

# SIGNIFICANCE OF BUDDHIST DIPLOMACY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN MODERN ASIA

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## ABSTRACT

*Buddhism is one of the leading religions and most intriguing philosophical values since its inception. This religious tradition not only travelled many Asian countries but also assimilated with local culture and played greater role in shaping of socio-political setting of many Asian countries. Imperatively, many royal families, across Asia, applied Buddhist approach for political proliferation during course of history. And even in modern and contemporary time, many Asian countries are projecting itself as the patron of the Buddhist culture.*

*Therefore, this paper attempts to critically examine the modern Buddhist diplomacy in historical perspective. Particularly, India's Buddhist diplomacy needs a deeper academic analysis. This paper underlines why India is trying to project Buddhism and what are its socio, political and economic aspects. The paper would also examine the significance of Buddhism in socio-economic contexts as Asian nations with about one-fourth of the world's population are becoming one of the largest consumer in contemporary time. This research would explore archival records and examine various primary documents in order to underline the significance of this topic in modern context.*

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## INTRODUCTION

This topic analyzes how Asian countries particularly India have used Buddhism for socio-political goals through their diplomacy. This article contextualize the theoretical aspect of socio-political engagement of Buddhism in modern Asia. It examines the approach of national leaders and envoys as a cultural diplomacy and its historical roots in Indian context. Thus, political use of Buddhism has always attracted the criticism of scholars and it has branded as “soft-power”, “geopolitical tool”, “hidden agenda” and so on. Buddhist diplomacy of India was primarily focused on revival of Buddhist linkage of India with Asian countries and further to portray India as a cultural leader. We may highlight the contemporary encouragement of Buddhist linkages across Asia by the present Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, but the notion of Buddhist linkages was strongly propagated by Dr. Ambedkar in 1940s. After independence, it became customary for Indian politicians and envoys to portray the Buddhist idea as a cultural legacy of India.

## CONTEXTUALIZING SOCIO-POLITICAL THEORY

During the last fifty years, Buddhist followers made a positive mark on modern society by applying Buddhist approaches to engage the people in their respective countries. The Buddhist leaders have not only identified the public role of modern Buddhism but also embarked on social empowerment and the formation of religious social base, which differs from other religious groups since modern Buddhists foster community value along with religious value. Modern development and emerging rivalry among Asian countries are the major threat for sustainable development and maintaining peace around Asia. But for understanding the role of Buddhism in modern context, we need to emphasize the Buddhist socio-political ethics which guide Buddhists to work for sustainable development.

Modern Buddhists are not restricted to traditional practices. They are instead suffused with a new social consciousness and espouse the principle of deep engagement with modern society

and sustainable development. Moreover, social justice and social empowerment of marginalized people has become the central subject for contemporary Buddhist movements, which have been applying various modern means in order to bridge the social gap in modern times. Religious communities 'play an important role in engaging people for social activities' and enable people to control their behaviors (Cnaan and Yancey 2003, 21). Buddhist communities and their activities are more significant in order to emphasize the sustainable development in modern time.

Karl Marx notably states, in the context of religion, that 'religious distress is at the same time expression of real distress and the protest against real distress (Dawson 2006, 39)'. Thus, the question arises as to whether the rise of Won Buddhism and Neo-Buddhism as new spiritual communities is actually expressions of distress. Since these religious movements also appeared as social movements, can the classical Marxist proposition of 'emancipation and mass society' be a theoretical paradigm for comprehending the Buddhist movements in Korea and India? James White influentially applied the concept of 'mass society' in understanding the Soka Gakkai movement in Japan, registered with United Nation as a Buddhist non-government organization,<sup>1</sup> but his work focused more on the political aspect than social emancipation.

Traditional sociological explanations have established the link between shrinking religious belief and practices with urbanization, industrialization and the education process. Casanova, in his study on new religious movements, notes that 'decline of religious belief and practices is a dominant historical trend in many modern Western, particularly European, societies (Casanova 1994, 213). He has applied the concept and theories of secularization in the context of two traditions—Catholic and Protestant—in four different countries. But his work is confined to the civil-society movement and the church-state relation, finding both religious consciousness and religious growth in a declining phase. Thus, this similar socio-

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1. The concept of 'mass society' was developed by William Kornhauser in 1959 and was primarily applied in the understanding of European society, but James R. White applied the concept to understand the new religious movement in Japan. See James R. White, *The Soka Gakkai and Mass Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 1970. See review by David A. Titus.

political explanation is not applicable in the context of many Buddhist organizations, because, along with Buddhist belief and practices, religious consciousness and religious growth are rising in many Asian countries. Furthermore, Wilson's assertion, that 'the decline in the prominence of conventional religions was a necessary precondition for the rise of new religious movements,' is applicable to an understanding of the historical course of the Asian Buddhist movements, since conventional religions of many countries failed to satisfy the socio-spiritual needs of masses in modern times.

Mcguire notes that historical and cross-cultural comparative methodologies are one of the key approaches in contemporary sociology. Casanova, who has applied such an approach to study the role of the public religion, mentions that 'the 1960s was a period for the rise of new religious movements and new religious consciousness, however the 1980s attested to the public role of new religious traditions' (Casanova 1994, 5). That said, there are a few studies on new religious organizations and NGOs—such as Bryan Wilson, 1999; Mei Yujun, 2003; and Bush, 2006—but they are infrequent despite a vast number of works on modern religions (Boli and Brewington 2007, 204). But the majority of these works predominantly center on Christian organizations and NGOs, only merely scrutinizing nationally and internationally oriented Buddhist organizations and NGOs in Asia. What is contrary to the new religious movements and organizations that consist of a "cosmopolitan, transnational activist elite (Bush 2007, 164-6),"<sup>2</sup> while Won Buddhism and Neo-Buddhism consist predominantly of provincial masses and downtrodden people in the early stage of movement and then shifted to the urban and suburban middle class?

Weber, on the religion of non-privileged classes, observes that Buddhism arose as a salvation doctrine and rejected the illusions of life. Furthermore, he finds distress, social and economic oppression, as an actual basis for salvation beliefs (Weber 1967, 107, 116). Evidently, some Buddhist movements arose by

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2. Evelyn has cited Tarrow's assertion, and he critically examine Peter Berger, who points out that 'secularism is most prominent among a cosmopolitan, highly educated, See Evelyn L. Bush.

emphasizing salvation beliefs, but here, it is meant as an escape from contemporary socioeconomic apathy and poverty. Thus, the movements reinterpret traditional Buddhist ethics in modern context and provide new ethics for socio-economic empowerment and sustainable development.

Weber asserts that Buddhism has established no 'social-political' goal and was the product of a privileged class, not of the underprivileged (Weber 1996, 226-7; Chakravarti 1987, 97). This hypothesis attracted criticism especially from Asian scholars who emphasized the socio-political role of Buddhism in historical perspective. The leading traditionalist school embraces a greater segment of Asian scholars, the so-called leaders of Asian Buddhism, such as Buddhadasa, the Dalai Lama, Maha Ghosananda, Sulak Sivaraksa, and Thich Nhat Hanh. Evidently, modern Buddhists have started modern social movements by establishing Buddhist NGOs focusing on social and sustainable development throughout the world.

Social change requires a charismatic authority figure who can guide followers in a right direction, and religion has been a major source of such leaders (Mcguire 2002, 251). Although Max Weber distinguishes medieval religious reformers from the category of charismatic authority (Weber 1967, 54), the followers Neo-Buddhism consider their religious leaders as a charismatic authority. Dr. B. Ambedkar (1891-1956), the founder of Neo-Buddhism, was the representative leader who provided a religious remedy for the common people of India. He was well-versed in both the Eastern and the Western spiritual traditions, but he embraced the Buddhist tradition as a tool to meet the contemporary socio-spiritual demand of modern world. His key objectives was to help needy and downtrodden people.

## BUDDHIST DIPLOMACY IN MODERN INDIA

Before focusing on the contemporary Buddhist policy of India, we need to scrutinize the Buddhist diplomacy of India since independence. Various questions arises if we deeply observe India's Buddhist diplomacy for example, does India actually wish to emerge as a Buddhist destination; whether India aspired to lead and engage ancient Buddhist linkages; and what mechanism they

applied in this regard. Since Buddhist diplomacy of India has been not well organized and never been a consistent force, we need to highlight its core values and integrated accomplishment. What potent appears is that the India's diplomacy is designed for peaceful existence and sustainable development of nations. And the socio-political ethics of Buddhism have been guiding force since its independence.

The tradition of holding Buddhist discussions and council continued since inception of Buddhism, which not only strengthened the India's Buddhist linkage but it also played an important role in shaping of Buddhism in India. Interestingly, the bond between Buddhism and state is not a new phenomenon, and it goes back to the period of Emperor Ashoka, who began the policy popularly known as conquest through Dharma. He started to send the Dharma mission to the neighboring countries and he appears to be roping royal family members in spread the Dharma and further to develop diplomatic ties with various nations. Developing ties with Asian nations through the penetration of Buddhism should be contextualize into greater policy objectives of the kingdom. Following Ashoka's policy, many East Asian rulers adopted and applied Buddhist linkage for political objective (Gupta, 2009, 12-39).

After independence, Indian government adopted the Buddhist notion of Panchsheel as a guiding principle to shape the relation with neighboring countries. Particularly this concept has been guiding force between India and China after independence. The issue of India's ancient cultural linkage and the role of Buddhism in diplomacy and foreign policy are the potent issues emerging time to time since the period of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. In 1952, India hosted the International Buddhist Conference in Madhay Pradesh where more than 3,000 Buddhist nuns, monks, and historians participated. This conference was attended by the then Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Prime Minister of Burma (Ahir, 1991, 19). Certainly, this visit provided an opportunity to re-develop Buddhist connection, but it also provided an opportunity to discuss sustainable development and solution for disputes.

Same year, India also presented the sacred Relics of Lord Buddha

to Japan. After the huge success of previous conference, in 1954, the Sixth Buddhist Council was convened in Burma where many Indian leaders participated. Moreover, the Buddhist linkages were part and parcel of the 'Blue Print' which Dr. Ambedkar presented in Rangoon, Burma, at the International Buddhist Conference held on 4 December 1954 (Hari Narke: 2003, 506–12). In 1956, India celebrated the historic Buddha Purnima by roping leading political leader and government machinery. India celebrated the home-coming of the Sacred Relics of Arahāt Moggaliputta Tissa and others from the British Museum, London. Through this Sacred Relics, perhaps, the Indian Government initiated its Buddhist diplomacy and the casket containing Sacred Relics of Moggaliputta was presented to the Government of Ceylon by the India Government. This initiation further resulted fruitfully and the Prime Minister of Ceylon, Mrs. Sirimayo Bandaranaike, presented the Bo-sapling brought from Anuradhapur, Sri Lanka, which was planted in the Buddha Jayanti Park in 1964. Moreover, India engaged representatives of about 23 countries during the World Fellowship of Buddhists in 1964. Diplomats from various countries were invited to participate in this conference. The Indian Government also made effort to facilitate land for building Monasteries of Buddhist countries. The Thai Monastery at Bodh Gaya was completed by Thai Government in 1966. Since then many Asian countries have constructed their Vihara in Bodh Gaya, India (Ahir, 1991, 23). Throughout 1970s and 1980s, there were various efforts made to engage international people and government.

The entire efforts made on government level were, more or less, were oriented to re-connect Buddhist linkage with the Buddhist countries. Also the orientation was to develop deeper ties with these nations for mutual growth and sustainable development in the region. But the term "Buddhist diplomacy" not ever became functional. Thus, we may assert that India only aspired for the re-connection of Buddhist nations, but Buddhist linkage, as a tool to lead the Buddhist counties, was not nurtured.

#### DIPLOMACY OF INDIAN BUDDHIST GROUPS

In the Indian context, Dr. Ambedkar's Buddhism is a form of

social activism based on the principle of missionary work. He strongly believed in and interpreted Buddhism from the modern perspective that ‘*Dhamma* is social. It is fundamentally and essentially so’. Furthermore, he stated that if there are two men living in relation to each other, they require *Dhamma* and society cannot do without it (Dr. Ambedkar: 1957 [2002], 316). Dr. Ambedkar had dreamed it for India to be a Buddhist country bound up with the Buddhist countries of the world.

Ambedkar appears to have taken the liberty to interpret the *Dhamma* in a modern context. In a 1956 broadcast from the BBC, London, he said ‘neither god nor soul can save society’, and thus, society has to save itself with the Buddha’s teaching of right understanding (*prajna*), love (*karuna*), and equality (*samata*) playing an instrumental role (Ambedkar, 2002: 490). Here, Ambedkar emphasized the society-centric teachings of Buddhism so as to motivate people for community welfare, in particular, and social welfare, in general.

He proposed a Buddhist democratic social system in which friendship (*maitree*) was the root of the democratic society (BAWS Vol.4, 1987: 283–4). In his view, Buddhism is based upon ethical principles and teaches one how to serve the well-being of the common masses (BAWS Vol.17. III, 2003: 410). He interpreted and utilized the social doctrine of Buddhism to strengthen the religious system and, more importantly, build a morally sound social system. The Buddhist concept of morality is meant for social relationships (Gokhale, 2004: 126). Ambedkar emphasized that ‘man and morality must be the center of religion, and morality must become the law of life’ (BAWS Vol.3, 2008: 442). ‘Morality comes only wherein man comes in relation to man, and it arises from the direct necessity for man to love man’ (Ambedkar, 2002: 322–3). Furthermore, Ambedkar interpreted the social view of Buddha as follows: ‘Let none deceive another nor despise any person whatsoever in any place; in anger or ill-will let one not wish any harm to another.’ (Ambedkar, 2002: 573). He mentioned that ‘trust is the best of relationships’ (Ambedkar, 2002: 368). Without cultivating high moral values in individuals and society, such social ideals cannot be developed as the law of life. His views were



proposed for Buddhists of all nations.

With Dr. Ambedkar's inspiration, Y. B. Ambedkar eagerly started to engage Neo-Buddhists with international Buddhist communities and Buddhist scholars. He headed a delegation consisting of Dadasaheb Gayakwad, B. C. Kamble, Rajabhau Khobragade, D.A.Katti, and N. Shivraj to Fifth World Dhama Conference in Thailand in November 1958; he showed gratitude to Buddhist communities for their generous support of Dr. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in Nagpur; and he pursued the world Buddhist community to provide moral guidance for the Neo-Buddhists of India (Sanghsen Baudh: 2004, 46). Y. B. Ambedkar not only represented the BSI in the International Buddhist Councils held in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Sarnath and Delhi. He also cogently advised the organization on the existing condition of Neo-Buddhists in India (J.V. Pawar: 2011). The Ambedkar Bhavan, Delhi branch of the BSI, held a warm reception in honor of Prime Minister Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka in 1957. A similar reception was held for the chief justice of Burma, who was visiting the Ambedkar Bhavan to develop it as a Buddhist center (Bhagwan Das Baudh: 2001, 20). Evidently, the BSI attempted to re-establish its connections with Buddhist communities as Dr. Ambedkar had dreamed for India to be a Buddhist country bound up with the Buddhist countries of the world.

The Seventh Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists was held in 1964 in Sarnath, where the BSI sent the delegates Y. B. Ambedkar, B. K. Gaikwad, P. T. Borale and K. B. Talwatkar. The BSI organized an All-India Buddhist Conference in 1968 to examine the movement and to discuss the socio-religious advancement of its followers. Y. B. Ambedkar presided over the conference, and in the presence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Ven. Kushak Bhakul of Ladak and Ven. Anand Kausalyayan, he passed a resolution for the future course of Buddhism in India (BSIAPB: 1991, 24). Y. B. Ambedkar also participated in the Tenth General Conference of World Fellowship of Buddhists in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in August 1972. Furthermore, the Third Asian Buddhist Conference was held in Delhi from 1 to 3 November 1975, and the BSI sent a number of Buddhist followers there headed by Y. B. Ambedkar to fraternize

with Buddhists from Japan, Korea, Mangolia, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Nepal (Sanghsen Baudh: 2004, 46). The BSI made tremendous efforts in order to establish strong ties with Asian Buddhist communities, and in this regard, the BSI-Delhi Branch held an anti-Vietnam War protest march at the U.S. and Chinese embassies, with about 25,000 Neo-Buddhists participating and declared support for the Buddhists of Vietnam (Dhamma Darpan, 2001, 22).

Y. B. Ambedkar passed away in 1977. Thereafter, his wife Miratai Ambedkar was elected president of the BSI. Miratai Ambedkar was able to lead the organization, and under her guidance, the BSI registered a significant presence in Neo-Buddhist society. They demanded for establishment of an institution for conserving the Buddhist heritage and formation of a central working committee for the BSI after every five years (Sanghsen Baudh: 2004, 46–7). At the fourth conference, the BSI passed a resolution criticizing government for its mistreatment of Buddhist sites. The society demanded to hand over management of Bodh Gaya Mahavihara to Buddhist monks. Nevertheless, today, Hindu representative administer this ‘great monastery.’ Apparently, the role of government and the antagonism of fundamentalist groups are the key impediments to any cordial solution. Moreover, in view of the pattern of Hindu and Muslim personal law, the BSI demanded a Buddhist personal law (S.D.Bhanu: 1993, 10–12). However, these prolonged demands only reached a certain point, perhaps for socio-political reasons.

### CONTEMPORARY BUDDHIST DIPLOMACY OF INDIA

During last two decades, Buddhism expanded its prominence in India’s diplomacy for nurturing ties with ASEAN countries with focusing on the ‘Neighbourhood First’ policy, ‘Look East’ policy, and now “Act East” policy. In terms of international policy, Buddhism is correspondingly becoming a sign of rising India. The country has realized the commercial importance of pilgrimage and tourism. Various Buddhist sites in India, deeply rooted with the emotion of millions in Asian people, which can be emerged as a destination of Buddhist pilgrimage and consequently promote the tourism sector and change the economy millions of people living around the Buddhist sector. The Buddhist sector would not only

bring job opportunities to million but it would also attract huge investment from public and private sector.

In fact, since 2006, China has made huge investment in the Buddhist sector and it has been trying to evoke Buddhist legacy as a means to project China as the patron of Buddhism (Details see, Scott, David, 2016). Perhaps, by projecting patron of Buddhism, China could buttress its rise as global and regional power. Recognizing the importance of Buddhist linkage, India seeks greater role in Asian countries. Basically, there is no struggle over leadership of Buddhism between India and any other Buddhist countries, because India's cultural legacy is still a dominant force embedded into Buddhist countries. As well as, India represents all Buddhist sects which are active and practicing in different countries. Thus, India's struggle is for promotion of Buddhist notion of peace, which has greater acceptability. In fact, one may outline strategic rivalry between India and other countries over Buddhism. However, in reality, India's Buddhist diplomacy seems to be more conducive and relevant in global context. That is why many Asian countries continue to associate with India as they consider it as their spiritual home.

Since propagation of "Look East Policy", India is deeply working for greater and deeper linkage with Buddhist countries. But the entire effort, perhaps, made little progress in terms of cultural linkage. Fortunately, through "Act East Policy," Prime Minister Modi is engaging Asian countries by promoting Buddhism as a tool of diplomacy. But India needs to understand the undercurrents of Asian countries, as well as its economic potential. By underlining and emphasizing the Buddhist heritage, India may promote its any Buddhist sites for pilgrimage. But such efforts are less favorable if one would follow the previous approach such as to publicly embrace Buddhism and internally practice other Indian religions. Buddhism as a cultural heritage and independent religious tradition has more acceptability than mixing with other Indian religious tradition.

## CONCLUSION

Since ancient period, many kings and royal families have applied Buddhism and Buddhist ideas for political motive. Contemporary rise of Buddhist groups for socio-political engagement is deeply

rooted in history. There has been wide scholarly discussion on the socio-political engagement of Buddhism. Theoretical scholars are divided into many groups, and thus we need to understand the Socio-political theories and its application in contemporary context.

After independence, Indian politicians also used Buddhism as a tool to re-develop cultural linkage with Asian countries. Dr. Ambedkar was the first Indian politician who identified Buddhism as a potent force for socio-political development of India and its political role in modern Asia. Prime Minister Modi is also following the same path by promoting Buddhism as a tool to connect with Asian countries. We might find other countries aspiring for leadership of Buddhism, but existence of all Buddhist groups and its cultural heritages are very unique and conducive for India.

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