

SACRED ENCLAVES IN THE AGRARIAN HINTERLAND: MYANMAR AND THAI BUDDHIST INTERVENTIONS IN RURAL NORTH INDIA

Ajit Kumar

*Research Scholar, Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi*

Abstract: The current transformation of the ancient Buddhist heritage site located within the rural regions of India—specifically Bodh Gayā, Sarnath, and Kuśīnagar—will be examined within the context of the international revitalization initiatives that were implemented within the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although these heritage sites are recognized as national monuments under the administration of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), the physical and cultural landscape of these areas are being redefined through the construction of modern monasteries and temples that are being funded by foreign Buddhist countries.

Keywords: *Buddhist Heritage, Religious Diplomacy, Myanmar- Buddhist Architecture, Thai-Buddhist Art, Rural Pilgrimage*

Introduction: Bodh Gayā and Kuśīnagar are globally recognized as the loci of Buddhist enlightenment and passing, they are geographically situated within some of the most socio-economically marginalized rural corridors of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The 'rurality' of these sites is a critical, yet often overlooked, factor in their contemporary transformation. These foreign-funded monasteries—monumental, gilded, and architecturally sophisticated—stand in stark contrast to the surrounding agrarian landscapes and local village infrastructures. This creates a unique 'sacred-secular' tension: while the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) preserves the sites as static, rural ruins, Myanmar and Thai institutions treat them as fertile ground for modern development. Consequently, these monasteries function as nodes of global wealth and high-art within a rural hinterland, acting as primary drivers of local economic transition from agriculture to a service-oriented pilgrimage economy.

Theoretical Framework: Sacred Geography and Soft Power: The analysis of modern Buddhist monasteries in rural India is situated at the intersection of three primary theoretical lenses:

- **Sacred Geography and "Place-Making":** This study utilizes the concept of *Sacred Geography* to understand how Bodh Gayā and Kuśīnagar are not merely archaeological ruins but "living" landscapes. By constructing new temples, nations like Myanmar and Thailand engage in re-territorialization, mapping their own national identities onto ancient Indian soil.
- **Soft Power and Religious Diplomacy:** Drawing on Joseph Nye's theory of Soft Power, the paper views these monasteries as instruments of cultural diplomacy. These structures allow donor nations to exert international influence and strengthen bilateral ties with India through shared religious heritage rather than military or economic coercion.
- **Iconographic Appropriation:** The framework also employs Visual Culture Analysis to examine how "royal" and "national" styles (such as the Burmese *uṣṇīṣa* or Thai *Uposatha* architecture) are used to "claim" the Buddha. This transforms the universal historical Buddha into a figure that mirrors the local ethnic and political identity of the sponsoring nation.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, multi-disciplinary research design to capture the complex layers of contemporary Buddhist transformation through a combination of archival, ethnographic, and comparative methods. It integrates archival and document analysis of Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) records to understand secular site management, alongside a review of monastic chronicles and donor inscriptions—such as the copper plates at the Myanmar temple—to trace lineages of patronage. This is complemented by ethnographic fieldwork and site visits to Bodh Gayā and Kuśīnagar, involving direct observation and visual documentation of architectural layouts, murals by artists like U Ba Kyi, and sculptures. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews with Chief Abbots, monks, and international pilgrims provide insight into the functional and spiritual motivations behind modern constructions. Finally, a comparative iconographic study analyses Buddha images across various national temples to identify how physiological features and attire are adapted to reflect distinct Myanmar and Thai cultural aesthetics.

The archaeological sites of Bodh Gayā, Sarnath, and Kuśīnagar, are now maintained as national monuments by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), with designated boundaries, ticket counters, and pathways. However, modern interventions have led to the construction of new Buddhist structures that serve to reclaim these sites and reinterpret their historical significance. (Plate No.1,2, 3, 4, 5, 6 & 7) Reclaiming these ancient sites through modern architectural projects and new iconography represents an effort to compensate for the loss of historical remains and reinterpret the past through contemporary perspectives. This paper examines the agency of contemporary Buddhist monasteries in the redefinition and spatial transformation of ancient heritage sites in rural India, specifically focusing on the influence of Myanmar and Thai ecclesiastical institutions. It analyses the convergence of secular and sacred spheres by investigating the visitations of political and religious leaders and the subsequent impact of their patronage on the architectural and cultural landscape of these sites. By synthesizing archival research, ethnographic fieldwork, and qualitative interviews, this study interrogates the complex intersection of geopolitical interests and religious devotion, illustrating how modern interventions reshape the historical identity and socio-religious significance of these revered locations.

The Emergence of Modern Buddhist Monasteries: Myanmar Buddhist Monasteries at Bodh Gayā

The development of the Myanmar Monastery in Bodh Gayā is analysed through the lens of transnationalism and sacred place-making. As argued by scholars like Thomas Tweed (2006), religions are not static; they "flow" across borders, allowing diaspora communities and foreign states to recreate "homeland" identities in sacred centres. By constructing these edifices, the Myanmar Buddhist community engages in a process of re-territorialization, where the physical architecture of Bodh Gayā is transformed into a microcosm of Myanmar's national and religious identity.

One of the earliest modern Myanmar Buddhist monasteries in Bodh Gayā was established in 1934. (Plate No. 8) Located near the Mahābodhi Temple, the monastery was founded by Burmese monks Ashin Nandamalar and Ashin Dhannissara, who acquired land for the construction of a temple and monastery. Financial support from donors facilitated the construction of an ordination hall in 1966, with later expansions including meditation cells, guesthouses, and additional temple floors. This ordination Hall was built by U Thein Maung. U Thein Maung was a businessman of Taung-ngu, Myanmar. The temple building was expanded with one more floor (Schober 2011, 87). The fourth Chief abbot U Nyaneinda played important role in building these new floor and kitchen in 1976. For the smooth practices of Buddhism and comfort stay of monks, Chief abbot U Nyaneinda also built number of meditation cells in the compound of temple, also open to international visitors. This meditation centre also offers various courses associated with Buddhist philosophies for foreign visitors to learn *Mahāyāna* Buddhist studies and practices.

The late 20th century saw increased international interest in Buddhist studies and meditation, attracting foreign visitors to the Myanmar Buddhist monastery. To accommodate this influx, a three-storied guesthouse was built in 1983, supported by donations. A nominal fee is collected from international tourists for the course and staying in these monasteries. These donations are used for the maintenances of the guest house and monastery.

This section utilizes a longitudinal case study approach, tracing the monastery's evolution from its 1934 inception to the present. The methodology prioritizes visual ethnography—analysing the spatial expansion and architectural shifts (e.g., the 1966 Ordination Hall) as physical evidence of changing patronage patterns. By cross-referencing monastic records with donor inscriptions, the research maps the transition from private mercantile patronage (U Thein Maung) to systematic state-sponsored religious diplomacy.

The Myanmar government further promoted Buddhist tourism by organizing pilgrimage tours to historical Buddhist sites in rural India, fostering stronger bilateral ties. Myanmar Government started sending groups of Buddhist monks, Buddhist followers, and researchers. These scholars and Buddhist pilgrims mainly visited four important Buddhist sites associated with Buddha's life in rural India. It initiated in 1990 and continues to visit historical Buddhist sites in rural India. These developments led to the expansion of Buddhist monasteries and facilities, accommodating pilgrims from Myanmar and regions of India with significant Buddhist populations, such as Assam, Manipur, Tripura, and Arunachal Pradesh (De Caroli 2004, 132).

The flow of tourism encouraged flow of money, and this influenced to constructed a new two storied guest house within the compound of the Myanmar Temple behind the Ordination Hall at the main road to Gayā. These developments continue these ancient Buddhist sites in rural India. On the turn of the millennium, Sayadaw U Nyaneinda founded the Myanmar Buddhist

Society in India, which oversees the maintenance of Myanmar Buddhist temples and monasteries in India. (U Than Sein 2021). His leadership played a pivotal role in the construction of new Buddhist monasteries in eastern and South Asian countries, solidifying Myanmar's cultural and religious presence at these sacred sites in rural India.

The current scholarship on Buddhist revitalisation in India emphasizes the "International Era" of Bodh Gayā. Schober (2011) and Geary (2017) have highlighted how modern monasteries serve as "embassies of faith." This study builds upon their work by specifically examining the role of the Myanmar Buddhist Society in India (est. 2000) as a regulatory body that institutionalizes Myanmar's presence, distinguishing it from the more decentralized Thai or Japanese models.

The Myanmar presence in Bodh Gayā began as a grassroots effort by monks Ashin Nandamalar and Ashin Dhannissara in 1934. However, the transformation of the site into a major monastic complex was driven by mercantile patronage. The 1966 Ordination Hall, funded by Taung-ngu businessman U Thein Maung, illustrates the early reliance on the Myanmar bourgeoisie. Under the fourth Chief Abbot, Sayadaw U Nyaneinda, the site underwent a shift toward institutionalization, incorporating meditation cells and international guesthouses (1983) to cater to the burgeoning global interest in Mahāyāna and Theravāda practices.

The 1990s marked a pivot toward state-led religious diplomacy. The Myanmar government's initiative to send monks and researchers to the four primary pilgrimage sites (Bodh Gayā, Sarnath, Kuśīnagar, and Lumbini) aligns with what De Caroli (2004) describes as the "monumentalization of the past."

There is a notable tension here between the secular ASI management and sacred monastic expansion. While the ASI focuses on "freezing" the archaeological past, the Myanmar monastery represents a "living" heritage that actively expands to accommodate pilgrims from India's Northeast (Assam, Manipur) and abroad. Unlike the critiques of Geary, who views commercialization as a threat to sanctity, this study suggests that the "nominal fees" and donation-driven guesthouses are essential for the maintenance of cultural sovereignty. The leadership of Sayadaw U Nyaneinda illustrates that modern Buddhist architecture is not merely an aesthetic choice but a strategic tool to solidify Myanmar's "soft power" within the South Asian religious landscape.

The following section is analysed through the lens of Iconographic Indigenization and the Politics of Merit (Kutho). According to Donald Swearer (2004), the physical representation of the Buddha is rarely a "neutral" historical reconstruction; rather, it is an act of "consecration" that mirrors the cultural and political values of the donor. By depicting the Buddha with Myanmar-specific physiognomy and royal regalia, the monastery engages in transnational place-making, effectively transplanting the Burmese "sacred centre" to the Indian periphery. Furthermore, the inclusion of donor figures aligns with the Heesterman (1985) theory of the "inner conflict" of kingship and tradition, where the elite (military and mercantile) legitimize their secular power through public displays of religious patronage.

The methodology for this section employs visual semiotics and comparative formal analysis. By breaking down the components of the shrine—the *Bhumisparśa Mudrā*, the *uṣṇīṣa*, and the *kīrtimukha*—the study decodes how these symbols communicate specific national narratives. Comparative formalism is used to link the aesthetics of the Bodh Gayā sculptures to their prototypes in Myanmar, such as the Shwedagon Pagoda and Onhmin Thonze. This approach allows for a rigorous identification of "artistic fingerprints" that distinguish Myanmar's intervention from those of other Buddhist nations.

Art and Cultural Representation in Myanmar Buddhist Monasteries

Myanmar Buddhist temples in rural India exhibit a distinct artistic style, with wall paintings, scrolls, sculptures, and artifacts depicting significant events in the Buddha's life. The Ordination Hall at the Myanmar monastery in Bodh Gayā features murals by renowned Burmese artist U Ba Kyi, painted in 1960, including a depiction of Buddha subduing the raging elephant Nalagiri (U Than Sein 2021).

Once Buddha was walking with other monks on the streets of sarvati. Devadatta, cousin of the Buddha and wanted to kill Buddha, purposefully made Nalagiri elephant very angry and set him towards Buddha. As Nalagiri, running wildly and trumpeting, came closer to the Buddha, Buddha with his kindness and friendliness made Nalagiri calmed low and subsequently bowed low before the Buddha as a way of showing reverence. (Bechert and Gombrich 1984, 54).

This event is painted in a scenic landscape, where the architecture has elements from Myanmar. The attire of Buddha and other monks is in the traditional dressing of Myanmar. In this wall painting, Buddha and his life event and story observed in local tradition. The appearance of Buddha has feature of Myanmar royal traditional elements. It renders the Buddha a king of Myanmar and easy to associate with common Myanmar. (Plate No.9 & 10). These wall paintings, sculptures, and artefacts on one hand render Myanmar's rich cultural practice and tradition. The construction of Myanmar Buddhist temple and monastery at Indian Buddhist site attract people from Myanmar. Here Buddhism is used as a soft tool to represent and promote the respective countries and their culture.

A central Buddha sculpture in the Myanmar shrine is positioned on a highly decorated pedestal in the earth-touching gesture (Bhumisparśa Mudrā), symbolizing the Buddha's enlightenment at Bodh Gayā (Plate No. 11). The sculpture's aesthetic, featuring a golden robe, porcelain-white complexion, and a highly ornamented background, reflects traditional Burmese artistic elements. The shining white coloured Buddha sculpture contrasts the background, ornamented with carvings and dark painted decorative elements and images. This is one of the similar practices to represent the Buddha images in the Myanmar shrines. The image of *kīrtimukha*¹ is also represented on the top of the Buddha image, a decorative background, a swallowing fierce monster face with huge fangs, and wild opened mouth, showing teeth of the monster. It creates a contrast between central image and background and attracts the viewer's eyes, while creating a frame for the seated or central sculpture of Buddha. This seated white Buddha sculpture has golden robe and hair knot (*uṣṇīṣa*), representing peace and glory. The ornamented pedestal and background resemble a royal palace and a royal throne, where the central image of Buddha is positioned as a monarch of this temple and the Buddhist universe. This royal influence also gets more prominent with two fully opened parasols lying in the background of the Buddha Image. This royal rendering of Buddha depicts him as a king and the monarch of the divine world too (Lowry 1974, 2). The representation of the Buddha as a monarch, adorned with parasols and placed within an elaborate frame, aligns with Myanmar's royal Buddhist iconography (Frasch 2018, 210).

The rounded face of Buddha features narrow, half-closed eyes, small and thin red lips—reminding of the local facial characters of Myanmar. In comparison onto the face of Buddha, the flat hands are oversized, and whole image is coloured in shiny white like made of porcelain. This Buddha image has close resemblance with the famous Buddha statues at Onhmin Thonze Pagoda, Shwedagon Pagoda at Yango and the colossal Buddha of Sagaing and Monywa. To make Buddha sculpture more aesthetically appealing lots of artificial flowers, leafs and gifts

¹ It is an image of monster always referred to as time and a common iconography of Indian temple architecture.

are placed around it. These industrial decorative elements replaced the traditional use of natural flowers. The use of the popular artifacts in the temple premisses, render the adoption of local cultural practise and establishes a relation with contemporary practise of popular art and traditional images of Buddha. The central image in the shrine has the Buddha in the earth touching position which resembles the enlightenment of the Buddha at Bodh Gayā. During my filed trip of ancient Buddhist sites in rural India, I found a common practise at all historical Buddhist sites have representation of Buddha in their respective country, means, the physiology of Buddha and his attire have imprint of their country's styles. While on other hand they also create a relation with the associated site, with the image of Buddha in posture of respective the sites.

Contemporary scholarship by Frasc (2018) and Lowry (1974) has long debated the "royalization" of Buddhist art. While traditional art history focused on the "purity" of Gāndhāran or Mathurā styles, modern scholars like Justin McDaniel (2011) emphasize the "material turn," where industrial elements (artificial flowers, porcelain finishes) are recognized as valid expressions of contemporary devotion rather than "degradations" of tradition. This paper builds on this by identifying the specific use of U Ba Kyi's 1960 murals as a benchmark for modern Burmese nationalist art.

The depiction of the Buddha subduing the elephant Nalagiri by U Ba Kyi serves as a primary example of "cultural translation." While the narrative originates in the Pali Canon (Bechert and Gombrich 1984), the landscape and architectural motifs are distinctly Burmese. By rendering the Buddha in the traditional attire of Myanmar, the artist does more than tell a story; he performs what Schober (2011) describes as the "domestication of the sacred." The Buddha is transformed into a "King of Myanmar," making the cosmic history of Buddhism accessible to a local national audience.

This royal rendering is further solidified in the central shrine. The juxtaposition of the porcelain-white Buddha against a dark, ornate background—framed by a *kīrtimukha* and royal parasols—aligns with Lowry's (1974) observation of the Buddha as a "Chakravartin" (Universal Monarch). The oversized hands and narrow eyes serve as an ethnic "claim" on the Buddha's physiology.

Noted Myanmar people are represented as donor figures. They are accompanied by these life size figures of monks. It renders the role of donors in the revival of Buddhism and the relation between the donors, monks, and monastic or real world and celestial world. Names of the donors and their addresses are also written at various memorials stones, entrance of the gates and pillars of the monastery. The names are mainly of Myanmar royal family, military personals, and famous businessmen, which reflect the influence of Buddhism on Myanmar government and people. (Plate no.11) I have noted down names of some of these donors Broker U Mardee, Daw DawSu, Daughter Daw MyintMyint of Boyarnyunt lane, Yawmingyi quarter Dagon Township, Yangon; The role donor as Patrons in the building of the Pagoda are mentioned on a copper plate and place in the front of the pagoda near to the memorial sculpture of Chandramani (Plate no. 13, 14 & 15). Their names are 1) Lieutenant General Myo Nyunt, 2) Major General Sein Htwar, 3) U Aung Khin, 4) U Kyaw Aye, Brigadier General Thura Aung KO, 6) U San Lwin, 7) U Aunt Maung. Names of the government officers with their official designations represent the interest of the Myanmar Government to represent their Buddhist cultural identity in the India and other countries. The interest of Myanmar defence officers in building temples and monasteries in a foreign land (India) and plays an essential role in religious activity represent the Buddhist identity of Myanmar.

Prominent Myanmar donors, including members of the royal family, military officials, and business magnates, are honoured at these monasteries through memorial plaques and inscriptions. The involvement of Myanmar government officials highlights the strategic use of Buddhism to assert cultural identity and strengthen Myanmar's international religious influence.

The inclusion of life-sized donor figures and copper-plate inscriptions (e.g., Lieutenant General Myo Nyunt, Brigadier General Thura Aung Ko) marks a critical intersection of the sacred and the state. As De Caroli (2004) argues, the "monumentalization" of these sites by foreign military and government officials acts as a soft-power tool. The presence of Myanmar defence officers' names in the heart of rural India is not merely an act of personal piety; it is a strategic assertion of cultural sovereignty. These inscriptions transform the monastery into a diplomatic space where the "monastic world" and the "celestial world" are mediated by the Myanmar state, effectively using Buddhism as a bridge for international religious influence.

The Thai Temple at Kuśīnagar

Among the most striking foreign Buddhist temples in Kuśīnagar is the Thai Temple, constructed under the patronage of King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand to commemorate his fiftieth year on the throne. Initiated in 1996 with donations from Thai Buddhist devotees, the temple remains under construction. Officially named Wat Thai Kusinara Chalermraj, it features a monumental stūpa (Chetiya) enshrining Buddha's relics (Plate no.16), (Sujato 2006, 68).

A maha Chetiya named Wat Thai Kusinara Chalermraj is constructed with the patronage from the king of Thailand Bhumibol Adulyadej. Princess Cakri Sirinthorn laid the foundation stone of the maha Chetiya on 30 march 2001. This Chetiya consists the Buddha's relics, thus it is categorized as a Dhatu Chetiya. It also contains hair of the Thailand king. It is the only royal Chetiya ever built outside Thailand.

This Buddha's relics were discovered near Piprahwa, a village in the Basti district on the borders of Nepal in 1898 by Mr. William Claxion Peppe. The then British Government of India had offered this relic to Thailand King Ramu V, who was the only existing Buddhist monarch. King of Thailand gifted that relic to the India, which is now enshrined in the Maya Chetiya at Kuśīnagar. The Maha Chetiya is a Centre of worship for Buddhists all over the globe. It is one of the finest gifts from Thailand to India, the land of the Buddha. It is also seen a step toward to strengthening the bilateral relation between India and Thailand. This act underscores the Thai monarchy's role in fostering Buddhist ties with India and strengthening religious diplomacy between the two nations (Skilling 2009, 94). It makes Kuśīnagar (a Buddhist Site in Rural India) as one of the important places in the Buddhist map.

This *Chetiya* has eight Buddha images placed in the outer niches of eight direction as a concept of blessed and protection. The *Chetiya* is beautifully painted in the combination of white and golden colour. Roof of the *Chetiya* is decorated with a main big *stūpa* and eight *stūpa* like structures. These smaller *stūpa* like structures have images of Buddha.

According to the description written on the entrance of the Thai-Temple, the temple hall is a consecrated assembly hall called Uposatha. Uposatha is a Buddhist religious practice in which the cleansing of the defiled mind for inner calm and joy is practice. In this temple, it is performed bi-weekly with the recitation of the fundamental discipline and ordination ceremony. During certain ceremonies, laymen are not allowed inside specific parts of the temple. Image of Buddha in the shrine is identical to the image of Buddha at the Bodh Gayā Thai temple (Plate no.17. This temple and Uposatha is designed by Assistance Professor. Dr.

Phinaga Suwankhiria, a renowned national artist of Thailand. The name of the Buddha sculpture is “Phra Buddha Sayambhayam” bestowed by the Thailand King. The image has character of Thai Buddhist art, a conical hair knot (*Uṣṇīṣa*), royal throne background with golden and red colour. The image of Buddha is accompanied by his two chief disciple’s sculptures of *Sariputta* on the right and *Moggallana* on the left. The walls of the temple hall is painted with the story of King *Mahājanaka* from *Mahājanaka Jātaka*, who practiced ultimate virtue of heroism and indifferent towards life of pleasure without the desire of any reward, which resulted in his gaining a throne and bringing prosperity to the city of *Mithila*. According to the temple display information, this story was modified by the Thailand King to suit contemporary society. The story was painted on the wall by Thai artistes from Department of Fine Art, Ministry of Education, Thailand, highlight the intersection of Buddhist teachings with contemporary social narratives (Woodward 1997, 112). Wall paintings also portrayed the social activities of Thailand king. This temple displayed the photograph of their King Bhumipol as monk inside the hall.

Jātaka stories are painted on walls of the temple, which is modified by Thailand king. King supported construction of the Thai temple and monasteries through donation. The construction of the Thai temple and monasteries is done under the supervision of Thai embassy. It renders the political and religious advertisement of Buddhism. Through constructions of temple and monasteries, the ancient sites in rural India are getting attention from all over the Buddhist world and these activities are working for revival of Buddhism in these ancients’ sites. It also claims Buddhist identity of respective country in their ritualistic way.

The analysis of Wat Thai Kusinara Chalermraj is grounded in the theory of Sovereign Sacrality and Religious Diplomacy. According to Stanley Tambiah (1976), the Thai monarchy has historically functioned as a *Chakravartin* (Universal Monarch), where the King’s legitimacy is inextricably linked to his role as the protector of the *Sasana* (Buddhist religion). By constructing a "Royal Chetiya" on Indian soil, the Thai state utilizes Soft Power (Nye, 1990) to project national identity abroad. This framework views the temple not merely as a place of worship, but as a "diplomatic monument" that materializes the historical and political links between the Thai Crown and the land of the Buddha's *Mahāparinirvāṇa*.

The methodology employs architectural semiotics to decode the symbolic language of the *Maha Chetiya* and the *Uposatha* hall. By examining the floor plans, orientation, and specific decorative motifs designed by Dr. Phinaga Suwankhiria, the study identifies how "Thai-ness" is exported and stabilized in a foreign rural context. Furthermore, narrative analysis is applied to the *Mahājanaka Jātaka* murals to understand how traditional Buddhist texts are "re-authored" by the monarchy to align with contemporary social narratives and political ideologies.

Recent scholarship by Skilling (2009) and Sujato (2006) has documented the expansion of Thai monastic networks in India, often characterizing them as "elite" interventions compared to the more grassroots local Buddhist movements. While Woodward (1997) focuses on the stylistic evolution of Thai art, this paper advances the discourse by highlighting the unique status of the Kuśīnagar site as a Dhatu Chetiya (relic stupa) that houses both the Buddha’s relics and the hair of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, thereby merging divine and royal lineages.

The establishment of Wat Thai Kusinara Chalermraj (initiated 1996) represents a pinnacle of relic diplomacy. The historical trajectory—moving from the 1898 discovery of relics at Piprahwa by W.C. Peppe to their gift to King Rama V, and their eventual "return" to India—illustrates a circularity of sacred capital. As noted in the text, this "Royal Chetiya" is unique in being the only one of its kind outside Thailand, serving as a permanent religious embassy.

Re-interpreting Tradition for the Modern State

The inclusion of the *Upasatha* hall and the specific iconography of the Phra Buddha Sayambhayam statue highlights a deliberate attempt to maintain ritual purity in a foreign land. The restriction of laymen during certain ceremonies emphasizes the "consecrated" nature of the space, distinguishing it from the secular "monument" status of the neighbouring ASI ruins.

The critical discussion arises from the Mahājanaka Jātaka murals. As Woodward (1997) suggests, Thai Buddhist art often serves the state; here, the modification of the Jātaka story by King Bhumibol to emphasize "ultimate virtue" and "heroism" for contemporary society functions as a moral didactic tool. By portraying the King's own social activities and his time as a monk alongside the Buddha's life, the temple creates a visual hagiography that blends the sacred history of the Buddha with the modern history of the Thai Chakri Dynasty.

Ultimately, the construction under the supervision of the Thai Embassy confirms that the temple is a site of political and religious advertisement. It transforms Kuśīnagar into a node of a "Thai-centric" Buddhist map, where the revival of the ancient site is synonymous with the promotion of Thai national identity and bilateral religious cooperation.

Buddhism as a Cultural Bridge: A Soft Power Strategy

The proliferation of Myanmar and Thai Buddhist monasteries within the rural Indian landscape transcends mere religious expansion; it constitutes a sophisticated soft power strategy designed to project national influence through cultural and religious diplomacy. By financing and constructing these monumental structures at ancient archaeological sites, donor nations engage in national identity assertion, effectively transforming these locations into "sovereign" religious enclaves that promote their specific heritage.

These modern interventions facilitate a revitalization of pilgrimage traditions, yet they do so by layering contemporary nationalistic aesthetics over the historical substrate of the sites. This process reshapes the sacred geography, creating a dual-layered landscape where the secular authority of the state (India) intersects with the sacred aspirations of foreign entities. Consequently, these monasteries serve as permanent cultural embassies that influence the socio-religious perceptions of both local Indian Buddhist communities and a global network of international visitors, thereby solidifying the donor countries' roles as central custodians of the Buddhist faith (Tambiah 1976, 23).

Conclusion

The contemporary transformation of ancient Buddhist sites in rural India reflects a dynamic interplay between historical memory, religious practice, and modern geopolitics. The emergence of Myanmar and Thai monasteries at Bodh Gayā and Kuśīnagar demonstrates how Buddhist nations utilize their immaterial heritage—in the form of liturgy, iconography, and relic devotion—to strengthen bilateral diplomatic relations and assert a visible cultural presence on the subcontinent.

While these developments contribute significantly to the preservation and continued relevance of Buddhist traditions, they also fundamentally alter the historical landscape. By reinterpreting the past through the lens of modern national identities, these institutions ensure that the sacred sites of rural India remain evolving, living monuments at the heart of an increasingly globalized Buddhist map.

Ultimately, the presence of these monasteries in rural India signifies a complex 'glocalization.' By importing foreign materials, artisans, and architectural philosophies into the Indian

countryside, Myanmar and Thailand are not just building temples; they are re-mapping rural India as a global Buddhist centre. This process shifts the identity of the rural landscape from a peripheral agricultural zone to a central node in the international 'soft power' network of Asian Buddhist states.

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Plates

(Plates images taken by author during his field works from 2024-2025)



Plate No. 1, : Mahaparinivana Temple, Kushinagar, U.P , India



Plate No. 3, Lumbini, Nepal

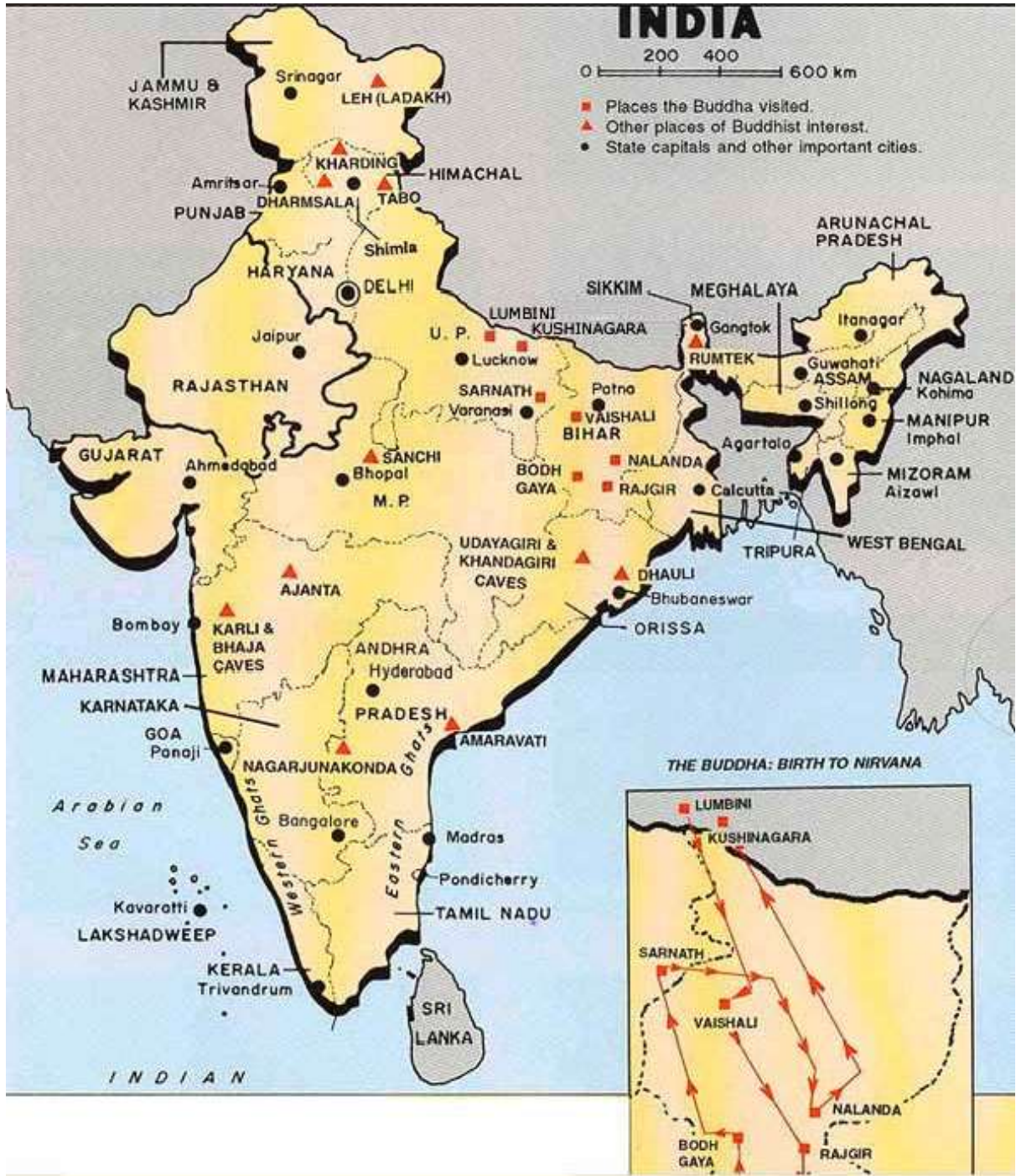


Plate no 2, Map of Buddhist sites in Rural India



Plate No 4, Mahabodhi Temple, Bodh Gaya, Bihar.



Plates 5, Mahabodhi Tree, Bodh Gaya, Bihar



Plate 6, Sarnath, U.P., India.



Plate No. 7, Mahaparinivana Temple, Kushinagar, U.P.



Plate 8, Chanthargyi Ceti of Myanmar stūpa and Temple, Kushinagar, U.P.



Plate No 9, Myanmar Buddhist Temple, Bodh Gayā, Bihar



Plate 10, Buddha Sculpture, Myanmar Buddhist Temple, Bodh Gaya.



Plates 11, Donors are Political leaders and Army officers, their names on various copper plate, placed at Chanthargyi Ceti of Myanmar stūpa, Kuśīnagar



Plate 12, Donors are Political leaders and Army officers, their names on various copper plate, placed at Chanthargyi Ceti of Myanmar stūpa, Kuśīnagar



Plate 13



Plate No. 14, Thai Temple, Kushinagar



Plate No. 15, Wat Thai Kusinara Chalemraj, Thai Temple, Kushinagar



Plate No 16, Buddha Sculpture, Thai Temple, Kushinagar



Plate No 17, Thai Temple, Bodh Gayā



Plate No. 18, Buddha sculpture ,Thai Temple, Bodh Gayā



Plate 19, Buddha, Vishwa Shanti Stupa, Vishali, Bihar