

USING BUDDHISM AS A TOOL OF SOFT POWER

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May 31, 2023 12:15 am | Updated 01:05 am IST

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi greets a Buddhist monk during the inauguration of the first Global Buddhist Summit, hosted by the Ministry of Culture in collaboration with the International Buddhist Confederation, in New Delhi. | Photo Credit: SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

I am a Shakya from Nepal, a supposed descendant of Siddhartha Shakya, who went on to be known as the Buddha. Every Shakya is engaged in a different path today, yet is bound by one phenomenon. But it is rare for individuals, or the tribe, or even Nepal to feature in a congregation of Buddhists such as the Global Buddhist Summit, which took place in New Delhi in April. Realisations like these prompt a closer look at why growing superpowers, India and China, are defining their own versions of the future of Buddhism and using it as a tool of soft power.

The Shakyas who ruled Kapilavastu after Buddha's Parinirvana did not have an army, and many were massacred in Sagarahawa. Eventually, the remaining Shakyas fled to different parts of Greater Magadha and to far-flung places like Gandhara (modern-day Afghanistan) and Burma (Myanmar). Many also went to the Kathmandu valley and were granted a status comparable to that of the Vajracharya priests, but they were not permitted to practise priesthood outside of their families. Therefore, in Hiranyavarna Mahavihara (Golden Temple) Shakyas alternate as temple caretakers and conduct all the rituals. Aside from the Kumari temples, this is one of the few temples in the Kathmandu valley where a 1,000-year-old tradition continues. When Nepal accepted a grant from the Government of India to renovate portions of the Golden Temple complex, it created a controversy. Many locals believe that India was only interested in this project because, after Lumbini, the birthplace of Buddha, this is the temple complex most frequently visited by Chinese tourists, indicating vested interests and strategies.

For India, Buddhism provided an identity of peace and tranquillity during the formation of the Republic, which was a time of intense violence and division between the country's two key religions, Hinduism and Islam. Professor Naman Ahuja, curator of the Lumbini Museum, discusses the usage of Buddhist symbolism as a means of escaping difficult times, whether it be the Ashoka Pillar or the wheel in the flag. In addition, the inscriptions on the edifice erected by King Ashoka provided evidence of the life and teachings of the Buddha.

Due to such usage and evidence, India likes to claim Buddhism as its own. It convened the Global Buddhist Summit in April primarily to provoke China by promoting Tibetan Buddhism and the Dalai Lama. There were no Nepal representatives present. The summit was hosted by the International Buddhist Confederation, a Buddhist organisation based in India, which has neither a patron nor a member of the Supreme Dhamma Council from Nepal. Nobody from Bhutan, a

Buddhist nation, was present either. Therefore, the geopolitical tool for India seems to be the promotion of Tibetan Buddhism, which has greater Western appeal.

The India International Centre for Buddhist Culture and Heritage is coming up in Lumbini, Nepal. Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid the foundation stone in May 2022. A year later, little progress has been made on the construction of this centre. This could be seen as an attempt to counter the opening of the Gautam Buddha International Airport in Bhairahawa, Nepal, which, in India's eyes, is a Chinese project. It was constructed as part of a project financed by the Asian Development Bank and carried out by a Chinese contractor.

India's overtures of Buddhism in Nepal began only after 'Buddha is Born in Nepal' became a populist slogan of sovereignty in Nepal, which Mr. Modi had to accept in a speech he delivered to the Constituent Assembly in Nepal in 2014. India's claim over Buddhism by excluding discussions with the pallbearers of tradition and the larger Buddhist community will only serve the purpose of irritating China.

China is home to around 245 million Buddhists, 28,000 Buddhist monasteries, 16,000 temples, and 2,40,000 Buddhist monks and nuns. This makes Buddhism an important soft power for China. By adding religious overtones to China's existing portfolio of cultural and linguistic diplomacy, the state religious system has become increasingly involved in Xi Jinping's efforts to support the growing political and economic power of China abroad. Beijing pursues a multifaceted and flexible approach to promote Chinese Buddhism abroad, with its specific modalities varying depending on whether the target country is Buddhist-majority, Western, or one of China's Asian competitors. As a source of Buddhism, the Chinese look to Nepal rather than India, as the popular temples in Beijing have a connection with Nepal, whether through the use of Newa Ranjana scripts on the pillars or the association of these temples with Nepali artist Arniko, who is revered in China. China utilised Buddhist narratives alongside infrastructure investments in Sri Lanka, just as Cambodia, Laos, and other Buddhist countries in Southeast Asia do. With large crowds thronging to Buddhist temples, China cannot ignore the undercurrents and, therefore, would prefer to use its own version of Buddhism not only for national integration but also as a tool of soft power.

In Nepal, a popular rumour is that China will send five million Buddhist pilgrims and establish hotels and other businesses through its investment arms as a big soft power push. It is also rumoured that India will invest more money in Lumbini. My hope is that the geopolitical wrangling over my ancestors will not turn Nepal into a Buddhist Disneyland.

Sujeev Shakya is author of Unleashing Nepal and Unleashing the Vajra

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