

INDIA'S CULTURAL SOFT POWER STRATEGY IN BANGLADESH: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR VIKSIT BHARAT@2047

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Abstract

India's cultural diplomacy efforts in Bangladesh positively correlate with enhanced bilateral relations, increased people-to-people exchanges, and improved national branding, thereby contributing to India's vision of becoming a hegemon in South Asia, and Bangladesh's strategic importance can become a major factor in Viksit Bharat @2047. The culture plays an important role in India's soft power strategies in Bangladesh for altering the broader regional power dynamic in South Asia and its implications for Viksit Bharat@2047. The digital cultural diplomacy has shaped the perceptions, attitudes, and alliances between India and Bangladesh. It further explores the significance of cultural exchange programs (art and culture; films and television), and societal interactions through diasporic communities between the two countries in strengthening soft power relations and fostering mutual understanding. Education and research are also an important part of cultural diplomacy and can contribute to India's vision of a developed nation. Moreover, the study has adopted a mixed-method approach and qualitative methods to analyse cultural diplomacy between India and Bangladesh. Ethnographic research is used for systematic observation of the cultural practices of different groups in Bangladesh and India through participant observation. The case study approach has been used to analyse the cultural implications of rituals and festivals in these events and how this cultural diplomacy shaped India-Bangladesh relations. Annual reports of the "ICCR, Ministry of External Affairs, Ministry of Culture, Bangladesh Ministry of Cultural Affairs, and Embassies of India and Bangladesh" are used as authentic qualitative sources. Thus, the main aim of the

study is to highlight the different roles of non-state actors in contributing to the soft power dynamics in the region.

Keywords: Cultural diplomacy, Soft power, Viksit Bharat, India, Bangladesh

Introduction

Cultural dominance/diplomacy is one of the most crucial factors of soft power strategy in global politics. Developing countries generally employ soft cultural power to consolidate their positions at the international level in order to grow their national interests. This research explores India's cultural soft power strategies in Bangladesh by investigating its accomplishments and challenges. It identifies that India has stretched its cultural resources to significant levels in Bangladesh, such as conducting cultural programs, supporting higher education, cultural exchange programs, and digital infrastructure development. However, India faces several challenges in achieving its soft power goals due to cultural barriers, misperception of political manipulation, and mismanagement of policies. India is required to develop initiatives to reduce the country's challenges especially due to China's growing cultural diplomacy in Bangladesh. This study fills a crucial research gap in the understanding of India's cultural diplomatic presence in Bangladesh. If India wants to achieve its vision of a developed nation, then among the factors like economic growth, technological advancement, innovation, etc, what will serve as the most important factor will be India's art and culture, ethics, and values, yoga, ayurveda, etc which make India unique from rest of the world. Therefore, India which is popularly known for its cultural diversity can leverage cultural diplomacy as a powerful soft-power tool for

achieving its vision of Viksit Bharat @2047.

Problem Statement

With the growing globalization and rise in regional connectivity, cultural exchange among countries has manifoldly increased. Even so, though cultural diplomacy in international relations assumes greater importance, there are relatively fewer scientific studies on the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy in fostering friendly bilateral ties with Bangladesh by India. The existing literature primarily focuses on economic and strategic cooperation on issues such as smuggling, water resources sharing, immigration, terrorism, and religious conflicts in Indo-Bangladesh relations. It is also unexplored whether cultural diplomacy has played a major role in shaping the views of Bangladesh towards India. Such a research gap remains a hindrance in designing effective foreign policy strategies. Finally, Bangladesh has increasingly become a battlefield for the conflicts of regional and global great powers. Regional supremacy remains a competition between India and China. While to some extent, India counts Bhutan and Afghanistan as its allies in the region, close ties are claimed by the People's Republic of China with countries like Maldives, Pakistan, and, to a certain degree, Sri Lanka. Nepal and Bangladesh therefore remain uncertain and potentially available to influence. The two countries should strive to reach a mutual understanding and establish robust institutions for the two to always find a way of addressing all these issues. Issues can be addressed indirectly, mainly through strategic cultural diplomacy techniques to set up strong interpersonal relationships founded on the similarities in ideology between the two countries. Thus, failure to realize the significance of cultural diplomacy for India-Bangladesh relations could imply lost opportunities for cooperation and increased tensions.

Geopolitical Significance of India and

Bangladesh in South Asia

In South Asia, the most strategic place for India's vision of "Viksit Bharat@2047" is Bangladesh. Both countries have good linkages in terms of economics. Several sectors, including textiles, pharmaceuticals, and agriculture, are significant in this context, so Bangladesh is an emerging market for Indian products and services. Both countries shared a land border, facilitating trade and people-to-people contact. Geographical proximity and shared riverine systems provide enhanced connectivity, trade, and economic cooperation opportunities. Both nations are interested in regional stability, economic development, and countering terrorism. Both countries have young populations, which can be leveraged for economic growth and innovation. By strengthening its relationship with Bangladesh, Bangladesh can serve as a gateway to other South Asian markets. Joint initiatives in areas like infrastructure, energy, and water resources can benefit both countries. A strong India-Bangladesh partnership can help India counterbalance China's growing influence in the region. Therefore, Bangladesh is a crucial partner for India in its journey towards becoming a developed nation by 2047. Bangladesh's economic potential and strategic location make it a more immediate and impactful partner in South Asia for India's development goals.

Geopolitical Significance of Bangladesh for India's Vision of Viksit Bharat

The foremost crucial aspect that ties Bangladesh to India is its strategic geographical location. It is almost an India-locked country as it shares borders with India on both the eastern and Western sides. India's north-east region is on Bangladesh's periphery while borders with Indian states surrounding it viz. West Bengal, Tripura, and Mizoram make possible for easy demographic movement as 94% percent of its long border is shared with India. In this context, Bangladesh depends on

India for both trade and security reasons. It also gives Bangladesh some advantage over India because Bangladesh has provided India with easy and economical connectivity between India's eastern parts and the rest of the country. Therefore, Bangladesh is critical for India's internal connectivity too. East Pakistan which became Bangladesh demanded close links with West Bengal and therefore with India. Moreover, the location of Bangladesh is also of strategic importance due to its close affinity with the Chinese-Tibet border in the north. Thus, the physical proximity with India is an important factor that works as a major determinant of Bangladesh's Foreign Policy.

Role of Culture in Development and Shaping Traditions:

M. R., Muniandy, R., & Kandasamy (2020): According to some studies culture is directly linked to development and vice versa in India and Bangladesh. Culture is an essential element in addressing global challenges as it has its role in economic growth, human development etc. If a country can overcome cultural backwardness, it can develop according to Marana (2010), and Schwartz (1992). Sustainable development can also be ensured by integrating cultural factors into soft power diplomacy. Cultural diversity is a source of innovation and exchange. Contemporary scholars have argued that by understanding the importance of local indigenous knowledge, we can overcome development crises. But according to Banfield & Banfield, (1958), sometimes cultural traditions can also undermine political and economic development as development depends primarily on consensus based on shared norms, values, and beliefs. However, with much cultural diversity, it is difficult to form a consensus. For example, India with high diversity of culture. It is also true in the case of the indigenous and ethnic communities of Bangladesh. Culture can be a strong weapon

to fight against cultural aggression where the Westernization versus indigenization fight is at its climax. Such conflict can be reduced through the harmonization of culture.

Sakib, S. N. (2023). Traditional festivals like Diwali and Eid showcase the shared cultural bond between India and Bangladesh. Culture played an important role in shaping tradition as discussed by Smith (1984), Hobsbawm (1983), and Turner (1969). Hobsbawm (1983) argued that tradition is a dynamic process leading to the formation of cultural identities. Whereas, according to Turner (1969), traditions led to social change. Smith (1984) argued that "traditions are constructed and reconstructed to serve political, social, and cultural agendas." Bangladesh and India have a rich and diverse cultural heritage that can be traced back to ancient times and has been shaped by the interactions of various traditions and civilisations (Sen, S., 2015). For example, both countries are influenced by the religions of Hinduism, Islamism, Christianity, Buddhism etc.

Soft Power Diplomacy: Joseph Nye

The concept of "Soft Power" was given by Joseph Nye in 1990 which includes the power of education, technologies, economic growth, and cultural attraction. According to Nye, "Soft Power to the ability of a country to attract and persuade other countries to want what it wants instead of using 'hard power', i.e. coercion or payment". Soft power diplomacy of any country consists of three key aspects i.e. culture (centretradu of attractiveness to others), political values, and its foreign policies (when others see them as legitimate and having moral authority)" (Nye 2011).

In the context of India, cultural values of democracy, human rights, and free press are among the major factors of attraction in Indian culture. India has a very old culture, hosted several world's oldest civilizations, the home of yoga and ayurveda, the birthplace of

Hinduism and Buddhism, etc which all are crucial factors of cultural diplomacy. The Indian government has spoken a great deal about the primacy of greater economic cooperation with its South Asian neighbors particularly Bangladesh, but results are inadequate and unconvincing. If India wants to have a dominant influence in South Asia as and wants to emerge as a developed nation, it needs to actively use its soft power diplomacy. It has to rethink the ways on how it can build substantial relations with its immediate neighborhood, like Bangladesh. For India to become a regional hegemon specifically in South Asia, Bangladesh can play a major role, especially in terms of geopolitical significance countering China and collaborating with the USA. So, by focusing on cultural diplomacy as a soft power strategy, India can build a strong relationship with Bangladesh which can be one of the major factors in creating a strong hegemonic position of India in South Asia. It can prove to be a major factor in becoming India a developed nation and achieving its mission of Viksit Bharat@2047

Cultural Diplomacy: Mark Leonard

Mark Leonard defines cultural diplomacy as an “interplay between culture, diplomacy, and soft power.” He called cultural diplomacy a crucial aspect of public diplomacy which relates to built long-term relationships. This concept of public diplomacy sees cultural diplomacy which is characterized by three stages. The first one is the short-term stage which consists of “reactive news management which takes hours and days.” Second stage is the medium-term consists of “strategic communications which takes months.” Finally, the third tier is cultural diplomacy- the best tool for “the development of long-term relationships and can take years.” For him, “Public diplomacy is a way to advance national interests in the new global democratic environment of new media & networks and new communication technologies.” In this context, two aspects are pointed out by

Leonard i.e. first, the audience you reach, and the second, the message with which you reach them. The outlook of a country towards other countries depend on how well they can advance their interests. Furthermore, according to Leonard, effectiveness of public diplomacy depend on three groups i.e. political parties, diasporas, and NGOs. He recognizes the fact that cultural exchange and understanding are necessary to build positive international relations. He also argued that, by promoting cultural activities, a nation can:

- Enhance its image: Showcase its values, traditions, and creativity to a global audience.
- Foster mutual understanding: Bridge cultural divides and create empathy between different societies.
- Strengthen diplomatic ties: Use culture as a tool to build relationships and trust with other countries.

India's Digital Cultural Diplomacy in Bangladesh

India can effectively promote its culture, values, and achievements by leveraging the power of social media. Social media changed the way countries related to each other. It has enabled India to expand its cultural diplomacy and soft power to Bangladesh successfully in the following ways:

1. Indian films and TV serials are very popular in Bangladesh. Indian culture, music, fashion, and lifestyle are introduced through these films and television serials. Currently, Netflix and Amazon Prime are the streaming services that stream and provide greater exposure to audiences. Online fan communities like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have fostered a sense of shared identity and cultural affinity between the two nations.
2. Indian social media influencers called cultural ambassadors, particularly those from the Bengali-speaking regions, have a significant following in Bangladesh. Both countries share common experiences, traditions, and cultural insights. These

influencers also promote Indian brands and products that contribute to India's economic diplomacy in lieu of brand endorsements.

3. The Indian government has wisely used social media platforms to engage with the Bangladeshi public to share information about India's development, cultural heritage, and foreign policy. Social media has been used during crises to spread accurate information and make relief efforts. It shows the humanitarian role of India.

4. Social media platforms have led to the establishment of online communities where people from both countries can connect, share experiences, and discuss issues of mutual interest. Online cultural activities and virtual tours facilitated cross-cultural practices and exchanges.

Hence, India needs to have a positive online presence in Bangladesh. However, by making proper use of social media, India has managed to further strengthen its bond with Bangladesh culturally wherein goodwill and a more enhanced regional soft power status concerning matters of cultural diplomacy is strengthened. Although social media has been a powerful tool for India's soft power, but has some negative impacts too such as misinformation, online trolling, and cyberbullying which can undermine these efforts. Hence, India needs to have a positive online presence in Bangladesh. However, by making proper use of social media, India has managed to further strengthen its bond with Bangladesh culturally wherein goodwill and a more enhanced regional soft power status concerning matters of cultural diplomacy is strengthened.

Education and Research Opportunities: India and Bangladesh

“Bharat Mitra Samman - Indology Award instituted by ICCR in 2015 was given to some Bangladesh research scholars to recognize eminent Indologists who have made outstanding contributions to Indian cause, by studying / teaching / doing research in India's

philosophy, thought, history, art, culture, Indian languages, literature, civilization, society etc., has been renamed as”. The Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre, Kabul; The Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre (IGCC) at Dhanmondi, Dhaka and the Indian Cultural Centre of Dhaka, Bangladesh, promote bilateral cultural relations between India and Bangladesh by organizing cultural programs, workshops, seminars, and training of Indian Classical Music and dance like Manipuri and Kathak. It also attracts high-class professionals from Bangladesh who are trained from Indian Universities in the streams of Vocal (Indian Classical Music), Hindi, and Yoga. Many students from neighboring countries such as Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Nepal opt to come to ICCR, Shillong for their higher studies because of its reputed Northeast Hill University (NEHU), which has modern infrastructure and facilities. In addition in 2019, the Director General, of ICCR felicitated Arts of the Bangladesh Silpakala Academy as part of four Ramayana groups from Bangladesh, Thailand, Trinidad & Tobago, and Mauritius. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) has been signed with Bangladesh, Dhaka University. The objective of the Chair is to create greater understanding and awareness about India and Indian Civilization among Bangladesh's academicians and thinkers through other academic activities such as delivering public lectures, guidance in research, conducting seminars and co-ordinations, publications, generating scholarly interactions with the academics of Bangladesh as well as students. They assist in spreading information on India and in creating a better understanding of various India's issues.

Cultural Programs shared between India and Bangladesh

India has emphasized those cultural programs and festivals that have produced admirable achievements and have fostered favorable outcomes. India and Bangladesh have keenly participated in the interchange of customs by

organizing joint events and festivities, and by developing mutual understanding and appreciation. For instance, in 2022 the “Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) under the Ministry of External Affairs” conducted a cultural program at Hyderabad House of Shri Kayam Ali, a Santoor Player. This program was hosted by the Hon’ble Prime Minister of India in honor of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. In 2021, Government of Bangladesh (Ministry of Culture) has also organized a month-long art exhibition as part of the 19th Asian Art Biennale Bangladesh’ in Dhaka in collaboration with ICCR. This event was a particular political priority to the Government of Bangladesh, as it forms part of the celebration of the birth centenary of the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who is considered as Father of Bangladesh. The year is also special as it completed 50 years of India’s bilateral diplomatic relationship with Bangladesh. It also completed 50 years of Bangladesh’s Liberation at the same time.

In June 2022, India launched a refurbished form of the “Bangladesh Youth Delegation Campaign” in order to draw the best talent from Bangladesh as an important initiative of youth connecting youth. As a part of the delegation, youth from diverse disciplines were invited to the major cities of Chattogram, Rajshahi, and Dhaka. A 100-member delegation from Bangladesh also pays a visit to India in February 2024. These members visited famous places of cultural, academic and national interest in many Indian cities including New Delhi.

Cultural Agreements between India and Bangladesh

This cultural bilateral relation between India and Bangladesh has been a greatly practical aspect in nurturing bilateral relations as well as in cultural diplomacy promotion. For instance, the 1972 Cultural Cooperation Agreement acted as the ground for cooperation in arts, education, and literature.⁴

This was further strengthened with the Memorandum of Understanding on cultural exchange in 2011, where clear programs and initiatives were agreed on pertaining to performing arts, exhibitions, and heritage preservation areas. Also, in 2011 “MoU on Educational Cooperation between Jawaharlal Nehru University and Dhaka University” promoted academic exchange and cooperation between two excellent institutions, promoting intellectual exchange and understanding. Additionally, “MoU on Cooperation in the field of Renewable Energy”, 2011 mainly focused on energy cooperation, but this agreement has also realized possibility of cultural exchange and cooperation on sustainable development.

Films and Festivals: A Bridge Between India and Bangladesh

India and Bangladesh have a rich cultural connection. Many cinema and film festivals have played their role in cementing the bond between people, and Padma Nadir Majhi (1993) exemplifies this concept. It epitomizes the day-to-day lives of people on the banks of the Padma River, sharing common experiences and common struggles.

Film Festivals:

- Kolkata International Film Festival showcases Bangladeshi films in its various sections, of competitive categories and special retrospectives. This film festival provides a platform for Bangladeshi filmmakers as a source of recognition for their work in India. Thus, it led to cinematic exchange as a part of cultural diplomacy.
- Dhaka International Film Festival is also a crucial platform for showcasing Indian films in Bangladesh. Here, we witnessed a dedicated section for Indian cinema with a distinct range of films from different regions and genres. Thus, Bangladeshi audiences witnessed the richness and diversity of

Indian cinema here.

Cultural Exchange Programs:

- Workshops on Filmmaking: Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute in India and the Bangladesh Film Development Corporation conduct joint workshops and training programs for upcoming filmmakers of both nations. They come as opportunities for the young talents to learn from even more experienced professionals while building cross-border collaborations.
- Film Heritage Foundation: Working in collaboration with various Bangladeshi institutions, it restores classic films from Bangladesh. Conservation of cinematic heritage will be complemented by a strengthening of cultural ties based on historical appreciation.

Such examples portrayed different ways by which films and festivals served as a bridge between India and Bangladesh and the cultural gap bridged them while furthering bilateral ties.

Shared Religious Festivals Between India and Bangladesh

India and Bangladesh share a rich cultural and religious bond, especially between the provinces of West Bengal and Bangladesh. In fact, there are several religious events that find extremely wide acceptance in both countries. These have increasingly become social events helping to strengthen cultural diplomacy and ameliorate India's soft power policy in Bangladesh:

1. **Durga Puja** is one of the greatest Hindu festivals that celebrate the triumph of Goddess Durga over the demon Mahishasura. The cultural importance and glory of Durga Puja are associated at a very deep cultural level in both countries. This festival unifies people, social relationships, and transnational relations that can facilitate interpersonal contacts. In this regard, the celebrating

moments of cultural rituals, traditions, and gourmand experiences developed through Durga Puja would lead to the bonding between the two nations.

2. Two the most significant Islamic festivals are "**Eid-ul-Adha and Eid-ul-Fitr**". Eid-ul-Fitr is observed at the end of Ramadan and Eid-ul-Adha depicts the sacrifice of Ibrahim (Abraham).

The joyous celebrations, prayers, and communal feasts associated with these festivals are common to both nations. The shared celebration of these festivals promotes religious tolerance, harmony and understanding. High-level visits and exchanges often coincide with these festivals, further strengthening diplomatic engagements.

3. **Pohela Boishakh** is the Bengali New Year, celebrated with great enthusiasm in both countries. The colorful processions, cultural programs, and traditional Bengali delicacies associated with Pohela Boishakh are common to both nations. The festival provides an opportunity for cultural exchange, including music, dance, and literature. The festival often coincides with economic initiatives and trade exhibitions, thereby strengthening bilateral relations.

Thus, through this Indian and Bangladeshi cultural relationships are strengthened while interpersonal engagement is encouraged through religious contacts that foster mutual understanding. Such celebrations are the bedrock of India's soft power policy towards Bangladesh as they create overall goodwill and a good perception of India by the people of Bangladesh.

CHALLENGES TO CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

Change in Political Regime

For implying any soft power strategy, the bond between the political leadership of both countries is very important. Change in political leadership can affect cultural relations too. The

recent student-led protest overthrew Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina leading to violent chaos in the country. This overthrow of the regime has been labeled as the “Second Revolution” which has led to a more democratic and more economically equal Bangladesh. Apart from far-reaching socio-political and economic consequences of this uprising to Bangladesh, there is a high possibility of its impact on one of the key geopolitical issues, ‘India-Bangladesh relations’, leading to both short-term and long-term impacts on this emerging “new Bangladesh”. Sheikh Hasina’s rule was mixed; initially, her rule led to economic growth and development, but later it became more authoritarian, corrupt, and undemocratic because the benefits of the economic development were only accessible to those who were aligned with her party. Such corrupt practices led to the violent overthrow of the Hasina government, just months after her fourth electoral victory in January 2024. Thus, Bangladesh is facing a delicate geopolitics scenario, which requires such foreign policy that can be proved as a safe harbor for them. Thus the “so-called second revolution is not the solution; it is just a window of opportunity”

Religious Complexity: Rise of Hindu Nationalism and Anti-Hindu Violence in Bangladesh

India-Bangladesh cultural relations are further complicated by religion. The rise of Hindu nationalism and anti-Muslim and anti-Bangladesh sentiments among Indians led to chaos in Bangladesh. In the current uprising in Oct 2024, the attack on Puja Mandap and the desecration and damage of Hindu temples in Bangladesh led to serious concerns. This anti-Hindu violence has led to hate and anger in India towards Bangladesh. If it is not addressed properly, this can become an obstacle to better India-Bangladesh relations. Indian “Ministry of External Affairs appealed to the Government of Bangladesh” to ensure the safety of Hindus and minorities. It also

appealed to secure Hindus’ places of worship, particularly during festival times.

CAA and NRC Protest

Although India and Bangladesh share historical and cultural similarities, India has greater soft power than China. India’s Neighbourhood policy also faced serious challenges during the launch of the “Citizenship Amendment Act, CAA and the proposed National Register of Citizens, NRC.” Both of them had a negative impact on India’s relations with Bangladesh & Afghanistan. The CAA targets three Islamic neighbours- Bangladesh, Pakistan, & Afghanistan. The CAA was perceived as targeting Muslims and linking Hinduism with Indian Citizenship, raising concerns for the Islamic world. Even India’s affiliates questioned its identification as a pluralistic, multicultural civilisation. Although India did enjoys some soft power benefits as one of the major democracies, with varied cultures and religions existing parallelly in a stable political system, that image has been flawed by some recent developments like these which can impact cultural diplomacy.

Countering China and USA

Bangladesh is an ally to both India and China but the new Bangladesh will fundamentally alter the regional balance of power, which can tilt either way. A pro-China Bangladesh can lead to Chinese dominance over South Asia but a pro-India Bangladesh will create neutral playfield in the region of South Asia. However, Bangladesh cannot abandon China completely because China is a major source of defense procurements, imports, and investments. Bangladesh owes debt of over \$6 billion to China. It is also part of One Belt One Road Initiative of Xi Jinping. It is Bangladesh's largest arms supplier too. Thus, Bangladesh is equally dependent on China and India. Aside from this, though, the fact that India does not share a border with China gives it a slight advantage over China in terms of

dependence. Talking of historical and cultural similarities between India and Bangladesh, one can observe that India has more soft power than China.

Bangladesh has also become the part of soft power strategy of the United State to strengthen its democracy. Many political experts are also skeptical that the U.S might have had its role in the overthrow of Yunus and Sheikh Hasina regime and Yunus is also seems as pro-U.S. The growing cold war between China and the U.S. probably has reached the shores of Bangladesh. International geopolitics has a push and pull in complicated ways on peaceful change and domestic reforms for Bangladesh. Here, the presence of the U.S. has increased the noticeability of an already critical India-Bangladesh relationship. India had successfully safeguarded Sheikh Hasina from U.S pressure in the past. If Bangladesh will lean towards India, India has that power to balance China's dominance and safeguard Bangladesh from the U.S. But if Bangladesh leans toward China, then both India and U.S. will begin exerting all forms of pressure on it. For instance, India can restrict exports to Bangladesh as earlier which cause economic difficulties.

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