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Tourism and Modi's Foreign Policy in Amrit Kaal: Soft Power, Peace and Prosperity

Abstract

This paper discusses the integration of tourism within the foreign policy framework under Modi's administration. This integration aims to boost tourism for economic growth and leverage tourism as a soft power resource in service of foreign policy goals, including friendly neighbourly relations, regional cooperation, trade, tourism, security, and peace in the region. Given that India's cultural, spiritual and civilization heritage is shareable with countries in South, Southeast and East Asia, it gives a unique opportunity to India to leverage these in terms of tourist sites and destinations for foreign exchange earnings, friendly bilateral relations, and also to project itself as normative power based on its claim that India stands for the values of peace, plurality, non-violence, universal brotherhood inherent in the spiritual, cultural, civilizational heritage of Buddhism, Jainism and the Vedas. This study shows that tourism-linked economic objectives and foreign policy goals remain substantially unrealized. More resources are needed for soft power projection, investment in infrastructure, and improved coordination among public diplomacy agencies to achieve the objectives.

Keywords: soft power, cultural diplomacy, Buddhist-Ramayan circuit, foreign tourists, peace and prosperity

1. Introduction

In the domain of public policy, tourism is a 'relatively young phenomenon which involves the development of a singular important economic sector' (Velasco, 2016). Its huge potential to contribute to economic growth, infrastructure development, foreign exchange earnings, employment generation, and poverty alleviation is well recognized. Even as it contributes immensely to the economy, it has grown quite significantly. As Louis D' Amore (2010) opines, 'tourism has established itself as one of the world's largest and fastest growing industries...' 'The number of tourists all over the world has increased manifold from 2.5 crore in 1950 to 123 crore in 2016' (Narayanamurthy, 2018). According to the global tourism industry statistics on Statista.com, the number of international tourist arrivals worldwide in 2023 was 1.3 billion (Statista, 2024). While tourism drives economic growth, it is also 'a key cultural factor', a 'fertile mechanism to make different cultures come together', for 'fostering communication' and 'allowing people to understand the richness of our diversity' (Velasco, 2016). It is recognized for 'revolutionizing our understanding of ourselves, others, and the world' (D'Amore, 2010). By fostering intercultural understanding, it can contribute to peace when propitious conditions are available. The 'peace-through-tourism' movement also posits 'that contact through travel leads to the normalization of relations between people and the improvement of perceptions is promoted'. However, the evidence is not so straightforward (Farmaki, 2017). It can facilitate national integration in a multicultural society by enabling people to discover and appreciate the cultural and historical-sociological diversity within their own culture. In the tourism-peace discourse, the Modi administration is attempting something unique. By highlighting several tourist destinations associated with India's rich ancient, Buddhist, and Vedic spiritual traditions, Modi is projecting India as a 'normative power' in international affairs (Hall, 2015).

Viewing tourism as both an economic and cultural factor, this paper examines the interplay between tourism policy and foreign policy in India under the Modi administration. Based on a critical appreciation of literature

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on foreign policy and tourism in India, this paper posits that [a] even as Modi's administration recognizes tourism's potential to drive India's economic development towards *Viksit Bharat* during *Amrit kaal*, and to that end, the Modi government has taken several steps, [b] it is also leveraging tourism as an element of India's soft power in its cultural diplomacy for securing foreign policy goals of peace, and prosperity. Sites and destinations associated with Buddhism and Hinduism are critical to India's soft power projection as a normative power. This paper has seven sections. Section one is the introduction. Section 2 discusses the institutional development of the tourism sector in India. Section three discusses the promotion of international tourism through *the Incredible India* campaign, which began in 2002. Section four examines the unique interplay between foreign and tourism policies under Modi's administration. Section five highlights the initiatives of the Modi government aimed at projecting India's soft power through tourism. Section six examines the impact of integrating foreign and tourism policies on achievements in international tourism, specifically in terms of foreign tourist arrivals (FTA) and the foreign policy goals of peace and prosperity. Section 7 concludes with some final observations.

2. Institutional evolution of the tourism sector in India

The earliest effort to promote tourism in India dates to 1948 when a Tourist Traffic Committee was established to suggest steps for promoting tourism. In 1958, a separate Department of Tourism was opened in the Ministry of Transport and Communications. Around the same time, the Tourism Development Council was established as an advisory body, with the minister-in-charge of tourism serving as its chair (Seth, 2006). The next big step was the establishment of 'The Indian Tourism Development Corporation' (ITDC) in 1966, considered 'the first public milestone in the history of tourism' (Baken & Bhagavatula 2010). ITDC was a federal organization established to develop tourist infrastructure and services. At the state level, similar corporations were established, albeit with considerable delay, limited budgets, and restricted operational scales (Baken & Bhagavatula 2010).

Indira Gandhi's government created the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation in 1968. Air India officers promoted tourism. India's first Tourism policy came in 1982, in the backdrop of the Asian Games in Delhi. It laid 'an action plan based on the development of tourism circuits' (Singh, 2001). In the 1980s, tourism was recognized as a significant export industry. In 1987, the Tourism Finance Corporation was established to encourage private investors and entrepreneurs. In 1997, the Department of Tourism published a 'National Tourism Action Plan'. It identified a few areas for 'integrated tourism development' along tourism circuits and aimed at overall growth of the tourism sector through better marketing, infrastructure building and human resources development. However, 'Funding by no means matched the challenging quantitative targets' (Baken & Bhagavatula 2010).

In 2002, a new tourism policy was announced. It made tourism a joint concern of central and state governments. It projected tourism as an 'engine of growth' and a 'development tool that can generate high quality, mass employment and prosperity among vulnerable groups in backward areas'. For attracting foreign and domestic tourists, the policy underlined the need 'to diversify tourism products, substantially improve quality of tourism-infrastructure, marketing, visa arrangements and air travel'. Domestic tourism, linked with rural tourism, was targeted as the 'developmental tool', and international tourism was targeted to bring in a 'high-yielding variety' of tourists (Government of India, 2002).

International Cooperation Division of the Ministry of Tourism, the External Publicity Division and the 'Indian Council for Cultural Relations' of the Ministry of External Affairs became the key institutions for cultural diplomacy and international tourism. These setups maintain continuous contact with other countries and international organizations, such as UNWTO, ESCAP, BIMSTEC, MGC, and ASEAN, to promote tourism in India.

3. Promoting international tourism: Incredible India

The new tourism policy of 2002 was also an acknowledgement of the failure to capitalize on tourism's potential for economic growth. India had very few tourist products to offer: the Golden Triangle, Goa, Kerala, and the Himalayas (Times News Network, 2005). To drive a significant push for tourism in a focused, concerted, and centralized manner, the Government of India launched the 'Incredible India' campaign in 2002 as an international tourism initiative. The idea was to portray India as an attractive tourist destination by highlighting various aspects of India's culture, history, modern achievements, and remarkable diversity. It also promoted tourism for special interest groups, including adventure tourism, spiritual tourism, and the exploration of India's flora and fauna, as well as its beaches, among others. Within five years of its launch, India catapulted to fifth position on the list of most attractive global destinations, according to the Lonely Planet Pulse survey. In 2008, the Ministry of Tourism launched an adjunct program called *Atithidevo Bhava* to ensure that foreign tourists received good, satisfying hospitality.

Post the 2002 new tourism policy, the number of FTA began to increase. It was 2.38 million in 2002, increased to 5.28 million in 2008, then declined to 5.17 million in 2009 (Government of India, 2016). This drop was due to a global economic downturn in 2009. But very soon, there was a recovery in footfalls of foreign tourists. In 2010, 5.78 million foreign tourists arrived (Government of India, 2016). As these arrivals increased, foreign exchange earnings surged from Rs 14,195 crore in 2002 to Rs 53,700 crore in 2009 and Rs.64,889 crore in 2010 (Government of India, 2016).

In 2011, at the World Travel Mart in London, India won two awards – 'World's Leading Destination' and 'World's Leading Tourist Board, Incredible India' (Press Trust of India, 2011). In 2011, to attract international holidaymakers, the Ministry launched a major tourism campaign at ITB Berlin, the world's largest travel trade show (Press Trust of India, 2011), under the 'Incredible India' initiative.

The Modi government, in 2014, gave a further push to tourism. To attract foreign tourists, it introduced a new visa policy in November 2014, which allowed tourists and business visitors to obtain a 'visa on arrival' at 28 international airports. To avail of this facility, travelers had to acquire an Electronic Travel Authorization online before arrival. In 2015, the scheme was renamed 'e-Tourist Visa'. It is now available to tourists in about 180 countries. The new policy proved to be a significant boost to tourism. Tourist arrivals in October 2014, just before the new visa policy was implemented, was only 2705. These arrivals jumped to 56,477 in October 2015. From January to October 2015, 258,182 arrived on e-tourist Visa, whereas during the same period in 2014, the number was only 21,995 (Manju, 2015).

Besides the E-Visa facility, many more steps were taken to develop tourism. In the main, six such measures can be identified (ET Online, 2015): First, rural tourism sites were selected in many states for development. Second, a new scheme, *Swadesh Darshan*, was launched around specific themes: Ramayan Circuit, Desert Circuit, Eco Circuit, Wildlife Circuit, Buddhist Circuit, Jain Circuit, and Sufi Circuit. To develop these circuits, the government is developing and creating infrastructure. The infrastructural components being focused are – 'development/upgradation of passenger terminals, improvement of road connectivity leading to tourist sites, use of clean energy sources for street lighting, and wayside amenities with emergency vehicle breakdown, repair and refuel facilities, external infrastructure such as water supply, sewerage, drainage, electricity and roads, first-aid centers, helipads, helicopters, airstrips, ropeways; communication system, Mobile services, Internet connectivity, Wi-fi'.

Third, under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, a campaign has been launched to protect and preserve the sanctity of monuments. In the campaign, the Prime Minister appeals to people to keep their surroundings clean and their Smarak Swachh. Fourth, the state governments are being provided with central assistance for developing places of religious importance under two schemes: [1] PRASAD: Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive, and [2] Swadesh Darshan: Integrated Development of theme-based Tourist Circuits.

Under PRASAD, 12 cities have been identified for development: Amritsar, Ajmer, Dwarka, Mathura, Varanasi, Gaya, Puri, Amaravati, Kanchipuram, Vellankanni, Kedarnath, and Guwahati. Fifth, to guide tourists, the government has launched a mobile application- 'Incredible India Helpline'. Sixth, the government has adopted a code of conduct for safe tourism concerning fundamental rights such as dignity, safety, and freedom from exploitation of tourists and residents. Safety guidelines include a) 'pre-travel precautions; b) travel information on calamities/situations by the State Government; c) locating tourists in times of emergency; d) government communication and inter-agency coordination; e) regulations of service providers- transport, services, accommodation sector; f) regulating leisure and recreational services including adventure sports'.

India launched 'Incredible India 2.0' in 2017 on 27 September- on the "world tourism day". This campaign promotes domestic tourism in a big way. After all, India has 'amazing diversity ranging from 38 UNESCO World Heritage sites to the Himalayas, to pristine beaches and plenty of other natural assets' (Kant, 2020). Furthermore, its focus is on market-specific promotional plans and content creation rather than generic promotions worldwide, as Incredible India 1.0 did. It is building its digital presence on mass-reach portals, social media and television. The ministry has accounts on all major social media platforms, including Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. Under the 'Adopt A Heritage' Project, tourist amenities are being developed at the heritage sites by involving both the public and private sector companies.

The Modi administration announced a New Tourism Policy in 2022 as part of its vision for a New India. It claims to provide a holistic framework for sustainable and responsible growth of the tourism sector. The primary objectives are to make 'India a year-round destination' and increase visitors, 'create jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities in the tourism sector', draw in the private sector and make the tourism sector competitive, preserve and enhance India's natural and cultural resources, and ensure that tourism industry develops in a sustainable, ethical and inclusive manner (Government of India, 2022). The guiding principles of tourism policy are [1] the promotion of sustainable, responsible and inclusive tourism, [2] green tourism, [3] the promotion of digitalization, innovation and technology in the tourism sector, [4] the 'whole of government approach, [5] private sector-led growth, [6] Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat, and [7] destination -centric and tourist-centric approach (ibid).

The tourism policy has five missions: (a) fostering green tourism, (b) digital tourism, (c) developing tourism and hospitality sector skills, (d) establishing destination management organizations, and (e) focusing development of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) for catering to tourism sector (ibid).

Modi government is now pushing the development of tourism in a mission mode. It encourages multilevel and multilateral engagement between the public and private sectors to develop destinations, services, amenities, infrastructure, and tourism products in a green and sustainable manner. He is linking it with the age-old practice of *yatras* for promoting domestic tourism, especially spiritual and religious tourism. At the same time this big push to 'spiritual and religious tourism' is meant to portray India as a civilizational state and normative power on the world stage.

4. Modi's foreign policy and tourism

For the Modi administration, tourism is not only an important economic development tool but also a part of India's soft power resources to be leveraged 'in service of larger strategic goals' (Mazumdar, 2018). 'Soft power' refers to the ability to influence others to get the results one wants through 'attraction' rather than 'coercion' or 'payment' (Nye, 1990). Nye identifies three generic sources of a state's soft power- culture, political values, and foreign policies.

India has many soft power sources, particularly in civilizational heritage, natural beauty, and spiritual traditions. Tharoor, drawing on Nye's idea that in foreign policy, the 'side with a better story to tell often wins',

has argued that India's stories are more persuasive and attractive than its rivals' stories. Hence, India's soft power may help produce the desired outcomes (Tharoor, 2008).

Since Nye's conceptual contribution, the concept of 'soft power' has seen refinement. Soft power is not limited to cultural and civilizational heritage and its values but also encompasses perceptions about how nation-states conduct themselves and address moral issues. Nye's 'soft power' presumed a binary of hard and soft power. In the real world, the two go together. Moral realism enables the transcendence of the hard power-soft power binary, as it posits that a realist foreign policy grounded in hard power can also incorporate political values and moral concerns. In other words, in *realpolitik*, the 'moral realism' approach enables a country's foreign policy to adopt a more morally acceptable approach. If a State is perceived to act morally, its acceptability and legitimacy on the international stage are enhanced. To that extent, it encounters less resistance from others where there are apprehensions about the possibility of using hard power for domination. In cases where no conflict of national interests is involved, it can elicit a willingness to collaborate. In this contextual reasoning, Illan Manor explains 'soft power' as 'the ability to manage the normative associations that a state evokes so that a state is seen as a desirable partner for creating temporary or permanent alliances' (Viswanathan, 2019).

Modi administration's foreign policy projects India as a normative power on the international stage. India has long aspired to be a normative power in international affairs—an aspiration that dates back to the Nehruvian period. Over time, India's influence as a normative power declined. When the Cold War ended, India was more of a 'norm taker' than a 'norm maker, adjusting to the new liberal economic order and American hegemony (Mohan, 2003).

Yet, the aspiration to be a normative power remained (Hall, 2015). Manmohan Singh wanted India to play that role by extolling India's distinctive democratic -development model (Baru, 2013). India, advocating for democracy, human rights, and inclusive development, is another image of India as a normative power (Tharoor, 2013). In that same spirit, Modi wants India to be the *Vishwaguru*, with a clear vision of how international affairs ought to be organised, rather than merely a power that accepts the system as it is. (Mohan, 2015, p. 198). There is a noticeable burst in soft power diplomacy under Modi.

Modi's projection of India as a normative power and its agenda, however, differ somewhat from those of his predecessors. Modi's normative agenda is rooted in ancient Hindu-Indian knowledge and spiritual traditions, as well as the wisdom of the Vedas and Buddhist-Jain philosophical and spiritual traditions. Nehru, who was the most normatively oriented among India's Prime Ministers, on the other hand, relied mainly on Gandhian concepts and a liberal and radical amalgam of socialist ideas. In presenting India as a normative power, the Modi administration is underlining the imperative goals of conflict avoidance, peace, full coexistence, universal brotherhood (*Vasudev Kutumbakam*), and a non-violent world order.

The soft power diplomacy and projection of India as a normative power are linked to the larger goals of foreign policy and considerations of *realpolitik*. It aims to mitigate the adverse effects of India's emergence as a significant global power. India's rapid economic growth over the last few decades has enabled it to transform its military prowess significantly. India is the largest importer of arms. With considerable hard power capabilities, India has emerged as one of the major powers. It seeks to reclaim the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), re-establish its prominence in South Asia, and maintain the region's freedom from the influence of outside powers. Here, it must contend with China, which also seeks its influence in Asia. This brings India and China into a competitive relationship. Historically, India and China have not had harmonious relations. India's relations with many of its neighbours have not been without vexation, and therefore, it seeks to mitigate regional discord so that its neighbours do not gravitate towards China.

In light of the above, India's rise in hard power (economic and military) necessitates reassuring states, especially in the neighbourhood, that it does not intend to influence either their domestic affairs or their bilateral

relations with one another. Otherwise, India's rise could 'push' the neighbours to pursue a close relationship with major powers (China and the USA) outside the subcontinent to balance India's power in South Asia. Preventing neighbours from drifting towards China and keeping the region free from outsiders' influence are significant challenges that the Modi administration is facing.

For India's foreign policy, the soft power challenge is to narrate a story that the recently acquired significant hard power resources and capacities are meant for protecting and promoting national interests peacefully and for defensive purposes only and that India, rooted as it is in its cultural and civilizational values, is committed to this approach. The Indian worldview eschews aggression and wanton imperialist violence against any other country. In other words, as Tandon would put it, such a narrative must convey that 'India's rise is intended to be peaceful, non-threatening, and entirely benevolent' and, thus, protect India against 'potential threat emanating from India's growing hard power' (Tandon, 2016).

Cultural diplomacy, which encompasses tourism diplomacy, is expected to play a crucial role in alleviating such concerns among Asian states. Although the tourism industry in India offers a wide range of products and destinations, one type of destination—linked to cultural and civilizational heritage—has received particular attention in Modi's foreign policy, as it helps India project itself as a normative power. It is believed that although such a soft power exercise may take time, it could be conducive to the conduct of diplomacy, building bilateral relations and also healing the ruptures created by history and politics since some of India's neighbours continue to be apprehensive of cultural connectivity across states and frontiers (Mukherjee, 2019).

5. Tourism and soft power projections under Modi

Pithily put, the soft power exercise aims to secure *Samman* (dignity), *Samvaad* (dialogue), *Samriddhi* (shared prosperity), *Suraksha* (regional and global security), and *Sanskriti* and *Sabhyata* (cultural and civilizational links) (Mukherjee, 2019). The orientation of soft power projection is, however, very different from the pre-Modi era, which, according to Malone, was perceived as 'gauche', 'laden with ideas of cultural superiority that put forward the notion that some Southeast Asian countries were India's 'cultural colonies' (Malone, 2011). Modi's cultural diplomacy and soft power projection are far more sophisticated, careful and nuanced. It is for shared prosperity, dignity, dialogue, security, and cultural and civilizational linkages. Cultural imperialism as a goal of India's soft power is, thus, ruled out.

Sophistication in soft power diplomacy was evident from the very start of the Modi regime, when India invited, for the first time, all the heads of government and states of neighbouring countries and ASEAN to the oath-taking ceremony of the Modi government in 2014.

Another significant soft power initiative by Modi was to get the UN General Assembly to recognise 21 June as International Yoga Day. Here, Modi was seeking the world's recognition for India's spirituality and its global presence. In the past, yoga was a big draw for tourists in India.

The promotion of 'religious tourism' has been another of the Modi administration's soft power projection exercises. The Modi administration, in particular, highlighted Buddhism - its origins in India and its spread to East and Southeast Asia. Modi has consistently highlighted India's ancient cultural civilization and spiritual links with these countries, particularly the values that Buddhism embodies. Buddhism has been at the heart of India's recent diplomatic engagements with Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, China, Mongolia and south-east Asian countries. India's Buddhist heritage has been instrumental in helping the country connect with ASEAN, even though India is not a part of the Asia-Pacific region in a geopolitical sense. During the ASEAN-India summit in Myanmar in November 2014, Modi discussed the possibility of offering tours of important Buddhist sites in ASEAN countries (Haider, 2015). In its relations with Vietnam, Buddhism has

facilitated the two countries' coming together. Given Vietnam's ongoing dispute with China over the South China Sea, Modi's outreach to Vietnam through his visit there and his offer of a scholarship for Buddhist studies was 'eagerly responded ...in an attempt to balance China' (Mazumdar, 2018).

Ministry of Tourism has curated a 'Buddhist Circuit' for foreign Buddhist tourists. Every point in the Buddhist circuit has a history steeped in myth and meaning. It is designed to offer the tourists, as Mukherjee describes, 'a journey for internal peace, passing through austere Stupas and ancient monasteries reverberating with the mystical chants of sacred Buddhist mantras' (Mukherjee, 2019).

Modi's Buddhist diplomacy is also interpreted as steps to 'strengthen India's case for leadership of Buddhist Asia' (Mazumdar, 2018). The purpose, in addition to promoting tourism, is to counter China's soft power Buddhist diplomacy in Asia (Chauhan, 2015). Under its Buddhist diplomacy, China has supported Lumbini site development in Nepal, helped build a Lotus-shaped telecommunication center in Colombo, Sri Lanka, sent Buddhist relics to Myanmar Theravada Buddhist Pagoda, and has been encouraging with financial resources, all kinds of initiatives such as conferences, constructions and development of religious sites, exhibition of sacred relics related to Buddhism.

Modi's administration, so far, has been careful not to overstep on China's Buddhist toes. Still, it is assiduously pursuing Buddhist cultural diplomacy to neutralize China's soft power advantage in Asia, particularly in India's neighborhood. China, which has the world's largest Buddhist population, is undergoing a Buddhist renaissance under President Xi Jinping. India, on the other hand, has a minuscule Buddhist population, but it is home to three of the four most sacred Buddhist pilgrimage destinations. Modi has seized every opportunity to emphasize India's claim over Buddhist heritage.

India's Buddhist diplomacy is, in fact, an exercise in promoting peace, avoiding conflict, and fostering economic growth and prosperity. India's call is that Asia must follow the Buddha's message of peace and non-violence. On the eve of President Xi Jinping's arrival in India in 2014, Modi underlined Buddhism as a standard connection between them and again, when Modi visited China in May 2015, he reminded Buddhism' shared heritage. He said, 'Our relationship has been complex in recent decades. But, we have a historic responsibility to turn this relationship into a source of strength for each other and a force of good for the world' (Chauhan, 2015). The idea is that if Asia, led by India and China, is at peace with one another, it could become an inspiration and guiding spirit for world peace. Thus, India is invoking Buddhism to promote peace and conflict -avoidance (Press Information Bureau, 2015).

Besides Buddhism, the Indian Vedic spiritual heritage is invoked to project India as a *Vishwaguru* —a normative power. In the 'religious circuit', India is offering the 'Ramayan Circuit', which was started in 2018. Modi and Nepal's Prime Minister KP Oli co-inaugurated a direct bus service between Janakpur (Nepal) and Ayodhya. Under the Swadesh Darshan Scheme, fifteen destinations are being developed as part of the Ramayan Circuit. It is expected to be an excellent draw for the Hindu diaspora.

The Indian diaspora, being the ambassadors of Indic culture, are also crucially important as India's soft power carrier in their host countries. In many countries, the successful Indian diaspora has become influencers in their host countries and can, thus, advance some of India's foreign policy goals. Hence, they must remain connected to India's cultural heritage. Connecting them to their roots and 'paramara' through tourism is a readymade task cut for cultural and tourism diplomacy.

India also shares civilizational-cultural continuity with Pakistan and Bangladesh- two countries with a Muslim majority. There are religious shrines of great regard on either side of the border, and there is unmistakable continuity and overlap in cuisine, language, literature, music, and sports. People-to-people have remained in continuous interaction, and religious tourism centered around Islam and Sikhism has continued even in times when relations between India and Pakistan had been very strained.

6. Outcomes of braiding tourism and foreign policies

As a result of the steps taken during Modi's administration, foreign tourist arrivals (FTA) have grown. It increased from 6.79 million in 2013 to 10.93 million in 2019 but then declined due to the pandemic, reaching 2.74 million in 2020 and 1.52 million in 2021. Since then, it has picked up again, reaching 6.44 million in 2022 and 7.4 million in 2023 (Government of India, 2023); however, it is still far short of the estimated 13 million arrivals for that year (Government of India, 2022). These figures are for tourists arriving from all parts of the world. When the sources of FTA are examined, it is found that among the top ten source countries, during 2022, there were five Asian countries -Bangladesh (20.29%), Sri Lanka (2.87%), Nepal (2.19%), Singapore (1.87%) and Malaysia (1.88%), totaling to around 30% of the FTAs (Government of India, 2023). This means that there were far more FTAs from outside the Buddhist diplomacy's soft power focus zone, specifically South Asia, ASEAN, and the Far East. This suggests that India's benefits from its Buddhist heritage are still to be fully realised, even though 'three of the four main Buddhist pilgrimage sites are in India' (Chauhan, 2015).

One important reason for this 'failure' is the inadequate facilities for tourists, such as basic infrastructure, including roads, hotels, and international airports, which do not meet world standard (Chauhan, 2015). Even the academic institutions for Buddhist studies that India promised to develop, such as Nalanda University in Bihar and a Buddhist University in Madhya Pradesh, have not materialised as expected (Chauhan, 2015). Destination development has shown slight improvement since 2015. The development of the tourism sector, with a focus on destination development, tourist-friendly stays, travel, and services, along with requisite security and infrastructure, has become crucial. At the same time, the Standing Committee on External Affairs, in its report of December 2022 on 'India's Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy: Prospects and Limitations' has pointed out the 'need to increase tourism offices abroad', and 'adoption of a country-specific approach for tourism promotion' (PRS Legislative, 2022). The committee notes that 'tourism is a key indicator of a country's soft power capital'.

Assessing the efficacy of soft power exercise in foreign policy is, however, not easy as no objective yardstick can be found to make such an assessment. Nonetheless, through contextual analysis and issue-based relationship analysis, one can gain a broad sense of the general drift of the relationship. Given that India -China relationship is passing through a rough patch, and India's relationship with Nepal, Sri Lanka, and even Bangladesh has seen frequent ups and downs, and with Pakistan, the hostility has never abated, one can make a broad observation that Modi's use of soft power per se has had a limited effect so far in terms of nurturing stronger relations with these countries. As Heng observes: 'India is still having difficulties changing its neighbour's behaviour by using soft power. Neighbouring countries with weak democracies and frequent political transitions continue to be threatened by India's strong and stable democracy' (Heng, 2016). This could indicate limitations of India's soft power capabilities. From above it follows that India needs to develop its soft power projection more effectively. The Standing Committee on External Affairs has commented extensively in its December 2022 report, 'India's Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy: Prospects and Limitations'. The report states that more resources are needed for soft power projection (PRS Legislative, 2022). Compared with the US, European countries, and even China, 'where financing the soft power activities is quite high, 'India is still in the early stages of developing its soft power toolbox' (Narang, 2023). It also alludes to three other limitations on India's soft power: (a) 'lack of coordination among various institutions', (b) 'shortage of skilled manpower, and' (c) 'lack of clarity on the mandate of Indian Council for Cultural Relations' (PRS Legislative, 2022).

7. Concluding observations

The tourism sector in India suffered from policy inattention until the "Incredible India" campaign started in 2002 to attract foreign tourists. Since then, the development of the tourism sector as an 'economic tool'

picked up momentum, more so under the Modi administration. He also played a key role in India's foreign policy, utilizing it as a strategic soft power resource

While significant efforts were made to ease the rules for FTA, and policies were sharpened for developing and branding tourist destinations, the targets for FTA could not be reached. FTAs from the regions that were particularly the focus of Buddhist diplomacy have been relatively poor, indicating that the potential of the Buddhist circuit remains significantly unrealized. Success requires more resources for soft power projections and better coordination among institutional actors involved in public and cultural diplomacy. The standing committee had as much to say on the above point. At the same time, Modi's attempt to project India as a normative power, and for that purpose, his thrust on religious diplomacy and religious tourism, is certainly novel and marks a departure from the earlier Congress foreign policy. However, so far, it has had limited efficacy in promoting tourism to these destinations and improving bilateral relations in and of itself. India's relationship with its immediate neighbors -Pakistan and China remains frayed. Nonetheless, cultural and tourism diplomacy keeps the hope of promoting regional cooperation and relationship building. The formation of the European Union (EU) is an example of the triumph of soft power to settle centuries of dispute and conflict in Europe.

Modi's policy of using tourism to project India as a normative power that privileges peace, non-violence, universal brotherhood, and conflict-avoidance through *samvaad* (dialogue) is of immense relevance, for it makes India reiterate, more often than any other leading power in the world, the imperatives for peace and through that peace, prosperity for all. To be sure, there is an awareness in the Modi administration that India's soft power and its claims to being a normative power may not be able to directly persuade foreign actors to support India's positions on various issues, but in the long run or/ and favourable geopolitical situation, it will help India achieve its foreign-policy goals.

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