



Negotiating Sacred Geography: India's Buddhist Circuit as Spiritual Tourism, Transnational Diplomacy, and Borderland Geopolitics

Dr. Chow Ananda Chiring

*Assistant Professor,
Department of Political Science,
Venerable Uktara Bethany College,
Manmow, Arunachal Pradesh*

Nang Myawati Thommong

*Guest Lecturer,
Department of Political Science,
Indira Gandhi Government College,
Tezu, Arunachal Pradesh*

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Abstract

India's Buddhist Circuit illustrates the convergence of religion, tourism, and geopolitics. Rooted in sacred sites linked to Gautama Buddha, the circuit has evolved from Ashoka's patronage and classical pilgrimage traditions to colonial rediscovery and contemporary tourism branding. This study, based entirely on secondary sources, employs a qualitative and interpretive approach combining historical analysis, policy review, and comparative case studies. Sources such as inscriptions, archaeological surveys, government reports, UNESCO documentation, and scholarly works were examined to trace its historical trajectory and assess its modern significance. Special focus is placed on the Union Budget 2026 allocation for expanding the circuit in Northeast India, highlighting the role of state investment in heritage tourism and cultural diplomacy. A comparative lens situates India's strategy alongside China, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, revealing distinctive claims and competing narratives. Findings show the circuit functions simultaneously as a spiritual itinerary, economic driver, and geopolitical instrument, reinforcing India's soft power and sovereignty.

Keywords: *Buddhist Circuit, Sacred Geography, Heritage Tourism, Cultural Diplomacy, Borderland Geopolitics*

I. Introduction

India's Buddhist Circuit brings together some of the most sacred sites connected to the life and teachings of Gautama Buddha. It includes Bodhi Gaya, where he attained enlightenment; Sarnath, where he delivered his first sermon; Kushinagar, the place of his parinirvana; and Rajgir, Shravasti, and Vaishali. The circuit also extends beyond India's borders to Lumbini in present day Nepal, the

Buddha's birthplace, making it part of a wider transnational network. Its story stretches back to the 3rd century BCE, when Emperor Ashoka gave pilgrimage a formal shape by building stupas, monasteries, and inscribed pillars across the Gangetic plains. In doing so, he wove Buddhism into India's cultural geography (Singh, 2009). Over the centuries, these sites became magnets for pilgrims from Sri Lanka, China, and Southeast Asia, creating bonds of faith and culture that crossed borders and endured through time. The question today is why this circuit matters in the modern world. Since the early 2000s, India has reimagined the Buddhist Circuit as a tourism initiative (Shinde, 2022), presenting itself as the guardian of Buddhism's sacred geography. This branding serves multiple purposes: projecting soft power, strengthening cultural diplomacy with Buddhist-majority countries such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, and Japan (Roy, 2020), and reinforcing sovereignty in sensitive borderlands like Arunachal Pradesh, where heritage and geopolitics intersect (Gogoi, 2021). In this sense, the circuit is far more than a spiritual journey. It is also a strategic instrument of influence, making its study relevant for understanding how religion, tourism, and geopolitics converge in contemporary Asia.

II. Research Methodology

This study is based entirely on secondary sources, employing a qualitative and interpretive approach that combines historical analysis, policy review, and comparative case studies to examine the evolution and contemporary significance of the Buddhist Circuit. Published works, inscriptions, archaeological surveys, government reports, UNESCO documentation, and other scholarly contributions were systematically reviewed to construct the evidentiary foundation of the research. Particular attention was devoted to recent



government initiatives, especially the Union Budget 2026 allocation for expanding the circuit in Northeast India, in order to assess the role of state investment in heritage tourism and cultural diplomacy. A comparative framework was further applied to situate India's strategy alongside those of China, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, thereby highlighting distinctive claims and competing narratives in the promotion of Buddhist heritage.

III. Literature Review

Tok, (2024). Unveiling the Arunachal Pradesh Conflict and Its Impact on Sino-Indian Border provided a multidimensional perspective on the Arunachal Pradesh issue. It situated the conflict within historical legacies such as Tibetan influence, British colonial expansion, the Simla Convention, and the 1962 war, while also analysing contemporary security strategies of both India and China.

Nayak, Babuli Chandra (2024). This paper examines India's foreign policy through the prism of Buddhist soft power, emphasising culture and heritage as diplomatic tools. Nayak highlights India's historical legitimacy as the birthplace of Buddhism and its use of sites like Bodh Gaya and Nalanda to strengthen international ties. The study underscores how Buddhist diplomacy aligns with initiatives such as "Act East" and "Neighbourhood First," while also noting challenges in implementation and competition from China's parallel efforts. In a few sentences, the work shows that India's Buddhist heritage is a powerful resource for diplomacy, but its potential remains underutilised without stronger institutional follow-through.

Mishra & Mishra (2024) argued that India used its Buddhist heritage as a diplomatic tool to strengthen ties with countries like Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bhutan, and Mongolia. The authors showed how India's symbolic gestures, such as temple visits, conferences, and heritage projects, helped project cultural influence, while also noting that China adapted Buddhism for its own soft power strategies. They concluded that India's efforts remained largely symbolic and lacked sustained institutional follow-through, especially in projects like Nalanda University, which limited the long-term impact of its Buddhist diplomacy.

Malviya & Rana (2025) argue that India's global influence in the era of globalization is increasingly shaped by its ability to project soft power, drawing on Joseph Nye's theoretical framework and emphasizing five pillars: peace, solidarity, prosperity, security, and culture while showcasing initiatives

such as the International Day of Yoga, Bollywood's global reach, and India's leadership in BRICS and UN peacekeeping; the paper's strengths lie in its integration of theory with practice and its novel proposal of the Vishwamitra Odyssey as a cultural diplomacy initiative, though its limitations include a lack of deeper comparative analysis with other nations and insufficient empirical grounding, ultimately making it a valuable contribution to understanding India's positioning as a Vishwaguru while leaving scope for future research to expand on comparative and data-driven dimensions.

Historical Foundations

The historical foundations of India's Buddhist Circuit can be delineated across four distinct phases, each reflecting shifts in patronage, practice, and interpretation. The first phase emerged in the 3rd century BCE under the Mauryan emperor Ashoka, whose extensive patronage institutionalised pilgrimage through the construction of stupas, inscribed pillars, and monasteries across the Gangetic plains. This imperial intervention embedded Buddhism into India's sacred geography and facilitated its transmission to regions such as Sri Lanka and Central Asia (Singh, 2009). The second phase, spanning the 4th to 12th centuries CE, witnessed the consolidation of classical pilgrimage traditions. Monks and pilgrims from Sri Lanka, China, and Southeast Asia including figures such as Faxian and Xuanzang undertook journeys to Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, and Kushinagar. Their travel accounts not only documented ritual practices but also reinforced transnational religious linkages, situating India at the centre of Buddhist networks (Behl, 2018). The third phase unfolded during the colonial period in the 19th century, when archaeological surveys and excavations led by scholars such as Alexander Cunningham reintroduced Buddhist sites into global consciousness. This rediscovery and restoration reinscribed India into the broader Buddhist imagination, reframing heritage as both an object of scholarly inquiry and cultural revival (Roy, 2020). The fourth and contemporary phase began in the early 2000s, when the Government of India formally branded the Buddhist Circuit as part of its tourism development strategy. Investments in infrastructure, interpretation centres, and international marketing campaigns sought to attract pilgrims and tourists from Buddhist-majority countries, thereby aligning heritage promotion with cultural diplomacy and economic development (Shinde, 2022). Taken together, these phases illustrate the transformation of the Buddhist Circuit from an imperial project of



religious patronage to a modern instrument of tourism and diplomacy. The circuit thus operates simultaneously as a spiritual itinerary and a geopolitical framework, embedding sacred geography within contemporary strategies of influence.

Spiritual Tourism

The contemporary development of India's Buddhist Circuit can be examined through four interrelated dimensions that highlight its transformation from a heritage initiative into a multidimensional policy instrument. First, tourism policies and branding have been central since the early 2000s, when the Ministry of Tourism formally designated the circuit as a heritage tourism product. This institutional recognition positioned India internationally as the custodian of Buddhism's sacred geography and reframed pilgrimage as a vehicle of cultural diplomacy (Shinde, 2022). Second, infrastructure development has been prioritised to enhance accessibility and visitor experience. Investments in roads, airports, interpretation centres, and hospitality training programs reflect a deliberate strategy to integrate pilgrimage flows with broader regional development agendas (UNESCO, 2015). Third, the circuit has generated significant economic impacts at the local level. Pilgrimage-driven demand has created employment opportunities, promoted indigenous entrepreneurship, and revitalised regional economies in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and the Northeast. Hotels, transport services, handicrafts, and cultural enterprises have become embedded within the circuit's economic ecology, linking heritage promotion with livelihood generation (Roy, 2020). Finally, the circuit is increasingly marketed as experiential tourism. Beyond conventional sightseeing, initiatives such as meditation retreats, monastic stays, and cultural immersion programs enable pilgrims and tourists to engage directly with Buddhist practices and traditions, thereby deepening the spiritual and cultural dimensions of travel (Singh, 2009). Taken together, these dimensions demonstrate that the Buddhist Circuit functions simultaneously as a spiritual itinerary, an economic driver, and a diplomatic instrument. Its evolution underscores how heritage tourism in India operates at the intersection of cultural diplomacy, regional integration, and geopolitical strategy.

Transnational Networks

The transnational dimension of India's Buddhist Circuit is central to understanding its contemporary role in cultural diplomacy and

regional integration, as it operates through interconnected layers of cross-border linkages, institutional exchange, soft power projection, and bilateral cooperation. Lumbini in Nepal, the birthplace of the Buddha, is frequently marketed alongside Bodh Gaya and Kushinagar, while Bhutanese monasteries and pilgrimage flows from Thailand, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka reinforce India's position as the spiritual heartland of Buddhism (Singh, 2009). Monasteries, universities, and cultural organisations such as Nalanda University, international Buddhist associations, and transnational monastic networks sustain ecologies of dialogue, scholarship, and ritual practice that transcend national boundaries, embedding the circuit within a wider intellectual and spiritual geography (Behl, 2018). At the same time, the circuit serves as a platform for India's soft power projection, enabling the country to strengthen ties with Buddhist-majority nations by positioning itself as the custodian of Buddhism's sacred geography (Roy, 2020). Case studies of India–Sri Lanka, India–Thailand, and India–Myanmar relations further demonstrate how pilgrimage flows and cultural cooperation reinforce diplomatic ties: Sri Lankan monks and pilgrims regularly visit Bodh Gaya and Kushinagar; Thailand has invested in temple restoration projects; and Myanmar collaborates with India on Buddhist heritage promotion. These interactions embed India within broader Buddhist networks while countering competing narratives advanced by China (Gogoi, 2021; Shinde, 2022). Collectively, these dynamics reveal that the Buddhist Circuit functions not merely as a spiritual itinerary but as a transnational cultural corridor that consolidates India's regional influence.

Borderland Geopolitics

The borderland geopolitics of India's Buddhist Circuit highlight the ways in which cultural heritage and tourism are strategically intertwined with sovereignty and diplomacy. The deliberate inclusion of Northeast India, particularly Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and Assam, reflects India's effort to integrate Buddhist monasteries such as Tawang and Rumtek into the circuit, thereby reinforcing national identity in regions that are geopolitically sensitive and contested (Gogoi, 2021). In this context, cultural heritage becomes a tool of sovereignty, as the recognition and promotion of Buddhist sites strengthen India's claims in disputed territories, especially Arunachal Pradesh, where China contests the boundary. This dynamic is further shaped by China's competing narrative through Tibetan Buddhism, with Beijing emphasising its



custodianship of Tibetan Buddhist heritage to project soft power across Asia and position Tibet as the spiritual centre of Buddhism. India counters this by asserting its role as the birthplace of Buddhism and custodian of its sacred geography (Roy, 2020). Moreover, tourism infrastructure in these regions serves dual purposes: roads, airports, and interpretation centres built to facilitate pilgrimage simultaneously enhance strategic mobility, border integration, and national security (Shinde, 2022). Collectively, these developments demonstrate that the Buddhist Circuit in the borderlands functions not merely as a spiritual itinerary but as a geopolitical instrument, reinforcing sovereignty, countering external narratives, and embedding contested regions within both national and transnational networks.

Opportunities and Challenges

The Buddhist Circuit in India presents a complex interplay of opportunities and challenges that span tourism, diplomacy, borderland geopolitics, and community development. On the one hand, the circuit has stimulated significant economic growth by attracting international pilgrims and tourists, creating employment, and fostering local entrepreneurship in regions such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Yet this expansion also risks over-commercialisation, where sacred sites may be reduced to tourist attractions, undermining their spiritual authenticity and producing uneven development outcomes (Shinde, 2022). From a diplomatic perspective, the circuit enhances India's soft power by positioning the country as the custodian of Buddhism's sacred geography and strengthening cultural ties with Buddhist-majority nations such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Myanmar. However, India faces competition from China, which promotes Tibetan Buddhism as part of its own cultural diplomacy, generating overlapping claims of heritage leadership (Roy, 2020). In the borderlands, the inclusion of sites in Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and Assam fosters integration and reinforces sovereignty in contested regions, though it simultaneously raises geopolitical sensitivities, particularly in areas where China disputes territorial boundaries (Gogoi, 2021). At the community level, the circuit empowers local populations by generating livelihoods, promoting indigenous entrepreneurship, and revitalising cultural pride, but it also risks commodifying traditions and rituals, packaging them for tourist consumption in ways that may erode authenticity and meaning (Singh, 2009). Taken together, these dynamics underscore that the Buddhist Circuit embodies a delicate balance

between spiritual heritage, economic development, cultural diplomacy, and geopolitical strategy.

IV. Discussion

The Buddhist Circuit in India exemplifies the intersection of religion, tourism, and geopolitics, making it a multidimensional phenomenon with both domestic and international significance. At its core, the circuit is rooted in religion, encompassing sacred sites directly linked to the life of Gautama Buddha and serving as pilgrimage destinations for millions of Buddhists worldwide (Singh, 2009). Simultaneously, these sites are embedded within India's tourism strategy, branded as a heritage product to attract international visitors, stimulate economic growth, and foster local entrepreneurship (Shinde, 2022). This tourism dimension is inseparable from geopolitics, as India leverages its custodianship of Buddhism's sacred geography to project soft power, strengthen ties with Buddhist-majority countries, and reinforce sovereignty in contested borderlands such as Arunachal Pradesh (Gogoi, 2021). Thus, the Buddhist Circuit is not merely a spiritual itinerary but a multidimensional framework at once a sacred pilgrimage route, a cultural diplomacy tool, and a geopolitical instrument that integrates domestic development with international influence (Roy, 2020).

Recent policy developments further underscore this multidimensionality. In the Union Budget 2026, the Government of India announced a new scheme to develop a Buddhist Circuit across six Northeastern states, allocating significant resources to preserve monasteries and temples while building tourism infrastructure (India Today, 2026; Times of India, 2026; Mint, 2026). This initiative represents a major policy shift, as it not only strengthens religious tourism but also embeds contested borderlands such as Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim more firmly within national and transnational networks. The budgetary support will enhance connectivity through roads, airports, and interpretation centres, while also creating employment opportunities and revitalising local economies. Importantly, the scheme positions the Buddhist Circuit as a strategic instrument of cultural diplomacy, countering China's competing narrative of Tibetan Buddhism by reinforcing India's claim as the birthplace of Buddhism and custodian of its sacred geography.

From a comparative perspective, India's strategy diverges from other Buddhist heritage states. China emphasises Tibetan Buddhism and promotes sites such as Lhasa and Mount Wutai as part of its soft power diplomacy, Sri Lanka



highlights its Theravāda monastic complexes, and Thailand integrates Buddhist heritage into national tourism branding through festivals and pilgrimage. India's approach is distinctive in claiming origin status, anchoring its cultural diplomacy in the assertion that Buddhism was born on Indian soil. The new budgetary allocation strengthens this claim by institutionalising the circuit as both a heritage and geopolitical project, situating India at the centre of transnational Buddhist networks.

Taken together, the Buddhist Circuit demonstrates how religion, tourism, and geopolitics converge in contemporary Asia. With the infusion of government funding, the circuit is poised to expand its role as a spiritual, economic, and diplomatic instrument, balancing heritage preservation with strategic influence.

V. Conclusion

The study of India's Buddhist Circuit demonstrates how religion, tourism, and geopolitics converge to create a multidimensional phenomenon. Historically rooted in Ashoka's patronage and centuries of transnational pilgrimage, the circuit has evolved into a modern heritage initiative that simultaneously functions as a spiritual itinerary, an economic driver, and a diplomatic instrument. Its religious significance continues to attract global Buddhist communities, while its tourism branding generates livelihoods and fosters local entrepreneurship. At the same time, the circuit strengthens India's soft power by positioning the country as the birthplace of Buddhism and forging ties with Buddhist-majority nations, while reinforcing sovereignty in contested borderlands such as Arunachal Pradesh. Recent policy developments, particularly the Union Budget 2026 announcement of a new scheme to expand the Buddhist Circuit across six Northeastern states, further highlight its strategic importance (India Today, 2026; Times of India, 2026; Mint, 2026). This allocation of resources for monasteries, temples, and tourism infrastructure not only enhances accessibility and visitor experience but also embeds borderland regions more firmly within national and transnational networks. By integrating heritage preservation with economic development and strategic connectivity, the budgetary support strengthens India's cultural diplomacy and counters competing narratives advanced by China. Taken together, the Buddhist Circuit exemplifies how sacred geography can be mobilised as a comprehensive framework of influence—anchoring spiritual heritage, advancing economic growth, projecting soft power, and reinforcing sovereignty.

Looking ahead, sustained investment, regional cooperation, and innovative approaches such as digital tourism and climate resilience will be essential to ensure that the circuit continues to evolve as both a spiritual journey and a strategic instrument in the 21st century.

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