

CULTURAL TOURISM AS A TOOL OF SOFT POWER: A STUDY OF INDIA'S ENGAGEMENT WITH SOUTHEAST ASIA SINCE 2014

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Abstract

Since the end of the Cold War, the influence of soft power in determining political dynamics in international relations has increased significantly. The same can be seen in regional power politics, and Southeast Asia is not different. With the formation of ASEAN, competition between major powers to influence the region has increased manifold. India, which has had long historical-cultural relations with Southeast Asia since ancient times, has also tried to build stronger diplomatic ties after the Cold War. Along with other strategies like financial and infrastructural support, cultural cooperation, particularly cultural tourism, has been used as a tool to increase its regional influence. The paper focuses on India's initiatives of cultural tourism and its role in establishing soft power in the Southeast Asian region. Historical-cultural ties and growing connectivity provide ample scope for strengthening diplomatic relations with Southeast Asian nations. The paper considers various elements related to cultural tourism and the steps taken by the Indian government since 2014. With the replacement of the Look East Policy (LEP) with the Act East Policy (AEP) in 2014, a major focus has been kept on establishing cultural cooperation with Southeast Asian nations. The paper builds on the above propositions, primarily focusing on cultural tourism and soft power diplomacy.

Keywords- Act East Policy, ASEAN, Cultural Tourism, Cultural Cooperation, Look East Policy, Soft Power.

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Introduction

With the formation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967, Southeast Asia has brought itself to the global level as a prominent region, gaining the interest and attention of major powers in the world (Hussain, 2017). Among the major powers, India and China have a more prominent interest in the region, leading to growing power politics and changing dynamics in the Southeast Asian region (Chuyong et al., 2022). The region has attracted financial investment and other initiatives from the major powers to increase their influence. China, already an established regional power, and India, aspiring to become a regional power, constantly compete to establish strong diplomatic relations with countries falling in Southeast Asia (Grossman, 2023). Both countries have used various approaches and tools to influence Southeast Asian nations. ‘Cultural tourism’ is one of the tools that is used by both countries to enhance their engagement with Southeast Asia. The United Nations Tourism General Assembly defines Cultural Tourism as “the movements of people for essentially cultural motivations such as study tours, performing arts and cultural tours, travel to festivals and other cultural events, visits to sites and monuments, travel to study nature, folklore or art, and pilgrimages (2017).” It is argued that the strong cultural ties with the ASEAN states can help India deepen its diplomatic relations in the region (Bhonsale, 2019). India has several things in common, primarily related to culture, with the Southeast Asian nations, which can be utilised and enhanced by making cultural tourism more effective and prominent. The Indian government has taken various initiatives to establish stronger ties with the countries of Southeast Asia, in which cultural tourism plays an important role. Cultural Tourism is an important element of Act East Policy (2014). The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has emphasised three pillars of this policy: Commerce, Culture, and Connectivity (Ministry of External Affairs, 2015).

Two central pillars of the Act East Policy are culture and connectivity, through which India seeks to expand its diplomatic relations with Southeast Asia. Most countries in the region practice Buddhism, whereas Buddhism spread in these nations from India, providing one of the avenues for strengthening ties using

culture. Apart from culture, the Indian government has launched various connectivity projects like the '*Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project (2008)*' and '*India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highways (2002)*' to make travel much easier and more effective with the nations in this region (Naskar, 2018). These connectivity projects were initiated with dual objectives. On the one hand, it would link India's landlocked Northeastern part with the mainstream economy; on the other hand, it would counter growing Chinese influence in Southeast Asia. However, due to political unrest in Myanmar and lack of funding on the Southeast Asian side, the projects are yet to be completed.

Both culture and connectivity can play a prominent role in enhancing cultural tourism between India and Southeast Asian nations. Southeast Asian nations contain a prominent influence of Indian culture in their art and architecture, which can be further utilised to enhance cultural tourism in the region. Making this cultural heritage a prominent element in the growth of tourism between India and her Southeast Asian neighbours would help in enhancing India's soft power in the region (Maini, 2016).

This research paper aims to analyse and understand the role of cultural tourism as a tool of soft power in enhancing diplomatic relations, with particular reference to India's initiatives in the Southeast Asian region since 2014. The paper also aims to analyse the present status of cultural tourism and the flow of tourists from Southeast Asia to India. The paper is divided into four sections. The first section includes a brief history of cultural ties between India and Southeast Asia. The second section discusses the changes introduced by the Indian government while shifting from the LEP to AEP. The third section sheds light on the initiatives taken by the government of India to promote cultural tourism as a tool of Soft Power diplomacy. The fourth section discusses the present challenges and future opportunities for India to enhance its soft power in the region through tourism. The paper uses descriptive-analytical methods of research, using official documents, Thinktank reports, and scholarly literature.

India-Southeast Asia Historical-Cultural Engagement

India and Southeast Asia have had a historical-cultural connection since the first century B.C. (Bjpai, 1991). During this period, India was connected with Southeast Asia by sea route, which allowed Indian traders to establish maritime trade with Southeast Asia (Rajan, 2019). More importantly, it provided an opportunity for Indians and Southeast Asians to synthesise their culture with each other (Kossak, 2001). Thus, Indian culture has greatly impacted the political, social and cultural sphere of Southeast Asia (Braginsky, 2013).

At the social and political level, Indian merchants contributed to the formation of a political system based on the Indian model (Braginsky, 2013). This was possible because the Brahmins and Buddhist monks who came with Indian traders also “brought their religions, arts, architecture, and political system, and the rich religious literature of India to the region” (Kossak, 2001). The cultural assimilations not only impacted the political and social sphere of Southeast Asia but also impacted the “architectural treasures of Angkor, Borobudur and Prambanan” (Kumar & Siddique, 2008). Not only Indians travelled to Southeast Asia, but also the Southeast Asian believers of Hinduism and Buddhism travelled to many sacred places in India. Consequently, both regions remained connected through culture for the ‘next thousand years’ (Kossak, 2001).

At the cultural level, same as the political and social sphere, ‘cultural absorption’ also happened with some changes in its original form (Ooi, 2004). These transformations in Southeast Asian culture, political system, art and literature have been introduced by the Indian religion – Hinduism and Buddhism (Braginsky, 2013). Hinduism and Buddhism, the Indian form of state and law, art and culture, influenced Southeast Asian elites, resulting in the formation of a new culture (Braginsky, 2013), which later impacted almost the entire Southeast Asian polity, society and culture. This helped in the formation of homogeneous culture and similar state systems in the Southeast Asian region.

This shows that India and Southeast Asia have greater political, religious, cultural and social connections. This cultural connection strengthened India-Southeast Asia relations for many centuries (Lamb, 1975). But This connection did not always remain the same. It was badly impacted during the British rule in India. However, the independence movements in both regions realign them for a short period (Khalid, 2011). Thus, India hosted the ‘Asian Relations Conference’ in March 1947. To address the issue of colonialism, soon after its independence from British rule, India participated in a Special Conference on Indonesia in 1949 (Hussain, 2017). However, the Cold War negatively impacted India-Southeast relations, which was improved during independence movements in both regions. India alleged some Southeast Asian states to be on the capitalist side, which was led by the U.S.A., while they alleged that India indirectly supports the communist camp led by the Soviet Union. (Bawa, 2013). However, both regions again came closer after the end of the Cold War. Due to the deteriorating economic conditions of India and the economic prosperity of Southeast Asia, India started to show its interest in engaging Southeast Asia. Consequently, India launched its Look East Policy in 1991, which emphasises promoting economic, political and cultural connections with East and Southeast Asia.

From Look East to Act East: Promoting Soft Power through Cultural Connectivity/Cultural Tourism

Joseph Nye (2008) has defined Soft Power as “the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment.” According to Nye (2004), “culture, political values, and foreign policy are three sources of soft power for a country.” In the case of India-Southeast relations, India derives its soft power from the ancient cultural link between them (Bhonsale, 2019). India, since its independence, has taken various initiatives to strengthen cultural connectivity between both regions. One of those initiatives is that India has signed various cultural agreements and Memorandum of Understanding (MoUs) with the ASEAN states (Table 1). The Look East/Act East Policy has enhanced all these initiatives, which helped India in achieving its strategic interests in Southeast Asia (Mazumdar, 2015).

The Look East Policy (1991) has Cultural, Political, Economic and Strategic dimensions. However, strategic and economic dimensions of it remained dominant in Look East discourse (Acharya, 2015). In the first phase, India prioritised institutional and economic measures to connect with Southeast Asian states (Bajpae, 2017). After the introduction of the Look East Policy in 1991, the ASEAN provided 'sectoral dialogue partner' status to India in 1992; since then, India-ASEAN trade relations have improved significantly (ASEAN, 2015). During the first decade of LEP, the bilateral trade between India and ASEAN reached to US\$ 12.1 billion in 2003. It was only US\$2.9 billion in 1993 (ASEAN, n.d.). In the second phase, which started in 2003, India emphasised Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and security relations with ASEAN (Bajpae, 2017). India and ASEAN signed a Free Trade Agreement in 2009 called as 'ASEAN-India Free Trade Area (AIFTA)', which has been in effect since 1 January 2010 (Ahmed, 2010). In the last year of the Look East policy in 2013-14, the bilateral trade between both regions remained at US\$74 billion (ASEAN-India Centre, 2015), which grew up to US\$131.5 billion in 2022-23, which makes 11.3 percent of India's total global during 2022-23 (Ministry of Commerce and Industry, 2023).

Economic and strategic dimensions have greater importance in Look East Policy (Haokip, 2011). However, many scholars argued that the LEP has also promoted cultural and religious ties between both regions. According to the annual report of 1999-2000 of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, cultural delegates from Southeast Asian states, particularly from Myanmar, Singapore, and Vietnam, travelled to many sacred places in India. This can be seen as a strategic initiative to strengthen cultural ties between the two regions (Ministry of External Affairs, n. d). Apart from this, student exchange programmes have also been taking place between the two regions, which strengthens people-to-people contact between India and Southeast Asia. It also promotes India's cultural reach in Southeast Asia (Ha, 2014).

Table 1: *Cultural Agreements between India and Southeast Asian countries*

Cultural Agreement between India and Cambodia	31 January 1996
Agreement Concerning Cultural Relations between India and Indonesia	29 December 1955
Cultural Agreement between India and Malaysia	30 March 1978
Agreement between India and Myanmar on Cultural Cooperation	25 January 2001
Cultural Agreement between India and the Philippines	6 September 1969
MOU between India and Singapore Concerning Cooperation in the Fields of the Arts, Heritage and the Archives	5 February 1993
Cultural Agreement between India and Thailand	29 April 1997
Cultural Agreement between India and Vietnam	18 December 1976
MoU on restoration of UNESCO World Heritage Site at Vat Phu (Laos)	May 2007
MoU on Cultural Cooperation with Brunei	May 2008

Source: Ministry of Culture, Government of India. <https://www.indiaculture.nic.in/cultural-agreement>

Besides student exchange programmes and delegates' visits, India also provides financial and technical support for the renovation of temples and Buddhist sites in various Southeast Asian nations (Vasudevan, et al., 2012). India also assisted Preah Vihear Temple, Cambodia and advocated for the UNESCO World Heritage status for the same (Kundu, 2022). This shows India's commitment to continue its relations with Southeast Asia based on shared culture.

It is evident that the Look East Policy has stressed on institutional, economic, strategic and cultural relations between the two regions. Still, the economic and strategic dimensions were dominant. However, the whole policy was formulated in such a manner that "while commerce, connectivity, and capacity-building continue to propel the India-ASEAN relations to new milestones, culture and religion provide mental and spiritual fodder to nurture its growing

engagement” (Chand, 2014). Thus, LEP brought India and Southeast Asia closer economically, politically, and culturally.

With the advent of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014, a renewed emphasis was given to India-Southeast Asia relations. Subsequently, the ‘Look East policy’ was renamed as the ‘Act East Policy’ (Parameswaran, 2014). However, the Act East did not alter the main objectives of Look East – Commerce, Culture and Connectivity. It also emphasises all these three pillars while engaging with Southeast Asia (Naskar, 2018). However, the qualitative difference between the ‘Look East’ and the ‘Act East’ is “the conviction of the present government that India’s relations with her neighbours should be marked by action and dynamism rather than confining to the sobriety of gaze towards them” (De & Chirathivat, 2018). In this spirit, Prime Minister Modi has explained the Act East Policy, which is based on three pillars indicated by three ‘Cs’ – ‘Commerce’, ‘Culture’ and ‘Connectivity’ (Rajendram, 2014).

The cultural domain of the Act East works as a common platform for both India and its East and Southeast Asia neighbours (Acharya, 2015). Culture can be used to strengthen and rediscover historical links between both regions (Jha, 2014). Particularly, the Act East emphasised cultural aspects, which serve as an important element of India’s soft power diplomacy (ASEAN-India Center 2019). In fact, “one of the defining points of India’s Act East Policy is to project the country as an emerging soft power and activate her cultural assets and stringing them with her history in the Southeast Asian region” (ASEAN-India Center, 2019), which China has been doing successfully for many decades.

China has aggressively promoted its cultural heritages, especially Buddhism, with Southeast Asian states. Buddhism has been used for “image management” by the communist governments of China since its formation in 1949 (Ding, 2011). Besides its own image-building, it has also been used as a propagandist and geopolitical tool against other major powers, such as the US, Japan, and India, to limit their influence in Southeast Asia (Lijun, 2015). To counter the political and strategic use of Buddhism against India, the Indian government has strongly emphasised the promotion of its shared culture – Buddhism – in

its bilateral and multilateral relations with Southeast Asian states. However, against the Chinese version of Buddhist diplomacy, India promotes the genuine elements of Buddhism through its foreign policies (Scott, 2016), the Look East and Act East. The government of India has taken various initiatives to promote Buddhism in its cultural diplomacy. One of these initiatives is the promotion of cultural tourism, which focuses on people-to-people contact between India and Southeast Asian states.

Government of India's Initiatives to Promote Cultural Tourism since 2014

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has actively promoted India's rich cultural heritage, especially its Buddhist heritage, with East and Southeast Asian neighbours (Kasturi, 2015). Thus, Buddhism has become an important pillar of the Act East Policy. The Indian government promotes 'Buddhist tourism' as a form of Cultural Tourism (Chaudhary, 2017). In this spirit, three Buddhist Circuits were identified in 2015 by the Indian Ministry of Tourism (Press Information Bureau, 2015). These circuits have been developed to "showcase India as a land of Buddha and a destination for spiritual and cultural tourism (Niti Aayog, 2022)". Three identified circuits are the Buddhist Heritage Trails (State Circuit), the Extended Dharmayatra (Extended Sacred Circuit/Retracing Buddha's Footsteps), and the Dharmayatra (The Sacred Circuit) (Press Information Bureau, 2015). These circuits include visits to various sacred places related to Buddhism. Such places are Bodhgaya, Nalanda, Rajgir (Bihar), Sarnath, Kushinagar (Uttar Pradesh), Lumbini (Nepal), Ladakh (Jammu and Kashmir), Dharmashala (Himachal Pradesh), Aurangabad (Maharashtra), Tawang and Bomdila (Arunachal Pradesh) etc (Press Information Bureau, 2015). Besides Buddhist circuits, tourists also visit nearby destinations such as Khajuraho and Sanchi in Madhya Pradesh, Taj Mahal in Agra, Ajanta and Ellora caves in Maharashtra (Ministry of Tourism, n. d.).

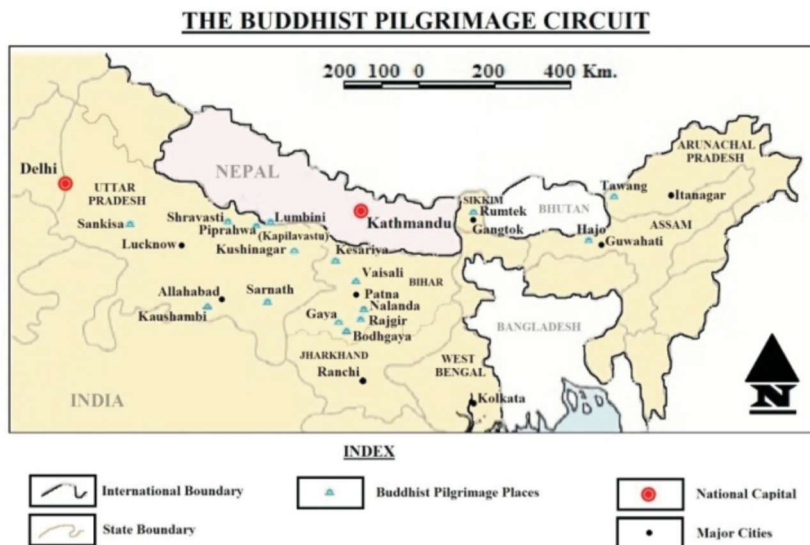


Figure 1: Map of Buddhist Pilgrimage Circuits

Source: Top Travels and Tours (P) Ltd.- Buddhist Pilgrimage Circuit, http://www.buddhisttrain.com/images/buddhist_map_big.jpg

Apart from the circuits, the government of India continuously organise Buddhist conclaves and conferences to project India as the ‘Land of Buddha’ and to attract participants and cultural tourists from all over the world, particularly from East and Southeast Asian states (Press Information Bureau, 2014). One such conference is the International Buddhist Conclaves which the Ministry of Tourism has been continuously organising since 2004 (Kundu, 2022). Prime Minister Modi himself attended the Bodhgaya conclave in 2015 (Tewary, 2015), which shows his keen interest in promoting Buddhist heritage as India’s soft power.

Besides these measures at the domestic level, the Indian government has taken various steps to promote its tourism destinations at the global level. For

example, India signed a MoU with ASEAN in 2012 for cooperation in the tourism sector (Press Information Bureau, 2012), which aims to facilitate tourist visits, information sharing and strengthening partnerships. Apart from MoU, India and ASEAN together organise two Joint Working Group meetings every year.

Due to various initiatives taken by the government of India, India evidenced an increase in the number of foreign tourists during the Act East period. In the year 2017, 10.04 million foreign tourists visited India, which was 14 percent higher than in 2016 (Ministry of Tourism, 2018). Among them, Southeast Asia (8.22 percent) had the fourth-highest share of foreign tourist arrivals to India in 2017. In 2022-23, 6.43 million foreign tourists visited India, among them Southeast Asia has a share of 6.41 percent (Ministry of Tourism, 2023). Also, the Buddhist circuits identified by the government of India attract a yearly average of 6.5 percent of total foreign tourist arrivals to India.

Challenges and Opportunities

In the globalised world, Tourism, especially cultural tourism, has become an essential element of soft power diplomacy. Most countries use cultural tourism as a form of soft power to enhance people-to-people contact with other countries (Ha, 2022). From Look East to Act East, India has also promoted cultural tourism as a tool for enhancing its soft power in Southeast Asia. We have seen in the above sections that India has long historical-cultural links with Southeast Asia since ancient times. Buddhism is one of the aspects of the cultural links between the two regions, which India uses as a tool of soft power/cultural diplomacy. The Indian government has taken various initiatives to promote its Buddhist heritage with its Southeast Asian neighbours. In this regard, the government of India has identified and developed Buddhist Circuits to attract cultural tourists from all over the world, especially Buddhist-majority countries of East and Southeast Asia (Press Information Bureau, 2015).

Despite these, India faces challenges in Southeast Asia from its international competitors. China continuously presents tough competition to India's promotion of Buddhism as a tool of soft power in Southeast Asia. Its Belt and

Road Initiative (BRI), which is an infrastructure-led initiative, also incorporates cultural diplomacy efforts, particularly the promotion of its Buddhist sites (Mazumder & Upadhyaya, 2019). Chinese Yunnan province, which has a historical connection with Southeast Asia, has also been promoted as a Buddhist heritage site to attract cultural and religious tourists from ASEAN states (Song, 2021). Apart from these efforts, the government of China actively promotes digital tourism platforms such as virtual tours, digital exhibitions, and targeted marketing campaigns to attract Southeast Asian cultural tourists. Moreover, China's hosting of international Buddhist forums and conclaves, which attract participants from across East and Southeast Asia, enhances its image as a leader of global Buddhism (Ashiwa & Wonk, 2020). These efforts directly challenge India's attempts to promote cultural heritage in Southeast Asian states.

Despite the challenges from the Chinese side, there are several opportunities for India to promote its cultural tourism in Southeast Asia. Firstly, India can focus on improving the infrastructure, like transport connectivity and accommodation facilities, around its Buddhist circuits so it can be more attractive to Southeast Asian tourists. Investment in tourism infrastructure not only attracts tourists from all over the world but would also help India to compete with China's well-developed tourism facilities (Johri, 2020). Additionally, India can promote the cultural and spiritual significance of its Buddhist sites, emphasising India as the Land of Buddha. This unique position would help India in fostering deeper cultural connections with Buddhist-majority countries of Southeast Asia (Mahaseth & Khatoon, 2024). Secondly, India should also collaborate with Southeast Asian nations by co-hosting Buddhist festivals, exhibitions and cultural exchanges. This would enhance India's diplomatic ties with Southeast Asia. Furthermore, India can expand its digital outreach by creating virtual tours, documentaries on various Buddhist sites and online campaigns to promote its Buddhist destinations. This would globally enhance India's visibility as a destination for Buddhist tourism. These combined efforts would help India counterbalance China's influence and solidify its role as a key player in Buddhist cultural tourism in Southeast Asia.

Conclusion

The long-standing historical linkages between India and ASEAN apparently offer India several advantages in terms of tourism and soft power. Notwithstanding, British rule in India abruptly suspended some of the flourishing trade routes and cultural exchanges; the recent decades of Indian foreign policy evidently attempted to rejuvenate the glorious historical ties. The 1990s reforms in the Indian economy led India to find alternative trade partners to collaborate which is clearly visible in the shift from Look East to Act East policy. While tourism activities are seen as a boon for any economy, they can also be utilised for soft power enhancement. Indian historical legacy to ASEAN in the form of the spread of Hinduism and Buddhism is immensely beneficial for the tapping into the soft power within the ASEAN region. The growing Chinese influence in the region, due to its economic and soft power manoeuvres, could be contained through a reinvigorated focus on these untapped possibilities in international politics. The policy alternative and fusion are the contemporary requirements of the Indian foreign policy which can divert its energy from isolated individual projects and can assimilate the diverse set of approaches into one whole plan of action. The connectivity projects, strategic ties, tourist exchanges and cultural revival should go hand in hand to boost the Indian soft power in the region. The ASEAN is one of the most successful regional organisations and has tremendous market potential as the region remained stable from any major war except a military coup in Myanmar; it can provide a stage for long-term partnerships for India.

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