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**EDITORIAL ANALYSIS**

# The Dhamma Diplomacy – How India's Buddhist Heritage Is Becoming Strategic Currency

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GS2

GS1



The Hindu

MAINS RELEVANCE:

GS Paper 2

GS Paper 1



## INTERVIEW ANGLE

*"India's Act East Policy increasingly uses Buddhist heritage as diplomatic soft power with Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Japan, and Mongolia. Is this a sustainable long-term strategy, or is it a cultural overlay on relationships that ultimately depend on economic and security content?"*

## WHY IN NEWS

The Grand International Exposition of the Sacred Piprahwa Relics of Bhagwan Buddha — the first-ever public display of 2,300-year-old authenticated relics of the Sakya clan — was inaugurated in New Delhi. The event is the latest in a deliberate pattern of Buddhist heritage diplomacy that India has deployed increasingly since 2014 as part of its Act East and neighbourhood policies.

## THE FORGOTTEN ARCHITECTURE OF INDIAN SOFT POWER

India's soft power is most commonly associated with Bollywood, cricket, yoga, and Ayurveda. These are real — but they are relatively recent and largely market-driven. They lack the institutional architecture and geopolitical intentionality that defines effective state-led cultural diplomacy.

What is less recognised is that India possesses the most consequential Buddhist heritage archive in the world — and Buddhism is not a minor cultural fact. It is the moral foundation for the political culture of 10-12 nations across South, Southeast, and East Asia, followed by approximately 500 million people. The four sites most sacred to Buddhism's founder are all in or adjacent to India: Lumbini (Nepal/UP border — birthplace), Bodh Gaya (Bihar — enlightenment), Sarnath (UP — first sermon), and Kushinagar (UP — death). The Piprahwa relics now add a fifth dimension: authenticated material remains of the Sakya clan itself.

This is not coincidence — it is historical geography. Buddhism originated in the Gangetic plain. India's claim to be the land of the Buddha's life is not soft power positioning — it is archaeological fact. The question is whether India is deploying this asset with the strategic intentionality it deserves.

## DHAMMA DIPLOMACY: WHAT INDIA HAS DONE

Since 2014, India has deployed Buddhist heritage with increasing strategic awareness:

**Sri Lanka:** PM Modi's 2014 state visit began at the sacred Mahabodhi Temple, Bodh Gaya, with Sri Lanka's President. India gifted the Kapilavastu relics (different from Piprahwa — these had been on long-term loan to Sri Lanka) back to Sri Lanka as a diplomatic gesture. India funds multiple Buddhist monastery restoration projects in Sri Lanka, creating goodwill in a country where the government-Buddhist institution complex is politically central.

**Myanmar:** India was among the first to offer the Buddha's bone relics (from Piprahwa's sister collection held at the National Museum, Delhi) for temporary display in Myanmar — an act of enormous religious significance in a country where Buddhism is constitutional and culturally foundational. The relics' visit drew millions of pilgrims. This was deployed ahead of infrastructure investment negotiations on the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway.

**Mongolia:** Mongolia's government — 90%+ Buddhist in population and a traditional ally of India's — receives significant Indian Dhamma diplomacy. India restored the famous Kalachakra Temple in Ulaanbaatar, gifted a Buddha statue, and provided a Sanskrit-Mongolian Buddhist text corpus restoration programme.

**Thailand and Southeast Asia:** India's ASEAN engagement increasingly features Buddhist circuit tourism promotion, Sanskrit linguistic links, and the Ramayana connection (the Ramakien in Thailand; the Ramayana in Cambodia, Indonesia, and Malaysia). The Piprahwa exposition was inaugurated with Buddhist nations' diplomatic representation.

**Japan and Korea:** Both are Mahayana Buddhist nations with deep reverence for Indian holy sites. PM Modi's visits to Japan have included Buddhist site references; Indian Tourism offices in Tokyo and Seoul actively promote the Buddhist circuit to these markets.

## WHY DHAMMA DIPLOMACY WORKS

Buddhist diplomacy functions differently from economic or security diplomacy for two reasons:

**Personal resonance:** Unlike trade deals or defence MoUs, Buddhist heritage connects to the personal faith of heads of government in Buddhist-majority nations. Thailand's Prime Minister, Myanmar's military-political leadership, Sri Lanka's political establishment, Mongolia's President — they all have personal religious stakes in maintaining positive relations with the custodian of Buddhism's birthplace. This creates an affective dimension in bilateral relations that cannot be negotiated away.

**Domestic political amplification:** Leaders in Buddhist-majority nations who demonstrate a strong relationship with India — specifically with Buddhist India — earn domestic religious legitimacy. The Prime Minister who secured the visit of the Buddha’s relics to his country is not just a diplomat — he is a protector of the faith. This makes Indian partnerships politically valuable to these leaders in ways that Chinese economic partnerships are not.

**China’s limitations:** China also practices Buddhist diplomacy — it has restored Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, hosts international Buddhist forums, and claims to be a Buddhist civilisation. But China’s suppression of Tibetan Buddhism, its treatment of the Dalai Lama question, and its control over Tibet (the Himalayan region that hosts much of Mahayana Buddhism’s sacred geography) create fundamental credibility problems. India, as a secular democracy that has never suppressed Buddhist practice and hosts the Dalai Lama’s government-in-exile, occupies a uniquely credible position in the Buddhist world.

## THE LIMITS OF DHAMMA DIPLOMACY

Buddhist heritage diplomacy cannot substitute for substantive bilateral content — and India’s Act East Policy has faced criticism for being stronger on diplomatic visits than on project delivery.

**Myanmar paradox:** India’s Buddhist diplomacy with Myanmar coexists with complex relations — Rohingya crisis (India did not offer sanctuary), the 2021 military coup (India did not strongly condemn), and India’s economic interests in Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (still incomplete after years). Buddhist soft power provides goodwill buffer, but does not resolve these contradictions.

**Sri Lanka’s hedging:** Sri Lanka’s recent economic crisis (2022) was resolved primarily through IMF loans and Chinese debt restructuring — not Indian aid, which arrived late and was insufficient. Buddhist ties did not prevent Sri Lanka from remaining deeply dependent on China for infrastructure finance. Soft power has limits where hard economics dominate.

**Thailand-China trade:** Thailand’s trade with China dwarfs its trade with India. Buddhist ties create warmth but do not substitute for economic gravity.

**India’s Buddhist sites themselves:** India’s own Buddhist circuit — while historically unparalleled — is undermaintained, difficult to access, and poorly marketed compared to what the sites’ significance warrants. Bodh Gaya has improved but lacks five-star pilgrimage infrastructure that Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese Buddhist pilgrims expect. The Swadesh Darshan Buddhist Circuit scheme needs far more investment to convert heritage capital into tourism revenue.

## INSTITUTIONALISING DHAMMA DIPLOMACY

India’s Buddhist diplomacy remains largely episodic — driven by individual state visits and specific relic-display events rather than a standing institutional framework.

What India needs:

A dedicated **International Buddhist Heritage Trust** — a permanent institutional body managing India’s Buddhist heritage diplomacy portfolio

**BharatNet-connected virtual pilgrimage infrastructure** — live streaming from Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar to diaspora and foreign Buddhist communities

**Scholarship programmes** for Buddhist scholars from Southeast Asia at Nalanda University (reconstituted) and Indian universities

**Relic diplomacy protocol** — standardised procedures for temporary relic loans to foreign Buddhist communities, with security, insurance, and ceremonial protocols

### UPSC RELEVANCE

Buddhist circuit sites (Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar, Lumbini-adjacent); Piprahwa (UP; 1898; Sakya clan; AA antiquity); Swadesh Darshan Buddhist Circuit; Nalanda University (reconstituted; 2014; Bihar); India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway; Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project; Mongolia (90%+ Buddhist; landlocked)

### MAINS GS-2:

“Evaluate India’s Buddhist heritage diplomacy as a component of the Act East Policy. What are its achievements and limitations?” | “How does India’s custodianship of Buddhist heritage create diplomatic capital with Southeast and East Asian nations? Discuss with examples.”

### MAINS GS-1:

“Trace the origins and spread of Buddhism from India to Southeast Asia. How does this historical-cultural legacy shape contemporary India’s diplomatic strategy?”

### ESSAY:

“Soft power without hard delivery is not diplomacy — it is tourism. India’s Buddhist heritage is a genuine strategic asset only if it is backed by economic substance in the same relationships.”

### INTERVIEW:

“India hosts the Dalai Lama’s government-in-exile, giving it unique credibility with Tibetan Buddhists. How should India leverage this asset in its relations with China, Tibet, and Himalayan Buddhist communities?”

## ★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGE PEDIA

### BUDDHISM — KEY STATISTICS:

Global Buddhist population: ~500 million (4th largest religion globally)

Major Buddhist nations: China (~18%), Thailand (~6%), Myanmar (~4%), Sri Lanka, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Mongolia

Branches: Theravada (SE Asia, Sri Lanka), Mahayana (China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam), Vajrayana/Tibetan (Tibet, Mongolia, Bhutan)

### BUDDHIST CIRCUIT SITES IN INDIA:

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

Sarnath (Varanasi, UP): First sermon (Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta)

Kushinagar (UP): Parinirvana

Shravasti (UP): Where Buddha spent 25 monsoons; Jetavana Monastery

Vaishali (Bihar): Buddha's last visit; Licchavi republic site

Nalanda (Bihar): Ancient Buddhist university (5th-12th century CE); reconstituted as Nalanda University (2014)

Sanchi (MP): Largest stupa complex; UNESCO WHS; relics of Sariputra and Moggallana

### INDIA BUDDHIST DIPLOMACY EVENTS (2014-2026):

2014: Kapilavastu relics gifted back to Sri Lanka

2017: Buddha relics temporarily displayed in Myanmar

2019: Kalachakra Temple, Ulaanbaatar restored (India gift to Mongolia)

2023: Nalanda University campus inaugurated (Bihar)

2026: Piprahwa relics grand exposition (New Delhi)

### KEY SCHEMES:

Swadesh Darshan (Buddhist Circuit): One of 15 thematic circuits; UP-Bihar Buddhist corridor

Prasad Scheme: Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Heritage Augmentation Drive — includes Buddhist sites

### INDIA-MYANMAR RELATIONS CONTEXT:

Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project: Sittwe Port (Myanmar) → Mizoram; connectivity to Northeast India; long-delayed

India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway: 1,360 km; Moreh (India) → Bagan Tamu → Mae Sot (Thailand)

### OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Dalai Lama: 14th Dalai Lama (Tenzin Gyatso) based in Dharamsala (Himachal Pradesh) since 1959; Government of India guest

Tibetan Government in Exile: Based in McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala; Central Tibetan Administration

China Buddhist diplomacy: World Buddhist Forum (Beijing); Tibetan monastery "restoration"; undercut by Tibet suppression

Nalanda University reconstituted: 2014; Rajgir, Bihar; East Asia Summit partners as co-funders (China, Japan, Singapore, Australia, Thailand)

Sources: The Hindu, MEA India, PIB



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