

Developing Ancient Buddhist Sites as Tourist Circuits To Minimise Conflict in SAARC Region

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Internal and external conflicts engulf South Asian Association of Regional Co-operation countries [hereinafter SAARC] which consists of seven countries: Afghanistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka. The region has been facing sporadic recurrence of territorial wars, civil wars or terrorist disruptions since long. Though international agencies and organizations have been active to damage control and curtail spread of such wars and further escalation of internal war like situations yet SAARC has not been able to eliminate the fear and challenges thrown open by these activities. In the present paper an attempt has been made to understand the rise of this phenomenon of distrust and destruction and also to suggest ways and means to create an amicable atmosphere towards trust building among these countries by way of promotion of ancient Buddhist Sites as Tourism circuits across the national boundaries. To

be specific the objects of the present study are:

1. To analyse the salient features of the SAARC countries like their demography and economy
2. To identify the causes of the member nations internal disturbances/ conflicts and external conflicts
3. To explain the role of reawakening the ancient common heritage of the vast region by means of promotion of pilgrim tourism
4. To identify the ancient Buddhist sites and then develop them as pilgrim circuit tourism
5. To provide necessary guidelines for making these Buddhist Pilgrim Circuits as sustainable development tourism product centres that would lead to improving the economy and lessening of elements of turbulence in the region
6. To find out how active participation of the SAARC countries to develop these sites could lead to furtherance of UNESCO and UN Millennium Development Goals in addressing and dealing with intra-country and inter country conflicts in the region.

It would not be out of place to reproduce an extract regarding utility of preserving ancient heritage contained in Buddhist sites and Stupas in Asia, what Nobel Laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has conveyed in a message to Sidhartha Gauri, one of the authors:

“I know that in these days and age people are not always interested in preserving the past. Too many people are simply looking to the present, too many people have forgotten that the present could not have existed without the past... I wonder what is achieved in the past even without the technological known how. The present inspires us to work hard for the future not just culturally but spiritually... Spiritual values which will help our world to become one in harmony and friendship and understanding and peace.”

Data Collection Methodology and Discussion:

The paper is based on secondary data collected from published material and reinterpreted. The sources used have been duly acknowledged in the references given at the end of the paper.

Table - 1: Area, Population and Economy/GDP

Country	Area (km)	Population (2009-2012)	Density (/km ²)	GDP (nominal) (2009/2012)
Afghanistan	652,230	29,150,000	52	\$34.55 billion
Bangladesh	147,570	152,518,015	1,099	\$153.72 billion
Bhutan	38,394	697,000	18	\$1.488 billion
India	3,287,240	1,210,193,422	382	\$1.947 trillion
Nepal	147,181	26,620,080	200	\$19.921 billion
Pakistan	796,095	180,440,000	225	\$230.525 billion
Sri Lanka	65,610	20,277,597	319	\$64.914 billion

The above table shows that the SAARC countries cover about 4.48 million kms which comes to about 10% of the continent of Asia or 2.4% of the land surface of the world. Bangladesh has the highest density 1,099 persons per square kms and Afghanistan has quite sparse density with just 52 persons per square kms. India heads all the countries in regard to total number of population over 121 crores with 382 persons per square kms that is second position in terms of density of population.

If we take an overall view it is revealed that this region is comparatively thickly populated and is home to 34% of the population of Asia and over 16.5% population of the world. It is also revealed from the above table that among the SAARC nations India emerges the biggest country in area, population and also economically strongest of all the member countries followed by Pakistan on all these indicators.

Table - 2: Religion-wise data:

Country	Christi- anity	Bud- dhism	Islam	Hindu- ism	Jainism	Sikhism
Afghanistan	0.3%		99%	0.3%		0.3%
Bangladesh	0.32%	0.7%	89.5%	9.5		
Bhutan		75%		25%		
India	2.3%	0.8%	13.5%	80.5%	0.4%	1.9%

Nepal		10.7%	4.2%	80.6%		
Pakistan	1.59%		96.28%	1.85%		
Sri Lanka	7.45%	70.19%	9.71%	12.61%		

Table 2 manifests that the SAARC nations are home to Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism Jainism and Sikhism. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism were born in this region and also that Christianity and Islam also came in the region at very early times. The current divergence ratio of religious composition of the population of the SAARC region does not present the real picture of the rich ancient heritage of the region will be explained in the succeeding pages of the paper that for a long time in early historic times many of these nations have experienced the teachings of Buddhism. It is clear from the table that whereas Hinduism is major religion in India and Nepal followed by Bhutan; Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan are almost fully Islamic nations. In case of Sri Lanka, Buddhism is the main religion followed by Hinduism, Islam and Christianity.

There have been cases of internal conflicts or civil wars and also external wars between the SAARC nations. Why these conflicts arise has been a very significant topic of discussion. It has been said that “There are two types of internal conflicts. The first is conflict against the state or civil war. Examples of this are terrorism, which is an extreme manifestation of conflict and reflects a certain degree of organisation of conflict. It is carried out by a relatively organised group of non-state actors, and directed against the state. The second category includes people-to-people conflict, or ethnic conflict. Examples of this include localised land conflicts, religious and ethnic riots, homicides or other crimes (Stewart 2008, Varshney 2002).”

On the rise of conflict, it is said that it “can be triggered by low economic growth which leads to a lower economic opportunity cost of rebellion against state in poor areas. Low economic growth in certain areas can be the result of unequal distribution in gains from development or political marginalisation. A second trigger for conflicts is a natural disaster. The SAARC countries suffer from both types of problems – low economic growth and higher vulnerability to

natural disasters. Several countries have experienced much slower economic growth compared to leading regions. They are also more vulnerable to droughts and floods. The consequences of conflict on development are more severe in lagging regions because they have weak institutions, poor geography, and are poorly integrated with global markets.”

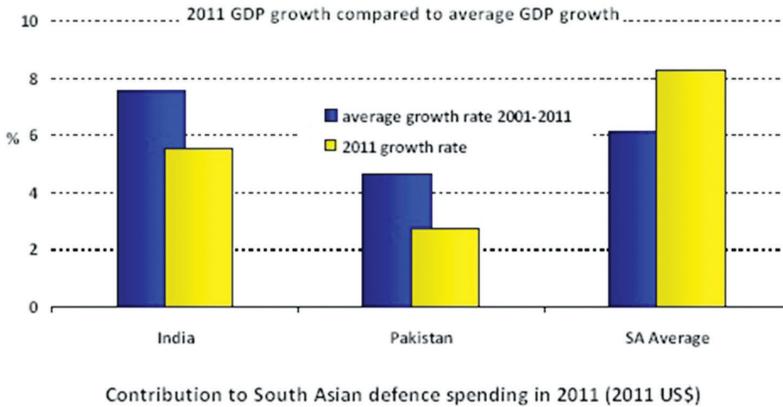
Table – 3: The internal and external challenges and conflicts:

India	Sri Lanka	Nepal	Bhutan	Pakistan	Bangladesh	Afghanistan
Indo-Pakistani War of 1947	Eelam War 1976-2009	Nepal Civil War 1996–2006	Nepalese displacement	Indo-Pakistani War of 1947	Bangladesh Liberation War 1971	Skirmish with Pakistan and others
Indo-Pakistani War of 1965				Indo-Pakistani War of 1965		
Indo-Pakistani War of 1971				Bangladesh Liberation War 1971, Indo-Pakistani War of 1971		
Kargil War 1999				Kargil War 1999		

Prevalent religious composition of the region leads to multi-culture dimensions of the member countries. This ethnic and religious variety in turn sometimes leads to division of the people on religious lines, leading to flare of internal strife or communal violence as happened in 1947 between Hindus [including Sikhs] and Muslims in India and Pakistan. Likewise Bhutan faced Nepalese displacement and Sri Lanka and Nepal had to pass through the throes of long drawn civil wars. Moreover Afghanistan has been facing internal tribal fights problems inviting foreign intervention in their affair since long. In recent years there have been seen rise of Moist Movement in some parts of India in addition to sporadic incidents of terrorist activities in various parts of the country. There have also been 4 wars between

India and Pakistan since 1948 and also war between Pakistan and Afghanistan as depicted in the table 3.

Graph showing Spending by India and Pakistan [Two major Military Powers of the region in comparison to South Asia] on Arms, Ammunition and Armed forces to meet internal and External Challenges



Buddhist sites in the SAARC region:

The SAARC countries have been linked by trade routes for millennia. Buddhism spanned the Indian and Chinese cultural realms of Asia by moving along these trade routes—across deserts, mountains, and oceans. From around 1,000 years BC until the seventh century AD, northern Pakistan and parts of modern Afghanistan formed the Gandhara kingdom, where Greek and Buddhist customs mixed to create what became the Mahayana strand of the religion. *The Buddhist Forum* with the help of organizations and scholars based in different Asian countries has been preparing a database for several ancient Buddhist sites in various Asian countries for the last few years. According to *The Buddhist Forum*, besides renowned and well preserved world heritage sites there are numerous other ancient Buddhist sites in Afghanistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Thailand, Laos and other Asian countries which need attention of the concerned people and authorities towards their preservation,

exploration and promotion, which have tremendous pilgrimage tourism potential.

On the basis of information gathered from Government departments of Archaeology and Cultural affairs and from individual scholars the following ancient Buddhist sites in SAARC nations have been listed:

Table -4: Buddhist Sites in SAARC Nations:

Countries	No. of Buddhist Sites
Afghanistan	120
Bhutan	2,084
Bangladesh	500
India	834
Pakistan	132
Nepal	136
Sri Lanka	2971
Grand Total	6677

How these sites could lead to generate goodwill in the region:

1. With the formation of international Buddhist circuits of all the historical Buddhist sites, monuments, art work available in various SAARC Countries could lead to preservation of ancient art, architecture and heritage.
2. This would generate funds for the preservation and conservation of newly excavated and preserved ancient Buddhist sites.
3. The International Buddhist Sites Circuit development will lead to better preservation of monuments in Asia so that they could be raised to higher level of art and promotion. Majority of Asian countries in past have experienced the richness of the Buddhist culture and arts. The Buddhist art can act as a catalyst to unify the Asian countries towards peace, prosperity and harmony in future too.
4. Boosting national economies: When various Asian countries will

place their well-preserved historical and spiritual monuments on their National tourist map, the foreign currency reserve of the concerned Asian countries will be increased with the inflow of International tourists. In today's world terrorism and violent organizations are a major concern among Asian countries as these organizations are recruiting youth who readily fall prey to them due to unemployment problems. With the promotion of these ancient monuments, employment for the local youth will be generated in transportation, hotels, small scale industrial sectors also.

5. To act as catalyst in generating tourism potential of shrines and monuments of all other religions. With the promotion of ancient Buddhist monuments, the sacred shrines and sites belonging to other religions could be promoted on the same pattern.

Recent Attempts to Revive Buddhist Sites as Pilgrim and Religious Tourism places:

It is found from a domestic tourism survey conducted by the Indian Ministry of Tourism in 2002 that more than 100 million visitors travelled for 'religious purposes and pilgrimages' and eight of the top-ten ranking domestic tourist destinations were pilgrimage sites. According to the Ministry's Tourism Satellite Accounts, religious tourism segment contributed almost 20% towards the total domestic tourism consumption (approximately INR 2.8 Billion) and this contribution is likely to increase annually. Such figures, often based on estimates from formal Components (such as travel costs, accommodation in registered places, etc.), should be considered only as partial indicators of the volume of religious tourism market.

According to the newspaper Hindu [dated March 22, 2012], the Government of Pakistan hoped to boost Buddhist tourism in "Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, with its balmy climate in the mountains and its wealth of history on the border with Afghanistan" which was once a playground for colonial adventurers and a favourite holiday destination for upper-crust Pakistanis. Wealthier Pakistanis and Westerners stopped visiting, scared away by attacks and the threat of kidnapping, but the provincial government is now trying to lure thousands of visitors from wealthy Asian countries such as Japan

and South Korea. A group of around 20 Buddhist monks from South Korea made the journey to the monastery of Takht-e-Bahi, 170 kilometres (106 miles) from Islamabad, and close to the tribal areas that are a haven for Taliban and Al-Qaeda linked militants. "We really felt it was our home town, it was a great feeling which it is not possible to describe in words," JeonWoonDeok, a senior Korean monk, told AFP by email of the visit last year. "We only regret that we waited so long to come here." The monks defied appeals from Seoul to abandon their trip for safety reasons and were guarded by Pakistani security forces on their visit to the monastery, built of ochre-coloured stone and nestled on a mountain side. The gardens of Takht-e-Bahi host picnicking families and daydreaming teenagers, as well as students from nearby Koranic schools. But foreign visitors are rare. "There used to be foreign tourists here in the past, but after the attacks there are hardly any," said local guide IftikharAli. The flow of adventurous tourists from east Asia is no more than a trickle at the moment -- Ali said he saw only one or two visitors a month on average. "For them this place is like Mecca," said Zulfiqar Rahim, the head of the Gandhara Art and Culture Association, which is dedicated to the promotion of Pakistan's Buddhist heritage. Last year monks from Bhutan also came to visit, but the government wants to boost numbers quickly. "We are currently working to promote religious and archaeological Buddhist tourism," said Syed Jamaluddin Shah, the deputy minister of tourism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The authorities are even planning package tours for visitors from China, Japan, Singapore and South Korea, including trips to the Buddhist sites at Takht-e-Bahi, Swat, Peshawar and Taxila. "The tourism potential is enormous. If each person who comes spends \$1,200 with hotel costs and all the rest, and a million people come, that makes a billion dollars," said Rahim. "And we're not talking about a million people but 50 million Mahayana Buddhists in Korea, China and Japan."

To attract at least half of the total Buddhist population spread in 35 countries by promoting Buddhist pilgrimage sites, is the new mantra of the ministry of tourism, Government of India and the states enshrining the Buddhist pilgrimage sites. The call was given during the inauguration of the three-day International Buddhist Conclave (IBC)-2012 at a hotel compound in Nadesar area. Apart from 133

delegates from 30 countries, who were mainly tour operators, opinion leaders and travel writers, delegates from 16 states were also taking part in the conclave.

In his address, UN World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) executive director Marcio Favilla said that “while the number of international tourists last year was one billion, next year this figure can touch the mark of 1.8 billion”. “During the G-20 summit held in June, the tourism sector was approved as an important economic activity. It’s for the first time that the tourism has been included in G-20 declaration. Focus should be on sustainable tourism to generate employment. Similarly, religious tourism would play a key role in increasing the number of international tourists. The Union minister of state for tourism said: “The ministry is aiming at promoting religious tourism on the line of the Muslim religious shrines in Saudi Arabia. Even if half of the Buddhist population (out of a total of 50 lakh) visits the Buddhist pilgrim centres in the country annually, the goal of the ministry would be achieved. This would also help in generating employment for three crore people.” The minister also highlighted the measures initiated by the Central government regarding visa issues. The tourism ministers of participating states, including Jammu and Kashmir, Odisha and Andhra Pradesh, left no opportunity to promote the Buddhist sites of their states. Bihar Tourism Minister highlighted how improvement in basic infrastructure, especially roads, had helped in attracting a large number of tourists to the Buddhist sites in Bihar. Seven Buddhist tourist circuits in the state attract visitors from all over India and Korea, Japan and Malaysia which follow the religion. As many as 25 sites and caves connected with Buddhism will be developed at a cost of Rs. 70 crores, by the Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC). The corporation will provide amenities for the Nashik-Pune circuit and introduce tourist amenities at Pandavleni, Junnar, Karla, Bhaja and Bedsa caves.

“The idea is to form a tourist attraction of prominent sites in the state associated with Buddha,” an official said. The project involves developing the Mumbai-Thane, Raigad, Nashik-Pune, Satara, Aurangabad I and II, and Nagpur circuits. “Parameters such as the connectivity between these places, tourist facilities and information systems have been studied. Additions will be made. Some places

have good connectivity, but may lack parking facilities. Hence, missing amenities will be provided,” the official said. The corporation will also establish interpretation centres in Mansar (Nagpur), and Nalasopara (Mumbai) if land is available, after permission from the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) is obtained. Information about a site and its connection with Buddhism will also be displayed at these heritage spots. As part of the Mumbai-Thane sub-circuit, plans are to develop Nalasoparastupa, Vipassana pagoda, Canary, Mahakali caves and ChaityaBhoomi. In Raigad, the corporation will set up tourist facilities at Thanale, Gandharpale, Kuda and Khadsambale caves. The Nashik-Pune circuit, will have basic tourist amenities at sites such as Pandavleni, Junnar, Karla, Bhaja, Bedsa and Ghoradeshwar caves.”The Satara circuit includes development activities at Agashiv Caves in Karad and Pandavgad caves near Wai. The Aurangabad circuit will have sub-circuits I and II. The first sub-circuit will have better tourist amenities at Aurangabad, Pitalkhora and Ellora caves, while the second circuit will include facilities at Ajanta caves,” officials said. Nagpur’s Deekshabhoomi and sites such as Mansar will also be developed.

Government of Bangladesh to promote Buddhism Sites:

According to an official of the Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation, “Buddhism received royal patronage and its influence can still be seen in the culture and heritage of this country especially in the life and society of the people of the Hill-tracts districts. In Bangladesh some discoveries have been made on Buddhism, which are very significant.” These discoveries have added substantially to our knowledge of the history and chronology of ancient Bangladesh and various aspects of her Buddhist life and culture. Buddhism originated in Nepal and flourished in India. From the reign of the Great Emperor Ashoka (which began from 3rd century B.C. and flourished until the 7th century A.D.) it had the dominant influence on the sub-continent. Much of the great art of India was produced during this period. Buddhism spread over Far East, but faded on the sub-continent, though not without leaving some effects upon the Hindu thoughts. That’s why there is found a little bit similarity of festivals between these two creeds. The prominent Buddhist sites of Bangladesh that have been excavated until now are – Paharpur, Mahasthangarh, BasuVihara, Sitakot, HaludVihar, Jagaddal,

Mainamati, It is customary to take off one's shoes before entering a Buddhist temple as a sign of respect.

In addition to internal attempts to develop Buddhist pilgrim sites by various countries, Nepal and India have taken steps to join hands to promote it with cross-border understanding which will benefit pilgrims from all over the world, as well as local economies in Nepal and neighbouring Indian states. India and Nepal have agreed to jointly promote all major Buddhist religious sites, officials are optimistic even more visitors will flock there. An understanding to this effect was reached during a first ever Nepal-India Tourism Mart held in mid-January in Lumbini, the birthplace of Siddhartha Gautama, who became the Lord Buddha and founder of the Buddhist tradition. "As the event was first of its kind, we could not have reached any formal agreement. But there has been an understanding to jointly promote Buddhist religious sites in Nepal and India," Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) spokesman Aaditya Baral told Khabar South Asia.

Government officials and travel industry representatives from both countries discussed in detail how to promote a travel circuit comprising all major Buddhist sites in a technical session at the two-day event. "As a large number of Buddhist pilgrims visit only to the pilgrimage sites lying in India, the tie-up will be crucial for Nepal to bring in more tourists," said Kathmandu-based tour operator Laxmi Bhattarai, who participated in Travel Mart. Promoting all Buddhist destinations will uplift the livelihoods of common people. Nepali tourism entrepreneurs say pleasant weather throughout the year, easy road access, no visa requirement and favourable currency exchange rates all contributed to the increase in Indian tourists visiting Nepal. "The travel mart has paved the way for joint collaboration and co-operation," Baral said. The event was organised by the Indian Embassy in Kathmandu, in association with NTB and Nepal's Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation. Representatives of some 125 Indian and Nepali companies, airlines and hotels participated, as did state government officials from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and New Delhi. Minister for Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation and India's Ambassador to Nepal jointly inaugurated the event. In the same way examples of this type could be multiplied manifold but in view of the limitation of the words and time allotted we proceed to conclude the

paper. However it is to be mentioned that some of the SAARC Nations have not been able to develop sufficient mutual confidence as Table I also shows that all the SAARC countries have their own strengths and weaknesses in the field of Human Resource and Economy.

Conclusion:

In a nutshell it can be said that creating Buddhist Ancient Sites Circuits in the length and breadth of the SAARC region could usher in an era of peace and tranquillity replacing the blind race of acquisition of arms and ammunition and the money thus saved could be utilised to provide facilities in the sectors of health, education and food to the masses.

India has shown the way by creating some of the Buddhist circuits, and Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan have also initiated some plans to promote Buddhist Site Tourism. If these efforts continue, newer sites could be added to pilgrim tourist destinations. The SAARC region can hugely benefit through the joint promotion of Buddhist pilgrimage sites. India receives over a million tourists annually to Buddhist sites, officials say, and the number would rise hugely if Buddhist circuits at cross frontier level are promoted by other countries too. The contribution of the development of the Buddhist pilgrim circuits would lead to creation of more jobs in the tourism sector and also generate tolerance and cohesiveness among these countries thus paving way for regional economic and cultural cooperation. Further, if this initial foray in the so far unattempted realm to implement the Buddhist pilgrim experiment succeeds to desired level in minimising the recurrence of conflicts among the member countries then it could be implemented in phased manner to further increase in religious and pilgrim tourist circuits including Hindu, Islam, Sikh, Jain, Christian and so on circuits in the region.

But there is a long way to go. It will be difficult to overcome huge security problems, poor tourist infrastructure and the challenges of getting a visa and permission to travel to high-risk areas in the SAARC nations. Perhaps, the basic indicators are enough to convince the policy makers and planners to take a plunge to test the conclusions arrived at in this study.

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