



Assessing Modi's China Visit: Cultural Dimensions

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The Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, concluded his three-day trip to India's northern neighbour, China, on 16th May 2015, which included Xi'an, Beijing and Shanghai. During Modi's visit, cultural diplomacy was brought to the centrestage. During the tour, he visited several places of historical and cultural importance, such as the Terracotta Army Museum, Daxingshan Buddhist Temple, Giant Wild Goose Pagoda and Temple of Heaven. Modi's visit has also been regarded by a section of the international media as a sign of the two nations competing to exhibit their soft power. In the recent past, Xi took up the ambitious project of 'One Belt One Road', which binds China to its neighbours, whereas Modi promoted 'Project Mausam', a vision initiative to reconnect and re-establish lost communications between countries of Indian Ocean region.

In the past, government to government contacts and media reports played a major role in shaping India-China relations and there has been little direct communication between people of the two countries. It was the first time that an Indian leader directly talked to the Chinese people. Even before the commencement of the tour, Modi debuted on China's popular social media platform, Weibo. China's official media has praised his efforts to communicate with the local people. The popularity of Modi can be measured by the fact that within a few days of his joining Weibo, which is regarded as 'China's twitter', he

garnered 46,000 followers, which is a rare feat by a foreign leader. In addition to social media, Modi also interacted with the Chinese students, common people and business leaders through his lectures and informal interactions.

Modi started his visit on 14 May from Xi'an that is associated with Chinese traveller and famous Buddhist scholar, Xuan Zang or Hieun Tsang, who travelled extensively in India between 629 and 645 AD. It was intended to highlight the ancient ties between the two neighbours. He was welcomed by President Xi Jinping in Xi'an, which happens to be his home town. This was a departure from standard protocol and was seen as a reciprocal gesture by the Chinese leader, who was hosted by Modi in Ahmedabad when he visited India in 2014. This has been widely seen as the highest level reception offered to an Indian Prime Minister.

After arriving in the ancient city of Xi'an, his first place of visit was the Terracotta Army museum, which houses a collection of terracotta sculptures depicting the army of Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of China. Modi also viewed the Daxingshan Buddhist temple where monks from India translated sacred Buddhist texts into Chinese language 13 centuries ago. This visit gives hope of finding a spiritual connection between the two countries and pushing forward the friendly ties. He also visited the Giant Goose Pagoda dedicated to the famous Buddhist pilgrim, Hsuan Tsang, who travelled to India to bring back Buddhist texts. Later in the day, Modi took part in a ceremony inspired by the splendour of the Tang dynasty that ruled more than 11 centuries ago.

The display of cultural kinship reflected an important element in relations between India and China. Modi and Xi are charismatic, nationalist leaders, who pitch themselves as custodians of their national honour rooted in the ancient past. Both of them have tried to use that bond with the past to project and achieve their priorities. It may be reiterated that both India and China are not mere societies, but civilizations with shared history of over two thousand years.

As a matter of fact, the PM has put Buddhism at the heart of India's vigorous new diplomacy. During his visit, Modi reiterated that religion could be a valuable bond between Delhi and Beijing, thereby, highlighting the significance of cultural diplomacy. Modi's focus on Buddhism complements his efforts to accelerate economic growth and build new infrastructure facilities through the promotion of manufacturing and tourism within the country. Modi has projected Buddhism as one of India's bridge to China, which is evident from his statements at various instances in China.

Modi attended Yoga-Taichi event at the Temple of Heaven in Beijing accompanied by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang. Modi's advocacy of Yoga is another evidence of his soft power overtures towards China. Modi also inaugurated the Centre for Gandhian and Indian Studies at Fudan University. Throughout his visit, the central theme of his speeches and gestures was peaceful co-existence, harmony and mutual benefit. Inaugurating the Gandhian centre and attending Yoga session prove the point.

It has to be considered that a good relationship between the two giant neighbours is significant beyond the bilateral scope, given the fact that they have more than one third of world's population and they are the driving engine of global economic growth. Cooperation and stability of relations between China and India will not only benefit their people, but also lead to the rise of Asia.

India-China relations have been burdened by their border disputes for years. Modi's recently concluded tour offers a rare silver lining as it highlights the significance of 'culture' and 'soft power' in diplomacy. Modi's visit has been successful in stepping up ties with China and strengthening mutual trust through cultural diplomacy. In an increasingly globalised and interdependent world in which the use of mass communication technology ensures easy access to each other than ever before, cultural diplomacy is critical to develop peace and stability throughout the world. While Modi's overtures towards China have been remarkable, the onus lies on people of both countries to endeavour towards getting to know each other, and strengthen people-to-people linkages. This will contribute towards strong India-China relations.

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