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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Buddha's India — Why Buddhist Soft Power Is One of New Delhi's Most Under-Leveraged Foreign Policy Assets

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THE EDITORIAL ARGUMENT

On May 1, India celebrates Buddha Purnima — the anniversary of the birth, enlightenment, and Parinirvana of Gautama Buddha. The sacred sites in India and Nepal — Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar, Lumbini — receive millions of pilgrims from across Asia every year. India's Prime Minister sends the customary greetings. Buddhist monks gather at Mahabodhi Temple. The ceremony is sincere, the attendance is large, and the opportunity it represents is largely unrealised.

India's Buddhist heritage is one of its most powerful foreign policy assets. It connects India to over **500 million Buddhists worldwide**, gives it cultural credibility in Southeast and East Asia that no economic relationship can replicate, and provides a counter-narrative to China's growing appropriation of Buddhist heritage. The question is whether New Delhi is leveraging this asset deliberately — or simply observing it ceremonially.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF BUDDHIST DIPLOMACY

Five bilateral relationships are most directly shaped by India's Buddhist heritage:

Sri Lanka — Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka traces directly to Emperor Ashoka's mission (his son Mahinda and daughter Sanghamitta brought the Bodhi tree sapling and Buddhist texts to Ceylon). The Mahavamsa, Sri Lanka's foundational chronicle, treats Ashokan India as the source of Sri Lankan civilisation. This cultural bond is a significant counterweight to China's Belt and Road investments in Colombo Port City and Hambantota. India's Buddhist diplomacy — more investment in Bodh Gaya-Sri Lanka pilgrim connectivity, more Buddhist cultural exchanges — could reinforce this advantage.

Japan — Japan is Mahayana Buddhist; its cultural connection to India is indirect but deep. Japanese Buddhist organisations have funded major restoration projects at Bodh Gaya and Nalanda. India-Japan Buddhist tourism is one of the fastest-growing corridors in high-value inbound tourism. The Nalanda University revival —

partially Japanese-funded — is a tangible expression of this connection.

Thailand and Myanmar — Both are Theravada Buddhist kingdoms whose royal families make ceremonial visits to Bodh Gaya. India's bilateral relationships with both countries benefit from this religious dimension. In Myanmar, where India-China competition for influence is acute, Buddhist cultural ties give India a channel that purely transactional diplomacy cannot replicate.

Bhutan and Mongolia — Both are Vajrayana Buddhist countries with deep India connections. Bhutan's unique relationship with India has a strong cultural-religious dimension. Mongolia, though geographically distant, is enthusiastically engaged with India's Buddhist heritage.

CHINA'S COUNTER-STRATEGY

Beijing has been systematically building a parallel Buddhist diplomacy — the World Buddhist Forum (hosted in China since 2006), major temple projects in Southeast Asia funded by Chinese Buddhist organisations, and claims to Buddhist heritage that implicitly place China at the centre of Asian Buddhism. China's claims are not historically groundless (Chinese Buddhism has its own 2,000-year tradition), but they represent a deliberate effort to shift the cultural geography of Buddhism away from its Indian origins.

India's response has been inadequate. The Buddhist circuit tourist infrastructure in Bihar and UP remains underdeveloped compared to its potential — Bodh Gaya's airport has limited international connectivity, the Sarnath museum needs modernisation, and Kushinagar's infrastructure is far below what the site's significance warrants. India's Ministry of Tourism has identified the Buddhist circuit as a priority, but implementation lags rhetoric by years.

WHAT A GENUINE BUDDHIST DIPLOMACY STRATEGY WOULD INVOLVE

- 1 **International pilgrimage connectivity** — direct air routes from Colombo, Bangkok, Tokyo, and Seoul to Bodh Gaya and Varanasi (for Sarnath), not just through Delhi
- 2 **Nalanda as a living institution** — Nalanda University must develop into a genuine centre of Buddhist scholarship and pilgrimage that brings scholars from Buddhist countries to India
- 3 **Mahabodhi Temple governance** — the dispute over control of the Mahabodhi Temple between Buddhist organisations and a Hindu trust is an embarrassment that India should resolve; it diminishes India's credibility as the custodian of Buddhist heritage
- 4 **Buddha Purnima as a diplomatic event** — treat it as a moment of genuine international Buddhist diplomacy, not just domestic celebration

The Prime Minister's Mann Ki Baat mention of Buddha Purnima is a start. The infrastructure and institutional commitment must follow.

UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS2 — IR	Buddhist soft power; India-Sri Lanka; India-Japan; India-ASEAN; India-China Buddhist rivalry
GS1 — Art & Culture	Buddhist heritage; UNESCO WHS; pilgrimage circuit; Ashoka's Buddhist mission
GS1 — History	Emperor Ashoka; Nalanda; Theravada-Mahayana-Vajrayana traditions

Mains Keywords: Buddhist soft power, Buddha Purnima, Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Nalanda, Mahabodhi Temple, Ashoka, India-Sri Lanka Buddhist ties, India-Japan Buddhist diplomacy, Buddhist circuit tourism, China Buddhist diplomacy

Prelims Facts Corner

ITEM	FACT
Buddha Purnima	May 1, 2026; Vaishakha Purnima
Bodh Gaya	Enlightenment site; Mahabodhi Temple (UNESCO 2002); Bihar
Sarnath	First sermon site; Dhamek Stupa; Ashoka Pillar; Uttar Pradesh
Kushinagar	Parinirvana site; Uttar Pradesh
Nalanda	UNESCO WHS (2016); revived as university
Ashoka	Sent Mahinda + Sanghamitta to Sri Lanka; founded Buddhist missionary tradition
World Buddhist Forum	China-hosted since 2006 — China's Buddhist soft power tool
Mahabodhi Temple governance	Currently managed by Bodh Gaya Temple Management Committee; disputed
Buddhist population worldwide	500+ million

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