Buddhist Diplomacy

Mains: *GS1 - Salient features of Indian Society*

GS2 – International relations | India and its neighborhood- relations

Why in news?

In recent times, the real geopolitical frontier between India and China lies not in the oceans but in the Himalayas, where Buddhism has become a geopolitical chessboard.

Why Buddhism in Himalayas is strategically important?

Buddhism*, one of the major world religions, began in India around the sixth century, B.C.E. The teachings of Buddhism spread throughout Central and Southeast Asia, through China, Korea, and Japan. Today, there are Buddhists all over the world.*

- **Himalayan Buddhism** - The Himalayas and Buddhism are synonymous, for the Bud*dha himself was born in the foothills of the Himalayas.*
- Early Indian Buddhist Sutras probably arrived in the Himalayas when Buddhism was spreading into China and Central Asia in the 2nd century.
- **Geo-political importance** - In the Himalayas, where *territory is often inaccessible and infrastructure* scarce, **soft power is hard power**.
- Monasteries that once served as centres of meditation and monastic education now sit at the frontlines of national power games.
- **Sovereign power** – The reincarnation of lamas has become a matter not just of religion but also of sovereignty.
    - For instance, in regions such as Ladakh, Tawang, and even remote Bhutan, Buddhist culture is increasingly shaped not only by the sacred but also by strategy.
- **Indo-China power war** – Both India and China understand that influence over Himalayan Buddhism is influence over identity, and in borderlands where lines on a map are fuzzy, identity is everything.

How Chinese approach over Buddhism evolved?

- **Buddhism as Statecraft –** Chinese see the influence over the *Himalayan Buddhism as the skillful management of state affairs*.
- **Dominance over lamas** – Since the 1950s, Beijing has worked to dominate Tibetan religious life.

- It exiled or marginalized independent lamas, co-opted institutions, and crucially claimed the sole right to approve reincarnations.

> *In Tibetan Buddhism, a **lama** is a spiritual teacher who transmits the teachings of Buddhism to their students and guides them on the spiritual path.*

- **Political supremacy over spiritual legitimacy** - In 2007, the Chinese government formally asserted that *any "Living Buddha" must be sanctioned by the state.*
- They pose spiritual legitimacy flows from political authority.
- **Watchdog of lamas** - It *maintains a database* of officially recognised reincarnate lamas and monitors monastery activities across Tibet.
- **Diplomacy campaigns** – Sacred sites are being repurposed as instruments of soft power.
- Roads led to shrines were built with Beijing's help.
- **Regional developments** – In Nepal, it has invested heavily in Buddhist infrastructure, especially around Lumbini, the Buddha's birthplace.
- In Bhutan, it subtly courts monastic communities even as the kingdom maintains a tight control over religious affairs.

How India's Buddhist diplomacy evolved?

- **Revival of Buddhism** – Post independence, India made a special *effort to improve upon a situation* after Buddhism falling behind, often in a competition, performance, or a general sense of progress.
- **Relationship with Lama's** – *Hosting the Dalai Lama* and the *Tibetan exile government* since 1959 gave India a moral power.
- **Diplomatic tool –** India leverages Buddhism as a soft power tool *to strengthen cultural and diplomatic ties* with Asian countries sharing Buddhist heritage.
- **Spiritual homeland of Buddhism** – India through its initiatives like international conferences, heritage restoration, and Buddhist circuit tourism, promotes itself to foster goodwill and regional cooperation.
- Only in the last decade has New Delhi begun to engage seriously by promoting India's heritage as the Buddha's birthplace and funding regional pilgrimage circuits.
- **Challenges** – These efforts remain fragmented when compared to China's centralized vision.

What are challenges associated with Buddhist diplomacy?

- **Reincarnation issues** – The *current 14th lama* who turned 90 recently, has motioned that he wants to *reincarnate outside Chinese territory mostly in India.*
- **China's counter move** – Beijing, predictably, has vowed to appoint its own Dalai Lama, using the centuries-old ***"Golden Urn"*** method.

Golden Urn Method

• **Established by** – Qing dynasty in 1792
• **Purpose** – For selecting reincarnated Tibetan Buddhist leaders, particularly the Dalai and Panchen Lamas.
• It was intended to stan*dardize the selection procedure and reduce corruption,* while also consolidating the Qing dynasty's control over Tibetan affairs.
• **Method** – It is *kind of lottery system*, which involves placing slips of *paper with candidates' names into a golden urn* and drawing one to determine the rightful reincarnation.

- **Dual leaders** – One Dalai lama recognized by the Tibetan exile community and much of the global Buddhist diaspora, and one endorsed by Beijing and installed in Lhasa under heavy guard.
- **Divisive politics** - This division would force Buddhist communities across the Himalayan rim in Ladakh, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Nepal, and Bhutan to pick sides.
- **Reshaping of geopolitics** - If the spiritual figure (lama) sits in India, loyalty may deepen toward New Delhi.
- If seated in Lhasa, with Chinese backing and resources, the gravitational pull could shift east.
- **International boarder issues** - In Arunachal Pradesh, *China asserts its claim to Tawang*, birthplace of the 6th Dalai Lama not only through military posturing but also through spurious cultural logic.

What lies ahead?

- India can leverage the internal disagreements within Buddhism for building a cohesive strategy for India’s and regional benefits.
- India can further the relationship with all Buddhist dominated nations for devising a collective methodology of lama succession thereby maintain the peace in Tibet region.

Reference

The Hindu| Buddhist Diplomacy

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