

**Buddhist heritage and cultural diplomacy:  
A Buddhist path to cultural diplomacy**

**Arvind Kumar Singh**

School of Buddhist Studies and Civilization, Gautam Buddha University

Shri Narendra Modi declared, at the “*Samvad*” conference in 2015, that India was “taking the lead in promoting the Buddhist heritage across Asia.” While India has a minimal Buddhist population, with only 0.7% of its people declaring themselves Buddhists in the 2001 census, it is in a unique position to utilize Buddhist diplomacy. India is, after all, is the place where Buddhism originated, and it holds many of the most important Buddhist sites, including, *Bodh Gaya*, *Sarnath Kusinara*, *Rajagaha*, and *Nalanda* and many more. There is no doubt that Buddhism is one of the most intriguing philosophical products that originated in India 2660 years ago, though this profound Indic philosophical tradition has never been viewed as a religion in the theistic sense or in the context of being a faith. Yet, it has remained a powerful integrated philosophical whole, encompassing all facets of both spiritual and material culture that have guided humanity for centuries. Sir Edwin Arnold, in his book *The Light of Asia* (1879), recorded that Buddhism has influenced millions for over 26 centuries and the spatial dimension of its dominions extended “from Nepal and Ceylon over the whole Eastern Peninsula to China, Japan, Tibet, Central Asia, Siberia, and even Swedish Lapland.”

For all these centuries, Buddhism remained as the solid foundation for societal and cultural transformation in Asia. It still remains a key anchor for Asian identity and a phenomenon of unprecedented Pan-Asian importance, especially in terms of spiritual connectivity among nations with enduring impact. Buddhism has already gained prominence in India’s diplomacy for fostering deeper engagement with ASEAN countries as part of the ‘Look East’ and now “Act East” policy. In fact, Buddhism is also becoming a brand symbol of rising India. The country is sitting atop a millennia-old tourist mine. Numerous Buddhist sites in India, directly linked to the spiritual destinies of millions in Asia, could form a part of Buddha-Industry, which, in turn, could transform the lives of millions, providing lucrative career options to a large youth component. The proposed paper will deal with the cultural Buddhist heritage of India and its role in promoting Soft Power through cultural diplomacy to have tie ups and close relationship with Buddhist nations across the world along with highlighting its Buddhist heritage.

**Keywords:** *Buddhist, Cultural diplomacy, Heritage*