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The Sacred and the Strategic — India's Buddhist Heritage as Soft Power

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"How does India leverage its Buddhist heritage as a tool of foreign policy? Is cultural diplomacy a substitute or complement to hard power in South Asia?"

The inauguration by PM Modi of the “The Light and the Lotus: Relics of the Awakened One” exhibition at Rai Pithora Cultural Complex in January 2026 — reuniting the Sacred Piprahwa relics for the first time in 127 years — is much more than a cultural event. It is a diplomatic statement rooted in a centuries-old heritage that India is increasingly weaponising as strategic soft power. With over 500 million Buddhists worldwide across Asia, India’s status as the homeland of the Buddha connects it to a swathe of nations in ways that neither military alliances nor trade agreements can replicate.

THE STRATEGIC LOGIC OF BUDDHIST DIPLOMACY

India’s Buddhist soft power rests on a profound geographic and historical advantage: every major site in the Buddha’s life except his birthplace Lumbini (Nepal) lies within Indian territory. Bodh Gaya (enlightenment, Bihar), Sarnath (first sermon, Uttar Pradesh), Kushinagar (parinirvana, Uttar Pradesh), Nalanda (greatest Buddhist university, Bihar) — these are not merely heritage assets, they are pilgrimage destinations for hundreds of millions of people across Asia, making India a permanent sacred homeland in the Buddhist imagination.

This creates what scholars call **civilisational soft power** — influence that operates at the level of identity and religious sentiment, not merely economic or security interest. Unlike development aid (which creates dependency), or military agreements (which create alliance obligations), civilisational soft power creates emotional bonds that persist across political cycles.

The “relic diplomacy” tradition: India has deployed Buddhist relics as diplomatic instruments in moments of strategic need:

2012: Relics sent to Sri Lanka during post-civil war reconstruction — supporting bilateral relations as China sought to expand its footprint in Colombo

2013: Relics of Buddha’s disciples Sariputta and Moggallana (held at Victoria and Albert Museum, London) loaned to Myanmar

2024: Buddha relic sent to Thailand as part of bilateral deepening

2026: Piprahwa exhibition — consolidating India’s narrative as the custodian of the world’s Buddhist heritage

THE GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT: CHINA’S BUDDHIST COUNTER-MOVES

India’s emphasis on Buddhist soft power is not happening in a vacuum. China has been systematically deploying its own Buddhist diplomacy — primarily through Tibetan Buddhist leadership claims — to contest India’s cultural influence:

China’s strategy:

Claims over the next Dalai Lama succession — the Chinese government insists it has the right to select the next Dalai Lama under the “golden urn” tradition

Buddhist temples and cultural centres funded by Chinese entities across Southeast Asia

Belt and Road Initiative investments in countries with Buddhist majorities (Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia) that mix economic with cultural influence

Promotion of Chinese Buddhism as the “authentic” inheritor of the tradition

India’s counter-position:

Dharamsala and Tibetan Buddhism: India hosting the Tibetan government-in-exile and the 14th Dalai Lama is the most powerful single demonstration of India’s role as a protector of Buddhist tradition

International Buddhist Confederation (IBC): India-based body that promotes Buddhist dialogue globally, headquartered near Bodh Gaya

Nalanda University revival: International university at Rajgir, Bihar, recreating the ancient institution with students and faculty from across Asia

PRASHAD Scheme and Swadesh Darshan 2.0: Government infrastructure investment in Buddhist circuit sites

INDIA’S BUDDHIST ARC OF INFLUENCE

India’s Buddhist heritage connects it to distinct regional blocs in different ways:

Theravada Buddhist countries (Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam):

These nations venerate the historical Buddha and his physical relics. Relic diplomacy works powerfully here — a visit of Buddha’s bone fragments to Colombo or Yangon draws millions of devotees and generates enormous goodwill with ruling establishments.

Mahayana Buddhist countries (Japan, South Korea, China, Vietnam): Philosophical connection — Indian Buddhist scholars like Nagarjuna, Asanga, and Chandrakirti are foundational thinkers. India's connection here is more intellectual and historical than devotional, but Bodh Gaya and Nalanda remain pilgrimage destinations.

Vajrayana/Tibetan Buddhist communities (Tibet, Mongolia, Bhutan, Ladakh, Sikkim, northeastern states): India is literally the sacred homeland — the place where the Buddha taught, where the Dharma originated. India hosting the Dalai Lama is the foundation of enormous goodwill in these communities.

THE LIMITS OF SOFT POWER

For all its strategic value, Buddhist soft power has limits that any honest assessment must acknowledge:

The Myanmar problem: India's Buddhist heritage generates goodwill in Myanmar, but India's military relations with the Myanmar junta — maintained for strategic reasons (counterterrorism cooperation, infrastructure projects, Kaladan corridor) — sit in deep tension with Buddhist humanitarian values when the same military conducts ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya Muslim minority. The contradiction between India's civilisational rhetoric and its strategic realpolitik erodes credibility.

The Sri Lanka paradox: India's cultural affinity with Sri Lanka's Theravada Buddhist majority was a factor in normalising relations after the civil war. But India's failure to support a meaningful political settlement for the Tamil minority during the conflict era means Buddhist soft power coexists with Tamil political grievances that remain unresolved.

Commodification risks: The commercialisation of Buddhist sites — aggressive hotel development around Bodh Gaya, pollution at Sarnath — can undermine India's claim to be a respectful custodian of the tradition. Several Buddhist countries' pilgrims return with complaints about infrastructure, sanitation, and treatment at India's holiest sites.

Authenticity gap: India's Buddhist population is small (~7 million, mostly in Maharashtra following Dr. Ambedkar's conversion movement). When a country with such a small indigenous Buddhist population presents itself as the global custodian of Buddhism, there is an authenticity question that sophisticated audiences in Buddhist-majority countries notice.

THE CIVILISATIONAL STATE ARGUMENT

The Piprahwa exhibition is being held under the Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav umbrella — connecting the Buddha (~500 BCE) with India's Independence (1947 CE). This is a deliberate narrative strategy: India as a **civilisational state** with millennial continuity, not merely a postcolonial nation.

This narrative has significant strategic value. It positions India as a **peer civilisation** to China — not just a rival power, but an ancient and equally deep civilisation with its own global cultural legacy. The Buddha is arguably India's greatest cultural export — his teachings shaped the spiritual life of more than a third of Asia's population across two and a half millennia.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

For India to maximise its Buddhist soft power:

Upgrade Buddhist circuit infrastructure: The physical condition of India's Buddhist sites must match the rhetorical claims of custodianship. Bodh Gaya and Nalanda deserve UNESCO-level maintenance and visitor management

People-to-people programmes: Scholarship schemes for Buddhist students from Southeast Asia, funded residencies for Buddhist scholars at Nalanda, regular monk exchange programmes

Relic diplomacy institutionalisation: Rather than ad hoc deployments, India needs a structured relic diplomacy programme — a rotating schedule of relic loans that maintains continuous Buddhist engagement across the region

Consistent values alignment: India cannot maintain Myanmar junta ties and Rohingya indifference while claiming Buddhist civilisational values. Strategic clarity on when security interests outweigh soft power costs is needed

Digital Buddhist heritage: Creating world-class digital archives of Pali texts, Nalanda manuscripts, and Buddhist archaeological records — making India the global knowledge custodian of the tradition

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

SACRED PIPRAHWA RELICS — CORE DATA:

Location: Piprahwa village, Siddharthnagar district, Uttar Pradesh

Identification: Kapilavastu — Sakya kingdom; Siddhartha Gautama's childhood home

Discovery: W.C. Peppe (British engineer), 1898; stone caskets + Brahmi inscriptions

Inscription translation: "This relic-shrine of the Blessed Buddha is the deposit of the Sakyas, brothers of the Blessed One..."

Exhibition: "The Light and the Lotus" — January 3, 2026; PM Modi inaugurated; 80+ artefacts; 127 years since reunification; Rai Pithora Cultural Complex, New Delhi; Ministry of Culture + Godrej Industries PPP

BUDDHIST SOFT POWER TOOLS (INDIA):

International Buddhist Confederation (IBC): India-based; headquartered near Bodh Gaya; promotes Buddhist dialogue globally

Nalanda University revival: International university at Rajgir, Bihar; opened 2014; ~17 participating nations; connected to ancient Nalanda

PRASHAD Scheme: Ministry of Tourism; development of pilgrimage infrastructure including Buddhist circuit

Swadesh Darshan 2.0: Thematic circuit development including Buddhist Heritage Circuit

Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav: India's 75th Independence anniversary programme; launched March 12, 2021 (Dandi March anniversary); legacy programmes continue into 2026

BUDDHIST RELIC DIPLOMACY TIMELINE:

2012: Relics to Sri Lanka (post-civil war reconstruction)

2013: Sariputta and Moggallana relics (V&A London) loaned to Myanmar

2014: PM Modi inaugurated Nalanda University revival

2023: PM Modi laid foundation of India International Centre for Buddhist Culture and Heritage at Lumbini, Nepal

2024: Buddha relic sent to Thailand

2026: "The Light and the Lotus" Piprahwa exhibition, New Delhi

KEY BUDDHIST SITES IN INDIA:

Bodh Gaya (Gaya, Bihar): Enlightenment; Mahabodhi Temple (UNESCO WHS 2002)

Sarnath (Varanasi, UP): Dhammachakka Pavattana (first sermon); Dhamek Stupa; Ashoka Pillar — Lion Capital (India's national emblem)

Kushinagar (UP): Parinirvana; Mahaparinirvana Temple; Myanmar, Japan-funded restoration

Nalanda (Bihar): Greatest Buddhist monastery-university; est. ~450 CE; destroyed ~1193 CE; UNESCO WHS 2016

Rajgir (Bihar): Griddhakuta (Vulture's Peak) — Buddha taught here; Nalanda University revival nearby

Sanchi (MP): Ashoka-era Great Stupa; UNESCO WHS; oldest surviving Buddhist monument

CHINA'S BUDDHIST COUNTER-STRATEGY:

Claims right to select next Dalai Lama (Panchen Lama precedent: Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, 1995)

Buddhist soft power via Belt and Road projects in Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Myanmar

Xi Jinping's "Buddhism for social harmony" framing — Chinese Buddhism promoted domestically

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

~500 million Buddhists globally (some estimates: 300-520 million); ~7 million in India (mostly Maharashtra — Ambedkar conversion movement, 1956)

Buddha's parinirvana: ~483 BCE, Kushinagar; born ~563 BCE, Lumbini (Nepal)

Buddhist denominations: Theravada (Pali Canon; South/Southeast Asia), Mahayana (Sanskrit; East Asia), Vajrayana (Tantric; Tibet, Mongolia, Bhutan)

Brahmi script (from Piprahwa inscriptions): ~3rd century BCE; parent of all South and Southeast Asian scripts; deciphered by James Prinsep (1837)

India's Buddhist tourism: ~Rs 5,000-6,000 crore annually from Buddhist circuit pilgrims

Sources: The Hindu, Ministry of Culture, PIB, International Buddhist Confederation

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