

Soft Power in India's Foreign Policy and Cultural Diplomacy to South East Asia

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Abstract: *In the twenty-first century, soft power and cultural diplomacy have gained popularity in the field of international affairs. India is therefore unable to avoid this global change. India, an ancient civilization with a rich cultural legacy, is drawing attention from all over the world with its amazing cultural diversity and exotic allure of spirituality, making it a potential center of soft power. For India, the idea of soft power is not a novel one. With its rich spiritual and material culture, India has long influenced the world and its neighbors. But in the last 20 years, following its economic boom, India has once again begun to reclaim its former allure. The government has recently begun investigating India's historic ties to the nations in the for the moment, the People's Republic of China, another old civilization nearby, is emerging quickly and breath taxingly, enthraling the entire globe with its astounding economic growth. Since the beginning of the Chinese dynasty, India has had a strong influence on Chinese philosophy and way of life through Buddhism. However, Indian Sanskrit writings and Vedic thought have also been translated into Chinese throughout history. The purpose of this article is to draw attention to India's longstanding cultural ties to East and Southeast Asian nations through maritime trade, as well as the proactive measures India has made to capitalize on these ties through its "Look East and Act East Policies." With the growing influence of China*

Keywords: *Cultural legacy, Chinese dynasty, Buddhism, Sanskrit writings*

Received : 06 January 2024

Revised : 17 February 2024

Accepted : 04 March 2024

Published : 30 June 2024

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Nayak, B.C. 2024. Soft Power in India's Foreign Policy and Cultural Diplomacy to South East Asia *South Asian History, Culture and Archaeology*, 4: 1, pp. 1-5.

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, soft power and cultural diplomacy have gained popularity in the field of international affairs. India is therefore unable to avoid this global change. India, an ancient civilization with a rich cultural legacy, is drawing attention from all over the world with its amazing cultural diversity and exotic allure of spirituality, making it a potential center of soft power. Even so, India is hardly a recent adopter of the idea of soft power. India's rich culture has long influenced the world and

its neighbors, but in the last 20 years, as its economy has grown, the country has once again begun to regain its former allure. The government has also recently been investigating India's longstanding ties to other Asian nations, particularly through marine trade. For the moment, the People's Republic of China, another old civilization nearby, is emerging quickly and breathtakingly, enthraling the entire globe with its astounding economic growth. Since the beginning of the Chinese dynasty, India has had a strong influence on Chinese philosophy and way of life through Buddhism. However, Indian Sanskrit writings and Vedic thought have also been translated into Chinese throughout history. The purpose of this article is to draw attention to India's longstanding cultural ties to East and Southeast Asian nations through maritime trade, as well as the proactive measures India has made to capitalize on these ties through its 'Look East and Act East Policies.' Additionally, in an effort to restore India's long-standing leadership role in the region, it will look at possible areas of strategic cooperation that may be included into its foreign policy.

India and the Southeast Asian nations have deep historical, cultural, and spiritual ties. The study attempts to assess the effectiveness of the Modi government's 'Act East Policy' and the use of soft power to increase Indian influence in the region against the backdrop of growing Chinese influence in the area. The study evaluates India's soft power strategy in the area and offers suggestions for potential enhancements to position India as a significant smart power going forward.

The Power of Soft Power

In the field of international relations, soft power is mostly examined and understood in relation to realities that are security-oriented, economic, and commercial, as well as those that are politico-diplomatic. Conventional approaches to international relations have neglected the socio-cultural aspects of its research and interpretation in favor of what is known as power politics. During the Cold War and especially during world wars, this method was widely used. Globalization and the end of the Cold War, however, have compelled us to reevaluate the processes of international politics through a far broader lens. The end of the Cold War brought about a significant shift in the global order as well as national foreign policy approaches. The way that international relations were theorized also underwent a significant change. In order to comprehend the dynamics of the international system better, we observe that scholars and practitioners of international relations are taking diverse approaches. Whether or not international relations can be scientifically comprehended using scientific instruments and methodologies is the central question of discussion. Post positivists, on the other hand, disagreed with positivists who thought it could be. Nonetheless, normative components like culture one of the essential components of soft power play a decisive role in modern international relations, regardless of our adherence to the views of positivists or post positivists.

The literature on the global dimensions of identity politics is growing and centers on the relationship between transnational links and conflict, the function of international organizations, foreign intervention, and conflict resolution. A growing body of research is being done directly on the connection between culture and international politics, frequently looking at how culture functions in cross-border negotiations. However, there hasn't been much systematic focus on how cultural considerations affect foreign policy decisions. Joseph Nye, arguing that culture may be a source of power, also emphasized the significance of culture in the 1990s. In his book *Bound to Lead*, he promoted the idea of "soft power," which he developed by combining culture and other elements. Nye suggests that the outdated notion that using force is the only effective way to get what one wants is no longer relevant in today's world politics.vii He suggests that an actor has additional tools of power in addition to the conventional ones, such as the ability to draw others with their alluring cultural, philosophical, or

spiritual qualities. And this attraction, whether ideological or cultural, is the soft power that makes the promise to achieve one's objective without using force. Hard power, therefore, is based on inducements and threats, or 'carrots' and 'sticks,' but soft power persuades others to follow due to the attraction of another's way of life. Naturally, Nye is by no means the first to acknowledge that one might exercise authority without threatening others or offering rewards. Prominent scholars and political scientists such as Foucault, Bourdieu, Gramsci, and others have also expounded upon manifestations of 'soft' power. Because soft power is a supplement to traditional hard power and because it uses influence to legitimize a nation's ideology or policies on a global scale. Even international relations experts have readily embraced the idea of a 'softer' form of power. However, in today's foreign policy circles and mainstream scholarship, it is Nye's account

Cultural Diplomacy towards South East Asia:

India is a global treasure trove of civilizations, philosophies, religions, and history. India is one of the most sought-after travel destinations because of the widespread interest in seeing and experiencing these resources. As a tourist commodity, Buddhist pilgrimages have enormous potential and are important for generating livelihoods, integrating politics, and enabling the economy. From the Ganges valley, from when Buddhist tourism originated and expanded throughout the nation and the world, one may notice the national setting of this industry. From the standpoint of tourism, the Indian subcontinent offers the "historical," or more genuine, product because it is home to Buddha's travels and the first stages of the development of "ethics and thought," whereas the rest of South Asia concentrates more on Buddha. Therefore, the Indian Subcontinent has a stronger advantage in terms of product positioning, even while the rest of Asia gets a peek at the 'New Buddhism.' Although the political and geographical makeup's of the countries that make up the Indian subcontinent vary, the main members are India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka. Meanwhile, the Buddhist legacy in other countries continues to flourish despite the socio-political unrest that surrounds them.

Independent India's acknowledgement of the value of cultural diplomacy in its foreign policy is shown in the establishment of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR). It has acted as a connecting link between Indians and people in other countries ever since it was founded in 1950. By effectively exhibiting and endorsing the richness of Indian civilization and culture, as well as its legacy, it has attempted to establish a connection between people worldwide and India. By developing and putting into practice policies for enhancing India's cultural linkages with the outside world, it seeks to support the growth of India's external cultural and political ties. Additionally, it has established its objectives to strengthen cultural ties with other nations and foster a deeper understanding of India; to expand people-to-people exchanges and enhance India's relations with other nations. The ICCR has expanded its reach by establishing cultural centers throughout multiple regions of over 35 nations. The Indian government's Ministries of External Affairs and Culture are attempting to spread India's soft power alongside these nations by means of signing multiple bilateral cultural agreements and putting cultural exchange programs into place. The importance of culture as a potent tool for spreading soft power is highlighted by the words of Dr. Karan Singh, the former President of the ICCR: 'Using culture to interact with the masses has been the most effective way to win hearts in the era of globalization.' Culture knows no bounds.(Sahai (2013)

The Indian government has begun to resurrect and employ its historic cultural heritage as a source of soft power throughout the past 20 years. 'There has been growing popular interest in India's culture from yoga to cuisine and from Bollywood to contemporary art,' according to C. Raja Mohan, 'amidst India's globalization and the intensification of its global footprint since the 1990s.'(Mohan, 2015).

India began to engage with nearly every nation in South East Asia through cultural partnerships. It signed official cultural agreements with Malaysia in 1978, the Philippines in 1969, Vietnam in 1976, and Laos in 1994, and Myanmar in 2001 and the United Kingdom in 2010, and so on. Additionally, India now has formal avenues for engagement with these nations through a variety of cultural diplomacy initiatives, including performances, cultural exchange programs, and cultural activities. These agreements are bilateral in nature. Indian cultural events are also frequently arranged by Indian embassies and consulates in these Southeast Asian nations. The Indian government also provides support for cultural troupes to tour other nations. Various nations are receiving cultural troupes. With the growing popularity of Indian cinema in mind, there are occasionally Indian film festivals. Additionally, the government provides financing and support for the cultural troops to travel different countries.

- Improving India's trade, economic, and cultural ties with other countries is the main goal of the Indian government's cultural diplomacy policy. The main themes include:
- The annual 'Pravasi Diwas' aims to establish a single forum for the vast Indian diaspora living abroad and to link present-day India with them. Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas has been celebrated in January each year since 2003.
- The goal of 'Brand India' is to present a more favorable image of the country to the world. The term 'Brand India' now refers to the marketing strategy India is employing to draw in foreign investors and trading partners.
- The Indian government launched the Know India Programme (KIP) at Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) on January 8, 2014, for the youth of Overseas Indian descent (ages 18 to 26). KIP provides a special opportunity for young professionals and students of Indian descent to gain a deep understanding of their heritage and culture by travel to India, where they may exchange ideas, expectations, and firsthand experiences. This allows them to forge closer bonds with modern-day India.
- The 1943-founded Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) is an event organizer that also plans academic conferences. By means of consistent intellectual endeavors and collaboration, it endeavors to establish connections with global think tanks and cultivate an improved international perception of India.

Policies of the Indian government place more emphasis on spiritualism than religion. In an attempt to find mental calm amidst the mechanical and stressful lifestyle of today, individuals all around the world are becoming drawn to Indian spiritualism, yoga, vegetarianism, and other practices. Indian impact has been felt all over the world thanks to the captivating global audience that the country's film industry and other artistic forms have long commanded. Nye's notion of soft power states that political principles provide a significant resource for any nation's soft power, in addition to culture and foreign policy. Any nation's soft power is derived from its core ideals, which include democracy, pluralism, secularism, and federalism and upon which the Indian state is built. India undoubtedly has an advantage over autocratic China in terms of extending their soft power impact due to their democratic political system (Lee, 2010, Kugiel, 2017). Additionally, according to Kugiel (2010), Joseph Nye acknowledged that 'democratic India has passed the test which China has not yet taken.'

Conclusions

The Buddhist tradition not only offers a strong economic tie-up but also unites these diverse cultures into a unified fabric of regional cooperation, supporting cultural engagement, peace, and solidarity. This

is particularly relevant now as India's Look East Policy is materializing into various action-oriented deliverables. For the 450 million practicing Buddhists as well as tourists drawn to the Buddhist Circuit for its rich history, culture, and customs,

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