



Policy Brief

Culture, Buddhism & Soft Power India's Religious Diplomacy in Sri Lanka – A Veiled Influence?

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Executive Summary

Given its centrality to the heritage of Buddha civilisation, India uses culture and Buddhism as instruments of soft power in the projection of its foreign policy, aiming to maintain regional hegemony. India claims to uphold the principles of non-coercion and peaceful coexistence inherent in the Buddhist faith, which it considers integral to its aspirations of becoming a great power. However, this approach appears to serve the underlying objective of consolidating India's political influence in South Asia. Sri Lanka regards Buddhism as a fundamental element of its national identity and cultural heritage. Pakistan, too, holds significant potential to develop and promote religious and cultural tourism by attracting Buddhist visitors. However, it has yet to fully leverage its rich Buddhist heritage to project its soft power capabilities. Pakistan, however, has not effectively utilised its Buddhist legacy as a strategic cultural asset in regional diplomacy and international engagement.

Following are the brief recommendations:

- The National Heritage and Culture Division should actively celebrate significant Buddhist festivals such as Vesak, observed on May 1 (also known as Buddha Jayanti, Buddha Purnima, or Buddha Day).
- The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting should initiate targeted media campaigns to promote Pakistan's Buddhist religious and cultural heritage to attract Sri Lankan tourists and Buddhist monks.
- The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting of Pakistan, in collaboration with the Ministry of Buddhasasana, Religious and Cultural Affairs of Sri Lanka, should develop a joint social media campaign aimed at engaging Buddhist pilgrims, cultural enthusiasts, and history aficionados of Sri Lanka interested in Pakistan's Buddhist heritage.
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should develop virtual tours and digital content showcasing Pakistan's Buddhist heritage sites, enabling Sri Lankan audiences to explore these historical and cultural landmarks online. Additionally, there is a need to create user-friendly applications or websites in Sinhala, Tamil, and Urdu to enhance accessibility to information on Buddhist religious tourism. The

link to these digital platforms should be made available on the official website of the High Commission of Pakistan in Colombo.

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Overview

India uses culture and Buddhism as instruments of soft power in the projection of its foreign policy, aiming to maintain regional hegemony. India claims to uphold the principles of non-coercion and peaceful coexistence inherent in the Buddhist faith, which it considers integral to its aspirations of becoming a great power. However, this approach appears to serve the underlying objective of consolidating India's political influence in South and East Asia, as evidenced by the cancellation of the SAARC summit in 2016, when five member states, including Sri Lanka, aligned with India's stance. Sri Lanka regards Buddhism as a fundamental element of its national identity and cultural heritage. Unlike India, Pakistan neither aspires to regional hegemony nor instrumentalises its Buddhist heritage to influence Sri Lanka's internal policy-making or disrupt the regional political balance.

Issue to be Analysed

To analyse the use of Buddhism as a tool of India's soft power projection in its diplomatic engagements with Sri Lanka, with the underlying objective of asserting political influence over Lanka's internal decision-making process.

Analysis

Although India has a relatively small Buddhist population, it holds several advantages which facilitate the advancement of its Buddhist diplomacy. First, India is the historical cradle of Buddhism, with deep-rooted cultural and religious connections to the faith. Second, it is home to many revered Buddhist sites, such as Nalanda, Sarnath, and Bodh Gaya, which attract pilgrims and scholars from across the world.¹ Thirdly, the presence of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile in Dharamshala, resulting from their conflict with the Chinese government, has bolstered India's image as a protector of the persecuted and an advocate of religious freedom.

¹ Ankit Mohonto, "Buddhism and India's Soft Power Diplomacy," Vivekananda International Foundation, March 31, 2023, accessed July 15, 2025, <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2023/march/31/buddhism-and-indias-soft-power-diplomacy>

The intersection of Buddhism and statecraft in India is not a recent phenomenon; it traces back to Ashoka's policy of Dharmavijaya (conquest through righteousness). In the contemporary era, Buddhist diplomacy is also aligned with India's broader foreign policy strategies, including the "Act East" and "Neighbourhood First" initiatives, wherein Buddhism is leveraged as a tool of soft power to foster regional cooperation and cultural affinity.²

India regards itself as occupying a leading position within the global Buddhist order. The Indian government has initiated cultural and educational-related initiatives by emphasising the country's historical ties to Buddhism. It has revived Nalanda University as a pan-Asian initiative, aiming to position it as a cultural hub of Asia.³ To attract more tourists to unique Buddhist religious or historical sites, the Indian Ministry of Tourism has developed special travel routes called "Buddhist tourist circuits." These routes are not limited to just one country — they extend across international borders, connecting Buddhist sites in multiple countries, including Sri Lanka.

India and Sri Lanka share a deep-rooted connection through the common thread of Buddhism. Buddhism has flourished more prominently in Sri Lanka than in India. In Sri Lanka, over 70 per cent of the population practices Buddhism. Recognising the religion's profound cultural significance in Sri Lanka, the Indian government has leveraged this shared heritage to strengthen its bilateral relations with Sri Lanka.

India seeks to convey to the Sri Lankan populace that Buddhism serves as a vital instrument for fostering cultural integration and strengthening historical ties between the two nations. In an effort to strengthen Buddhist linkages with neighbouring Sri Lanka, India facilitates Sri Lankan Buddhist pilgrimages and regularly organises cultural exchange initiatives to promote shared religious and cultural heritage. Emphasising the people-to-people ties and the shared Buddhist heritage between India and Sri Lanka, the revered relics of Buddha from Kapilavastu (discovered in India in 1970) have been exhibited in Sri Lanka on two notable

² Mohonto, "Buddhism and India's Soft Power Diplomacy."

³ Harsh Mahaseth & Sadqua Khatoon, "Enhancing India's soft power through the prism of Buddhism," *Hindustan Times*, May 12, 2024, accessed July 21, 2025, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/ht-insight/international-affairs/enhancing-india-s-soft-power-through-the-prism-of-buddhism-101715428573968.html>

occasions.⁴ The first exhibition took place in 1978, attracting nearly 10 million devotees. In 2012, at the request of then-President Mahinda Rajapaksa, the relics were once again sent to Sri Lanka to mark the 2600th anniversary of the Buddha's Enlightenment.⁵ India announced the provision of specialised scholarships to attract the Buddhist community of Sri Lanka, including support for students pursuing advanced studies in Buddhism, as well as one-year fellowships specifically designated for members of the Buddhist community to pursue Sanskrit at Indian academic institutions.⁶

Assessing Modi's Buddhist Diplomacy

Modi has a clear intention to leverage Buddhism as a means of strengthening India's cultural diplomacy. This approach aims to enhance India's pro-Buddhist image globally and employ Buddhist soft power as an instrument for advancing the country's national interests. After assuming office in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi undertook visits to several Buddhist-majority countries, where he addressed constituent assemblies, academic institutions, conferences and student bodies. Through these engagements, he consistently projected India as the land of Buddha, highlighting the shared philosophical foundations of Hinduism and Buddhism in their emphasis on peace. He framed this narrative within the broader context of India's commitment to global peace and non-violence.

Modi has consistently promoted Buddhism as a cornerstone of India's civilizational identity. He often references the teachings of the Buddha in his speeches. Notably, in his address to the United Nations, he asserted, 'Bharat ne duniya ko Buddha diya hai, yuddh nahi' (India has given the world Buddha, not war), highlighting India's claims that it is committed to peace and non-violence through its Buddhist legacy.⁷

Modi has strategically employed Buddhism as a diplomatic tool to foster deeper and more constructive engagement with Sri Lanka. He is promoting a narrative

⁴ "Brief on India - Sri Lanka Cultural Relations," High commission of India, Colombo, accessed July 21, 2015, <https://www.hcicolombo.gov.in/page/india-sri-lanka-cultural-relations/>

⁵ "Brief on India - Sri Lanka Cultural Relations," High commission of India.

⁶ Shantesh Kumar Singh & Ravi Shankar Raj, "India's Soft Power and Buddhist Diplomacy: A Study of Investment and Initiatives" in *Changing Dynamics of India's Foreign Policy: Challenges and Way Ahead*, ed. Dr. Palu Joshi (Delhi: ACS PUBLISHER, 2025), 27.

⁷ Singh & Raj, "India's Soft Power and Buddhist Diplomacy." 28.

intended to convince the Sri Lankan community that India's commitment to peaceful coexistence and non-violence reflects the core principles of the Buddha's teachings. During his visit to Sri Lanka in 2015, Modi, in his address at the Mahabodhi Society of Sri Lanka in Colombo, underscored the unifying role of Buddhism by stating that 'Buddha unites us all.' The visit aimed to foster religious and cultural linkages between the two nations and represented a broader initiative to enhance India's religious soft power diplomacy.⁸

In May 2018, Modi participated in the Buddha Jayanti celebrations organised by the Ministry of Culture in collaboration with the International Buddhist Confederation. On this occasion, he also offered "Sangh Dana" (alms) to visiting Buddhist monks from Sri Lanka, symbolising India's commitment to fostering Buddhist ties.⁹

The Modi government also approved a US\$15 million grant to Sri Lanka in 2020 for the construction and restoration of Buddhist temples, facilitating cultural exchanges, promoting archaeological collaboration, and enabling the reciprocal exhibition of the Buddha's relics.¹⁰ These initiatives have been undertaken to further reinforce bilateral cultural relations by fostering and deepening Buddhist linkages between India and Sri Lanka. During the virtual bilateral summit held on September 26, 2020, between Indian Modi and former Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa, both leaders emphasised the importance of strengthening bilateral relations through the shared cultural and religious heritage of Buddhism.¹¹

Due to its geopolitical and strategic importance, Sri Lanka has been increasingly drawn into China's sphere of influence in South Asia. This growing Chinese presence has posed significant challenges to India's strategic and diplomatic interests in the country. To counter this move, the Modi administration employed religious diplomacy as a strategic tool. Furthermore, during Sri Lanka's economic and humanitarian crises, India extended comprehensive assistance across multiple

⁸ Vinod Khobragade & Kriti, "BUDDHISM: INDIA'S SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY," *South India Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. XX, no. 2 (December 2022): 71-82, 75.

⁹ Shantesh Kumar Singh & Ravi Shankar Raj, India's Soft Power and Buddhist Diplomacy: A Study of Investment and Initiatives in *Changing Dynamics of India's Foreign Policy: Challenges and Way Ahead*, ed. Dr. Palu Joshi (Delhi: ACS PUBLISHER, 2025), 28.

¹⁰ Mohonto, "Buddhism and India's Soft Power Diplomacy."

¹¹ Khobragade & Kriti, "BUDDHISM: INDIA'S SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY," 75.

sectors.¹² In a reciprocal gesture underscoring the special relationship between the two nations, newly elected Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake selected India for his first official visit last year.¹³ Thus, India's approach of using culture and Buddhist heritage appears to serve the underlying objective of asserting its political influence in Sri Lanka.

India's Hegemonic Aspirations and Sri Lanka

Indian influence on Sri Lankan policy-making is evident in Sri Lanka's withdrawal from the 19th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Summit, which was scheduled to be held in Islamabad on November 9–10, 2016.¹⁴ The country became the fifth country — after India, Bhutan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh — to decline participation.¹⁵ This decision, taken amid escalating tensions between India and Pakistan, reflected the influence of India's regional hegemony and had adverse implications for the cohesion of the SAARC regional bloc.

India also appears to prioritise religious diplomacy over cricket diplomacy in shaping Sri Lanka's stance regarding the forthcoming Asia Cup, in pursuit of its strategic interests. This is exemplified by the joint decision of India and Sri Lanka to abstain from attending the Asian Cricket Council (ACC) meeting held in Dhaka on July 24.¹⁶ This move has cast uncertainty over the organisation of the Asia Cup, reflecting India's hegemonic regional posture and its continued reluctance to engage with the Pakistan cricket team, especially owing to the current ACC Chairmanship being held by Mohsin Naqvi of Pakistan.

Pakistan's Buddhist Legacy and Its Diplomatic Relations with Sri Lanka

India seeks to position itself as the epicentre of Buddhist studies. However, it was not India, but the broader South Asian subcontinent that historically held this distinction,

¹² Khobragade & Kriti, "BUDDHISM: INDIA'S SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY," 75.

¹³ Ashok K. Behuria, "Visit of Sri Lankan President to India: Issues at Stake," International Centre for Peace Studies, December 24, 2024, accessed July 21, 2025, <https://www.icpsnet.org/issuebrief/Visit-of-Sri-Lankan-President-to-India>

¹⁴ "Sri Lanka will not attend Saarc summit in Islamabad, says environment not conducive to hold meet," Scroll.in, September 30, 2016, accessed July 21, 2025, <https://scroll.in/latest/817878/sri-lanka-will-not-attend-saarc-summit-in-islamabad-says-environment-not-conducive-to-hold-meet>

¹⁵ "Sri Lanka will not attend Saarc summit in Islamabad, says environment not conducive to hold meet," Scroll.in.

¹⁶ "Asia Cup In Doubt After India, Sri Lanka Refuse To Attend ACC Meeting In Dhaka: Report," NDTV, July 11, 2025, accessed July 18, 2025, <https://sports.ndtv.com/cricket/asia-cup-in-doubt-after-india-sri-lanka-refuse-to-attend-acc-meeting-in-dhaka-report-8856505>

attracting scholars and travellers to renowned centres such as Taxila in present-day Pakistan. Pakistan possesses considerable potential to develop and promote cultural and religious tourism by attracting followers of Buddhism. The country is home to numerous historically significant Buddhist sites, particularly in regions such as Swat and Taxila, which host a rich array of monasteries, stupas, and ancient sculptures. These heritage sites not only represent the historical spread of Buddhism from the subcontinent to other parts of Asia but also serve as important destinations for Buddhist pilgrims. Currently, approximately 2,000 Buddhist pilgrims visit these sacred sites annually — a figure that falls significantly short of the potential, given the global Buddhist population of nearly 500 million.¹⁷ Pakistan needs to leverage its rich Buddhist historical and archaeological heritage to attract Sri Lankan Buddhist pilgrims and further strengthen its already cordial bilateral relations with Sri Lanka.

The genesis of Pakistan-Sri Lanka relations can be found in shared cultural and Buddhist affinities, and collaboration within multilateral forums. The relationship has been significantly strengthened in the 21st century through the expansion of economic cooperation and defense partnerships. Pakistan and Sri Lanka have maintained a conflict-free bilateral relationship. Pakistan extended military assistance to Sri Lanka during its armed conflict with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Furthermore, Pakistan has consistently opposed United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) resolutions calling for investigations into the Sri Lankan government's military operations against Tamil insurgent groups.¹⁸

Despite its rich Buddhist heritage and cordial ties with Sri Lanka, Pakistan — unlike India — does not leverage religious diplomacy, particularly Buddhism, as a foreign policy tool to influence Sri Lanka's domestic or external affairs. Pakistan should capitalize on its underutilized Buddhist tourism potential to project soft power in Buddhist countries like Sri Lanka.

Conclusion

India views South Asia as its traditional sphere of influence and, within this framework, seeks legitimacy for its role as a regional hegemon. In pursuit of this objective, India

¹⁷ "Tourism — massive untapped potential," *Express Tribune*, March 27, 2023, accessed July 15, 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2408343/tourism-massive-untapped-potential>

¹⁸ Riaz Khokhar & Asma Khalid, "Reviewing Pakistan-Sri Lanka Relations," *Stimson*, March 22, 2021, accessed July 12, 2015, <https://www.stimson.org/2021/reviewing-pakistan-sri-lanka-relations/>

employs Buddhism as one of the key instruments of soft power in its diplomatic engagements. This approach is reflected in India's assertion of a historical legacy of defending and promoting Buddhism both within the regional Buddhist community and beyond. Drawing upon this civilizational heritage, India undertakes initiatives such as providing grants for the construction and restoration of Buddhist temples, organising cultural exchange programmes, and engaging in archaeological cooperation. These efforts aim to enhance India's religious soft power—particularly in the case of Sri Lanka—where Buddhism is leveraged as a tool to influence internal decision-making processes, including those related to foreign policy. Unlike India, Pakistan advocates for regional cooperation and equilibrium, refraining from using Buddhism as an instrument of soft power to advance a regional power agenda or disrupt the balance of power in South Asia. Despite possessing considerable potential for Buddhist tourism, Pakistan does not instrumentalise its Buddhist heritage to influence the religious sentiments of the Buddhist community or to affect Sri Lanka's foreign policy decisions. Nevertheless, Pakistan should seek to capitalise on its rich Buddhist heritage to attract Sri Lankan pilgrims, thereby fostering deeper cultural ties and further strengthening bilateral relations between Islamabad and Colombo.

Recommendations

- The National Heritage and Culture Division should actively celebrate significant Buddhist festivals such as Vesak, observed on May 1 (also known as Buddha Jayanti, Buddha Purnima, or Buddha Day). Vesak is one of the most important Buddhist festivals, commemorating the birth, enlightenment, and parinirvana (death) of Gautama Buddha.
- The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting should initiate targeted media campaigns to promote Pakistan's Buddhist religious and cultural heritage, with the aim of attracting Sri Lankan tourists and Buddhist monks.
- The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting of Pakistan, in collaboration with the Ministry of Buddhasasana, Religious and Cultural Affairs of Sri Lanka, should develop a joint social media campaign aimed at engaging Buddhist pilgrims, cultural enthusiasts, and history aficionados of Sri Lanka interested in Pakistan's Buddhist heritage.

- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should develop virtual tours and digital content showcasing Pakistan's Buddhist heritage sites, enabling Sri Lankan audiences to explore these historical and cultural landmarks online. Additionally, there is a need to create user-friendly applications or websites in Sinhala, Tamil, and Urdu to enhance accessibility to information on Buddhist religious tourism in Pakistan. The link to these digital platforms should be made available on the official website of the High Commission of Pakistan in Colombo.