

The Importance of Lumbini

Writer- Ranjit Rae (Former Ambassador to Nepal)

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Modi's visit is political and strategic and is an opportune time for India to do much more in the region.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Lumbini, Nepal, though only for a few hours, is full of symbolism and substance. No Indian Prime Minister has visited Lumbini in the last few decades. Mr. Modi's visit is a combination of personal desire and political and strategic goals. For him, it is the fulfilment of a wish articulated in 2014 when he first became Prime Minister. Since he could not travel to Lumbini during his previous visits to Nepal, as Ambassador, I planted, on his behalf, a sapling of the sacred Bodhi tree in the gardens of the Maya Devi temple where Gautama Buddha was born.

Amid the strife and turmoil and the anger and hatred that we see in society, the Prime Minister's visit also provides a moment for quiet reflection and a reiteration of the message of peace, compassion and non-violence preached by the Buddha and spread by the roaring lions in the four directions, as depicted in the Lion Capital of Ashoka, our national emblem — a message that calls for shunning extremes in ideology and thought and following the middle path forged through tolerance, dialogue and debate, and reconciliation and consensus.

The birthplace of the Buddha

The visit is political, since it will, hopefully, put to rest the unnecessary debate on whether the Buddha was born in Nepal, which, for Nepal, is a sensitive issue. Any assertion to the contrary results in anti-India demonstrations in a country whose national identity is tied to Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha.

It is strategic, in the face of the growing presence of China in Lumbini, which is close to the Indian border; the largest monastery has been built by the Chinese who sponsor and support international conferences on Buddhism in Nepal as well as the massive celebrations on Buddhist festivals such as Vesak. In pre-COVID-19 times, there was a steady flow of Chinese tourists to Lumbini and reports about potential Chinese investments in the region. The Chinese are leaving no stone unturned to exploit the soft power potential of Buddhism, a fast-growing religious tradition that has half-a-billion adherents (largely in East and Southeast Asia).

During a visit to Myanmar some years ago, this writer saw huge crowds in the capital city Yangon, which was decked up for the occasion. They were waiting patiently for a glimpse of Buddhist relics from China.

India is home to some of the most sacred sites of Buddhism: the place of Lord Buddha's enlightenment, Bodh Gaya; of his first sermon, Sarnath; and of his Mahaparinirvana, Kushinagar. And this is not counting Shravasti, where the Buddha preached for many years; Nalanda; and Rajgir, among several others. Unfortunately, India remains largely unrepresented in Lumbini, but for a small museum building that was constructed with Indian assistance in the late 1990s. A proposal for a 'sound and light show' remains in limbo.

Lumbini is home to beautiful monasteries from several countries. The first foreign monastery in Lumbini was built by a Vietnamese monk, Thay Huyen Dieu. He subsequently built another one in Bodh Gaya. (In large part, due to his efforts, a visit to Bodh Gaya has become de rigueur for every visiting communist politician from Vietnam.) India does not have a monastery in Lumbini. Mr. Modi's visit is an opportune time to remedy the situation and announce the establishment of an Indian monastery.

There is much else that India can do in Lumbini. More than 50 years ago, United Nations Secretary-General U Thant had set up an international committee for the development of Lumbini. A master plan was developed by the Japanese architect Kenzo Tange. Since then, Nepal has been implementing the plan, albeit at a lethargic pace. From time to time, Nepalese leaders have talked about reviving the committee to inject more dynamism into the project. India could assist them in this regard.

Both Lumbini and the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya are UNESCO World Heritage sites — they are to Buddhists what Mecca is to Muslims or Kashi is to Hindus, and should be visited at least once in a lifetime.

However, the footfalls of Buddhist pilgrims remain low. For years there has been talk about developing a Buddhist circuit with seamless connectivity and comfortable travel between the major pilgrimage sites in Nepal and India. Unfortunately, talk has not fully translated into action. Though the roads network on the Indian side is much better today, the link roads connecting Nepal with the Indian highway system need to be upgraded. It is a nightmare to cross the Sunauli-Bhairahawa India-Nepal check post along the Uttar Pradesh-Nepal border that is designated for tourists.

Perhaps travel by road, rather than helicopter, would give the Prime Minister an idea of the poor state of border infrastructure and immigration and other facilities in the area. Of course, now with the construction of airports in Kushinagar (India) as well as Bhairahawa (Nepal) travel would be easier. Speedy construction of the integrated check post would also boost tourism and the local economy.

Developing the Buddhist circuit

While there is a master plan to develop Lumbini, the absence of one is glaring in Bodh Gaya. Bodh Gaya has developed in an unplanned fashion with the secular and the sacred jostling cheek by jowl; it is like any other small town in India – chaotic, dirty and noisy. It is anything but serene. There is an urgent need to adopt a master plan and develop Bodh Gaya as a sacred place for pilgrimage for both Hindus and Buddhists. The relationship between the monasteries of foreign countries in Bodh Gaya and the local communities is fraught. A high-level coordination committee comprising representatives of State and Central governments as well as of foreign monasteries should be set up to resolve problems.

The monasteries are headed by monks who are greatly revered in their home countries and should be treated with respect and reverence. Bodh Gaya can also learn from the experience of Lumbini with the establishment of a twinning arrangement between the two towns. Efforts should be made for the entire Buddhist circuit, namely Lumbini-Bodh Gaya-Sarnath-Kushinagar, to be declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site with master plans for each segment of the circuit.

India can also take the initiative to organise an international conference on the development of the Buddhist circuit; this will give a sense of participation and ownership to Buddhist countries. This could be a joint initiative of India and Nepal. India can also establish an international museum of Buddhist traditions in Bodh Gaya and invite all Buddhist countries to participate.

If we implement some of these suggestions and improve infrastructure in the area, millions of devotees who wish to walk in the footsteps of the Buddha would be forever grateful.

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Expected Question (Prelims Exams)

Q. Consider the following statements:-

1. The Indo-Nepal Peace and Friendship Treaty of 1950 has been the basis of the special relationship that exists between the two countries.
2. Nepal is a land-locked country.
3. A joint military exercise named Surya Kiran is conducted between India and Nepal.

Which of the above statements are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2
- (b) 2 and 3
- (c) 1 and 3
- (d) all of the above

Expected Question (Mains Exams)

Q. India-Nepal relations have seen many ups and downs in recent times due to the complex nature of many issues. What expected steps should be taken by India to improve this relationship, as well as discuss how Buddhism can play a role in improving the relationship between the two countries? (250 Words)

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Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC main examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.