

PEACE

GLOBAL BUDDHIST SUMMIT



HUMANITY



Buddhism

provides template for global engagement

ENVIRONMENT

GAUTAM BUDDHA



COMPASSION

WISDOM

SHAKYAMUNI

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Research Brief

Buddhism provides template for global engagement

Gautam Buddha's doctrine based on compassion & wisdom will help tackle issues like environment crisis, Ukraine conflict and economic instability to usher peace to humanity

Dr Amritpal Kaur

A global Buddhist summit was held in Indian capital, New Delhi during April 21 – 22 this year. Over 170 delegates from thirty countries converged for this summit to find new ways of responding to global conflicts and challenges. Central theme for this two day summit was 'Responses to Contemporary Challenges: Philosophy to Praxis'. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the summit.

Prime Minister Modi argued that following Buddha's path for sustainable and peaceful future would lead to resolution of many issues confronting the humanity. These include lingering issues such as environment crisis, Russia-Ukraine war, and economic instability among others. Indian foreign policy and diplomatic engagements including peace missions, rescue and relief operations in natural disasters or conflicts were aligned with this Buddhist doctrine of peaceful co-existence and living for entire humanity.

Prime Minister postulated that majority of countries professing Buddhism should come together to work for world peace free of disease, illiteracy and poverty. This would be at variance with nations that single-mindedly insist on imposing their ideas and faiths on

others¹. His Holiness the Dalai Lama put Buddha's teachings in the context of need for world peace by arguing that 'the heart of Buddha's teaching is a combination of compassion and wisdom'².

Within the Buddhist universe, India holds a unique place. As the land of Buddha and the country he lived in, preached and attained nirvana, India has a special place in its philosophical orientation.

Effectively it is the central loci of Buddhist faith. As a world religion, adherents of Buddhism are spread across the globe with heavy concentration in Southeast Asia and East Asia. Buddha's teachings are therefore integral to Indian world view. Buddhism is easily recognized as an element of consequence in Indian strategic relations which combines soft power on religious, socio-cultural issues to hard power on economy and sharp strategic ties with several countries.

Commonality of religion, coincidental as it is, can be turned into intentional coming together of countries.

Against this background, the Global Buddhist Summit can be seen as Indian attempt to bring together 'like-hearted' countries. Former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee had summed up India's relations with Asian neighbors as 'India belonging to Asia - Pacific community is a geographical fact and a political reality'³. Reiteration and reinforcement of historic-religious thread of commonality provided by Buddhism adds a unique dimension to this relationship that India has nourished over the years on principles of mutual respect, equality and openness.

¹ PIB, 'English rendering of PM's Inaugural address at the Global Buddhist Summit ' (Delhi, 20th April)<<https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1918232>> accessed 1st June 2023

² The office of his holiness the Dalai lama, 'Global Buddhist Summit, 2023' (The Address of His Holiness The Dalai Lama, 21st April)<<https://www.dalailama.com/news/2023/global-buddhist-summit-2023>> accessed 1st June 2023

³ Atal Bihari Vajpayee, India's Perspective on ASEAN and The Asia Pacific Region (Institute of Southeast Asia Studies 2002)

Buddhism: A History

Buddhism as one of the leading religions in world can be traced to the life of its preceptor Gautam Buddha or Shakyamuni (563 - 483 BC) born in the Shakya clan at Lumbini in the Himalayan foothills of present day, Nepal. Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment or Nirvana in the deer park of Bodh Gaya near Banaras, one of holiest Hindu centers of learning from the Vedic period and popular as 'Kashi' in India. Buddha gave his first sermon at Sarnath and died in Kushinagar that's located in present-day Uttar Pradesh state of India. Buddhism has followers spread in most continents. The heaviest concentration of its followers is in East and Southeast Asia.

Central to Buddha's teachings was to take recourse to 'The Middle Way' or middle path to balance and avoid extremities. The middle way seeks to provide answers to sorrows of human life through 'Eightfold Path'. These teachings of Buddha were sought to be propagated by the Sangha or Congregation of Buddhist Monks with the support of lay-followers.

Brief history of Buddhism and its spread into East and Southeast Asia is important to understand centrality of India in Buddhist universe and its present network across Asia. For over a century after Buddha's death, Buddhism remained one of many religious denominations in Northeastern India. Though Harayanka Dynasty King, Bimbisara and his son Ajatshatru supported Buddhism, dynasties later including Shishungas took away state patronage from it. Buddhism became predominant religion during Mauryan King Ashoka's period. The Kalinga War (260 BCE) was paradigm shift for him when Ashoka expressly adopted Buddhism incorporating it into his administrative policies.

It is argued that in later years of his reign, Ashoka propagated Buddhist religion in India and beyond. Rock edicts carried his written decree on non-violence and Buddhist teachings as part of his Dhamma. Ashoka sent his son Mahinda as his ambassador, carrying

the sapling of Bodhi Tree under which Buddha attained enlightenment, to Sri Lanka. As a consequence, Sri Lankan King Devanampiya Tissa converted to Buddhism. Ashoka organized the third Buddhist Council near his capital, Patliputra (one of the four major Buddhist Councils in ancient India).

Ashoka's reign is regarded most relevant vis-à-vis other kings for the present discussion. Ashoka was one of the few kings who explicitly sent his emissaries to other countries for propagation of Buddhism. His missionary activities were some of the significant events that sowed seeds of Buddhism outside India.

Kushans (30 CE-230 CE) in North West India was another kingdom to have given patronage to Buddhism which took it to Central Asian region around first century AD. Old silk route passing through Kushan kingdom was the major conduit to spread Buddhist ideas into Central Asia and China. Takshshila and Gandhara were major centers of Buddhism in Kushan Empire. Kushan ruler, Kanishka I organized Fourth Buddhist Council where schism between Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism came to fore. In first century AD, state patronage and mercantile networks were primarily responsible for spread of Buddhism in areas outside South Asia.

Himanshu Prabha Ray argued that another possible route for spread of Buddhism to South East Asia came from Coromandel Coast. South Indian Kingdom instrumental in spread of Buddhism into South East Asian region was the Satavahanas (First Century BCE-Third Century CE) who ruled east coast of Indian peninsula. The Satavahana gave patronage to Buddhism. But unlike, the Mauryans they did not convert themselves. Traders from the Satavahana kingdom took Buddhism to Burma and Thailand.⁴

Buddhism travelled to South East Asia with Indian maritime traders. It spread in the form of portable figures of Buddha and architectural

⁴ Himanshu Prabha Ray, *Coastal Shrines and Transnational Maritime Networks across India and Southeast Asia* (Routledge, London 2021)

knowledge of temples taken along by seafaring traders, monks, priests, and emissaries sent across the sea. Architecture of Dvaravati in Thailand, Balinese inscription, Indonesia (10th-11th Century AD) propounding Buddhism mentions Varanasi, Nalanda and Amaravati. Indian influence on south-east Asia is visible in Stupa work in Burma (Myanmar) and Thailand including architectural influence of Nagarjuna konda and Amravati on Stupa designs in Pyu (Myanmar) and Mon (Thailand), Buddhist inscription similar to the Mauryan style.

John Guy described this phenomenon as ‘Pan Asian Internationalism’. According to him, material conditions provided by thriving maritime trade between India and Southeast Asia was the force which facilitated this spread. Buddhism as a conduit, Indian influence merged with Southeast Asia to produce a distinctly composite culture during the Pan Asian Internationalism.⁵

Sinification of Buddhism: Buddha goes to China

Buddhism reached China at the turn of Common era. The earliest evidence of Buddhism was found in Ming era rock edict dated to 65 AD which discussed donation to a Buddhist Monastery. Besides the maritime route which took Buddhism to Southeast Asia, overland route running along the old Silk Road took the ‘peaceniks’ to Central Asia.

Historians have deduced that Bamiyan in present day Afghanistan was an important stopover on Silk Road which went into India known as *uttarpath* or the northern road. Buddhist Merchants and Monks took this route towards Central Asia and from there Buddhism spread to China and beyond. Unlike Southeast Asia where Theravada Buddhism (a sub-division of Hinayana Buddhism) was practiced, Chinese Buddhists were adherents of Mahayana Buddhism.

⁵ John Guy, Pan Asian Buddhism and Bodhisattva Cult in Champa. in Tran Ky Phuong and Bruce McFarland Lockhart (eds), The Cham of Vietnam: History, Society and Art (National University of Singapore Press 2011) 300-322

Sinification of Buddhism refers to the process of adapting Buddhist ideas into Chinese society. Unlike rest of the world, Chinese took Buddhist ideas and interpreted them in consonance with their own cultural undercurrents. However, the problem with such an interpretation is that in the context of the original text, feasibility of such an interpretation becomes questionable. This process of Sinification took place in three distinct stages:

First, it was arrival of Buddhism to incorporation in Chinese Society (Third-Fourth Century AD): This first stage of Sinification involved usage of Chinese words and terms to explain Buddhist Ideas. One major school or tradition involved in this process was Xuanxue (Neo Daoism).

Arrival of monk named Kumarajiva in China and interpretation of Indian texts into Chinese language (Fifth-Sixth Century) happened in the second phase. This stage also marked beginning of the process to translate large body of Indian texts into Chinese. This period is significant as during this time, the Chinese monks gradually attained mastery over intricacies of Buddhist theology.

Third Stage (Sixth Century-Tenth Century AD) lasted from reunification of China under Sui Dynasty (589 AD) to the end of Tang period in Tenth century. During this period the Chinese had fully incorporated Buddhism into their society in accordance with their cultural sensibilities. They did not require the Indian authorities to interpret the Buddhist doctrine to them notwithstanding the fact whether such interpretation was feasible in accordance with the original text. Major schools of sinified Buddhism included Tiantai, Huayan, Chan and Pure Land. By the end of tenth century, Sinification of Buddhism was complete.

Buddhism spread from China to Korea and Japan through northern land route and southern maritime routes. Buddhism was adopted by South Korean kingdom of Paekche when Indian monk named Malananda traveled to the country in 384 AD. This also paved the way of its export and eventual percolation into Japanese society.

Sinification process tried to take the 'Indianness' out of Buddha and naturalize him into the intricacies of the Chinese society. But, it could not take away the centrality of India within Buddhist universe essentially due to the physical loci of Buddhism being situated in India. And, this essentially is the reason for resurgence of Buddhist sites in India since 19th century, with redevelopment of Bodhgaya and Sarnath.

Buddhism going global is also evident from the artforms beginning with Gupta style (4th-6th Century AD) symbolized by Mathura and Sarnath artefacts. This classical benchmark of Buddhist art idioms was copied across Asia. The second stage of Buddhist art form i.e. Tang International Buddhist Art Style also known as Sinification of Buddhism, incorporated Buddhist stylistic ideas into Chinese architectural sensibilities. This artform was exported further to Korea and Japan. The third stage was the Pala International style (10th Century AD) originated in India which took inspiration from Gupta style. During its time, it spread from India to Nepal, Tibet, China, Myanmar, Thailand and Indonesia.

History of Buddhism and its spread across Asia not only points to its extensive reach, but also centrality of India in the Buddhist universe. As the land of Buddha, India holds this unique position in Asian countries conglomeration especially the East and Southeast Asia. India's centrality to Buddhism should be seen beyond tourist destinations to historical and civilizational common ground required for contemporary times.

Centrality of India and Buddhism's significance in Indian strategic thinking can be gauged given that half a billion people adhere to various schools of this religion across the globe. China, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Sri Lanka are the countries with highest Buddhist population.

Majority of these countries are India's neighbors and important partners. Given India's centrality and its unique place, Buddhism can act as foreign policy plank not only in this country but for global

engagements. In contemporary times of turbulent international relations, insistence on peaceful resolution of disputes is a breath of fresh air. As a foreign policy template, Buddhism strikes a chord with numerous countries to resolve bilateral and multilateral disputes, equitable distribution of resources, addressing climate change and degradation of environment, which present a danger especially for countries of Global South.

It is a mechanism of truth and cordiality which can be used to reduce enemies and expand the arch of friendship. For, far too long, the idealistic-normative policy approach in international relations has been viewed with sarcastic eyes. However, as the world gape at the crisis situation one after another, Global Buddhist Summit as a platform for like-minded countries must not be a voice in the wilderness, rather it should be the guiding light 'for inter-faith dialogue, harmony and universal peace'.

Observations

Delhi declaration of Global Buddhist Summit provides the way forward to free the humanity from scourges of conflict, ill-feeling, greed, selfishness and uncertainty in life. At the same time, the declaration also provides basis for inter-faith dialogue, bring harmony and peace based on doctrines and philosophy of Buddha Dhamma.

This is the right moment to unite under global Buddhist community to end conflict, violence and war, recognise that environmental degradation as one of the most pressing challenges for humanity. Reduction in carbon emissions, protecting biodiversity and preserving natural resources has been recognized as primacy.

Happiness and well-being can be achieved by individuals and societies that are mindful, compassionate and take wise calls. On the parallel, protection, promotion and preservation of Buddhist sites without hindrance to their access will help promote spiritual growth, cultural understanding and social harmony.

Significant shift in human beings' attitude towards nature will help resolve multi-dimensional crises confronting the world. Constant conversations amongst stakeholders like Buddhist leaders, scholars, believers and institutions can build a platform for resolving issues.

Value education and character building experienced for over 700 years at Nalanda, one of the greatest centres for Dhamma education, should be restored to its original glory for realizing peace and harmony for the humanity.

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