

## **India's Soft Power Diplomacy in Southeast Asia: A Study of Tourism Engagement and Strategic Connectivity**

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### **Abstract:**

This article examines India's Soft Power diplomacy towards the region of Southeast Asia (SEA). India has historically relied on its non-aligned foreign policy, dynamic democracy and rich culture as the cornerstones of its soft power. India views SEA as a crucial location from which it receives its soft power, which is derived from a common culture that has been developed over more than two thousand years. This paper investigates the ways in which these cultures prepared the ground for India's growing influence in the region of SEA through tourism engagement. India's tourism engagement emerges as a critical tool for increasing India's influence in SEA. Tourism enhances confidence in India and its connection with ASEAN, and both parties are taking steps to grow the tourism industry. This paper also highlights the importance of connectivity projects and infrastructural development. The foundation for the sustainable growth of a nation's tourism industry is its infrastructure, a reason why India is constantly working to improve this area. India is organising events and marketing campaigns to ensure that more tourists are drawn from the SEA region. Although India has impacted ASEAN nations for the past two millennia, the government is currently taking steps to improve ties between the two regions. This study implements a qualitative research approach, incorporating secondary data analysis, content analysis and case studies to investigate India's tourism engagement and strategic connectivity.

**Keywords:** Culture, India, Infrastructural Development, Soft Power, Southeast Asia, Strategic Connectivity, Tourism Engagement

### **Introduction:**

In a general sense, diplomacy refers to the peaceful management of human affairs through negotiation and persuasive methods. In a specific sense, diplomacy is regarded as one of the fundamental mechanisms that define the international system and the system of sovereign states through negotiations and persuasive methods. It is also called the 'Westphalian system'

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in honour of the 'Peace of Westphalia', which was signed in 1648 (Lee & Hocking, 2011). The initial negotiations occurred in the Fertile Crescent, where envoys from the Egyptian court communicated with other Near Eastern kings. The foundation of modern diplomacy can be traced back to the 'Peace of Westphalia,' which was signed in 1648 CE. This agreement effectively concluded the 'Thirty Years' War' and established the principle of state sovereignty, ensuring the independence of each state involved. Since that time, the notion of diplomacy has evolved to encompass not only formal discussions among embassies, consulates, and professional diplomats but also informal communications among a diverse array of foreign representatives. Cultural activities and tourism are indeed integral components of the comprehensive definitions of diplomacy that are utilised in contemporary discourse (Baranowski et al., 2019).

Joseph S. Nye introduced the concept of "soft power" in the latter part of the 20th century to describe an evolving dimension of international relations that transcends the traditional framework of "hard power," which includes economic and military dominance. Soft power is defined as "the ability to make someone do something without a gun or an army." Nye posits that nations can effect change through 'persuasion and attraction' rather than coercive measures, thereby reshaping perceptions and promoting a positive global image. He further contends that for a country to effectively project soft power, it must articulate its values persuasively and cultivate public support for these ideals, in addition to sustaining a commendable public reputation (Srivastava, 2025). India's cultural influence in Southeast Asia extends back several centuries, with the dissemination of Hinduism and Buddhism playing a pivotal role in shaping the region's art, architecture, language, and social norms. The cultural connections forged during ancient times continue to reverberate in contemporary Southeast Asia, establishing a solid foundation for India's soft power within the region.

Since ancient times, India has enjoyed very good relations with the countries of Southeast Asia (SEA), and the long-standing link between India and SEA has been built on maritime trade. These interactions between the peoples of India and SEA countries resulted in substantial cultural exchanges and finally resulted in a blending of India's culture with the local culture of SEA. For thousands of years, people, ideas and things have been moving from India to SEA. The considerable activity in seaborne trade, combined with the eventual settlement of the Indian diaspora, rendered the blending of cultures feasible (Singh, 2023). This advancement facilitated the growth of the tourism sector between India and SEA.

Tourism is an important sector that can develop many sectors of the economy of a country, from agriculture to livestock and from construction to infrastructure. It is not limited to the economic sector only. It can significantly affect the harmonious relationships among individuals, the cultural landscape of a nation, the international reputation and prestige of the nation and the effectiveness of its foreign policy concurrently. Because tourism affects the economies of the nations, it is now considered a topic of discussion amongst high-level foreign affairs committees. The tourism sector is continuously rising because of factors like globalisation, and countries are also working to improve this sector (Jalalpour & Shojaeifar, 2017). Tourism initiatives play a vital role in enhancing the tourism sector while effectively addressing specific issues related to crises faced by destinations. This approach leverages the soft power of tourism to foster international cooperation and goodwill among nations. Its nonviolent approach and adaptable methodology enhance the philosophy of international relations and diplomacy, as well as the significance and roles of tourism (Muhia, 2023).

India's cultural and artistic resources have long been praised and regarded as a source of tourists' curiosity. In contemporary discourse, governmental bodies and bureaucratic institutions present tourism as a significant driver of economic growth. They highlight its potential to create employment opportunities and generate foreign currency revenue. The various forms of tourism popular in India, including medical, eco, wildlife, heritage, pilgrimage, marine, river, and educational travel, have proven effective in establishing the country as a prominent world travel destination. India has enhanced its tourism image through several initiatives, including *Incredible Bharat 2.0*, the *UDAAN Regional Connectivity Scheme* (which has increased tourism in remote areas), *Hop-in Hop-out buses* (that are popular in Delhi), and *Nagar Darshan schemes* in various Indian cities. By actively engaging non-governmental organisations and fostering private investments, India has effectively established itself as a prominent destination for leisure and traditional knowledge systems within the realm of regional tourism (Babu, 2020).

India's tourism initiatives towards SEA are an important aspect of its broader foreign policy. India and SEA present a wealth of opportunities for tourists, characterised by their diverse civilisations, rich heritages, impressive structures, varied languages and stunning landscapes. India tries to attract tourists from SEA and also makes its policy more convenient for the easy access of tourists from the countries of this region. Since ASEAN and India celebrated their 30th anniversary of partnership in 2022, exploring the possibility of collaborating on tourism will be quite advantageous. In 2012, ASEAN and India signed a Memorandum of

Understanding (MoU) aimed at enhancing their cooperation in the tourism sector. Subsequently, in 2013, a protocol was established to amend the MoU. The objective of both the MoU and the protocol is to foster proactive collaboration within the tourism industry. (Kundu, 2021). Connectivity is essential for any country to strengthen its relationships with others. India envisions a global community where nations can freely exchange goods, resources, and ideas. While globalisation and openness offer the potential for mutual benefits, it is crucial to implement appropriate policies to ensure that all parties gain from these exchanges. To support this vision, India has launched several initiatives under its “Look East Policy.”

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

### **The Historical and Cultural Foundations of India and Southeast Asia:**

Historical links and cultural exchanges between India and SEA are deeply rooted since ancient times. SEA is a region of considerable wealth that attracts individuals from India to its esteemed spiritual destinations. The geographical proximity facilitates the dissemination of Indian religion, art, culture, and language within this region. This region is described as a land of gold (*suvarnavipa*), the island of gold (*suvarnabhumi*), the island of coconuts (*narikeladvipa*), the island of camphor (*karpuradvipa*) and an island of barley (*yavadvipa*) in the *Ramayana*, *Pali Niddesa* and other classical texts (Mishra, 2021). So, the connections between SEA countries

and India are not new. It has been there since ancient times. This relationship fosters the growth of the tourism sector and benefits both parties.

India and SEA have a special bond that has been created and altered by many historical events. Faithful followers of Hinduism and Buddhism travelled to SEA by sea and land via South Asia, resulting in the blending of the regional faiths with distinctive Indigenous characteristics. For instance, although Indonesia has the world's biggest Muslim population, the official emblem of the nation is the mythical bird known as the *Garuda* from Hindu and Buddhist mythology. Apart from being the primary airline of Indonesia, *Garuda* is also reflected in the wayang, the traditional puppet culture of Java, and an imposing, elaborate statue located in the Prambanan Temple. Thailand, notable for its significant Buddhist population, prominently showcases the *Garuda* symbol. It is depicted mythologically with a human torso and red feathers. Such cultural exchanges and representations occur at Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport, the capital of Thailand. Here, foreign visitors are welcomed by a magnificent mythical display depicting the *Samudra Manthan* (the churning of the ocean), which draws heavily from Hindu mythology (Bhattacharya, 2020).

These cross-cultural interactions began when the merchant class, Buddhist monks, and Hindu priests brought Indian philosophy and culture to every part of SEA. Because they were apolitical and lived in ashrams and hermitages, the villagers welcomed them. The expansion of India's civilisation, culture, and religion across SEA can be attributed to the extensive journeys undertaken by merchants, monks, and Hindu Brahmin priests to distant kingdoms, including Cambodia and Indonesia. Through these interactions, significant cultural exchanges occurred, facilitating the dissemination of Indian traditions and beliefs in the region. The local culture experienced a profound absorption of Indian political ideology, literature, religion, artistic motifs, mythology, and stylistic elements, particularly as interactions with Indian communities increased and they established kingdoms in SEA. Buddhism was introduced to SEA from India during the 3rd century BCE, initiated by the efforts of King Ashoka, who dispatched Buddhist monks to the region (Sengupta, 2017).

### **Partnership and Engagement between India and ASEAN:**

Tourism represents a significant component of the robust relationship between India and the ASEAN nations. Both India and ASEAN acknowledge the considerable benefits that the tourism sector provides for the growth and development of their national economies. Tourism also enhances a country's influence in other regions through people-to-people connections.

With the passage of time, they developed a comprehensive network of tourism cooperation and signed numerous agreements for the development of the tourism sector in both areas.

It is crucial to promote continuous dialogues between India and ASEAN to enhance collaboration in the tourism sector. Such discussions could encompass joint marketing initiatives, promotions, conferences, workshops and meetings. Moreover, it is essential to prioritise the sharing of resources and best practices within the tourism sector. This focus should encompass the development of human resources, the implementation of sustainable and responsible tourism practices, the exchange of information regarding emerging tourism trends, effective crisis management strategies, and collaborative investments in tourism initiatives. Furthermore, efforts should be made to jointly market niche tourism segments and establish tourism standards. To improve cooperation in promoting integrated tourism markets and fostering collaborative investments, it is recommended to encourage the private sectors of ASEAN and India to increase their participation in the annual ASEAN Tourism Forum (ATF), ASEAN Travex, and the Professional International Travel Marts held in the ASEAN Member States and India (Plan of Action, n.d.).

As a ‘Sectoral Dialogue Partner’ (conversation at the secretarial level) in 1992, India first formally engaged with ASEAN. In 1995, it became a ‘Dialogue Partner.’ The initial years of engagement as a Dialogue Partner (DP) involved communications at the level of Foreign Ministers. This progression culminated in the inaugural summit-level meeting, which took place in 2002. In December 2012, during the 20th Commemorative Summit Meeting in New Delhi, our Dialogue Partnership was upgraded to a Strategic Partnership (Brief on ASEAN, n.d.). The 24th ASEAN-India Joint Cooperation Committee (AIJCC) Meeting was convened at the headquarters of ASEAN. During this meeting, ASEAN and India reaffirmed their commitment to enhancing their enduring cooperative relationship (ASEAN, India, 2024).

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

Some of the obstacles have already been addressed with a few initiatives. In 2019, the Philippines joined the list of nations with which India could sign a bilateral MoU on tourism. As a component of the ASEAN Tourism Forum, the 7th ASEAN-India Tourism Ministers Meeting was held in Ha Long City on Jan 18, 2019. During this meeting, the year 2019 was officially designated as the ASEAN-India Tourism Year. Additionally, the 8th ASEAN-India Tourism Ministers Meeting was conducted virtually in February 2021. The objective of this analysis concerning India's SAATHI (System for Assessment, Awareness, and Training for Hospitality) and the Buddhist Circuit is to effectively engage and attract a greater number of tourists from the ASEAN region to visit India (Kundu, 2021).

### **India's Soft Power and Cultural Exchange:**

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

Therefore, cultural diplomacy is an essential component of a country's soft power strategy. Prior to the widespread recognition of the term in the 21st century, India's soft power was already influencing global dynamics. For ages, Indian spiritualism, arts and culture have drawn visitors from all over the world. India's PM Modi combined fresh aspects of soft power with Indian diplomacy. Strategically speaking, these five pillars of soft power are *Suruksha* (regional and global security), *Samman* (dignity), *Samvaad* (dialogue), *Suruksha* (regional and global security), *Sanskriti* (culture) and *Sabhayata* (civilizational linkages) (Mukherjee, 2019).

India's soft power and cultural exchanges with SEA are deeply ingrained in historical ties, shared cultural history and a common desire to promote stability and abundance in the region. India and Southeast Asian nations share a deep historical, cultural, and spiritual bond. The Indian epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, continue to significantly influence people's thoughts. The *Ramayana* is intricately woven into the fabric of local society and culture, manifesting in a variety of forms. The enduring cultural connections to India are reflected in myths and folklore, traditional artistic expressions, city nomenclature, and contemporary

lifestyles. Despite changes in storylines, forms and dramatisation from the transfer, SEA nations continue to practice various versions of the *Ramayana* in modern times. This indicates the country's close ties to Indian culture, religion and society (Raj, 2022).

India has taken numerous proactive measures to enhance its position in SEA. One key initiative is the 'India-ASEAN Students Exchange Programme,' which was established in 2007 under the leadership of PM Dr. Manmohan Singh. The program aims to promote a deeper mutual understanding between these two dynamic regions. Two major events were planned in 2012: the 'ASEAN-India Car Rally' and the 'Shipping Expedition of INS Sudarshini' to ASEAN nations. The ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit includes these two events. These two occasions brought to light the close cultural, intellectual and commercial ties that exist between India and ASEAN. The primary objective of the Car Rally is to showcase 'India's proximity to the ASEAN.' In addition, it aims to raise public awareness of the India-ASEAN alliance and to promote tourism and people-to-people contacts (Bhattacharya, 2013).

### **Enhancing Strategic Connectivity and Infrastructure Development:**

Connectivity links the economies, fosters trade and draws people closer together. India envisions a beloved world where nations freely exchange goods, resources and ideas. Globalisation and openness can benefit everyone, but appropriate policies are necessary. Strengthening connectivity is vital to the region's growth, wealth and most significantly, the fight against poverty. Competitiveness in the industrial and service sectors depends on an effective and efficient infrastructure. Reliability is increased and expenditures are decreased with improved connectivity. This significantly affects industrial transportation, production, cost-effectiveness, and supply reliability (De, 2011). These connectivity and infrastructural projects directly impact the tourism sector. So, India works in this area with ASEAN to improve the connectivity between them.

At the onset of the new millennium, as the initiative to establish physical connectivity with SEA gained traction, India formally initiated the second phase of its Look East policy. This phase encompasses a comprehensive agenda aimed at expanding trade relations, enhancing security cooperation, developing infrastructure to improve regional transportation and connectivity, and unlocking the economic potential of Northeast India. This region offers significant economic opportunities and has a strategic location in relation to SEA. Look East Policy is a multifaceted initiative that enables India to work on many dimensions. Significant events include the 'India-ASEAN car rallies,' which were conducted in 2004 from Guwahati to

Indonesia and in 2012 from Indonesia back to Guwahati. Furthermore, the 'India-Myanmar-Thailand Highway project' holds considerable importance, as it establishes a connection from Moreh in India to Mae Sot in Thailand via Myanmar. Additionally, the initiatives to upgrade and construct the missing rail links between Jiribam (India) and Mandalay (Myanmar) aim to establish a comprehensive railway connection from Delhi to Hanoi, traversing Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia. These efforts have the potential to significantly enhance trade and tourism between India and the ASEAN member countries (Pukhrem, 2019).

The Eleventh Meeting of ASEAN and India Tourism Ministers took place on 25 January 2024. The purpose of the meeting was to emphasize the importance of enhancing land, air, and sea connections between ASEAN and India. This improvement aims to facilitate smooth cross-border travel, enhance visitor mobility, and elevate the overall experience for travellers. The recent addition of direct flights between Indonesia and India, bringing the total number of direct flights between the ASEAN Member States and India to six, was welcomed at the meeting. The meeting observed that India and ASEAN are starting to prioritise cruise tourism. The meeting also heard that India just unveiled its Draft National Strategy for Cruise Tourism in light of the considerable unrealised potential of overnight coastal tourism (Eleventh Meeting, 2024).

PM Narendra Modi launched 52 tourist projects under the *Swadesh Darshan* and *PRASHAD* programs, valued at approximately Rs 1400 crore. The project's goals are to promote pilgrimages and historical places all throughout India, as well as to provide infrastructure for tourism. All 52 locations experienced the launch events at the same time. The PM has initiated programs such as *Dekho Apna Desh People's Choice 2024* and the *Chalo India* Global Diaspora Campaign. These initiatives aim to promote domestic tourism and actively engage the public in selecting their preferred tourist destinations (Chaturvedi, 2024).

### **Promotional Campaigns and Events to boost Tourism in India from SEA:**

The Ministry of Tourism oversees the country's international marketing of travel destinations through events like roadshows and festivals, with eight offices located worldwide. The office in Singapore is tasked with advertising and advocating for tourism spots in India to ASEAN nations, Fiji, New Zealand, Australia and other Pacific Island states. There are road shows all across the ASEAN region that usually consist of presentations and business interactions. India's Tourism offices have limited jurisdiction, as there is only one office to serve a region that is so vast and culturally diverse. So, it is important to expand the number of tourism offices and implement a promotion strategy tailored to each country. For instance, in 2017, the Sikkim

State Tourist Administration chose to showcase its 59 attractions in Thailand through the organization of roadshows (Bhonsale, 2019).

India and the Association of ASEAN have formalised an MoU with four principal objectives. These objectives include the promotion of tourism, the enhancement of partnerships, the advancement of human resources within the tourism sector, and the exploration of opportunities for collaboration and information exchange. In addition to sharing data on tourism, including statistics, best practices, and future aspirations, India and the ASEAN bloc hold two joint working group meetings each year (Bhonsale, 2019).

The ASEAN member countries have actively engaged in developing Buddhist circuits both domestically and regionally, including discussions with India. The concept of promoting ASEAN and India as an integrated circuit was approved during the 2008 ASEAN Tourism Ministers Meeting and is thought to have a lot of promise. In addition, Myanmar has much potential in this field and has properly taken the initiative to unite its neighbours. The Thailand Tourism Authority (TAT) has taken steps to collaborate with Myanmar on the development of tourism infrastructure (Sailo, 2013).

### **Challenges:**

India-ASEAN relations have developed throughout time. But the full potential has not yet been reached. Addressing the challenges at hand and implementing effective solutions, as well as enhancing and reinforcing existing areas of collaboration, is essential for the mutual benefit of both parties involved. India's tourism engagement towards ASEAN countries faces some challenges, which are lowering its effectiveness. One key obstacle is infrastructure. Access to tourism destinations remains a significant issue, requiring infrastructure investment from federal and state governments. The private sector must make investments in the local hospitality industry (Bhonsale, 2019). India offers direct flight services to only six countries within the ASEAN region. These are Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia and Thailand. However, connections to other important ASEAN nations, such as the Philippines, Indonesia and Cambodia, have no direct flights from India. So, the flow from these countries is reduced ("Need to Focus," 2021).

Although India has introduced an E-Visa facility for various ASEAN countries, the process is still much more cumbersome than the visa-on-arrival or visa-free (India grants visa, 2024); Travelling to India, n.d.). Visa-on-arrival or visa-free policies are offered by many ASEAN nations and this policy makes them much more attractive to tourists (ASEAN Framework

Agreement, 2006). India also has a problem with using cultural connections in its marketing. For example, in spite of long-standing scholarships and cultural exchanges with countries like Indonesia and Thailand, India has not taken full advantage of these co-religionists in developing its tourism.

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

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

**Conclusion:**

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

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

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

India's primary attraction for tourists is its rich cultural heritage. India continuously works to improve its infrastructure to attract more tourists. In 2024, PM Modi launched various projects under the *Swadesh Darshan* and *PRASHAD* programs to meet the requirements. India organises road shows and festivals to promote tourism in ASEAN countries. However, these initiatives are only the start, as India is unwavering in its quest to broaden and enhance these exhibits and occasions in order to fully realise the potential of this tourism industry. Despite its limitations, India strives to improve in various areas to attract tourists from SEA.

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