

**ADDRESS BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA,
SHRI RAM NATH KOVIND
ON THE OCCASION OF INAUGURATION OF THE 6TH
INTERNATIONAL BUDDHIST CONCLAVE**

New Delhi, August 23, 2018

1. I am happy to be here for the inauguration of the International Buddhist Conclave 2018. This is a gathering of eminent personalities associated with Buddhist thought and scholarship, with Buddhist heritage and monuments, and with the tourism industry that does so much to facilitate the Buddhist travel and pilgrimage circuit. In particular, I would like to welcome the delegates from approximately 30 countries who have come to India for this Conclave, and who will be part of this event as well as events in Maharashtra, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh over the next three days.
2. I would also like to acknowledge the participation of Japan as a partner country in this Conclave. India and Japan have much in common, but there are few links we treasure as much as our shared Buddhist heritage. Through thousands of years of human existence, India has been a storehouse of history and culture, of faith and philosophy. Buddhism has been among India's greatest spiritual traditions. Many great locations associated with the life and teachings of Lord Buddha are found in India. These include Kapilvastu (Piprahwa), where he spent his childhood; Bodhgaya, where he attained Enlightenment; Sarnath, where he delivered his first sermon; and Kushinagar, where he embraced Mahaparinirvana.
3. Even after Lord Buddha's passing, monasteries, pilgrimage sites, universities and places of learning and worship that carried forward his work came up across India. Today Buddhist heritage sites are to be found in virtually every state

of India. Together these are known to pilgrims, religious tourists and fascinated travellers as the Buddhist Circuit.

4. The Buddhist Circuit in India is an important and revered set of destinations for the approximately 500 million-strong community of Buddhists that lives across Asia and other parts of the world. It is to facilitate such a travel and pilgrimage experience that this Conclave has been organised and that the website and film dedicated to the Buddhist Circuit have been formally launched.
5. The practice of cultural and religious travel and tourism is not new to India. It goes back thousands of years and in fact visits from Buddhist pilgrims, monks and scholars from other countries and civilisations have been a proud feature of our history. This has been mutually enriching, and in diverse ways. The voyage of Buddhism from India to Asia and the transcontinental links that were created carried more than just spiritualism. They carried a rich cargo of knowledge and learning. They carried arts and crafts. They carried meditation techniques and even martial arts. Eventually, the many roads that the monks and nuns - those men and women of faith - carved out became among the earliest trade routes. In that sense, Buddhism was the basis for an early form of globalisation – and of inter-connectedness in our continent.
6. It is these principles and values that must continue to guide us. I would emphasise that such thinking shapes the Indian tourism industry's approach to cultural and religious tourism. And it shapes the government of India's promotion of Buddhist-themed tourism.
7. Do consider some measures taken in this regard. The introduction and expansion of the e-visa scheme, which is an initiative of this government, facilitates among others those tourists coming to experience India's Buddhist legacy. The government is also making earnest efforts to develop Buddhist heritage sites as even more welcoming destinations.

I understand the Ministry of Tourism has identified the Buddhist Circuit as one of the thematic circuits for development under its Swadesh Darshan Scheme. Five projects, with a combined outlay of more than 350 crore rupees, have been sanctioned for the states of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh.

8. It goes without saying that the government cannot do everything on its own. Tourism is a multi-stakeholder enterprise. The private sector and civil society have substantial roles. And in terms of providing a safe and secure visitor experience, state and municipal administrations play a critical part. Of course, the business potential of tourism is immense. Across our world, this industry is a big job creator, especially for local households and local communities. In its essence, tourism, like Buddhism, is about people and empowering them to realise their potential.
9. In this context I am happy to note that the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, is organising an Investors' Summit as part of the Conclave. The objective is to finalise business and investment plans for developing world-class infrastructure in the Buddhist heritage sites that have been identified. I am confident that the delegates to the Investors' Summit, both from India and other countries, will give concrete shape to their proposals.
10. I would also like to acknowledge support from international agencies that have contributed to the development of tourist infrastructure in the Buddhist Circuit. The collaboration between the Japan International Cooperation Agency and the government of India for the Ajanta-Ellora Conservation and Tourism Development Project is worth mentioning. This will conserve one of our most remarkable cultural sites for future generations as well as enhance the tourist experience for those visiting the Ajanta and Ellora caves.

11. With loan assistance from the Japan International Cooperation Agency, the first phase of development of the Buddhist Circuit in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar too has been completed. The Union Ministry of Tourism and the state governments of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh are now cooperating with the International Finance Corporation, which is a part of the World Bank Group, on an integrated Buddhist Circuit Tourism Development Project. This will upgrade the quality of services for visitors.

12. In conclusion, I must emphasise that while we should take advantage of our strengths, we also need to overcome issues that are limiting us from scaling up. There are issues related to limited market research; limited interpretation; and inadequate exhibiting and presentation of the Buddhist Circuit's history and narrative. While air services have expanded in the past few years, last-mile connectivity, whether by way of road and rail, still has gaps that need to be filled. Pollution and environmental changes are other pressing concerns.

13. Despite these niggling problems, the potential is so large that it can only motivate us to move ahead with greater energy and vigour. I am confident that the combined expertise of the delegates at this Conclave, drawing inspiration from the wisdom and the problem-solving techniques of Lord Buddha, will lead our heritage tourism efforts to a more enlightened path. And with that, I wish the Conclave and its sessions and sub-events all success.

Thank you
Jai Hind!