Dharma Chakra Day

The Ministry of Culture, Government of India in partnership with International Buddhist Confederation (IBC) will celebrate the upcoming Asadha Poornima on 4th July, 2020 as Dharma Chakra Day.

The festivities would start off with chanting of prayers at Sarnath, Varanasi (U.P.) which will be livestreamed, following which the opening event will be shifted to the Rashtrapati Bhavan.

- The auspicious day of Asadha Poornima falls on the first full moon day of the month of Asadha as per Indian sun calendar.
- It is also known as Esala Poya in Sri Lanka and Asanha Bucha in Thailand. It is the second most sacred day for Buddhists after the Buddha Poornima or Vesak.
- The day marks Buddha's first teaching after attaining Enlightenment to the first five ascetic disciples (pañcavargika) on the full-moon day of Asadha at ‘Deer Park’, ¿i?ipatana in the current day Sarnath, near Varanasi, India.
- This teaching of Dhamma Cakka- PavattanaSutta (Pali) or Dharma chakra Pravartana Sutra (Sanskrit) is also known as the First Turning of Wheels of Dharma and comprised of the Four Noble Truths and Noble Eightfold Path.
- The Rainy Season retreat (Varsha Vassa) for the Monks and Nuns also starts with this day lasting for three lunar months from July to October, during which they remain in a single place, generally in their temples (Viharas/Chaityas) dedicated to intensive meditation.
- The day is also observed as Guru Poornima by both Buddhists and Hindus as a day to mark reverence to their Gurus.

Guru Purnima

- According to the Hindu calendar, Guru Purnima generally falls on a full-moon day in the Hindu month of Ashadh.
- It is dedicated to Maharshi Veda Vyasa, the sage who is believed to have edited the sacred Hindu text, the Vedas and created the 18 Puranas, Mahabharata and the Srimad Bhagavatam.
- For Buddhists, the festival marks the first sermon of Lord Buddha, which is said to have been delivered at Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh, on this very day.
- It is also believed to mark the onset of monsoons.

Buddhism and Diplomacy

- Buddhism has become an important tool in contemporary geopolitics.
particularly in Asia, and it has become increasingly evident that whoever controls the Buddhist discourse and activities will sway influence in Asia.

- The celebration of Dharma Chakra Day is being pushed as an event to show India’s strong Buddhist heritage amid tensions with China. It will see the virtual participation of leaders from major Buddhist countries, except China.
- The timing of the event is particularly important, because this is when both countries would like to resurrect their linkages with others. To show that like-minded countries are coming together sends across a message. What is however important is that one has to put in sustained effort at this, and have a relook at India-China policy with strategic cultural moves.
- The Central Tibetan Administration has asked Tibetan Buddhists to participate in the online event in large numbers to “support and appreciate” the effort.
- The Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) is an organisation headquartered in McLeod Ganj, Dharamshala, India. It is also referred to as the Tibetan Government in Exile which has never been recognized by China.
- The position of the CTA is that Tibet is a distinct nation with a long history of independence and it considers China's administration of Tibet as illegitimate military occupation. In addition to political advocacy, it administers a network of schools and other cultural activities for Tibetans in India.
- Meanwhile, the People’s Republic of China (PRC)'s World Buddhist Forum (WBF) has been hosting congregations of Buddhist monks since 2005. China's extensive infrastructure investment in Lumbini, Buddha’s birthplace in Nepal, is also seen as a strategic move to claim the Buddhist legacy.

While Buddhism might have vanished from India as a religion practised by many people, it is still a critical part of India's civilisational ethos.

There should be more Buddhist corridor including Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh and Arunachal Pradesh, apart from Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh. There could be nodal centres for people-to-people exchanges for those who come from South Korea, Taiwan and other countries. Although no other country can take Buddhist leadership away from India, the status of Buddhism in India is quite different now.

India has not been promoting its own Buddhist streams or strengthening the original Buddhism. Promoting anything else or any other brand than its own limits a genuine outreach. Promoting anything else becomes a subject of contestation, and the essence of using Buddhism as a diplomatic card gets lost.
Conclusion

There are also hundreds of millions of Chinese who have a deep devotion towards Buddhism. India needs to reach out to those Chinese constituencies too, for long term gains. After all, India conquered the hearts and minds of Chinese for 200 years without sending a single troop to China.