers such as Faxian (5th century CE) and Xuanzang (7th century CE) documented the movement of Indian Buddhist monks along this route. From China, Buddhism spread to Vietnam, where it developed under the Chinese influence while retaining some Indian elements. The overland routes brought Buddhism from Myanmar into Thailand and Laos (Stuart-Fox, 2021). The influence of Indian Buddhist traditions can be seen in the early development of Thai and Laotian scripts, monastic practices, and temple architecture. Unlike other Southeast Asian countries, Vietnam primarily received Buddhism through China. However, Mahayana Buddhist teachings from India also travelled along the Silk Road and reached Vietnam via Yunnan, creating a blend of Indian and Chinese Buddhist traditions (Ray, 2019).

India's Buddhist Diplomacy under the Act East Policy

India's Act East Policy, launched in 2014, aims to strengthen economic, strategic and cultural ties with Southeast Asia. Within this framework, Buddhism has emerged as a crucial element of India's soft power diplomacy, reinforcing historical linkage and fostering deeper connections with ASEAN countries. The shift from historical connections to a strategic soft power approach has led to significant initiatives, such as the promotion of Buddhist tourism, the revival of ancient Buddhist centres, and educational collaboration in Buddhist studies (Kesavan, 2020). Historically, India and Southeast Asia shared deep cultural and religious ties, primarily through Buddhism. However, contemporary Indian diplomacy under the Act East policy seeks to leverage Buddhism as a soft power tool to enhance political and

economic relations. The promotion of Buddhist heritage serves multiple diplomatic functions (Kishwar, 2018).

Bodh Gaya, the site of Buddha's enlightenment, continue to be a focal point of India's Buddhist diplomacy. The Indian government has invested significantly in infrastructure development, enhancing pilgrimage experiences for ASEAN visitors. Events Such as the International Buddhist Conclave and the global Buddhist summit have provided platforms for cultural dialogue, strengthening India's position as a key player in Buddhist diplomacy. These initiatives aim to control balance China's Buddhist diplomacy under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), where Beijing has sought to expand its influence through a Buddhist network in countries like Thailand, Myanmar, and Cambodia (Loitongbam, 2021).

India's Buddhist Circuit development program has facilitated international Buddhist tourism, linking key pilgrimage sites across India, Nepal, Myanmar, and Thailand. The India-Myanmar-Thailand Buddhist corridor has been a particularly important initiative, promoting regional connectivity through religious tourism. Furthermore, India has expanded scholarship programs in Buddhist studies, offering opportunities for ASEAN students to study at institutions such as Nalanda University and Banaras Hindu University. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) has also established academic chairs in Buddhist studies across ASEAN universities to promote Buddhist scholarship and cultural exchanges (ESCAP, 2023).

Recent developments, such as ASEAN leaders' participation in India's Global Buddhist summit in 2023, have reinforced India's diplomatic outreach. India has also collaborated with ASEAN nations on the digitisation of ancient Buddhist manuscripts, ensuring the preservation of shared religious heritage. The commemoration of Buddha Purnima has become an international diplomatic event, with India hosting leaders from Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia to celebrate the occasion, further strengthening diplomatic goodwill. In addition to its engagement with Myanmar, India has actively expanded its Buddhist diplomacy with other ASEAN nations

(Bhonsale, 2019). In 2023, India signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Vietnam to enhance cooperation in Buddhist heritage conservation, further deepening cultural ties. Similarly, Laos and Indonesia have witnessed increased participation in India's Buddhist conclaves, highlighting the growing scope of India's Buddhist outreach beyond traditionally engaged nations. The establishment of new direct air routes between ASEAN Nations and Buddhist sites in India has also improved accessibility, fostering greater people-to-people interaction (Kundu, 2023).

India's engagement with Myanmar through Buddhist diplomacy remains significant, particularly in light of the country's ongoing political crisis. By supporting Buddhist monastic institutions and cultural exchanges, India maintains diplomatic channels with Myanmar's religious and political communities. India has also positioned itself as a key factor in regional peacebuilding efforts, using Buddhist values to advocate for stability and dialogue in Myanmar. Similarly, India's cultural engagement with Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam through Buddhist conclaves and educational partnerships continues to solidify its soft power influence in ASEAN. India has hosted several Buddhist conclaves, including the Dharma-Dhamma Conference, which brought together scholars, monks, and leaders from ASEAN nations. These conferences serve as a diplomatic platform where India reinforces its role as the spiritual home of Buddhism and enhances international cooperation in Buddhist studies, beyond tourism and religious diplomacy. Indian Buddhist monasteries have increased monastic exchanges, where monks from Myanmar, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Cambodia visit India for pilgrimage and study (Kipgen, 2020). Programs such as the Indian-Myanmar Buddhist Sanga initiative promote deeper monistic ties and religious collaboration. India has launched a project to digitise ancient Buddhist manuscripts and texts, making them accessible to scholars worldwide. Collaborations with institutions in Thailand, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka aim to preserve and translate Buddhist scripture, reinforcing India's role as a custodian of Buddhist heritage (Muni & Mishra, 2019).

Regularly, India-ASEAN Buddhist forums facilitated cultural diplomacy and scholarly discussion. These forums explore topics such as Buddhist ethics in governance, interfaith dialogue, and peacebuilding, emphasising Buddhism's relevance in contemporary geopolitics. As India deepens its strategic partnership with ASEAN under the Act East Policy, Buddhist diplomacy remains a key pillar of cultural outreach. Through sustained investment, religious tourism, academic collaboration, and multilateral Buddhist forums, India continues to assert itself as the spiritual home of Buddhism while strengthening its diplomatic footprint in Southeast Asia. The recent integration of Buddhist diplomacy into India's broader Indo-Pacific strategy signals a long-term vision to leverage cultural heritage as a strategic asset in regional geopolitics (Naskar, 2018).

Challenges and Constraints in India's Buddhist Soft Power

China's influence in international Buddhist affairs is one of the main challenges facing India's Buddhist soft power strategy. China has actively promoted Buddhism through organisations like the World Buddhism Forum and has developed relationships with countries that have a majority of Buddhists, like Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand, even though it is not a predominantly Buddhist nation. Furthermore, India's standing in the Buddhist community is weakened by China's authority over Tibetan Buddhism and its efforts to appoint the next Dalai Lama. Also, there is no centralised, well-organised institutional framework for Buddhist diplomacy in India. Buddhist tourism and diplomacy are independently promoted by a number of government agencies, such as the Ministry of External Affairs, the Ministry of Culture, and the Tourism Department, which leads to fragmented efforts. China, on the other hand, has made calculated investments in Buddhist diplomacy through government-supported organisations. Even though India is home to important Buddhist pilgrimage sites, the country suffers from a lack of world-class hospitality services near these sites, poor road conditions, and inadequate

transportation. The efficacy of the Buddhist Circuit, a project to upgrade tourism infrastructure, has been limited by delays and uneven execution. India's position as a global centre of Buddhism is complicated by the presence of other dominant religions, such as Islam and Hinduism, and by its affiliation with the Tibetan Buddhist leadership, especially the Dalai Lama, which creates diplomatic tensions with China and certain Southeast Asian nations that are suspicious of Chinese influence. In addition to China, other nations with majority Buddhist populations, such as Thailand, Japan, and Sri Lanka, also practice Buddhist diplomacy. It is difficult for India to assert a distinct leadership position in Buddhist affairs, for example, because Thailand organises significant Buddhist conferences and Japan provides funding for Buddhist projects throughout Asia. To promote its Buddhist heritage internationally, India has not made the most of digital and media tools. To increase their soft power appeal, nations like China and South Korea have invested in documentaries, cultural programmes, and films with Buddhist themes; in contrast, India's efforts remain patchy and underfunded.

Policy Recommendations for Strengthening India's Buddhist Diplomacy

The government should adopt a multi-faceted strategy integrating cultural, academic, and diplomatic initiatives to strengthen India's Buddhist diplomacy. First, India should enhance its Buddhist tourism infrastructure by improving connectivity to keep pilgrimage sites such as Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar, and Nalanda. Investments in world-class facilities, streamlined visa policies for ASEAN pilgrims, and the development of the "Buddhist Circuit" as a premier international pilgrimage route will significantly boost India's attractiveness as a spiritual destination. Collaborations with ASEAN nations to promote these sites through joint tourism campaigns can further reinforce India's role as the epicentre of global Buddhism. Additionally, India should support the restoration and conservation of Buddhist

heritage sites domestically and in ASEAN countries, strengthening cultural ties through heritage diplomacy.

Academic collaboration is another crucial pillar for deepening India- ASEAN Buddhist engagement. India should expand scholarships, research fellowships, and monastic exchange programs to attract more Buddhist scholars and monks from ASEAN nations. Institutions such as Nalanda University and Sanchi University should be global centres for Buddhist studies, offering interdisciplinary programs integrating Buddhist philosophy, history, and diplomacy. Establishing dedicated Buddhist studies chairs in prominent Indian universities, in partnership with ASEAN institutions, would further solidify India's intellectual leadership in Buddhist scholarship. Additionally, India should host more international Buddhist conferences, creating platforms for dialogue between Buddhist-majority ASEAN nations and Indian scholars, fostering deeper cultural understanding and policy cooperation.

On the diplomatic front, India should institutionalise Buddhist diplomacy within its foreign policy framework by establishing a dedicated "Buddhist Diplomacy Desk" under the Ministry of External Affairs. This office should coordinate Buddhist-related initiatives, including cultural outreach, diplomatic dialogues, and intergovernmental collaborations with ASEAN. Strengthening India's engagement with international Buddhist organisations, such as the International Buddhist Confederation (IBC) and the World Fellowship of Buddhists (WFB), will enhance India's soft power and strengthen its leadership role in global Buddhist affairs. Furthermore, India should explore trilateral Buddhist cooperation with ASEAN and countries like Japan, Sri Lanka, and Mongolia, fostering a broader Buddhist-led regional network that promotes cultural diplomacy and geopolitical collaboration.

Lastly, India must leverage digital and media platforms to amplify its Buddhist diplomacy efforts. Developing virtual Buddhist tourism experiences, interactive educational platforms, and multilingual digital archives of Buddhist texts

will help disseminate India's Buddhist heritage to a global audience. Government-backed documentary films, social media campaigns, and cultural exchange programs showcasing India's Buddhist legacy can further enhance India's outreach. Strengthening India's Buddhist diplomacy requires sustained engagement at multiple levels- governmental, academic, cultural, and technological- ensuring that India remains at the heart of global Buddhist discourse while deepening its strategic and cultural ties with ASEAN nations.

Conclusion

The historical and cultural legacy of Buddhism continues to serve as a profound bridge between India and Southeast Asia. The ancient spread of Buddhist teachings and practices shaped the socio-religious landscapes of ASEAN nations and established enduring connections that resonate in contemporary cultural and diplomatic initiatives. India's status as the birthplace of Buddhism, combined with its rich historical narrative, underscores its pivotal role in running transnational ties.

Modern diplomatic strategies, notably under the Act East Policy, have revitalised this spiritual heritage by integrating Buddhist diplomacy into broader foreign policy goals. Through initiatives such as enhanced Buddhist tourism, academic exchanges, and multilateral religious forums, India is successfully leveraging its cultural assets to strengthen regional partnerships and project soft power in the Indo-Pacific. The efforts have reaffirmed the shared identity and mutual benefits derived from a common Buddhist past, reinforcing people-to-people connectivity and cultural diplomacy.

However, challenges remain in realising the full potential of India's Buddhist soft power. Competing regional influences, infrastructural limitations, and fragmented institutional frameworks pose significant hurdles. Addressing these issues through cohesive policy measures- such as improved heritage conservation, digital outreach, and institutional coordination-

will be essential for maintaining India's leadership in global Buddhist affairs. Ultimately, a strategic and collaborative approach to Buddhist diplomacy promises to preserve a cherished cultural heritage and to bolster sustainable diplomatic engagement and regional stability in Southeast Asia.

References (Zotero)

- Donnellon-May, G., & Joshi, P. (2024). Bringing Buddhism Back as a Component of India's Strategic Culture. *Asia Times*. <http://asiatimes.com/2024/11/bringing-buddhism-back-as-a-component-of-indias-strategic-culture/>
- Geary, D. (2024). 'Made in India': Heritage Diplomacy and the Infrastructure of Buddhist Memory. *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies*, 42(1), Article 1. <https://doi.org/10.22439/cjas.v42i1.7332>
- Kishwar, S. (2023). *The Rising Role of Buddhism in India's Soft Power Strategy*. Observer Research Foundation. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-rising-role-of-buddhism-in-india-s-soft-power-strategy>
- Kuzmenchuk, A., & Xavier, C. (2025). India's Heritage Diplomacy: The Case of Archaeology and Conservation. *Foreign Policy and Security - Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP)*. <https://csep.org/blog/indias-heritage-diplomacy-the-case-of-archaeology-and-conservation/>
- Mahaseth, H., & Khatoon, S. (2024). *Enhancing India's Soft Power Through the Prism of Buddhism*. Hindustan Times. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/ht-insight/international-affairs/enhancing-india-s-soft-power-through-the-prism-of-buddhism-101715428573968.html>
- Ministry of Culture. (n.d.). *Financial Assistance for Development of Buddhist/Tibetan Arts and Culture*. Ministry of Culture, Government of India. Retrieved 22 May 2025, from <https://www.indiaculture.gov.in/financial-assistance-development-buddhisttibetan-arts-and-culture>
- PIB. (2024). *Ministry of Culture and International Buddhist Confederation to Organise the Summit Themes 'Role of Buddha*

Dhamma in Strengthening Asia'. Ministry of Culture, Government of India. <https://www.pib.gov.in/www.pib.gov.in/Pressreleashshare.aspx?PRID=2070376>

- PIB. (2025). *IBC to Organise Two-Day International Conclave in Arunachal Pradesh on 21st & 22nd April 2025*. Ministry of Culture, Government of India. <https://www.pib.gov.in/www.pib.gov.in/Pressreleashshare.aspx?PRID=2121860>
- Shinde, K. (2025). Regional Diversity of Buddhist Heritage Tourism in South Asia and Southeast Asia. *Heritage*, 8(4), Article 4. <https://doi.org/10.3390/heritage8040121>

References

- Andujar, A. E. (2020). Heritage Assemblages. The Heritage Site of Borobudur (Indonesia) as a Cultural Landscape. *Moussons*, 36, 125–161. <https://doi.org/10.4000/moussons.6643>
- Bapat, P. V. (1956). 2500 years of Buddhism. Publications Division Ministry of Information & Broadcasting
- Bhonsale, M. (2019). Religious tourism as soft power: strengthening India's outreach to Southeast Asia. ORF Special Report, 97.
- Bhuyan, R. (2023). Spread of Buddhism in Odisha and its impact on Odishan Culture-A Historical study. RESEARCH JOURNAL OF BERHAMPUR UNIVERSITY, 62.
- Chakma, N. K. (2011). Buddhism in Bengal: A brief survey. *Bangladesh e-Journal of Sociology*, 8(1), 37-44.
- Chirapravati, P. (2000). Development of Buddhist traditions in Peninsular Thailand: a study based on votive tablets (seventh to eleventh centuries). *Studies in Southeast Asian Art, Essays in Honor of Stanley J. O'Connor*. Southeast Asia Programme. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University.
- Dash, S. (2023). Religious Diplomacy. In S. Dash, *Cultural Dimensions of India's Look-Act East Policy* (pp. 117–166). Springer Nature Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-3529-9_4
- ESCAP, U. (2003). Promotion of Buddhist tourism circuits in selected Asian countries.
- Gupta, S., et al. (2019). Indian Foreign Policy Under Modi: A New Brand or Just Repackaging? *International Studies Perspectives*, 20(1), 1–45. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/eky008>
- Kesavan, K. V. (2020). India's 'Act East' policy and regional cooperation. India and South Korea: Exploring new avenues, outlining goals, 7.

- Keyes, C. (2016). Theravada Buddhism and Buddhist Nationalism: Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Thailand. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 14(4), 41–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2016.1248497>
- Kipgen, N. (2020). India–ASEAN relations: the initiatives, successes, and challenges. *India Review*, 19(3), 207–222.
- Kishwar, S. (2018). The rising role of Buddhism in India's soft power strategy. Observer Research Foundation (Issue Brief), 228, 1–12.
- Kitagawa, J. M. (2002). *The religious traditions of Asia: Religion, history, and culture*. Routledge.
- Krech, V., & Steinicke, M. (2012). Dynamics in the history of religions between Asia and Europe: Encounters, notions, and comparative perspectives. BRILL. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004225350>
- Kundu, S. (2023). ASEAN-India Relations at 30: Cooperation, Challenges and Prospects. *Thirty Years of ASEAN-India Relations*, 23–49.
- Loitongbam, B. S. (2021). Bridging North East India and ASEAN: An Examination of Buddhist Circuit's Role in the Promotion of Tourism Industry. *Journal of Politics and Governance*, 11(1), 202–225.
- Muni, S. D., & Mishra, R. (2019). *India's eastward engagement: from antiquity to Act East Policy*. SAGE Publications Pvt Ltd.
- Murphy, S. A., & Lefferts, H. L. (2017). *Globalizing Indian Religions and Southeast Asian Localisms: Incentives for the Adoption of Buddhism and Brahmanism in 1st Millennium CE Southeast Asia* (T. Hodos, Ed.; pp. 768–788). Routledge. <https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/34544/>
- Naskar, I. (2018). Act east policy and India's cultural diplomacy with ASEAN. In *Celebrating the Third Decade and Beyond* (pp. 31–52). Routledge.
- Nye, J. S. (1990). Soft Power. *Foreign Policy*, (80), 153–171. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580>
- Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Public Affairs.
- Phan, T. L. (2023). The Origin of Buddhism in Southeast Asia. *BUDDHO*, 2(4), 9–22. retrieved from <https://so13.tcj-thaijo.org/index.php/Buddho/article/view/1508>
- Pinkney, A. M. (2015). Looking West to India: Asian Education, Intra-Asian Renaissance, and the Nalanda Revival. *Modern Asian Studies*, 49(1), 111–149. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X13000310>
- Ray, H. P. (2019). Buddhist monuments across the Bay of Bengal: Cultural routes and maritime networks. *TRANS: Trans-Regional and-National Studies of Southeast Asia*, 7(2), 159–180.
- Reddy, C. S., & Reddy, P. K. (2023). Revisiting India-ASEAN Historical and Cultural Linkages. *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues*, 27(2), 50–61. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48749435>
- Saha, P. K., & Minz, S. M. Historical Importance of Tamralipta in the Spread of Buddhism in Coastal Bengal and Its Impact on Southeast Asia.
- Scott, D. (2016). Buddhism in Current China-India Diplomacy. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 45(3), 139–174. <https://doi.org/10.1177/186810261604500305>
- Sen, T. (2015). *The spread of Buddhism*.
- Shinde, K. (2024). Managing Buddhist Cultural Heritage for Tourism in India. In A. Trono, V. Castronuovo, & P. Kosmas (Eds.), *Managing Natural and Cultural Heritage for a Durable Tourism* (pp. 365–381). Springer Nature Switzerland. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-52041-9_25
- Stuart-Fox, M. (2021). *A short history of China and Southeast Asia: tribute, trade and influence*. Allen & Unwin.
- Taufiq Elahi, K. (2018). Study of the Buddhist Viharas during Pala dynasty in Bengal.
- Thu, D. T. (2021). ASEAN–India Relations: A Soft Power Approach. In *ASEAN and India–ASEAN Relations*. Routledge.
- Verma, A. K. (2021). Spread of Buddhism and Peace in Southeast Asia. *Journal of Asia Pacific Studies*, 6(2).
- Watson Andaya, B. (2021). Religion and Commerce in Southeast Asia. In B. Watson Andaya, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.013.545>
- Wiyanarti, E. (2018, April). River and Civilization in Sumatera's Historical Perspective in the 7th to 14th Centuries. In IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science (Vol. 145, No. 1, p. 012123). IOP Publishing.
- Zhang, J. (2012). *Buddhist Diplomacy: History and Status Quo*. Figueroa Press.