

# Buddhism: India's Diplomacy and International Relations with Southeast Asian Nations

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This study explores the instrumental function of Buddhism as a soft power instrument in influencing India's foreign policy and international relations with Southeast Asian countries. Through centuries of maritime and overland exchanges, Buddhism has developed a distinct cultural and ideological framework that India uses to strengthen its strategic position in the area. The main goals of this study are to: (1) examine the historical spread of Buddhism from India to Southeast Asia and its cultural integration; (2) assess current diplomatic efforts such as India's "Act East Policy" and Buddhist diplomacy; and (3) determine how a shared Buddhist legacy promotes regional cooperation, cultural diplomacy, and people-to-people connections. The study methodology is qualitative in character, drawing on a multidisciplinary framework that encompasses historical analysis, content analysis of official pronouncements and government documents, and examination of scholarly publications on cultural diplomacy. To offer specific instances of cultural interaction, case studies of India's Buddhist circuit promotion, international Buddhist conclaves, and collaborations with nations such as Myanmar, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam are analyzed. Additionally, the study makes use of primary sources like government documents from the Ministry of External Affairs and addresses made by Indian politicians. This article claims that India's usage of Buddhism as a cultural bridge strengthens its regional clout, fosters peaceful coexistence, and advances multilateralism based on shared heritage. However, issues like geopolitical rivalry and different interpretations of Buddhist customs are also covered.

**Keywords** Buddhism, Buddhist Diplomacy, India-Southeast Asia Relations, Historical Exchanges, Soft Power, Act East Policy, Cultural Diplomacy, and International Relations.

## I. Introduction

One of the first and most lasting examples of cultural diplomacy and soft power in world history is the spread of Buddhism from India to Southeast Asia. Beginning in the 6th century BCE in the Indian subcontinent, Buddhism quickly spread beyond its home through a network of commerce routes, missionary efforts, and royal sponsorship. India began to exert its diplomatic and cultural sway throughout Asia under Emperor Ashoka of the Maurya dynasty in the third century BCE. The sharing of spiritual and philosophical ideals, rather than military conquest, formed the foundation of Ashoka's international engagement, which began with his sending Buddhist missionaries to many areas of the known world, including Sri Lanka and sections of

Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> The spread was aided by maritime commerce, monastic exchanges, and the founding of Buddhist towns that tailored Indian religious concepts to the cultural environment of Southeast Asia.

In this historical context, Buddhism not only originated as a religion but also served as a crucial cultural resource that strengthened India's diplomatic ties with Southeast Asian polities, including Funan, Srivijaya, Dvaravati, and later, the Khmer Empire and the kingdoms of Burma and Thailand. These interactions were mutually beneficial: Indian monks and scholars introduced Buddhist texts, rituals, and art forms, while Southeast Asian communities helped to diversify and localize Buddhist practices. The resultant syncretic traditions contributed to establishing a shared cultural and spiritual identity throughout the area, fostering civilizational ties that extended beyond trade and politics. Through Buddhism, India established a diplomatic channel for maintaining friendly and cooperative ties with its Southeast Asian counterparts, promoting a long-lasting legacy of cultural interdependence.<sup>2</sup>

Because Buddhism is able to convey universal ethical principles, foster intellectual and artistic exchanges, and establish trans-regional networks of knowledge and faith, it is a crucial diplomatic bridge. The religion's focus on nonviolence, compassion, and ethical government was used by Buddhist scholars and Indian rulers in Southeast Asia to win over both the populace and the aristocracy. The extent of this cultural invasion is demonstrated by the creation of massive buildings all around the area, including Stupas, Viharas, and inscriptions in Sanskrit and Pali.<sup>3</sup> These structures not only served religious purposes but also acted as representations of India's civilizational standing and influence, highlighting the soft power elements of Indian diplomacy in pre-modern Asia.

Furthermore, Buddhism's transnational appeal fostered a pan-Asian cultural corridor that bolstered intellectual collaboration and diplomatic ties. India maintained its position as a hub in a spiritual network that stretched from

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<sup>1</sup> Romila Thapar, *Ashoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, rev. ed. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Himanshu Prabha Ray, *The Return of the Buddha: Ancient Symbols for a New Nation* (London: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Heinz Bechert and Richard F. Gombrich, *The World of Buddhism: Buddhist Monks and Nuns in Society and Culture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1991).

“Nalanda and Bodh Gaya to Borobudur and Angkor Wat” through Buddhist pilgrimages, scriptural translations, and academic discussions. When rooted in mutual respect and shared values, religious and cultural diplomacy may have lasting effects, as demonstrated by this historical fact. As a result, the Buddhist legacy in Southeast Asia serves as both a demonstration of India’s historical outreach and a significant illustration of the use of culture and religion as tools for international relations and diplomacy.<sup>4</sup>

## II. Review of Literature

Numerous academic studies have looked at the impact of Indian Buddhism on Southeast Asia, emphasizing its significant effects on the area’s political, religious, and cultural environments. Here, are some notable academic publications that examine different facets of this impact, along with important viewpoints and conclusions.

**The Spread of Buddhism and Peace in Southeast Asia, by Gupta, R. K., & Verma, A. K. (2022).** This academic paper offers a fascinating historical narrative of the spread of Buddhism in Southeast Asia, connecting its spread to the advancement of peace and interfaith harmony. By effectively tracing the religious and socio-cultural impact of Buddhism, the writers strengthen its relevance as a unifying force in a variety of multifait communities. The research provides useful insights into how Buddhism influenced Southeast Asia’s pluralistic spirit.<sup>5</sup>

**Dalrymple, W. (2025). *The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World*.** In *The Golden Road*, William Dalrymple masterfully chronicles India’s significant cultural impact throughout Asia, mainly through the lens of Buddhism. He demonstrates how Indian linguistic and religious traditions have changed cultures by introducing the “Sanskrit Cosmopolis.” With a wealth of narrative and historical context, the book

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<sup>4</sup> Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600–1400* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> R. K. Gupta and A. K. Verma, “The Spread of Buddhism and Peace in Southeast Asia,” *Heritage of Nusantara: International Journal of Religious Literature and Heritage* 10, no. 2 (2022).

provides a comprehensive look at India's ancient soft power while also being informative and captivating.<sup>6</sup>

**India's Position in Asia's Buddhist Connectivity, according to Stobdan, P. (2016).** Stobdan's research emphasizes how India has strategically utilized Buddhism to strengthen its regional relations and impact, particularly in the context of Asian geopolitics. He makes a strong case for the idea that Buddhism is not just a religious tradition but also a diplomatic instrument that allows India to establish its cultural dominance. The article is especially useful for students of international relations and the function of religion in diplomacy.<sup>7</sup>

***The Resurgence of Buddhism in Indian and Chinese Diplomacy, Raj, A. (2022).*** The use of Buddhism as a medium for cultural diplomacy by India and China is compared in this piece. Raj emphasizes the cooperative and competitive aspects of their approaches, revealing the understated power dynamics at play in local politics. With a focus on current geopolitical narratives, the book adds to the discussion on cultural soft power.<sup>8</sup>

**Mahaseth, H., & Khatoon, S. (2024). Using Buddhism as a Prism to Strengthen India's Soft Power.** This article, which was published in a major news source, takes a journalistic approach to India's use of Buddhism as a way to wield soft power. The authors evaluate India's efforts to combat China's influence by reconnecting with its Buddhist past and interacting with countries with Buddhist majorities. The essay combines academic analysis with recent diplomatic events in a way that is both approachable and educational.<sup>9</sup>

**The Solar Numbers in Angkor Wat is a paper by Kak, S. (1998)** that examines the complex astronomical plan that is built into the temple and contends that its construction is a reflection of ancient Indian astronomical expertise. He emphasizes the alignments of the sun and moon, implying that

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<sup>6</sup> William Dalrymple, *The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World* (2025).

<sup>7</sup> P. Stobdan, *Asia's Buddhist Connectivity and India's Role* (New Delhi: Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Ananya Raj, "Resurgence of Buddhism in Indian and Chinese Diplomacy," *The Creative Launcher* 7, no. 2 (2022).

<sup>9</sup> Harsh Mahaseth and Shama Khatoon, "Enhancing India's Soft Power through the Prism of Buddhism," *Hindustan Times*, 2024.

Indian cosmological ideas were spread to Southeast Asia via religious and cultural interchange.<sup>10</sup>

**The Influence of Buddhism Evolution and Indianization on Ancient Southeast Asia and Lanka** is discussed in **Chakrapol Āchārshubho, P., & Saengpare, J. (2020)**. The impact of Indianization, particularly through trade, religious missions, and cultural dissemination, on the evolution of Buddhism in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka is explored in this work. The authors demonstrate how Buddhism maintained its fundamental Indian values while adjusting to regional cultures throughout this process, tracing the social and cultural changes that it brought about.<sup>11</sup>

In his book *The Diffusion of Classical Art in Antiquity*, John Boardman offers a thorough examination of the spread of Indian art and culture, with a focus on Buddhist iconography and architectural forms, throughout Asia, including Southeast Asia. The notion that India employed Buddhism and other cultural instruments for diplomatic soft power is supported by the book's chapter on Gandharan art and its Southeast Asian derivatives. Boardman's study is essential for comprehending the role that visual culture played in India's past international relations.<sup>12</sup>

Through trade, religion, and diplomacy, R. C. Majumdar's groundbreaking work, *Ancient Indian Colonies in the Far East*, examines India's early foreign impact in Southeast Asia. He highlights the spread of Buddhism to nations like Burma, Cambodia, and Indonesia and demonstrates how this religious transmission was a component of India's larger foreign policy. The study of historical ties between India and Southeast Asia continues to be based on this book.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Subhash Kak, "The Solar Numbers in Angkor Wat," arXiv preprint, arXiv:physics/9811040 (1998).

<sup>11</sup> Phra Chakrapol Āchārshubho and Jintana Saengpare, "Indianization and Buddhism Evolution: Influence in Ancient Southeast Asia and Lanka," *Journal of Peace Studies* 8, no. 2 (2020).

<sup>12</sup> John Boardman, *The Diffusion of Classical Art in Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> R. C. Majumdar, *Ancient Indian Colonies in the Far East*, vols. 1–2 (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1927).

Ian Harris's book *Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth-Century Asia* sheds light on how Buddhism is still utilized as a tool of diplomatic interaction in Asia, including India's modern attempts to connect with Southeast Asia through a shared Buddhist heritage. Buddhism is highlighted in the case studies as a transnational ideology that fosters cultural and diplomatic connections.<sup>14</sup>

In his book *Buddhist Diplomacy: India and Southeast Asia*, S. D. Muni examines the use of Buddhist cultural and spiritual legacy as a diplomatic instrument in India's Look East and Act East strategies. The book establishes a compelling connection between ancient tradition and contemporary geopolitics by highlighting how India utilizes shared Buddhist principles to foster regional goodwill and strategic alliances.<sup>15</sup>

The *Cultural History of the Indian People: The Age of Imperial Unity*, edited by R. C. Majumdar, covers the diplomatic missions and cultural exchanges of the Mauryan Empire, notably Emperor Ashoka's Buddhist missions to Southeast Asia. The book offers a thorough analysis of how Buddhism was employed as a soft power instrument in ancient Indian diplomacy, notably during Ashoka's reign.<sup>16</sup>

D. G. E. Hall's *Buddhism in Southeast Asia* is a historical narrative of the spread of Buddhism throughout Southeast Asia and the subsequent social and political ramifications. The book highlights India's key role in disseminating both religious and political notions, presenting Buddhism as a vehicle for Indian influence and diplomacy in the area.<sup>17</sup>

In this thorough book, titled *Buddhism Across Asia: Networks of Material, Intellectual, and Cultural Exchange*, Tansen Sen examines the vibrant networks that facilitated the transmission of Buddhism from India to Southeast Asia. Sen's study demonstrates how these transnational Buddhist

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<sup>14</sup> Ian Harris, ed., *Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth-Century Asia* (London: Continuum, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> S. D. Muni, *Buddhist Diplomacy: India and Southeast Asia* (New Delhi: IDSA Occasional Paper Series, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> R. C. Majumdar, ed., *The Age of Imperial Unity* (Mumbai: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1951).

<sup>17</sup> D. G. E. Hall, *Buddhism in Southeast Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981).

exchanges established the basis for long-lasting diplomatic and cultural ties, which were and continue to be essential to India's international standing.<sup>18</sup>

George Coedès's seminal work, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, investigates India's cultural, political, and religious impact on the region, highlighting the crucial role of Buddhism. Coedès demonstrates how Indian concepts, particularly Buddhist principles, influenced the development of the first Southeast Asian states and promoted diplomatic relations, acting as precursors to cultural diplomacy.<sup>19</sup>

***Cultural Transactions between India and Southeast Asia:*** In this book, Chandra explores the cultural and religious interactions that connected India and Southeast Asia for centuries. He highlights Buddhist literature, monastic networks, and temple architecture as means of diplomacy and cultural integration, demonstrating India's historical soft power strategy to foreign policy.<sup>20</sup>

In his book *Buddhism and International Relations: The Role of Soft Power in India's Foreign Policy*, P. K. Gautam examines how India has strategically used Buddhism in its foreign policy, notably in Southeast Asia. With Buddhism at the center of India's diplomatic vision, the book explains how India uses its historical Buddhist connections to promote goodwill and regional cooperation in the 21st century.<sup>21</sup>

These scholarly publications emphasize the many facets of Indian Buddhism's impact on Southeast Asia, covering its religious, cultural, architectural, and diplomatic aspects. They offer crucial perspectives on how Buddhism has functioned as a vehicle for India's soft power and cultural diplomacy in the area.

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<sup>18</sup> Tansen Sen, ed., *Buddhism Across Asia: Networks of Material, Intellectual and Cultural Exchange*, vols. 1–2 (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> George Coedès, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, trans. Susan Brown Cowing (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1968).

<sup>20</sup> Lokesh Chandra, *India and Southeast Asia: Cultural Transactions* (New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 1987).

<sup>21</sup> P. K. Gautam, *Buddhism and International Relations: The Role of Soft Power in India's Foreign Policy* (New Delhi: Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 2013).

### III. Historical Background

A significant shift in the religious and philosophical environment of the subcontinent was brought about by the rise and development of Buddhism in India. Initially disseminated throughout the Indian subcontinent via monastic networks and royal support, Buddhism was established in the sixth century BCE by the Buddha, Siddhārtha Gautama. In the third century BCE, the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka was instrumental in establishing Buddhism as a state-sponsored religion. As evidence of his missionary zeal, Ashoka sent Buddhist ambassadors to Sri Lanka, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia, among other places outside of India.<sup>22</sup> The foundation of India's first cultural diplomacy was laid by this trans-regional spread, with Buddhism serving as its ideological instrument.

Indian maritime trade routes were crucial in the transmission of Buddhist teachings to Southeast Asia by the early centuries of the Common Era. The exchange of culture and religion between India and states like Funan, Champa, Dvāravatī, and eventually Srivijaya was facilitated by monastic orders, academic institutions, and trade guilds. Early Indo-Southeast Asian relations were characterized by a cultural osmosis that included the embrace of Sanskrit, Indian art forms, and Mahāyāna as well as Theravāda Buddhist philosophies.<sup>23</sup> Royal support in Southeast Asian courts, where Indian scholars were welcomed and Buddhist monasteries served as hubs for education, diplomacy, and trans-regional interaction, strengthened these ties even further. A profound civilizational interaction is evidenced by the diversity of Buddhist schools and shared architectural languages, such as stupas, chaityas, and viharas.

Prominent historical figures like Ashoka, the Indo-Greek monarch Menander (Milinda), and later Chinese travelers like Faxian and Xuanzang documented the thriving Buddhist networks that connected India to Southeast Asia and beyond. In the Southeast Asian environment, emperors like Jayavarman VII of the Khmer Empire and the rulers of the Srivijaya and Sukhothai kingdoms actively promoted Buddhism as a means of governance

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<sup>22</sup> Romila Thapar, *Ashoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, rev. ed. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> Himanshu Prabha Ray, *The Return of the Buddha: Ancient Symbols for a New Nation* (London: Routledge, 2012).



and legitimacy. These historical trajectories show that Buddhism served as more than just a religion; it was a multifaceted instrument of diplomacy and soft power that established India's cultural and political dominance throughout maritime Asia.<sup>24</sup>

#### IV. Diplomatic Relations through Buddhism

In the past, Buddhism has served as a means of diplomacy and soft power in India's relations with Southeast Asian countries, not just as a spiritual path. The 3rd century BCE, during the reign of Emperor Ashoka, saw one of the first instances of diplomatic interaction made possible by Buddhism. Following his conversion to Buddhism after the Kalinga War, Ashoka embarked on a series of missionary endeavors, sending envoys to far-flung nations. His renowned Rock Edict XIII refers to the dissemination of "Dharma" to locations like "Suvarnabhumi" (thought to be portions of modern-day Thailand and Myanmar), which suggests an early diplomatic outreach that combined moral education with international goodwill.<sup>25</sup> These missions, which had a spiritual tone, established early precedents for cultural diplomacy, where the Buddhist philosophy served as a link between Indian and Southeast Asian politics, and laid the foundation for enduring civilizational ties.

These diplomatic interactions were greatly influenced by Indian scholars and monks. Buddhist missionaries like Ashoka's own son Mahinda and his daughter Sanghamitta not only brought the Buddhist teachings to Sri Lanka but also had an indirect impact on the larger Theravāda Buddhist communities that extended throughout Southeast Asia. Indian monks like Atisa (11th century CE) and other scholars who received their training at Nalanda visited Sumatra, Java, and other places in subsequent centuries, promoting religious transmission and cross-cultural discourse.<sup>26</sup> These traveling monks served as cultural ambassadors, whose presence in foreign courts helped strengthen ties between India and Southeast Asia. Their interactions with indigenous rulers frequently resulted in the founding of monasteries, the

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<sup>24</sup> Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600–1400* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003).

<sup>25</sup> Romila Thapar, *Ashoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, rev. ed. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>26</sup> Himanshu Prabha Ray, *The Return of the Buddha: Ancient Symbols for a New Nation* (London: Routledge, 2019).

translation of Buddhist scriptures, and the support of Buddhist art and architecture; each of these instances represents a form of diplomatic interaction based on common religious beliefs.

The maritime trade routes of the Indian Ocean were yet another arena where Buddhist diplomacy thrived. Indian traders, accompanied by monks and scholars, traveled to port cities in modern-day Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam, bringing with them Buddhist texts, relics, images, and other commodities. These commercial interactions frequently evolved into official diplomatic ties. The Srivijaya Empire, which was centered in Sumatra, is a good example. It kept close relations with important Indian Buddhist institutions like Nalanda and Vikramashila since it was a prominent Buddhist monarchy. According to the 8th century Chinese pilgrim Yijing, a large number of Southeast Asian monks were dispatched to India for instruction before going back to spread Buddhism in their native lands.<sup>27</sup> These international academic networks, which served as diplomatic channels between India and Southeast Asian political entities, helped sustain a regular exchange of intellectual and religious ideas.

During the Middle Ages, Buddhism maintained its diplomatic outreach to India, adjusting to shifting religious and political environments. The Chola dynasty, famed for its naval dominance, forged close diplomatic and religious ties with Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. Literary sources and inscriptions show that the Cholas backed Buddhist schools outside of India, particularly in places like Kedah (Malaysia) and Nagapattin, as part of a larger plan to use culture as a tool to sway trade and regional alliances.<sup>28</sup> These actions emphasize how Buddhism is strategically employed, not only for spreading religion but also for establishing political power and cultural renown. In this manner, Buddhism provided a framework for India's diplomatic relations, establishing a paradigm of interaction based on common moral values, mutual respect, and the advancement of knowledge and peace.

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<sup>27</sup> Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600–1400* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> Hermann Kulke, "The Devaraja Cult," in *The State in India, 1000–1700*, ed. Hermann Kulke (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), 335–56.

## V. Cultural Exchange and Influence

Buddhism has fostered a deep and lasting cultural exchange between India and Southeast Asia, influencing several facets of Southeast Asian communities. Buddhist missionaries, scholars, and merchants from India went to nations including Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Indonesia as early as the third century BCE, bringing with them not only religious doctrines but also philosophical concepts, social customs, and cultural values. The introduction of Buddhism to these areas brought about a shift in their spiritual perspective and aided in the development of new moral and philosophical systems. Particularly in its Theravāda and Mahāyāna forms, Buddhism grew to be a cornerstone of moral behavior and social government, affecting how communities were structured and how governments justified their authority. Through values and spiritual integration, this religious-cultural diplomacy enabled India to spread its soft power throughout Asia without military conquest, showcasing a distinctive paradigm of influence.<sup>29</sup>

The architecture of Buddhism, which is heavily influenced by Indian designs, is one of the most noticeable and lasting signs of this exchange. The architectural elements of temples and stupas built in locations like “Wat Pho in Thailand, Borobudur in Indonesia, and Shwedagon Pagoda in Myanmar” are influenced by Indian prototypes like the “Sanchi Stupa and Nalanda Mahavihara”. Indian architectural ideas were adapted to local environments, resulting in hybrid forms that combined Indian influence with native ingenuity. For example, the philosophical and ritualistic aspects of Indian Buddhism, which have been modified to reflect Southeast Asian aesthetics, are evident in the use of mandalas in temple layouts and the importance of verticality in stupa design.<sup>30</sup> In addition to being religious and educational hubs, these monuments also served as hubs for Indian cultural and educational diplomacy.

With the widespread adoption of Indian iconography and sculptural methods throughout Southeast Asia, artistic influences were equally significant. Sculptural and artistic representations of the Buddha, bodhisattvas, and Jataka stories frequently adhered to Indian aesthetic standards, such as

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<sup>29</sup> Himanshu Prabha Ray, *The Return of the Buddha: Ancient Symbols for a New Nation* (London: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>30</sup> Ian W. Mabbett, “The ‘Indianization’ of Southeast Asia: Reflections on the Historical Sources,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 14, no. 1 (1983): 1–14.

those of the Gupta and Pāla schools. These depictions became localized with unique Southeast Asian characteristics throughout time. Consider the tranquil face expressions and mudras of Thai Buddha sculptures, for instance, which are heavily influenced by Indian originals while also reflecting Thai notions of beauty and symbolism. Furthermore, Buddhist stories enhanced the literary traditions of Southeast Asia, affecting both courtly writing and folk tales. This process of cultural assimilation and reinterpretation, as reflected in the frequent translation of these stories into local languages and integration of indigenous themes, was a dynamic one.<sup>31</sup>

The spread of Buddhism throughout the area aided in the linguistic dissemination of Sanskrit and Pāli, the languages in which the majority of Buddhist texts were written. These languages had a profound impact on the creation of local scripts like “Khmer, Thai, Burmese, and Javanese”, as well as on the vocabulary used in government and religion. Theravāda Buddhism’s liturgical language is Pali, which is still popular in nations like Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar. Sanskrit, which mirrored the religious and intellectual aspects of the Indian-Buddhist connection, was also instrumental in creating upper-class literary culture and inscriptions. India’s intellectual diplomacy in Southeast Asia is highlighted by the Buddhist monastic organizations that preserve and adapt these languages, since language was used there as both a means of religious education and a means of cultural transmission.<sup>32</sup>

## VI. Case Studies

The historical and cultural evolution of notable Southeast Asian kingdoms like Srivijaya (modern Indonesia), Pagan (modern Myanmar), and the Khmer Empire (modern Cambodia) demonstrates the impact of Indian diplomacy through Buddhism. Between the 7th and 13th centuries, the kingdom of Srivijaya thrived as a significant hub for Mahayana Buddhism. Before continuing to the Indian subcontinent, Indian monks and academics, like the famous Chinese pilgrim Yijing, visited Srivijaya and recorded its significance as a hub for Buddhist learning and pilgrimage. The monarchs of Srivijaya imitated Indian court society, utilized Sanskrit in inscriptions, and

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<sup>31</sup> Peter Skilling, *Buddhist Narrative in Asia and Beyond*, vol. 1 (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011).

<sup>32</sup> Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

established diplomatic ties with Pala India, notably with Buddhist institutions like Nalanda.<sup>33</sup> These religious and cultural exchanges helped establish India's civilizational standing and forge connections that were more spiritual than forceful, creating a shared Buddhist identity throughout maritime Southeast Asia, all of which served as soft-power instruments.

In Myanmar, the Pagan Kingdom (11th to 13th centuries) witnessed a significant integration of Theravāda Buddhism, notably through diplomatic and religious connections with Sri Lanka and India. With royal support, Indian monks, Buddhist scriptures, and relics were brought to Pagan, where they influenced the development of its religious infrastructure and monastic establishments. King Anawraht's kingdom utilized Indian Buddhist traditions and scriptures to consolidate authority and unite diverse ethnic groups under a shared religious umbrella.<sup>34</sup> In this situation, Indian diplomacy focused on cultural legitimacy and the transmission of religious understanding. Unlike Srivijaya's maritime trade, Pagan's diplomatic tactics were more focused on land-based activities, such as building thousands of stupas to promote the Theravāda Buddhist cosmological order, which was influenced by Indian religious traditions.

The Buddhist diplomacy of India manifested in the Khmer Empire in a sophisticated blending of Theravada and Mahayana traditions, which resulted in the religious syncretism that characterized the magnificence of Angkor. Initially, the early Khmer kings were partial to Hinduism, but Indian Buddhist diplomacy gradually gained traction, especially via maritime routes and traveling monks. Jayavarman VII (late 12th to early 13th centuries), the most renowned Buddhist monarch of the Khmer Empire, proclaimed himself a bodhisattva-king and funded the creation of Buddhist temples like Bayon and Preah Khan. By employing Buddhist ideology to centralize state control and advance welfare-oriented governance, a strategy based on Ashokan ideals,<sup>35</sup> his rule served as a symbol of diplomatic success for Indian cultural outreach.

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<sup>33</sup> Kenneth R. Hall, *Maritime Trade and State Development in Early Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1981).

<sup>34</sup> Michael A. Aung-Thwin, *The Mists of Rāmañña: The Legend That Was Lower Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005).

<sup>35</sup> George Coedès, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, trans. Susan Brown Cowing (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1968).

As a result, Indian diplomacy skillfully integrated spiritual messages with political goals, encouraging cultural absorption and stable ties.

In contrast, India's diplomatic approach in these areas centered around the non-coercive propagation of religious ideology, educational exchanges, and ideological harmony via Buddhism, rather than political dominance. Indian and Southeast Asian nations were connected in Srivijaya through maritime trade and monastic patronage, with Buddhism serving as a vehicle for transoceanic diplomacy. On the other hand, Pagan's interactions were more centered on orthodoxy, textual authority, and monastic discipline, which were directly influenced by Indian and Sri Lankan traditions. The Khmer experience combined Buddhist governance with religious iconography and architectural symbolism, resulting in a unique civilizational identity based on Indian Buddhist cosmology. The outcomes of these strategies demonstrate the flexibility of Buddhism as a diplomatic instrument, providing India with a means of expanding its influence via cultural and spiritual ties rather than conquest.<sup>36</sup>

## VII. Contemporary Relevance

In today's Southeast Asian geopolitics, the enduring legacy of Indian-Buddhist diplomacy is still extremely important. In nations like Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, Buddhism is still maintained not only as a religious identity but also as a civilizational framework that shapes social conventions, political ideologies, and diplomatic discourse. Due to India's historical status as the birthplace of Buddhism, it has a distinct soft power advantage when interacting with these countries. India uses this common spiritual and cultural heritage to foster strategic alliances through contemporary diplomatic programs like the "Act East Policy" and the reconstruction of Nalanda University.<sup>37</sup> In addition to economic and political collaboration, the spiritual lineage that is traced back to Buddha's teachings establishes an intellectual and emotional connection. India's Buddhist circuit, pilgrimage tourism, and cultural exchanges continue to promote interpersonal

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<sup>36</sup> Himanshu Prabha Ray, *The Return of the Buddha: Ancient Symbols for a New Nation* (London: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>37</sup> S. D. Muni and Vivek Chadha Singh, *India's Act East Policy* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2019).

interaction, which is crucial for long-lasting international ties in the Indo-Pacific area.

India's foreign policy strategy toward Southeast Asia now includes cultural diplomacy, especially through Buddhist ties. Annual festivals like the Vesak Festival and forums like the International Buddhist Confederation offer venues for discussion, collaboration, and cultural strengthening. By reaffirming shared values like compassion, nonviolence, and tolerance, which are principles that are deeply rooted in Buddhist philosophy, these measures promote regional solidarity, peaceful coexistence, and conflict resolution. Southeast Asian nations frequently utilize these Buddhist principles to support their domestic and foreign policy positions, which give India the chance to serve as both a cultural benefactor and a political partner.<sup>38</sup> This multifaceted diplomacy fosters a unique civilizational ethos based on peace and mutual respect while also counteracting rival regional forces.

Maintaining a common Buddhist heritage has become the main focus of cultural collaboration between India and Southeast Asian countries. Governments, institutions, and international organizations are working together to digitally record old Buddhist sites, restore archaeological sites, and conserve manuscripts. Remarkably, the Archaeological Survey of India and organizations like the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) are actively participating in the rehabilitation of ancient Buddhist sites in nations like Myanmar and Cambodia. These cooperative initiatives are crucial for promoting tourism and economic participation, as well as for preserving culture and strengthening common historical narratives. Additionally, cultural conservation encourages academic partnerships, such as Indo-Thai and Indo-Lao archaeological projects, which advance a more profound scholarly understanding of shared Buddhist histories.<sup>39</sup> These projects are tools of soft power and promote mutual understanding.

These cultural and religious similarities have greatly aided bilateral ties between India and Southeast Asian nations. Buddhist diplomacy has played a catalytic role in fostering collaboration in trade, education, defense, and

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<sup>38</sup> Jairam Ramesh, *The Light of Asia: India and the Buddha Heritage* (New Delhi: Penguin Random House India, 2020).

<sup>39</sup> R. Sharma and S. Dutta, "Cultural Heritage Diplomacy and Buddhist Linkages between India and Southeast Asia," *Journal of Asian Studies* 80, no. 3 (2021): 567–589.

infrastructure. For example, India's relationship with Myanmar involves strategic infrastructure initiatives as well as cultural outreach based on common Buddhist connections. In the same way, India and Thailand often host Buddhist conferences and heritage festivals that strengthen strategic and economic connections in addition to honoring cultural links. The consistent impact of Buddhism on diplomacy demonstrates that religious and cultural soft power, when institutionalized, may serve as a long-lasting foundation for foreign policy. India's Buddhist legacy serves as an evergreen diplomatic instrument in a world where geopolitical alignments are constantly changing, giving modern alliances a foundation in rich historical ties and common values.<sup>40</sup>

### VIII. Conclusion

In conclusion, an examination of Buddhism as a channel of India's diplomacy and international relations with Southeast Asian countries reveals a deep cultural and civilizational connection that goes beyond simple economic or political ties. The primary conclusion is that Indian monks, academics, and merchants were essential in bringing Buddhist teachings, literature, artwork, and architectural ideas to Southeast Asian kingdoms, including Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, since ancient times. Buddhist monasteries became hubs for learning, cross-cultural interaction, and socio-political impact, making the dissemination not just spiritual but also institutional. Through missions, maritime trade, and royal patronage, dynasties like the Mauryas under Ashoka, the Guptas, and the Cholas actively backed and promoted these exchanges. Consequently, Buddhism acted as a diplomatic bridge, promoting religious harmony, mutual respect, and a common cultural identity throughout the area.

The importance of Buddhism in influencing India's historical diplomatic connections with Southeast Asia stems from its capacity to foster a non-coercive, soft-power strategy to international relations. In contrast to expansion by conquest, India's Buddhist diplomacy fostered lasting relationships founded on the principles of compassion, nonviolence, and universal peace. The flourishing of Pali and Sanskrit as languages of Buddhist study, as well as the architectural wonders of "Angkor Wat and Borobudur",

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<sup>40</sup> Sreeradha Datta Chakraborty, *India's Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy in Southeast Asia* (New Delhi: Routledge India, 2022).



demonstrated that this shared spiritual foundation laid the groundwork for regional unity. The shared Buddhist legacy still has an impact on contemporary diplomatic frameworks, with India revitalizing cultural diplomacy through projects like the restoration of Nalanda University, Buddhist circuits, and cultural exchanges. Thus, Buddhism not only established historical connections between India and Southeast Asia but also continues to influence their cooperative future in the areas of culture, education, and international harmony.

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