

BUDDHIST CIRCUITS IN NORTHEAST INDIA: A PILLAR OF TOURISM DIPLOMACY

*Dr. Sarvsureshth Dhammi**

Abstract

Tourism diplomacy is significant for exploring opportunities in countries' natural, cultural, and spiritual heritage. Many countries adopted the concept of tourism diplomacy to enhance their influence and diplomatic ties in the new world order. Countries like China and Thailand in Asia have encashed Buddhism to project countries' soft power and effective diplomacy. This article focuses on how Buddhist circuits with a rich heritage in northeast India can help elevate India's tourism diplomacy with Buddhist majoritarian countries and establish India as a soft power globally. The article examines how promoting the Buddhist circuits enhances regional development, strengthens cultural ties with neighbouring countries, and contributes to regional growth and stability. By analysing the region's natural assets and unique culture, this article will help highlight the challenges and opportunities in positioning the northeast region of India as a hub for Buddhist tourism. This article also provides some policy frameworks for New Delhi's strategic objective for the region's development, cooperation with Southeast and East Asian countries, and coordination with international organisations to develop this region. Ultimately, this paper argues that well-planned Buddhist tourism diplomacy in India's northeast region will recognise countries' diplomatic relations and cultural influence and foster sustainable development in the region.

Key Words: *India, Buddhism, Northeast region, Soft Power, Tourism Diplomacy*

* Assistant Professor, Dept. Of Defence and Strategic Studies, Science Faculty, University of Allahabad – 211002

Introduction

Tourism has a diplomatic advantage for any country. Since the 19th century, the West has developed a tourism policy to support its diplomatic engagements and spread its heritage legacy and economy. However, the same trend has not been seen in Asian countries. The role of tourism was limited to generating economic growth and employment for Asian countries. Later, in the end of 20th century, many Asian countries realised the importance of tourism in track-2/back-channel diplomacy. It helps Thailand, Malaysia, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Singapore to weave its cultural diversity to support its foreign policy. These countries successfully developed an eco-system supporting their religious beliefs (Buddhism) to develop local economy and tourism. Due to their cultural and spiritual beliefs, these countries are also able to establish a common agenda to spread their heritage legacy parallel to other tourism activities.

The rise of cultural tourism provides endless opportunities and helps different people know how others live. From attending the festival to visiting historical and religious places. Whether tourist are not a part of diplomacy, they have become part of tourism diplomacy. One of the examples in Asian countries is China, which developed a synthetic cultural legacy in terms of Buddhism. There was a time when China crushed Tibetan culture to promote a singular Han culture over the occupied Tibet. But later, when globalisation witnessed a drastic change and understood the importance of multipolarity in cultural tourism, Beijing changed its stance and started practising multipolar culturalism by forcing Tibetans to marry the Han and settling in occupied Tibet, Xinjiang and the Inner Mongolia region. It gave an edge to China in the diplomatic sphere by spreading its agenda and answering every question efficiently when it comes to human rights violations against different communities. From artificial lakes, villages, and community markets to heritage centres run by other communities' surveillance by strict government officials can be seen in Beijing when one visits China. This example shows how one nation can use tourism diplomacy to spread its foreign policy agendas.

Through developing the synthetic culture of Buddhism, Chinese authorities successfully managed cultural closeness with Southeast Asian countries.

But, when it comes to India, which has a unique, diverse Buddhist legacy, it is lagging in exploring its full potential. Tourism diplomacy is backed by intentionally using countries' tourism potential as a diplomatic tool to strengthen and build international relations (Kuri et al., 2020). To understand tourism diplomacy for India, there is a need to understand the significance of tourism for India's foreign policy. How do other nations use tourism in their diplomacy? What is Buddhism for India and its northeastern states?

In the 21st century, tourism diplomacy is growing its importance in India. It can play a significant role in international relations, backed by its diverse cultural heritage, particularly with regard to Buddhism. It holds a substantial potential to encash tourism as a diplomatic tool. With their unique cultural identities, India's northeastern states can play a critical role in contributing to its tourism strategy. India's four northeastern states, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram share a boundary with Myanmar, which is a door to the Buddhist majoritarian Southeast Asian nations. A recent study focused on how tourism can strategically influence India's foreign relations. The study highlighted how Indonesia attracted tourists from India by showing cultural similarities and targeted tourism promotion. This helped Indonesia to strengthen its bilateral ties with India (Minardi et al., 2020). In addition, the Public Diplomacy Division of the Ministry of External Affairs, established in 2006, recognise tourism as a key element in enhancing the country's global image and influence. This division helps India promote tourism and projects India's political and cultural narratives globally (Suri, 2011). Another study focused on tourism's contribution to India's GDP, foreign exchange earnings and employment in India. The study shows that tourism contributes culturally and diplomatically and helps in the economic development drive (Mehrad et al., 2023). Moreover, integrating public diplomacy with strategies can help promote India's positive image in competitive globalisation (Mazumdar, 2020).

India's Cultural and Historical Ties to Buddhism

India is the birthplace of Buddhism and the home of Siddhartha Gautama's teaching of compassion, peace and non-violence. It helps India establish its spiritual depth globally (Pham et al., 2021). On a cultural ground, India is intertwined with Buddhist heritage, which has helped the country position itself as a beacon of enlightenment and peace in the world (Scott. D, 2016). There are many ancient Buddhist sites all over India, like Nalanda, Bodh Gaya and Sarnath, attract pilgrims, tourists and scholars worldwide (Medhekar, 2022). By promoting Buddhist tourism, India can foster its global image as a soft power. It shows India's commitment to promoting and preserving universal values resonating with Buddhist teaching. Buddhist sites spread almost everywhere in India and when it comes to sites in the northeast states, two prominent sites are Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim. Both states can help India with tourism through India's Act East Policy. Arunachal Pradesh is one of the most important places in the region, as 17th-century Twang Monastery is the most important Buddhist pilgrim and attraction place in the area. Arunachal also shares a border with Myanmar. As Myanmar is a Buddhist majoritarian country, proper road connectivity through Arunachal, Manipur, and Mizoram can help to increase Southeast countries' religious tourism via road connectivity. Myanmar is a door to Southeast Asian countries for India. It will help develop the economy and infrastructure in the Northeast of India. Sikkim is also known as the Dharma Chakra Centre and the seat of Tibetan Buddhism, the Kagyu sect.

Moreover, the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Sikkim is one of the major repositories of Tibetan Buddhist artefacts and literature, contributing to studying Buddhist history and culture. These sites contribute to the preservation of Tibetan Buddhist culture and attract visitors from Southeast Asian countries and pilgrims through road connectivity. The road connectivity helps especially those who cannot afford air tickets. India's deep-rooted heritage sites of Buddhism offer a unique opportunity to strengthen its cultural and diplomatic ties with Southeast Asian countries (Mazumdar. A., 2018). Promoting Buddhist diplomacy allows New Delhi to develop closer spiritual

and cultural connections with these countries. Initiatives for collaboration to restore ancient Buddhist sites, cultural exchange, and the organisation of Buddhist conferences can help create stronger bonds with these countries.

North-Eastern India as a Diplomatic Asset

Many initiatives were taken for north-eastern states in the last few years under India's Act East Policy and the recent G20 summit in India. The northeast region of India is full of natural and cultural treasures. Characterised distinct traditions, diverse ethnic communities, cultural practices, and languages can help India explore more opportunities for tourism diplomacy. Festivals like Hornbill in Nagaland, Bihu in Assam, Losar in Sikkim, Ziro festival in Arunachal Pradesh, and Sengai festival in Manipur showcase the rich heritage, culture and vibrant lifestyle of the people of northeast India. In addition to this, natural beauty, fantastic landscapes like Dzukuo valley, tea gardens of Assam, Loktak lake of Manipur, valleys of Meghalaya and Mizoram, Unakoti in Tripura and majestic peaks of Arunachal Pradesh, including national parks in northeast India offers valuable asset for tourism. By fully exploring the potential of these states, India can leverage it in tourism diplomacy. Cross-border tourism connecting northeast states of India via roads with Southeast Asian countries will help India's to achieve its strategic interests. But there are also challenges. The promotion of Northeast India as a tourist destination is a big hurdle. Limited infrastructure and poor road connectivity due to its remoteness compared to other parts of India are hampering the growth of this region. These challenges are also turning into opportunities, but the pace of development needs to work at the level of war. Such initiatives are expanding air and road connectivity, upcoming railway links to Imphal, Manipur, national highways especially in Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and other north-eastern states of India, development of integrated borders check posts infrastructure and Economic Exclusive Zones for business in Arunachal, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram sharing border with Myanmar. In addition, promoting northeast tourism as adventure tourism, cultural tourism, and eco-tourism can also help India.

How have countries like Thailand and China successfully utilised Buddhism in their tourism diplomacy?

Countries like Thailand and China successfully leveraged Buddhism through tourism diplomacy. Both countries successfully attracted international visitors, which helped them strengthen their ties and enhance their global influence. Buddhism became the cornerstone of Thailand's tourism diplomacy (McCargo, D., 2004). Countries deeply intertwined Buddhist heritage became its cultural identity (Abuan, R. E. M., 2021). Thailand promoted a number of its Buddhist festivals, temples, and traditions, which became key attractions for international tourists. Iconic sites like Wat Pho, Wat Phra Kaew in Bangkok, and Wat Phra That Doi Suthep in Chiang Mai became Thailand's spiritual and cultural legacy symbol (Evrard et al., 2009). Countries' tourism campaigns reflect their image of spiritual, peaceful and prosperous cultural destinations, which helps to draw millions of visitors and helps Thailand in tourism diplomacy (Peleggi. M, 1996). Thailand also played a proactive role in the regional and global Buddhist network by putting efforts into cultural activism. Bangkok successfully organises and hosts international conferences with practitioners worldwide, which helps them to bring together many Buddhist leaders on single stage. Through these efforts, Thailand successfully strengthened its soft power image, which helped the country to concretise its diplomatic and cultural ties with Buddhist-majority countries.

China is a classic example of how Beijing successfully leveraged Buddhist diplomacy after forcefully occupying Tibet and crushing Buddhist cultural identity between 1950 and the 1990s. Single majoritarian Han's government in Beijing realised in the late 1990s how important multi-cultural tourism diplomacy is in establishing a positive image of China in the new world order. As Beijing's past had blood stains of cursing Buddhist culture, Uyghur Muslims of Turkish identity in Xinjiang, Mongolian culture in Inner-Mongolia, and the April 15, 1989, Tiananmen Square massacre, positive tourism became a medium for their rule policy makers to get away from their past bloody identity. China established several Buddhist and other cultural centres (Ce Qu et al., 2017). Since 2000, synthetic infrastructure in the main

cities has forced different communities into cultural centres and helped Beijing to successfully establish its global soft power image. In addition, strategically promoting and giving limited access to tourists in targeted places helped China boost its tourism and strengthen diplomatic relations, especially with major Buddhist countries. Important Buddhist sites like the Longmen Grottoes, the Shaolin Monastery and Mount Wutai are aggressively promoted as spiritual and cultural destinations. China hosted international Buddhist forums and invested in restoring and preserving these sites, which has helped elevate its image in the global Buddhist community. By investing in Buddhist heritage, Beijing attracted millions of pilgrims and used these cultural exchanges to build stronger diplomatic ties with Myanmar, Thailand, Sri Lanka and other Southeast Asian countries (Zhang, J, 2023). It helps China to foster goodwill among the Buddhist-majority countries and allows them to project cultural influence (Raymond, G. V. et al., 2020).

How India can Frames its Buddhist Tourism Diplomacy?

For an effective Buddhist Tourism strategy in the northeast region as a part of broader tourism diplomacy, India needs to work on the promotion and development of Buddhist circuits, cultural showcasing and festival, digital promotion and global outreach, enhancement of infrastructure and connectivity, collaboration with Southeast Asian countries and sustainable tourism practices. India can promote and develop a dedicated Buddhist tourism circuit along with other regional tourist places to highlight important Buddhist places in northeast India. For example, the Rumtek Monastery in Sikkim and Tawang Monastery in Arunachal Pradesh can be planned in the tourism circuit along with the Ziro Festival, Hornbill Festival, Sangai Festival, Shirui Festival Shad Suk Mynsiem Festival, Nongkrem Festival, Chapchar Kut festival, Garia and Bihu festival. Providing tourism packages and adding northeast regional festivals in this circuit will offer unique opportunities for tourists to explore the rich Buddhist heritage and cultural festivals of northeast India. Integrating these festival sites into tourist circuits, New Delhi can attract tourists and pilgrims from around the world, which will help enhance cultural exchanges and diplomacy (Medhekar, A. et al., 2022).

Promoting and organising cultural festivals to celebrate the Buddhist heritage of northeast India can play a significant role in India's tourism diplomacy. It will help India showcase its unique identity, art, traditions, and crafts in the northeast region. These activities will help enhance people-to-people ties, strengthening India's cultural connections with Buddhist majoritarian countries (Shinde. K. A., 2022).

Internet and social networks revolutionised the meaning of globalisation. Whatever is happening in the corner of the world can be seen from the platforms available on the internet. Considering today's needs, New Delhi must work aggressively on a comprehensive digital marketing campaign to increase digital imprints of the northeast region of India (Agarwal. M. et al., 2010). AI-enabled targeted online advertisements on social media and virtual tours of the northeast, especially Buddhist attraction sites, can help India attract tourists from Buddhist majoritarian countries and other parts of the world (Raffaele. F, 2021). It will also help New Delhi to project its image as a custodian of Buddhist heritage.

There is a need to invest significantly in infrastructure development. However, road connectivity is improving in the remote areas of the northeast; there is a need to work on hospitality infrastructure. In addition, air connectivity to critical Buddhist sites is essential to boost domestic and international tourists in the region. At present, hotels are available at prominent sites, but very few infrastructures are available when we talk about the northeast region. Moreover, it must be affordable for tourists. A competitive market will help the area to generate more revenue. Enhancing local amenities and visitor services will contribute to memorable and comfortable tourist experiences will help elevate India's image (Medhekar. A. et al., 2022).

Closer collaboration with Southeast Asian countries can foster India's Buddhist tourism diplomacy. New Delhi must work aggressively on joint initiatives such as cultural exchange, cross-border tourism packages, and heritage conservation projects on Buddhist tradition. India can also invite participants from Southeast Asian countries to conferences and events on

Buddhism in the northeast region. It will help India to concretise its cultural ties with Southeast Asian countries (Shinde. K. A., 2022).

Last but not least, sustainable tourism practices can help northeast India preserve the region's cultural and natural assets (Cajee. L, 2014). Eco-friendly tourism, with the collaboration of local communities and their traditional practices, will help protect the environment (Yugang He, 2022). Projecting northeast India as an example of sustainable tourism can attract environment-conscious tourists. It allows India to demonstrate New Delhi's commitment to preserving the natural and cultural heritage of the region.

Challenges of Buddhist tourism in the Northeast India

Underdeveloped infrastructure and remoteness of the northeast region of India is a primary challenge. Insufficient accessibility due to poor condition of roads, lack of quality accommodation and insufficient transportation network forced tourists not to visit these areas (Haokip. T, 2015). In addition, the monsoon is a boon and enemy to this region. Climate disruption further complicates tourism and travel in these areas (Mili. B. et al., 2017). One more prominent challenge of this region is the visibility and lack of awareness of northeast Buddhist places (Dam. S, 2020). Unlike famous pilgrimage sites like Sarnath and Bodh Gaya, northeast Buddhist sites are less recognised internationally. This is one of the most significant shortcomings of Indian tourism policymakers in promoting Arunachal Pradesh as a heritage tourism site in India to counter-narratives of Beijing's claim on Indian territory. By promoting tourism in this region, India can strengthen its image in the new world order.

Regional instability is another challenge to promoting Buddhist tourism in northeast India. Insurgency movements, ethnic tensions and border disputes with the Chinese in the forcefully occupied Tibet region are making things more complicated. Ensuring a stable and secure environment for tourist safety is crucial for fostering sustainable regional tourism. Northeast India has diverse ethnic groups with unique traditions, practices, and beliefs. While promoting Buddhist tourism, it is essential to preserve the cultural identities of the groups

by ensuring that development does not marginalise the local traditions. In addition, diplomatic considerations need to be managed efficiently as the northeast region of India shares a border with Bhutan, Tibet (occupied by China) and Myanmar. Territorial issues need to be addressed with caution and tensions avoided. In addition, India's border policy must be aligned to complement bilateral and multilateral relations (Das. S. B. et al., 2022).

Conclusion

New Delhi must adopt active tourism diplomacy through the northeast states and Buddhism. There is a need to adopt specific policy measures for the region. Governments (both state and central) need to invest in infrastructure development, comparative accommodation facilities, expanding the transportation network and connecting it to Buddhist sites. The central government UDAN (Ude Desh ka Aam Naagrik) scheme needs to communicate with these Buddhist heritage sites to provide economical air connectivity to domestic and international tourists.

A comprehensive targeted marketing strategy needs to be developed to promote Buddhist heritage in northeast India on a global stage. It includes international tourism fair participation, digital campaigns, and collaboration with the worldwide tourism industry to make customised travel packages highlighting India's northeast spiritual and cultural offerings. Domestic tourism industries need to be supported for targeted customer campaigns. There are many other places in northeast India where the Buddhist community lives. New Delhi can establish more pilgrimage circuits that link to these places across the country and Southeast Asia, providing an integrated spiritual tourism experience. India's tourism diplomacy must also work on policies encouraging sustainable and community-based tourism. There is a need for training in local communities for capacity building, preserving regional culture, and training programs for local entrepreneurs in the hospitality and tourism sectors to promote eco-friendly tourism practices.

India can also explore opportunities through multilateral forums and international organisations to enhance tourism diplomacy through Buddhism and northeast India. UNESCO can assist in promoting and preserving Buddhist heritage sites, which helps to raise India's soft power image on the global stage. Regional cooperation like the Bay of Bangla Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) can help facilitate cross-border dialogues to promote tourism initiatives and cooperation among the Buddhist heritage countries.

Lastly, positioning northeast India as a hub for Buddhist tourism can help New Delhi strengthen its diplomatic ties with East Asian Courtiers and Southeast Asian countries in many folds. It will help increase mutual understanding and people-to-people contact, which will help maintain peace and stability in the region. In addition, developing northeast India as a tourist destination helps to improve the area's economic growth, which directly helps to reduce regional instability, underdevelopment and economic marginalisation.

References

Abuan, R. E. M. (2021). Cultural diplomacy of Thailand and Indonesia in the Philippines. *Malaysian Journal of International Relations*, 9(1), 88–104. <https://doi.org/10.22452/mjir.vol9no1.5>

Agrawal, M., Choudhary, H., & Tripathi, G. (2010). Enhancing Buddhist tourism in India: an exploratory study. *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes*, 2(5), 477–493. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17554211011090102>

Cajee, L. (2014). Eco-cultural tourism: A tool for environmental, cultural and economic sustainability (A case study of darap Village, West Sikkim). *SHS Web of Conferences*, 12, 01029. <https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/20141201029>

Dam, S. (2020). Implication of SASEC tourism initiatives on north eastern States of India: A descriptive analysis - SASEC tourism. In *Destination Management and Marketing* (pp. 690–709). IGI Global.

Das, S. B., & Chattopadhyay, S. (2022). Identifying challenges and improving trade facilitation in the states of northeast India. *Asian Development Bank*.

Evrard, O., & Leepreecha, P. (2009). Monks, monarchs and mountain folks: Domestic tourism and internal colonialism in northern Thailand. *Critique of Anthropology*, 29(3), 300–323. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275x09104657>

Filieri, R., D'Amico, E., Destefanis, A., Paolucci, E., & Raguseo, E. (2021). Artificial intelligence (AI) for tourism: an European-based study on successful AI tourism start-ups. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 33(11), 4099–4125. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ijchm-02-2021-0220>

Haokip, T. (2015). India's Look East policy: Prospects and challenges for northeast India. *Studies in Indian Politics*, 3(2), 198–211. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2321023015601742>

He, Y., & Wang, C. (2022). Does Buddhist tourism successfully result in local sustainable development? *Sustainability*, 14(6), 3584. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14063584>

Kuri, B. C., Islam, S., & Ananya, S. A. (2020). Tourism diplomacy: A feasible tool of building nation's image through tourism resources. A study on Bangladesh. *European Journal of Business and Management*. <https://doi.org/10.7176/ejbm/12-24-10>

Mazumdar, A. (2018). India's soft power diplomacy under the Modi administration: Buddhism, diaspora and yoga. *Asian Affairs*, 49(3), 468–491. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2018.1487696>

McCargo, D. (2004). Buddhism, democracy and identity in Thailand. *Democratisation*, 11(4), 155–170. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1351034042000234576>

Medhekar, A., & Haq, F. M. (2022). Promoting trade and economic relations via Buddhist spiritual tourism circuit between India and Southeast Asia. In *Advances in Finance, Accounting, and Economics* (pp. 167–185). IGI Global.

Mili, B., Barua, A., Malakar, K., & Katyaini, S. (2017). Assessment of climate induced seasonality of tourism for planning sustainable tourism - a case of Northeast India. *International Journal of Society Systems Science*, 9(2), 119. <https://doi.org/10.1504/ijsss.2017.10006642>

Peleggi, M. (1996). National heritage and global tourism in Thailand. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 23(2), 432–448. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383\(95\)00071-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383(95)00071-2)

Pham, T. H., & Nikolaeva, E. (2021). The soft power of India Buddhism for the sustainable development in north East Asia. *E3S Web of Conferences*, 258, 05003. <https://doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/202125805003>

Qu, C., Timothy, D. J., & Zhang, C. (2019). Does tourism erode or prosper culture? Evidence from the Tibetan ethnic area of Sichuan Province, China. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 17(4), 526–543. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2019.1600867>

Raymond, G. V., & Lecturer at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra. (2020). Religion as a tool of influence: Buddhism and China's belt and road initiative in mainland southeast Asia. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 42(3), 346–371. <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs42-3b>

Scott, D. (2016). Buddhism in current China-India diplomacy. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 45(3), 139–174. <https://doi.org/10.1177/186810261604500305>

Shinde, K. A. (2022). How effective is a Buddhist pilgrimage circuit as a product and strategy for heritage tourism in India? *Heritage*, 5(4), 3846–3863. <https://doi.org/10.3390/heritage5040198>

Zhang, J. (2023). China's religious diplomacy for its belt and road initiative: A review and assessment. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 21(2), 83–94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2023.2200284>