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# Buddha's India and the Limits of Spiritual Soft Power — Why Devotion Alone Will Not Build a Buddhist Diplomacy

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# Buddha's India and the Limits of Spiritual Soft Power — Why Devotion Alone Will Not Build a Buddhist Diplomacy

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## THE EDITORIAL ARGUMENT

Every Buddha Purnima, India's leadership reaffirms the country's identity as the **birthplace of Buddhism**. Every Mann Ki Baat episode in May references Bodh Gaya. Every Asian summit features photo-ops at Sarnath or Nalanda. The cultural narrative is consistent: India is the source, the spiritual centre, the rightful custodian of Buddhist heritage.

The narrative is true. The follow-through has been inconsistent. On Buddha Purnima 2026, as Bodh Gaya hosts pilgrims from Sri Lanka, Thailand, Japan, and Myanmar, it is worth asking whether India's Buddhist heritage is being deployed as a serious diplomatic asset — or whether it remains a ceremonial occasion that periodically reminds the world of India's past without translating into present influence.

## WHAT INDIA HAS — AND WHAT IT UNDERUSES

India's Buddhist heritage is geographically concentrated and institutionally well-defined:

- **Bodh Gaya** (Bihar) — the place of enlightenment; UNESCO World Heritage Site (2002)
- **Sarnath** (Uttar Pradesh) — the place of the first sermon; Dhamek Stupa
- **Kushinagar** (Uttar Pradesh) — the place of Parinirvana
- **Nalanda Mahavihara** (Bihar) — UNESCO WHS (2016); revived as a modern university
- **Sanchi** (MP) — Great Stupa, UNESCO WHS (1989)
- **Ajanta Caves** (Maharashtra) — UNESCO WHS (1983)

This is a heritage map that no other country can replicate. It represents 25 centuries of continuous religious significance, sustained by approximately 500 million Buddhists worldwide who recognise India as the source.

Yet India's Buddhist institutional infrastructure is thin. The **Bodh Gaya Temple Management Committee (BTMC)** — constituted under the Bodh Gaya Temple Act, 1949 — has 4 Hindu and 4 Buddhist members, with the District Magistrate of Gaya (historically Hindu) as ex-officio chair. Buddhist groups have long protested this arrangement as inadequate Buddhist control of Buddhism's holiest site. Nalanda University, despite its symbolic significance, has struggled with funding stability and faculty recruitment since its 2014 revival. The Buddhist circuit's tourism infrastructure — airports, road connectivity, language services for international pilgrims — remains underdeveloped relative to its potential.

## CHINA'S QUIET BUDDHIST DIPLOMACY

While India's Buddhist diplomacy has been inconsistent, China has been systematic. The **World Buddhist Forum**, hosted in China since 2006, brings together Buddhist leaders from across Asia under Chinese institutional sponsorship. China funds Buddhist temple restoration in Cambodia, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. Chinese Buddhist scholarship — though distinct in tradition from Indian Buddhism — has been actively promoted through state-funded research and translation projects.

The geopolitical purpose is transparent: China seeks to position itself as the centre of Asian Buddhism, displacing India as the cultural anchor of the religion. The strategy is proceeding because India's response has been ceremonial rather than strategic.

## WHAT A REAL BUDDHIST DIPLOMACY WOULD REQUIRE

**1. Buddhist circuit infrastructure.** International pilgrim arrivals at Bodh Gaya are constrained by limited international flight connectivity — direct flights from Bangkok, Colombo, Tokyo, and Seoul to Patna or Gaya are infrequent. The pilgrim corridor (Bodh Gaya → Rajgir → Nalanda → Kushinagar → Lumbini) needs road and rail connectivity that meets international tourism standards.

**2. Mahabodhi Temple governance.** The continuing dispute over the temple management committee — with non-Buddhist members exercising significant control — is a diplomatic embarrassment. Resolving this requires legislative change to the Bodh Gaya Temple Act, 1949 — politically difficult but essential for Buddhist legitimacy.

**3. Nalanda as an institution, not a monument.** Nalanda University must develop into a genuine centre of Buddhist scholarship that brings researchers from Buddhist countries to India. This requires funding stability, faculty autonomy, and protection from political interference.

**4. Buddhist NGO ecosystem.** India should support the growth of Indian Buddhist organisations capable of engaging international Buddhist diplomacy on the lines of Sri Lanka's MahaBodhi Society or Japan's Soka Gakkai. The current institutional infrastructure is too thin for sustained international engagement.

## THE STAKES

The question is not whether India can match China’s investment in Buddhist diplomacy — China has more financial resources and more centralised state direction. The question is whether India can **leverage its legitimate** cultural advantage. India IS the Buddha’s birthplace. China is not. That fact alone is a diplomatic asset that requires only modest sustained institutional investment to translate into influence.

PM Modi’s annual Buddha Purnima messages are sincere. The institutional follow-through must match the rhetoric.


## UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS2 — IR	Buddhist soft power; India’s cultural diplomacy; China-India in South-East Asia
GS1 — Art & Culture	Buddhist heritage; UNESCO WHS; pilgrim circuits; Mahabodhi Temple
GS2 — Governance	Bodh Gaya Temple Act 1949; Nalanda University; institutional governance

**Mains Keywords:** Buddha Purnima, Buddhist soft power, Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Nalanda University, Mahabodhi Temple, Bodh Gaya Temple Act 1949, World Buddhist Forum, China Buddhist diplomacy, Buddhist circuit, India-Sri Lanka, India-Japan, India-Thailand

### Prelims Facts Corner

ITEM	FACT
Buddha Purnima 2026	May 1; Vaishakha Purnima
Bodh Gaya UNESCO	2002
Sanchi UNESCO	1989
Ajanta UNESCO	1983
Nalanda UNESCO	2016
Bodh Gaya Temple Act	1949
BTMC composition	4 Hindu + 4 Buddhist members; DM Gaya as ex-officio chair
World Buddhist Forum	Hosted by China since 2006
Indian Buddhist orgs	MahaBodhi Society (founded by Anagarika Dharmapala 1891)
Buddhist population worldwide	~500 million


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