

The Enduring Bonds: Soft Power Diplomacy in the India-Bhutan Relationship

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Abstract

This paper highlights the role of soft power diplomacy in the enduring India-Bhutan relationship. It emphasises cultural affinities, historical connections, and shared values that have fostered deep bonds. The article underscores the influence of yoga as a cultural bridge and environmental conservation as a mutual goal. It showcases the power of soft power diplomacy in shaping a resilient partnership, transcending political boundaries, and nurturing enduring connections built on common understanding and friendship.

Introduction

In the complex landscape of international relations, soft power diplomacy has emerged as a potent tool for nations to strengthen bonds, foster goodwill, and exert influence without coercion. Within the pages of the *Arthashastra* by the venerable Kautilya, there exists discourse about the Six Stratagems, known as *Shadgunyas* (excellences), alongside the four *Upayas* (approaches), which can be understood as strategic tools. These comprise *Saam* (conciliation), *Daan* (charity), *Bhed* (divide), and *Dand* (punishment).¹ Among these, the initial two options are inclined toward peaceful methodologies and incentives. Joseph Nye coined 'Soft Power' in 'Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power', noting three dimensions: military might, economic persuasion, and cultural assimilation. Military strength is typically seen as strong but not favourable in Soft Power.² However, its use in peacekeeping and disaster relief is valued. Promoting culture

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is generally positive, yet imposing it forcefully on smaller neighbours can be seen as imperialism. The key is how tools are used.

Soft power aims to engage and influence individuals' sentiments and thoughts. A people-centred approach is essential, as governments have constraints and typically facilitate rather than lead.³ Two instances from the last century exemplify this. India gained global popularity twice: during the Independence Struggle with Gandhi's nonviolent approach and in the 1960s Hippie movement which was drawn to yoga and Indian spirituality. The role of the Government was minor, even opposed to the popular movements. In both instances soft power prevailed despite government limitations.

On 12 Dec 2022, the Parliamentary Committee on External Affairs led by Mr. PP Chaudhary, released findings in a report titled 'India's Soft Power Prospects and Limitations'. Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) defines soft power as non-coercive influence through appeal. It has pinpointed four issues hampering India's soft power: limited funding, institutional coordination gaps, skilled workforce scarcity, and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) ambiguous role. The Committee's report comprises noteworthy insights and suggestions, among which are the following key observations and recommendations⁴:

- **Cultural Diplomacy Working Group.** The committee observed the dual involvement of the MEA and the Ministry of Culture in promoting India's cultural diplomacy. The Ministry of Culture develops policies and projects for cultural propagation, while the ICCR operates as the external executing body for conserving cultural heritage globally. The committee proposed establishing a working group between the MEA and the Ministry of Culture to synchronise and strategise cultural diplomatic efforts. Additionally, it suggested forming a comprehensive database of cultural resources.
- **Yoga Certification Board.** The committee acknowledged yoga's worldwide appeal and its potential as a soft power asset. It advised cooperation between the Ministry of AYUSH and the MEA to establish a Yoga Certification Board. This board would authenticate Indian yogic practices and therapies.

- **Engaging Indian Diaspora.** India possesses a substantial diaspora, exceeding 31 mn individuals, including 13 mn NRIs and 18 mn Persons of Indian Origin. The committee recognised the diaspora's role as a soft power asset in enhancing ties between their country of origin and host nations. The suggestion entails creating a mechanism for proactive interaction with the diaspora through Indian missions/posts abroad. Additionally, targeted events should be organised to gather their insights and ideas for more effective ongoing engagement with the host country.
- **Boosting Tourism.** The committee recognised tourism as a vital gauge of a nation's soft power influence. It stressed expanding overseas tourism offices and adopting tailored approaches for promoting tourism. The recommendation involves gathering input from diverse types of tourists to formulate comprehensive, country-specific strategies.

India and Bhutan have nurtured a unique and profound connection since the 1950s. The outreach made by the former Indian Prime Minister(PM), Jawaharlal Nehru, to Bhutan during that period stands as a demonstration of soft power; a concerted effort to fortify the bond linking these two nations. India's utilisation of soft power in its dealings with Bhutan is evident across a spectrum of foreign policy areas, spanning from economic collaboration to cultural engagements.⁵ An illustrative instance pertaining to India's provision of financial aid to support Bhutan's five-year development plans. Additionally, a consistent thread of cultural exchange programs unites both countries, underscoring the depth of their interconnectedness.

The soft power diplomacy approach's outcome has been the cultivation of goodwill, thereby reducing the potential for misinterpretations. Conversely, it can be argued that isolating soft power as a distinct policy instrument is counterproductive. Instead, it serves as the foundational element that underpins a nation's comprehensive policy architecture. This article explores the multifaceted role of soft power diplomacy in shaping the India-Bhutan relationship.

Historical Ties and Cultural Affinities

India and Bhutan share deep-rooted historical ties that have served as the foundation for a resilient diplomatic partnership. Their proximity, cultural similarities, and shared values have forged a unique bond that transcends political boundaries. The role of cultural diplomacy, encompassing elements such as shared traditions, religious practices, and cultural exchanges, has been instrumental in cultivating people-to-people connections and mutual understanding.⁶

PM Shri Narendra Modi picked Bhutan as his first foreign destination as India's leader, stating that the country's foreign policy interests lie in the region. According to PM Modi, it was a 'logical option' because of India-'unique' Bhutan's connection. Ever since the 8th century, when the renowned Indian saint, *Swami Padmasambhava*, recognised as the 'Second Buddha' or 'Rinpoche', introduced Buddhism to Bhutan, the influence of this religion has profoundly shaped every aspect of Bhutanese life, fostering enduring ties between the two nations.

Since the 1950s, India and Bhutan have maintained a particular relationship. Their official ties were established in 1968, though the essential foundation of bilateral relations was laid out in the 'Treaty of Perpetual Peace and Friendship' signed in 1949.⁷ The soft power diplomacy from India has helped to build strong commercial and cultural relations with Bhutan since then. Throughout Bhutan's five-year plans and investments in hydroelectric projects, India has been Bhutan's major development partner. The former having supported the country's seamless transition to democracy. A mutually beneficial collaboration between the Indian and Bhutanese governments has resulted in both countries greatly benefiting from Bhutan's hydroelectric capabilities.⁸

Bhutan's Unique Cultural Identity

There exist multiple avenues by which India can enhance its comprehensive approach to exerting soft power influence on Bhutan. Initially, fostering cultural cooperation between the two nations should evolve into a more formalised and structured endeavour, concentrating especially on regions adjacent to the borders rather than the capitals. Secondly, Bhutan's distinct cultural identity has been diligently conserved, evident in its policy

landscape. Bhutan's distinct cultural identity, highlighted by its concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH), has captured international attention. This emphasis on holistic well-being, social harmony, and sustainable development aligns closely with the principles of soft power diplomacy. The exceptional notion of GNH exemplifies this uniqueness, and India should create platforms for the exchange of knowledge. India has acknowledged and appreciated Bhutan's cultural uniqueness, thereby fostering a sense of respect and mutual admiration that forms the bedrock of their diplomatic ties. Through these platforms, India can glean insights from this indigenous concept, which presents a balanced trajectory between materialistic and spiritual aspirations.⁹

Education and Capacity Building

Indian and Bhutanese connections have always been based on the importance of education and learning. India's role in supporting Bhutan's education system through scholarships, exchange programs, and technical assistance has been a significant soft power instrument. 4,000 Bhutanese students are now enrolled in Indian colleges, making India the most preferred destination for Bhutanese students. Four Memorandums of Understanding on academic exchanges and science, technology engineering, and mathematics collaboration between Bhutan and India have been signed by the two governments to help young people in the Himalayan nation find jobs based on their education and skills. Students from Bhutan can now apply for special permission from the Indian government to study at prestigious universities like St. Stephens College, University of Delhi, and AIIMS after being nominated and recommended by the MEA and the Royal Government of Bhutan. Additionally, in Jan 2020, the two nations inked an agreement to prolong the Nehru-Wangchuck Scholarship Programme for an additional five years. The Indian government invites Buddhist students from Bhutan to India's famed Nalanda University, thus, extending the priceless spiritual tradition and ties that bind the two nations.

Also, the government schools in Delhi have introduced an educational program termed the 'Happiness Curriculum'. Although the inception of this idea is attributed to the efforts of the Delhi Government, it is widely acknowledged that the concept draws inspiration from Bhutan. In Feb 2018, Manish Sisodia, Deputy

Chief Minister, and Education Minister of Delhi, acknowledged the influence from Bhutan, saying, “As Bhutan is devising policies to elevate the Happiness Index among its populace, we, by crafting an interactive Happiness Curriculum for our school children, can not only enhance their individual development but also impact the trajectory of our society and nation”.¹⁰ These innovative policy notions should be expanded and consciously promoted on a larger scale. By empowering Bhutanese youth with education and skills, India has not only contributed to Bhutan’s development but has also strengthened people-to-people links that extend beyond national borders.

Buddhism, Yoga and Shared Values

The enduring influence of Buddhism and the propagation of yoga serve as pillars of soft power diplomacy between India and Bhutan. To develop and strengthen international relations, India’s foreign policy under PM Modi has placed a greater emphasis on promoting India’s ‘soft power’. The government’s adoption of the notion of ‘*Panchamrit*’ (five nectares), which includes five themes: ‘Dignity’, ‘Dialogue’, ‘Shared Prosperity’, ‘Regional and Global Security’, and ‘Cultural and Civilisational Ties’, has opened new pillars in India’s foreign policy architecture.

Political and cultural ideals and traditions of the Himalayan state of Bhutan have shaped India’s relationship with Bhutan. Two formal trips to Bhutan by Indian PM Shri Narendra Modi underlined the long history of cultural and spiritual links between India and Bhutan, as well as the need of expanding people-to-people contact between the two countries’ populations. The Indian state’s ties to Bhutan have been bolstered by India’s prominence in Buddhist thinking. “Without Buddha, this century cannot be Asia’s century”, said Indian PM Shri Narendra Modi in one of his statements at the United Nations General Assembly in New York city in Sep 2014.

“The common spiritual legacy here between two states is an unchangeable constant in their long age-relationship and complements India for their greatest gift of Buddhism to its people”, says Bhutan. As a result of the two nations’ strong ties in terms of culture and religion, there have been numerous cultural exchanges, including the annual celebration of Bhutan Week in India, pilgrimages to Buddhist holy places in both countries and the holding of Buddhist conferences.¹¹

Also, the common Buddhist background of the two countries has enabled them both to connect better and develop their humanitarian ties. Indian PM Narendra Modi expands the pursuits of Indian connections with the Himalayan country based on the ideals of integration and unity derived from the ancient cultural and civilisational concept of '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*' (The World is One Family) India's commitment in providing ongoing technical help and critical medical supplies to Bhutan during the current COVID-19 outbreak exemplifies the notion in practical reality.

The ancient practice of yoga is another important cultural link between India and Bhutan. Yoga, an ancient practice rooted in Indian culture, has emerged as a significant cultural link between India and Bhutan, strengthening the enduring bonds of their diplomatic relationship. This connection showcases the power of soft power diplomacy, fostering mutual understanding and friendship. Yoga's global popularity has resonated strongly with Bhutan, leading to collaborative efforts to promote physical and mental well-being. Many Bhutanese people are practicing yoga, an ancient Indian form of mental, physical, and spiritual discipline. When it comes to dealing with the pain, sorrow, and strains of modern life, they turn to yoga, which emphasises the concept of GNH as a yardstick by which to gauge their country's well-being. The Bhutanese have embraced this technique because it promotes physical and mental connection.

Furthermore, the foundation of India-Bhutan relations is firmly grounded in robust interpersonal connections. India holds allure for Bhutanese pilgrims, and the provisioning of facilities and licenses to tour operators merits careful consideration. Collaborative efforts between both nations can be orchestrated to streamline these processes effectively. Additionally, the spiritual connection between the two nations through Buddhism fosters a shared sense of values and ethics that contribute to their diplomatic synergy. It is essential to factor in the real-life encounters and perspectives of the people, as these can yield fresh insights for informing and shaping the diplomatic ethos of South Asian nations.

Infrastructure Development and Connectivity

India's role in supporting Bhutan's infrastructure development, including hydropower projects and road connectivity, has not only enhanced Bhutan's economic growth but has also underscored

India's commitment to Bhutan's progress. Cooperation between India and Bhutan in the hydropower industry is an excellent example of cooperation that benefits both countries.¹² Clean electricity is provided to India, while Bhutan earns export revenue. Several power agreements have been signed between the nations. The Jaldhaka Agreement, signed in 1961, marked the beginning of Indo-Bhutan hydropower cooperation. In 1987, the Chukha Hydropower Project (CHP) with a capacity of 336 Mega Watt (MW) was officially inaugurated, marking a watershed moment in Indo-Bhutan relations CHP.¹³ In the wake of CHP's overwhelming success and economic advantages, more projects were given the go-ahead. One of the largest collaborative projects between India and Bhutan, the 1,020 MW Tala Hydroelectric Project was also funded by the Government of India. Under the Framework Inter-Governmental Agreement, which the two nations signed in Apr 2014, public sector undertakings in both countries would build joint venture hydropower projects. Kholongchu, Bunakha, Wangchuk and Chamkhar are all included in this Inter-Governmental Agreement, which serves as a framework for developing the four hydroelectric power plants totalling 2120 MW on a joint venture-model between Public Sector Undertakings of the two nations. These four projects might get off the ground more quickly thanks to the Inter-Governmental Agreement, in addition to improving bilateral hydropower collaboration.¹⁴

Environmental Conservation

The mutual commitment of India and Bhutan to environmental conservation and sustainable practices further strengthens their diplomatic ties. Collaborative initiatives in preserving the Himalayan ecosystem and addressing climate change demonstrate shared values and a common goal, reinforcing the narrative of cooperation and mutual benefit. This connection underscores the potency of soft power diplomacy in fostering mutual respect and collaboration.

Both nations prioritise sustainable development and environmental preservation, echoing common values. Bhutan's commitment to maintaining carbon neutrality aligns with India's efforts to combat climate change. Such shared environmental objectives have facilitated a natural bridge for diplomatic cooperation. Collaborative initiatives, like joint conservation projects and knowledge exchange, demonstrate the tangible impact of their

soft power approach. This environmentally conscious partnership showcases how cultural and value-based ties can transcend political boundaries, fostering goodwill and friendship.

Exploring New Areas of Collaboration in India-Bhutan Relations

Bharat to Bhutan is a vision of shared prosperity that is anchored on the Indian state's belief that a partnership between the two countries can only succeed if it is based on people-to-people cooperation. Indian government's decision to strengthen ties with Bhutan's youth was motivated by the desire to meet the aspirational needs of Bhutan's youth, bridge the information gap to build trust and mutual understanding and facilitate collaboration to find innovative solutions to challenging problems that have a direct impact on the lives of young minds.

The Indian government emphasised the importance of capacity-building and decided to expand and diversify the collaboration between India and Bhutan to include new fields such as education, space research, information technology, digital payments, disaster management, and others in order to maintain the long-term relationship between the two countries. Building strong ties and an information highway among people, India's government emphasised the need to establish collaboration between India's National Knowledge Network and Druk Research and Education Network.

In addition, India encouraged the Bhutanese youth to keep pace with technical advancement by extending its cooperation in the fields of space, digital, and new technology. PM Narendra Modi inaugurated the Thimphu Ground Station erected by the Indian Space Research Organisation and welcomed the involvement of young Bhutanese scientists in India to work on building and launching Bhutan's satellite. As part of its efforts to improve educational opportunities for students throughout the Himalayan Kingdom, India established an e-library gateway for Bhutan. It is expected that the introduction of the Ru-Pay card and Bhutan's QR code payment system would further promote financial technology cooperation between the two nations by making cross-border QR code payments more easy, secure, and affordable.

For the sake of promoting a better understanding of the two nations and their inhabitants, both countries hold annual youth summits to bring together the next generation of diplomats and policymakers. In contrast, events like the India-Bhutan Start-up Conference help in establishing stronger future economic relations and foster more cooperation between the two countries' corporate sectors.

Conclusion

The India-Bhutan relationship exemplifies the profound impact of soft power diplomacy in building and nurturing bilateral ties. Historical, cultural, and geographical affinities, along with shared values, education initiatives, cultural exchanges, and collaborative projects, have collectively contributed to the growth of a relationship rooted in mutual respect and understanding. As both nations continue to harness the potential of soft power diplomacy, they pave the way for a future of enduring cooperation and shared prosperity.

Endnotes

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