

Between Soft Power and Hard Ideology: Buddhism in the Imagery of the Indian State and Hindu Right

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi has spear-headed efforts to promote Buddhism as part of his diplomatic overtures in Asia. Heralding this to be the Asian Century, he has been instrumental in crafting an Indian vision of Buddhism, that has been successful in making India a centrepiece of Buddhist diplomacy. However, whilst in the public domain of government, Buddhism has enjoyed widescale patronage, its reputation among Modi's ideological mentors in the Hindu Right presents a different case altogether. Ranging from ambivalence to appropriation and downright hostility, ideologues of the Hindu Right have portrayed Buddhism in complete opposite to the ethics and value driven Buddha Modi wishes to market. This article examines the successes of Modi in instrumentalising Buddhism as a tool of India's growing Soft Power. It also sheds light on Buddhism's place within the Hindu Right's imagination of the Indian nation, thereby showcasing how processes of omission and decontextualization play a crucial role in cementing Modi's message and avoiding conflict with Hindutva ideologues.

Keywords: Soft-Power, Hindutva, Ideology, Modi, Buddhism, Diplomacy

Entre el poder blando y la ideología dura: el budismo en el imaginario del Estado indio y la derecha hindú

RESUMEN

En los últimos años, el primer ministro indio, Narendra Modi, ha liderado los esfuerzos para promover el budismo como parte de sus iniciativas diplomáticas en Asia. Anunciando que este sería el siglo

asiático, ha sido fundamental en la creación de una visión india del budismo, que ha logrado convertir a la India en un eje central de la diplomacia budista. Sin embargo, si bien en el ámbito público, el budismo ha gozado de un amplio apoyo, su reputación entre los mentores ideológicos de Modi en la derecha hindú presenta un caso completamente diferente. Desde la ambivalencia hasta la apropiación y la hostilidad abierta, los ideólogos de la derecha hindú han retratado el budismo como algo completamente opuesto a la ética y los valores que Modi desea promover. Este artículo examina los éxitos de Modi al instrumentalizar el budismo como una herramienta del creciente poder blando de la India. También arroja luz sobre el lugar del budismo dentro de la imaginación de la derecha hindú sobre la nación india, mostrando así cómo los procesos de omisión y descontextualización juegan un papel crucial para cimentar el mensaje de Modi y evitar conflictos con los ideólogos Hindutva.

Palabras clave: Poder blando, Hindutva, ideología, Modi, budismo, diplomacia

在软实力与硬意识形态之间：印度国家和印度教右翼形象中的佛教

摘要

近年来，印度总理纳伦德拉·莫迪在其亚洲外交活动中积极推广佛教。他宣称这是“亚洲世纪”，并致力于构建印度式的佛教愿景，成功使印度成为佛教外交的中心。然而，尽管佛教在政府公共领域享有广泛的支持，但在莫迪的意识形态导师——印度教右翼人士眼中，佛教的声誉却并不相同。从态度暧昧到挪用，再到公然敌视，印度教右翼的意识形态家们对佛教的描述与莫迪希望推广的以伦理和价值观为导向的佛法截然相反。本文将探讨莫迪如何成功地将佛教作为提升印度软实力的工具。本文还揭示了佛教在“印度教右翼对印度民族的想象”中所扮演的角色，从而展现了省略和去语境化的过程如何在“巩固莫迪的信息传递以及避免与印度教特性意识形态人士发生冲突”方面发挥关键作用。

关键词：软实力，印度教特性，意识形态，莫迪，佛教，外交

Introduction

In October 2024, the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, addressing the United Nations remarked that “Bharat has given the world not war, but Buddha.”¹ He later stated “I confidently say that the entire world will find solutions not in war, but in Buddha. On this occasion of Abhidhamma Divas, I call upon the world, learn from Buddha, move away from war, pave the way for peace.”² Lam asserts this as an “Indian vision of Buddhism which appeals to ancient history while rooted in contemporary geopolitical concerns.”³ In recent years, particularly since the advent of Modi’s Prime Ministership in 2014, the Indian government has made active efforts to laud the ethics and virtues of Buddhism in the International arena and stake a claim for India as the centre of Buddhist diplomacy.

However, there is an uncomfortable question which is not addressed back home. This concerns the relationship Buddhism has with Modi’s ideological Hindu nationalist mentors and contemporaries. While scholars have rightly pointed out that the Hindu Right regards Muslims and Christians as its chief enemies, a less scholarly outcome is seen in its relationship with the “Indic” faiths, those whose birth took place in the present-day territory of India. While this article does not go to such exhaustive lengths and examine the Hindu Right’s ideological relationship with Jainism, Sikhism and Buddhism, it will place emphasis on the third of these faiths, as it is the message of Buddha which Modi seeks

to promote as an Indian virtue. At best indifferent, and at worst, hostile and often advocating violence against Buddhists, Hindu nationalists leave no stone untouched when it comes to the supremacy of the Hindu faith.

The article first introduces the concept of Soft Power, and applies it to the context of India, namely Modi’s overtures globally in the promotion of Buddhism, from its messages, beliefs as well as cooperation with other governments to enhance Buddhist tourism. Next, from the international, it focusses on the domestic sphere and provides an analysis of the Hindu Right’s perception of Buddhism within its national imagination. Here, the writings of some of its most significant ideologues will be analysed, namely Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar. Finally, it examines the Hindu Right’s approach to religious conversions, namely to Buddhism, by examining reactions to a former Delhi government Minister’s public conversion in 2022, and how the Dalit leader Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, even after his conversion to Buddhism in 1956, was never seen outside the ambit of the “Hindu” fold by the Hindu Right.

As the article deals with questions of soft power and domestic ideology, it fits within the scope the “world-view” transmission belt highlighted in this special series. It aims to examine the changing nature of India’s domestic identity from the prism of majority-minority relations. While the Hindutva discourse on minorities especially Muslims and Christians is well established

and continues to highlight tensions in various domains and forums, it is its relationship with Buddhism, both in the domestic (ideological) and international (soft power) sphere that warrants an investigation and decipher as to “how” it fits within a Modi-led Indian worldview.

Methodology

As the article underscores the need to examine the relationship of the majoritarian faith with minorities in the context of India, it becomes imperative to lay out key concepts and frameworks within which these will be placed. Firstly, it is the Hindu majoritarian discourse on Buddhism which will be weighed against the state attempts to project it as part of Indian identity and soft power play. In this regard, I adopt the definition of discourse as laid out by the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) school, which sees it as “so socially consequential that it gives rise to important issues of power. Discursive practices may have major ideological effects—that is, they can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations between (for instance) social classes, women and men, and ethnic/cultural majorities and minorities, through how they represent things and position people.”⁴

As Hindu nationalism is centred around favouring and privileging the majority community in India, i.e., Hindus, through processes of exclusion and co-option, I will analyse the discourse of the main ideologues associated with giving it a firm and coherent ideological structure. This brings us to

the second fundamental concept to be defined, which is crucial to the article, namely ideology. Ideology, within the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) of the CDA, is defined as “a one-sided perspective or world view composed of related mental representations, opinions, attitudes, and evaluations, which members of a specific social group share. Ideologies are an important means of establishing and maintaining unequal power relations through discourse.”⁵ Thus, in this regard, while public statements and government policies might be geared towards the patronage and marketing of Buddhism at home and abroad, to garner legitimacy and support, within the ideological domain, the attitudes could not be starker. This is because, in the Hindu Nationalist imagination, ideology is key towards establishing boundaries of belonging, both from a territorial and citizenship perspective. Indeed, it becomes crucial to examine this ideology vis-à-vis attitudes to Buddhism to decipher to what extent is the government’s narrative aligned or differ through notions of exclusion and co-option.

India and Soft Power under Modi

Political Scientist Joseph Nye defines Soft Power as “the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction, rather than coercion or payment.”⁶ In this sense, for India, projection of its power rests on its ability to market its most prized assets which are not military or financial in nature. Indeed, Nye

further argues that “a country’s soft power rests on its resources of culture, values and policies.”⁷ In the Indian context therefore, the prioritisation of soft power in International Relations and diplomacy is seen as key in enhancing its influence abroad.

The deployment of its cultural assets to enhance its influence and reach in the world is not new to India. Indeed, many soft power tools at its disposal are in constant use to project a more ambitious and self-confident nation, keen to showcase its cultural heritage on a global scale. For example, yoga has increasingly been used by the Modi government since first coming to power in 2014. Adopting and promoting it in cultural diplomacy, ensures that India is seen to the world as “inclusive and promoting a more general and deeply felt spiritual and philosophical worldview that promotes India’s cultural and civilizational characteristics as unique contributions to the world.”⁸ The marketing of yoga as a soft power tool is no great surprise as Gautam and Droogan note, that the yoga industry is worth up to 80 billion USD globally, with the United States accounting for roughly half that amount.⁹

The global popularity and reach of yoga were therefore key towards the Modi government refining it to enhance its marketability and publicity. The first administration (2014–19) introduced an AYUSH ministry in the central government (Ayurveda, yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy) to “promote India’s linkages with yoga within and outside the country.”¹⁰ The success of this outreach can be seen in

Modi’s visits to China in 2015 where a Yoga-Tai Chi event was organised at the Temple of Heaven in Beijing, the creation of a Parliamentary league for the promotion of yoga in Japan in 2017, and the bonhomie of Modi and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu with yogic rituals used as metaphors to cement deep ties between the countries.¹¹ The pinnacle, however, of India, and in-particular Modi’s success in the export of yoga as a global brand is reflected in the United Nations declaring June 21 as the International Day of Yoga. Indeed, at the most recent celebration of the day, Modi led the largest ever yoga gathering of around 3 lakh citizens in Vishakhapatnam remarking that “Eleven years on (from the adoption of the UN General Assembly declaration), yoga has become an integral part of the lifestyle of millions across the globe.”¹²

Another avenue through which the government has sought to leverage India’s soft power potential has been through the active outreach towards the Indian diaspora population. Indeed, as of 2024, India has the world’s largest diaspora population, numbering roughly around 35.42 million.¹³ Whilst there have been differing perspectives on attitudes towards diasporas between various Indian governments, which is outside the scope of this article, it would be pertinent to examine the BJP’s overtures towards the diaspora from the time it first came to power (1999–2004) and examine the trends which Modi himself has established since coming to power in 2014. The BJP first recognised the potential of the diaspora in its Chennai Declaration of 1999, stating “We believe

that the vast majority of NRIs (Non-Resident Indians) and PIOs (Persons of Indian Origin) also constitute a part of the Great Indian Family. We should endeavour to continually strengthen their social, cultural, economic and emotional ties with the mother country.”¹⁴ Indeed, the emotional connect was realised in 2003, when the government declared January 9th as Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (Overseas Indian Day) to “strengthen the engagement of the overseas Indian community with the Government of India and reconnect them with their cultural roots.”¹⁵ The significance of the date chosen is not surprising to those familiar with the history of the Indian freedom struggle, as this was the same date, that the “greatest Pravasi,”¹⁶ Gandhi, returned to India from South Africa and “changed the lives of Indians forever.”¹⁷

Tapping on the twin bandwagons of the strength of the diaspora and the message of Gandhi, Modi has sought to strengthen his connection with the former—inviting them to spread the message of the latter, to strengthen India’s message of inclusiveness. This was evident, when at the PBD in 2018, he remarked that “if there is any philosophy to counter radicalisation and extremism, it is the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and the philosophy of Indian values.”¹⁸

Buddhism and Soft Power:

A Historical Precedent?

A key question to be posed before delving into Modi’s own strategic thinking vis-à-vis

Buddhism is that is the use of Buddhism as a soft power tool for India a recent phenomenon? As will be shown in the following discussion, based on Modi’s rhetoric and many policies and decisions, the answer may be in the affirmative. However, there is a deeper connection between India, Buddhism and a projection of soft power. In 1952, a few years after independence, the government under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, India hosted the International Buddhist Conference in Sanchi,¹⁹ which was attended by over 3,000 monks, nuns and historians.²⁰ In fact it represented a culmination of the early Nehruvian years where the central and state governments provided substantial funding²¹ towards restoring Buddhist sites along with Sanchi such as Lumbini, Nalanda and Bodh Gaya. Indeed, Nehru was also keen at projecting India’s contribution to Buddhism, remarking after Ceylon (Sri Lanka) had achieved its independence that “the seed of Buddhism which has flourished in Ceylon is a symbol of that great gift which India gave to Lanka and the world so long ago.”²² Finally, Nehru placed great deal of importance on symbolic acts, most notably the Grand Buddha Jayanti celebrations of 1956, where “more than 200 royal dignitaries, heads of state, foreign ambassadors and Buddhist leaders” were invited to celebrate “twenty-five hundred years of Buddhism.”²³

While the historical context of this article notes the importance given to using Buddhism as a tool of the state (albeit in a non-proselytising and sectarian manner), the last govern-

ment before the advent of Modi led by the Congress also contributed to Buddhism's utility to serve as a soft power tool. This was notably reflected in the field of education, with work undertaken to establish Nalanda University. Indeed, India had garnered regional support within Asia through a proposal to re-establish the ancient University, through endorsements given by sixteen countries²⁴ at the East Asia Summit held in the Philippines in 2007. It was argued that this development was significant in two respects—Asian countries could now expand their mutual interests beyond trade “into something grander that would better the region and the world,”²⁵ and a “topflight institute of higher learning” would achieve this. Indeed, with its location being in the Eastern Indian state of Bihar and enjoying support through parliamentary legislations during the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) tenure, the Nalanda project embodied a continuation of Nehru's usage of soft power to further cement India's standing in the world. This is what scholar Marion Pinkney terms “Pan-Indian-Asianism,” wherein there is a readiness on the part of Asian countries to “affirm India as a centre for Asian spirituality, and a focus for Asian values.”²⁶

Therefore, what is clearly visible is that Buddhism already served as a vital tool for the Indian state, with which it could exert a certain influence at the regional and international level. From Nehru to Nalanda (issues surrounding its practical implementation notwithstanding), Buddhism is a ripe means from which India can derive legitimacy,

validation, and respect. It is this context, therefore, which we must keep in mind when examining the main case study of this article—the overtures of the present BJP government and in particular the rhetoric of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to decipher to what extent has he carried the legacies of his predecessors, or has he charted his own path in placing Buddhism within India's soft power paradigm.

Modi's Buddhist Overtures

The following section examines the moves made specifically by the Modi government in the field of Buddhist diplomacy. It unpacks three overarching themes: (a) development of Buddhist tourist sites, to place India at the centre of Buddhist civilization; (b) wooing neighbours, a strategic calculation with which to compete with China; and (c) within an ideological setting, placing of Buddhism within a Hinduised reading. It is specifically the last of these themes which marks Modi's fundamental departure from his predecessors mentioned in the previous section.

In 2016, in a bid to bolster tourist numbers, particularly Buddhist pilgrims from Thailand, Modi invoked Buddha, and his government provided double entry e-tourist visas for Thai citizens visiting Buddhist sites in India.²⁷ In exchange, his Thai counterpart, General Prayut Chan-o-Cha assured him that Thai companies would invest capital to develop the Buddhist circuit and develop high-end hotels.

In fact, Modi used one of Nye's key variables of Soft Power status to woo Thai tourists—Indian culture, and its shared heritage with Thailand. He remarked “[Y]ou come from a land that is very familiar to us. From the legend of Rama to the Wisdom of Buddha, our ties are founded in a shared cultural heritage.”²⁸ Taking advantage of India's deep geographical connection to Buddhism, Modi no doubt was putting Buddhism “at the heart of India's vigorous new diplomacy.”

This geographical advantage resonated, particularly with the holiest sites associated with the faith. Modi sought to place Bodh Gaya²⁹ as the centrepiece of his overtures to the wider Buddhist world, remarking “[W]e in India would like to develop Bodh Gaya, so that it can become the spiritual capital and civilizational bond between India and the Buddhist world.”³⁰ While Bodh Gaya ascribes huge significance to India and benefits the country from a tourism perspective, Modi in his diplomatic overtures, was also careful not to forget other countries with substantial Buddhist populations. For example, in an address to the Nepalese Constituent Assembly, he was keen to stress not just the common cultural and civilizational bonds, but also the significance of Nepal in the Buddhist faith. He remarked that while Buddha attained salvation in India, his birthplace was Nepal. This declaration seemed particularly significant given it was an attempt to “assuage the feelings of those Nepalese who have long protested against what they believed were false claims by some Indians that Buddha was born in India.”³¹

In an effort to further facilitate smoother tourism to Buddhist sites in India, the Indian Railway and Catering Corporation (IRCTC) launched the Buddhist Circuit Express train service in 2014. It enables tourists to visit the holiest places of Buddhism in a variety of packages. Most notably, its website states “[The] Buddha tells his followers that they can attain merit and a noble rebirth by going on pilgrimages to the places where he was born—Lumbini, gained enlightenment—Bodh Gaya, first taught—Sarnath, and attained Nirvana—Kushinagar.”³² In addition, the service expands to four other additional sites “linked to some of Buddha's most significant life events: Rajgir and Vaishali in Bihar, and Sravasti and Sankasia in Uttar Pradesh.” Once again, the government was keen to promote the dual benefits of such a move, with Seshadri Chari, a member of the ruling BJP's national executive committee at the time, remarking “it can be an entry point to attract tourists (and) even world leaders can be taken to Buddhist centres like Bodh Gaya and Sarnath.”³³

While India is keen to promote Buddhism in the domestic sphere, and attract foreign tourists to holy sites, Modi himself has gone to visit several Buddhist religious sites in other countries as part of his Buddhist diplomatic outreach. In fact, he said that “[D]uring my foreign visits, one day is always set aside to visit a Buddhist temple.”³⁴ He followed up his words with action by praying at the Toji and Kinkakuji temples in Japan. Subsequently, he addressed Buddhist monks at the Mahabodhi temple in Sri Lanka.

The Modi government's Buddhist outreach in India's neighbourhood, is primarily motivated by its Look East policy. In this regard, it is no surprise that economic benefits such as tourist money are important, and a more straightforward visa process to citizens from countries such as Thailand no doubt stands to benefit Buddhist tourism in India. However, on a more strategic level, these overtures should also be seen in the context of India's complicated relationship with its bigger neighbour, China. The next section examines the complexities of this relationship through the lens of Buddhism as a tool of regional influence.

Hindi-Chini Buddhist *Bhai-Bhai?*

Buddhism seems to be part of a bond between the two nations. One of Modi's Buddhist *hop on* trips was in Xian, China. This was in fact his first stop as part of a three-day state visit to China in 2015.³⁵ It would seem odd to notice that the capital, Beijing was not selected as the first stop of entry during the visit. Two reasons can be attributed here. First, Modi was following in the footsteps of Chinese President Xi Jinping. Xi had first stopped in Gujarat the year before on his own state visit to India.³⁶ Second, Modi was to visit the Wild Goose pagoda, an important site in Chinese Buddhism, that housed Buddhist texts and relics brought to China by the traveller, Xuanzang, regarded as a "household name in China and India." Chinese diplomats were keen to show that "his journey paves

the way for the communications of soul and exchanges of emotion between the two great civilizations."³⁷

However, it must be noted that whilst symbolic manifestations of co-operation are clearly visible, Buddhist diplomacy represents another source of competition between the two countries as well. At the most basic level, the position of the Dalai Lama drives a wedge into any perceived cooperation at least on a spiritual front between India and China. This must be viewed in the larger context of Tibet, where religion and geopolitics divide the two nations. Since 1959, when he fled China, the 14th Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso has been living in exile in India. His government-in-exile setup in Dharamshala in India is viewed unfavourably (to put it mildly) by China, as he remains the most visible manifestation of Tibetan self-determination.

Moreover, in another instance of Buddhism causing friction between the two countries—Tawang (in Arunachal Pradesh, which is disputed between India and China) became a flashpoint.³⁸ Seen as the birthplace of the 6th Dalai Lama, it has significant attachment in the realm of Tibetan Buddhism. When the Indian government granted the present Dalai Lama permission to visit Tawang in 2009, China denounced the move, claiming it would "affect the issue of the Dalai Lama's reincarnation."³⁹ While the Dalai Lama is widely seen as the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, China has taken it upon itself to promote its own version of Buddhism to counter his "anti-Chi-

na splittist nature.” This is reflected in government appointed figures such as Gyaincain Norbu, the Panchen Lama, to counter the influence of the Dalai Lama. In fact, the Panchen Lama in 2010 was appointed the Vice President of the Buddhist Association of China and vowed to “uphold the leadership of the Communist Party of China, safeguard national unification and expand Buddhist exchanges.”⁴⁰

On an institutional level, India has sought to challenge China’s growing tendency to market its version of Buddhism through the International Buddhist Confederation, based in New Delhi. Its first meeting was held in 2011, and attendees stressed the importance India had in the Buddhist world. The head of the Mahabodhi Society in Sri Lanka remarked, “[The] whole world looks to India because of Buddhism. If someone takes initiative, India can take leadership of the Buddhist world.”⁴¹ It is no surprise to note that China did not attend this session owing to the Dalai Lama’s presence, and in 2015, it organised the International Buddha Poornima Diwas celebrations, with Modi as the chief guest.

A further standoff occurred with India hosting the Global Hindu Buddhist Initiative on Conflict Avoidance and Environmental Consciousness, organised by the Vivekananda International Foundation. Modi accompanied delegates on their subsequent visits to Bodh Gaya. Whilst Sri Lanka, Japan, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia all sent delegates to the conference, China was

absent. China was also missing from Modi’s reference to the holy sites of Buddhism, when he addressed the conference—“The SAARC region is home to the holy sites of Buddhism: Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar.”⁴² In fact, this conference was to set the stage for a greater partnership between India and Japan—one of China’s competitors in Asia. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe recorded a video message where he remarked “Japan owes its rule of law to Buddhism.”⁴³ The conference itself was attended by foreign Minister Minoru Kiouchi.

Finally, as recently in 2023, India organised the first Global Buddhist Summit in New Delhi. Like the previous conferences, the Dalai Lama accepted his invitation and attended, which was a red flag for China not to attend, even though an invitation was extended to it. The Indian media reported that China’s absence was down to the presence of not just the Dalai Lama, but also two representatives from Taiwan, and the stand offs on the border with India, that had started in 2020.⁴⁴

A final point to conclude this section is to examine to what extent India’s overtures in Buddhist diplomacy will be successful. Whilst it seems paradoxical that the atheist Communist Party of China, would have anything to do with the regeneration of religious sites, the fact that China has the world’s largest Buddhist population, and borders states with large Buddhist populations, (particularly Nepal), means that it must compete with India in the business of spirituality. This was evident in

the massive influx of foreign direct investment estimated of around 3 billion USD, in an attempt to “buy control of Lumbini,”⁴⁵ through the development of its airport, establishing hotels and a Buddhist university at the site. On the other hand, India has prioritised the reconstruction and regeneration of Buddhist heritage sites within its geographical frontiers, and further, through infrastructural projects, such as the inauguration of the Kushinagar International Airport in 2021, to help facilitate the influx of tourists for the Buddhist circuit. The circuit itself provides India with immense opportunity to generate revenues through tourism and further cement its place as the cornerstone of Buddhist heritage. Whilst India’s overtures showcase the potential of its success in garnering the benefits of Buddhist soft power, as long as there remains a market to exploit against it, China will not be too far behind in this regard.

Where Hard Beliefs Meet Soft Power

While there is no doubt that the Indian government, especially under Narendra Modi’s Prime Ministership has made concrete efforts to promote Buddhism within the country and use it as a tool for soft power influence in the international arena, there is an important caveat to draw attention to. This is to do with the fact that while Modi himself may project an image of tolerance, respect and love for Buddhism, his party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)’s ideolog-

ical ancestors among the Hindu Right would have a very different picture to portray of Buddhism. Indeed, the status of Buddhism in India according to the constitution states that “reference to Hindus shall be construed as including a reference to persons professing the Sikh, Jaina or Buddhist religion.”⁴⁶ The constitution, whilst also acknowledging India as a secular republic, legitimises the Hindu nationalist conception of Buddhism through the above categorisation. This section therefore focusses on the domestic sphere and examines what are the attitudes to Buddhism, which Modi either ignores or decontextualises when he promotes his spiritual diplomacy abroad, and finally, sheds light on the Hindu Right’s attitude to religious conversions to Buddhism. While extolling the virtues of Buddha and his messages on the one hand, Modi’s ideological mentors and foot soldiers sing a very different tune.

One of Hindu nationalism’s core tenets is the careful crafting of a selected list of “enemies” of the Indian nation. The nation itself is imagined along strict majoritarian lines, where religious minorities should cede their cultures and faiths if they wish to belong. While there has been considerable research into how Muslims and Christians, regarded as “external enemies,” are excluded from the ambit of the Hindu nation, there also exists a hostility to the so-called “Indic” faiths.

The Hindutva perception of Buddhists can be traced to the time of Adi Shankara of Kalady, who, according to Kuruvachira, can be regarded as

the “Father of Hindutva.” Kuruvachira notes that “he advocated the philosophy of non-dualism (Advaita Vedanta) and systematically developed an aggressive attitude towards all religions and systems which differed from his, especially Buddhism.”⁴⁷ Karl Potter remarks, “Sankara viewed Buddhism as one of the worst of heresies and criticised it as roundly as any opposing philosophy of which he was aware.”⁴⁸ Further, Buddha’s rejection of the Vedas, Vedic sacrifices and rituals was considered anathema by Shankara, who regarded them as “eternal, and the source of knowledge.”

Echoing Shankara, Swami Vivekananda is adamant about the purity and sanctity of the Vedas as being intrinsic to Hinduism’s superiority and eventual triumph over Buddhism. He remarked, “[On] the philosophic side, the disciples of the great master [the Buddha] dashed themselves against the eternal rocks of the Vedas and could not crush them, and on the sider side, they took away from the nation, that eternal God to which every man and woman cling so fondly. And the result was that it had to die its natural death in India.”⁴⁹ Finally, in another severe indictment on what he initially termed as the “rebel child of Hinduism,”⁵⁰ he observed, “the most hideous ceremonies, the most horrible, the most obscene books, that human hands ever wrote or the human brain ever conceived, the most bestial forms, that ever passed under the name of religion, have all been the creation of degraded Buddhism.”⁵¹

The nationalist leader Bal Gangadhar Tilak, renowned for spearhead-

ing the extremist wing of the Indian National Congress, was also an admirer of Adi Shankara for his efforts in fighting Buddhism. He praised Shankara, who “brought together all the common philosophical elements for our religion and proved and preached them in such a way that Buddhism was swept away from the Land.”⁵² He refers to the time before the advent of Shankara as one of chaos where “Buddhism flourished, and attacks were made on the Hindu religion by Buddhists (and Jains).”⁵³ Thus, for Tilak, Hinduism is deemed the most superior faith, as it “provides Indian society a moral as well as social tie.”⁵⁴ Like many Hindu nationalists, he refers to a Golden Age of India’s past, the Vedic period, where India was a self-contained country and great nation united by a common culture. It was this unity which he believed was destroyed and brought about the country’s degradation. Buddhists, and Buddhism as such, were one of the key factors in bringing this about, and thus the efforts of Shankara are rightly seen by him in the rejuvenation of the faith and nation and marks a key event in his ideological frame of mind, that sought to establish a Hindu state in India.

Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, widely seen as the ideological father of modern Hindutva ideology, also devoted a large chunk of his writings in consolidating negative and hostile attitudes to Buddhists for the same reasons as his predecessors. In his historical imagination, the first degeneration of the Hindu nation occurred with the “expansion of Buddhism, and its propagation of ideals of love, equality, righteousness, tol-

eration—the opiates of universalism.”⁵⁵ This message of the Buddhists set the stage for the invasions of India. Thus, he is quite explicit in assigning blame to Buddhists for the demise of Hindu culture and society, which was the opposite of what Buddhism preached, and for allying with external aggressors in the conquest of India.

Savarkar held them and their institutions guilty of committing “seditious acts, hatched to undermine national independence.”⁵⁶ Punishments were seen as natural outcomes to put down any future acts of treachery on the nation. Savarkar maintained that those guilty of such acts were to be hanged, and monasteries, which became centres of sedition, were pulled down. In-fact, he states that these were “just punishments,”⁵⁷ and in no way, religious persecution. Acceptance of a subordinate place in the independent Hindu nation, was Savarkar’s final offer to Buddhists, to ensure they never again threatened it with expansionist designs. He maintained that they had “nothing to fear from India, the land of toleration, they should give up all dreams of endangering the national life of India and its independence.”⁵⁸

Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, head of the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) from 1940 to 1973, regarded the time after Buddha as one when his followers “began to uproot the age-old national traditions of this land. The great cultural virtues in our society were sought to be demolished.”⁵⁹ The first set of foreign invasions, according to Golwalkar,

took place during this time, as “Buddhist fanatics helped the invaders, who wore the mask of Buddhism.”⁶⁰ He, therefore, highlights a lack of devotion to the nation. In his view, the sect had turned a traitor to the “mother society and the mother religion.”⁶¹ It is simple to discern that the religion he refers to is the Hindu Vedic religion. He considered India as the “mother of all Hindus, who as the real children of the Hindu Rashtra, were living here since time immemorial.”⁶² The foreign invasions, aided by Buddhist collaborators, marked a fissure with Hindu history and thus needed rescuing. He remarked, “It is our sacred duty to re-establish the truth of our Hindu Nationhood, to remove all the debris of falsehood.”⁶³

Golwalkar also joyously declares the erasure of Buddhism from the “mother soil,” and while welcoming Lord Shiva (Buddha), “we do not welcome the flock of demons surrounding him.”⁶⁴ Another cause of Golwalkar’s ire towards Buddhism is its two-fold role in weakening the Caste System and the subsequent successes of Muslim invasions in the North-East and North-West. Golwalkar believed that where the caste system eroded, it became ripe for conquest. He unequivocally states that areas such as Delhi and Uttar Pradesh, “considered to be very orthodox and rigid in caste restrictions, remained predominantly Hindu.”⁶⁵

Buddhists Are Hindu: The Appropriation at Home

Buddhist diplomacy relies on the Indian government asserting the independence of Buddhism as a separate religion. The teachings of Buddha, and pilgrimage sites must be publicised through an evocation of the government's love and commitment to the promotion of the Buddhist faith, while taking in the dividends reaped through tourist money. However, on the domestic front, Buddhism is quite often construed as a renegade child of Hinduism. Even the ultimate act of leaving a faith, i.e., conversion, is seen by many on the Hindu Right as not necessarily leaving the Hindu faith. This final section delves into how the Hindu Right, whilst maintaining a hatred for the faith (as seen in the previous section), still requires a delicate balance with which to placate the so-called Indic faiths, such that binaries can be drawn with easier identifiable enemies, i.e., Muslims and Christians.

In fact, it is argued that Modi has “publicly embraced the Buddha as a reformer whose message has been reabsorbed back into Hinduism.”⁶⁶ This was particularly evident at the 2015 Global Hindu-Buddhist Initiative on Conflict Avoidance and Environmental Consciousness, held in Bodhi Gaya, where he remarked “Hinduism after the Buddha's advent became Buddhist Hinduism or Hindu Buddhism. They are today an inseparable amalgam.”⁶⁷ Modi's usage of Buddhism therefore needs to be seen in a careful and selective process, whereby the more radical elements of the faith,

and indeed the beliefs of Buddha, particularly, critiques of caste are ignored in favour of his ethics. An example of this can be seen in Modi attempting to draw similarities between Buddhism and Hinduism, remarking “Ethical values of personal restraint in consumption and environmental consciousness are deeply rooted in Asian philosophical traditions, especially in Hinduism and Buddhism.”⁶⁸

Within this Hinduised reading of Buddhism, it needs to be pointed out that Modi's portrayal above, is not a niche or new phenomenon. Indeed, it follows in the footsteps of many leaders of the 20th century, who sought to place Buddha within a Hindu pantheon. A member of the Arya Samaj, Harbilas Sarada, characterised Buddhism as “a modified form of Hinduism, not differing materially from the Vedic religion in its scientific aspects.”⁶⁹ Sarada finds a way to create a new set of people, termed as “Buddhist Hindus, who were responsible for the spread of Buddhism outside India through migration.” He maintained that “Hinduism is the groundwork of Buddhism, and the mythology and traditions of both are necessarily one and the same.”⁷⁰

Mohandas Gandhi's view on Buddhism did not necessarily provide it with the autonomy of a separate religion. To Gandhi, there was “no distinction between the essential teachings of Hinduism and Buddhism”⁷¹ and that “Gautama was a Hindu of Hindus. He was saturated with the spirit of Hinduism, with the Vedic spirit, and so far, as I am aware, he never rejected Hinduism

or the message of the Vedas.”⁷² In fact, Gandhi at best regarded Buddhism as a reforming movement within Hinduism, similar to that of Protestantism upon Catholicism. Douglas Ober suggests that this Hinduisation of the Buddha was “nothing less than a full-fledged assault on the idea that Buddhism is different from Hinduism.”⁷³ Given Gandhi’s towering presence during the anti-colonial freedom struggle, these words, Ober suggests were given greater potency. Once again, it is evident that Modi’s own message of a Hindu Buddhism finds an intellectual genesis in the Gandhian narrative. In a similar vein as well, a decontextualised interpretation, devoid of the critiques of caste is a common vantage point.

Additionally, even the former President of India, the philosopher Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, is someone whose perspective can be said to be similar to the line of argument developed by Gandhi, and Modi today. According to Douglas Ober, Radhakrishnan’s interpretation of Buddhism was “encoded by a Vedantic philosophy were seen as only mildly different from Hindu thought.”⁷⁴ In fact, Radhakrishnan even argued that Buddha “did not feel that he was announcing a new religion,”⁷⁵ and that he was “born, grew up and died a Hindu.”⁷⁶ This is a similar line of argument made by Savarkar, when questioning the validity of Ambedkar’s departure from Hinduism via conversion to Buddhism, which will be discussed towards the end of this section.

In post-independence India, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, founder of

the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), was also navigating a cautious line in the linkages between Hinduism and Buddhism. Prior to the BJS, Mukherjee had also served as President of the All-India Hindu Mahasabha in 1944. While his major disagreement with Prime Minister Nehru was over the granting of special status through Article 370 of the Constitution to Jammu and Kashmir, both men seemed to see eye-to-eye on the “latent potency of Buddhist symbols and ideas.”⁷⁷ It is therefore intriguing to note, that in spite of his pro-Hindu leanings, Mukherjee also served as President of the Mahabodhi Society from 1942 to 1953, and according to the tributes paid to him by the society, he “proved to be the most energetic, resourceful and hardworking President that the society ever had.” As President of the society, particularly during the first few years of independence, he performed an important function for Nehru’s Buddhist outreach program, travelling to Cambodia, Myanmar and Sri Lanka to deliver Buddhist relics on behalf of the society and government.⁷⁸ In a similar vein therefore, Modi channels Mukherjee, in drawing careful lines between domestic rhetoric (Mukherjee withdrew from the government over Article 370), and international outreach in order to project India as the centrepiece of Buddhist civilization.

Ram Swarup and Sita Ram Goel, also provide an important dimension to the absorption of Buddhism within the larger Hindu fold. Their importance in the wider Hindutva ideological framework is underlined by their co-found-

ing Voice of India, an influential publishing house in New Delhi in 1981. It catered to the propagation and production of beliefs more in-line with the ideology of the Sangh Parivar, as it provided a “full blooded Hindu ideology of its own and process all events, movements, parties and public figures in terms of that ideology, rather than live on borrowed slogans or hand to mouth ideas invoked on the spur of the moment.”⁷⁹ In matters pertaining to their own ideology, Buddhism is not seen in an independent light, and according to Swarup, it is as “Hindu in its origin and development and forms an intimate part of Hindu consciousness.”⁸⁰ In fact, he even refers to Buddha as a “Hindu.” He sheds any pretence of it being a separate faith by declaring it is “Hindu in origin and development, in its art, and architecture, iconography, language, beliefs, psychology, names, nomenclature, religious vows and spiritual discipline.”⁸¹ Swarup’s colleague, Goel, reaffirms this perspective and proceeds to embrace Buddhism within a wider Hindu fold, remarking “[The] term Hinduism is used to cover all schools of Sanatana Dharma—Buddhism, Jainism, Shaivism, Sikhism. Treating these segments of a single spiritual vision as separate religions is not only misleading, but mischievous.”⁸²

Finally, how do Hindu nationalist ideologues view the act of conversion itself? It is well known that the Dalit reformer, lawyer and freedom fighter, Dr Bhim Rao Ramji Ambedkar, famously converted to Buddhism in 1956, after enduring years of caste-based discrimination. Ambedkar par-

ticipated in a mass conversion program to Buddhism along with 600,000 supporters in Nagpur. At this ceremony, he made twenty-two vows subsequently recited by him and his followers. One of these was the rejection of Hindu gods and goddesses —“I shall have no faith in ‘Gauri,’ Ganapati and other gods and goddesses of Hindus nor shall I worship them.”⁸³ Another made clear his religious affiliation, “I renounce Hinduism which is harmful for humanity and impedes the advancement and development of humanity because it is based on inequality and adopt Buddhism as my religion.”⁸⁴

The answer lies in Savarkar’s reaction to Ambedkar’s conversion, and the need to adapt from his quite rigid views on Buddhism and Buddhists. Savarkar’s conception of belonging to (his) nation, was based on blood and territory: “a Hindu is someone who looks upon the land that extends from Sindu to Sindu—from the Indus to the Seas—as the land of his forefathers, his Fatherland (*Pitribhu*), who inherits the blood of that race whose first discernible source could be traced to the Vedic Saptasindhus”... and “addresses this land, this Sindhusthan as his Holyland (*Punyabhu*), as the land of his prophets and seers, of his godmen and gurus, the land of piety and pilgrimage.”⁸⁵ Indeed, according to Savarkar’s own interpretation, while it is logical that Muslims and Christians are excluded from citizenship, Buddhists are parts and parcels of this nation because they are the descendants of the same Vedic fathers as the Hindus.

Thus, according to Savarkar, the act of conversion itself, does not mark Ambedkar's departure from Hinduism, as "till Ambedkar is an Indian Buddhist, and his homeland and holy land is inevitably Asindhusindhu (India), so he will inevitably be included in the border area of Hinduism. As long as Ambedkar is a Buddhist, it is not possible for him to transgress that boundary. That is why when Ambedkar's death comes, he is a Baudh, that is why he will have to die as a Hindu."⁸⁶

Conclusion

Almost 60 years later, in 2022, a repeat of Ambedkar's ceremony took place in the Indian capital, New Delhi. This time, a legislator from the state government, led by the Aam Aadmi Party, Rajendra Pal Gautam, along with the Buddhist Society of India, and 10,000 others, converted to Buddhism and pledged to "work to make India free from casteism and untouchability."⁸⁷ Gautam was condemned as "anti-Hindu,"⁸⁸ forced to resign from the government, and subsequently questioned by the Delhi police for his presence at the event, where Hindu deities were allegedly denounced. Gautam, in fact, repeated some of Ambedkar's twenty-two vows, "I will have no faith in Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh, nor will I worship them as God. I will have no faith in Rama or Krishna, nor will I worship them. I will have no faith in Gauri, Ganapati and other Hindu Gods, nor will I worship them."⁸⁹

Thus, what has been found is that India today treads a fine line in

its attitude to Buddhism, at least from the ideological frame of mind, which is the backbone of the ruling party, the BJP. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a hardcore follower of Hindutva, treads a delicate balance on the international stage, in the need to showcase India's soft power status in the world. His advocacy for Buddhist diplomacy, has led to India looking East in its foreign policy outreach, and cementing alliances with countries in the region, posing a challenge to China. The rewards for this are a recognition of its place as a centre for Buddhist culture and pilgrimage, and the influx of tourists to visit the Buddhist corridor.

However, as seen in the action against Rajendra Pal Gautam, public displays of the Buddhist faith (at least by those who are ideologically opposed to Modi and his supporters) are not to be tolerated. The Hindu Right's troublesome relationship with Buddhism needs to be shunned in favour of a more ethics and values driven Buddha, who can be aligned with Hinduism. Indeed, this decontextualised representation of Buddhism in India today is symbolic of a larger Hindu nationalist outreach, that attempts at realising a majoritarian state. To what extent can the outlook of celebrated icons of the Hindu Right, such as Savarkar and Golwalkar, and indeed, Vivekananda towards Buddhism be divorced from the official government positions remains to be seen. But for the time being, it is safe to say, that in matters of public diplomacy and international outreach, Modi is firmly in Buddha's camp.

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