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Following the footsteps of Buddha: Buddhist heritage routes in the religious and cultural landscape of contemporary India

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Abstract. The relevance of the research topic is due to the increasing attention of Indian society to the problems of the development of Buddhism in South Asia. The study examines the problems related to the search for an answer to the question of the reasons for the growing interest in Buddhist values both at the level of mass perception and in the politics of India's leading political parties: both those currently in power (Bharatiya Janata Party) and those aspiring to it (Indian National Congress). The purpose of this study is to identify the peculiarities of the appeal of politicians, philosophers, and members of the Indian public to the Buddhist ideological complex, to show its evolution as a religious teaching and the development of concepts important from the point of view of state building. Forces of different ideological positions find in Buddhism those starting points that contribute to the formation of unified ideas about Indian civilization, which are traditionally associated with the ideas of religious tolerance and social consensus. The study analyzes the role of Buddhism in India's international activities and its peacemaking orientation. The article shows the importance of pilgrimage practice to places of Buddhist heritage as a factor in the development of national traditions, strengthening the unity of the multi-confessional Indian society, and increasing India's prestige in the Buddhist world.

Keywords: South Asia, Buddhism, Buddhist renaissance, Buddhist pilgrimage

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По стопам Будды: маршруты буддийского наследия в религиозно-культурном ландшафте современной Индии

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Аннотация. Возрастающее внимание индийского общества к проблемам развития буддизма в Южной Азии обуславливает актуальность темы исследования. Рассмотрены проблемы, связанные с поисками ответа на вопрос о причинах усиливающегося интереса к буддийским ценностям как на уровне массового восприятия, так и у ведущих политических партий Индии: находящихся ныне у власти (Бхаратия джаната парти) и стремящихся к ней (Индийский национальный конгресс). Цель исследования — выявить особенности обращения политиков, философов, представителей общественности Индии к буддийскому идейному комплексу, показать его эволюцию как религиозного учения и развитие концепций, важных с точки зрения государственного строительства. Различные по мировоззренческим позициям силы находят в буддизме отправные моменты, способствующие формированию единых представлений об индийской цивилизации, которые традиционно связываются с идеями религиозной толерантности и социального консенсуса. Проанализирована роль буддизма в международной деятельности Индии, его миротворческой направленности. Показано значение паломнической практики по местам буддийского наследия как фактора развития национальных традиций, укрепления единства поликонфессионального индийского общества, повышения престижа Индии в буддийском мире.

Ключевые слова: Южная Азия, буддизм, буддийское возрождение, буддийское паломничество

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Introduction

Buddhism emerged in historical India in the middle of the 1st millennium BC and went on to become the foundation of some of the largest states of antiquity and the early Middle Ages. In its homeland, it experienced several periods of flourishing: the 3rd century BCE under the Mauryas (especially during Ashoka's reign); the 2nd–3rd centuries CE under the Kushans; the 4th–7th centuries CE under the Guptas; the 7th–12th centuries CE in the Harsha Empire; and the

8th–12th centuries CE under the Pala dynasty. It then receded to peripheral regions of the subcontinent in the 13th century under the pressure from both Muslims and Hinduism followers. The religion subsequently spread northwards into the sub-Himalayan regions and southwards to the island of Ceylon, and beyond the borders of Hindustan, thus acquiring the status of a world religion. However, its influence in the areas of its initial prevalence diminished to individual groups within a predominantly Hindu society.

However, from the 19th century onwards, Buddhism in India underwent a period of revival, factoring in the restoration of its historical centres and sacred routes of its dissemination. The movement for Buddhist shrines protection came to refer to Buddhism as the “pearl necklace” of South Asia metaphorically embracing the region, thus emphasising its significance as an ethical teaching of wisdom and peace. Following India’s independence in 1947, Buddhism experienced a surge in popularity within Indian society and grew to be interpreted as an integral part of Indian civilization.

The purpose of this study — to identify the forms and mechanisms of actualization of Buddhist values in the socio-political practice of modern India.

Movement for Buddhism Revival and Restoration of Buddhist Shrines in British Colonies of South Asia

The resurgence of Buddhism in South Asia was accompanied by a rigorous engagement with the practice of studying Buddhist doctrine contextualized within the subcontinent’s unique sociocultural milieu. This methodological approach further crystallized into a distinct subdiscipline within Buddhist Studies. Concurrently, South Asia’s religious and cultural landscape garnered increasing scholarly attention from European academics, coinciding with colonial penetration into the Indian subcontinent of British military forces, technological innovations, and capital. During this period, European orientalist reached proficiency in Sanskrit and Pali, while seminal Buddhist texts — particularly historical chronicles — underwent systematic translation into English. European scholars published works on doctrinal genesis and historical development of Buddhism. The Pali Text Society, founded in 1881 through the collaborative efforts of Max Müller and T.W. Rhys Davids, emerged as a pivotal institution supporting Buddhological research through its scholarly endeavors. Of comparable academic importance was the Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland, established in 1907. The Theosophical Society, instituted by H.P. Blavatsky and H.S. Olcott with principal centers of operation in Adyar (near modern-day Chennai) and Colombo, Ceylon (modern-day Sri Lanka) likewise made substantive contributions to Buddhist Studies. This intellectual infrastructure, established by the end of 19th century, subsequently served as a foundation for South Asian scholars and intellectuals to advance their own scholarly pursuits [1. P. 3–7; 2. P. 122–140].

Throughout this period, a dual trajectory of studies flourished among South Asian academics concerning Buddhist traditions, encompassing both source-critical analyses and broader syntheses. A significant corpus of scholarly treatises was being translated and commented upon, and Buddhist philosophy was increasingly the focus of attention on the part of local historiographers. Vanguard research at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries was published by Rajendralal Mitra, Hara Prasad Shastri, Sarat Chandra Dash, Satish Chandra Vidyabhusan, Damodar Dharmananda Kosambi, and Benimadhab Barua [4. P. 27–30].

In these same decades, a significant sociocultural phenomenon took shape — Buddhist practitioners consolidated into organized cultural, educational, and political collectives. These groups comprised not merely lay followers but also monastics representing diverse Buddhist lineages. Foremost among these early institutional models was the Maha Bodhi Society (1891) with centers in Calcutta and Colombo established under the visionary leadership of Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933) — a pivotal figure in Buddhist revivalism, often heralded as the “second Ashoka” for his reformist zeal. These Buddhist organizations, operating in concert with entities like the Theosophical Society, evolved into vital hubs for Buddhist scholarship while safeguarding the transmission of doctrinal traditions. Their founders pursued dual objectives: elevating and broadening traditional Buddhist education while maintaining clarity in disseminating core teachings. The legacy of these revivalist pioneers manifested in the emergence of major Buddhist academic institutions, many of which continue to maintain scholarly preeminence. Their pedagogical frameworks skillfully synthesized European methodological approach with classical Buddhist disciplines — exposing students to contemporary scientific paradigms while simultaneously grounding them in foundational Buddhist principles, Sanskrit and Pali linguistics, contemporary Eastern languages, Oriental philosophical traditions, and literary-historical studies [4. P. 96–98].

Return to Buddhist traditions, expansive dissemination of Buddhist epistemological culture across British India and Ceylon, and validating pilgrimage practices as instrumental to the evolution of Buddhism constituted the core objectives pursued by the adherents of the Lanka Social Reform League (1905) founded by Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877–1947), a prominent intellectual, religious scholar, art historian, and public activist. The League united the efforts of lay participants in the Buddhist movement and practicing monks, facilitating comparative analyses between Buddhist and Hindu traditions¹. Concurrent with their public mobilization efforts aimed at Buddhist revitalization, these intellectuals engaged in scholarly publication of sacred Buddhist artifacts while producing seminal treatises on both the historical trajectory and contemporary state

¹ Coomaraswamy AK. *Hinduism and Buddhism*. N.Y.: Philosophical Library, 1943. P. 45–49.

of Buddhism². This period witnessed two significant institutional formations — the establishment of the Young Men’s Buddhist Association in 1898, followed by the inception of the Buddhist Congress in 1919.

Buddhist activists saw it as their primary mission to salvage, reconstruct and restore their faith’s most hallowed sites. Central to this endeavor were the efforts of Anagarika Dharmapala and his collaborator Walisinghe Harischandra (1876–1913), whose work focused on elevating the prominence of Buddhist religious and educational institutions — particularly those traditionally related to the sacred “path of the Buddha”³. These leaders advocated for the cultural and practical revival of pilgrimage (dharmayatra) to the shrines pivotal to the genesis and evolution of Buddhist thought, including Bodh Gayā, Sarnath, Kushinagar, Nalanda etc. [5. P. 6–7]. In Ceylon (modern-day Sri Lanka), key pilgrimage destinations included the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic (Dalada Maligawa) in Kandy, housing the venerated dental relic of the Buddha, and Adam’s Peak (Sri Pada), renowned for the legendary footprint of the Buddha on its summit [6. P. 17–20].

Buddhist pilgrimage is deemed one of the key elements in fostering national unity among Indians and facilitating their engagement with a shared cultural legacy. The recreation of historically significant Buddhist routes not only profoundly impacted adherents of the tradition within India, but also served as a catalyst for awakened self-identification among other religious communities across South Asia. These groups subsequently integrated their own movements to reclaim indigenous spiritual-cultural symbols with broader anti-colonial resistance against British colonialism.

Maha Bodhi Society convened an international Buddhist conference in Bodh Gayā that drew participants from India, Ceylon, China, and Japan. Deliberations centered on strategic initiatives to transform a traditional Buddhist complex into a global center for doctrinal dissemination, facilitated by an internationally recruited teaching staff. Concurrently, delegates engaged in rigorous discourse regarding the restoration of historically and culturally significant monuments, intrinsically linked to the biographical chronicles of the Buddha according to canonical tradition.

In their scholarly works and public discourse, the Maha Bodhi Society members articulated their vision of India as a center of Buddhist civilization, emphasizing India’s historical role as the birthplace of Buddhist doctrine where the “wheel of dharma” started rolling across the entire planet, transforming Buddhism into a world religion. Their intellectual endeavors contributed significantly to India’s recognition as a preeminent center of Buddhist education, renowned for its rich and ancient traditions. The society pioneered the establishment of academic institutions

² Coomaraswamy AK. *Essays in National Idealism*. Colombo: Colombo Apothecaries Co., 1909. P. 157.

³ Dharmapala A. *The World’s Debt to Buddha*. Calcutta: Maha Bodhi Book Agency, 1950. P. 3–5.

dedicated to the study of Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana Buddhism, while fostering integrative centers where these diverse traditions were examined in concert. Anagarika Dharmapala championed the cultivation of ecumenical principles, conceptualizing them as a framework for inter-denominational dialogue and the synthesis of religious thought. He highlighted religious syncretism as a defining characteristic of South Asian folk spirituality and positioned Buddhist inclusiveness as a paradigmatic model of peaceful coexistence [P. 273–275].

Dharmapala advocated for closer cooperation and a spiritual alliance between Buddhist communities across Asia, emphasizing spiritual unity and rigorous fidelity to canonical Buddhist principles. His endeavors were directed toward institutionalizing pilgrimages to India's sacred sites commemorating the Buddha's birth, his enlightenment, first sermon, and attainment of parinirvana. Contemplating the timeless imperative of monastic vocation, Dharmapala believed that its core functions were to disseminate dharma to adherents' consciousness, reliably transmit doctrinal content, and preserve its doctrinal integrity. Employing the Buddhist wheel-chakra archetype, he articulated the dynamics of the faith's propagation, elucidating the mechanisms underlying its geographical and cultural expansion⁴.

Acting in opposition to proselytizing activities of Christian missionaries, Buddhist educators skillfully used Western fascination with Buddhist culture and philosophical frameworks to advance their own objectives. These kinds of propaganda campaigns developed into an organized network of curated "pilgrimage" expeditions — predominantly targeting European and American destinations. One example of this phenomenon was Anagarika Dharmapala's seminal address at the 1893⁵ Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago, wherein he served as a proponent for Buddhist adherents, subsequently catalyzing the establishment of Maha Bodhi Society branches throughout Great Britain and Continental Europe⁶. In Buddhological historiography, this systematic dissemination of Buddhist doctrinal tenets is referred to as "Buddhist proselytism".

Sacred Geography of Buddhism in Its Homeland: Pilgrimage Traditions in Modern India

Buddhist pilgrimage remains a cornerstone of Buddhist culture and practice in modern India, serving as both a devotional act in search of transcendent realization and a means of preserving national traditions. Monastic tradition holds that traversing locations linked to the Buddha's life constitutes a tangible

⁴ Dharmapala A. *Return to righteousness: a collection of speeches, essays and letters of the Anagarika Dharmapala*. Ed. by A. Guruge. Colombo: Anagarika Dharmapala Birth Centenary Committee, Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs, Ceylon, 1965.

⁵ *Ibid.* P. 6.

⁶ Valisinha D., ed. *Diary Leaves of the Late Ven. Anagarika Dharmapala. The Maha Bodhi Journal*. 1956;64(1):23–27.

reenactment of the Enlightened One's path toward awakening⁷. The tradition of pilgrimage is deeply embedded within Buddhist doctrine: the metaphorical “wheel of dharma”, was rolling across the world, propagating the faith globally.

From the perspective of pilgrimage traditions, India holds a uniquely significant position for Buddhist practitioners globally, owing to its intrinsic connection with the life and legacy of the faith's founder. The enduring global fascination with Indian culture and Buddhism — a tradition that emerged from the subcontinent's historical soil, profoundly shaped its civilization, and ultimately ascended to the status of a world religion — reflects a persistent intellectual and spiritual engagement. As the cradle of Buddhist thought, South Asia exerts profound influence on adherents across diverse cultural contexts where the tradition has taken root. India has achieved international renown as a preeminent hub of Buddhist education with millennia-old scholarly traditions.

Representatives of Buddhism from around the world converge upon India in pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. Having embarked on a spiritual quest, they retrace the footsteps of the Buddha and explore historic centers of Buddhist civilization. Concurrently, scholars who have devoted their academic endeavors to the comprehensive study of Indian civilization — particularly its renowned religious-philosophical traditions, wherein Buddhism occupies a distinguished position — likewise make pilgrimages to the subcontinent [11. P. 36–38]. Pilgrimage trajectories now captivate not only traditional Buddhist adherents across Southeast and East Asia but also its adherents in the West.

The classic Buddhist pilgrimage route comprises eight sacred sites — a sacrosanct number in Buddhist tradition.

The first four locations are of paramount importance as they are associated with pivotal events in Buddha's spiritual journey:

Lumbini (Nepal, bordering India) — the birthplace of the Buddha;

Bodh Gayā (Bihar) — the sacred ground of his enlightenment;

Sarnath (near Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh) — the place where the Buddha delivered his first sermon;

Kushinagar (near Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh) — the site of his final transcendence into parinirvana.

The subsequent four serve as a complementary extension to the principal list, with each site linked to pivotal manifestations of the Buddha's transcendent powers:

Shravasti — the locus of the “twin miracles”, where the Buddha simultaneously emitted flames and water while levitating, subsequently multiplying his form manifold.

⁷Typologically similar processes can be traced in the evolution of pilgrimage practices in South Asian societies, as exemplified by similar narratives in other religious systems prevalent in this region, namely Hindu and Muslim traditions [8–10].

Sankasya — the place of the Buddha's descent to earth from the Tushita heavens, abode of gods.

Rajagriha (modern Rajgir) — the place where the Buddha tamed the raging elephant Nalagiri.

Vaishali — the place wherein a monkey offered honey to the Buddha.

Additionally, Rajagriha and Vaishali hold historical significance as the convocation sites of the 1st and 2nd Buddhist councils, respectively, while Pāṭaliputra (present-day Patna) is traditionally venerated as the venue of the 3rd Buddhist council.

A list of places sacred to Buddhists have expanded over time. Monuments representing the Buddhist architectural tradition, recognized as masterpieces of global architectural heritage, have emerged as focal points of pilgrimage. Among these are the Great Stupa at Sanchi, the Buddhist complex at Amaravati, and the cave temples of Ajanta and Ellora, featuring frescoes depicting Buddhist themes [5. P. 15–20]. Contemporary structures have similarly attained status as pilgrimage destinations, including the towering Buddha statue on Hussain Sagar Lake in Hyderabad, the Vishwa Shanti Stupa at Delhi's Raj Ghat memorial — the sacred cremation site of Mahatma Gandhi — and other modern monuments of spiritual significance.

Places associated with Buddhist veneration extend beyond the geopolitical boundaries of modern-day India, encompassing historically significant sites such as Taxila (Takshashila), now situated in Pakistan, and the Somapura Mahavihara monastic complex located in present-day Bangladesh. Notably, Sri Lanka hosts principal pilgrimage destinations, including the revered Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic (Dalada Maligawa) in Kandy, safeguarding the sacred dental relic of the Buddha, as well as Adam's Peak (Sri Pada), renowned for its summit bearing what is believed to be the Buddha's footprint.

Buddhist heritage sites hold a unique appeal that extends beyond Buddhist practitioners, drawing significant numbers of Hindu devotees as well. This phenomenon can be attributed to the pervasive Hindu theological perspective which identifies the Buddha as the ninth incarnation of Vishnu. Such religious syncretism exemplifies a long-standing and culturally ingrained distinction of South Asian folk religiosity [12. P. 12].

In India, from antiquity onward, prestigious monastic universities emerged as bastions of classical Buddhist erudition — Nalanda, Vikramashila, Odantapuri, Jagaddala Mahavihara., Somapura Mahavihara and Vallabhi [13. P. 5–10]. These institutions embodied a rigorous scholastic tradition characterized by profound immersion in doctrinal study, requiring years of disciplined engagement. Locations imbued with sacred significance through their association with the Buddha's spiritual peregrinations gradually evolved into intellectual centers, where disciples could undertake systematic study of Buddhist philosophy and praxis. Among these, Nalanda [14] achieved particular renown as a locus of pilgrimage and academic

excellence. Within those centers, scholars engaged with Sanskrit and Pali exegesis, delving into the doctrinal studies of both Mahayana and Theravada traditions. Similarly, Sri Lanka's Vidyodaya and Vidyalandara maintained prominence as important seats of Buddhist learning. A defining feature of these institutions was rigorous debates not only among diverse Buddhist traditions but also with Christian missionaries. These centers attracted monastic scholars from across the Buddhist world [13. P. 5–10].

Schools founded by the Maha Bodhi Society and disseminated across India synthesized aspects of classical educational framework of Buddhist universities and monastic institutions with contemporary educational paradigms. This hybrid model incorporated disciplines such as natural sciences and European languages, equipping graduates with skills necessary to engage effectively with the modern world (a fusion of monastic and secular education).

There was also a third type of education, which arose along with the university system in British India: specialized academic centers within state-funded higher institutions located in Delhi, Chennai, Mumbai, and Kolkata. Their appeal extended beyond committed adherents of Buddhism, attracting secular intellectuals interested in studying Buddhist traditions. These academic programs frequently featured clergy members serving as guest lecturers.

Dedicated spaces for meditative practice called Vipassana centers are emerging along the Buddhist heritage routes. These sanctuaries attract diverse Indian demographic, transcending religious boundaries, as the Buddhist tradition is associated with tranquility and the pursuit of inner harmony. Meditative practices in Buddhist centers serve as a further incentive for the expansion of pilgrimage networks.

Tour programs to Buddhist sacred sites exhibit distinct variations in their underlying conceptual frameworks and intended objectives. Pilgrimage routes designed for members of the Buddhist sangha and lay practitioners — including international adherents who have embraced Buddhism — incorporate devotional rituals, collective prayer ceremonies, communal recitations of canonical texts, dietary proscriptions, and adherence to vegetarianism. In contrast, introductory cultural-historical excursions catering to tourists interested in Indian religious traditions adopt a markedly different approach: they focus on guided visits to Buddhist landmarks, with offerings tailored to diverse economic capacities — ranging from standard group tours to exclusive VIP arrangements featuring luxury accommodations [15. P. 3854; 16].

Buddhist Pilgrimage Traditions within the Framework of Modern India's Evolving Sociopolitical Landscape

Since India gained independence, Buddhism has been strategically framed not merely as the spiritual domain of its practitioners, but as a cultural legacy intrinsic to South Asian civilization at large. The contemporary Indian political

culture has absorbed numerous Buddhist traditions, most notably its unifying ethos that seeks convergence amidst diversity. Prominent political figures across the entire ideological spectrum — from Indian National Congress leaders (Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, Manmohan Singh) to National Fronts leaders (Jayaprakash Narayan, Morarji Desai, Vishwanath Pratap Singh) to Bharatiya Janata Party adherents (Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Narendra Modi) — have consistently invoked Buddhist paradigms⁸. Their rhetoric converges on a singular feature: a symbolic parallel of Mahatma Gandhi's persona with that of the Buddha undertaking dharmayatra — a sacred mobilization championing justice and piety⁹.

Secular leaders of the Indian National Congress (INC) strategically employed Buddhist symbolism in their nation-building effort, positioning India as a pivotal force in the global Buddhist evolution. This ideological framework was further reinforced by the presence of the 14th Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile, established on Indian soil since 1959. Dharamshala, the Dalai Lama's Indian residence, evolved into a preeminent pilgrimage destination for Buddhist adherents worldwide, who came to receive spiritual guidance through his lectures and sermons. Pilgrimage circuits came to incorporate specialized Tibetan Buddhist learning centers, with Leh, the capital of Ladakh hosting the nation's top institution for Tibetan Buddhist studies, where the Dalai Lama delivers lectures on a regular basis. Following Ladakh's administrative separation from Jammu and Kashmir, the region has emerged as an educational hub, with numerous satellite schools complementing Leh's central university. Academic pursuit of Tibetan Buddhism has transcended its traditional northern strongholds, experiencing rapid institutional expansion into central and southern India. Notably, Karnataka — a Dravidian state in India's south — now accommodates an extensive monastic complex affiliated with the Drepung Monastery [19. P. 257–260].

Neo-Buddhists, followers of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956), played a significant role in the revitalization of Buddhist sacred sites. Ambedkar advocated for the conversion of marginalized Hindu castes and Dalits to Buddhism as a means of emancipating themselves of their low status in society. To institutionalize Buddhist resurgence, he established the Bharatiya Bauddha Mahasabha (Buddhist Society of India) in Bombay (present-day Mumbai) in 1955, and later underwent a historic mass conversion ceremony in Nagpur in 1956, alongside hundreds of thousands of adherents. This marked the inception of Navayana, a reformist Buddhist movement¹⁰. Neo-Buddhists subsequently emerged as fervent participants in pilgrimage, and elevating Ambedkar's cremation site in Dadar to sacred

⁸ The question of Buddhist rhetoric/terminology use by contemporary Indian politicians to rally the nation has been examined in detail by the author in her previously published works [17; 18]. This publication focuses on the use of historical, cultural, and religious traditions of Buddhism, including pilgrimage practices, in the search for ideological concepts by the country's leading political parties.

⁹ Nehru J. *The Discovery of India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989. P. 198–199.

¹⁰ Ambedkar BR. *The Buddha and his Dhamma*. 2nd ed. Bombay: Siddharth, 1974. P. 23–26.

status. The Chaitya Bhoomi memorial in Dadar is now a pilgrimage destination, venerating Ambedkar not merely as a Neo-Buddhist icon but also as a principal architect of India's constitution and a pioneering social reformer.

Statesmen and politicians affiliated with the incumbent Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), ideologically rooted in Hindu principles, frequently undertake pilgrimages to Buddhist sacred sites and pray before images of the Buddha. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has strategically positioned Buddhism as a cornerstone of India's contemporary diplomatic framework, accentuating its inherent pacifist ethos. While Buddhism increasingly appears a subject for Sino-Indian rivalry, it might become a potential ground for better relations between New Delhi and Beijing. Under Modi's leadership, Buddhism has been increasingly used as an instrument of "soft power", emerging as a pivotal mechanism for consolidating India's bilateral ties with Myanmar and broader Southeast Asian nations. Another area of application for 'soft power' is Hinduism and Buddhism promotion in Western countries by Indian diaspora communities along with patronizing the establishment of Buddhist societies in Europe and the USA [21. P. 100–102; 22. P. 8–15].

The current BJP-led administration, which secured another electoral mandate in the 2024 general elections, actively champions initiatives to revitalize Buddhist pilgrimage routs across India. This endeavor seeks to engage diverse adherents of Dharmic religions through strategic collaboration with Buddhist institutions, notably the New Delhi-based International Buddhist Confederation (IBC). The IBC functions as the principal coordinating body for Buddhists worldwide. Its comprehensive programs cater to domestic and international Buddhist practitioners, as well as scholars and enthusiasts of India's rich historical legacy, positioning these sacred locations at the intersection of religious devotion and cross-cultural exchange.

Tours along Buddhist heritage routes are also offered by various Buddhist organizations, including those based in neighboring South Asian nations where Buddhism is prevalent. These societies often coordinate pilgrimages to sacred Buddhist sites revered among Buddhist followers, with major role played by the Maha Bodhi Society, headquartered in Kolkata (Calcutta) with an extensive network of branches spanning nearly all cities along the classic Buddhist heritage route.

At the state level, these programs are run by India's Ministry of Culture. The seminal 1982 tourism policy first codified the significance of religious and cultural heritage, explicitly acknowledging Buddhism as an integral element of Indian civilization. Initial efforts to cultivate Buddhist tourism infrastructure materialized in the 1986 "Action Plan for the Buddhist Sector Development", which prioritized establishing adequate visitor facilities at sacred sites (15. P. 3855–3856). With growing global interest toward Buddhism, transnational Buddhist organizations in the early 21st century advocated for developing pan-Asian pilgrimage circuits. These included both traditional routes tracing the Buddha's historical journey

and contemporary “Living Buddhism” itineraries featuring modern meditation centers and educational institutions. This momentum culminated in the 2013 “Investing in the Buddhist Network” initiative, a collaborative endeavor between India’s Ministry of Tourism and the state governments of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. By 2015, the Ministry had officially designated specific Buddhist sites for targeted development through cooperative federal-state tourism programs.

The influx of foreign tourists catalyzed the government’s 2007 initiative to develop a “comprehensive Buddhist circuit tour package”, spearheaded by the introduction of the “Mahaparinirvan Express” — a premium air-conditioned luxury train service. This collaborative endeavor, jointly executed by the Ministry of Railways and the Ministry of Tourism, traverses eight sacred Buddhist pilgrimage sites over a seven-day itinerary. Additionally, targeted visitation programs for individual Buddhist shrines have been established, with the Bodh Gaya pilgrimage emerging as the most popular, owing to its status as the hallowed site where Buddhist tradition holds that Siddhartha Gautama attained enlightenment [23. P. 155; 24. P. 18].

Conclusion

Indian political elites strategically leverage Buddhism as a cultural and ideological asset to elevate the nation’s international prestige. By emphasizing India’s historical role as the cradle of a major world religion, they frame the country as a progenitor of universal philosophical concepts — toleration, non-violence, the moderation inherent in the “Middle Path”, distant from extremes, and the “Panchsheel” doctrine underpinning India’s non-aligned foreign policy. These ideological underpinnings of Buddhism hold significant relevance for India itself. Since independence, Buddhist philosophy has consistently resonated with all dominant political factions that have held power in the nation.

The state borders redrawn during decolonization have rendered Buddhism’s sacred geography inconsistent with contemporary territorial divisions. Key Buddhist pilgrimage sites — integral to South Asian devotional practices — are dispersed across the region’s sovereign states. India hosts primary sanctuaries, including Bodh Gaya (the locus of the Buddha’s enlightenment), Sarnath (site of the first sermon), and Kushinagar (where parinirvana occurred). Lumbini — the Buddha’s birthplace — lies within Nepal’s borders proximate to India but still on the territory of Nepal. Several ancient Buddhist centers now fall under Pakistan’s jurisdiction (Taxila) and Bangladesh’s domain (Somapura). This fragmentation has precipitated contentious debates regarding the custodianship of Buddha’s birthplace (Nepal versus India) or Sri Lanka’s challenge to India’s Theravada authority. Despite these tensions, the dissemination of Buddhist principles fosters a unifying civilizational identity among South Asian peoples, catalyzing transnational dialogue across the region.

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