



# Resurgence of Buddhism as a Key Strategic Asset for Bridging India's Influence Across the Indo-Pacific: A Systematic Review

Anupam Kumar <sup>1</sup>, Manoj Kumar <sup>2</sup>, Prof (Dr.) Seema Rani <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1 2</sup> Research Scholar in Political Science, Deptt of Political Science, Damyanti Raj Anand Government Degree College, Bisauli, Badaun, MJPRU, Bareilly

<sup>3</sup> Professor. Deptt of Political Science, Damyanti Raj Anand Government Degree College, Bisauli, Badaun, MJPRU, Bareilly

**Abstract-** The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as the 21st century's geopolitical fulcrum. The Indo-Pacific, encompassing South, Southeast, and East Asia, has ascended as a central geopolitical space. India's strategic priorities in this region have traditionally focused on maritime security, economic connectivity, and multilateral cooperation. However, these traditional instruments coexist with soft power tools, including shared cultural and religious heritages. As the birthplace of Buddhism, India is uniquely positioned to leverage Buddhist resurgence as a strategic asset for deepening ties with a region where Buddhism—historically and culturally—permeates societies from Southeast Asia to East Asia and beyond. This article explores the resurgence of Buddhism as a strategic soft-power asset enhancing India's influence in the Indo-Pacific region. Situated at the crossroads of history, culture, and geopolitics, Buddhism's historical diffusion across Asia offers India a civilizational bridge that complements its economic and security engagements. By analysing cultural diplomacy, heritage linkages, and contemporary initiatives, the paper argues that India's Buddhist heritage can deepen people-to-people ties, bolster normative appeal, and support broader strategic objectives in a region marked by rising competition and complex interdependencies.

**Keywords:-** Buddhist heritage, Indo-Pacific strategy, Soft Power, Multi-alignment, Regional security architecture, Strategic autonomy

## I. Introduction

The Indo-Pacific has become central to global strategic competition in the 21st century. While much attention is devoted to military alliances, economic corridors, and institutional frameworks, the role of cultural and civilizational linkages in shaping regional influence deserves systematic analysis. As the birthplace of Gautama Buddha, India holds a unique cultural capital that resonates across the Indo-Pacific, where Buddhist traditions historically spread and remain culturally significant. The resurgence of Buddhism can bridge the civilizations as a powerful strategic and cultural asset for India in strengthening its influence across the Indo-Pacific.

While strategic competition is often viewed through the lenses of hard power, economic ties, and institutional frameworks, this paper argues that civilizational diplomacy—particularly the resurgence of Buddhism—can be a pivotal soft-power asset for India. Drawing on historical connections, cultural affinities, and contemporary diplomatic initiatives, this research elucidates how Buddhist heritage offers a non-zero-sum avenue for expanding India's influence across the Indo-Pacific.

Once considered a dormant aspect of its foreign policy, India has actively revived Buddhism as a vital component of its foreign policy and cultural diplomacy. With over



98% of the world's Buddhist population residing in the Asia-Pacific region, Buddhism provides a unique, pan-Asian, and shared spiritual identity that transcends traditional geopolitical, military-centric power dynamics. The strategy is aimed at fostering a "peaceful, harmonious rise" in contrast to assertive alternatives in the region. It provides a "civilizational bridge" connecting India with East and Southeast Asia, offering moral authority and cultural, people-to-people warmth, especially in relations with Japan, Mongolia, Thailand, Indonesia among others.

## II. India's utilization of Buddhism serves several strategic imperatives

- Countering China: While China attempts to use Buddhist forums (e.g., World Buddhist Forum) to gain legitimacy, India leverages its status as the authentic "cradle of Buddhism" to build deeper, more trust-based relationships.
- 'Act East' Policy: Buddhist diplomacy is a cornerstone of India's 'Act East' policy, aiming for deeper engagement with ASEAN countries.
- Refugee Diplomacy: The presence of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan parliament-in-exile in India strengthens its image as a protector of Buddhist traditions, adding to its soft power, despite Beijing's objections.

## III. Research Questions

- How does the resurgence of Buddhism contribute to India's influence in the Indo-Pacific?
- What mechanisms enable Buddhist heritage to function as a strategic asset?
- How has India operationalized this cultural asset in its foreign policy?

To address this, the paper investigates how the historical evolution and resurgence of Buddhism can serve as a strategic asset for strengthening India's influence, complementing traditional tools of power with civilizational diplomacy that fosters trust, shared identity, and normative alignment. It assesses the extent to which India's soft power diplomacy has contributed to regional security and norm-building.

## IV. Theoretical Framework

**Soft Power and Civilizational Capital:** The concept of soft power, articulated by Joseph Nye, underscores the ability of states to attract and persuade through culture, values, and ideology rather than coercion. Within this framing, civilizational capital refers to the deep historical and cultural reservoir a country possesses that can be mobilised in international relations.

For India, Buddhist heritage represents civilizational capital that:

- Reflects shared history with multiple Indo-Pacific societies.
- Provides a narrative of peace, tolerance, and spiritual inquiry.
- Offers a non-transactional basis for engagement beyond material interests.



Buddhist cultural diplomacy thus aligns with normative objectives such as sustainable development, ethical governance, and inter-civilizational dialogue.

**Historical Context: Buddhism’s Spread Across the Indo-Pacific:** From the 3rd century BCE onwards, Buddhism disseminated widely beyond the Indian subcontinent, shaping long-standing cultural and spiritual ecosystems across:

- South and Southeast Asia: From Sri Lanka and Myanmar to Thailand and Indonesia, Buddhist traditions intertwined with local cultures.
- East Asia: Mahāyāna schools profoundly influenced China, Korea, and Japan.
- Central and East Asia: Buddhist scholastic networks extended even into Central Asia and the Himalayan region.

India’s historical Buddhist linkages have created enduring cultural affinities that contemporary diplomacy can strategically activate.

**Contemporary Resurgence: Strategic Dimensions, Mechanisms and Initiatives:** As the birthplace of Buddhism, India possesses a unique civilizational capital that can complement its economic and security engagements in the region. The revival of Buddhist interest — through pilgrimage, heritage conservation, academic exchange, and cultural festivals — has strategic implications:

- Pilgrimage and Cultural Tourism: India’s sacred Buddhist circuit, including sites such as Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar, Nalanda Mahavihara etc draws thousands of pilgrims annually from Buddhist communities worldwide especially across the Indo-Pacific. Enhanced infrastructure and multilingual cultural interpretation can transform these flows into sustained people-to-people linkages.
- Academic platforms and Monastic Exchanges: Institutions such as the revived Nalanda University serve as platforms for scholarly interaction. Scholarships and exchange programs for Buddhist studies enhance intellectual networks and strengthen relational depth.
- Diplomatic and Cultural Initiatives: Annual Buddhist summits, interfaith dialogues, cultural exchanges, and cooperative restoration projects with partners such as Japan and Thailand reinforce cultural affinity as a diplomatic resource.
- Media and Cultural Outreach: Films, documentaries, and digital content highlighting shared Buddhist heritage broaden public awareness in the Indo-Pacific.

## V. Civilizational Diplomacy: India’s Soft Power Advantage

India is home to key Buddhist heritage sites associated with Gautama Buddha, including:

- Bodh Gaya
- Sarnath



- Kushinagar
- Nalanda Mahavihara
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These sites connect India historically and spiritually to Buddhist-majority or Buddhist-influenced nations across:

- Southeast Asia (Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam)
- East Asia (Japan, South Korea, China)
- Himalayan region (Nepal, Bhutan, Mongolia)

Revitalizing these links enhances India's image as a benign, culturally rooted partner rather than merely a geopolitical actor.

## **VI. Indo-Pacific Strategy and Cultural Connectivity:**

India's 'Act East Policy' and 'Indo-Pacific Vision' emphasize connectivity, security, and shared values. Buddhism strengthens:

- People-to-people diplomacy,
- Spiritual tourism corridors,
- Academic and monastic exchanges,
- Cultural forums and dialogues

Revival of institutions like Nalanda University symbolizes intellectual reconnection with Asia's shared Buddhist heritage. This soft power complements groupings like:

- ASEAN
- Quadrilateral Security Dialogue

## **VII. Strategic Benefits for India's Indo-Pacific Engagement**

- **People-to-People Connectivity:** Buddhism's shared cultural resonance fosters mutual understanding and trust — a foundation for stable bilateral and multilateral relations.
- **Normative Alignment:** Buddhist philosophy — emphasizing compassion, non-violence, and ethical conduct — aligns with emerging norms in global governance, including climate ethics and human-centered development.
- **Counterbalancing Competing Influences:** While other major powers utilise cultural diplomacy in Asia, India's unique position as the cradle of Buddhism — reinforced by custodianship of heritage sites and custodial partnerships — provides a normative alternative rooted in shared history rather than contemporary power projection.



## VIII. Case Studies

### **India–Japan Cultural Cooperation**

Joint restoration of Buddhist artifacts, academic exchange programs, and cultural festivals strengthen the bilateral relationship beyond strategic cooperation.

### **India–Thailand Cultural Diplomacy**

Thailand’s strong Theravāda Buddhist tradition resonates with India’s Buddhist heritage, creating trust networks that transcend transactional diplomacy.

### **India–Sri Lanka Monastic Exchanges**

Monastic collaborations and shared revival projects in Buddhist education showcase religious diplomacy’s impact on bilateral soft power.

## IX. Opportunities

- Eco-tourism – Buddhism’s values of simplicity and harmony with nature can guide sustainable tourism models in sacred circuits.
- Joint global leadership – Shared ideals of compassion and the “middle way” can allow India and Japan to shape international debates on issues like climate change, AI ethics, and peacebuilding.
- Cultural branding – Collaborative initiatives such as Varanasi–Kyoto city twinning, digital pilgrim applications, and joint heritage exhibitions can highlight Buddhist circuits and bring soft power to the forefront.

## X. Challenges and Limitations:

Despite its strategic potential, Buddhist cultural diplomacy faces constraints:

- Resource Allocation: Heritage restoration and infrastructure require sustained investment.
- Policy Coherence: Coordination across ministries and diplomatic missions is essential.
- Diversified Traditions: Varied Buddhist practices across countries necessitate contextual understanding.
- Geopolitical Sensitivities: Cultural diplomacy must avoid being instrumentalised for competitive posturing.

## XI. Policy Implications and Recommendations:

Buddhism creates a connection well beyond any numbers or agreements. This connection has established a silent, mutual regard and trust for each country grounded in a sense of shared heritage. Therefore, the countries are producing ‘soft power’ which has brought the nations closer genuinely, and created cultural and moral depth as a partnership where strategy often defines the relationship.



To operationalise Buddhist resurgence as strategic leverage, India should:

- Enhance Heritage Infrastructure: Improve accessibility, interpretation, and conservation of Buddhist sites.
- Expand Academic Collaboration: Increase scholarships and joint research initiatives in Buddhist studies.
- Institutionalise Cultural Platforms: Establish annual Indo-Pacific Buddhist forums.
- Integrate Cultural Diplomacy: Embed Buddhist heritage initiatives within broader foreign policy strategies.

## XII. Conclusion

The resurgence of Buddhism in Indian diplomacy represents a shift toward leveraging civilizational strength to build a “soft” alternative in the Indo-Pacific. While facing stiff competition from China’s “Buddhist statecraft” India’s authentic, historical connection gives it a unique, enduring advantage. As a “key strategic asset” Buddhism is bridging cultural, historical, and economic gaps, helping to forge a more robust, and sustainable influence for India in the 21st-century Asian landscape. The resurgence of Buddhism constitutes more than religious revival; it offers India a strategic asset for fostering deep, culturally grounded influence across the Indo-Pacific. By leveraging shared cultural heritage, people-to-people ties, and normative resonance, India can augment its diplomatic repertoire, promoting a vision of regional connectivity grounded in mutual respect, shared history, and common aspirations.

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