

BHARAT'S TOURISM DIPLOMACY: BRIDGING CONNECTIONS WITH SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Abstract

This article examines Bharat's tourism diplomacy towards the region of Southeast Asia. Bharat has historically relied on its non-aligned foreign policy, dynamic democracy, and rich culture as the cornerstones of its soft power. India views Southeast Asia in particular as a crucial location from where it receives its soft power derived from a common culture that has been developed over more than two thousand years. This paper investigates the ways in which these cultures prepared the ground for India's growing influence in the region of Southeast Asia through tourism diplomacy. Bharat's tourism diplomacy emerges as a critical tool for increasing Bharat's influence in Southeast Asia. Additionally, tourism boosts confidence in Bharat and ASEAN's connection, and the two countries are taking steps to expand the tourism industry. This paper also highlights the importance of connectivity projects and infrastructural development. The foundation for a nation's tourism industry's sustainable growth is its infrastructure, that is why Bharat is constantly working to improve this area. Bharat is organizing events and marketing campaigns to ensure that an increasing number of tourists are drawn from the Southeast Asian region. This paper examines Southeast Asia's cultural exchanges with India as well as India's soft power. Although India has impacted ASEAN nations for the past two millennia, the government is currently taking steps to improve ties between the two regions. There are numerous barriers in the way of this relationship's growth and India's increased influence among the ASEAN nations. This also examines the obstacles that India must overcome in order to become more influential among the ASEAN nations. It thoroughly examines potential solutions to these problems.

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Introduction

In a general sense diplomacy refers to the peaceful management of statecraft through negotiation and persuasive methods. Diplomacy is regarded as one of the fundamental mechanisms that define the international system and the system of sovereign states through negotiations and persuasive methods. It is also referred to as the "Westphalian" system in honour of the *Peace of Westphalia*, signed in 1648 (Lee & Hocking, 2011). The first place, where, such negotiations took place was the Fertile Crescent, where envoys from the Egyptian court and other Near Eastern kings corresponded with one another. The modern diplomacy started with the Peace of Westphalia, which was signed in 1648 CE, put an end to the Thirty Years' War and ensured the independence of every state. Since then, the definition of diplomacy has expanded to encompass more casual exchanges among a wider range of foreign personalities and formal discussions between embassies, consulates, and career diplomats. In actuality, cultural activities and tourism are included in the broad definitions of diplomacy used today (Baranowski et al., 2019).

Tourism is an important sector that can develop many sectors of the economy of a country from agriculture to livestock and from construction to infrastructure. It is not limited to the economic sector only. It can also influence the harmonious relations between people, the cultural life of a country, the international reputation and prestige of a country, and the functioning of its foreign policy at the same time. Because tourism affects the economies of the nations, it is now considered a topic of discussion amongst high-level foreign affairs committees. The tourism sector is continuously rising because of factors like globalization, and countries also working to improve this sector (Jalalpour & Shojaeifar, 2017). Tourism diplomacy is used for the promotion of tourism sectors and to solve a specific problem which is related to a destination crisis between two or more nations or among nations using tourism's soft power. Its

nonviolent argument and flexible methodology enhance the philosophy of international relations and diplomacy as well as the significance and functions of tourism (Muhia, 2023).

Bharat's (India's) cultural and artistic resources have long been praised and arranged as the source of tourists' curiosity. Nowadays, the bureaucracy and the government portray tourism as "an engine of growth" and as a great way to create jobs and earn foreign currency. The many forms of tourism that are popular in Bharat, such as medical, eco, wildlife, heritage, pilgrimage, marine, river, and educational travel, have shown to be effective in putting the country on the map of world travel destinations. Through various tourism initiatives like *Incredible Bharat 2.0*, *UDAAN Regional Connectivity Scheme* (which helped increase tourism to remote regions), *Hop in Hop Out buses*, which are popular in Delhi, Nagar Darshan schemes in various Indian cities, and involving NGOs and private investments in promoting regional tourism, the image of Bharat as a haven for leisure and traditional knowledge systems have been integrated (Babu, 2020).

Bharat has had excellent links with the nations of Southeast Asia since ancient times, and their long-standing relationship has been based on maritime trade. These interactions between the peoples of Bharat and Southeast Asian countries resulted in substantial cultural exchanges and finally resulted in a blending of Bharat's culture with the local culture of Southeast Asia. For thousands of years, people, ideas, and things have been moving from Bharat to Southeast Asia. The great degree of movement in seaborne trade and the eventual settlement by the Indian diaspora made this blending of cultures conceivable (Singh, 2023). This development paved the way for the development of the Tourism sector between Bharat and Southeast Asia.

Bharat's tourism diplomacy towards Southeast Asia is an important aspect of its broader foreign policy. When it comes to civilizations, heritages, structures, languages, and scenic landscapes, Bharat and Southeast Asia have a lot to offer tourists. Bharat tries to attract tourists from Southeast Asia and also makes her policy more convenient for the easy access of tourists from the countries of this region. Since ASEAN and Bharat celebrated their 30th anniversary of partnership in 2022, exploring the possibility of collaborating on tourism will

be quite advantageous. In 2012, the ASEAN and Bharat signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to enhance their tourist cooperation and a protocol to alter the MoU was signed in 2013. In the tourism sector, the protocol and the MoU have been designed to promote proactive collaboration (Kundu, 2021).

This paper analyses Bharat's tourism diplomacy as a means of expanding its influence among the nations of Southeast Asia. Tourism plays a significant role in increasing country's influence at a root level. This paper emphasizes how crucial the tourist industry is to the development of any nation's economy and other sectors. The historical and cultural underpinnings of Southeast Asian (ASEAN) nations and Bharat are covered in the first section of the paper. The current relationships between these two were made possible by their shared historical background. Due to the similarities between the two cultures, culture is the most significant aspect of their relationship how these two countries' shared culture strengthens their diplomatic ties. Since ASEAN and Bharat are key partners, this analysis will focus on the initiatives that these two countries have taken to strengthen the tourism industry. Next, this paper examines how crucial infrastructure is to the boot tourism industry, as well as the connections that connect it. Promotional campaigns and events also help to boost the tourism sector between these two. This paper analyses the events and promotional campaigns between Bharat and ASEAN. Tourism plays a significant role in increasing the soft power of a country. So, with the help of tourism, Bharat is trying to increase its influence in ASEAN.

Cultural Foundations of India-Southeast Asia Relations

Historical links and cultural exchanges between Bharat and Southeast Asia are deeply rooted since ancient times. Southeast Asia is the land of wealth; it attracts Bhartiya to its holy place. The geographical proximity also helps Bhartiya to spread its religion, art, culture, and language in this region. This region is described as a land of gold (*suvarnavipa*), island of gold (*suvarnabhumi*), island of coconuts (*narikeladvipa*), island of camphor (*karpuradvipa*) and island of barley (*yavadvipa*) in the Ramayana, Pali Nidesa and other classical texts (Mishra, 2021). So, the connections between Southeast Asian countries and Bharat are not new. It has been there since

ancient times. This relationship paves the way for the development of the tourism sector, and it is beneficial for both of them.

Bharat and Southeast Asia have a special bond that has been created and altered by many historical events. Faithful followers of Hinduism and Buddhism travelled to southeast Asia by sea and land via South Asia, resulting in the blending of the regional faiths with distinctive Indigenous characteristics. For instance, although Indonesia has the world's biggest Muslim population, the official emblem of the nation is the mythical bird known as the Garuda from Hindu and Buddhist mythology. Apart from being the primary airline of Indonesia, Garuda is also reflected in the wayang, the traditional puppet culture of Java, and an imposing, elaborate statue located in the Prambanan Temple. Thailand, a nation with a large Buddhist population, is another place where the Garuda is widely seen. There, it is more mythologically depicted with a human torso and red feathers. These kinds of cultural exchanges and representations take place at Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport, the capital of Thailand. Here, foreign visitors are welcomed by a magnificent mythical display depicting the Samudra Manthan, or the churning of the ocean, which draws heavily from Hindu mythology (Bhattacharya, 2020).

These cross-cultural interactions began when the merchant class, Buddhist monks, and Hindu priests brought Bhartiya philosophy and culture to every part of Southeast Asia. Because they were apolitical and lived in ashrams and hermitages, the villagers welcomed them. Bharat's civilization, culture and religion, therefore expanded across Southeast Asia as a result of the numerous trips that merchants, monks, and Hindu Brahmin priests made to distant kingdoms like Cambodia and Indonesia. The deeper local culture's absorption of Bhartiya political ideology, literature, religion, artistic motifs, mythology, and style occurred with increased contact with Bhartiya who established in South East Asia's kingdoms. Buddhism arrived in Southeast Asia from Bharat during the 3rd century BCE, when King Ashok send Buddhist monks to this place (Sengupta, 2017).

Partnership and Engagement between Bharat and ASEAN

Tourism is a vital aspect of the healthy relationship between Bharat and the Southeast Asian countries (ASEAN). Both Bharat and ASEAN understand the benefit of the tourism industry for the growth of the national economy. Tourism also enhances a country's influence in other regions through people-to-people connections. With the passage of time, they developed a comprehensive network of tourism cooperation and signed numerous agreements for the increase of the tourism sector in both areas.

Encourage ongoing talks between Bharat and ASEAN to develop tourism cooperation further. Examples of these talks include joint marketing and promotion, conferences, workshops and meetings; sharing of resources and best practices in the tourism industry, such as human resource development; practicing sustainable and responsible tourism; exchanging information about tourism; handling crises; investing in tourism and jointly promoting tourism in niche markets and promoting tourism standards. To increase opportunities for cooperative promotion of integrated tourism markets and cooperative investment, encourage the private sectors of ASEAN and Bharat to participate more in the annual ASEAN Tourism Forum (ATF), ASEAN Travex, and Professional International Travel Marts held in the ASEAN Member States and Bharat (Plan of Action, n.d.).

As a "Sectoral Dialogue Partner" (conversation at the secretarial level) in 1992 Bharat first formally engaged with ASEAN. In 1995, it became a "Dialogue Partner." The first years of being a Dialogue Partner (DP) involved communication at the level of Foreign Ministers, and in 2002, the first summit-level meeting took place. During the 20th Commemorative Summit Meeting at New Delhi in December 2012, our Dialogue Partnership was elevated to a Strategic Partnership (Bried on ASEAN, n.d.). At the 24th ASEAN-Bharat Joint Cooperation Committee (AIJCC) Meeting, which took place today at ASEAN Headquarters, ASEAN and Bharat reiterated their commitment to fostering their long-standing cooperation (ASEAN, India, 2024).

In 2012, ASEAN and Bharat signed a MoU to enhance their tourist cooperation (Brief on ASEAN-India, n.d.). A protocol to alter the MoU was signed in 2013. The protocol and the MoU have as their goals the promotion of proactive collaboration in the tourism industry. There were over 4.67 million Indian tourists visiting ASEAN nations in 2018. However, in comparison to the total number of international tourists that Bharat receives, the number of tourists from ASEAN is negligible. Issues that ASEAN visitors visiting Bharat have encountered and reported include inadequate infrastructure and connection, as well as insufficient expertise and information regarding major tourist spots in Bharat (Kundu, 2021).

Some of the obstacles have already been addressed with a few initiatives. In 2019, the Philippines joined the list of nations with which Bharat could sign a bilateral MoU on tourism. As a component of the ASEAN Tourism Forum, the 7th ASEAN-Bharat Tourism Ministers Meeting was held in Ha Long City on January 18, 2019. During this meeting, 2019 was proclaimed as the ASEAN-Bharat Tourism Year. The 8th ASEAN-Bharat Tourism Ministers Meeting took place virtually in February 2021. The goal of this elaboration on Bharat's SAATHI (System for Assessment, Awareness, and Training for Hospitality) and Buddhist Circuit is to entice more tourists from the ASEAN region to visit Bharat (Kundu, 2021).

Enhancing Connectivity and Infrastructure Development

Connectivity links economies, fosters trade, and draws people closer together. Bharat envisions a world, where nations freely exchange goods, resources, and ideas. Globalization and openness have the potential to benefit everyone, but in order to do so, the right kind of policies must be created. Strengthening connectivity is vital to the region's growth, wealth, and most significantly the fight against poverty. Competitiveness in the industrial and service sectors depends on an effective and efficient infrastructure. Reliability is increased and expenditures are decreased with improved connectivity. This has a significant impact on industrial transportation and, by extension, production, cost-effectiveness, and supply reliability (De, 2011). This connectivity and

infrastructural projects directly impact the tourism sector. So, Bharat works in this area with ASEAN to improve the connectivity between them.

When the idea of creating physical connectivity with Southeast Asia gained traction at the beginning of the new millennium, Bharat launched the second phase of the Look East policy, which has much broader agenda that includes trade relations expansion, security cooperation, infrastructure development for regional transportation, connectivity, and unlocking Northeast India, which has not only enormous economic potential but also a strategic location in relation to Southeast Asia. Look East Policy is a multifaceted initiative that enables Bharat to work on many dimensions. Events such as the India-ASEAN car rallies from Guwahati to Indonesia (2004) and from Indonesia to Guwahati (2012), the India-Myanmar-Thailand Highway project from Moreh in India to Mae Sot in Thailand via Myanmar, and the upgrading and construction of the missing links between Jiribam (Bharat) and Mandalay (Myanmar) towards the establishment of a rail link between Delhi and Hanoi via Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia could foster trade and tourism between Bharat and ASEAN (Pukhrem, 2019).

The Eleventh Meeting of ASEAN and India Tourism Ministers was held on 25 January 2024. The aim of the meeting was to discuss how important it is to improve land, air and sea connections between ASEAN and Bharat in order to facilitate smooth cross-border travel, improve visitor mobility, and improve their overall experience. The recent addition of direct flights between Indonesia and Bharat, bringing the total number of direct flights between the ASEAN Member States and Bharat to six, was welcomed at the meeting. The meeting observed that Bharat and ASEAN are starting to prioritize cruise tourism. The meeting also heard that Bharat just unveiled its Draft National Strategy for Cruise Tourism in light of the considerable unrealized potential of overnight coastal tourism (Eleventh Meeting, 2024).

Under the Swadesh Darshan and PRASHAD programs, Prime Minister Narendra Modi unveiled 52 tourist projects valued at about Rs 1400 crore. The projects' goals are to promote pilgrimages and historical places all throughout India, as well as to provide infrastructure for tourism. All 52 locations

experienced the launch events at the same time. The PM also started initiatives like Dekho Apna Desh People's Choice 2024 and Chalo India Global Diaspora Campaign to encourage travel and involve the public in choosing their favourite tourist destinations (Chaturvedi, 2024).

Promotional Campaigns and Events

The Union Ministry of Tourism administers the nation's foreign marketing of travel destinations through events like road shows and festivals, and it has eight offices across the globe. The office in Singapore is tasked with advertising and advocating for the tourism spots in Bharat to ASEAN nations, Fiji, New Zealand, Australia, and other Pacific Island states. There are road shows all across the ASEAN region that usually consist of presentations and business interactions. Bharat's Tourism offices have limited jurisdiction, as there is only one office to serve a region that is so vast and culturally diverse. So, it is important to expand the number of tourism offices and implement a promotion strategy tailored to each country. For instance, in 2017, the Sikkim State Tourist Administration chose to showcase its 59 attractions in Thailand through the organization of roadshows (Bhonsale, 2019).

Bharat and ASEAN have a MoU with four goals: (a) to facilitate tourist visits, (b) to strengthen partnerships, (c) to provide mutual support for the development of human resources in the sector of tourism and (d) to explore opportunities for cooperation and sharing information. Apart from sharing data on tourism, figures, best practices and hopes for the future, Bharat and the ASEAN bloc convene two joint working group meetings annually (Bhonsale, 2019).

The member countries of ASEAN have been actively engaged in the process of developing Buddhist circuits both domestically and regionally, involving discussions with Bharat. The concept of promoting ASEAN and Bharat as an integrated circuit was approved during the 2008 ASEAN Tourism Ministers Meeting and is thought to have a lot of promise. In addition, Myanmar has much potential in this field and has properly taken the initiative to unite its neighbours. The Thailand Tourism Authority (TAT) has taken steps to

collaborate with Myanmar on the development of tourism infrastructure (Sailo, 2013).

Soft Power and Cultural Exchange

It is widely acknowledged that Bharat has made a substantial contribution to the world through the use of its soft power, which it derives from its long history of culture and civilization. One of the earliest proponents of global citizenship as it is currently understood is "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam," which holds that all people have a communal responsibility to one another and to their shared future. Bharat's soft power today is a powerful reminder that the secularism, tolerance and inclusivity of cultures that are fundamental to our civilization are still relevant in today's unpredictable global environment. This is exemplified by Bharat's vibrant cultural and civilizational heritage as well as by the country's large diaspora (Mukherjee, 2019).

Therefore, cultural diplomacy is an essential component of a country's soft power strategy. Before the phrase became widely used in the 21st century, Bharat's soft power was acknowledged globally. For ages, Bhartiya spiritualism, arts, and culture have drawn visitors from all over the world. Bhart's PM Modi combined fresh aspects of soft power with Indian diplomacy. Strategically speaking, these five pillars of soft power are *Suruksha* (regional and global security), *Samman* (dignity), *Samvaad* (dialogue), *Suruksha* (regional and global security), *Sanskriti* (culture) and *Sabhayata* (civilizational linkages) (Mukherjee, 2019).

Bharat's soft power and cultural exchanges with Southeast Asia are deeply ingrained in historical ties, shared cultural history, and a common desire to promote steadiness and abundance in the region. Bharat and Southeast Asian nations have a close historical, cultural, and spiritual bond; the Bhartiya epics Mahabharata and Ramayana continue to have a lasting impact on people's thoughts. The Ramayana is present in the local society and culture in a variety of ways. The deep cultural linkages to Bharat remain in everything from myths and folklore to traditional art forms and city names to modern lifestyles. These Southeast Asian nations continue to practice various kinds of Rama and

Ramayana in modern times despite changes in storylines, forms, and dramatization brought about by transfer. This indicates the countries' close ties to Bhartiya culture, religion, and society (Raj, 2022).

Bharat adopted several proactive measures to strengthen its position in Southeast Asia. The *India-ASEAN Students Exchange Programme* was envisioned in 2007 by the Indian government, led by PM Dr. Manmohan Singh, with the goal of fostering deeper mutual understanding between the two vibrant regions. Two major events were planned in 2012: the *ASEAN-India Car Rally* and the *Shipping Expedition of INS Sudarshini* to ASEAN nations. The ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit includes these two events. These two occasions brought to light the close cultural, intellectual, and commercial ties that exist between Bharat and ASEAN. The primary objective of the Car Rally is to showcase "India's proximity to the ASEAN." In addition, it aims to raise public awareness of the India-ASEAN alliance and to promote tourism and people-to-people contacts (Bhattacharya, 2013).

Challenges

Bharat-ASEAN relations have developed throughout time. But the full potential has not yet been reached. Recognizing the obstacles and implementing solutions, as well as broadening and strengthening the current areas of collaboration, are essential for both party's mutual interest. Bharat's tourism diplomacy towards ASEAN countries faces some challenges which is lowering its effectiveness. One key obstacle is infrastructure. Accessibility to tourism destinations is still a significant issue, necessitating infrastructure investment from the federal and state governments. The private sector must make investments in the local hospitality industry (Bhonsale, 2019). There are direct flights from Bharat to only six ASEAN countries. These are Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia and Thailand. However, connections to other important ASEAN nations such as the Philippines, Indonesia and Cambodia have no direct flights from Bharat. So, the flow from these countries is reduced ("Need to Focus," 2021).

Although Bharat has introduced an E-Visa facility for various ASEAN countries, the process is still much more cumbersome than the visa-on-arrival or visa-free (India grants visa, 2024); Travelling to India, n.d.). Visa-on-arrival or visa-free policies are offered by many ASEAN nations and this policy makes them much more attractive to tourists (ASEAN Framework Agreement, 2006). Bharat also has a problem with using cultural connections in its marketing. For example, in spite of long scholarships and cultural exchanges with countries like Indonesia and Thailand, Bharat has not taken full advantage of these co-religionists in developing its tourism.

Bharat has to compete with regional tourism rivals, which have been well-established for years in places like Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore. These countries have much better infrastructure, higher levels of marketing expenditure per destination, and are far easier to visit than Bharat is at present. Moreover, fears over security – often stirred up by the media with reports on small incidents in areas such as Jammu and Kashmir – all serve to darken visitor perception of Bharat as somewhere safe to travel. Geopolitics can also impact Bharat's tourism diplomacy, especially in countries whose China ties are close.

To counter these challenges, Bharat needs to enhance air connectivity and improve infrastructure. Direct flights, as well as quick access from many places of Bharat. Bharat can streamline the visa process for travellers from ASEAN countries such as Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, etc. Targeted marketing campaigns to highlight cultural ties and promote niche tourism, such as spiritual and eco-tourism. Security matters such as better safety precautions and more cooperation with the press need to be addressed. Engaging in regional tourism activities with other countries and formulating inexpensive tour plans can draw more visitors from ASEAN.

Conclusion

The border between Bharat and the Southeast Asian countries is no longer a barrier for deeper understanding of one another thanks to tourism. Essentially, tourism has revived the notion of world community? It has also been demonstrated that the Indian philosophy of "*athithidevo bhava*," which emphasizes treating guests as God, stimulates foreign curiosity about visiting Bharat. This is one of the main reasons Bharat is still a popular tourist destination.

Travelers engage in cross-cultural exchanges that help them gain a deeper understanding of the nation they have visited. The National Tourism Policy of India recognizes tourism as a unifying force that unites people both domestically and internationally and fosters better understanding via travel, realizing the potential of tourism to sustain peace and better integrate nations. Thus, Bharat attempts to expand its influence in Southeast Asia through tourism diplomacy.

The development of eco-tourism provides a key opportunity. Since different natural landscape thrives, this will be attractive to the eco-conscious and environmentally friendly tourists of neighbouring ASEAN countries. When ASEAN countries enjoy economic growth and rising disposable incomes, Bharat should align its marketing with them in order to develop a larger surrounding area. Additionally, Bharat's growing wellness and spiritual tourism sector, centered around yoga and Ayurveda, offers a unique appeal to ASEAN tourists seeking health and spiritual retreats.

Bharat's main attraction for tourists is its rich heritage and culture. Bharat continuously works to improve infrastructure in its area to attract more tourists. In 2024, PM Modi launched various projects under Swadesh Darshan and PRASHAD programs to meet the requirements. Bharat for the promotion of tourism in the ASEAN countries organises some road shows and festivals. However, these initiatives are only the start, as Bharat is unwavering in its quest to broaden and enhance these exhibits and occasions in order to fully

realize the potential of this tourism industry. Despite its inherent limitations, Bharat tries to get better in every area to draw tourists from Southeast Asia.

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