

DIGITAL ARCH: INDIA'S ENGAGEMENT WITH ITS SOUTHEAST ASIAN DIASPORA THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

India's diaspora, comprising over 32 million people, is a significant cultural, economic, and political asset for its home countries. Social media has transformed traditional diplomacy by allowing states to directly engage with diasporas, creating a "digital bridge" between them. The diaspora serves as a strategic partner in advancing India's foreign policy objectives under its Act East Policy. The Indian government has used social media to engage its diaspora through campaigns like #DigitalIndia, virtual town halls, and digital celebrations of India's 75th year of independence. This human-centric approach to digital diplomacy offers valuable lessons for India and the world in the digital age.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Indian embassies organized virtual celebrations, Q&A sessions, and webinars to engage with diaspora members. However, challenges include homogenizing diaspora narratives and engaging older generations and rural communities. Governments and NGOs in Southeast Asia are working on digital infrastructure, but progress is slow.

India's digital diplomacy has blended tradition with technology to foster a global community united by heritage and identity. Initiatives like Vande Bharat Mission and virtual Pravasi Bharatiya Divas demonstrate the government's responsiveness and ability to connect across borders.

Key Words: *South-eastern countries, India.*

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Introduction

India's diaspora, estimated at nearly over 32 million, is not only a demographic statistic; it is a dynamic and multifaceted asset that reflects India's cultural wealth, diversity and treasure. Safran (1991) advocates that diasporas serve as significant transnational communities, functioning as cultural, economic and political assets for their home countries. He argues that diaspora engagement can strengthen the "long-distance nationalism" of expatriates, fostering deeper ties with their homelands. From the lively streets of Little India in Singapore to the vibrant Deepavali and Pongal celebrations in Kuala Lumpur, the Indian diaspora in Southeast Asia has created a connection that surpasses the geographical borders. These communities do have deep connections with their host nations, but their love for Indian culture and heritage represents an arch between India and the Southeast Asian region countries. This arch has now got more solidified by the power of digital platforms like social media. Manor (2019) emphasises that social media has transformed traditional diplomacy by enabling states to reach audiences directly. He views social media as an essential tool for creating a "digital bridge" between governments and diasporas, fostering real-time communication and engagement.

Just imagine a third-generation Tamil-Malaysian youth is scrolling through Instagram and finds a reel posted by the Indian Embassy in Kuala Lumpur. The reel showcases Bharatanatyam dancers performing at an event celebrating "India@75". The caption invites diaspora members to participate in virtual cultural discussions and share their own stories about their connection to India. For this youth, who has grown up feeling both Malaysian and Indian, this simple digital interaction becomes a gateway to rediscovering their roots.

Or consider a young entrepreneur of living in Singapore; her family migrated there generations ago. She is inspired by the "#DigitalIndia" campaign trending on X (formerly Twitter), and she approaches Indian startups in Bengaluru to explore tech collaboration opportunities. This type of interest present in the digital realm could lead to innovations benefiting both nations. These platforms have transformed the nature of government-diaspora

relationships, which traditionally revolve around formal announcements, physical meetups and speeches, and created interactive and participatory experiences.

During the COVID-19 pandemic too, social media became a very important tool in diaspora diplomacy for India all over the world and especially in Southeast Asian countries. When international borders were closed, the Indian government moved to digital platforms to assist thousands of Indians across Southeast Asia. For instance, the government launched the Vande Bharat Mission using social media for updates, to coordinate efforts, and to address the concerns of the diaspora in real time.

These stakes are high, given the historical and cultural importance of the region to India for leveraging social media in call-to-action of its diaspora. The diaspora itself is, of course, not homogenous; while there are communities of Tamil origin in Malaysia that can trace their roots to colonial-era labour migration, there are also highly skilled professionals fuelling innovation in Singapore – groups that can seem worlds apart. As each of these groups harbours different ambitions and adversities, India's digital diplomacy must be made gentle but comprehensive.

The role of this Indian diaspora in Southeast Asia is therefore very crucial for India as it seeks to strengthen its Act East Policy. This diaspora serves as a vital link between India and the region, facilitating economic opportunities, cultural exchanges and political partnerships. Beyond the cheer tweets: The story of India's digital engagement with its diaspora is not just a story of policy but about people.

This paper explores the extent to which India has embraced social media to enrich its outreach to its diaspora in Southeast Asia. The Indian government has redefined traditional diplomacy—#DigitalIndia, virtual town halls, and digital celebrations of India's 75th year of independence have made traditional diplomacy accessible, real-time and human-centred. It has not only enhanced cultural and emotional connections but has also turned the diaspora into a

leverage point in training India's pursuit of its foreign policy goals, especially in the context of its Act East Policy. On one hand, the world is moving towards digitisation, while this human-centric approach to digital diplomacy provides significant lessons not only for India but also for the world in the new digital paradigm of the 21st century.

India's Diaspora in Southeast Asia

The narrative of the Indian diaspora in Southeast Asia is fundamentally historical, characterised by traits such as aspiration, flexibility, and cultural transfer. This is a story that starts with an ancient sea trade route bridging India and the kingdoms of Southeast Asia, so far known as Srivijaya (a Hindu-Buddhist thalassocratic empire based on the island of Sumatra) and the Majapahit (the so-called Wilwatikta, a Hindu-Buddhist thalassocratic empire based on the island of Java) (Arndt 2020). One can also find a source from Arasaratnam's (1970) work, which pointed out that the ancient historical relationship between India and Southeast Asia links the long-distance movement of Indian communities to Southeast Asia through ancient trading networks and British colonial systems. From here, it continues on up until fairly recent times, where you can find Indian origins mixed with various ethnicities and religions, such as Tamils, Gujaratis, Punjabis, Bengalis, Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism settled in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Thailand, to name a few. Indians in Southeast Asia are representative of the era of long-established trade and civilisation links. Ports located along the eastern coast of India were historically places not only of trade in commodities like spices, textiles, and ivory but also of exchange in ideas, art, and religion. Note: With the distinct influence of Indian traders, scholars, and priests, Hinduism, Buddhism, and aspects of Indian architecture and governance were introduced into the region. One can see this from the temples, traditional cuisines and even in the literature of Southeast Asia.

In Southeast Asia, Malaysia hosts one of the largest Indian communities, with about 2 million individuals of Indian descent, which contributed 7.6% of the country's population. Indonesia and Thailand are home to Indian merchants

and traders whose businesses have shaped their local economies. These diaspora communities, according to Kumar (2019), are not merely cultural ambassadors which foster people-to-people connections but also strategic assets in advancing the Act East Policy for India. Khadria (2009) describes India's diaspora as a "knowledge network" that contributes to India's global stature. He suggests that platforms like social media enhance the government's ability to engage its diaspora strategically, promoting economic and cultural diplomacy. Similarly, Tharoor (2012) emphasises that India's diaspora in Southeast Asia acts as a "living bridge", facilitating cultural exchange and strengthening bilateral ties. He also notes how governments can use diaspora communities to enhance soft power and cultural diplomacy in the region.

Social Media as a gadget for diaspora engagement

The waves of the digital age have made the traditional modes of government-diaspora engagement real-time and dynamic. Soft power is not only an important element of diplomacy; several scholars (Nye, 2004) have contended that cultural diplomacy can be used as and to have an impact. He explained that social media magnifies this influence because it allows governments to not only attract rather dispersed diasporas but also market a coherent narrative about culture, shared values, and history and thus mobilise diasporic populations for political purposes. Southeast Asia plays an important role in many perspectives for India, so social media here has been a gimmick to create an identity for the diaspora and to strengthen bilateral bonds for India.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Indian embassies in Southeast Asia organised virtual celebrations for festivals such as Diwali and Pongal. There were live-streaming cultural performances and rituals on YouTube and Facebook. Campaigns showcasing festivals like Thaipusam (celebrated by Tamil communities in Malaysia) or Vesak Day (marking Buddha's birth in countries like Thailand and Indonesia) highlight India's influence in Southeast Asia. #IndiaAt75 Campaign initiative celebrating India's 75th Independence Anniversary with online contests, webinars, and storytelling sessions highlights India's freedom struggle and achievements. 2. External Affairs

Minister Dr S. Jaishankar, along with Indian embassies in countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, regularly posts updates, shares cultural content, and addresses queries directly on X. During crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, X proved invaluable in providing real-time updates. 4. Embassies used hashtags such as #VandeBharatMission to share repatriation schedules and ensure smooth coordination. Diplomats often flash success stories of people of Indian origin in Southeast Asia, which gives pride among the diaspora. For instance, the community greatly appreciates congratulatory tweets sent to ministers of Indian origin in Singapore or business leaders of Indian origin in Malaysia.

Southeast Asian Indian embassies have hosted Facebook and Instagram Live sessions, conducting Q&As on topics ranging from visa renewals to OCI card processing and student scholarships. LinkedIn facilitates discussions between Indian-origin entrepreneurs in the Southeast Asia region and industry leaders in India. The webinars also focus on investment opportunities, cross-border partnerships, and knowledge transfer. Through engaging the diaspora digitally, India can also boost its Act East Policy, which is considered as gaining ground through people-to-people connections, as highlighted by Mohan (2021). For example, he points to cultural webinars and virtual trade forums as a way to increase the synergy between the two sides. India has implemented adjustments to enhance its appeal to the general public on platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, among others. The #My Indian Heritage Challenge invited youngsters to post messages, pictures and videos about their links to Indian heritage. In Southeast Asia, audiences have been lapping up traditional and contemporary Indian stories through viewership initiatives such as influencer and content collaborations. Indian-origin influencers in Malaysia, for example, have made reels for ethnic wear, festivals, and food.

Same for us. They conducted several virtual tours there, suggesting that the diaspora is eager to virtually visit our heritage sites, such as the Sun Temple in Konark and the Meenakshi Temple in Madurai, to reconnect with their roots. Channels like “Incredible India” have produced documentaries and cultural series that focus on Southeast Asia, including the introduction of Hinduism and

Buddhism into the region's cultural development. Embassies have also promoted pride in shared heritage by discussing ancient maritime trade routes that connect Indian ports to kingdoms in Southeast Asia on their YouTube channels.

Embassies, consulates, and international organisations, like the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), are conducting virtual job fairs and industry-specific webinars. LinkedIn uses promotions like #DigitalIndia and #MakeInIndia to entice diaspora entrepreneurs to invest in India's expanding tech and startup ecosystem. One such event, a webinar titled "FinTech Innovations," organised by the Indian High Commission in Singapore with partners on August 30, 2021, links the Indian-origin community in Southeast Asia with Indian professionals.

India ran a host of campaigns aimed at reaching out to the diaspora globally, including in Southeast Asia during its G-20 presidency in 2023. Facebook and YouTube streamed live virtual panels on sustainable development and technological innovations. This ongoing digital dialogue strengthens cultural and emotional ties and positions the diaspora as key stakeholders in India's Act East Policy and its broader global diplomacy goals.

Impact of Social Media on Traditional Diplomacy

For India, particularly in its engagement with the Southeast Asian diaspora, social media has revolutionised diplomacy and given way to public diplomacy, shifting it from a traditionally closed and formal practice to an open, inclusive, and real-time engagement process, which has significantly boosted its visibility and soft power in Southeast Asia. During the COVID-19 pandemic, hashtags like #VandeBharatMission and #StrandedIndians brought clarity and accessibility to thousands of people seeking help. Social media enabled embassies to issue real-time advisories during natural disasters such as floods in Malaysia or volcanic eruptions in Indonesia. WhatsApp groups were used to provide critical information to Indian-origin communities, ensuring timely evacuations and assistance. Social media has democratised diplomacy; Indian

embassies and diplomats now directly engage with diaspora members, bypassing bureaucratic layers and creating a two-way dialogue. In the long term, social media has enhanced India's efforts to strengthen its Act East Policy by promoting regional integration and collaboration with Southeast Asian nations. Mishra (2020) highlights the significant role of Indian-origin entrepreneurs in Southeast Asia, particularly in Singapore and Malaysia, in advancing India's Act East Policy.

Challenges in Digital Diaspora Engagement

The strength is also the weakness of social media: it spreads information incredibly fast. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook disseminated misleading claims about repatriation policies and travel bans. This created confusion among diaspora members in Southeast Asia, making it more difficult for embassies to clarify and help. According to Patnaik (2021), in rural areas of countries like Indonesia and Myanmar, many Indian-origin communities struggle with limited internet connectivity, excluding them from social media campaigns and online events. Governments and NGOs in the region are working on digital infrastructure, but progress is slow. Digital engagement efforts often exclude the older generation, who are not technologically savvy.

Virtual town halls or online cultural festivals are unable to engage older members of the diaspora who are comfortable with more traditional means of communication, such as phone calls or physical events. In Southeast Asia, governments may view campaigns as interference in their domestic politics. In Malaysia, for example, where race and religion already have a role in politics, campaigns targeting the Indian diaspora must be carefully framed to avoid backlash or being accused of favouritism.

The most difficult challenge in digital diaspora engagement is the risk of treating the diaspora as a homogenous entity. Vertovec's (2007) highlights the complexity of diaspora identities and cautions against homogenising diaspora narratives. The Indian diaspora in Southeast Asia is diverse, with differences

in socioeconomic status, linguistic background, religion and political affiliations. In like manner, Varadarajan (2017) highlights the Indian diaspora's diversity in Southeast Asia – from Tamil labourers in Malaysia to Gujarati businessmen in Indonesia – cautioning against a homogenised approach. Sharma (2018) asserts that implementing a uniform social media campaign could potentially alienate certain segments of the diaspora. For example, campaigns only targeting the urban professionals might not connect with rural workers or small-business owners.

Future Prospects

The tech savviness of the youth diaspora represents a long-term trend. Strengthen creative problem-solving on issues like climate change, education or technology among virtual hackathons for youth diaspora in Southeast Asia. 10 An example of this could be a “Pravasi Tech Challenge”; through this, Indian youth can be partnered with their counterparts in Southeast Asia to co-create for local and global issues. Fun and interactive education on our history, languages and cultural practices can also be made with youth-friendly apps or games — perhaps a VR/mapping game exploring how life was like in the Indus Valley Civilisation or another on the maritime trade links between India and Southeast Asia? Another thing that can be done is the government can also introduce digital ambassadorships for diaspora youth, where they represent their local communities in virtual events or campaigns. This can nourish their leadership and reinforce their cultural pride too. AI chatbots coupled with personalised recommendations can be built for diaspora questions on Indian traditions, festivals or cuisines. India can collaborate with filmmakers and VR developers to create 360-degree virtual experiences that tell the story of moments in Indian history and contributions from the diaspora in Southeast Asia. India, in collaborating with ASEAN, should also implement campaigns focusing on shared cultures and history; for instance, a co-produced web series to be called “India-ASEAN Connections” will bring forth the converging history of these regions.

Digital diplomacy can also help mobilise the diaspora to contribute to sustainable development goals (SDGs) in India and Southeast Asia. In Southeast Asia, Indian-origin businesses should be encouraged to develop Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) projects that are sustainability-orientated in areas like clean energy or education which foster collaborative development. We can deepen these connections and contributions by creating opportunities for diaspora members to mentor Indian students, fund basic projects, or offer technical help through online platforms.

By instituting these measures, India can assure that its diaspora continues to be both a cultural boon as well as a handy tool in projecting India to the world.

Conclusion

India is taking the whole of China, so to speak, scrolling through the estimated 300 million strong pages of their social media, and lo and behold, it was the aforementioned quote from Matt Mullenweg — “Technology is best when it brings people together” — that truly captures the essence of the Indian government’s new vision to reach out to its Southeast Asian diaspora, turning these connections into compelling tools of diplomacy and cultural revival. Through digital diplomacy, India has not only set a new precedent in working with its diaspora but also set a new trend in the way countries associate with their diaspora by bringing together their traditions and technology for a global community of like-minded mentees united by heritage and identity.

This has transformed social media campaigns such as #DigitalIndia and India@75 into virtual homes for Indian culture, seamlessly dovetailing diaspora engagement activities with national policies such as the Act East Policy. The Vande Bharat Mission and virtual Pravasi Bharatiya Divas show that the government does respond and connect with citizens beyond national borders, but not when the going is good — only on the rare occasion when it is bad.

The Future — Emerging technologies such as AI and VR hold transformative potential for India. Visualise temple tours in the metaverse, gamified cultural learning, and Indian-origin entrepreneurship in a virtual horizon. And India can strengthen these bonds further by addressing challenges like misinformation and the digital divide.

India has a changing vision: “We progress together, we connect digitally. Glued to a past, India’s digital diplomacy is not only an arch of its past but a beacon which can adorn the orchards towards a globally united future with creativity and inclusivity.

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