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Cultural Diplomacy Through Buddhist Approach: Strengthening India-Taiwan Ties

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Abstract:

In today's context, cultural diplomacy emerged as a strategy to reinforce international relations by promoting mutual understanding, respect and collaboration. This approach, recognized as a type of soft power has become significant in case of India and Taiwan, where common Buddhist customs form the basis for stronger bilateral connections. Through the encouragement of Buddhist cultural interactions, both countries seek to transcend boundaries and address modern challenges by drawing on the compassionate, wise and morally upright aspects embedded in Buddhist doctrines. Efforts like academic partnerships, cultural events and diplomatic meetings highlight the capacity of Buddhism as a powerful tool for enhancing international relations, resolving conflicts, to overcome cultural barriers, establishing a stage for harmonious cohabitation and joint advancement. This method not only reinforces diplomatic ties but also fosters global peace and stability by highlighting shared values and a collective human experience. This paper will emphasize that leveraging cultural diplomacy particularly through the lens of Buddhism as a means to bridge differences, build trust and work towards common goals.

Keywords: - Cultural Diplomacy, Soft power, Buddhism, Bilateral, Harmonious

POWER

Power is a contested yet central concept in global politics. Joseph Nye defines it as the ability to achieve desired outcomes. While resources like population, economy, military strength and culture contribute to power, effectively using them is key. Traditionally, power is divided into hard power (coercion) and soft power (persuasion). Realists emphasize hard power, whereas liberals highlight soft power. It was coined by

Joseph Nye in *Bound to Lead*, soft power draws on culture, values and diplomacy. Though more subtle, it requires time and skill to cultivate and apply effectively.

NEXUS: SOFT POWER, CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AND BUDDHIST APPROACH

In contemporary international relations, soft power has become indispensable. Highlighting the Wagner's focus, India is strengthening the six pillars of soft power as *Panchamrit*, reformulated by PM Narendra Modi after the General Elections of 2014. The five pillars are *samman* (dignity), *samvad* (dialogue), *samriddhi* (shared prosperity), *suraksha* (regional global security) and *sanskriti evam sabhayata* (cultural and civilizational links) this way it can have better bilateral relations through cultural exchanges, enhancing developmental cooperation and citizen- to-citizen interactions. India views Buddhism as a crucial factor in strengthening ties on the global stage. Concurrently, the application of Buddhist principles, which advocate for balance, compassion and ethical behaviour, presents a compelling framework for diplomatic interactions. To define diplomacy through the words of Chatterjee (2010) "diplomacy stands for the management of international relations which is primarily related to the settlement of dispute and differences which should be achieved by negotiations". Propagation of culture is nothing new. In earlier times, we called it "Cultural Diplomacy". The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) under the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) does pioneering work in not only disseminating our culture abroad but also encouraging exposure of other cultures in India to encourage a cultural dialogue. The integration of soft power and cultural diplomacy is interchangeably, linked with each other. Hence, Buddhist philosophy can potentially enhance the efficiency and ethicality of international relations through cultural diplomacy. Just as the Middle Way (*Mūlamadhyamakārikā*) in Buddhism advocates for balance of power and avoiding extremes. This philosophy can guide soft power in a way that is ethical and effective. Even the legitimacy and ethical use of power are crucial for its effectiveness. Consequently, Buddhism places a strong emphasis on ethical conduct (*sīla*) and compassion (*Karuna*) as means to direct the ethical application of both hard and soft power. The essence of Buddhism inherently encompasses the dependent origination (*Pratītyasamutpāda*), which teaches that all phenomena emerge based on various causes and conditions, thus promoting a comprehensive approach. This is particularly relevant in international relations, where the principle of Radical Interdependence underscores the recognition that the actions of one nation have repercussions on others. Hence, it emphasizes the necessity of cooperation, mutual support and mixed solution based on the right balance between hard and soft as crucial elements for global stability and prosperity.

I. FROM INDIA TO TAIWANESE BUDDHISM: TRANSNATIONAL LINKS

The Indian subcontinent stands as the birthplace of four major religions: Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism and Buddhism. Notably, Buddhism is highly revered across various Asian nations. This shared heritage links India with neighboring Asian countries like Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Cambodia, Japan, Thailand and China ultimately Taiwan is fostering spiritual connections among their people. Taiwan was largely influenced by Buddhism through its cultural and religious connections with China through the periods when Chinese

settlers migrated to the island. Buddhism spread from India to Taiwan through multiple historical routes and influences. Buddhism has a long history in Taiwan, primarily introduced through Chinese cultural and religious connections. Early Han Chinese migrants from Fujian and Guangdong, who arrived in Tainan around 400 years ago, transformed the island from an Austronesian hunter-gatherer society into a densely populated Chinese community. Towns like Lukang, one of Taiwan's oldest, bear testimony to this cultural evolution through the Ming and Qing dynasties, the Japanese colonial era, and post-WWII developments. The end of the Chinese Civil War saw a large influx of Chinese nationals, including monks and scholars, further enriching Taiwan's Buddhist landscape. This period marked the establishment of major temples and monastic institutions, fostering diverse traditions like Chan and Pure Land. Taiwanese religious life features a blend of Buddhism, Taoism and folk beliefs. While many deities are of Chinese origin, some are uniquely local. Folk deities include land gods, city gods and Wang Ye, who are venerated during rituals like Donggang's boat-burning festival. Mazu, the sea goddess born in 960 AD in Fujian, remains Taiwan's most popular deity. Guanyin, originally the Indian male Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, is worshipped as the compassionate Goddess of Mercy in Taiwan, especially in temples like Mengjia and Lugang's Longshan Temple. Humanistic Buddhism has played a transformative role in modern Taiwan. Prominent figures like Master Hsing Yun (Fo Guang Shan) and Master Cheng Yen (Tzu Chi Foundation) emphasize applying Buddhist teachings to social welfare and contemporary issues. These organizations have established vast networks of temples, universities (e.g., Tzu Chi University, Huaan University), hospitals and media platforms, both in Taiwan and abroad (e.g., Hsi Lai Temple in California, Nan Tien Temple in Australia). Contemporary Taiwanese Buddhism blends tradition with modernity, as seen in efforts like the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association (CBETA), which digitizes Buddhist scriptures and promotes digital outreach. Recognizing Taiwan's Buddhist prominence, the Government of India has been promoting Buddhist diplomacy through initiatives like the Buddhist Circuit. This form of cultural diplomacy strengthens India-Taiwan ties by encouraging peaceful dialogue, religious tourism, cooperation on environmental and development projects rooted in Buddhist ethics. By aligning shared cultural values and strategic interests, India and Taiwan can foster a meaningful and sustainable partnership that also contributes to regional peace and stability.

II. INDIA-TAIWAN: CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTAL TIES

The two governments maintain unofficial ties with one another that are not always visible. Despite of all odds, during the tenure of Indian Prime Minister Rao and Taiwan President Lee Teng Hui, India and Taiwan took the remarkable initiative of establishing unofficial relations. New Delhi established the India Taipei Association (ITA) in March 1995 in Taiwan to help the two sides coordinate more, in order to strength investment capabilities and the reason was trade, commerce and tourism. The organisational counterpart in India is the Taipei Economic and Cultural Centre (TECC) in New Delhi which was established in the same year. In addition there are now TECC offices in Chennai established in 2012, Kolkata and Mumbai. Though these offices function as de-facto embassies carrying out agreements and treaties on behalf of their respective governments offering consular and passport services and promote trade and business links, scientific exchanges and people to people interactions. Over the years bilateral engagement between Indo and Taiwan

has improved gradually. Diplomatic interactions, encompassing high-level visits and collaborative efforts on a multilateral level, have the potential to enhance mutual comprehension and global advocacy through dialogues. Hence, Taiwan exhibits a keen interest in engaging in trade activities with India.

III. AREAS OF COOPERATION

With the increasing support for Taiwan within India's civil society, the bilateral relations between the two countries have significantly deepened, laying the foundation for a more robust strategic partnership in the future.

a) ALIGNING STRATEGIES

In 2014, under PM Narendra Modi, India transitioned from the Look East Policy to the more proactive Act East Policy, placing greater emphasis on regional cooperation and connectivity in the Indo-Pacific region. In parallel, Taiwan launched its New Southbound Policy (NSP) on August 16, 2016, under President Tsai Ing-Wen, aimed at strengthening ties with Southeast Asia, South Asia, Australia and New Zealand. This policy has been instrumental in enhancing Taiwan's engagement with key partners particularly India. The Act East Policy and the New Southbound Policy present an open opportunity for deeper India-Taiwan cooperation. Taiwan, known for its expertise in software technology, semiconductors and sustainable innovation, seeks to expand trade and technological partnerships with India. Collaborative initiatives in artificial intelligence, semiconductor manufacturing and green technologies hold the potential for mutual economic gains. Taiwan's interest in strengthening economic relations aligns closely with India's Indo-Pacific strategy. Currently, over 55% of India's trade passes through the Indo-Pacific, much of it via the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait, underlining the strategic importance of this region to India's economic security. As Taiwan intensifies outreach under its New Southbound Policy and India broadens its engagement through the Act East framework, both countries are poised for stronger economic, technological and political ties. Enhanced cooperation not only offers bilateral benefits but also contributes to maintaining open and rules-based Indo-Pacific.

b) EDUCATION EXCHANGES

In 2004, Taiwan began offering Indian students the Taiwan Scholarship and National Huaya Enrichment Scholarship to study Mandarin. The Foundation for International Cooperation in Higher Education in Taiwan and the Association of Indian Universities signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in 2019, fostering cooperation in various fields. Initiatives like cultural and educational exchanges, encompassing student exchange programs and cultural celebrations, harbour the potential to establish profound interpersonal bonds. The Taiwan Education Centre (TEC) established its centre at O.P Jindal Global University in collaboration with National Tsing Hua University. There are many education centre of TEC at Amity University, SRM University Kattankulathur Campus and Jamai Millai Islamia, IIT Madras, Bombay and Indore as well. Recently, it's a matter a pride for Nava Nalanda Mahavihara (Deemed University), under Ministry of Culture signed an MOU with Taiwan Huien Tsang University on 25th June, 2024. The delegation from Taiwan Xuanzang University was led by Professor Shao Chan, President accompanied by Suman Tai, Director, Student Welfare Department and Tiang Chang Lia. According to

memorandum, the two universities will support each other in terms of academic exchanges and enrolment matters in the future. In order to deepen business ties both the countries have revived demand for learning Mandarin language and aspects of Taiwanese culture, quite common in Tamil Nadu's electronic cluster. As per the investment promotion officials, there are 26 Taiwanese companies in Tamil Nadu. Foxconn, Delta Electronic components, communication, Zheng Ding Technology and Pou Chen services are few Taiwanese majors in Tamil Nadu. This year, on 13th August, even IIT Guwahati partners with TECC to introduce Mandarin course, have becoming the 36th such Taiwan Education Centre in India's universities, marking a pivotal step in strengthening bilateral relations between India and Taiwan through education and cultural learning.

c) CULTURE

Cultural exchanges form the cornerstone of civilizational ties. Indian music, cuisine and traditional attire, alongside Taiwanese performing arts, reflect the growing cultural engagement between India and Taiwan. In 2023, Taiwan's Ming Hwa Yuan Arts and Cultural Group performed at the International Theatre Festival of Kerala, while Zen Yun Lin Ge Puppet Theatre participated in the 9th Indo-International Dance and Music Festival. Earlier, groups like Ten Drum Art Percussion (2013), U Theatre (2014), and the Taiwan Bamboo Orchestra (2015) also visited India. The Taiwan Film Festival, held in New Delhi in 2018 and 2022, further promoted Taiwanese culture, accompanied by a 25-member Youth Ambassadors delegation under Taiwan's International Youth Exchange Programme. These initiatives highlight the vital role of cinema and art in fostering cross-cultural ties and reflect India's growing commitment to strengthening relations with Taiwan.

d) TOURISM

Taiwan Tourist Bureau has been pushing Taiwan travel by conducting road shows in Delhi, Kolkata, Hyderabad, Pune and Kochi. Following the establishment of the Taiwan Tourism Information Centre in Mumbai on 7th February, 2024 was to invite Indian businesses for site inspection for MICE market expansion. Recently, Taiwan tourism hosted its first post- pandemic road show at Leh Meridien, New Delhi attracting over 110 travel agents and 12 media outlets. The purpose of this event was to aware and promote seamless travel between India and Taiwan with a focus on MICE and tourism. Additionally, to benefit the travellers, Taiwan is considering introducing a Visa-on- Arrival policy for Indian citizens (Deputy Foreign Minister Tien Chung- Kwang revealed this potential change).

e) ECONOMY

Taiwan has emerged as a global tech leader, producing over half of the world's semiconductors. Historically, significant economic growth occurred between 1952 and 1961, with Taiwan's expanding rapidly, setting the foundation for its modern industry. This makes it strategically important for India. In recent years, Taiwanese investment in India has grown, with major companies like TSMC and UMC expressing interest in setting up fabrication units. Tata has partnered with Taiwan's Powerchip Semiconductor Manufacturing Corporation (PSMC) to build a 28nm chip plant, according to Elara

Securities. Beyond technology, India and Taiwan are also expanding cooperation in traditional medicine. In 2021, India donated ₹1.5 million to Taiwan's National Research Institute of Chinese Medicine (NRICM). Both Ayurveda and Traditional Chinese Medicine share philosophical similarities rooted in nature's elements. On June 24, 2024, a MoU was signed to establish an Ayurveda Chair at NRICM to promote academic and research collaboration. Further, a Mutual Recognition Agreement (MRA) signed this year eases the export of Indian organic products to Taiwan by reducing certification hurdles. A migration and mobility agreement has also been signed to facilitate Indian employment in Taiwan. Both nations share a vision of a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific, paving the way for cooperation in areas like maritime security and sustainable development.

WAY FOREWARD: INDIA AND TAIWAN

By embracing a Buddhist approach, India and Taiwan can foster a deeper and more meaningful relationship that transcends political boundaries. It emphasizes the necessity of cooperation, mutual support and mixed solution based on the right balance between hard and soft as crucial elements for global stability and prosperity. India and Taiwan can much progress adapting strategies which is crucial for successful engagement by recognizing its democratic values and diverse society within nations. For example, India should also engage with Taiwanese NGOs as well, such as the Tzu Chi Foundation which is a Taiwanese International Humanitarian and Non-Governmental Organisation that focuses for charitable assistance and medical care. Volunteers of Tzhu Chi have been conducting home visits to contribute the well-being of the people Bodh Gaya since April, 2023. Recognizing, Taiwan as a socially and functionally integrated entity within the global community aligns within universal brotherhood and serves India's cultural, strategic and economic interest.

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