

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

*Prof. Sangit Kumar Ragi<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Abhishek Choudhary<sup>2</sup> and  
Dr. Ningthoujam Koiremba Singh<sup>3</sup>*

## 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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- 1 Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Delhi,  
email – sangit\_ragi@yahoo.co.in
- 2 Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Delhi,  
email – achoudhary@polscience.du.ac.in
- 3 Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Delhi,  
email – koirembasingh@gmail.com

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

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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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 5<sup>th</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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,

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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

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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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# SYAMA PRASAD MOOKERJEE'S ROLE IN INDIAN FOREIGN POLICY: A CASE STUDY OF THE KOREAN WAR

*Kuri Sravan Kumar<sup>1</sup>*

## ABSTRACT:

*Syama Prasad Mookerjee, also known as S. P. Mookerjee, was one of the prominent leaders in Indian politics and a key player in the evolution of Indian foreign policy, which occupied a space between bloc politics. In post-World War II, Korea became a playground for bloc politics and was divided into two parts at the 38th parallel line: North Korea and South Korea. In 1950, the Korean conflict turned into a Korean War, an immediate threat to world order, and the changes in the situation made Indian foreign policy to perform an arduous task in Korea. This paper follows S. P. Mookerjee's role in the construction of Indian foreign policy through the Korean War. It provides a new ray to the Korean conflict. Scholars such as Kim (2010) and Barnes (2013) have emphasised the lack of data regarding India's involvement in the Korean War. Nevertheless, none have addressed the role of Indian political parties in the Korean War. Despite the scholarly neglect, this paper attempts to find India's opposition voice, as in S. P. Mookerjee's significance in Indian foreign policy through the Korean War from an Indian political opposition standpoint and its analysis through the primary data of archival materials. It urges that 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 (HMS) and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS); therefore, India needs to follow the policy of united Korea and on bloc politics that the world is big enough for all ideologies to co-exist. Moreover, there is a need to call for greater engagement of the Indian opposition party voice, S. P. Mookerjee, in the evolution of principal foreign policy, and the severely understudied field.*

**Keywords: Bharatiya Jana Sangh, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Hindu Mahasabha, Korean War, India-Korea Relations, Indian Foreign Policy, Cold War.**

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1 Doctoral Candidate, Department of East Asian Studies, University of Delhi.  
Email - kuri.shravan@gmail.com

## INTRODUCTION:

India and Korea have had a long historical connection. In addition, archaeological studies' recent discoveries of Megalithic rock showed a greater connection between both nations (Rajitha, 2017). Some unknown links exist between India and Korea, including the language and culture between Dravidian and Korean (Clippinger, 1984). Historically, India-Korea relations began with Queen Heo and Buddhism (Pankaj, 1989). Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore influenced modern Korean history, and inspired Korea's independence movement during the colonial period (Tayal, 2014).

The Korean question was raised as an international issue after the end of World War II. Cumings (1997) outlined the modern history of Korea and mentioned that, in 1945, after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki incidents, the Union of Soviet Socialist Russia (USSR) entered the Pacific War, and the Red Army marched into the northern side of Korea; the Soviet Union had always shown interest in Korea. The United States of America (USA) expanded from the southern side of Korea. Gupta (1977) mounted a meticulous study on India's peacekeeping activities during the Korean War and pointed out that in 1945, America started to bargain with the Soviet Union on the Korean peninsula; as a result, Korea was divided into two parts at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel line without the consultation of the Koreans. After the division, two opposite ideologies influenced the peninsula: Communism in the North and Capitalism in the South, which gradually conquered the peninsula.

In post-World War II, the United Nations (UN) was actively involved in several international issues, including the Korean conflict, which turned into the Korean War and resulted in the Korean crisis. Kim (2010) noted that, in September 1947, the USA brought the Korean conflict to the United Nations. However, the Soviet Union did not favour the UN's involvement in the Korean peninsula. Before the UN intervention in Korea, in May 1945, a four-power trusteeship was established, consisting of Britain, the USA, the Soviet Union, and the Republic of China; however, their efforts failed (Gupta, 1977).

In 1947, the UN came into the picture regarding the Korean peninsula

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(Kim, 2010). The settlement of Korea was raised in the UN, and the Korean question was turned into an international issue. India was involved in the Korean conflict following her independence. Indian policymakers saw an opportunity to mediate between the two blocs to find a solution to bring peace to the Korean War and the world order (Sen, 1967). Non-aligned states played a crucial role in the UN peace resolution on the Korean peninsula. The Korean crisis was a testing ground for Capitalist, Communist, and Non-Alignment ideologies, and each succeeded at some point.

The Korean War was not just a conflict between two countries. It was an ideological race of bloc politics (between America and the Soviet Union) for domination of one another in world affairs and beginning of Cold War (Jervis, 1980), and the Korean peninsula became a playground to the two big powers to wrest with each other for domination and control in world politics. India's involvement in the Korean crisis was inevitable with the concern of international order. India had to halt the war in the region and bring the warring sides to the negotiation table. Therefore, the Indian Parliaments discussed the Korean War and course of action and necessary modifications under the guidance of Indian parliamentarians.

This paper argues that S. P. Mookerjee emphasised that Indian foreign policy must take a realistic approach and undergo considerable revision as drifting towards war. It needs to focus on internal affairs first while also following world peace. The fundamental problem of the Korean conflict is the Korean division and, therefore, needs to focus on a united Korea. Furthermore, on the bloc politics, different ideologies can co-exist.

India's role in the Cold War context has recently begun to receive attention in research, though its importance has not yet been fully highlighted. Kim (2010) and Barnes (2013) raise the issue of the lack of data and sources regarding India's role in the Korean War. Kim (2010) noted that the role of India in the Korean War is relatively little known in both nations. Barnes (2013) wrote that at the National Archives of India of the Ministry of External Affairs, records relating to Korea remain closed, and at Prime Ministers Museum and Library (PMML), which was previously called the Nehru Memorial Museum

and Library (NMML), Nehru's post-independence papers have restricted access. This paper documents the Indian opposition's standpoint on the Korean War through S. P. Mookerjee's perspective on Indian foreign policy through archival materials.

This study can provide an opportunity to reconstruct the greater engagement of the Indian opposition party voice, S. P. Mookerjee and his associations the Hindu Mahasabha and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, in the evolution of principal foreign policy during the Korean War. It can shed light on the Indian opposition's standpoint on the Korean War by the following Indian foreign policy, the Non-Alignment.

## **INDIA'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE KOREAN PENINSULA**

In March 1947, at the Asian Conference in Delhi, three representatives from the southern part of Korea participated in the conference (Tayal, 2014). It was the first modern interaction between Independent India and divided Korea, and here, some interceptions were developed on Korea's future in Asia.

Initially, Indian policymakers believed that a divided Korea would always be an unstable Korea, and nobody would be able to arrest its negative fallout. Therefore, India supported the unification of Korea in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and participated in conducting elections through United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea (UNTCOK). In November 1947, the United Nations set up a UNTCOK, responsible for conducting free and fair elections to form an independent national government in the Korean peninsula (Gupta, 1977). In February 1948, India chaired the UNTCOK, and initially, the commission was concerned with the whole of Korea, but later on, it supported elections in the southern part of Korea (Kim, 2010).

On May 10, 1948, the election was held in the south, and then on August 15, 1948, the Republic of Korea (ROK) was formed under Syung Man-Rhee. In the north, in September 9, 1948, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) was established, with the support of the Soviet Union

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under Kim Il-Sung (Tiwari, 1988). In 1948, the United Nations Commission of Korea (UNCOK) was formed to replace UNTCOK because it could not bring unification and integration of all security forces in Korea. India again led the commission (Gupta, 1977). In 1947, 1948, and 1949, several civil conflicts occurred between North Korea and South Korea (Cumings, 1997). South Korean leader Syung Man-Rhee and North Korean leader Kim Il-Sung wanted to capture the other side of Korea and considered the Korean division an external event. Each side wanted to be the whole of Korea, and the conflicts constantly increased. Cumings (1997) pointed out that the most severe dispute occurred in Kaeseong and Ongjin.

The civil conflicts have to be resolved by the UN's based organisation, the UNCOK, but it failed to resolve the disputes, and the problem was raised to a position to take each other cities and enter into a war; however, it can be resolved by big powers diplomats, but they are unable to fulfil the task (Gupta, 1977). It shows the lack of independent organisation in the Korean peninsula; there was UNCOK in Korea, but the big powers dominated it and could not resolve the minor civil conflict. Later, this civil conflict became a big mess, like a war. However, UNTCOK and UNCOK could not handle Korea, especially from the Northern side of Korea (Dayal, 1959). Nevertheless, after Korea's division, the UN became a player in the Korean peninsula, but when it reached Korea, it was already dominated by the big powers. The big powers indirectly dominated UNCTOK and UNCOK, so the UN could not do much, and it failed, which further reflects the beginning of the Korean War.

On June 25, 1950, the Korean War began, and the UN sought assistance from the world. India acknowledged North Korea as the aggressive side and sent the 60th Parachute Field Ambulance (PFA) team to the Korean War for medical assistance to support the UN command (Gupta, 1977). According to Barnes (2013), the Korean War was a perfect testing ground for Nehru's beliefs.

In the Korean War, India participated on humanitarian grounds and provided medical assistance through the 60th PFA. The UN forces crossed the 38th parallel line and forwarded to Pyongyang, which led China to intervene in the Korean War through the Chinese People's Volunteer Army (CPVA)

(Prasad, 1976). Then, the war escalated into a Korean crisis-unending war. Panikkar (1977) noted that India warned the UN forces against crossing the 38th parallel, which would provoke China, but the UN crossed, resulting in a crisis. On various platforms, Indian representatives stressed the importance of communist China in resolving the Korean crisis (Kumar, 2015). To some extent, diplomats played a peacemaker role between the countries to bring consensus on Korea regarding the America, the Soviet Union, and China. In 1953, Soviet leader Stalin's death and other factors led to stopping the Korean War, but neither side was ready to halt the war due to Prisoners of War (POW) issues. On July 27, 1953, the Armistice Agreement was signed at Panmunjom, and Indian diplomats contributed to commissioning the draft at the UN (Gupta, 1977).

The Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (NNRC) was established to handle the Prisoners of War and consisted of Czechoslovak, Poland, India, Sweden and Switzerland (Tiwari, 1988). In September 1953, the NNRC was established, and before getting the leadership of the NNRC, in August 1953, India sent an Advance Party to Korea for first-hand information (Gupta, 1977). In August 1953, the Custodian Force of India (CFI) was established under India to deal with POW. In February 1954, the NNRC completed its task in Korea and returned home. It was India's last mission in the Korean crisis. After the Korean War, India moved its foreign policy to a new level with an active role in world politics through Non-Alignment. Brecher (1962) mounted a meticulous study on neutralism and pointed out that India's role in the Korean crisis reflects one aspect of neutralism: a neutralist state can positively relax international tensions.

Through the Indian foreign policy, India participated in the Korean War in diverse roles inside and outside the peninsula. Indian foreign policy became very active in the international platform from the Korean question, and it was an essential milestone for independent India's future in world affairs. India's actions in the Korean War were discussed in the Parliaments, and political discourses and one of the prominent voices of the opposition was S. P. Mookerjee, who was the voice of the other side, which played an essential role in the evolution of the Indian foreign policy.

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## **S. P. MOOKERJEE IN INDIAN POLITICS:**

S. P. Mookerjee is one of the prominent leaders in Indian politics and played a role in world affairs and a key player in the evolution of Indian foreign policy, which occupied a space between bloc politics. He is a myriad of talented individuals with a diverse understanding of Independent India. However, he focused more on the realistic approach to the development of India and had a distinguished career in the academic and political fields (Baxter, 1969); in 1944, he became the President of Hindu Mahasabha (Bharatiya Jana Sangh). In 1941 and 1942, S. P. Mookerjee acted as a Minister of Finance in Bengal. In the early stage, he understood the function of Congress and emphasised the need for alternatives in the Indian political system (Ganguly, 2017).

Kashyap (1995) stated that S. P. Mookerjee was an “astute Parliamentarian.” After independence, he was one of several non-Congress politicians in Jawaharlal Nehru’s cabinet; and joined as Minister of Industries and Supply (Baxter, 1969). Pillai (1966) noted that in April 1950, S. P. Mookerjee resigned from the cabinet in a protest against the Nehru-Liaquat Ali Pact and joined the small opposition group in the Provisional Parliament. In Parliament, Nehru always respected S. P. Mookerjee and listened to his voice with great concern (Kashyap, 1995). Madhok (1969) highlighted that S. P. Mookerjee was the only opposition member who stood head and shoulders with Nehru in Parliament.

Baxter (1969) stated that, on May 5, 1950, S. P. Mookerjee delivered a lecture and announced the formation of the People’s Party in Hindi called Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS). That day, the conference adopted a program, selected S. P. Mookerjee as a provincial leader, and invited groups with similar thoughts to engage with the new party. The program contained eight points and, in foreign policy, mentioned the need for “a more realistic and independent attitude in matters of foreign policy consistent with Bharat’s paramount self-interest” (Baxter, 1969). Pillai (1966) mentioned that according to Myron Weiner, there are two critical factors in the formation of the Bharatiya Jan Sangh Party: an organisation called the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and a personality named S. P. Mookerjee. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Hindu Mahasabha were closely knotted (Pillai, 1969).

The Jana Sangh election manifesto mentioned that the object of the party was to make India prosperous and powerful (Baxter, 1969). The Jana Sangh secured three seats in the first Lok Sabha and 33 in the Vidhan Sabha in the elections (Pillai, 1966). According to Pillai (1966), after the elections, especially from the opposition side, S. P. Mookerjee became a more vocal, active and responsible Parliamentarian. S. P. Mookerjee attempted to unite the thoughts that did not support Congress, the Socialists or the Communists. As a result, the 30 Parliamentarians joined the National Democratic Group (NDG) from Maha Sabha, Rama Rajya Parishad, Akali Dal, Ganatantra Parishad, Commonweal Party, Tamilnad Toiler's Party and some independents. In mid-1952, the NDG number increased to 32, but this group could not last long and loosened after the death of S. P. Mookerjee in 1953 (Kashyap, 1995).

S. P. Mookerjee was one of the first strong voices against Nehru's government on several subjects and later developed a collective effort to make the government act more effectively and progress towards some key issues. He believed that Indian foreign policy needs to follow a realistic method and the nation's self-interest. He emphasised first internal development and then the external issue as India-first and world-next.

### **S. P. MOOKERJEE IN PARLIAMENT ON THE KOREAN WAR:**

According to the Parliamentary Debates Vol. V, on August 3-4, 1950, in the emergency session, the Provisional Parliament of India introduced a discussion on Korean situation. In the debate, S. P. Mookerjee addressed the Indian foreign policy, stated that there is a need for "considerable revision", and the priority to be self-interest and simultaneously progress toward peace in the world. Accordingly, India supported two resolutions on Korea passed by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). It implies that India supports establishing the "International Police system?" but why the action on Korea? Why not in other cases, such as Palestine, Indonesia, Holland, and Kashmir? Furthermore, why is the international system concerned more with Korea? Therefore, the Korean conflict needs to look at the interests of Korea and the possibility of a world crisis. The fundamental reason for the Korean crisis was

that “Korea was disunited.” Therefore, on the reunion of Korea, let us call for “Hands off Korea; you take off your hands” and enable the representatives of Korea and others to sit at a round table and discuss the basis of the Korean reunion rather than support UNSC resolutions. India supported the UNSC resolution and was ready to send medical assistance to South Korea. However, that was not the assistance the UN thought of India; they wanted India to go with the “whole hog.” India supports the UN resolution on South Korea and wants China’s involvement in Korea and what is China’s role in the issue of the Korean War. Korea was torn to pieces as two big powers came for the cause of protection of the people, but they “take away their birthright, their freedom.”

S. P. Mookerjee compared the India-Pakistan partition with North Korea and South Korea’s division and economic challenges (Parliament of India, 1950). He opined that India should not dictate what pattern to follow and what not to follow, and therefore, the world is “enough for all patterns to live together and not run at one another’s throat?” (Parliament of India, 1950). India must stand for an independent policy through “moral and political rights” and unite for the “foundation for United Korea” and must engage and cooperate with Koreans, not outsiders (Parliament of India, 1950). India must follow an independent foreign policy on re-unifying Korea, which is the only way to resolve the Korean crisis. Therefore, everyone should acknowledge the reunification and send a representative of North Korea and South Korea (Parliament of India, 1950).

On bloc politics, S. P. Mookerjee stated that we are not favouring this bloc over the other and our priorities will be India and the world’s interests. India has its thoughts and methods towards the world’s affairs and does not support blocs (Parliament of India, 1950). It was the first time the Republic of India took a stand on the ongoing conflict between the blocs. Furthermore, it is time for India to call for a united stand against oppressed people, and the slogan should be “United Korea” (Parliament of India, 1950).

On December 6-7, 1950, the Provisional Parliament of India introduced a discussion on the international situation. In the debate, S. P. Mookerjee

addressed the Korean War and that India needed to be concerned about its safety and security. He stated that he wants peace, aims to avoid war, follows the policy of negotiations, and must not follow “a policy of drift” into battle (Mookerjee, 1951).

Furthermore, the world order is at a critical juncture and needs to focus on “what should be our outlook and our policy” on international issues (Mookerjee, 1951). He observed certain inconsistencies in Indian foreign policy toward Korea. Jawaharlal Nehru emphasised that no settlement in the Korean conflict was possible without China. S. P. Mookerjee questioned whether it was the correct approach as it noted that China backed North Korea in aggression against South Korea. He appreciated America’s stand on North Korea as an “ideological conflict” rather than an attack. America is fighting the battle for democracy, and we must make ourselves “what we stand for” (Mookerjee, 1951). We must look at world peace and focus on our position as a realistic approach, and there will be possible repercussions if “Korea is allowed to develop into a theatre of world war” (Mookerjee, 1951).

S. P. Mookerjee opined that “this world is big enough for all of us to live in”, and different ideologies can co-exist (Mookerjee, 1951). India stands for the “doctrine of live and let live”, if there is an ultimate conflict between two-ism, then we will try to negotiate between them; if the dispute continues, what is next? Furthermore, what if it comes to our doorsteps? What will we do? Therefore, Indian foreign policy must be realistic (Mookerjee, 1951). In the Parliamentary Debates Vol. VI, he further emphasised that India stands for peace, but our inconsistent and uncertain policies are slowly drifting our nation to a disaster. In Parliaments, S. P. Mookerjee discussed the changes in the Korean War and the world crisis and mentioned that there is a need for changes in Indian foreign policy and India’s approach towards resolving the war and emphasised that different ideologies can co-exist without conflicts.

### **S. P. MOOKERJEE’S ASSOCIATIONS ON KOREAN WAR:**

S. P. Mookerjee’s attached associations took a standpoint on Indian Government policy during the Korean War. On July 3, 1950, in a press

conference, Narayan Bhaskar Khare (N. B. Khare), President of the Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha, characterised the Government of India's decision to support the United Nations resolution on the Korean War as "Camouflage neutrality" and urged the Government of India to formulate a "united foreign policy" along with the consideration of opposition parties, to encounter the world crisis with confidence and commented that United Nations followed a double stand by compare the Kashmir and Korea and criticised the Indian Government policy on Korean War (Hindu Mahasabha's Criticism, 1950; Pillai, 1969). The S. P. Mookerjee's attached organisations criticised the Government's role in Korea and opposed the Government of India for "taking active interest in the Cold War"; however, they stand for united Korea (Pillai, 1969).

According to the All India Hindu Mahasabha, C-182, (PMML) records, on October 2, 1950, the Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha held a working committee meeting and addressed the foreign policy on Korea and reminded the unfortunate partition of India and Pakistan. On December 14, 1950, the Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha, in an Anti-Hindu Code Conference held in Bengal and N. C. Chatterjee, stated, "Kashmir is still a vital problem, Korea is still fraught with peril" (All India Hindu Mahasabha, C-184, 1950).

On Indian foreign policy, the Hindu Mahasabha opinions that the policy of neutrality without the concern on defence policy is not a realistic approach, and if there is a war, then the policy of neutrality will not be respected by the blocs (All India Hindu Mahasabha, C-184, 1950). Therefore, we need to focus more on the development of defence.

On account of the international situation, the Hindu Mahasabha advised the Indian Government to update its military and commented on the UN's attitude by comparing Kashmir and Korea on the subject of aggression (All India Hindu Mahasabha, C-184, 1950). According to records of S. P. Mookerjee's writings (PMML), on December 1950, in the annual function of RSS, S. P. Mookerjee stated that there were drastic changes in the international situation and, at such time, the "greatest need is to strengthen the home front", as India needs to prepare and strengthen as per the changes in the international

situation. The associations did not want the Government of India to indulge in bloc politics as India follows a neutral policy and needs to follow a balanced approach between sides and focus on India's internal development. On several occasions, they compared Kashmir with Korea. They advised that India needs to plan for the future, as per the change in international situations, and emphasised a collective approach for united Korea.

### **S. P. MOOKERJEE ON INDIAN FOREIGN POLICY:**

Generally, a foreign policy learns lessons from pasts, national movements, and external events, which aims for future outlooks. The Indian freedom movement under British rule added important lessons to Indian foreign policy. Several international events have made Indian leaders aware of world affairs and have made them responsible leaders. S. P. Mookerjee considered that India must follow a realist foreign policy approach. He observed that the "success of a country's foreign policy could be judged only by results", and he urged India to focus more on internal issues (Nehru's Foreign Policy Not Independent, 1953).

Several prominent American politicians urged President Truman to demand a cease-fire, withdraw all foreign troops from Korea, and call for a "hand-off policy in Korea", similar to S. P. Mookerjee's thought (Hands-off Policy in Korea Urged, 1950). In foreign policy discussions, S. P. Mookerjee mentioned that Jawaharlal Nehru promised to call the leaders of opposition groups for an informal talk, however it occurred only once (Lok Sabha, 1990). S. P. Mookerjee considered that, on account of foreign policy, there would be an effective foreign policy only if there was a precise and proper system in the nation (Lok Sabha, 1990). Therefore, S. P. Mookerjee emphasised that priority should be internal rather than external. During the discussions in the Parliament, S. P. Mookerjee highlighted the changes in world order and the need to modify foreign policy for the future of India and world peace.

A draft of the Jana Sangh party under the guidance of S. P. Mookerjee mentioned that India's foreign policy now is "vacillation and inconsistency" and has not produced any result and, therefore, will focus on the "spirit of enlightened self-interest" (Mookerjee-Subject Files, PMML). Initially, there

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was some indifference to the Cold War among the Indian political leaders. However, the outbreak of the Korean War made Indian politicians and the masses concerned over the subject of the Cold War as Asia was turned into a fireball and could not escape further, so they needed to stop the flames.

S. P. Mookerjee's opinion on bloc politics is that India needs to deal with the bloc's issue not only from the international situation but also the point of safety and security of India and what is experiencing in the world today is "lust for power, possession, and prestige" (Lok Sabha, 1990). According to S. P. Mookerjee, the Korean conflict was due to division, and he criticised the Indian Government for linking the issue of China's admission into the UN to resolving the Korean War (Pillai, 1969). S. P. Mookerjee understood the depth of the Korean War and India's interests and limitations and advised the Indian foreign policy need to work on the goal of interest of Korea, which is Korean-ness as in united Korea which can stop the Korean War and indulge between the blocs are not a realistic approach of Indian foreign policy and need in-depth analysis on international events and prepare the Indian motherland at its best for the world peace and considered that the internal is first than external.

The opposition parties have limited consultations on foreign policy with the government. The Indian foreign policy on Korea aims to stop the war through international platforms with a multiplayer approach, but whereas S. P. Mookerjee views that the Korean War origin from the division of Korea and, therefore, Indian foreign policy should follow the reunification of Korea, which can halt the Korean War and restore the peace in the Korean peninsula and stability in the world order.

## **CONCLUSION:**

India played diverse roles in the Korean War under the guidance of Indian Parliamentarians. They understood the heat of the Korean War in blocs conflict and aimed to halt the Korean War, not to spread any other parts of Asia. The Indian foreign policy gained a unique experience in the Korean conflict, and S. P. Mookerjee served as a proof-reader of the Indian foreign policy and urged a revision. S. P. Mookerjee emphasised that the Korean War

was a conflict of the Korean question. Korean reunification is the only way to resolve the Korean question, and a united Korea can be accomplished through India's independent foreign policy. Therefore, India's foreign policy should focus on Korean-ness and world peace rather than other alternatives.

India's independent foreign policy must focus on a united Korea rather than managing between the blocs. Indian foreign policy is drifting towards war, and there is a need for a realistic approach to the Korean War as it becomes a theatre of world war. Therefore, Indian foreign policy must be revised considerably and should be focused on India's self-interest. By observance of international situations, Indians need to learn lessons and focus on the safety and security of the nation. In the world of bloc politics, different ideologies can co-exist without conflict. S. P. Mookerjee stresses that India should not take sides on blocs and strives for a realistic approach to the Korean conflict, and the Korean-ness is essential in resolving the Korean question.

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# INDIA'S SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY IN THE MALDIVES: CULTURAL AND STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT AMIDST GEOPOLITICAL CHALLENGES

Rajani Mol<sup>1</sup>, Abdul Wasi Popalzay<sup>2</sup>, and Musssaib Rasool Mir<sup>3</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*The relations between India and Maldives are deeply rooted in historical and geographical proximity and are concretized through soft power assets. India's soft power diplomacy with the Maldives has been multifaceted, including Cultural diplomacy, educational assistance, development aid, healthcare support, capacity-building, tourism, and diplomatic and strategic engagement. Despite these successes, India's soft power diplomacy in the Maldives faces significant challenges due to geopolitical strains, the shifting foreign policy of Maldives, and the growing competition in the Indian Ocean Region. However, the recent election of Maldivian President Mohammad Muizzu, known for his anti-India rhetoric and China stance, has challenged the once stable and cooperative relationship. This study explores how India's soft power has evolved as a strategic tool to maintain influence in the Maldives amid rising geopolitical challenges. Through this lens, India's soft power diplomacy becomes not just an avenue for cultural exchange but a dynamic force in shaping the trajectory of strategic relations amid evolving regional dynamics. The main objective is to analyze India's soft power assets, which have helped to strengthen India-Maldives relations. Secondly, it examines the role and impact of India's soft power in fostering bilateral relations and navigating the geopolitical strain between India and Maldives.*

**Keywords: India-Maldives relations, Cultural Diplomacy, Soft Power, Geopolitical Dynamics, China**

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- 1 Research Scholar, Department of South and Central Asian Studies, Central University of Punjab, Email - rajanimol96@gmail.com
  - 2 Research Scholar, Department of South and Central Asian Studies, Central University of Punjab, Email - abdul.wasi.popalzay@gmail.com
  - 3 Research Scholar, Department of South and Central Asian Studies, Central University of Punjab, Email - musaibmirkmr@gmail.com

## INTRODUCTION

The intricate tapestry of cultural relations between India and the Maldives is woven with threads of historical connections, religious affinities, linguistic ties, geographical proximity, and shared cultural elements. This rich tapestry has been further embellished through soft power assets, a nuanced and strategic tool that is pivotal in shaping the bilateral relations between India and Maldives. Maldives occupies a special place under India's "Neighbourhood First" Foreign Policy, which aims to bring stability and prosperity to the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Also, both nations are key players in maintaining the safety and security of the IOR, thus contributing to the India-led Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) vision (High Commission of India, 2024). The relationship between India and Maldives has developed over time and has been shaped by various geopolitical, economic, and strategic factors. In this context, India's soft power emerged as a key element of foreign policy that aims to integrate cultural connections with strategic goals. India's soft power diplomacy towards the Maldives has been multifaceted, employing a wide range of India's soft power elements such as Cultural diplomacy, educational assistance, development aid, healthcare support, capacity-building, tourism, and diplomatic and strategic engagement. These initiatives collectively form a robust framework through which India seeks to reinforce its cultural and strategic presence in the Maldives.

Nonetheless, India's soft power strategy in the Maldives encounters challenges. The Maldivian political landscape is dynamic, with shifts in leadership and policy direction impacting India-Maldives relations. 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. Muizzu stepped up his anti-India rhetoric, and his robust China stance has a negative trajectory in the relationship, explicitly aiming to reduce Male's reliance on Indian influence. In this context, the once warm and brotherly relationship between India and the Maldives is undergoing a transformative phase and the interplay between soft power and strategic dynamics takes center stage as geopolitical landscapes evolve. India's soft power assets meticulously examine its role in navigating the complexities arising from the Maldives'

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China stance. Against this background, there arises a question of how soft power evolved as a strategic tool for the Maldives and how soft power assets help to overcome the geopolitical tension between India and the Maldives.

As the Maldives navigates its foreign relations, it finds itself at the center of a significant power struggle in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Additionally, domestic political shifts within the Maldives and pro-China stance have profound implications for India. Increasing competition from other regional actors, particularly China, has raised concerns regarding India's ability to maintain its influence in the region. Amidst these challenges, India's soft power efforts aim to solidify its position as a trusted partner for the Maldives, balancing cultural affinity with strategic imperatives in a rapidly shifting geopolitical landscape. In the face of changing geopolitical dynamics, India's nuanced and effective approach, leveraging cultural ties, showcases a resilient strategy to fortify its strategic partnership with the Maldives. Through this lens, soft power diplomacy becomes not just an avenue for cultural exchange but a dynamic force in shaping the trajectory of strategic relations amid evolving regional dynamics. Given this context, the main objective is to analyze India's soft power assets, which have helped to strengthen India-Maldives relations. Secondly, it examines the role and impact of India's soft power in fostering bilateral relations and navigating the geopolitical strain between India and Maldives.

## **SOFT POWER: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In the ever-evolving landscape of international relations, the traditional paradigms of power and influence have expanded beyond military strength and economic prowess. However, the 1990s marked a significant juncture where the traditional shibboleths of power underwent a profound transformation. This transformative period saw the emergence of a new dimension in the discourse of power, particularly with the introduction of the concept of soft power by Joseph Nye. Nye's conceptualization of power introduced a dualistic perspective, distinguishing between two facets: hard power and soft power. While hard power traditionally involves coercion, military strength, and economic might, and hard power relies on tangible and coercive tactics, often

associated with military force or economic leverage. In contrast, soft power recognizes the persuasive influence that culture, ideas, and appeal can exert on the global stage.

Joseph Nye first introduced the concept of “soft power” in his book ‘Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power’ in 1990. The term “soft power” was later explicitly coined and elaborated upon by Nye in his book “Soft Power: The means to Success in World Politics” in 2004. According to Nye, soft power is co-optive power or indirect power that can help in “getting others to want what you want,” and it shapes the preferences of others by the attraction of intangible resources such as universalistic popular culture or political cohesion (Nye, 2016). Soft power is used to shape the preferences of others without coercion and influence one feels subtly or surreptitiously (Mahapatra, 2016). Nye had identified three sources of soft power. A country’s soft power, Nye states, rests upon the attractiveness of its culture, its domestic political and social values, and the style and substance of its foreign policies (Nye, 2004). According to him, there are three mechanisms through which a country can sprout, deploy, or engage its soft power toward other countries: cultural relations, public diplomacy, and cultural diplomacy (Rivera, 2015).

Various scholars interpreted the concept of soft power in several ways: Wilson (2008) elaborated succinctly, “Soft power is a crucial element in the contemporary political context to achieve goals more smartly. Kurlantzick (2007) has defined soft power as “anything outside of the security and military realm, with not just common culture and public diplomacy, but even more coercive economic and political levers such as assistance and investment as well as involvement in multilateral organizations.” As the world becomes more interconnected, the strategic use of soft power has emerged as a crucial tool for navigating the complex landscape of global politics.

## **INDIA- MALDIVES RELATIONS: HISTORICAL AND RECENT DYNAMICS**

India and the Maldives share a long and intricate history of cultural, linguistic, and religious ties that have shaped their contemporary diplomatic

relations. The Maldives hold strategic importance for India due to its location in the Indian Ocean, which aligns with the government's "Neighborhood First" policy. None other than India was the first to recognize Maldives as an independent sovereign state among the community of nation-states (Malone, 2011). In 1974, India was also the first to start a resident mission in Maldives. In 1988, India was forcefully saved Maldives longest ruling President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's government "from a political coup mounted by Abdullah Luthufi, assisted by Tamil separatist forces" (Thakur, 2023). In fact, India's swift military intervention during the 1988 coup attempt in the Maldives further solidified its role as a protector of Maldivian sovereignty, underscoring the depth of their relationship (Zahir, 2021). Under President Maumoon, Maldivian foreign policy took a lukewarm turn towards India.

The shift in dynamics grew during Abdulla Yameen's presidency in 2013, during which China's influence in Maldives increased through the Belt and Road Initiative (Bhadauriya & Mishra, 2023). Abdullah Yameen, overtly considered pro-China in India, visited New Delhi from January 1 to 4, 2014, and tried to alleviate the fears of the Indian elite that China would be given a free pass to the island nation. Sushma Swaraj, the then Foreign Minister, visited Maldives in 2015, keeping India's Neighborhood Policy alive despite Male having gone much closer to China. The years 2012-2018 saw a dramatic fall in the bilateral relationship between India and Male, due to Chinese control over the working of the foreign policy of Male. Although it should be mentioned here that the Chinese didn't get access to the critical projects on their own, it was facilitated by the then-Yameen government to counter the traditional Indian presence in the state as well as in the Indian Ocean Region. Although ties improved significantly under President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's "India First" foreign policy. Solih's first visit to Delhi in 2018 revitalized the India-Maldives relationship, which had suffered during the Yameen administration (Goud, 2023).

The Maldives' relationship with India took a downturn when Muizzu, then a presidential candidate, rode a wave of anti-India sentiment encapsulated in the "India Out" campaign. After winning the elections in the Maldives on 17 November 2023, president Muizzu showed a clear tilt in favor of Beijing,

and chose to visit China in 2024. The two leaders, Muizzu and Xi signed over more than 20 MoU in various critical areas like “blue economy, digital economy, infrastructure development projects linked to the Belt and Road Initiative [BRI], disaster and risk mitigation, and news cooperation, through an MoU between the Public Service Media of the Maldives and the Xinhua news agency of China” (Marwah & Verma, 2023). Interestingly, after returning from China, Muizzu issued an ultimatum to India to pull back its 88 defense personnel responsible for operating the Dornier aircraft and helicopters given by India. These assets are used for surveillance of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of Maldives, as well as conducting disaster relief operations across over a thousand islands in Maldives. Additionally, he has announced plans to host a PRC ship, Xiang Yang Hong 03, which is stated to be on a dual-purpose oceanographic mission (Yousuf, 2024).

The escalating tension between India and Maldives was further strengthened by the social media outbursts triggered by Prime Minister Modi’s visit to Lakshadweep. The two Maldivian ministers, Mariyam Shiuna and Malsha Shareef, labeled PM Modi a "clown" and a "puppet of Israel" on social media over his posts on India's Lakshadweep islands (Reuters, 2024). These actions, breaking ministerial protocol, significantly affected relations between the two countries. The diplomatic rift reached a critical point when the ministers were suspended in response to India's increasing dissatisfaction. Although the Maldivian foreign ministry clarified that these comments were personal and did not represent the government's stance, concerns persist. The foreign policy of Maldives has taken a significant shift from being a state to embarking previously on an ‘India First Policy’ to the ‘India Out Campaign.’ As a result of this significant shift in the foreign policy of Maldives towards India, the relationship has undergone substantive changes as well as witnessed stress and strain in the India-Maldives relationship (Shivamurthy, 2022).

## **SOFT POWER IN ACTION: INDIA’S ROLE IN STRENGTHENING BILATERAL TIES WITH THE MALDIVES**

India's soft power strategy towards the Maldives involves several key areas: Cultural diplomacy, educational assistance, development aid, healthcare

support, capacity-building, tourism, and diplomatic and strategic engagement.

### ***Cultural Diplomacy***

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) plays a vital role in promoting Indian culture in the Maldives through festivals, events like Diwali and Holi, and yoga and Bollywood programs (Isar, 2020). The Indian Cultural Centre (ICC) in Malé, established in 2011, offers language, dance, music, and yoga classes to strengthen cultural ties (Manoharan, 2014). Furthermore, India's support for preserving and promoting Maldivian cultural heritage, including restoration projects of historical sites and cultural exchanges (Kugiel, 2017). For example, experts from the NRLCCP in Lucknow, India, successfully renovated three historic mosques in the Maldives: the Friday Mosque in Male, the Fenfushi Mosque in South Ari Atoll, and the Dharumavantha Rasgefaanu Mosque in Male (Upadhyay & Mishra, 2024). Additionally, Yoga serves as another cultural link between India and Maldives (Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, 2023). Traditional Indian paintings like Madhubani and Warli art adorn many Maldivian homes and businesses, adding elegance and charm (Maaz, 2021). Bollywood films, yoga, language, and literature are extremely popular in the Maldives (Aheibam & Maluleem, 2023).

### ***Educational Assistance***

India has significantly strengthened educational ties with the Maldives by providing education and scholarships to Maldivian students. The scholarships, including the ICCR scholarships, cover tuition fees, accommodation, and living expenses for undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral studies in India (Hashimy, 2023). For example, in 2023 alone, India provided 200 scholarships to Maldivian students to study in Indian universities (Manoharan, 2024). Many prominent Maldivians like Mohamed Nasheed, Mohamed Waheed Hassan, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, Mohamed Jameel Ahmed, and Mariyam Shakeela have studied in India, shaping the country's socio-political landscape. These individuals have leveraged their education from India to make significant contributions to various fields in the Maldives, reflecting the strong educational ties between the two nations (Jain, 2023). Approximately 25% of teachers in the Maldives are Indian, playing a vital role in the development of the Maldivian education sector. This educational

cooperation contributes significantly to capacity building in the Maldives, fostering a sense of cultural and professional reciprocity (Times of India, 2024a).

### ***Development Aid***

India is involved in various development projects in the Maldives, such as infrastructure development, and disaster relief. “India has assisted the Maldives in several areas of development, such as providing concessional budget support, credit for water and sewerage facilities in selected islands, and the construction of other civic infrastructure projects” (Ranjan, 2021). India has provided financial support through standby credit facility to the Maldives amounting to US\$100 million in 2008 and \$100 million in 2011 (Ministry of Finance, Republic of Maldives, 2020). On August 13, 2020, India said it would provide funding for the Greater Malé Connectivity Project (GMCP), fulfilling its pledge to build public facilities in the Maldives. During Jaishankar's trip in 2021, the Addu City road and drainage system construction contract was granted. During Jaisahnkar's visit, the Memorandum of Understanding for the construction of a Geydhoshu Mas Plant at Noonu Atoll Kendhikulhudhoo was agreed upon. With funding from an Indian credit line, the Hanimaadhoo International Airport Development project aims to build a new terminal that will boost its capacity to handle 1.3 million passengers each year. In 2023, India and the Maldives signed nine new MoUs for local projects and contracted the Greater Male Connectivity Project (GMCP) to boost infrastructure. After the 2004 tsunami, India provided quick relief with supplies, ships, and medical aid, spending Rs. 36.39 crores and later offering Rs. 10 crores in financial aid.

### ***Tourism***

The Maldivian economy relies heavily on its tourism sector, which is the primary source of foreign exchange earnings and government revenue. As the closest neighbour, India plays a pivotal role in driving tourist arrivals to the Maldives, with the number of Indian tourists experiencing a remarkable sevenfold increase over the past 12 years, spanning from 2011 to 2023 (Ministry of Tourism, Maldives, 2023). Despite the challenges of the pandemic in 2020, India became the largest source market for the Maldives,

with nearly 63,000 Indian visitors. This trend continued in 2021 and 2022, with India remaining the top market, with over 2.91 lakh and 2.41 lakh Indian tourist arrivals, respectively, capturing 23% and 14.4% market shares (The Economic Times, 2024). In March 2022, India and the Maldives agreed to an open skies arrangement, which is expected to enhance connectivity between the two countries, further boosting tourism (Ministry of External Affairs India, 2023). According to the Maldives Tourism Ministry statistics, more than 2.09 lakh Indians visited the island nation in 2023 (The Economic Times, 2024a).

### *Healthcare support*

India provides significant healthcare support to the Maldives through medical infrastructure and services. The Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital was inaugurated in 1995 with 200 bed hospital was established at an estimated cost of Rs.42.5 crores. India has become the preferred destination for Maldivians seeking specialized medical treatments and surgeries that may be either unavailable or limited in their home country (India Today, 2024a). Notably, in 2021, Maldivians constituted the third- largest group individuals visiting India for medical treatment. The proximity of India to the Maldives, direct flights, and affordable healthcare options make it an attractive destination for Maldivians (Binoy, 2017). Medical tourism not only benefits the patients but also contributes to the economy of both countries and strengthens their bilateral ties (Shanmugam, 2013). Maldivians make up about 15-20% of the 3,000 foreign nationals seeking medical care in Kochi monthly, with around 600 receiving treatment under the Maldivian government's 'Aasandha' universal health insurance scheme. According to the Kerala Medical Tourism Facilitators Forum and the Association of Medical Facilitators, Kerala, Oman nationals are the largest group of medical tourists in Kochi, followed by individuals from Maldives, Africa, and Gulf Cooperation Council countries (The Hindu, 2024a).

India's diaspora in the Maldives is seen as a significant bridge that is beneficial for Indian cultural diplomacy. According to the Ministry of External Affairs (2023), India, as of June 2023, an estimated population of 27,000 of the Indian diasporas in the Maldives serves as a bridge between the two

nations. Through remittances, investments, and employment generation, the Indian diaspora significantly impacts the Maldivian economy. The Indian High Commission in the Maldives actively engages with the diaspora, providing consular services and facilitating cultural exchanges (Pradhan & Mohapatra, 2020).

### ***Capacity Building***

Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program plays a significant role in conducting capacity-building programs for Maldivians in various fields. Several MoUs have been signed between India and the Maldives to strengthen human resource capacity building in various sectors (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023). India is the primary provider of training for the Maldivian National Defence Force (MNDF), fulfilling about 70% of their defense training needs. The MNDF also participates in various military-to-military activities with India, including joint EEZ patrols, anti-narcotic operations, search and rescue (SAR) missions, the sea-rider program, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) exercises, adventure camps, and sailing regattas. Indian Navy has also provided MNDF with air assets for air surveillance, MEDEVAC, SAR, Helo-borne vertical insertion capability (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023). Notably, around 70% of the Maldives' defense training is provided by India, either on the islands or in India's prestigious Military Academies. (The Geopolitics, 2024). The collaboration extends beyond training to the provision of critical resources, as the Indian Navy has supplied aircraft and helicopters to the Maldivian defence forces for aerial surveillance (The Diplomat, 2023)

### ***Bilateral and strategic engagement***

India and Maldives have strong Bilateral relations, encompassing political and security, maritime, trade, etc. Due to its location in the Indian Ocean, the Maldives holds strategic significance for India as part of the government's "Neighbourhood First" policy. India has made many bilateral treaties and strategic partnerships with the Maldives. The Maldives consistently supports India in forums like the UN, Commonwealth, NAM, and SAARC, and India backed the Maldives for a non-permanent seat in the UN Security

Council for 2019-20. India and the Maldives signed a maritime treaty in 1976 defining their boundaries. In 1982, a diplomatic issue arose when India misinterpreted a speech by the Maldivian president's brother as a claim to Minicoy Island, but the Maldives clarified it was about cultural ties. On trade, both countries signed a comprehensive agreement in 1981 and are founding members of SAARC and the South Asia Free Trade Agreement, promoting regional cooperation.

The 1988 Defense Cooperation Agreement established India's role in training Maldivian forces and addressing equipment shortages. That year, India intervened in Operation Cactus to thwart a coup, strengthening defense ties. Subsequent agreements include the Comprehensive Security Cooperation Agreement (2016) and the Radar Network Agreement (2018), enhancing maritime surveillance across all 26 Maldivian atolls. The Indian Navy and the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) signed a technical agreement for sharing "White Shipping Information" on non-military vessels. Both nations also conduct joint military exercises, like Ekuverin, and work on defense infrastructure projects such as the Coastal Surveillance Radar System (CSRS). In June 2019, Modi visited the Maldives and signed an MoU on Hydrography and a technical agreement on White Shipping Information (India-Maldives Joint Statement During the State Visit of Prime Minister to Maldives, 2019).

## **GEOPOLITICAL CHALLENGES IN MAINTAINING INDIA'S SOFT POWER IN THE MALDIVES (ANALYSIS)**

India's soft power diplomacy towards the Maldives is molded by a complex geopolitical landscape, particularly influenced by regional dynamics and external actors. India encounters diverse geopolitical challenges in sustaining its soft power: the impact of external actors on the Maldives, the shift in Maldivian foreign policy, and geopolitical rivalry in the Indian Ocean (IO).

### ***Impact of external actors on the Maldives***

Maldives has become a geopolitical hotspot of competition between India, the US, and China. While Washington has limited interaction with Male,

it looks upon the government in New Delhi to keep its feet firmly implanted there as it knows that both the states have long cordial relations and India's soft power assets suffices the job of keeping the state under check. Beijing on the other side, has started a robust strategic campaign to earn the dividends that the access to a vital geopolitical state like Maldives can provide. Economics, trade, and investment have been the bedrock of deepening ties between Maldives and China. China, a major economic giant, has very cleverly used its economic strength and financial tools to lure the smaller economically poor states who are in dire need of financial assistance. Chinese inroads into the Maldivian economy took a flight during the 2008 economic crash when tourism the backbone of its economy took a significant hit.

China's involvement in the Maldives has expanded through infrastructure development projects, particularly under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). One of the most significant infrastructure projects, Sinamale Bridge (China-Maldives Friendship Bridge), connects the capital city of Malé to the nearby Hulhulé Island (where Velana International Airport is located) and is Funded by Chinese loans. In addition, China funded the renewal of Velana International Airport. These projects have bolstered China's economic presence, potentially diminishing India's influence. It has challenged India's traditional dominance in the absolute sense and raises questions about the impact of its soft power assets in the state. China's growing economic clout allows it to exert political influence, creating competition for India.

The Chinese presence in the region (from Qatar to the Strait of Malacca) providing annually space to more than 1 million cargo ships challenges the yet privileged position of the Indian Navy (Shukla, 2018). The Chinese development of Special Economic Zones, seaports, etc. along the region directly conflicts with the Indian policy of sharing the Free and Open Indo-Pacific region (FOIP) and will give China an upper hand in the Sino-Indian rivalry. Maldives' decadal bilateral trade figures with India and China show that the change of the government in Male also brings a subsequent change in its foreign policy preferences (Table 1.)

Year	China Exports	China Imports	India Exports	India Imports	Year
2010	58.2	0.374	141	30.8	2010
2012	93.6	4.06	163	7.65	2012
2015	190	0.161	228	6.23	2015
2018	511	5.47	263	8.12	2018
2020	273	5.32	196	17.1	2020
2021	406	22.17	591.79	50.7	2021

Table 1. Bilateral Trade of the Maldives with China and India between 2010 and 2021 (Million Dollars).

*Source: Trade Economics, 2022 <https://tradingeconomics.com/india/exports/maldives>.*

The numbers clearly point to the staggering rise of Chinese exports to the Maldivian market, however India has not lacked behind in giving China a tough competition, even surpassing the total export value of USD 91.79 million against \$406 million of China in the year 2021. Alongside the pro-China voices of "India Out," the slogan "India First" was also disseminated to foster friendly relations (Thakur, 2023). That's why Indian exports to Maldives saw a steep rise once the Solih's government, mostly considered pro-India, took a positive step towards having an open and friendly relationship with New Delhi.

Despite the increased Chinese involvement in the Maldives, the impact on bilateral relations between the two nations is considerable. This influence was particularly evident during the Maldivian president's recent state visit to China, where both countries advanced their ties by establishing a 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.' The partnership aims to strengthen political guidance through high-level engagements, expand practical cooperation across various sectors, enhance collaboration in international and multilateral arenas, improve the well-being of both populations, and work towards a shared future for China and the Maldives (The Hindu, 2024b). These agreements do not necessarily indicate Chinese intent to alter the regional security balance and the triangular relations between China, the Maldives, and

India. Nevertheless, military collaboration could be part of China's broader strategy to leverage power and diminish India's sphere of influence over South Asian countries. However, they have raised concerns, especially in India (Loc, 2024).

### *The shift in Maldivian foreign policy*

Maldives has mostly played a very safe card in shaping its foreign policy towards both India and China. As a small state, the Maldives does not have many foreign policy options other than either to smartly manage its relations with big powers or align with a powerful state or a group of states for security and economic reasons" (Ranjan, 2021). From an India First strategy, it has moved to a more balanced involvement with diverse states including US to benefit from its geo-strategic location. Changes in the Maldivian government significantly impact India's diplomatic relations. The government of President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih (since 2018) has been more pro-India, while the previous government under Abdulla Yameen leaned towards China. The strategy of tight military and security cooperation with India and the US was adopted by the previous Solih government, but under the current Muizzi government, the Maldives has demonstrated a distinct change. It seems that the current government has picked its side, and this "alliance of shelter" (Bailes et al., 2016) with Beijing is considered more fruitful compared with the gains accrued from bonding with New Delhi. The soft power tools of India to keep a working cordial relationship with the Maldives government has been overrun by the hard power tactics of the Chinese state.

During the Muizzi government, there has been a rise in "India Out" movements in the Maldives, driven by some factions within the country's political landscape. These movements oppose perceived Indian interference in Maldivian domestic affairs and are often amplified by external actors, including pro-China groups. However, the mounting economic troubles in the Maldives, including high debt and economic instability, made President Muizzu decide to reconcile with India. With its economy presently valued at USD \$7.2 billion, the Maldives' debt level remains at over 115 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). From 2022 to 2024, the country has been obligated to spend an average of USD \$300 million annually toward servicing

its foreign debt. The Maldivian government is scheduled to service almost USD \$1 billion in debt in 2026 alone — the highest debt repayment in a single year in the country's history. Ties with China have only served to heighten these fiscal concerns. Over 60 percent of the Maldives' sovereign-guaranteed debt is owed to Chinese financial institutions such as the China Development Bank and Export-Import Bank of China. As economic cooperation with China grows, the Maldives' debt burden may become unsustainable, leading to mounting pressure to borrow more and risking uncontrollable inflation (The Hindu, 2024; IMF, 2024; ORF, 2024; South Asian Voice, 2024).

Although Muizzu was known for his pro-China stance during the campaign, the Maldives' economic dependence on India, especially in areas like aid, trade, and tourism, made improving relations a pragmatic choice. India's involvement in infrastructure development and financial aid packages has been crucial for the Maldives in addressing its economic challenges. President Muizzu recently tried to reassure the neighbouring country by calling India its 'closest ally' and expressed hope that "India will accommodate debt relief measures for the Maldives' in the repayment of the hefty loans taken from the country over consecutive governments." Rather than completely alienating one country, Muizzu has begun to carefully rebalance and strategically assert the Maldives' position in the India-China relations after his initial hardline approach (Thome, 2024).

### ***Geopolitical rivalry in the Indian Ocean (IOR)***

Maldives is strategically positioned in the Indian Ocean, which contains major (international) water channels of communication. A substantial amount of China's trade and almost 80% of its energy imports—oil and gas—pass across the Indian Ocean, particularly through the Strait of Malacca. Maldives is central to China's Indian Ocean strategy. Maldives is a part of the MSRI (Maritime Silk Road Initiatives) through the Ihavandhippolhu Integrated Development Project, or IHavan, which is located on the northernmost island. The project passes over the seven-degree channel that holds a key geostrategic location since it connects major shipping routes from Southeast Asia and China to West Asia and Europe. China has strategically placed a project in the region to take advantage of the US\$18 trillion worth of goods transported

across the seven-degree channel annually (ORCA, 2022). Notably, China's growing interest in investment projects across the Indian Ocean, especially since the early 21st century, is significant as both the Pacific and Indian Oceans contain China's vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs) for commercial and energy supplies.

In January 2024, the Maldives and China signed several bilateral agreements focused on maritime security cooperation, which included joint naval exercises and discussions about establishing a maritime research station in the Maldives, along with defense and energy partnerships during President Muizzu's visit to Beijing. These proposals are part of China's broader strategy to establish a permanent presence in the Indian Ocean and Maldives, a move that could disrupt the delicate balance of power in the region (Oberoi, 2024).

While China's military engagement in the Indian Ocean is limited compared to India's. But, during the recent visit, the Maldives signed two defense agreements with China, committing to providing military assistance. The recent defense pacts and growing alignment could bolster China's influence in the Indian Ocean. However, military collaboration could be part of China's broader strategy to leverage power to diminish India's sphere of influence over South Asian countries. As part of the 'String of Pearls,' the Maldives could enhance China's maritime capabilities and presence despite its historical context within India's sphere of influence (Loc, 2024). The Maldives' decision to partner with China militarily while removing Indian military presence from its islands may further upset India and lead to a more hostile perception of Beijing's efforts to exert global influence. As the China-Maldives relationship strengthens, this development holds significant implications for China's influence abroad and regional dynamics in the Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific (Thome, 2024).

China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean has heightened India's concerns about maritime security in a region where it has traditionally held dominance (ORCA, 2022). In response, India acknowledges that it cannot overlook China's emergence as a key player in the Indian Ocean. China has been solidifying its presence through various maritime agreements in the region, which India views as a direct challenge to its role as the security guarantor. India is concerned about China's growing involvement with the

Maldives and Sri Lanka through investments, infrastructure projects, and trade agreements, which are solidifying Beijing's presence in the region. Similarly, Beijing has been competing with countries such as the United States and Australia in the Indo-Pacific region to strengthen partnerships and security agreements. Although India cannot deny China's rising influence in the long term, the strategic use of smart power, addressing a range of shared concerns, can help India reinforce its position in the region.

### ***Impact and Response to Geopolitical Strain on India-Maldives Relations***

The geopolitical strain on India-Maldives relations has impacted bilateral ties in several ways. During the period of diplomatic strain, soft power assets such as Cultural diplomacy, educational assistance, development aid, healthcare support, capacity-building, tourism, and diplomatic and strategic engagement come to the forefront and are put to the test. The strained relations between India and Maldives had significant economic implications, particularly in the tourism sector, which is a cornerstone of the Maldivian economy, with reduced inflows from Indian tourists. India was the top source of inbound tourists to the Maldives in 2023, contributing around 12% of total visitors, and China was in the third spot (Oberoi, 2024). The number of tourists from India declined by 42% in the first four months of 2024 compared to the same period in 2023. While the Maldives received 73,785 tourists from India between January and April of 2023, the island nation recorded 42,638 tourist arrivals in the same period this year - a decline of 31,147 tourists in absolute terms. Between April and June this year, only 28,604 Indian tourists visited the Maldives, down from 54,207 during the same period last year—a nearly 50% decrease (India Today, 2024b).

Meanwhile, Chinese tourists have surged, with China becoming the top source of visitors with 1.2 lakh arrivals in the first half of 2024. (Times of India, 2024b). Indians, on the other hand, were only 63,450 - a drop of 42.5% and India became the sixth market for tourism in Maldives. Overall, tourist arrivals in Maldives increased 9.2% in the first half of 2024, compared to the same period last year, and the Indian boycott seems to have greatly affected the dwindling numbers (Hindustan Times, 2024a). Due to strained relations,

Indian celebrities and Bollywood stars, who frequently visited the Maldives' luxury resorts, also curtailed their trips, contributing to the slump in tourism revenue. The tourism sector, which is heavily reliant on Indian visitors, suffered a sharp downturn, leading to pressure from the business community on the Maldivian government to mend ties with India (Oberoi, 2024). Moreover, the Maldives' reliance on India for healthcare services and economic support became increasingly evident during the standoff.

In response to the geopolitical strain, the foreign minister of Maldives, Moosa Zamer, has acknowledged that the Maldives-India ties witnessed rough patches in the initial days of President Mohammad Muizzu-led government but insisted that the two countries have resolved the "misunderstandings" following the repatriation of Indian troops from the Maldives (The Economic Times, 2024b). Amid a diplomatic standoff, Maldives Foreign Minister Moosa Zameer arrived in New Delhi on 8th May 2024 to discuss bilateral ties, marked a key moment in the diplomatic reset between the two countries. During his visit to India, the two sides discussed bilateral and regional issues and sought ways to provide impetus to our multifaceted relationship (NDTV, 2024). Also discussed the ongoing Indian-backed projects in the Maldives, which have been instrumental in the country's development. Under the circumstances, Maldivian President Muizzu now aims to rebuild and maintain a cautious relationship with India. During Dr. S. Jaishankar, the External Affairs Minister of India to Maldives from 09-11 August 2024, president Muizzu appreciated India's continued developmental assistance provided to Maldives and reaffirmed his commitment to deepen the India-Maldives relationship further (Ministry of External Affairs, 2024). On Friday, September 26, 2024, Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu denied having espoused an "India Out" agenda during the 79th Session of the United Nations General Assembly. He reiterated, "We have never been against any one country at any point (The Hindu, 2024c). Muizzu further stressed that he had taken action against deputy ministers for insulting Prime Minister Narendra Modi on social media. "No one should say such a thing. I took action against it. I will not accept insulting anyone like that, whether he is a leader or an ordinary person. Every human being has a reputation" (Times of India, 2024c). The resignation of ministers indicated the Maldives' symbolic gesture was to rebuild diplomatic ties. According to

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the Hindustan Times (2024b), Muizzu will travel to India in the second week of October for a visit that is seen as an attempt to reset bilateral ties after an acrimonious period in the relationship.

India's responses emphasized that they did not hold a grudge against the Maldives, prioritizing the strong people-to-people relationship over political disputes. India's influence in the Maldives extends beyond politics and economy, encompassing cultural, educational, and development. However, the resilience of these connections, built over decades, helped prevent a complete breakdown in relations. These soft power elements are playing a crucial role in rebuilding trust and cooperation. The strained relations highlighted the extent to which cultural ties are intertwined with diplomatic relations (Oberoi, 2024).

Despite ongoing diplomatic strains, India-supported and sponsored projects continue to progress. Since 2022, India has extended USD \$900 million in credit to the Maldives for multiple projects, including the development of water and sanitation facilities in 34 islands, the redevelopment of the Gan International Airport, and road development and land reclamation in the Addu Atoll. Beyond these large-scale projects, India is also supporting 65 community development projects across the Maldives worth USD \$23 million, which include a diverse array of fish processing plants, drug detoxification centers, cultural centers, and sports complexes. Many of these projects remained unaffected by the strained relations. In addition, in the recently announced budget for 2023-24, the Maldives was granted Rs 770.90 crore as aid, an increase of over 300 percent from the Rs 183.16 crore granted in 2022-23 (Bhattacharjee, 2024).

India-Maldives relations reached a turning point during External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's visit Maldives from August 9-11, 2023. The visit took place amidst rising geopolitical strains, particularly the growing influence of China and internal anti-India sentiments, including the "India Out" campaign. His recent visit to the Maldives, described as highly successful, was a testament to India's commitment to deepening bilateral relations. Jaishankar was received warmly in the Maldives, where he met with President Muizzu and other key officials, signing several Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs)

that paved the way for renewed cooperation in areas such as infrastructure, health, and education. EAM Jaishankar held talks with Maldivian Foreign Minister Moosa Zameer to review bilateral relations. He also discussed strengthening the defence and security partnership with the defence minister. Additionally, he met with the Ministers of Finance, Economic Development, and Trade and the Governor of the Maldives Monetary Authority to explore ways to boost trade and economic ties. In Male, MoUs were exchanged on capacity building of an additional 1000 Maldivian civil servants in India and on the introduction of UPI in Maldives. Six High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs) under grant assistance from India in the areas of mental health, special education, speech therapy, and street lighting were also jointly inaugurated (Ministry of External Affairs, 2024). The ministers visited the India-assisted Greater Male Connectivity Project (GMCP) site and Addu City on 11 August 2024 and jointly inaugurated the Addu Reclamation and Shore Protection Project and Addu Detour Link Bridge Project. The visit underscores the significance of the Maldives, India's maritime neighbour, as a key partner in the 'Neighbourhood First' policy and India's Vision 'SAGAR' (Security and Growth for All in the Region).

## CONCLUSION

India's soft power diplomacy towards the Maldives stands as a multifaceted and strategic endeavor. The multifaceted approach through Cultural diplomacy, educational assistance, development aid, healthcare support, capacity-building, tourism, and diplomatic and strategic engagement, has played a pivotal role in maintaining and strengthening bilateral ties. Despite the geopolitical challenges posed by the Maldives' pro-China stance under President Mohammad Muizzu, soft power assets have served as a stabilizing force. Amidst growing external pressures from other regional powers, India's soft power assets help to strengthen trust and cooperation with the Maldives, ensuring a stable partnership that supports India's strategic interests in the region. In a shared perspective, both Indian and Maldivian thinkers perceive the ongoing political tensions as a temporary phenomenon. This shared viewpoint reflects a pragmatic understanding of the fluidity inherent in international relations, suggesting an optimism that the current political tensions may

not have a lasting impact on the overall relationship between India and the Maldives. The recent dynamics in India-Maldives relations demonstrate that India's soft power assets are a resilient force, capable of overcoming strains in strategic and diplomatic ties. This nuanced approach has played a significant role in mitigating strains in India-Maldives relations, positioning soft power diplomacy as a key instrument for fostering resilience in the face of evolving geopolitical dynamics between India and Maldives.

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# BRIDGING CULTURES BEYOND BORDERS: THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF NORTHEAST INDIA THROUGH THE LENS OF ACT EAST POLICY

*Mudang Onju<sup>1</sup>, Naina Lahon<sup>2</sup>, Rehfi Mele<sup>3</sup>, and Dr. Padi Hana<sup>4</sup>*

## ABSTRACT

*As a brand India has created a buzz among scholars, researchers, Indian diplomats, and the public in general as it moves one step up in the Global Soft Power Index, 2023, ranking from 29<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> among 121 countries. India needs to step further up the ladder as a country's worldwide influence and its position in the international scenario are frequently enhanced by its ability to employ soft power. Act East Policy is one such initiative by the government of India that can help develop the country's soft power. Further, the North-Eastern Region (NER) of India known for its various ethnic groups, beliefs, unique customs, and traditions, along with diverse cultural heritage is 'diversity in diversity' in itself. Its diversity goes unnoticed, unrecognised and its contribution unacknowledged as NER is often mistaken to be a homogenous region which is due to lack of cultural sensitivity. Therefore, this study delves into the potential of NER 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. The study has adopted a descriptive approach and secondary sources such as government documents, published articles, journals, newspapers, books etc. for collecting data. Thus, a paradigm for diplomacy*

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- 1 Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Rajiv Gandhi University, Rono Hills, Doimukh, Arunachal Pradesh, Email - onjumudang231@gmail.com
  - 2 Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Rajiv Gandhi University, Rono Hills, Doimukh, Arunachal Pradesh, Email - lahonnaina07@gmail.com
  - 3 Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Rajiv Gandhi University, Rono Hills, Doimukh, Arunachal Pradesh, Email - rehfiemele93@gmail.com
  - 4 Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Rajiv Gandhi University, Rono Hills, Doimukh, Arunachal Pradesh, Email - padi.hana@rgu.ac.in

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*that upholds mutual tolerance, embraces diversity, and fosters the cultural ties that bind Northeast India with South East Asian countries is suggested.*

**Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy, Cultural Sensitivity, Northeast India, Soft Power**

## INTRODUCTION

The North-eastern part of India is rich in heritage and deeply rooted in customs and is revealed as a heterogeneous tapestry within the intricate web of global connections. Situated amidst lush landscapes, with seven sisters and a brother, this region serves as a salad bowl where various communities and cultures co-exist, forming a dynamic array of identities. Though Northeast is the gateway to East and Southeast Asian Nations, and yet, despite its richness, Northeast India has a history of frequently being side-lined from mainstream India, with its cultural significance overshadowed by geopolitical narratives and a record of marginalisation. However, proper attention to its diverse cultural characteristics can contribute to building bridges between India and other nations while cultivating cross-border understanding as well as contributing to cultural diplomacy across the globe.

Northeast India's diverse culture, unique art forms, customs, traditions and practices can be a powerful tool to enhance its international relations. This can be done through India's existing foreign policy known as the 'Act East Policy' (AEP). The Act East Policy focuses on strengthening ties with other countries, particularly with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) which has become the core of India's foreign policy. ASEAN countries include Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam etc. This foreign policy primarily focuses on fostering stronger economic cooperation, promotion of cultural ties and building political relationships with countries of Asia-Pacific regions at multiple levels.

The AEP of India earlier known as the 'Look East Policy' (LEP) during the 1990s was a strategic push by the then Prime Minister of India PV Narasimha Rao. India's LEP saw potential in Japan, Singapore and South

Korea as sources of technological advancement to invest and in East and South Asian Nations as export markets (Chakraborty & Chakraborty, 2018). It is also argued that though LEP focused on Southeast Asian nations, it was the influence of non-Asian countries that catalysed the actual growth of the economy within the Southeast Asian countries (Dubey, 2013). This marks the importance of ASEAN and non-Asian countries and their contribution to the growth of India at the international level.

One of the reasons why LEP shifted to AEP in 2014 is also that LEP was seen to lag in its contribution towards the infrastructural and industrial development of the North Eastern Region (NER) of India (Ghosh, 2023). NER being the gateway to India's eastern partners, its physical and social development remains crucial. Unlike LEP which focussed mainly on the economic aspect, AEP now focuses on enhancing connectivity with its Southeast Asia counterparts through commerce, culture, and communication.

Thus, numerous studies have been conducted to investigate the diplomatic relations between India and Southeast Asian countries, focusing particularly on the Act East Policy (Ghosh, 2023; Ahmed, 2019; Chakraborty & Chakraborty, 2018; Hussain, 2017; Dubey, 2013). These studies have highlighted the crucial need to strengthen social and cultural ties in the Northeast region of India. The Northeast region is well-positioned to connect with Southeast Asian nations, thanks to its geographical proximity, as well as shared socio-cultural and historical links, among other factors. Therefore, it is important to continue to promote people-to-people contact between the involved countries, as this can play a significant role in shaping India's perception as a country that values diversity and tolerance (Hussain, 2017; Ahmed, 2019; Hussain, 2023). This collaboration and interaction will have positive spillover effects on various sectors such as tourism, trade, peace, and mutual understanding. A recent study on India's cultural diplomatic relationship with Cambodia explained the crucial role of cultural aspects in developing India's soft power. By projecting a positive and peaceful image of India, cultural ties can help strengthen India's position on the global stage (Bunthorn, 2022). The effective role of deepening cultural ties can also serve to boost political and economic cooperation between India and Southeast

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Asian nations.

This study explores India's culture-based foreign policy and analyse the integration of cultural components of NER with the Act East Policy to develop a robust culture-based foreign policy. Objectives for the study include-identifying the cultural soft power potential of NER and understanding cultural sensitivity for cultural diplomacy. Lastly, the paper examines the challenges in developing cultural sensitivity in NER. For this, the paper has relied on a survey of literatures and has employed descriptive-analytical techniques for producing arguments, proposals and solutions. For comprehending the functioning of AEP journals, articles by Ahmed (2019), Ganapathi (2015) and Hussain (2017) etc. have been referred to. To understand the phenomenon of cultural diplomacy, cultural sensitivity, and soft power studies of Bunthorn (2022), Cummings (2003), Dubey (2013), Foronda (2008), Jeong and Grix (2023), Mark (2010), Mishra (2023), Nye (2004, 2017), Lee (2015), Sarmah (2023) and Tharoor (2008) were looked into. Further, India's foreign policy books and government documents were referred to such as reports by the Ministry of External Affairs etc. Furthermore, relevant state newspapers and other existing literature were consulted for an in-depth understanding of cultural complexities in NER namely Meetei (2014), Patgiri and Hazarika (2016), Vanlalhruaia (2015), Talukdar (2022). After reviewing the arguments presented in the study, certain recommendations were made to improve foreign policies, which would benefit both Southeast Asian countries and India.

## **CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AND RISING SOFT POWER: A BIRD-VIEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY**

The term 'cultural diplomacy' is relatively new. To establish rapport, discover common ground, construct bridges, and win over trust- cultural diplomacy is essential. Although from the beginning of civilization cultural diplomacy has been practised in various forms. Studies have found that the explorers, travellers, traders, educators, artists etc. worked as informal ambassadors or cultural diplomats in ancient times. Whether in the past or present, these cross-cultural exchanges occur in many different contexts-

such as economy, arts, culture, literature, business, science, sports, and so forth. Throughout time it has improved and gained popularity to maintain a hegemonic relationship between different nations, hence known as Cultural Diplomacy.

A wide range of initiatives aimed at fostering closer relations between nation-states are included in cultural diplomacy. A state can create a favourable impression, spark curiosity, encourage interactions, and foster trust for long-lasting alliances through its culture. This type of involvement was seen back in the days of the Roman Empire to build its alliance (Mulcahy, 1999). French culture is another example that held a prominent place in many European societies during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries due to France's active persistent self-promotion (Lane, 2013).

Colonial powers have also taken cultural assets under the pretence of modernization. Nations like Japan and Britain increased their influence over a large empire by exporting culture in large quantities. After World War II, cultural diplomacy also garnered a lot of attention. The Marshall Plan was one of the many ways that the USA thoughtfully funded the reconstruction of Europe and Japan. The projects and organisations that arose from these efforts matched the interests of Americans with those of the receiving nations. The US and the USSR both made significant investments in cultural events, such as radio programmes, art exhibits, and student exchanges during the Cold War to draw outsiders into their respective domains in command (Lee, 2015). Rather than the Soviet Union's economic or military failings, some scholars even claim that the collapse of the Soviet Union was caused by the general distaste for its culture and identity (Richmond, 2003). All things considered, collaborative and disruptive tactics are all part of cultural diplomacy.

Furthermore, building on Joseph Nye's 1980s concept of 'soft power', American political scientist Milton Cummings defined cultural diplomacy as the notion of "the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding" (Cummings, 2003, p. 1). This widely used definition places a strong emphasis on the pursuit of an ideal (mutual understanding) and the

reciprocity (exchange) process. Other scholars, on the other hand, concentrate on the unilateral process of promoting national interests and portraying a national image through cultural activities (Higham, 2007). Critics argue that this instrumental strategy is more appropriate for informational diplomacy or, to put it more bluntly, propaganda than cultural diplomacy (Mulcahy, 1999; Nye, 2004; Mark, 2010). Notwithstanding these theoretical disagreements, the majority of observers agree that the creative arts, media, sports, and education are all part of the culture. Moreover, a significant number of people consider cultural diplomacy as a subset of public diplomacy since the latter encourages interpersonal relationships rather than state-to-state politics which refer to traditional diplomacy (Mulcahy, 1999; Mark, 2010).

Thus, from the above definitions, it is preferable to understand cultural diplomacy as a set of conduct that is predicated on and makes use of the sharing of ideas, beliefs, customs, and other facets of culture or identity. It reflects a tapestry of interwoven links between nations by making use of the vibrant threads of their distinct yet similar culture. It involves more than merely introducing everyone around the world to the music, artwork, or literature of one country. Rather, it invites a sincere dialogue, for all parties to grow, change, and thrive. Countries may showcase their identities, share their experiences, and emphasise the values they cherish through these cross-cultural exchanges. While traditional diplomacy emphasises power, alliances and enticements, cultural diplomacy focuses on the power of cultural attraction and political ideals giving rise to mutual respect, inclusivity, and adaptability beyond politics towards other nations.

## **HARNESSING SOFT POWER OF THE NORTHEAST REGION**

The NER of India comprises eight states, namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. It is known for its vibrant culture, rich heritage, and unparalleled physical landscape. The northeast boasts a rich cultural heritage, including arts and crafts, music, cuisines, folk dances, and more. These cultural elements can be harnessed to shape the perceptions of others across Southeast Asia and around the world.

The cultural soft power of northeast India can act as a catalyst for the AEP. AEP today includes not only the 10 ASEAN countries but also Japan, South Korea, China, Australia, and New Zealand (Ganapathi, 2015). Hence, by actively engaging in cultural collaborations, exchanges, festivals, and collaborative projects with the AEP nations, the northeast region can showcase its unique and vibrant cultural identity and reinforce the pride of India in being one of the most diverse cultures in the world. At the same time, it can fulfil the strategic aim of AEP which is to enhance economic and cultural ties between India and East Asian countries. This soft power can then be employed by India to achieve its political goals domestically, regionally, and internationally (Jeong & Grix, 2023).

Furthermore, according to the 2023 Global Soft Power rankings, Asian countries like China and South Korea were ranked 4, 5 and 15 respectively. They are recognised as some of the most powerful soft power countries in Asia and the world. The rankings were based on their performance in eight soft power pillars, including business and trade, culture and heritage, governance, international relations, education and science, people, and values etc. Countries having high soft power also attract investments, trade, talent, and tourism. For example, South Korea's cultural soft power, famously known as the K-wave or *Hallyu*, has contributed significantly to the South Korean economy. The K-wave includes various cultural phenomena such as K-drama, K-pop music, Korean cuisine, online games, beauty products and YouTubers. These cultural exports have generated over 12 billion dollars for the South Korean economy, and they have also helped boost tourism in the country (Hussain, 2023; Mishra, 2023). The K-wave has undoubtedly played a massive role in increasing South Korea's global profile and its soft power influence.

In Northeast India too, one can witness the powerful soft power influence of a few East Asian countries, such as China, Japan, Korea, and others. There is a seamless blending and adoption of Korean or Japanese culture by the people of the region. From the street style to the food habits, music, dance, and festivals, the northeast people have been heavily influenced by the East Asian culture as can be seen in the way people dress, the food they eat, the music they listen to, and the festivals they celebrate.

For centuries, India has placed great emphasis on highlighting its civilizational similarities and fostering diplomatic relationships with ASEAN and other East Asian countries, particularly through Buddhism. The promotion of Buddhism as a foreign policy by our honourable Prime Minister Narendra Modi is something public often witnesses (Scott, 2023). It is high time we recognise the immense cultural richness and diversity of Northeast India and bring it to the forefront. The region is home to a plethora of indigenous tribes, each with its unique customs, traditions, and languages. From the mesmerising folk and classical music and dance of Assam and Manipur to the delectable cuisine of Nagas, and festivals like Hornbill, and Ziro Music festivals that have gained international recognition. Northeast India has a lot to offer to the world. By showcasing and promoting this cultural heritage, we can not only celebrate the unique identity of the region but also foster greater understanding and appreciation among people from different parts of the world.

Furthermore, the northeast region shares many similarities with the Southeast Asian nations in terms of physical features, food habits, customs, and practices. The people of northeast India belong to the same Tibeto-Burman family as many of the ethnic communities in the Southeast Asian nations. The region is ethnically different from the rest of India and bears more similarities in terms of animistic culture, traditions etc. with the East Asian countries (Hussain, 2017; Lalengkima, 2020; Hussain, 2023). This shared cultural heritage and affinity can serve as a strong foundation for building cultural ties, promoting people-to-people contacts, and fostering regional cooperation.

In conclusion, unveiling the cultural soft power of northeast India is not a distant dream but a realistic possibility. Emphasis on cultural diplomacy is important as culture can play an important role in developing mutual understanding by narrowing differences in international relations (Hussain, 2017). By leveraging the region's rich cultural heritage, diversity, and shared cultural affinity, India can enhance its cultural diplomacy with the Southeast Asian nations and deepen its strategic engagement in the region.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTURAL SENSITIVITY IN PROMOTING CULTURAL DIPLOMACY**

Cultural sensitivity plays an instrumental role in strengthening socio-cultural ties across nations in this ever-changing realm of international relations by building a sense of tolerance and mutual respect for different cultures. It is about acknowledging the cultural differences among nations and their people by “employing one’s knowledge, consideration, understanding, respect...” and adapting to cultural diversity (Foronda, 2008, p.4). This is in turn used by diplomats and experts in foreign policies to build diplomatic relations. As stated by Paasche (2004) the main principle of cultural sensitivity is to recognize the role of culture in people’s lives and respect the differences in culture as well as minimise the negative consequences that cultural differences bring.

Furthermore, developing foreign policies also requires government efforts to shape the opinions of foreign nations. And in a world where information spreads fast, people’s opinions greatly impact international relations, making it all the more crucial. It is the public’s thoughts and attitudes that can either make or break the economy of a nation. This is where cultural sensitivity becomes imperative. It plays a crucial role, this is particularly true under India’s AEP, which aims to strengthen India’s socio-economic, political and cultural ties with Southeast Asian countries, including North East India (Trivedi, 2010). Scholars argue that AEP has increased the prospects of NER in India since NER is located between the edge of South Asia and South East Asia (Patgiri & Hazarika, 2016). As AEP represents a strategic shift in the foreign policy of India, a deeper understanding of the cultural nuances, and appreciation of the traditions and values of Northeast India can be put forward by being culturally sensitive. It is understood that Northeast India has the potential to develop into a soft power, exploring the domains of music, dance, folklore, and food in Northeast India can yield a significant impact. This will further help to build a stronger connection between India and Southeast Asian nations while fostering mutual respect.

Moreover, in this diplomatic effort, where traditional diplomacy is no longer effective or less effective, it is through cultural exchanges that

relationships between countries can be strengthened (The Power of Cultural Diplomacy, 2023). To build stronger ties between different cultures, it is tolerance and respect, the two important elements of Unity that can essentially be developed through cultural sensitivity (Muslichah, 2017). It can be applied within the states of Northeast India as well, as this will help in building trust among the local communities and their Southeast Asian counterparts. Thus to prevent miscommunication, cultural diplomacy initiatives should acknowledge the cultural sensitivities of North East India as well. This is particularly important in areas where customs and practices vary considerably from one another, especially from the rest of mainstream Indian society. This strategy can aid in overcoming gaps in culture and assuring the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of public diplomacy initiatives under the Act East Policy.

It should be further noted that cultural sensitivity can primarily aid to a better understanding of different cultures and their perspectives which in turn can build soft power via promoting exhibitions of traditional arts and crafts and encouraging people-to-people interaction. Cultural sensitivity can also help to thoroughly comprehend the nuances of the social and cultural environment of North East India, rather than only superficially admiring the customs and traditions. Exploration of the historical complexities, diverse population and their distinctive way of life is also crucial for such diplomacy. In keeping with the AEP, India can encourage sincere and long-lasting ties with Southeast Asian countries by incorporating this knowledge into public diplomacy efforts.

Thus, under India's AEP to successfully execute cultural diplomacy and soft power, cultural sensitivity is essential in promoting cooperation and constructive engagement with Southeast Asian nations. Therefore, cultural sensitivity becomes paramount in understanding the complex cultural landscape of Northeast India and bridging the cultural gap between Southeast Asia nations. Thus, cultural diplomacy requires building trust among countries and understanding and appreciating other cultural perspectives.

## **NAVIGATING HISTORICAL COMPLEXITIES AND DIVERSITY: CHALLENGES IN PROMOTING CULTURAL SENSITIVITY IN THE NORTHEAST REGION**

Cultural sensitivity refers to the awareness, understanding and respect for the diverse cultures, traditions, languages and customs of the people living in a particular region. Since the North-eastern states comprise diverse ranges of ethnicities, languages, and faiths are indicative of the state's multicultural composition making it a great example of 'diversity in diversity'. More than 220 of the 705 tribe groupings in India (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, n.d), speaking various dialects and languages of the Tibeto-Burman people are concentrated in this area, making 'Northeast' and 'tribe(s)' inseparable. There is a variation to some extent among the tribes that comprise the majority of the population in states like Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland. People from different religious backgrounds, including Muslims, Christians, and Hindus, as well as local tribes and communities, live in states like Assam, Manipur, Tripura, and Sikkim. This region is undoubtedly one of the ethnically and linguistically varied regions in Asia and each state has its own distinct cultures and customs. Because of the NER's distinctive historical complexity and geopolitical dynamics, it has been extremely challenging to promote cultural sensitivity in this region.

First of all, the central government has a history of marginalising North-east India, which has caused alienation among the region's many ethnic communities resulting in numerous social movements and struggles (Vanlalhraia, 2015). Historical grievances such as the imposition of foreign cultures and the negligence of indigenous traditions contribute to intergroup tensions and hinder efforts to promote cultural understanding and sensitivity.

Secondly, the region is the abode of plentiful ethnic communities, each with its exclusive cultural practices, dialects, and belief systems. Managing this diversity requires nuanced approaches that recognize and respect the unique identities of each group. As Charles Taylor argues, due recognition of any culture is a vital human need, when remains unrecognised or misrecognized can instigate hatred (Taylor, 1992 cited in Meetei, 2014). Nevertheless, if not

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handled carefully the differences in customs, languages, and social norms can cause misunderstandings and conflicts.

Thirdly, the geopolitical difficulties that affect cultural sensitivity are a result of Northeast India sharing borders with other countries as well. The cultural terrain is shaped by historical displacements, cross-border exchanges and geo-political tensions (Kakati, 2021). Hence, it is difficult to maintain intercultural relations and promote sensitivity without taking larger geopolitical surroundings into account.

Fourth, cultural sensitivity promotion is a major obstacle due to the linguistic diversity of Northeast India. There are more than 400 languages spoken in the area which might make it difficult to communicate and comprehend one another (Talukdar, 2022). Not only do language barriers hinder communication, but they also make it easier for cultural norms and values to be misunderstood and misinterpreted (Fiset et al., 2024).

Fifth, the region has witnessed several socio-political grievances and identity issues that have contributed to prolonged instances of violence and insurrection in the region (Subuddhi, 2006). These disputes frequently make intergroup tensions worse and obstruct efforts to foster mutual respect and trust among communities. Promoting cultural sensitivity in conflict-ridden areas requires addressing underlying grievances and promoting reconciliation programs to create sustainable peace through non-violent means as well as holistic peace building (Ueland, 2015).

Sixth, traditional modes of life in Northeast India are changing as a consequence of rising factors like urbanisation, modernization and globalisation. The preservation of cultural legacy and the promotion of sensitivity to indigenous customs are challenged by these changes, even though they also present economic opportunities (Hall & Fenelon, 2015). Thus, a careful assessment of community needs and aspirations is necessary to strike a balance between these factors and cultural preservation.

Lastly, the way Northeast India has been portrayed in the media often feeds prejudices and stereotypes about the region, which spreads false

information and hinders efforts to encourage cultural awareness (Barma, 2023). To promote a better knowledge and appreciation of the Northeast region's rich cultural diversity, it is imperative to address misrepresentations in the mainstream media and support diverse narratives.

Cultural sensitivity in diplomacy becomes imperative in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as it also contributes to the soft power projection of the country and provides a non-coercive way to influence other countries, form bonds, and work together to address global issues. Thus to foster cultural sensitivity in Northeast India, it is necessary to employ holistic strategies that tackle the above challenges. By recognizing and engaging with these challenges, stakeholders can work towards building inclusive societies that respect and celebrate the cultural diversity of the region.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Historically it was the trade that was the catalysing factor for India's relationship with Southeast Asia but today it has expanded to polity, religion, art, education and other sectors. Cultural diplomacy has become an important foreign policy tool to promote national interests through the promotion of various cultural activities such as cultural events, art exhibitions etc. (Hussain, 2017). Understanding the importance of it, the authors have tried to delve into the intricate relationship between cultural sensitivity, cultural diplomacy and the soft power potential of Northeast India within the framework of the AEP. NER with its rich cultural heritage can emerge as a significant player in shaping India's image and fostering soft power on the global stage.

However, there are various obstacles on the path to realising the full potential of NER. A major challenge for the holistic development of the Northeast region of India is the lack of cultural sensitivity towards the various ethnic and linguistic groups residing there. The indigenous group in the region has been marginalised, and marred with various prejudices and stereotypes which further aggravate the situation.

Notwithstanding the long list of challenges, the authors have made the following recommendations for employing cultural assets of the northeast

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region in India's soft power strategy keeping in mind how NER of India and the Southeast Nations can reap the benefit.

- 1) Indian media both domestic and international can contribute to building a positive national and international narrative of NER. To date, the Indian media is not inclusive as one can hardly see the culture and people of northeast India in mainstream media. This step is important as emphasised in the website of the Ministry of External Affairs 2003, states how significantly Bollywood has influenced India's soft power in other countries making Indian cultures, cuisines, classical and popular music widespread across the globe, as well as making the contribution of Indian writers and intellectuals impactful.
- 2) Greater cultural collaborations, people-to-people contact through film and music festivals, visits by international delegates, rich border haat programs, and cross-culture interactions through exposure tours conducted by the concerned countries.
- 3) Preparing the north-eastern people in the hospitality, skill development and service sectors. Creating a climate conducive to conducting business, trade, tourism etc.
- 4) Organising events that showcase the festivals of Northeast India is suggested taking inspiration from the ideas of Pupul Jayakar, writer and cultural activist, who popularised the festivals of India and its art across France, US, and Japan during the 1980s. Similarly, popular festivals like the Ziro music festival, the buffalo fighting festival of Assam locally known as *Moh-Jooj*, popular music, and sports and art forms of India's North-eastern states can be put at the forefront.

Therefore, such an effort will require robust planning and involvement of all the stakeholders involved and the need for further research studies on the matter. Lastly, to create a positive and influential perception among the Southeast countries, or any country in the world for that matter, India must undertake a comprehensive and all-encompassing improvement program. This is because various underlying issues such as corruption, poverty, unemployment, crimes, and religious fault lines tend to undermine India's reputation on the global stage, and therefore, create obstacles in its quest to

become a global soft power. By addressing these fundamental challenges, India can improve its standing in the world and become a more respected and influential player on the international stage.

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# DIASPORA: A SOFT POWER STAKEHOLDER IN INDIA'S SOUTHEAST ASIAN FOREIGN POLICY

Dr. Ningthoujam Koiremba Singh<sup>1</sup> and  
Tayenjam Priyokumar Singh<sup>2</sup>

## ABSTRACT:

*In today's complex-interdependence world, India is grappling with the multi-dimensional aspects of the international arena, striving to overcome obstacles for sustainable growth. 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. In this regard, article is a modest attempt 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.*

**Key Words: Diaspora, Diplomacy, Soft Power, Bridge, Policy.**

## INTRODUCTION

Since the inception of International Relations as a discipline, most scholars have studied strategic and military preponderance through the self-

- 1 Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Delhi, Email: koirembasingh@yahoo.com.
- 2 Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Shivaji College, University of Delhi, Email: priyokumartayenjam@gmail.com.

interest dictum of an anarchic environment. This narrative is supported by a series of incidents, such as World Wars and Cold War, which serve as concrete examples of the study of power in action. Power is still one of the most critical topics in this field, often confined to a one-dimensional aspect that is hard power. Joseph Nye defined the hard power concept as “the ability to use the carrots and sticks of economic and military might to make others follow your will” (Nye, 2003a). This power is related to the idea of an anarchic world system. Historically, it has been measured in terms of military forces, economic strength, etc. According to Hans Morgenthau, “like all politics, international politics is a struggle for power, and whatever the ultimate aims of international politics, power is always the immediate aim” (Morgenthau, 1996). In this obsession with the hard power game, scholars always ignored other aspects of the International Relations.

However, many theories developed in the late 1980s due to the changing nature of complex global politics, and they started criticizing the one-dimensional aspect of the field. With the end of the Cold War, International Relations gradually transformed into complex interdependence and a world of globalisation. This poses a big question of whether the myopic version of International Relations is enough to understand the ever-changing global world order or how far overemphasis on military and hard power are relevant to upcoming security threats. Joseph Nye brought up a new aspect, soft power, to complement the dynamics of international relations. He introduced the idea of “soft power” in his 1990 work “Bound to Lead.” The capacity of a country to influence other countries via persuasion and attraction rather than coercion or force is known as soft power. The advocate of soft power, Nye, outlined:

“A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries—admiring its value, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness—want to follow it. In this sense, it is also important to set the agenda and attract others in world politics, and not only to force them to set the agenda and attract others in world politics, and not only to force them to change by threatening military force or economic sanctions. This soft power gets others to want the outcomes that you want - co-opts rather than coerces them” (Nye, 2004b).

He also develops the three pillars of soft power - culture, political ideals, and foreign policy-which the traditional realists overlooked. Public diplomacy, as well as bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, mostly influence these ideas. A nation's three most significant assets are its culture (when it is appealing to others), its political ideals (when it upholds them both at home and abroad), and its foreign policy (when they are seen as morally and legally sound). A society's culture is made up of a variety of practices that give the society its meaning. It is customary to make a distinction between high culture, which caters to elites and includes things like literature, art, and education, and popular culture, which emphasises public enjoyment (Nye, 2008c).

Drawing intangible resources like political unity and universalist popular culture also impacts how others perceive things. The paradox of globalisation, according to Niall Ferguson, is that as the world gets more linked, power diffuses (Ferguson, 2004). According to Joseph Nye, today's major powers are less equipped than in the past to utilise their conventional power resources to further their objectives. Small nations have seen an increase in the influence of private players on several issues. He noted that at least five tendencies have influenced this power-diffusion. They include evolving political concerns, transnational players, nationalism in weak governments, economic interdependence, and the expansion of technology (Nye, 1990). It has been amplified even louder in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Giulio M. Gallarotti emphasised how soft power has historically been a significant part of national strength and how it reflects the shifting nature of international relations (Gallarotti, 2010). Nye redefined the soft power as "the ability to impact people to accomplish desirable results via the co-optive means of setting the agenda, persuasion, and positive appeal," (Nye, 2011d) which is a far more extensive definition from the earlier idea. Yet, it needs a more advanced level of knowledge and abilities because soft power is more complicated than hard power (Pallaver, 2011).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, most countries, including superpowers, have started using the soft power strategy to maintain their power status quo. China and the US both found success in their ways. One of the significant issues raised by the writers in this article is how far India may go under the guise of soft power.

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In the growing complex-interdependence world, India's efforts to utilize soft power for sustainable development and international influence are a part of the global context, connecting us all.

When people from all over the world observe sizeable rallies staged for the Indian Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi, at various places, the involvement of the Indian diaspora has been one of its significant triumphs for the image makeover of India. The present government, led by Shri Narendra Modi, is putting a lot of effort into enticing foreign investors to invest in India. The 17<sup>th</sup> Pravasi Bharat Divas theme, which has been celebrated since 2003, is "Diaspora: Reliable partners for India's progress in Amrit Kaal" and was held from 8-9 January 2023 in Indore, Madhya Pradesh (PMO, 2023). This theme reiterates the government's goal of making the Indian diaspora an essential stakeholder in the developmental works of India. This convention provides a space for them to discuss their attitudes toward India and build goodwill bridges with their fellow people in the globalised world. Being an ambitious participant, India has been attempting to ameliorate the economic and geopolitical crisis in the contemporary international system and the development of East and Southeast Asia in the world order. Linking strategically with the rest of Asia and Southeast Asia is a necessary and calculated move for India because this area is one of the emerging economies in the world and a new destination for global firms.

The Government of India has been taking many initiatives to boost the participation of its diaspora in different host countries. Its efforts to reach out to the diaspora could be analyzed broadly in twofold. The government caters to the requirements of Non-Resident Indians (NRI) and Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI) by providing them protection, consular services, and outreach initiatives. At the same time, they adopt and create policies to encourage them to support other development initiatives and philanthropy, invest in innovation, share expertise, and contribute to India's prosperity (Challagalla, 2018). In order to protect and promote the welfare and interests of Indian diasporas, several measures were announced. For instance, the 2014 Minimum Referral Wages (MRW), which are applicable to countries with Emigration Check Required (ECR) such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, raised

the minimum salary for Indian workers hired as laborers, domestic helpers, cleaners, and industrial employees. The Modi administration has repackaged the “Know India Program” (KIP) and other programs. The initiative primarily targets Girmitya youth and allows them to deepen their connections to their ancestral homeland, better comprehend and appreciate modern India, and broaden their involvement with India. The ultimate goal is to shape them into unofficial Indian ambassadors (Challagalla, 2018). In 2014, the Look East Policy was upgraded/rebranded to the Act East Policy, which added new participants to the diaspora in Southeast Asian countries. This policy is a trump card for India to flourish with its Southeast Asian counterparts. However, the policy could not achieve its optimum goals due to many reasons, one of which might be trust deficit. This paper is a modest attempt to explore how far trust and capacity building in Southeast Asia could be fulfilled by employing soft power diplomacy through utilising the strong foothold of the Indian diaspora community.

## **PROSPECTS OF INDIA’S SOFT POWER**

India has been making every effort to interact with South and Southeast Asian nations ever since the Look East policy began. The diaspora’s soft power in these nations has become a valuable asset. Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s trips to the area are crucial to improving relations with numerous ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) nations. The Act East initiative is successful in large part thanks to ASEAN. In 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi travelled to Malaysia to participate in the 10<sup>th</sup> East Asia Summit and the 13<sup>th</sup> ASEAN-India Summit. Afterward, he officially visited Singapore to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the two countries’ diplomatic ties, transforming it into a strategic alliance (Ranjan, 2016). Again, he visited Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia in 2018 to strengthen ties between India and these crucial Southeast Asian allies (Roche, 2018).

In response to the visits, many ASEAN leaders reciprocated by visiting India on various occasions and events. Singapore is one of the Asian countries with a rich diplomatic background and a strong bond in terms of economy and strategic domain with India. It is the first ASEAN nation to start the

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Comprehensive Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with India and one of the most significant foreign direct investments (FDI) sources in India. Furthermore, there have been several efforts over the past two decades to improve ties with ASEAN through forging deeper ties with the Asia-Pacific area. It is gradually becoming a crucial component of Indian foreign strategy.

During these visits, the Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi, has used soft power diplomacy significantly to enhance the role of the diaspora in maintaining smooth ties with the region. He tries to engage with the Indian diaspora on his tours, Southeast and East Asia are no exceptions. One of the most involved Indian Prime Ministers in international forums is Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He has gone above and beyond using India's cultural soft power to reach as many people as possible (Kugiel, 2017).

Since its independence, India has been trying to balance its power structure with soft power. India's pluralistic society successfully integrated unity in diversity into a prosperous democratic country which became a symbol of stability in Asia and continues to be so. India is the largest democratic nation on earth and one of the most prosperous and stable democracies among post-colonial countries. Western counterparts have many expectations from India to promote democracy in the region. The global audience noticed India's economic growth in the late 1990s. India's multilateral engagement has also been increasing. To live up to international standards, the Indian government has started to tie the advancement of democracy to its development aids. The plural nature of the Indian political system has also inspired societies abroad. Democratic polity in India, unparalleled in most post-colonial countries, may be viewed as a strong soft power resource.

The soft power of India is anchored in our philosophical traditions, consistent messages of peace, harmony, and co-existence, attractive customs and traditions, and so on. Our diasporas preserve and promote these values of who we are. Many foreign policy experts like Shashi Tharoor and C. Raja Mohan believe that India has the soft power that would make it an influential global leader. Foreign policy expert, C. Raja Mohan put India as "India could always count itself among the few nations with strong cards in the arena of

soft power” (Mohan, 2003). Shashi Tharoor also said that “this country with all these qualities inherited from millennia of living as example of this sort of culture has the soft power that would truly make it the influential leader in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (The Economic Times, 2017). India is, nevertheless, in a laid-back posture to benefit from her capabilities at the regional and global levels. India appears to be content with its soft power assets, such as its democratic traditions and prospects for economic progress. India possesses extraordinary storytelling skills that set it apart from its competitors in terms of force, appeal, and persuasiveness. It helps to remain India as the “land of the better story” (Tharoor, 2011). In the words of Christian Wagner, India is a “soft power by default” (Wagner, 2010). But rather than using its soft power to attract foreign investors, he saw it as a “defensive soft power” that limits its political model as a means of influencing others. He also makes a distinction between vast capacity that is already accessible and limited capabilities that are required to boost a nation’s standing abroad (Wagner, 2010). Some aspects of India’s soft strength may also represent its soft vulnerability, according to Jacques E.C. Hymans. He recognises that India’s soft power has grown over the past twenty years. Nonetheless, India is still only a modest soft power in the present word (Hymans, 2009).

Several academics have noted that India’s ethnic conflicts, governmental structure, poverty, and corruption all have flaws and limitations that prevent India from becoming a more influential soft power. However, India’s foreign policy has been trying to come up with many soft power tactics like non-reciprocity, connectivity, and asymmetrical responsibilities. India has established several people-to-people contacts to improve animosities between neighbouring states. The diversified characteristics of the soft power of India are Bollywood movies, Yoga, Ayurveda, political pluralism, multicultural and religious diversities, a large diaspora across the globe and so on. India extensively tries to re-route long historical, civilisational, and cultural ties with Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East on this account. Re-visiting Buddhism from India across Asia is also one of the main agendas for cultural sustainability. An example of these initiatives to revitalize long-standing cultural links is India’s proposal for cooperation with South Korea, Japan, China, and Singapore to rebuild Nalanda University in Bihar state. India is looking forward to historical, cultural, and

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religious interconnectedness to build cooperation and coordination along the line of sustainability with deep-rooted culture.

In recent years, the Indian government has launched several attempts to integrate “culture” into foreign policy. India is embracing alternative culture through cinema, particularly Bollywood, and it is quickly overtaking Hollywood in terms of output, making it one of the fastest-reaching platforms for Indian culture. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) is widely regarded as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ soft power division. It started promoting Indian culture via festivals, tournaments, and exchange programs. The then President of ICCR, Dr. Karan Singh, stated that “earlier cultural diplomacy was considered peripheral, now the message is clear: soft power is important, and the idea behind the festival is to project India as a plural multicultural society and to achieve the goals of political diplomacy” (Shukla, 2006).

The diaspora’s capacity to impact a nation’s foreign policy without using force or other forms of hard power automatically transforms into a soft power instrument. With approximately 18 million diasporas living abroad, India has the highest emigrant population in the world, followed by Mexico with 11 million (IOM, 2022). Diasporas could be a powerful leveraging tool to attract and lobby foreign investors to invest in their origin countries. The current government sees the Indian diaspora as a soft power tool. It could be witnessed in the mammoth rallies of Indians living abroad that Modi addresses whenever he visits. This strategy has been employed by the current BJP-led NDA government, led by visionary leader Narendra Modi, to promote India’s soft power through Ayurveda, Yoga, and Buddhism and proactive engagement with the Indian diaspora. One of the significant accomplishments is the United Nations General Assembly’s (UNGA) recognition of June 21<sup>st</sup> as the International Yoga Day since 2014. This decision drew a lot of support from the Indian diaspora. The demonstrations conducted in support of the Indian Prime Minister across the US, UK, Canada, and Singapore also demonstrated the pride of the diaspora in India’s accomplishments. It represents one of the most significant changes in India’s diplomacy history.

Unquestionably, succeeding governments have tried to utilise different

facets of soft power. In the post-liberalisation age, soft power has been effective mainly due to India's growing economic strength. In this context, foreign policy analyst C. Raja Mohan has opined that "amidst India's globalisation and the intensification of its global footprint since the 1990s, there has been growing popular interest in India's culture — from yoga to cuisine and from Bollywood to contemporary art and culture. The economic success of the Indian Diaspora, especially in the developed Western world, has tended to boost India's soft power" (Mohan, 2015a). The spiritualism of India has drawn adherents from all over the world, and its Gurus have travelled the globe promoting yoga and mysticism, according to Foreign policy analyst C. Raja Mohan. Bollywood has contributed more to India's impact overseas than the bureaucracy. India today has various soft power levers at its disposal, from its classical and popular music to its cuisine and from the expanding influence of its authors and intellectuals (Mukherjee, 2013).

However, India's image has been somewhat flawed both regionally and internationally as a result of its inconsistent foreign policy, inadequate internal security and law enforcement system, ongoing territorial conflicts with neighbours, and, most significantly, its domineering attitude towards smaller neighbours (Baniya, 2021). India did not even place in the top 30 nations in the poll "Soft Power 30," which rates nations globally based on their soft power (Shetty & Sahgal, 2019). It begs the issue of whether India, a nation with a wealth of soft power assets, is unable to turn those assets into concrete results and whether the nation's positive soft characteristics are eclipsed by its negative hard ones (Shetty & Sahgal, 2019).

## **INDIA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The historical influence of India on Southeast Asia, dating back to prehistoric times, is a lasting and significant aspect of world history. This influence is evident in Southeast Asia's customs, religious life, language, literature, and monuments. Many aspects of Southeast Asian culture and civilization still witness this profound influence. The temples of Bali, Borobudur, Angkor Wat, Luang Prabang, and the Champa civilization in Vietnam are internationally recognized for their Indian art and architectural

styles. Hinduism was the first religion to spread in Southeast Asia, followed by Buddhism and Islam (Muni & Mishra, 2019). The mythical bird, Garuda from Buddhist and Hindu mythology, serving as the national symbol of Indonesia, the country with the highest Muslim population in the world, is a testament to this enduring influence (Bhattacharya, 2020).

The Chola rulers, especially Rajaraja I and Rajendra Chola I, not only established a military power in Southeast Asia but also left an indelible mark on its culture, a unique contribution to India's history. Around AD 1025, the Chola King Rajendra I overthrew the renowned Southeast Asian kingdom of Srivijaya in Sumatra and on the Malay Peninsula, capturing more than a dozen harbour cities (Kamalakaran, 2021). This conquest led to a significant increase in trade activity in the last years of the first millennium BC. The peaceful expansion of Indian culture over the Gulf of Bengal during the first century AD, as seen in the profound and enduring influence of Buddhism and Hinduism on Southeast Asia's developing mainland and marine civilizations, is a testament to the Chola rulers' cultural influence. The oldest inscriptions of the Pallava Grantha from what is now Indonesia, dating back to the fifth century AD, are often cited as the first distinctly South Indian influences. This is followed by a significant impact of Pallava and Chola art and architecture in Southeast Asia (Kamalakaran, 2021).

A well-known Southeast Asian folktale about the union of an Indian Brahmana named Kaundinya and a local Naga princess named Soma explains the influence of India on Southeast Asia and the beginning of Southeast Asian royalty. The region's Hindu kingdoms were established in this manner. The most significant Hindu kingdom in Sumatra, Srivijaya, was established around 670 CE. With the development of its maritime policy, it became a substantial hub of trade and culture. It's fascinating to note that although there is evidence of vernacular epigraphs as early as the seventh century CE, most of the Southeast Asian inscriptions are written in Sanskrit, indicating a deep level of cultural integration. Instead of forcing Hinduism upon them from without, local rulers chose to embrace Indic gods and languages for their own benefit (Saran, 2018).

Although most of the Indian value systems that made their way to

Southeast Asia have their roots in religious heritage (Hindu-Buddhist). For instance, the Dhamma philosophy of the Indian Emperor Ashoka, whose conversion to Buddhism acted as a positive catalyst for disseminating Buddhism outside of India, particularly in Southeast Asia, included explicit prohibitions against the ill-treatment and cruelty to both people and animals. These are some illustrations of core values and beliefs. The Arthasashtra of Kautilya, which inspired Southeast Asian statecraft, strategy, and diplomacy, would also be an excellent example of causal beliefs (Acharya, 2013). Many literary works based on the Ramayana were also produced in Southeast Asia, but each had a unique quality that could be recognised (Sengupta, 2017).

In fact, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose is a legend among the Indian diasporas and local people of East and Southeast Asian countries. Indian diasporas, mainly in Malaysia, Singapore, and Burma (Myanmar), proactively participated in the Indian National Army (INA). INA drew its members primarily from Indian Prisoners of War (PoW) and other Indian migrants sent as farm labourers in this region by the Britishers. They found a ray of hope to free their homeland, India, from the British Empire and brought new awakenings within them (Mani & Ramasamy, 2006). They donated large sums of money and other materials to Netaji, and thereby, the Indian Freedom Movement became a rallying point. It left a significant mark on the Indian population and, with the aid of reimagined homeland links, transformed community-based identities into an all-encompassing “Indianness.” Several aspects of Indian culture and civilization have survived throughout Southeast Asia. One of the key contributing reasons for preserving a solid relationship in the era of globalisation is the long-standing contact between India and Southeast Asian nations.

## **INDIAN DIASPORA IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

Southeast Asian nations host a large and diverse population of the Indian diaspora. They make up around 8 percent to 9 percent of Singapore’s and Malaysia’s overall populations. Moreover, they make up around 4 percent of Indonesia’s overall population. However, the social, political, and economic standing of Indian diasporas in various nations is not uniform. For instance,

the Sikh, Sindhi, and Tamil populations moved to Indonesia in small groups, which led to the establishment of the Indian diaspora there (Oak, 2017).

However, at times, India overlooks a crucial geopolitical connection between Southeast and East Asia. It is primarily due to the lack of understanding of India's foreign policy with regard to the political, cultural, and social facets of diplomacy in the area, such as Myanmar and Malaysia, where Indian diasporas are even denied many fundamental human rights. However, diaspora is recognised as an essential factor in forging international ties. However, given the numerous tragic incidents affecting the Indian-origin population in Malaysia, it appears to have gone the opposite way in the case of India-Malaysia relations. Malaysian society faces a constant risk of ethnic violence since it is somehow divided along racial lines and reinforced by religion, culture, language, and occupation. After the racial disturbances in May 1969, around 60,000 Indians moved back to India (Singh, 2007). Moreover, more than 2.9 million, around 4 percent of the total population of Myanmar, peacefully residing Indians reside in Myanmar (Chaturvedi, 2015). After gaining its independence, the Myanmar government, under Prime Minister U Nu, adopted various actions designed to advance the economic interests of the local population against those of foreign origins. Indian diasporas were disproportionately affected by these restrictions since they made up the largest group of foreign residents in independent Myanmar. The Land Alienation Act was one of several laws that the Myanmarese government established in 1948 that outlawed selling land to anyone who wasn't a citizen of Myanmar (Chaturvedi, 2015). In these unfortunate incidents, India could not do its best. Furthermore, India could not take many proactive roles in the Indian diaspora crisis in Southeast Asia compared to China in the 1960s. During the Malaysian ethnic crisis, the Chinese government fully supported its immigrants without any hesitation. India had played a very safe game of "hands off" in these two incidents, which gave the Indian diaspora a sense of uneasiness and called into question the legitimacy of India's diaspora policy.

Indian expatriates were strongly urged by the then Prime Minister Pandit Nehru to assimilate with their host country. This approach, in Marie Lall's opinion, had a number of shortcomings. When a section of the Indian

diaspora faced extreme crises or political, economic, and social injustice, India was not to intervene. Even so, India did not bring up the subject of human rights abuse. There was little encouragement for diasporas to get involved in India's economic developmental activities. As a result, until the late 1980s, there was somewhat distrust between the Indian government and its diaspora. It was believed that the Indian state had ignored expatriates and that its inability to create a suitable economic climate was one of the main reasons for the gap between India and her diaspora (Gangopadhyay, 2005). In the 1990s, New Delhi shifted its attitude towards its diaspora policy trend, which some analysts sometimes call a "missed opportunity" (Pande, 2013). India launched the Look East Policy and implemented a multi-faceted strategy to repair its long-damaged relationships with its diaspora. This shift in policy has led to a mutually beneficial and symbiotic connection, offering optimism for the future as the Indian diaspora gradually realises the immense economic potential of India and its rise to prominence as a global force (Pande, 2013).

Despite the regime changes, India still seems to have adopted a very narrow and tapered strategy for engaging with its diaspora, focusing on a select few groups, particularly those who have achieved outstanding success in their host nations. One obvious issue is that the Government of India has neglected the somewhat weaker segment of the Indian diaspora in favour of the wealthy and prosperous sectors of abroad Indians (Chenrui, 2018). Although the Indian diasporas in Southeast Asia are not financially robust, this does not preclude the Indian state from using them as a resource. It would help if the Indian diaspora and government had a closer working relationship in such a situation so that they could look out for each other's interests. The Indian diaspora in this region has hardly been as active in furthering India's interests, nor has India paid as much attention to them. Nevertheless, India needs them to engage with Southeast Asia. The diaspora can help India's foreign policy by strengthening India's soft power through increasing economic and political networks. Even though they are not as strong as the ones in Western countries, Indian diasporas worldwide are known for their peace-loving, adaptable nature that usually makes them family-oriented and socially stable. Indian diasporas in Southeast Asia are increasingly becoming more educated and economically stable. People of Indian origin in Singapore are one of the success stories of Southeast

Asia. There are approximately 650,000 people of Indian origin in Singapore, comprising nearly 10 per cent of the country's six million population and thus making them the third-largest ancestry and ethnic group in Singapore (Bajeli-Datt, 2023). Singapore has three people of Indian origin as its President. They are Chengara Veetil Devan Nair (third President: 1981-1985) and Sellapan Ramanathan (sixth President: 1999-2011). The current and ninth President of Singapore (since 2023), Tharman Shanmugaratnam is also India-origin (PTI, 2023).

Indian diasporas are not well represented politically in these countries, except Singapore. Few Indian diasporas are even represented in the administrative apparatus. As a result, they are of little use in advocating their benefits from the host countries. The region also has a wide range of politico-economic systems. It is important to note that genuine democracies are not just rare, but extremely rare, which again makes lobbying difficult. Furthermore, there aren't many powerful Indian origins who may shape public opinion broadly through various means, such as media ownership and Multi-National Corporations (MNCs).

India should continue to support ASEAN's standards for peace and security and its central role while nurturing unique relationships with some of its most crucial member nations, particularly given the changing dynamics of power relations in East and Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, these resources will not enhance India's soft power unless its cultural practices are closely linked to its economic prosperity. A recent Carnegie report concludes, "South Korea provides a new model of what a 21<sup>st</sup> century Asian country can look like: an advanced economy mixed with an ancient civilisation that is at once irrevocably democratic, technologically innovative, and culturally vibrant" (Rao, 2021).

## CONCLUSION

India is an emerging superpower country with a robust soft power heritage. India's capacity to tell a better tale hasn't yet produced the intended results. If put into practice, India's potential for soft power would raise its

status around the globe, making it prosperous and well-liked. India has the capacity and enormous prospects to strengthen its position as a “rising global soft power,” which may further open the door for the nation to become a soft power powerhouse of the twenty-first century (Amaresh, 2020). To effectively utilise the Indian diaspora as a soft power and make them a main stakeholder of India’s narrative in Southeast Asia, the Government of India needs more energy and effort.

India needs to leverage its diaspora as a tool for its foreign policy to establish itself as a viable alternative to China in the region. This requires a well-planned, mature approach to building the capacity of the diaspora. China has invested heavily in soft power strategies, establishing Confucius Centres in various universities and locations. In contrast, India’s ICCR cultural centers are somewhat lacklustre. Efforts to promote Indian cinema, TV shows, and networks also lack a coordinated approach. With the diaspora’s involvement, these promotional activities could be integrated into India’s public diplomacy efforts. Some Indian universities and schools have successfully used these tactics to attract and engage the Indian diaspora, establishing campuses abroad. However, this approach is notably evident in Malaysia and, to a lesser extent, Singapore in Southeast Asia.

Encouraging the Indian diaspora to serve as India’s brand ambassadors is a key strategy to involve them in India’s growth. As significant shareholders in a nation’s brand image, they are required to encourage to be active both as tourists and business people, supporting the economic and industrial growth of their motherland. For instance, the Government of India’s Ministry of External Affairs should actively listen to their grievances and provide assistance, without getting involved in domestic politics. This support empowers the diaspora to represent India in their local institutions or organisations. They should be stakeholders in India’s growing relations with their host countries. This underscores the need for the public diplomacy of Indian Embassies and High Commissions in these countries to be specifically geared towards the people of Indian origin, ensuring they feel prioritized and catered to.

Maintaining constant engagement with the Indian diaspora through

cultural, academic, and social activities in their host countries will promote awareness of India's interests. Organizations such as the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI) could be played a significant role by encouraging Indian companies to invest in these nations with the support of the diaspora. India needs to implement various strategies in the medium to long term to enhance the current situation while leveraging both its hard and soft power to uphold its position in the international community. However, the responsibility does not solely lie with the Indian government; it is also the moral obligation of the Indian diaspora to utilize their expertise, economic influence, political power, exposure to diverse cultures, and social progress to contribute to India's prosperity (Srinivas, 2019).

It may be difficult for India to counter any strategic or influential giant players in Southeast Asia regarding mercantile diplomacy or military. Nonetheless, it would be reasonable to say that even if several governments have been attempting to use different aspects of soft power, soft power as a strategy would only be effective with India's growing economic weight on the post-liberalization stage of the globe. If India wants to increase its influence through the medium of the Act East Policy, it might be from the soft power influence in East and Southeast Asia. For this, the Indian government must make the diaspora as a critical player in these efforts. The engagement of the diasporas requires better planning and execution as the Chinese influence is already sweeping them up. India is not considered a threat to Southeast Asian nations, making it easier for the Indian government to project its soft power tools of cultural and historical ties to build relations. India's connections with the area would be more established and developed than they are today if it had recognised decades earlier the Indian diaspora's significance, potential, and prospects.

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# FROM SPICE TRADE TO MODERN DIPLOMACY WITH THE SOUTHEAST THROUGH THE LENS OF SANGAM LITERATURE

Sibi S.<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*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. 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. Our objective is to find guidance that is of cosmopraxis in nature to make that inclusive level approach for enhanced and prolongingness of interconnections. This cosmopraxian approach was well prospered by Rajendra Chola of the Medieval Chola Dynasty, who had immense cultural relations that reflected in southeastern culture, especially Malaysia, Cambodia, Java, and Thailand. The Sangam literature of Tamil, especially "Pattinappalai" remarked on the prosperous trade between Tamils and the Southeastern archipelago in its texts elaborately satisfying our question of ontological way. The main thing that reflected ancient times trade is the "alliance" relation between where Srivijaya dynasty with Medieval Cholas which is a cultural cosmopolitan in nature, unlike the current scenario where political realism with "strategic" relations are maintained by the situations that act as determiners. 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. In this paper, we will discuss the learning from Pattinappalai of Sangam literature which encapsulates the cultural influences, people-people exchange, literature traditions, and culinary exchanges as a*

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1 Postgraduate in Political Science, University of Delhi,  
Email - sibibks@polscience.du.ac.in

*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.*

**Keywords: Cosmopraxis, Human-centred, Cultural-cosmopolitanism, Sangam, Pattinappalai**

## Introduction

The prolixity of wars, relative gains, soft power, and struggle for dominium in regions as well as the global system explains the modern-day international political scenario in a realist sense. The longingness of cosmopolitanism starting from ancient times by Diogenes in the 4th BCE lacks the outcome in reality and pertains in an idealistic nutshell. The cosmos always lacked inclusivity, and interconnectedness in achieving the ideal because of political, economic, and social reasons. Accordingly, “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam” a theme portrayed by India at the G20 summit in Delhi (2023), proclaims and supports the cosmopolitan worldview of Earth as One Family. In this paper, this particular phenomenon will be seen in the Southeast context with Indian foreign diplomacy in improving, following Act East policy by providing insights from the Tamil literature Sangam where the Tamil kings and merchants in the early and medieval eras had influenced culturally and economically in the southeastern archipelago. It should be acknowledged that the similarities between Tamil and Koreans in cultural, linguistic, and culinary variations propounded the ancient hoods of the kingdoms.

*“Vēru palnāṭṭir kāltaravanta  
palavi nai nāvāy tōṅrum perunturai”*  
- Narrinai (Uruthirankannanar, 135/1946)

This line of Narrinai 295 of verses 5 and 6 tells, that ships from various countries have docked at the port in the ancient port of Tamilnadu Korkai (Arokiyaraj, Chozhan, & Narayanan, 2021) and in this research work, we will look after the texts that support our cosmopolitan theme in the context of Southeast Asia, a diplomatic learning of ontology from our past. Before

that, we should know about the various authors who took the responsibilities of re-inventing tradition in the modernities, and who pioneered South Indian sculptural notes, especially with Southeast Asian nations; theorists who suggested various interconnective ways for an inclusive world in the literature review. Then moving on to the problems we face in achieving universality, and what we can learn from the tradition to present-day diplomacy within actors especially stressing India and Southeast Asia. The methods that were pursued in ancient times cannot be taken as such but with some modernized context in promoting inclusiveness. So what is promising is the knowledge that we can get from the Tamil culture which is often left out by many scholars for modern plights and compromising themselves with Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Buddhist pieces of literature to engage in contemporary conflicts that actually need a revisit and resolutions.

The paper has a two-fold objective. First, it attempts to find out the possible learnings from Cholas vis-à-vis the Southeastern nation's relations to the present modern diplomacy of the governments. Second, it tries to answer how the cosmopraxis of the past, with a pinch of modernism, led to cosmopolitanism, and why it remains vital for the modern world.

## **HISTORY OF THE CHOLA EMPIRE THROUGH THE TEXTS**

This section will explore early Chola empire relations with Southeast Asia, followed by scholarly citations on Medieval Chola influences, and finally, connect these with modern-day cosmopolitanism and its relevance. Starting with the textual evidence, Tamil literature is well known for its imagery, spirituality, depth in thoughts, love, kingships as sung by poets in councils, the social life of the regions, feminine power, trade activities, relations, etc. Especially Pattinappalai a certain text contains the valor of the Chola dynasty where the early Chola kingdom had its capital in Kaveripattinam aka Poombuhar, which was the celebrated city in ancient times and was submerged by sea a thousand years ago. The city served as the epicenter for trade with the southeastern archipelago and prospered in fulfilling the trade demands of the Romans by acting as an intermediary in transfers (Glover, 1989, 1990). However, the first clear evidence of maritime contact appears in the second half

of the first millennium B.C. from Ban Don Ta Phet in West-Central Thailand, dated to the early 4th century B.C. The origin of the carnelian beads found here and at other sites of Southeast Asia has been traced to the Indian subcontinent as sources of carnelian are rare in mainland Southeast Asia though scattered in the Indonesian Archipelago (Glover, 1989).

The epic *Pattinappalai* verses 103 by Uruthirankannanar (135/1946, pp. 171-172) translated by J.V. Chelliah on Sangam literature highlights King Karikalan's valour, emphasizing his leadership during the early Chola period. The work delves into the unity of Vanigar merchants, religious practices like Shaivism and Buddhism, and the significance of Kaveripattinam in trade, supported by archaeological evidence of its connections with Southeast Asia.. There is one specific passage in this literature, in which mention is made about six ports along the sea coast to which merchant ships could sail (Trenckner 1928, p. 359). The scholar who translated Milinda Panho (Davids 1890, p. xiii) attempted to identify all the ports and cities referenced in the text. He suggests that Kolappattanam should have been located along the coast of South India. Kolappattanam is likely none other than Kaveripattinam the erstwhile port-town (Soundara Rajan & Raman, 1994).

The Sangam tradition gives the numismatic findings of square Chola copper coins at *Perumpatan kal* from an ancient port city of Khun Luk Pat on the Klong Thom river of the western coast of Southern Thailand as noted by K. Rajan in his *Archeology Of TamilNadu Early Historic Period* who studied the megalithic monuments which were founded in the archaeological survey in the erstwhile capital of Cholas. Also, several findings of monuments, coins, and articles with evidence of Western roots were excavated. With the support of this, we can establish many ideas from the ancestors' past socio-economic life, which depicts some insights that need to be renewed for modernity.

Also, with the support of the Government of India, archeological excavations at Kaveripattinam (1963-73) under the head of Soundara Rajan helped us with the type of articles that we got in the excavations mainly Pottery in black and red ware and all-black wares, Rouletted ware, Kushana polished red ware in sprinkler types, exotic green glazed pottery which first time seen in

here that dated in Malay-Indonesian archipelago while these pottery supports with C14 dating and yielded approximately between 300BC and 200BC of age (Soundara Rajan & Raman, 1994). This report also gives us information on the coast of Chola's regular trade with the southeast from the 9th to 12th century A.D. The work also gave the stages of Buddhism propagated in the Imperial Chola time with the peaking of Shaivism. The discovery of the Buddhist monastery confirmed the literary evidence found in the Tamil epics like *Silappadikaram* and *Manimekalai* closely connected with the port town. These excavations showed the effective trade and cultural exchanges between the landscapes of South India and Southeast Asia and most of the excavational findings are befitting the *Pattinappalai* praising the commercial life of Cholas (Abraham, 2003).

We also have to look at the excavations, inscriptions, and literature from the Southeast in supporting the quality trade in the past with Tamils. A Malayan text of 17th century *Sejarah Melayu* also known as *Sulalatal-salatin* engages the Malayan familiarity with Cholas for many centuries. This text revealed the context of Malacca and Singapore that the kingdom had long-sustained commercial, political, and even marital alliances with the Malay Archipelago, and Kalinga which is present-day Odisha was once a fleet of Rajendra Chola from which he acquired success in his siege against Kedah kingdom in 1025 CE (Gopal, 2022).

Many transregional mythic motifs can be found, for example, Varuna or Baruna as he is known in the name in the Malay world, where according to *Tholkappiyam* assigns Varuna as the god of *Neytal* i.e. coastal lands where *Pattinappalai* refers to the communities of the coast worshipping the fierce power residing in the ocean which also performed by Malayan world which gets the support from *Hikayat Sang Boma*, the Malay version of old Javanese text, *Bhaumakavya* in which he depicted as the god of sea, emerging from the sea accompanied by celestial spiritess to aid the protagonist of the tale, Boma. Even today we can see temples for him on both coasts (Gopal,2022). The point here that we should take is the shared mythologies of the two areas. Still, there is ongoing archeological research over Malayan coasts where the discovery of a shipwreck dating back to 600 years near Pedra Branca at the Straits of

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Singapore could shed some light on the techno-cultural sharing between entities which would fuel our understanding of the methods of relations in our past.

The reviewed literature and excavations denote that maritime trade before Christ involved shared rituals and deities across regions. Cultural diffusion reached its height under Rajendra Chola, emphasizing collaboration rather than coercion, a principle inherited from his father, Rajaraja the Great. This period saw the rise of the "imperial style," which connected a mercantile economy with agrarian production and religious institutions. It transcended linguistic and cultural boundaries, encouraging artistic innovation and promoting regional unity. The imperial style acted as a ceremonial framework for cooperation or conflict, legitimizing power among great dynasties and fostering significant regional development and alliances.

In the book *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa - the reflections on the Chola Naval Expeditions to Southeast Asia* there are plenty of details like medieval commercial activities in the Indian Ocean, Rajendra Chola and Srivijaya relation and also the China triangle, Nautical perspectives, excavations at Imperial capital and its significance, South Indian Merchant guilds in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia. Cultural implications of the two kingdoms as cited by many authors supporting the imperial Cholas influences overseas rather than coercing and controlling the territory with the central rule in the interest of plundering as mentioned by Spencer's *The Politics of Plunder: The Cholas in Eleventh Century Ceylon*. where he mentions that idea of Indian influence was by either called as plundering or just influencing in other terms as we use later in modern diplomacy part as "Strategic partnership" or an "Alliance" because the Southeast Asia adopted many traditions and customs of Indian origin where we can sense here that amount of influences in a question which even encapsulated some of the nativity of the southeast or the other way.

We can find related elements in "*The Imperial Style In South And Southeast Asia*" by Heitzman where he states that by the 9th century the period of cultural diffusion involving India and Southeast Asia had passed and all regions were participating under a single commercial and political arena on an

equal basis. In this work, Heitz points out the similarities that we can identify among the Northern part of India, South India, and Southeast Asian polities which depicts the importance of Chola-period records that their sheer number and prosaic contents allow us to view most closely the relationship between the South state and Southeast Asia's polity and economy that helps to navigate the importance of the commerce. He also notices the religious institutions playing a crucial role in influencing Southeast Asia by portraying them as either incorporative or imperative with the support of Kulke's detailed study "*The Segmentary State: Interim Reflections*" (1995) where the author noticed that in both Indian and Southeastern states King was the highest representative of the divine will and thus partook with divinity which to the extent legitimated, precisely through the protective role that included construction of the sites themselves which confirms us the necessary proliferation of ideas and thoughts among the two polities.

We can accept that Heitzman's understanding of the importance of southern Indian trade and the imperial style of it extending to modern-day Philippines would help us to proceed with our further argument of striving for the necessity of cosmopraxis exchanges for the high development of cosmopolitanism. Now Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam which is proclaimed as the mantra of India's diplomatic lexicon has remained ambiguous and rarely elaborated, so we by this work try to improvise the term with our findings for the modern-day relations with our context which is southeast Asia. George L. Hart (1975) in his *Poems of Ancient Tamils* explains the cosmopolitic nature of Tamil poems where the texts emerge with a way of life of ancient Tamils leading to the unified inclusive world after he cites many literature of Sangam traditions and concludes that universality was in the essence of Tamil ancient authors. The cosmopolitanism nowadays getting struck by many factors due to various reasons and interests, the necessity of worldview from Held to Pogge thriving for a unified principle that we can work for as by the authors of *Cosmopolitanism in a globalized World: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* stresses this as an ever-present social condition in which individuals are embedded lags significantly behind and them proposes an individual level of understanding and importantly ANT(Actor- Network Theory) developing three important elements of cosmopolitanism such as

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cultural omnivorousness, ethnic tolerance and cosmopolitics which we can relate with our ancient mechanisms from the texts that eventually lead us to take the path of cosmopraxis which literally mean the way to move beyond the trap of reifying relations and focusing on establishing how the relations interacts and also the other parts inspite of the subject (Querejazu, 2021) as a method which is new in nature but was well present in the activities by means of exchanges. So linking the past and present here, with the ultimate aim of cosmopraxian nature of ancient Tamils with the Southeastern kingdoms guiding India's cultural diplomacy to act in such a way that entails its G20's pledge supporting world family, which here applies accompanying archipelago within the family. During the 5<sup>th</sup> century period, southern India functioned as a key region, connected to the Philippines, through a replicable "imperial style." This paradigm linked mercantile economies, agrarian production, and religious institutions, promoting agricultural expansion, artistic innovation, and cooperation or conflict among dynasties across cultural boundaries.

#### **LIMITATIONS IN UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORY OF CHOLAS:**

The texts considered are rich in poetry. The Sangam literature can be classified into two types, one is of love which deals with inside or personal (*agam*) and the other is outside or political or social (*puram*). The paper does not surf on the poetical lines of the texts or in finding the personal problems which even has solutions rather we delve in the trade activities mentioned by the texts.

The understanding in this paper is guided by *Pattinappalai* for the early-era Cholas commercial activities. The text praises many trade policies exchanges, social life, people-people exchanges, Karikala Chola's administration, and polity, etc. The paper takes the necessary factors regarding the trade, exchanges, and cultural diffusions with the empire and southeastern kingdoms to serve the objective.

Rather than the epistemological approach of Medieval Cholas on Southeastern nations like the Srivijayan dynasty, the paper tends to adhere to the ontological approach that Cholas pursued that we connote the entire process as cosmopraxis way of cultural diffusions and not the initial part of it.

It rather looks at how it started the prolonged diplomacy.

Cosmopolitanism can be achieved only with sacrifices and also transformations because the activity we saw in the past was during war epochs i.e., conquests were made before the relations but instead we have trade now, so the sacrifices should start from the greater economy rather dominating the inferior which is in the case of the Cholas and Kedah kingdom.

## EMBRACING THE DIFFUSIONS

### *Early excavations*

The ancient way of life leverages a uniqueness in the approaches and accuracies in resolving the problems that they faced, with some amendments the accuracies can also be the best suitable solution for the sustainability issues. The connectivities before were mostly unnoticed and moving on in a scientific approach leaving out the masterpieces for example the connection between Tamil Nadu and Southeast Asia dates back to 2000 years ago (Saju, 2020) where epigraphy and archaeology find the attestations to this early presence of Tamils in Southeast Asia including 10 medieval inscriptions, coins, Indo-Roman rouletted pottery, ceramics, beads, and bronze artefacts.

Poombuhar aka Kaveripattinam an erstwhile trade centre and also the capital of Karikala Chola was submerged thousands of years ago, and present excavations on the city show the social life and trade of the Port City (Soundara Rajan & Raman, 1994).

The Sangam anthologies consist of the oldest literary references of Tamil Southeastern relations where particularly *Pattinappalai*, dating to the 2nd century A.D, narrating the import of foreign merchandise from Kedah to the Chola's famous port-town Poompuhar aka Kaveripattinam, so it becomes paramount to know the early life as said by the text

*Quite free and happy are their lives  
Amidst their multiplying kin  
They know no foes; the fishes play*

*Near the fishers' quarters unafraid,  
And cattle multiply untouched  
In butchers haunts.*

*- Pattinappalai*

These lines explain how happy the people were living at an early age when the environment appeased everyone for their daily work and their relations with their kin, this can be taken as an ideal society proposed for our sustainable earth because living happily without problems are much greater than living with dilemmas and profits as in game theory. But this early theory doesn't have that game theory instead a life theory for sustainability. (Uruthirankannanar, 135/1946, pp. 227-232)

The trade and mechanisms with Southeast Asia relations in the text go by

*The merchants thus  
Condemn the taking of these lives,  
They speak the truth and deem it shame  
To lie, for others goods they have  
The same regard as for their own  
In trade. Nor do they try to get  
Too much in selling their own goods,  
Nor give too little when they buy  
They set a fair price on all things.*

*-Pattinappalai*

This sets the character of the merchants who had trade with people all over the world, and the “fairness” or non-profit seeking idealness that we can seek for our present world. The texts also show the importance of Southeastern trade activities especially the articles imported and exported. (Uruthirankannanar, 135/1946, pp.245-251)

*Here are brought  
Swift, prancing steeds by sea in ships*

*And bales of pepper black, by carts.  
 Himalayas sends gems and gold,  
 While Kudda hills, sweet sandal-wood,  
 And akhil; pearls from the south sea come,  
 Red coral from the eastern sea.  
 Ganges and Kaveri bring  
 Their yield; Ceylon provides food,  
 And Burma, manufactures rare  
 With other rare and rich imports  
 This wealth lies close and thickly piled,  
 Where mechants live the fish is safe in sea.*

- *Pattinappalai* (Uruthirankannanar 135/1946, pp 213-225)

The poet *Nachinarkkiniyar* explains the valor of the hero of this poem Karikala Chola for his bravery, administration and diplomacy in the territory, as he says the Kings has a conception of a vast universe where nature and mind form an inseparable bound-up whole and all the natural objects constitute, as it were, a permanent habitation for the soul which dwells within (Maraimalaiadigal, 1966). The inner soul would melt the plastic outward matter with its laws, which is the main idea of the Karikala Chola who ran a successful kingdom. The idea of imports and rare products can be seen through the texts that the merchants were so busy trading and also at the same time living a peaceful life. The quality of life that we can observe in the early age is far different from the later centuries because the former does not have any established institutions in working for self-interests as we can see by changing eras.

After the demise of early Cholas, the exchanges did not curtail, because the merchant community never got ruled out, we can still see the merchant communities in present-day Tamilnadu, Kerala, and Andhra Pradesh named *Chettiars* and *Komatis* in continuing generations. Because of the decentralized commercial activity of Cholas the people exchanges never stopped. There were people-to-people exchanges between Tamils and Cambodians, Malaysians,

Koreans, Indonesians, and more.

On account of this several important exchanges also happened between the landscapes and one important thing to note is that similarities were found between the Korean and Tamil cultures of India. We can cite some of the reasons for such an exchange is that a marriage between Korean Prince Kim Suro married a 16-year-old princess named *Sembavalam* as mentioned in the Korean book *Samguk Yusa* in 48CE. Starting this as an example the people proportions in respective lands are high with nearly 4000 Koreans living in Tamilnadu and 10,000 Indians living in South Korea working at MNCs. (Arokiyaraj et al., 2021) It is quite important to note that both regions shared Languages, Festivals, Rituals, Cultural celebrations, Culinary exchanges, and so on.(Arokiyaraj et al., 2021).

### ***Medieval Meddling***

The intermediary age till the 9th century A.D showed effective exchanges between people but now the historic peak of cultural diffusion can be observed particularly during the Rajendra Chola era especially in 1025 A.D. as the highest peak where the naval expedition reached Kedah kingdom in the Malay region as apart of his *digvijaya* which solely described by King's Inscriptions only. So there is also a dilemma arising in cultural relations as a part of his Imperial rule or Integrative rule as questioned by Spencer in his work.

Considerable dominion over the Malay peninsula and the Eastern Archipelago, supported by stone inscriptions and in the Tiruvalangadu and Karan dai (present-day Tanjore) copper plates a trustworthy account of the military and naval transactions of his reign as the influences of the Cholas laying the way as shown in Figure 4.1 of the Rajendra Campaign over the Kedah (*kadaram*) Kingdom from which after the conquest the former was praised as *Kadaram Kondan* in Tamil texts. The *Prasasti* (Inscriptions of the King) leverage details about the Kedah kingdom in the archipelago and the Chola empire's communication with the islands of the archipelago, and the Chinese are evident. The construction of the *Cudamani-vihara* in Nagapattinam by *Mara-vijayottunga-varman* of the Sailendra dynasty of Sri Vijaya paved the

way for wealthy trade between the entities (Sastri, 1955).

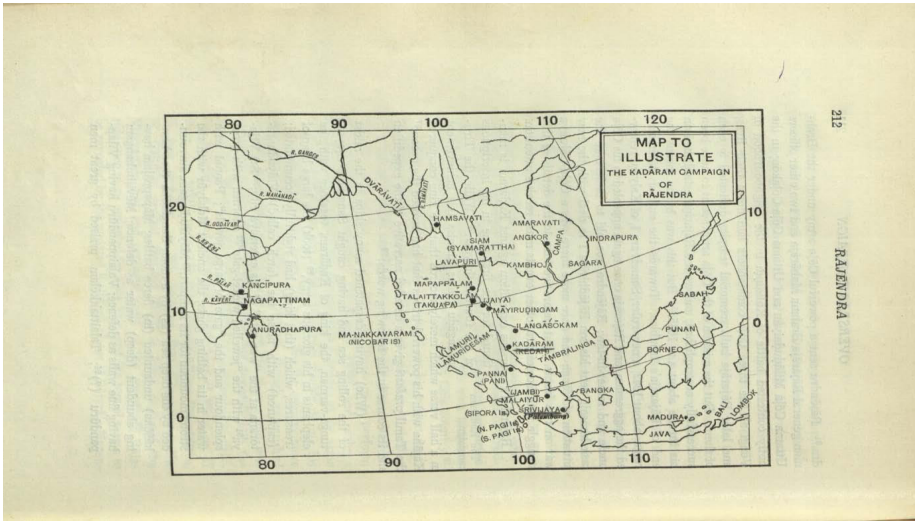


Figure 1: Map to Illustrate the Kadaram Campaign of Rajendra

Source: Sastri, N. (1955). *The Colas* (2nd ed.). Madras: G. S. Press.

The information that we can take from this golden period is administration had been carefully organised and a fairly powerful bureaucracy brought into existence, which, while it scrupulously respected the liberty, feudal and corporate, of the various magnates and associations that studied the land, successfully maintained die king's peace and enforce all civil rights.

The point of view on expeditions differs in scholars where Spencer says the imperial desire of the Cholas to seek profits and make Taxation and Tributes in a way where the treasury which already with the plunder of the gold from commerce, hunched to overflow (Spencer , 1976) and the other view can be of is the integrative nature of the Cholas as royal coordination and direction of a common enterprise among the market decentralized socio-political system. The later probabilities are in the sense of leaning towards the imperative nature because the other expeditions or *digvijaya* of the Chola dynasty show that decentralization is an important character of the polity but with a unanimous power of the King and also the Prince which assumably

started by Rajaraja Chola.

The most famous activities were done by Rajendra which was his invasions of Malaya and Sumatra of the Southeastern archipelago. The *prashishtis* notes him as *Kadaram Kondan* meaning the conqueror of Kedah which can be also noted by various poets for example Jayamkondan in his *Kalingattupparani* (verse 189). We can even accept that as Sastri tells the part of expedition as *digvijaya* which made him a supreme power in that decade or we can even see as Spencer says the expedition over Ceylon by Cholas as Politics of Plunder but the takeaway here should be the standard of living of the people, which by the poems we can tell for example *Barani* notes the people of Cholas under Rajaraja and his son never knew how loss, defeat feel which makes us so keen on seeing the administration by the golden emperors.

Trade in the region was facilitated by Tamil merchants, who sought to obtain local products like forest goods, sea cargo, and minerals to sell in the lucrative Chinese markets. In exchange, the increasing volume of high-quality Indian textiles offered new opportunities for commodity trade and wealth transfer. These robust maritime trade networks connecting India and China, with stops at ports along the Southeast Asian coasts, drove not just economic growth but also cultural diffusion - most notably the spread of Buddhist and Brahminical religious influences in the region(Devare, 2009).

### *A Cosmopraxis?*

The sharing of Indian culture, religion, sculptures, languages, arts, architecture, customs and manners to East Asia to the extent that historians described the phenomenon as the development of a “Greater India” (Meenakshisundararajan, 2009) where the which now takes us to Cosmopraxis of that era among the people because of the Commerce and Business that prompted the people of India to cross the sea to the east that included the diffusion or in other words a diverse cosmologies are intermixing in a plural way and making a combined life out of it. The cosmopraxis of life was seen in the past age because it was never a problem in reifying the relationships but living in a way of pluriversal dimension which we can see particularly in the context of Tamils and Koreans. This uniqueness of cosmopraxis can be seen

over the Southeast Asian region before when the exchanges were at a peak level. The shift was in focus towards the interactions and co-constituting the realities of the people who migrated either way after the challenges but got settled quickly so that they became inherent members of the society.

The modern diplomacy distinctively and popularly started from the Look East with the change after three decades into Act east focusing on the Indianization which even claimed by local elites of southeast in legitimising themselves following the indianized cultures and ideas (Mabbet, 1977). However, it could possibly amend the tools necessary for the cosmopraxy to go for an effective cultural mix for plurality which produces cosmopolitanism as the outcome (Smith, 1999).

Presently, India and Southeast nations, to be peculiar ASEAN the two sided operationalised many cooperative schemes to note starting from Look East in early 90s after the disintegration of soviet, dialogue partner of the hitherto ten-nation grouping in 1996, summit level partnerships in 2002, Free Trade Agreement in 2010, importantly the “Strategic Partnership” in 2012 gradually setting up separate mission to blocs and so on. We all know the modern multipolarity in containing or balancing or counteracting or deterring mechanisms as this partnership as with doing so against China by India with South eastern nations.

Along with these initiatives it is imperative to note the difference that makes gradual level of integration in Look East policy which formulated the economic integration and the other Act East policy which enunciated the Economic, as well as Security level integration and cooperations. Even though PM Modi stresses on 4Cs of Act East namely Culture, Commerce, Connectivity, and Capacity building the main intention that supplies here is the security or strategic level of cooperation which is evident in this century after the great wars or to exactly point after the claim of science as the only solution which autotuned ethics as unwanted one driving actors into an egoistic battle and causing lives. This is what we call plights of the modernity or science to exact, it should be overcome by re-inventing the “alliance” or a “soulmate” which is inevitable for the standard of livelihoods as well as ecology by insisting

the cosmic essence to the globals. Our stress on alliance can be achieved by Cultural Integration served by Cosmopraxis which we got from the Chola era.

The linkages we have seen before in religion, festivals, culinary recipes, trades- both in barter times and currency times, and importantly wedlocks which produced the offsprings of relationality also serving the cultural exchanges more by rituals of the ceremony that includes everyone and substantial things for integrations. A marriage ceremony is substantial because of the cosmopraxis of the process that includes because of the above events. This cosmopraxis of the tradition can be utilised in modern diplomacy by India to the Southeast and even beyond it because cosmopraxis would accompany cultures which pulls masses behind it and we can also use this as a counteract to Huntington's clashes where he assumes the people's cultural identities as the primary source of conflicts in post coldwar world (Huntington, 1993) where we suggest the cosmopraxian identities will act as the main source of annihilation of present conflicts if the foreign policies show resemblances over cultural, interconnected matters with every nation.

### **Cosmopolitanism via Cosmopraxis**

There is a famous line from Thirumoolar, a sage from Tamil who quotes

*“Yam Petra inbam peruga ivvayagam”*

-Thirumandhiram

This quote suggests that happiness should be shared with the world, embodying the essence of cosmopolitanism. Throughout history, shifts from physical to mental domination, colonial to neo-colonial, show the monopolization of knowledge. Today, cosmopolitanism is essential, addressing challenges at individual, communal, national, and global levels, and advocating shared solutions.

Deriving this, cosmopraxis that we learnt from the past should align with modern interests and leverage the reorientation in International Relations towards a pluralistic understanding. It brings attention to practices, and cultural diffusions leading to a mix of festivals, customs, beliefs, culinary recipes,

emotions fraternity etc., So the cosmopraxis encourages a re-enchantment in modern plights by inviting openness to diverse sensibilities, intuitions, and imaginations advocating for a less rigid and more imaginative approach to address global issues and also offers a multi-dimensional map that tracks our path in relation to inclusivity and universality (Querejazu, 2021). This is necessary in modern-day strategic politics because of the non-partnership of the ideal that we saw. The achievement of alliances leading the world to be unified is the substantiality needed in the present political systems that habituated warfare and caused deaths and pollution of money leading to imbalances.

## CONCLUSION

The extensive Indo-SE Asian interlinkages over two millennia underscored a cosmopraxis ethos focused on co-constituting a shared lifestyle through pluralistic cultural diffusion. From the vibrant trade and harmonious community relations described in Sangam texts to the peak medieval cultural blending under the Cholas, the emphasis was on connectivity and integration rather than coercion. The spread of religions, languages, martial alliances, customs, etc created common ground as we noted by the cosmopraxis in international relations.

The civilizational legacy of cosmopraxis holds profound insights for reshaping modern Indian diplomacy. As India seeks leadership in an emerging multipolar world order, it must re-embrace the ancient principle of unity-in-diversity to harmonize pluriversal dimensions between contemporary nation-states and cultures. This requires moving beyond narrow transactional partnerships framed by hard power geopolitics alone. Instead, India should launch a new wave of cosmopraxis with Southeast Asia - focused on egalitarian cultural exchanges, august festivals that weave the tapestry of time, student scholarships discovering the wisdom of difference, vigorously nurturing people-to-people bonds that touch the core of hearts rather than purses. Such initiatives will organically foster integrative alliances and collective growth. India must also integrate the cosmopraxis worldview in its global governance vision - championing soft connectivity projects that affirm civilizational worth; advancing humanitarian aid without borders, and spearheading knowledge

networks on ecological oneness. By thus boldly rediscovering and living the ideal of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' from past promise to future possibility, India can lead in harmonizing the pluriversal dimensions between nations and cultures on the world stage. This is the enlightened path to actualizing a truly cosmopolitan global order.

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# ENGAGING IN THE INDO-PACIFIC AS A CIVILIZATIONAL STATE: A STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY INDIAN STATECRAFT

*Amruta Karambelkar<sup>1</sup>*

## ABSTRACT:

*In the immediate period following its independence in 1947, Indian foreign policy sought to connect to Eastern Asia. Works of KM. Panikkar was based on the premise of homogeneity of the so-called Asian values and those being distinct from the so-called Western values, which were manifested in colonisation and subjugation, based on the assumptions of “White man’s burden”. India had a good start in the way it led the newly-decolonised nations under the framework of Asian Relations Conference, or the Non-Aligned movement. Later, India’s own domestic constraints came in the way of meaningful external engagement. Eventually, India’s strategic orientation was restricted to the continent, obliterating the vast maritime dimension. Indian leadership had to prioritise domestic situation which forced it to neglect the external environment. 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. This paper*

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1 Assistant Professor, Rashtriya Raksha University, Gandhinagar, Gujarat, Email - amruta.karambelkar@rru.ac.in

*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.*

**Keywords: Civilisational state, Maritime, Diaspora, Indo-Pacific, Act-East**

## INTRODUCTION

The prolonged experience of colonisation had strong impact in the making of India's foreign policy. As a newly-independent nation, the Indian foreign policy had specific characteristics of a nation that has come out of two centuries of subjugation. The colonial experience was an aberration in the centuries-long continuity of the Indian civilisation. The governance during the British rule was a completely new system and had no semblance to the earlier models. The concept of 'Ram Rajya' which has been so intrinsic to the traditional Indian governance was lost. What replaced it under a foreign ruler was a governance based on exploitation and subjugation. Many Indian cultural practices were prohibited or looked-down upon by the European colonisers because it was unfathomable to their peculiar cultural-religious conditioning.

Many governance features of independent India were a carry-over of the British political system. The Western political commentators of that time had pessimism about the Indian democracy and few had hopes for its success. The general perception was that an extremely diverse country such as India; in fact, an amalgamation of several nations with distinct languages and dialects, cultural practices, religious diversity within in the Hindu fold-was inconsistent with liberal democracy. However, the 'Indian experiment' has not only survived, but thrived during the course of the last 76 years. What has come as a surprise to many is as to how a diverse state like India has survived, has managed economic growth and is now emerging as one of the

major powers. The role of the leadership in the immediate post-independence period is to be duly acknowledged. Particularly universal adult franchise, the expansive welfarism of the Indian State and progressive legislations. Yet, a lot of credit must go to the Indian people who amalgamated into the 'new' political system with ease, barring a few exceptions. As time has passed, there is a larger agreement that democracy in fact, is totally in sync with the Indian cultural traditions. The prime minister recently described India as the mother of democracy (PM addresses Summit for Democracy 2024). He was referring to the long, civilisational continuity of dialogue and discussion as the centrepiece of the Indian polity. Amartya Sen's 'The Argumentative Indian' written by Prof. Amartya Sen also examines the deliberative and dialectical discourses within Indian socio-political history. So, while India embraced the Westphalian notion of state and the modern governance system in the form of parliamentary democracy and a republic, there is an imprint of its civilisational ethos in its policymaking. Gandhi ideals, which itself were drawn from Bhartiya ethos, are still the guiding principles of governance (Bhat, 2019; Mishra, 2019; Ram, 2016). The Indian foreign policy too, was no exception to the continuity of the cultural ethos.

The thinkers in the post-independence period like K.M. Panikkar wrote extensively on the distinction of 'Asian' from the 'West'. The Asian Relations Conference held in 1947 in New Delhi was a notable Indian initiative to shape an alternative world, as seen in Mahatma Gandhi's speech on this occasion (Gandhi, 1947):

“What I want you to understand is the message of Asia. It is not to be learnt through the western spectacles or by imitating the atom bomb. If you want to give a message of truth, I do not want merely to appeal to your head, I want to capture your heart”.

Based on such ideals, the Indian foreign policy set out the following as its principles — non-interference, non-aggression, peaceful-coexistence, respect for territorial integrity, and, equality and mutual benefit, which have been enshrined as 'Panchsheel'. There is a principled policy that refrains from stirring up conflicts. So, Indian foreign policy is fundamentally opposed to

regime changes and imposing ideologies (Malhotra, 2019). It is believed that the choice with respect to electing or removing a political leader is solely with the people of that country. It also does not endorse unilateral sanctions or military actions. Further, the policy also champions constructive engagement over aggression (Malhotra, 2019). India's vision of international order which would be a peaceful, cooperative, collaborative and mutually-beneficial one, is drawn from the long-drawn Bhartiya philosophical tradition. Critics of the Indian idealism have called such principles and visions as utopian. Yet, these ideals are a prescription of a collective life wherein everyone is happy, healthy and prosperous (Principles and Objectives of India's Foreign Policy, n.d.). This vision is best expressed through the 'Kalyan Mantra' of Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah, Sarve Santu Niramaya... (Principles and Objectives of India's Foreign Policy, n.d.).

## WHAT IS A CIVILISATIONAL STATE?

A civilisational state when broadly understood refers to when a country identifies itself on the basis of peculiar socio-political circumstances over a geographical space. A civilisational state is different from a nation-state. A nation-state is a product of the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 and the events thereafter, a civilisational state is the one where distinct socio-political character is larger than a nation-state. A nation-state is based on race, ethnicity or language, whereas a civilisational state is a state with distinct socio-political character. It has a peculiar political tradition, a distinct historical and cultural unity, derived from a continuous process of cultural syncretism. A civilisational state can have ethnic and cultural diversity, but it demonstrates an ethos of cultural unity. The unity exists despite displaying significant cultural diversity across centuries of history and a large geographical space. A civilisation state essentially denotes cultural continuity over centuries, but the culture of a civilisational state is claimed to be distinct. A civilisational state would emphasise on its historical continuity and cultural unity across a large geographic region. It is a country that aims to represent not just a historical territory, ethnolinguistic group or a body of governance, but a unique civilisation in its own right. Culture occupies a predominant place in a civilisational state. In such a state, its functioning and processes would be

governed by its culture and the conduct of its people. A civilisation state would argue for a bespoke political structure that is reflective of its distinct culture. In order to be categorised as a civilisational state, a country's culture and history has to be consistent across a particular geographic area. A civilisation state is the one that claims not just one language or a particular geographical area or ethnicity, but an entire, distinct civilisation(Hindustan Times 2024; Barabanov 2023; Buddhi 2021; Gurumurthy 2020; Jacques 2011; Singh 2016; Naumkin 2021; Vivekananda International Foundation New Delhi 2020). Civilisational states may display a unique world view or a moral vision. Some arguments of civilisational state (such as made by China as the 'Middle Kingdom') can claim moral superiority or higher standards or higher development than others(Florek, 2020; Seth, 2019; Sinha, 2021; United States–China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2020).

Critics argue that the civilisational states are fundamentally illiberal. This is because it is held that a civilisational state can challenge the existing order and norms such human rights or democratic political system(Rachman, 2019). Civilisations are founded on religion, ethnicity and language whereas liberalism seeks to transcend it to seek universal norms and values(Tharoor, 2023). Proponents of civilisational state would argue that the liberal criticism stems from the position of imagining a singular source of modernity. Modernity is generally understood as the product of Enlightenment in the West, whereas it is argued that modernity has multiple sources. The tendency to regard modernity as synonymous only with Western Enlightenment leads to view other sources of modernity as illiberal(Gurumurthy, 2023).

Samuel Huntington brought forth the role of culture and religion in international politics in the post-Cold War period, as a refutation of Fukuyama's treatise that claimed of the irreversibility of the liberal-Western world order. The emergence of the discourse on civilisational states reiterates Huntington's scholarship. It is also coming about in a period when the calls for reformation of the existing international order are getting louder.

India as a civilisational state- Insights on international relations.

In many ways, contemporary India is a historical continuity. The culture, faith, practices of contemporary India are continued across generations. Culture has always been a centrepiece in Indian public life. Mahatma Gandhi has described the freedom struggle against British in 'Hind Swaraj' as a civilisational struggle. In his article in Foreign Affairs in 1939, Jawaharlal Nehru had also described the freedom movement as cultural (Gurumurthy, 2023). Swami Vivekananda's famous speech at Chicago at the World Parliament of Religions in 1893 was a guide in how to avoid religious conflicts and a manual on how various nations, cultures and religions can coexist. His version believes in harmony in diversity, as against the popular dictum of unity in diversity for it is believed that 'unity' indicates essentially an opposition to something. On the other hand, harmony implies no opposition and the understanding that culturally diverse groups can coexist (Gurumurthy, 2020). The Indian knowledge systems were passed down across centuries through the 'Shrutis'. Indian philosophers, such as Mahatma Gandhi, have had a normative approach to society and politics.

Kalidas Nag (1926) in 'Greater India' when writing about India and internationalism, draws a distinction between the historical evolution of India and that of China and Egypt and Babylon etc. to note that the Indian quest was always focused on the metaphysical, while the other civilisations were progressing on science, architecture, legal codes and astronomy. The Indian on the other hand was exploring the boundaries of human knowledge and human philosophy. This philosophical exploration led to a society that valued equity over economics, and ethics to politics and jurisprudence. This distinct socio-philosophical outcome was consolidated in the form of 'Rajdharm' and 'Dharmashastra' wherein the conceptual lynchpin was 'Dharma' (Nag, 1926). Further, Nag also refers to Sten Konow's work of 1921 titled 'The Aryan Gods of the Mittani' (where Varuna, Indra and Mitra the Vedic Gods were invoked during signing of a peace treaty between the two tribes at Cappadocia) and the inscription at Boghaz Keui to demonstrate that the Indian internationalism has historically been about peace making, as compared to the contemporary internationalism of exploitation of Phoenician or the compulsive imperialist internationalism of the Assyrians and Romans. The harmonious essence of the Indian internationalism was a product of deep philosophical wisdom accrued

over a long period of time (Nag, 1926). It is not that the Vedic Aryans did not face resistance from autochthonous people just as Egyptians and Assyrians and Dorians faced, but where the Vedic Aryans differed was how they responded to such resistance. Nag notes that Vedic Aryans not only understood that the opponents had to exist or co-exist, but that they were transformed from enemies into collaborators into building of civilisation. The Bhartiya civilisation is thus a product as such. The Aryan and Dravidian nations, both with different language, race and culture were synthesised, reproduced and thus lay the foundation of a great assimilative civilisation. The epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata are lessons that war is necessary and yet it is only the righteous that wins the war. And even after winning a war which is compared to a gamble, it is just like a defeat. The Shantiparva is about how peace is the only sublimation of war. Thus, underlying the idealism, the Indian international relations also has also been pragmatic (Nag, 1926).

In modern times, Indian leadership has showed solidarity with other nations such as when Mahatma Gandhi felt that unless African nations gain independence, India is not truly free. In fact, about twenty years before 1947, the Indian political leaders had linked the Indian national movement to the worldwide fight against colonisation. Likewise was the solidarity shown to the Vietnamese struggle through the slogan of ‘Tera naam, mera naam, Viet Nam’. The Panchsheel with China too carried the slogan of brotherhood as ‘Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai’ Thus, Indian world view or the feelings of solidarity have always remained broad, and not restricted to its territory. A natural sense of familiar bond or brotherhood was displayed by the Indian leadership all through its modern history. This solidarity is not merely a diplomatic gimmick but a passionate tendency of organic solidarity with the non-Western world.

## **INDO-PACIFIC ENGAGEMENT**

The two distinct terms one hears in the foreign policy discourse these days are ‘Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam’ and ‘Vishwaguru’. Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam means that the world is one family. The Indian chairmanship of the G-20 in 2023 had Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: One Earth, One Family, One future as the theme. Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his speeches stated that

India's presidency has been inclusive where the developmental concerns of the Global South have been taken into account. He also stated that the G20 Summit will chart a new path in human-centric and inclusive development (Modi, 2023b). The Indian prime minister also wished for global economic growth to be inclusive, sustainable, strong and balanced. The Indian narrative sees the current order problematic at many levels and hence recommends for a change. The underlying view is that the existing order is exclusionary and Euro-centric and thus neglects the rest of the humanity of the world. There is also a criticism of the existing economic order which perpetuates inequality, hence the Indian view calls for a shift from GDP-centric to a human-centric growth (Modi, 2023a). The Indian presidency of the G20 was determined to make a difference and it attempted to do so by inclusion of the African Union into the G20. It was held that the Global South and the African continent has been marginalised and therefore India wanted to mainstream such marginalised aspirations. Under its G20 presidency, 125 nations participated under the 'Voice of Global South' summit (Modi, 2023a). Thus, when it got an opportunity to shape international relations, India, while perfectly acting in its national interest, also took a moral stance when it sought to give platform to the marginalised countries of the world.

When the Indo-Pacific construct was being shaped, and it was essentially a US-led view that was designed to face its bilateral challenge with respect to China, India's policy called for Indo-Pacific to be inclusive. It was signalling against escalation of tensions and avoidance of yet another division that may spur blocs. India's view was shared by all of Southeast Asian nations, and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific bears remarkable similarity to the Indian view. The Indian position should not be construed as oblivious to the geopolitical challenges in the Indo-Pacific, but that while duly acknowledging the challenges, the Indian policy endorsed a measured, incremental approach where regional peace and prosperity must be the priority (Modi, 2018).

The Indo-Pacific is also a strategic geography and it is essentially maritime. While the concept was commonly used in environmental sciences, it was adopted in the geopolitical parlance to imagine a seamless continuity of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, evoking cultural and economic ties over

centuries. It was also a revision in regionalism that wanted to accommodate India, which was left out of the Asia-Pacific construct and always imagined in the South Asian region primarily. India's rising international profile caused by sustained economic growth and a large military force were noticed and therefore it was no longer a power that could be ignored. Likewise, India's own aspirations were expanding and it sought to play a larger role in the world, with primary focus into its immediate and extended neighbourhood. The views from the US and Japan (particularly Abe Shinzo) called for greater Indian involvement in the region, although such views were unsurprisingly based out of respective national interests. However, the calls for greater Indian attention in Southeast Asia were made by the late Lee Kuan Yew, who saw value in India's role as a moderator in this geopolitically sensitive region. It is a well-known story that Southeast Asian nations have desired greater and sustained Indian presence for they view India as a potential 'balancer' to great power contestations. But it also stems from India's benign image. India has not had historical baggage of colonisation, conquest or exploitation as is with most of the Western countries in Asia and Africa. India's legacy as one of the founders of the Non-Aligned Movement and its continued ethos even in the present times under the concept of 'Strategic Autonomy' and 'Multi-Alignment' has had diplomatic dividends in the Global South. This is to be seen in the level of trust and faith and goodwill that India generally enjoys in these countries. There is thus a perception that India can potentially be a 'Third Pole' (Mahbubani, 2023).

Considering the level of expectations and optimism about India's rising role in regional security, how has India responded? A normal course would entail a country utilising its power to threaten or exploit the weaker countries, as has been generally the history of modern international relations. However, India has, in continuity of its civilisational ethos, has utilised its position to empower other nations of the Global South. It has, as mentioned earlier, sought to represent the marginalised nations of Asia and Africa at the G20 as also in the UN. This position and the underlying moral position is not be misunderstood as a lack of cognisance over *realpolitik*. But that even as New Delhi is well aware of geopolitical challenges and security threats, it has consciously stived to respond to these challenges without losing its moral

foundations. A study of Indian diplomacy in the past ten years shows that India is proposing an alternative model of security and international relations, wherein 'Danda' is also displayed (Pakistan after Uri, Pathankot and Pulwama; China during Galwan clash) when crucial, but also that military successes have not translated into belligerent tendencies.

New Delhi's two major initiatives in the Indo-Pacific would be Security and Growth for All (SAGAR) and Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative (IPOI). SAGAR is India's security policy aimed at maritime security. This is realised through regular presence of the Indian naval forces, bilateral and multilateral naval exercises, and capacity building of regional countries. India is a resident naval power in the region which has serious traditional security threats in the form of Pakistan and security challenge in the form of China, as also the persistent non-traditional security threats. It is common to make alliances in such circumstances, but India has not. It is because of its policy of strategic autonomy but also because most of the regional countries are also uncomfortable with military alliances. When it comes to the Indian Ocean Region, most of the strategic countries are small island-states. When big fish eats the small fish is the common practice in international politics, India has been an exception where it has respected the policy choices of the small-island states. While no sight is lost on its strategic and security objectives, India has chosen the path of capacity building so that these nations are equipped to face maritime security threats and challenges. Thus, the primary actor in that particular sub-region or in its territory remains that particular country. When nations neglect security of its territory (particularly so in the maritime domain), it can quickly turn into a frontier zone and thereby open for competition. A power vacuum, often a product of inability of small maritime states to enforce its jurisdiction; leads to an extra-regional or a powerful navy filling in, as has been seen in the case of China in the South China Sea as also in the Indian Ocean. By investing in the capacity building by way of offering defence lines of credits or supplying patrol crafts and surveillance aircrafts, India is empowering the regional island-states. It could have had the alternative of establishing maritime hegemony, and compel the island-states to bandwagon or ally, but it has chosen not to do so.

If SAGAR is the national vision, India's collaborative, international

instrument for regional security is through the IPOI. The IPOI is aimed at joint efforts to realise a sustainable and prosperous Indo-Pacific region. Under this, various areas of cooperation are included, that are largely in the non-traditional security realm. These include blue economy, environmental issues and climate change, sustainable fishing, urban planning, oceanic sciences, and trade and connectivity. These transnational issues can only be managed through regional and international cooperation. In order for countries to come together, a sense of common identity or solidarity is essential, which the IPOI envisions by tying it to the Indo-Pacific region. Indian vision of IPOI is based on the principles of openness and inclusivity. Usually, regional security mechanisms are exclusionary but the IPOI is not a closed club. India has also encouraged participation from European nations in this endeavour. Experiences in regionalism show that it is not easy to institutionalise cooperation in geographically huge and/or culturally diverse region. Therefore, the IPOI is a non-treaty based, non-binding initiative, wherein each stakeholder has the choice and can contribute where its strength lie. Thus, IPOI can be imagined as an aggregate of national strengths to shape a stable and prosperous regional order.

During the Covid-19 pandemic while the Western nations were withholding supplies of vaccines and essential drugs to prioritise its citizens at home, India's 'Vaccine Maitri' supplied covid vaccines and humanitarian aid to 101 countries, the majority of which were poorer nations of Indo-Pacific, Africa, Latin America, Western Pacific Islands and the Caribbean. It is to be noted that the supply and aid continued even as India was battling a severe second wave. While it was natural and understandable for a country to safeguard its own population first, the Indian exception evinces that its civilisational morality does not permit it to secure itself at the cost of suffering of others during a humanitarian crisis as the Covid-19 pandemic. The Bhartiya culture that accords sacrifice as the highest virtue ('Daan'), the culture where even the poorest of hosts share their meagre bread with guests, not disrupting aid and vaccines was a natural policy choice.

The Western Pacific Island region has gained strategic significance following the salience of the Pacific Ocean, but largely due to China's

growing footprint and influence in the region. The AUKUS treaty, much to the discomfort of the island-states in the Western Pacific; is the most significant security mechanism in this region. US-China contestation is unfolding in this region. As small island-states so remotely located, the primary security concern of these countries is climate change and development. But great powers tend to view their utility only in military terms, and often neglect their aspirations and needs. India has been engaging with these island-states actively since 2014. At the Forum for India-Pacific Island Cooperation (FIPIC) meeting in Jaipur in 2015, the prime minister spoke of partnering with regional states in their quest for inclusive growth and sustained economic development. India has also provided HADR assistance to Fiji, Toga and Vanuatu. The prime minister also mentioned about capacity building in HADR and provision of technical assistance for early warning systems(Pandey, 2018). Thus, the Indian policy is about understanding the needs of the host country and responding, rather than push down its own vision upon them.

During the evacuation from Yemen, Ukraine and Libya, India's capacities and capabilities were demonstrated to the world. Even during these operations, India did not restrict these capacities to itself, but also evacuated foreign nationals. During evacuation in Afghanistan after US's withdrawal, India also carried back its K9 forces, (military canine force) a sharp distinction from the retreating American forces that left back its K9s locked in cages to their fate.

## CONCLUSION

Critics view the civilisational state as illiberal, exclusionary and at odds with modern state. While the epistemologies can be debated, as also as to who is the best judge on these concepts, it is hereby argued that painting all claims of civilisational states with one stroke lacks intellectual rigor. The Indian experience denotes a unique picture, and in fact is essentially in tune with modern conceptions of liberalism, although such ethos was intrinsic to the Indian civilisation all along. Even if one argues that the Indian statecraft is pursuing its national interest like any other state, and one can hardly disagree, yet, what constitutes the Indian national interests (which is so often global in

its essence) and the means to achieve those is what sets the Indian civilisation apart. The philosophical maturity of understanding and accepting diversity in all its forms and co-existing harmoniously, is a trait that is carried over across centuries is still exhibited in present times.

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# DECONSTRUCTING INDIA'S SOFT POWER TRAJECTORY IN SOUTH ASIA: MAPPING THE CASE OF BOLLYWOOD

*Dr. Abhishek Choudhary<sup>1</sup>, Aiman Urooj<sup>2</sup> and Dr. Avantika Singh<sup>3</sup>*

## ABSTRACT:

*Through its creative engagement with representation, the 'aesthetic approach' in International Relations (IR) not only promotes political discourse but also awakens a profound awareness of our world's realities in an innovative and far-reaching way. This paper 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. The paper reflects the broader geo-cultural concept of India beyond its mere 'territorialized' idea, which tended to intensify particularly after globalization. Theoretically, enfolding a constructivist approach in IR, which underscores the social construction of reality and the significance of ideas, beliefs, and identities in contouring international relations, it analyzes two Bollywood movies: "Pardes" and "Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge". It explores how these cinematic productions lay symbolic representation, retention of cultural practices, and values that reflect the strategic autonomy of India while preserving diplomatic ties globally. Methodologically, by engaging with themes of tradition, modernity, and diaspora, the paper uses discourse analysis to examine how Bollywood has influenced the maneuvering of India's soft power in its foreign policy discourse by fostering unity and familiarity among audiences.*

**Keywords: South Asia, Bollywood, territorialized, soft power, Post-colonial, Discourse, Culture**

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- 1 Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Delhi,  
Email - achoudhary@polscience.du.ac.in
  - 2 PhD Scholar, Department of Political Science, University of Delhi,  
Email - aimanurooj98.au@gmail.com
  - 3 Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Delhi,  
Email - asingh@polscience.du.ac.in

## INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, India has harnessed its cultural heritage, democratic values, and diplomatic initiatives to wield influence in South Asia. India's rich history, branded by civilization, spirituality, and diversity, echoes with its neighbours (Kumar, 2017). India fosters regional ties and glorifies peace through diplomacy, trade, education, and cultural exchange (Mukherjee, 2019). This soft power is manifested in cultural exports, educational opportunities, and democratic ideals, cultivating kinship and solidarity among South Asian countries (Tharoor, 2012; Wagner, 2010).

Embodying aesthetic approaches in International Relations (IR) has added a fine understanding of global politics. This paper explores aesthetics, performativity, and soft power projection, emphasizing Bollywood's role in shaping India's geopolitical influence in South Asia and beyond. The geo-cultural concept of India surpasses its territorial limitations, especially post-globalization, with increased cultural exchange directed towards a more interconnected world. Aesthetic elements like symbolism, imagery, and performance evoke emotions, create shared understandings, and influence perceptions globally. Bollywood - as India's "dream factory" - plays a crucial role in projecting India's soft power (Singh & Sarwal, 2017). Bollywood has a profound influence on Indian society and it plays an important role in constructing narratives of nationhood, romance, and social change (Juluri, 2013).

Soft power implies a country's ability to impact others by cultural appeal instead of coercion (Nye, 2004). Bollywood eloquently provides India's soft power strategy by celebrating Indian values, culture and lifestyles, creating an appreciable image of India that nurtures goodwill (Pandey, 2012). Themes of tradition, modernity, and diaspora in Bollywood movies strategically contour foreign policy discourses (Tharoor, 2009). This paper uses a constructivist approach to IR to assess how *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (DDLJ henceforth) and *Pardes* construct India's national identity globally.

Constructivism, featuring the social construction of reality, is well-

defined for evaluating cultural artefacts creating political and social identities. Notwithstanding the foregoing discussions about quantitative methods, proving a case with endless facts & data, the paper uses discourse analysis to inspect themes and narratives in Bollywood films (Gokulsingh & Dissanayake 2004). Discourse analysis centres around language, symbolism, and representation by understanding how cultural texts construct and impart meanings.

Aesthetics analyzes taste and beauty, provoking affective sensibilities. This interdisciplinary approach has led to academic exposure of international politics through literary works, visual art, music, cinema and so on. Ronald Bleiker talks about aesthetics in rethinking global political issues as “an aesthetic approach... assumes that there is always a gap between a form of representation and what is represented therewith” (Bleiker, 2001). Films, as aesthetic emotions, unhide political phenomena more appropriately than traditional means, by conveying complicated political ideas in a reachable and engaging way.

Questioning the field’s epistemological processes, the stress on aesthetics in IR evolved into two waves. The first wave, in the 1980s, witnessed postmodernism redefining IR’s theoretical frameworks, stressing art and literature (Bleiker, 2001). The recent second wave depends on cinema, theatre, music, and visual arts, showcasing the increasing importance of such non-verbal means. In continuation of this aesthetic turn, the paper grapples with the retention of cultural practices and symbolic representation in *Pardes* and *DDLJ* constructing a narrative of India’s cultural identity.

This paper accepts the unavoidable difference between representation and the represented, explaining how characters, dialogues and visual styles in films influence audiences’ perceptions, identities and social roles at the global level. The performativity of cultural values in these films showcases the soft power of India, highlighting the idea of India as a cultural carrier cutting across geographical boundaries.

## DE-TERRITORIALIZING INDIA'S IMAGE AS A GEO-CULTURAL POWER THROUGH BOLLYWOOD

Globalization involves the increased interconnectedness and interdependence of global markets significantly influencing the projection of India's culture globally (Ghosh, 2011). Bollywood serves as a powerful medium for shaping perceptions about Indian values, culture, and lifestyle worldwide (Ganti, 2012). With the onset of globalization, Bollywood has emerged to integrate differing narratives and cultural dynamics corresponding to global trends.

The impact has simplified a transition from a territorialized idea of India to a deep geo-cultural one (Gupta, 2019). Conventionally, Bollywood narratives were fixed to India's cultural and physical geography, reflecting local socio-economic customs and beliefs. However, globalization has expanded Bollywood's depiction of India, as not merely a geographical being but as a cultural idea beyond national borders (Ganti, 2012). Bollywood's analysis of the Indian diaspora's experiences reflects the transition to cultural hybridity and transnationalism (Mishra, 2002).

The industry's competence to stir traditional Indian narratives with global themes has convened global recognition, enhancing India's visibility globally (Mehta, 2001). Through its various genres, storytelling, and thematic inquiry, Bollywood portrays India as a developed and modern nation accommodating global discourses (Viridi, 2003). The Indian Media and Entertainment sector, as per the FICCI-EY Report 2023, observed cordial growth increasing by INR 348 billion to reach INR 2.1 trillion (FICCI-KPMG, 2015). This significant hike out-shined pre-pandemic 2019 levels by 10%, investigating the sector's exceptional resilience and accommodating the challenges backed by the COVID-19 pandemic (EY Report, 2023).

*DDLJ* and *Pardes* demonstrate this fusion of traditional Indian beliefs with Westernized lifestyles, serving a wide audience within India and globally. The idea of 'Indianness' excels in geographical borders, fostering a sense of belonging among the Indian diaspora, regardless of their location. This

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reaffirms India's position as a cultural ideal in the 21st century (Kaur & Sinha, 2005).

## **BOLLYWOOD AND INDIA'S SOFT POWER**

Introduced by Joseph Nye, soft power is about using non-coercive means to influence others, such as cultural beliefs and diplomacy in place of military and economic coercion (Nye, 1990). Soft power refers to correlating traditional hard power, embodying both passive elements, like cultural and historical features, and effective strategies encompassing public diplomacy and cultural exchange (Nye, 1990, 2004). Culture plays a central role in mending power dynamics and enhancing intercultural understanding (Mazrui, 1990). India, having a rich civilizational heritage and cultural variances, shows a model of soft power grounded in cultural capital. India's economic growth over the past two decades has supported its ability to secure soft power initiatives. Historically, India's soft power has been aimed towards Asia, resulting in strong cultural and social ties (Mankekar, 2015).

Bollywood's history has evolved over the centuries from silent films to a global phenomenon. Early films like Dadasaheb Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) originated from Indian mythology and moved towards advancing national identity. The transformation to sound in the late 1920s brought harmonized sound and musical sequences, founding Bollywood's unique narrative style. The golden age of the late 1940s to 1960s brought iconic filmmakers and socially cognizant films. The 1970s and 1980s saw the mushrooming up of the formula film genre, with artists like Amitabh Bachchan as cultural icons.

Economic liberalization in the 1990s resulted in improved production of films accommodating to the diaspora (Ganti, 2012). In the realm of post-colonial discourse, Bollywood drove the complications of identity and nationhood (Huggan, 2001). The legacy of British colonialism in India impacted governance systems and cultural portrayal (Desai, 2004). Bollywood provides a demanding site for regulating post-colonial identities and examining problems of history and cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994; Bill,

Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2007). According to the latest report by EY, India's Media and Entertainment Industry is forecasted to hit US\$ 29.2 billion and US\$ 35.4 billion by 2025. India's Advertising revenue is expected to cross US\$ 5.42 billion by 2024. Compared to the media and entertainment sector, the share of traditional media sources like television, print, and radio was 58% in 2022 (EY Report, 2023). These statistics reflect the strength of India's soft power arsenal in the armoury of India's foreign policy.

## **CONSTRUCTING IDEA OF INDIA IMPACTING INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY**

The constructivist approach in International Relations (IR) underlines the social construction of reality, suggesting that IR are shaped by ideas, beliefs, and identities, not only by economic resources and military power. Constructivist scholars investigate how foreign policy discourses and measures frame national identities. They vary from rationalist, realist, and liberal approaches which consider foreign policy interests as pre-given and changeless. Rather, it believes in the significance of foreign policy discourses and practices of representation, as they are recreated in public and private accounts and actions (Muppidi, 1999).

This approach is segmented into conventional and critical constructivism. Conventional Constructivists by Alexander Wendt emphasizes how state narratives and interests are built by social interactions and how these identities result in specific foreign policy behaviour. For instance, a state's identity as a peaceful nation can help in seeking diplomatic solutions over military interventions (Hopf, 1998). Critical constructivism further questions how identities and truths are created and familiarized by confronting the myths (Hopf, 1998). The paper juxtaposes this approach along with Discourse analysis to reveal how language and narratives affect some foreign policy actions while excluding others.

It is pertinent to look at diverse theoretical traditions that take culture into account. Hans Morgenthau gives notable insight into the interconnection between cultural context and foreign policy. Morgenthau believed that "the

kind of interest determining political action in a particular period of history depends upon the political and cultural context within which foreign policy is formulated” (Morgenthau, 1985). This perception reflects the value of cultural and political aspects in framing foreign policy aims and behaviour. Morgenthau’s view allies with Bollywood’s role in India’s foreign policy by depicting the narratives set in the socio-cultural context of India (Weldes, 1999). The latest ‘practice turn’ in constructivist research analyzes foreign policy practices such as the creation of security communities such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as “socially meaningful patterns of action, which... reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world” (Chacko, 2018). Thus, this aptly fulfils the choice of constructivism as an approach to tackle local practices in sustaining foreign policy discourses and practices.

The economic reforms in the 1990s and early 2000s positioned India to form goodwill that could captivate foreign direct investment (FDI) and international collaborations upon being considered a culturally rich partner, trusted by other nations (World Economic Forum, 2012). Soft power played an important role in India’s foreign policy strategy. *DDLJ* and *Pardes* played an important role in showcasing Indian cultural values in a sound way with Indian diaspora and domestic audiences internationally. *DDLJ*, focusing on family, traditions, and love, became an iconic characterization of Indian culture worldwide, especially among the Indian diaspora. Similarly, *Pardes* highlighted the difference between Indian and Western values by not degrading either and nurturing other aspects of foreign policy. This reflection of Indian culture in these films reassured globally that India’s modernization cannot undermine its cultural roots. This also helped in sustaining strategic autonomy, as India engaged globally on its terms, ensuring its economic progress.

## **RETENTION OF CULTURAL PRACTICES AND INDIA’S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY**

Retention holds the conservation and resonance of foreign policy discourses and practices within the identities of actors, institutional frameworks, dominant visions, and state activities. As explained in Jessop’s analysis,

retention includes the integration of chosen cultural practices into balanced actions that reinforce state existence and power (Jessop, 2011). Strategic autonomy is defined as the State's ability to be involved Internationally while preserving its cultural identity and sovereignty.

When *Pardes* (1997) and *DDLJ* (1995) were released, India was transforming to economic liberalization and globalization, moving from a reserved economy to market-oriented principles. This formation required India to portray itself as a developed and advancing nation while retaining its cultural sovereignty. The representation of the Indian diaspora in *Pardes* and *DDLJ* resonates with audiences globally with major Indian populations in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom and neighbours in South Asia . This cultural resonance can lead to profound strategic partnerships and healthy cultural connections while promoting regional stability.

By using discourse analysis, the paper identifies Bollywood's role in contributing to the construction and emergence of India's cultural identity. The paper seeks an answer to this epistemological inquiry of how these films frame perceptions of India, both domestically and internationally. Discourse analysis, grounded in linguistic and sociological traditions, is selected as a qualitative research method to inquire into the interrelation between language, texts, and communicative actions within their social and cultural milieu. Discourses frames reality by constructing and fixing interpretations to the material world, by naturalizing these representations and identities to emerge as 'truth'. They reject the demarcation of knowledge from the social ground, sighting knowledge as constitutive of reality (Dunn & Neumann, 2017).

The use of discourse analysis in studying Bollywood films is justified for several reasons. Firstly, Bollywood films are complex cultural artefacts consisting of visual, auditory, and perspective to form national narratives and social beliefs. Secondly, Discourse analysis gives a comprehensive structure for evaluating these texts and revealing the meaning within dialogues, visuals, and symbols. Lastly, Bollywood films have an international resonance, affecting audiences beyond India. By assessing them, the paper aims to uncover the ways in which these films project an idealized vision of India that resonates worldwide.

Referring to Marx's and Foucault's work, Bob Jessop (2011) defined the development of three key stages in power relations in communities: variation, selection, and retention. Variation refers to modifications in foreign policy discourses and practices, selection includes the adoption of some discourses and practices over others to illustrate acts and legitimize actions, and retention suggests institutionalizing these discourses and practices, accommodating them into firm policies of state power (Chacko, 2016).

The paper focuses on the retention component by highlighting the portrayal of family, tradition, and modernity in these films, institutionalising cultural discourses that sustain India's cultural identity and soft power. This retention of cultural narratives into substantial strategic policies of the State nurtures India's Image as a culturally rich and influential modern State.

### **ASSESSING THE THEMES OF TRADITION, MODERNITY, AND DIASPORA THROUGH AESTHETICS IN BOLLYWOOD**

Bollywood is just not about entertainment. It also shapes the narrative for the state related to modernity, nationhood, and development (Ganti 2004; Dwyer, 2014). Bollywood gained prominence in the post-liberalization era with the opening up of the market economy with the shooting up of global consumption of these films. The Indian diasporic community holds a large chunk of viewership for Bollywood, with presentations being culturally appealing (Mishra, 2002; Pugsley & Khorana, 2011). The Indian diaspora connects to themes like family, altruism, and the depiction of a mix of tradition and modernity (Appadurai, 1996). Such themes are very well reflected in *DDLJ* and *Pardes* and form a cultural continuity (Roy, 2012).

Bollywood plays a crucial role in embedding cultural elements into world consciousness, particularly through perceptions, and the perennial process of institutionalization, reception, and production (Thomas, 1995; Bhattacharya and Pandharipande, 2010). The paper stresses the analysis of identity formation by relating to sociological research and values, moving across the conceptualization of identity as requiring the negative identification of an 'Other'.

*Pardes*, directed by Subhash Ghai, delves into narratives of cultural identity, diasporic communities, and the tussle between traditional and modern. The story starts with the character Arjun in the film struggling against dual cultural identities and reconnecting with one's cultural traditions amidst the assimilation pressure of being in the USA.

On the other hand, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (DDLJ)* by Aditya Chopra, is a timeless love story that shows a tussle between the fast and modern life in London with the traditional values of rural Punjab. The movie is about the love story of *Raj* and *Simran*. They fell in love with each other during a trip to Europe and found it difficult to get consent from the traditional and orthodox family of *Simran*. Dialogues in *DDLJ* reflect the cultural ethos and vernacular enunciations depict strong Indian thinking, values, and mindset. For instance, the willingness of *Simran's* father to return to India and his adamance for arranged marriage reflect the tussle between traditional Indian values and modernity. The thrust on *Samskar* (cultural ethos) and *Parampara* (customs) reflects the significance of cultural continuity.

To explore more about employing the constructivist approach, this paper caves into how these cinematic formations use emblematic portrayals and showcase cultural ethos and values. By providing a theoretical framework the approach helps to comprehend how does Bollywood films impact the foreign policy and strategic autonomy of India (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 1999).

Figure 1, shows two scenes, from *DDLJ*, a strong inference can be drawn from the pictures about the rich use of symbols that resonate with the culture and emotions of the audiences from India and the diaspora. In the first scene, *Raj* is seeking the permission of *Simran's* father for their marriage in *DDLJ*. This scene signifies cultural sovereignty as it depicts the significance of consent from the family and attachment to traditional ethos in Indian families. The use of colourful attire, music and traditional rituals in *Pardes* as shown in the wedding scene and the train scene in the climax of *DDLJ* depicts a tussle between the values of tradition and modernity. However, both films do highlight the strong message that there is a need to harmonize traditions with modernity.

Figure 2 shows the dialogue between a father and a daughter and the textual evidence, such as "*Ja Simran, jee le apni zindagi*" (Go, *Simran*, live your life), communicates the importance of individual agency and cultural pride, consequently encapsulating India's cultural sovereignty by arguing for personal happiness and harmonizing it with traditional values. This signifies the flexibility and freedom reflected in Indian traditions.



**Fig. 1: Scenes from the movie *DDLJ***

Source: Scroll.in (<https://scroll.in/article/692288/how-ddlj-ruined-my-generation>)



**Fig. 2: An iconic scene from the movie *DDLJ***

Source: <https://sobodiaries.wordpress.com/2016/10/20/jaa-simran-jaa-jee-le-apni-zindagi-ddlj/>

Visual arts carve modern subjectivity by enabling a vantage point that consolidates seeing and being seen in particular contexts. They produce

interdisciplinary observations of how images and surveillance practices interlace to govern daily life, backed by institutional spaces that nurture these ideas. This provides different ways of seeing, living, and being in the world, strengthening the significance of visual arts in representing and interpreting our world realities (Lisle, 2017). In *DDLJ*, one of the most significant reflections is the belief in “homeland” or *desh*. Despite being away from India, the characters depict a strong cultural and emotional belongingness to their motherland. This is visible in the way the willingness of *Simran's* father to return to India and follow the traditional customs and practices proves to be a strong reflection of cultural continuity and pride. By examining the dialogues and visuals of these films, the paper analyses how Bollywood sails through the intricacies and peculiarities of globalization while juxtaposing it with India's resilient and vibrant culture.



2.1. Baldev and the pigeons in London.



2.2. Baldev remembers his home in Punjab.

**Fig. 3: In the opening scenes from *DDLJ*, Baldev feeds the pigeons in London and remembers his home in Punjab respectively**

Source: Mankekar, P. (2015) *Unsettling India: Affect, Temporality, Transnationality*

The optics in *DDLJ* prove to be significant in holding cultural meanings. The scenic murals of Punjab showcase India's cultural sovereignty, raising nostalgia for the pastoral beauty of rural India. The mustard greenery of Punjab depicts a picturesque of the heartland of India against the fast cosmopolitan life of Europe. The climax of the film is filled with symbolic representation of traditional rituals and a triumph of love that respects tradition.

*Pardes* also symbolizes the tussle between traditions and modernity. The character Ganga contrasts with Rajiv as being a symbol of traditional Indian values whereas the latter is western in thought and style. The film depicts the USA as a land of ambitions but morally corrupt, against the idealized portrayal of India as a land of cultural values and moral ethos. Arjun, the third character, is portrayed as a bridge between these two vast lands, symbolizing the optimism of harmonizing traditional ethos with modernity.

### **Performativity as a tool to institutionalize India's soft Power**

According to John Austin, performativity can be described as follows:

“[H]ow to Do Things with Words, it cannot be said to be either true or false, as a constative utterance might be. In this sense performativity can be said to investigate the pragmatics of language” (Austin, 1962).

In films and plays, performativity is reflected in the ways that cultural art, traditions, and narratives depict what is real and actively form and build societal realities (Hall, 1997). Bollywood plays an important role in building and fostering national identity (Chakravarty, 1993). Film directors and Central Board of Film Certification members ensure diligent, aesthetically entertaining, and culturally accommodative content. This helps create a marvel that is well reflective of the national consciousness, social constructs, and societal practices (Prasad, 1998).

Butler (1990) argues that gender is performative, constructed by repeated acts and societal norms rather than being an inherent identity. These performances continuously reshape and redefine the concept of gender, challenging conventional notions of fixed identity roles. The performativity of traditions and the picturization of the female persona within cultural heritage in these movies reassert the cultural sovereignty of India. Bollywood in this way carries forward the idea of India abroad, contributing to a broader geo-cultural identity and acting as a cultural ambassador of India (Gopinath, 1998). *Lajjo*, the mother of the female protagonist, blesses *Raj* and *Simran* and agrees

to their eloping against patriarchy. This is indicative of female agency in the movie:

*"My daughter will not give up her love and sacrifice her happiness. Raj, you will bring great happiness to my daughter. My blessings are with you. Take her out of there. Nobody here understands your love. Now take her. I will handle everything. My son, I beg you!"*

This nature of confrontation, though framed in the form of sacrifice and blessing, reflects a criticism against the oppressive patriarchal values and a wish for her daughter's happiness beyond these constraints. Proficiency in the parents' language, respecting elders, love for Indian food, and celebrating religiosity are some of the cultural requisites for Indian identity that *Raj* and *Simran* satisfy in *DDLJ*. These traits are well reflected in *Raj* and *Simran* depicting their connection with Indianness despite their upbringing in a foreign land. This is reflected in *Raj's* proclamation,

*"I am not eloping. It's not my intention to steal you. Though I was born in England, I am an Indian. I have come here to make you my bride. I will take you with me from here only when your father gives his consent (your hand)".*

The assertion also reflects *Raj's* commitment to Indian traditions and respect for *Simran's* parents' consent against personal desires.

However, the movie also endorses the agency and defiance of its female characters within these cultural limits. To avoid breaking her fast with Kuljeet during the '*karva chauth*' celebration, *Simran* pretends a swoon and have water from *Raj*, which is an example of what Shakuntala Banaji describes as an "ephemeral agency" (Banaji, 2006). Though a subtle act, but signifies her right to choice and love confined within the borders of traditions.

## LYRICS AND SYMBOLISM IN FILMS

"*Ghar Aaja Pardesi*" from *DDLJ* and "*I Love My India*" from *Pardes* are songs that explicitly depict Indian identity, asserting emotional bonds with the motherland and rejoicing the cultural heritage.

### **"Ghar Aaja Pardesi" from DDLJ**

*"Is gaon ki anpadh mitti, Padh nahin sakti teri chitthi, Yeh mitti tu aakar chume to, Is dharti ka dil jhume"* (Bollywoodsongs143, 2024).

(The illiterate soil of this village cannot read your letter, if you come and kiss this soil, the heart of this earth will dance in delight.)

The above-mentioned lines from the song induce a connection between the land and the citizens, emphasizing the emotional connection between the individual and their homeland. The soil signifies the inherent connection between nature and customs in India. Reminding the diasporic community of their roots with the motherland the picturisation of the song is very appealing.

*"Maana tere hain kuch sapne par, Hum to hain tere apne, Bhulnewale humko, Teri yaad sataaye re"*

(I agree that you have some dreams, we are yours, the ones who forget us, their memories trouble us.)

These lines resemble the aspirations of the diasporic community while connecting to their roots, family relations, and cultural bonds. The word "*apne*" (your own) in the song signifies the everlasting nature of these bonds, fostering the idea that despite being far away from the motherland the connection to one's origins remains the strongest.

*"Panghat pe aai matiyare, Chham chham payal ki jhankaren, Kheton mein lehrai sarson, Kal parson mein beete barson"*

(The dust has come on Panghat, the chimes of anklets are sounding, mustard is fluttering in the fields, and years pass like yesterday.)



**Fig. 4: Picturization of a song from *DDLJ***

Source: YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/@bollywoodsongs143>)

This picturization depicts the everlasting beauty of Indian villages, invoking the memories of traditional rural life. The bright mustard crop and the sound of anklets depict the cultural continuity, laying importance on India's rich rural heritage.

*"Ghar aaja pardesi, Tera des bulaye re"*  
(Come home traveller, your country calls you)

The mentioned lines are a direct call to the diasporic community, urging them to come back to their country, their motherland. It appeals to their cultural connection and the welcoming nature of their motherland. The objective is to induce a sense of national unity and belongingness.

***"I Love My India" from "Pardes"*****Fig. 5: Picturization of a song from *Pardes***

Source: YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/@bollywoodsongs143>)

*"London dekha, Paris dekha, aur dekha Japan, Michael dekha, Elvis dekha, sab dekha meri jaan, Saare jag mein kahin nahi hai Doosra Hindustaan"*

*(Seen London, seen Paris, and seen Japan, seen Michael, seen Elvis, seen everything, my dear, there is no other country like India anywhere in the whole world)*

These lines signify the unique and unparalleled stature of India among the nations with rich cultures. The comparison elevates and highlights distinctive values of Indian culture, fostering pride among the Indians both within and outside the country.

*"Ye duniya ek dulhan, Dulhan ke maathe ki bindiya, Yeh mera India, yeh mera India"*

*(This world is a bride, the dot on the bride's forehead is my India.)*

Symbolizing India's central and crucial stature at the global level the 'world' in the above lines is likened to the bride. The ornament 'bindi' wearable on the forehead of the bride is likened to India. The bindi on the forehead of the bride resembles the carrier of Indian identity at the world stage fostering a

sense of pride and affection towards the country.

*"Peehu, peehu bole papihaa, koyal kuhu kuhu gaaye, Hanste rote humne jeevan ke sab geet banaaye"*

*(Pihu, Pihu said Papiha, the cuckoo sang kuhu kuhu, we made all the songs of life while laughing and crying)*

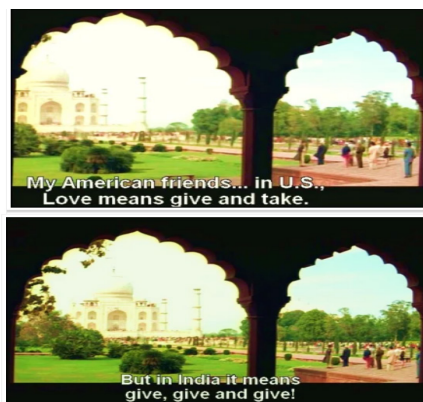
These lines show the connection between the nature and emotions of the people in India, rejoicing in the richness of the Indian way of living. The singing of cuckoo signifies nature's harmony, depicting the richness of culture and emotional vividness of Indian society.

*"Yeh saare duniya apne apne geeton ko gaaye, Geet voh gao jisse is mitti ki khushboo aaye"*

*(Let this entire world sing its own songs, sing those songs which make this soil smell good)*

The above lines of the song are an appeal to the people to celebrate their cultural roots and belongingness. It suggests despite diverse songs on diverse situations, the songs that appeal to the essence of one's motherland are of significance, reasserting cultural pride and identity.

### *Dialogues from "Pardes"*



**Fig. 6: Dialogues from *Pardes* asserting India's distinctiveness**

*Source: Bollywood Food Club*

*"Yahan ya toh bahut sannata hai, ya phir bahut shor ... aadmi akela hai, ya phir mela hai"*

*(Here either there is a lot of silence, or there is a lot of noise... the man is alone, or in a crowd)*

The dialogue mentioned above goes against the lifestyle in the US as compared to India. It depicts the loneliness and limited social life in the US, in comparison to the communitarian and cheerful societal way of living in India. It highlights the significance of social interactions and society in the Indian way of life, against the alienation observed in individualistic societies such as the US (Sitaji, 2011).

### ***Symbolism of Ganga in "Pardes"***

In *Pardes*, Mahima Chaudhary plays the role of *Ganga*. She is the epitome of Indian culture, values and traditions. Her name comes from the sacred Ganges River (*Ganga*) which is the symbol of purity, spirituality, and continuity. The character is named *Ganga* to assert her identity as connected to Indian traditions, and customs. The river *Ganga* represents perennial flow without obstruction depicting the unchanging and unchallengeable legacy of Indian customs despite the assimilative pressures of Western society.

*Ganga* wears Indian jewellery, *bindi*, and *maang tikka* fostering the Indian cultural identity abroad. The attire signifies the strength of Indian culture among the diaspora where, despite being on a foreign land, the traditions and customs prevail.



**Fig. 7: Ganga as the female protagonist in *Pardes* and as a metaphor for purity**

*Source: Bollywood Food Club and Rediff.com*

Upon arrival to the US, after she gets engaged to *Rajiv*, *Ganga* is asked to sing at a party. The song she sung was "*Jahan Piya Wahan Main*". The song depicts her love for her motherland. The song highlighted her emotional belongingness to India. It shows her emotional journey after leaving her father's home and going to a new home after marriage. She remembers her father's home and its courtyard where she had childhood memories. She expresses mixed emotions and nostalgia. She tries to reconcile with her cultural identity and fate being far away from her homeland. However, she asserts that she will be happy with her beloved, wherever he may be. The customary imagery of attachments and nostalgia signifies the movie's reflection on altruism, sacrifice, and a struggle to secure one's own cultural identity amidst change.

### **IMPACT OF BOLLYWOOD ON THE AUDIENCES OF SOUTH ASIA: DOMINANCE WITHOUT COERCION**

The impact of Bollywood stretches substantially over South Asia, influencing the neighbourhood countries. This comprehensive appeal is carried by common cultural and linguistic heritage, reflecting Bollywood as a significant cultural strength in these areas (Ahmed, 2014). Bollywood usually carries popularity surpassing local industries, influencing regional cultural politics and attitude towards India (Punathambekar, 2013). For Bhabha (1994), culture is a place of negotiation and hybridity, where meanings are continuously recreated by resonance and adaptation. This view highlights that cultural identity is not fixed but dynamically framed by interactions and power across different circumstances (Bhabha, 1994).

Bollywood has been immensely popular throughout Pakistan even with the frequent bans and restrictions (Dudrah, 2012). Bollywood proves to be a cultural bridge having a common language and culture across the boundaries. *DDLJ* and *Pardes* have found significant viewership in Pakistan, showcasing the themes of altruism, customs, and the motherland connection of the Indian diaspora (Thussu, 2007, 2012). They resonate with the emotions of the audience of Pakistan. Bollywood films play a significant role in building peace and understanding between the nations (Raja, 2013; Thussu, 2012).

Bangladesh has a large audience who consume a lot of Hindi films and music due to shared culture and identity. *DDLJ* and *Pardes* portrayed familial unity and bonding signifying altruism. The local culture is largely influenced by the fashion, dance and stars of Bollywood. This cultural penetration of familial respect and social harmony in the audience of Bangladesh boosts India's soft power strategy, forming cultural bonding and affinity. Bollywood's international success is rooted in its fusion of traditional Indian features with global cinematic practices, results pleasing to diverse audiences (Bhattacharya and Pandharipande, 2010).

Local cinema in Nepal is also dominated by Bollywood films. Having a shared culture of Roti and Beti, Bollywood's portrayal of Indian tradition finds a welcoming viewership, impacting sociocultural customs. The popularity of *DDLJ* and *Pardes*, which lays thrust upon traditional ethos and familial ties, boosts India's cultural and diplomatic influence in Nepal including the customs and lifestyle (Ganti, 2004).

Sri Lanka is also significantly impacted by Bollywood films being a staple in cinemas and music and dance indispensable to local celebrations. The portrayal of Indian cultural magnificence and traditional values in *DDLJ* and *Pardes* appeals to Sri Lankans, cherishing a sense of common cultural tradition and boosting India's cultural influence in the region.

Bilateral relations are significantly impacted by collaborations and exchanges in cultural events like films, dance and music. The active engagement of Bollywood celebrities and the nomination of films in international festivals fosters diplomatic relations (Athique, 2011). The rich use of music, dance, and visuals depicting universally acceptable themes like Indian customs, traditions, and festivals in *Pardes* and *DDLJ* have proven to be a carrier of Bollywood's image as a cultural ambassador of India (Kumar, 2023).

## **CONCLUSION: THEORIZING INDIA'S SOFT POWER APPROACH VIA THE CULTURAL REACH OF BOLLYWOOD**

Performative acts, symbolic names, and evocative lyrics used in Bollywood perform an important role in showcasing and reflecting the cultural

strength of India abroad. It also reassures the cultural sovereignty of India and signifies continuity and relevance among the diaspora and global audiences (Bose, 2016). The main thrust of this paper revolves around the importance of films in reflecting and shaping political values to project India's cultural image globally.

Movies like *Pardes* and *DDLJ* reflect the use of symbolic representation to project India's cultural sovereignty by engaging with the themes of tradition, modernity, and diaspora. Though showcasing the retention of cultural values, traditions, customs and practices, Bollywood acts as the cultural ambassador of India. Constructivist foundation, methods, and ideas are important in illustrating the alternative building of India's engagements and its skill to realize its foreign policy objective as its multinational interaction rises and domestic political strife magnifies.

The significance of performativity and aesthetics in International Relations (IR) lies in their strength to contribute valuable knowledge to the cultural amplitudes of world politics. Analyzing the disparity between representation and the represented helps in locating the political within this space, contributing to an affluent awareness of international politics. This aesthetic methodology objects to older ways of portrayals, supporting a broader interaction with the cultural narratives of political strategies. By asserting an aesthetic approach to one's study of world politics, one gets a broader understanding of the cultural underpinnings, highlighting the importance of multidisciplinary intelligentsia in sailing through the voyage of international politics.

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