

CONTOURS OF INDIA'S CULTURE-BASED FOREIGN POLICY IN SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

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ABSTRACT:

India has always been the embodiment of cultural heritage and stands tall as a testament to the resilience and diversity of its true multi-coloured culture and traditions. India's extensive cultural heritage, ranging from the profound spiritual teachings of ancient texts such as the Vedas, Mahabharata, and Ramayana, to the intricate artistry of classical dance forms like Bharatnatyam and Kathakali, as well as diverse religions including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, has collectively woven a rich tapestry of history, tradition, and innovation. India has harnessed its rich cultural heritage for centuries to constructively cultivate and fortify relationships with neighboring and other nations. A deep, longstanding cultural and historical bond connects India to the countries of South and Southeast Asia, stemming from ancient trade networks, religious interactions, and cultural exchanges. The paper serves as an introduction to various aspects related to India's culture-based foreign policy in South and Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy, South Asia, Soft Power, Civilization, Foreign Policy

INTRODUCTION

In the age of competition and contest for dominance among nation-

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states talk on cultural diplomacy looks a little out of place. But the term has occupied the attention of scholars and diplomats alike. After Joseph Nye introduced the concept “soft power” in the late 1980’s, it propelled the discussion in the academic discourse as a new narrative in foreign policy (Nye, 1990). Nye looked at the question of whether ideas, values, languages, and other elements have the power to persuade, convince and attract the opposition (Nye, 1990). While hard power seeks to dominate through coercion, soft power refers to the ability to get things done using non-hard power (Wilson, 2008). It was on this proposition that scholars started discussions on cultural diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy refers to the exchange of ideas and values between nation-states to win them to their side (Tharoor, 2012; Wagner, 2010). So, the important question is; do cultural ingredients as a whole or even a small unit of it influence the diplomacy of a nation-state? Do these elements carry any weight in international politics where nations have been engaged in the preservation and promotion of hard power to dominate the world? Do language, religion, art, and music play any role in influencing the foreign policy of a nation? Often, we have seen the heads of states gifting cultural and spiritual artefacts to visiting dignitaries. Similarly, countries have now started cultural fests in their countries to understand each other where dance and literature, forms of arts and music engage and interact on the same political or literary platform. These remind us of the fundamental question: does culture play a role in shaping inter-state relations? Does it carry weight to harmonize the relations between the countries that belong to the same cultural genre? Do the co-religionists have better inter-state understanding and lasting friendship compared to the nation-states who do not have a common meeting ground?

There is no quick one-line answer to this question. Europe has one dominant religion but Christianity did not assure that there will be no war between the two Christian countries or they will have better relations just because they belong to the same religion. Today, Iran and Israel are engaged in a war-like situation, but in 1948 Iran was the country which had given diplomatic recognition to Israel. Afghanistan under the regime of the Taliban is not very friendly with Pakistan which sponsored and supported them in their regain of power in Afghanistan. Buddhist China does not have good relations with Buddhist Bhutan. And the Hindu-dominated Nepal does not have the same

warmness towards India that it held till a few decades back. The language of past warmness, affinity and proximity seldom work when sovereign interests of the nation-states come to the fore.

In the context of the complex geopolitical landscape of the 21st century, it is crucial to understand and analyze the intricate interplay between culture and diplomacy to strengthen India's culture-driven foreign policy, with a particular focus on South and Southeast Asian nations (Pande, 2021). The two-day international seminar that was conducted on the broader theme "India's Culture-based Foreign Policy in South and Southeast Asia" provided an opportunity to delve deeper into the profound impact of India's cultural diplomacy as a critical component of its foreign policy, which aims to fortify the overall relationship with all the stakeholder nations in South and Southeast Asia. In this era of Amrit Kaal, under the leadership of the Honourable Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, India's vision for the next 25 years is filled with optimism and confidence. Over the past 75 years, India has made significant strides in aligning its foreign policy towards South and Southeast Asian nations, evolving from the SAARC framework to the "Neighbourhood First Policy," and from the "Look East Policy" to the "Act East Policy" (Singh, 2019; Singh et al., 2022). This shift in India's foreign policy towards these regions embodies its vision of building a global family, or "*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*". The papers of this special issue are selected from the international seminar on "India's Culture-based Foreign Policy in South and Southeast Asia" that was held on 11-12 March 2024 at the University of Delhi with generous support from the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi. The seminar sought to comprehensively explore India's culture-based foreign policy and dissect its multifaceted dimensions in developing robust diplomatic relations with all the nations of South and Southeast Asia, during this critical juncture of the complex geopolitical landscape.

INDIA'S CIVILIZATION HERITAGE AND FOREIGN POLICY

The culture and the civilization of India go beyond the materialism and scientific approach to history that is essentially Eurocentric. Indian foreign policy seeks to accentuate its cultural heritage and questions the traditional

cartography imaginations of the West. Moving away from the ‘territorial trap’ of International Relations, India presents itself as a ‘civilizational state’ (Agnew, 1994; Gurumurthy, 2020). Drawing from its ancient cultural and civilizational roots, India’s significant role in the promotion of soft power and cultural diplomacy has been well-recognised globally. India has been a pioneer in employing cultural diplomacy as a soft power tool in influencing its geopolitics, particularly in South and Southeast Asian nations. The region’s rich cultural heritage and its diverse traditions have allowed easy synchronization with India’s diverse traditions and culture including yoga, spirituality and religion, cuisine, cinema, and art and literature. It enables India to foster and strengthen its diplomatic and cultural relations with the countries in the region apart from enhancing its global image as a soft power giant (Kugiel, 2017). Therefore, India’s significant emphasis on cultural diplomacy in the recent past especially under the leadership of honourable Prime Minister Narendra Modi has successfully enabled it to persuade and attract countries across the globe including South and Southeast Asian nations rather than coercion or force. UNESCO’s recognition of 21st June of every year as the “International Yoga Day” is a testament to India being a global leader in soft power diplomacy (Mukherjee, 2019).

According to the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India, “soft power” means “the ability to influence others through appeal and attraction, using non-coercive means” (MEA, 2022). The diverse cultural heritage that is manifest in art and dance forms, literature, and yoga, allows India to use cultural diplomacy as an effective foreign policy tool in strengthening its relations with these countries. The concept of “cultural diplomacy,” refers to “the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding” (Cummings, 2009; Clarke, 2020). Through this foreign policy approach, since independence India has been successfully employing cultural diplomacy in a multipronged manner. Understanding the significance of culture in promoting peace and strengthening diplomatic relations with the rest of the world, India established the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) in 1950 as an “institutionalized framework” in its pursuit of cultural diplomacy and soft power (ICCR, 2022). The approach is particularly relevant in the

South and Southeast Asian region as ICCR operates 12 international centres encompassing the region. It underscores India's commitment in strengthening its relations through cultural diplomacy as ICCR is mainly responsible for India's global cultural relations through cultural exchange with other countries and its people (ICCR, 2022).

The recent 18th G-20 summit hosted by India manifests its soft power with the theme *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* which means "One Earth, One Family, One Future" (RIS, 2023). This philosophy has been inspired by the Indian ancient text "Maha Upanishad" (Rasheed, 2021). It means that "the world is one family" (RIS, 2023) and all the inhabitants in the entire world are interconnected. The primary objective of the philosophy is to promote values of universal brotherhood, unity and integrity regardless of race, religion or nationality (RIS, 2023). In fact, *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* is the precursor to the present-day terminology of Global Citizenship. Moreover, through archaeological traces in the form of coinage with Hindu deities and linguistic closeness, India and the South and Southeast Asian region have civilizational linkages. For example, remnants were found in multiple places such as Angkor Wat in Cambodia, and Ta Prohm in Thailand (Saran, 2018). There is also a strong civilizational connection with India and the region through the epic "Ramayana." The old capital city of Thailand *Ayutthaya* is believed to be designed based on Rama's birthplace "Ayodhya" (Saran, 2018). *Ramayana* is known by different names in the region, namely "*Kakawin Ramayana*" in Indonesia and "*Ramayana Hikayat Seri Rama*" in Malay (Saran, 2018). All these historical connections highlight India's enduring engagement with culture as a tool in managing its diplomatic ties with countries in the region.

The influence of Buddhism as a religion after the 5th century in South and Southeast Asia also underscores India's long-lasting impact in the region. Approximately, 190 million-205 million Buddhists reside in this region thereby making Buddhism the second-largest religion after Islam (Srihamongkhon, 2022). As Buddhism is one of the primary religions for most of the countries in the region, establishing a cultural and religious soft power diplomacy is of great significance. Considering this broader cultural and religious context, India's new "Act East Policy" which is a reformed "Look East Policy" puts "culture"

as one of the four central pillars (Bajpae, 2022). This new foreign policy initiative brings cultural diplomacy to the forefront particularly emphasizing the South and Southeast Asian region.

The Indian diaspora in the region plays a significant role in strengthening its cultural and diplomatic relations. With a sizable population of 9%, 8%, 4% and 0.5% in Singapore, Malaysia, Myanmar and Indonesia respectively (Mishra, 2024), the Indian diaspora in these countries holds tremendous economic and political clout. Some of the prominent Indian origin include former Singapore's president S.R. Nathan and its Deputy Prime Minister S. Jayakumar. Hence, it clearly indicates the Indian diaspora's profound imprint on the overall landscape in the region by enriching the diversity and promoting cross-cultural exchanges.

Another prominent tool of India's soft power is "Yoga." Even though India's spirituality has had a global presence for centuries, the recent recognition of *Yoga* by UNESCO in 2014 and the celebration of 21st June every year as International Yoga Day since 2015 (Mukherjee, 2019). highlights the significance of promoting and integrating spirituality and wellbeing through yoga thereby aligning with the broader objectives of "*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam.*" Moreover, Indian cinema, particularly Bollywood, enjoys a large international audience. Indian films have successfully reached viewers in a variety of nations, promoting cross-cultural exchanges and expanding India's soft power reach (Ghosh, 2011).

FACETS OF INDIA'S CULTURE-BASED FOREIGN POLICY IN SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

The cultural basis of India's foreign policy in South and Southeast Asia manifests in several ways. This special issue of the journal covers a wide range of areas that pertain to India's cultural diplomacy. It not only comprises soft power as the main discourse of cultural diplomacy. The special issue tries to encapsulate various nuances of cultural diplomacy which is beyond the pretext of the theory of soft power. In this context, we incorporate many critical understandings and trajectories to make sense of cultural diplomacy,

especially in the context of India's engagement in South and Southeast Asia. It is hoped that the contributions included in this issue are not just a snapshot of the area of study rather we intend to understand cultural diplomacy with clear theories and practices with a keen critical overview of challenges and prospects of cultural diplomacy in South and Southeast Asia.

The first article attempts to find the opposition's voice in India. To do so, the article analyses Syama Prasad Mookerjee's significance from an Indian political opposition standpoint in Indian foreign policy through the Korean War. The analysis is provided through archival research of primary sources and data. S.P. Mookerjee emphasised that Indian foreign policy needs considerable revision, and the Korean conflict's fundamental problem is Korea's division and also follows the views of Hindu Mahasabha and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Therefore, India needs to follow the policy of a united Korea. His views on bloc politics is also examined where he saw the world as big enough for all ideologies to co-exist. There is a need to call for greater engagement of the voices of India's opposition parties. S.P. Mookerjee's role and relevance in the evolution of principal foreign policy is a severely understudied field and the article makes an excellent attempt at filling this void.

The second article tries to analyze India's utilization of cultural diplomacy as a strategic soft power tool towards the Maldives. It further examines the role and impact of India's cultural diplomacy in fostering bilateral relations and navigating the challenges posed by the Maldives' tilt towards China. The political ties between India and the Maldives reflect a commitment to regional stability, economic growth, and cultural understanding. However, the recent political landscape has witnessed a notable shift, primarily catalyzed by the election of Mohammad Muizzu as the new President of the Maldives. India's cultural diplomacy emerges not only as a key component of its foreign policy towards the Maldives but as a strategic response to the geopolitical challenges posed by the Maldives' tilt towards China. As India and the Maldives navigate the complexities of their evolving relationship, cultural diplomacy assumes a paramount role in deciphering the deeper nuances and contributing to the broader realm of their bilateral ties.

The third article delves into the potential of the North Eastern Region

of India to build soft power across Southeast Asian nations and the world. In this study, the role of cultural sensitivity in public diplomacy under the Act East Policy, with special reference to Northeast India is explored. The research delves into the challenges in promoting cultural sensitivity due to NER's historical complexities, and diversity. Thus, a paradigm for diplomacy that upholds mutual tolerance embraces diversity, and fosters the cultural ties that bind Northeast India with South East Asian countries is suggested.

The fourth article tries to explore how far trust and capacity building in Southeast Asia could be enhanced by leveraging soft power diplomacy through the strong foothold of the Indian diaspora community. As an ambitious player, India is working to mitigate the economic and strategic challenges in the present world order and the emergence of Southeast Asia. Strategically connecting with the rest of Asia and Southeast Asia is imperative for India, given that this region is not just one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, but also a new destination for multinational companies. The Indian influence in Southeast Asia has deep historical roots and is often described as "Indianising." This influence extends to various aspects of the Southeast Asian world, including social, cultural, and religious elements. Indian diaspora play an integral role in the economic and political life of the receiving societies, leading to the emergence of diasporic consciousness while continuing a strong connection with their native country.

Learning from the past is inevitable and applying it in the present is unmatched, India and South East Asia in the era of the Act East initiative substantiates vis-à-vis commercial, security, and cooperative relations between the two landscapes. The fifth article discusses the learning from Pattinappalai of Sangam literature which encapsulates the cultural influences, people-people exchange, literature traditions, and culinary exchanges as a cosmopraxis ontological way for an expansionist regime of the past that had an inclusive relation via sea and how it can be utilized for the Indian state as the emerged proposer of universality and thriving for a human-centred global system. Bridging the gap between dissimilarities within nations, the emergence of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam during G20, as a philosophical move towards the global level by the presidency, but here we are concerning the

South east might face serious difficulties in many areas in achieving the ideal. The cosmopolitanism of Imperial Cholas can be matched with the ideal of ‘World as a Family’ proclaimed by India, which due to its utopic tendency in this modern era could be impossible, unlike the past.

The sixth article, analyses contemporary Indian engagement in East Asia (that is Southeast Asia and the larger Indo-Pacific) to argue that it is a revival of the ancient Indian cultural traditions to emerge as a leading power in the world, shaping the narrative correspondingly. At the same time, the means to the end are strongly value-driven, which are drawn from its identity as a civilisational state. The study would focus on the maritime initiatives as well as engagement with the diaspora in Southeast Asia and further east. India’s engagement with the East was systemically revived under the aegis of the Look East Policy, which has been renamed to Act East Policy, signifying greater strategic attention to this geography. The Indian strategic policies or diplomatic efforts in contemporary times mark a break from the earlier decades characterised by reticence in security partnerships, particularly arms sales. There is a greater, conscientious effort at engaging the world in full spectrum, best exemplified by naval engagements in the form of Ex. Milan, Ex. Malabar. Unlike Nehruvian policy, the current diplomacy actively seeks to engage and nurture the Indian Diaspora in the Indo-Pacific. While such foreign policy transformation has been seen as something new, it is however a revival of the traditional Indian statecraft that had global connections, far and wide. The flagship policies and initiatives like the International Solar Alliance, India’s G20 presidency, adoption of the Indo-Pacific narrative, etc. are indicative of India’s value-based statecraft, albeit the underlying *realpolitik*.

The significance of culture accentuated through popular channels of cinema and music has a major impact on how India is presented and represented. The seventh article attempts to situate India’s cultural diplomacy through the ‘aesthetic approach’ in International Relations. It attempts to explain the interplay of aesthetics, performativity, and soft power projection focusing on Bollywood’s role in shaping India’s impact in South Asia. Utilizing the constructivist approach, the paper emphasizes the role and significance of ideas, beliefs, and identities. Through an analysis of two popular Bollywood

movies, *Pardes* and *DDLJ*, the paper seeks to explore how cinematic productions contribute towards symbolic representation. Another aspect that the paper touches upon relates to the retention of cultural practices and values indicative of India's strategic autonomy while preserving its global diplomatic ties. The paper uses discourse analysis on some popular songs and scenes to examine the influence of Bollywood in maneuvering India's soft power in its foreign policy discourse.

CONCLUSION

India's soft power and cultural diplomacy have contributed in enhancing its relationship with the South and Southeast Asian countries since time immemorial. The region has preserved many Indian cultural and religious traits. Traces of India's rich cultural and religious past are found in the customs, religious life and monuments of the region (Mishra, 2021). The strong age-old connection between the two regions has set a new paradigm in their relationship in this age of rapid globalization and the increasing interconnectedness among nations.

Lastly, the competing global environment destabilizes the overall international relations justifying the realist perspective of an anarchic state. The prevailing situation in the South and Southeast Asian region also highlights the same. Therefore, it is pertinent to bring a viable alternative approach to mitigate the conflicting nature of the region. Hence, India's foreign policy approach putting cultural diplomacy as one of the cornerstones signifies its commitment to an inclusive and reliable conflict resolution mechanism rather than coercion.

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