

# KUSHINAGAR CONNECT TO SRI LANKA

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One of the murals, by Sri Lankan artist Solias Mendis, that will be gifted to India on the occasion. Special Arrangement

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi declares open the Kushinagar International Airport in Uttar Pradesh on October 20, a sizeable Sri Lankan contingent, led by a member of the first family, will be present.

Sports Minister Namal Rajapaksa, nephew of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and son of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, will travel to Uttar Pradesh, along with ministerial colleagues and a group of 100 Buddhist monks to attend the event, according to officials in Colombo.

## Buddhist circuit

The airport is expected to provide seamless connectivity to tourists from Sri Lanka, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, China, Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore and so on. Kushinagar is the centre of the Buddhist circuit, which consists of pilgrimage sites at Lumbini, Sarnath and Gaya. Buddhist pilgrims consider Kushinagar a sacred site where, they believe, Gautama Buddha delivered his last sermon and attained 'Mahaparinirvana' or salvation.

The inaugural flight on Wednesday will land at the airport from Colombo, Sri Lanka, carrying the 125-member delegation of dignitaries and Buddhist monks.

To mark the occasion, Sri Lanka will present to India photographs of two murals painted by renowned Sri Lankan artist Solias Mendis at the Kelaniya Rajamaha Vihara, a popular Buddhist temple near Colombo, officials at the Sri Lankan High Commission in New Delhi told *The Hindu*.

One of the murals depicts 'Arahat Bhikkhu' Mahinda, son of Emperor Ashoka delivering the message of the Buddha to King Devanampiyatissa of Sri Lanka. The other shows the arrival of 'Theri Bhikkhuni' Sanghamitta, the daughter of the Emperor, in Sri Lanka, bearing a sapling of the 'sacred Bodhi tree' under which Siddhrtha Gautama is believed to have obtained enlightenment.

The gesture comes at a time when Sri Lanka and India have agreed to strengthen ties through their shared Buddhist heritage.

Despite India's known support to the Mahinda Rajapaksa administration in defeating the LTTE, sections among Sri Lanka's southern population remain India-sceptics, wary of the big neighbour who "interfered" in Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict, "sided with Tamils".

## Cultural diplomacy

In the decade after the civil war, which coincides with China's growing influence, New Delhi seems keen on recasting its image as a friend, using religious and cultural diplomacy.

When India sent the first consignment of 5 lakh doses of Covishield vaccine to Sri Lanka in January this year, the Indian High Commission in Colombo in a tweet linked its arrival to a "blessed Poya Day", or full moon day considered holy by Buddhists.

Sri Lanka, too, considers promoting shared Buddhist ties a matter of “paramount importance”, as was outlined in the Integrated Country Strategy prepared by Sri Lanka’s High Commissioner to India.

On the growing emphasis on shared Buddhist ties, senior political scientist Jayadeva Uyangoda said: “A cynic might say this marks the beginning of a soft saffronisation [of bilateral ties], but it signals that India is going to have a more assertive foreign policy stance towards Sri Lanka.”

*(With inputs from Jagriti Chandra in New Delhi)*

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