

PROMOTING VIETNAM – INDIA CULTURAL DIPLOMACY THROUGH BUDDHISM AND YOGA

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Abstract

In the present era, when nation states are endeavoring to expand their influence in myriad ways, cultural diplomacy is epitomized in promoting bilateral and multilateral relations. To boost Vietnam – India relations, cultural diplomacy is perceived as the foundation for multi-dimensional connections. Using methods of analysis and synthesis, the article analyzes the cultural diplomacy policies of Vietnam and India; and its implementation through convergences in the traditions espoused by Buddhism and Yoga. The paper argues that Buddhism and Yoga are intertwined aspects of cultural diplomacy that both nations can utilize effectively to strengthen people-to-people connections, generating a multiplier impact for enhanced goodwill. If these aspects can be further optimally promoted, the overall Vietnam – India relations in all areas will foster a qualitative change.

Keywords: Cultural diplomacy, Soft power, Vietnam–India relations, Buddhism, Yoga, Transnational religious flows, Civilizational diplomacy

INTRODUCTION

“Culture has a strong penetrating power and can help achieve goals that political and military measures may not be able to achieve” (Vũ Dương Huân, 2010, p. 317). It was Bill Clinton, who delivered this message at the Cultural and Diplomatic Conference held in the US in 2000. Nations as India and China, as civilizational states have deep cultural moorings, which are reflected in their continuing cosmological narratives that remain central to their contemporary ways of life. India’s cultural influence in Southeast Asia has been documented by several historians including Sastri, N.A.K. (1949) Acharya, A. (2013), among several others.

India and Vietnam share close cultural affinities through the Champa civilization, also known as the Cham civilization, in Vietnam. The influence of India in the Cham civilization, from archaeology to language and Buddhism underpins an important component of the relations between the two countries. As with Hinduism, it was monks, traders and sailors who, through their voyages, transported Buddhism to Vietnam. According to historical accounts from China and France, Buddhism was brought into Vietnam by Indian monks via sea channels, much before it reached Southern China. Intellectuals with extensive understanding of Buddha and Buddhist teachings were common among Buddhist monks during that era. From Luy Lau, a Buddhist center in Tonkin (Giao Chau), Buddhism extended to Pengcheng and eventually to Luoyang, China. According to one theory, Theravada Buddhism was brought to Vietnam, before the advent of Mahayana Buddhism (Hoang Thi Tho, Tibetan Buddhist Encyclopedia).

Vietnamese people rever Buddha’s teachings and philosophy and seek to imbibe these in their way of life. In India, Buddhism is viewed as both a religion and a philosophy, especially in the states of Sikkim, Maharashtra and Tripura. In both nations, the values espoused in Buddhism have a profound influence on people’s lives. This will be discussed later in the paper.

In the present rapidly transforming times, both Vietnam and India have had to recalibrate their domestic and foreign policies to overcome difficulties and challenges; to take advantage of the opportunities for national development. In particular, cultural diplomacy finds greater visibility in

their respective foreign policies, especially after the two countries upgraded their relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2016.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural diplomacy in general and cultural diplomacy of Vietnam and India in particular have been the subject of research by many scholars in Vietnam, India and around the globe. Nicholas J. Cull (2008) viewed cultural diplomacy as one of the five elements of public diplomacy after listening, advocacy, international exchange, and international broadcasting. Laskar (2019) described Indian cultural diplomacy as the manifestation of activities including: sending of cultural troupes abroad, sending of works of art abroad, holding of festivals of India in foreign countries, propagating India's language and cultural heritage (such as promotion of Sanskrit and Hindi, promotion of Yoga, etc.) in foreign countries, propagating the works and thoughts of eminent Indians (such as Mahatma Gandhi, Gurudev R. Tagore and Swami Vivekananda) in foreign countries (Le Thi Hang Nga & Trieu Hong Quang, 2021).

In India, cultural diplomacy was considered 'a powerful tool for furthering (India's) interests in commercial, political and strategic fields' (Laskar, 2019). The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) is the leading institution for cultural diplomacy. For promoting India's culture abroad, ICCR maintains 37 full-fledged 'Cultural Centres' (ICC, later renamed as Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centres) in foreign countries; supporting the ICCs with local support on 'PPP' Model (Public-Private Partnership) in Spain and South Korea; deploying teachers of Indian culture on Yoga, Veda and Sanskrit to various ICCs; deploying India based teachers in the disciplines of Bharatanatyan, Kathak, Odissi, Kuchipudi, Hindi language etc. (MEA, 2017). ICCR undertakes activities including Yoga promotion (facilitating the celebration of International Day of Yoga in 172 countries in 2019), Sanskrit and Hindi promotion (organizing Hindi workshops, printing Hindi magazines), holding of Indian cultural festival abroad, sending cultural delegations abroad, establishing and maintaining 'Indian Studies' Chair in foreign universities, art/cultural exhibitions abroad, sending of statues/busts of great personalities of India, etc. (Le Thi Hang Nga & Trieu Hong Quang, 2021).

In Vietnam, cultural diplomacy was sometimes used interchangeably with public diplomacy. From Vietnam's perspective, cultural diplomacy is considered one of the three solid pillars of its comprehensive diplomacy, including political and economic diplomacy (Le Thi Hang Nga & Trieu Hong Quang, 2021). Although there is no consensus on the definition of cultural diplomacy, Vietnamese researchers and policy makers agree on its role in promoting the country's relations with the outside world and elevating national interests. As remarked by Vu Khoan, former Deputy Prime Minister cum Foreign Minister of Vietnam (2002-2006), 'the depth of diplomacy is the culture' (VOV5, 2016). Vietnam's diplomacy since ancient times has played an important role in turning danger into safety, weakness into strength and war into peace. Vietnam's cultural diplomacy has had a long history, starting from the Dai Viet period in the form of paying tribute and selecting representatives to maintaining relationships with big neighbors (Le Thi Hang Nga & Trieu Hong Quang, 2021).

On India-Vietnam cultural diplomacy, experts have highlighted the common values as well as cultural projects and a range of activities encompassed within the framework of their expanding strategic partnership, especially since 2007. People-led diplomacy has been a subject articulated by scholars and practitioners including Triệu Huy Hà (2022), Lê Thị Thu Hằng (2019). People's diplomacy¹ (*ngoại giao nhân dân*) is an agency to promote Vietnam's soft power. Cultural tools and diplomatic reports are vivid manifestations of people's diplomacy which help promote the country's soft power. That each Vietnamese citizen is a cultural ambassador and people's diplomacy is one of the unique creations of the Vietnamese revolution, has been stressed in the writings of Vũ Lê Thái Hoàng (2014), Nguyễn Phương Nga (2022), Lê Thị Hằng Nga, Huỳnh Thanh Loan (2022, 2023), Trần Đức Minh (2017).

¹ In Vietnamese, the term "ngoại giao nhân dân" (people's diplomacy) is often used, sometimes interchangeably with cultural diplomacy.

Indian authors have also emphasized the growing cultural connections. Daya Kishan Thussu (2014), analyzed the BJP Government's new way in applying Panchamrit principles to guide foreign policy, actively promoting India's image as a rising power at the global level. Sonu Trivedi (2017) has written about the significance of the diaspora in forging people's diplomacy. Parama Sinha Palit (2018) studied the role of media in Indian people's diplomacy and affirmed the contribution of digital media to India's international stature. Paramjit Sahai (2019) demonstrated that Indian cultural diplomacy embodies its ethos of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' (The World is One Family), and highlighted the 'idea of India' as expressed through the acceptance of diversity and celebration of pluralism. Reena Marwah and Le Thi Hang Nga (2021) highlighted the significance of cultural connections and have documented the traces of Indian culture in Champa civilization, from the 7th to the 15th century from language, religion to architecture and sculpture etc. as significant elements cementing the bilateral relationship.

It is evident then, from a review of the literature that both India and Vietnam consider culture as the axis of progressive partnerships and people's diplomacy as the essence of nations' capacity to project soft power. It is institutional linkages which must be established for continuing and edifying the relationship. Hence, both formal, the ICCR (discussed earlier), Swami Vivekananda Cultural Center (SVCC), and informal mechanisms as Friendship Organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), art groups, businesses community and research institutes, have lent support for the cultural diplomacy outreach initiatives, thereby helping to build a strong and long-lasting relationship between the two peoples. This was also affirmed by the President of India Ram Nath Kovind during his visit to Vietnam in 2018, 'in the ultimate analysis, the people-to-people network between Vietnam and India' was 'the foundation and the edifice' of the two countries' partnership (Ministry of External Affairs, November 20, 2018).

Hence, the cited works recognize that cultural diplomacy helps enhance mutual understanding between the people of the two countries, consolidating mutual political trust, and is the foundation for the development of relations between the two countries in other fields. However, in the above analysis on Vietnam – India cultural diplomacy, there is a serious gap, viz. of the Buddhist and Yoga connections. Hence, this article focuses on analyzing the role of Buddhism and Yoga within the framework of cultural diplomacy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper relies on four key theoretical perspectives in order to examine the contribution of Buddhism and Yoga in the Vietnam-India cultural diplomacy.

To begin with, soft power theory by Nye (2004) gives the general conceptual starting point. Soft power focuses on the strength of a country to lure and seduce instead of commandeer. Buddhism and Yoga are symbols of the civilization that can be discussed as the assets of India because they reflect the image of the country as culturally appealing, whereas Vietnam receptivity is the illustration of the interactions between soft power and historical memory, shared values, and cultural resonance. The article views exchanges between Vietnam and India Buddhism and yogic to be mutually supporting soft-power resources other than one-way influence.

Second, the analysis is structured with the help of cultural diplomacy frameworks by Cull (2008), Melissen (2005), and Laskar (2019). The taxonomy of the public diplomacy offered by Cull: listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange, and broadcasting makes it possible to define Buddhist pilgrimages, monastic training, and Yoga festivals as a structured diplomatic tool. The point that cultural diplomacy is best achieved when it is part of a long term relationship building as argued by Melissen fits the case of Vietnam and India perfectly as they have had a multi-decade relations built.

Third, the paper uses a transnational religious flows and civilizational diplomacy approach. The transnational religion scholars (Huntington, Mandaville) observe that religious identities do not recognise national boundaries, and as a result, cultural connexions are formed to influence

international politics. Buddhism traditionally moved in India to Vietnam via the sea routes; revival of the flows by pilgrimage, monasticism and spiritual tourism can be viewed as a kind of civilizational diplomacy that does not involve state based diplomacy.

Fourth, there is an ASEAN cultural diplomacy lens that offers regional background. The ASEAN is one that promotes cultural exchange as a platform of community-building. The relationship between Vietnam, and India in terms of Buddhism and Yoga can be attributed to greater ASEAN-India processes like the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation and ASEAN-India Cultural Exchange Programme. This local contextualization brings out how the Vietnam-India culture diplomacy is different compared to the other ASEAN partners because of more civilizational attachment.

METHODOLOGY

The research design adopted in this article is a qualitative research with the interpretation of documents. There were three types of sources, which were studied:

- (1) governmental records of Vietnamese and Indian governmental culture diplomacy and foreign policy;
- (2) scholarly works in the field of cultural diplomacy, soft power, and transnational Buddhism; and
- (3) timely and original documents e.g. speeches, policy statements, media coverage, and published materials by institutions (e.g., ICCR, SVCC, Vietnam Buddhist Sangha).

It conducts its analysis based on qualitative content analysis to identify the recurrent themes in between Buddhism and Yoga as diplomatic tools. Documents were coded according to such categories as soft-power strategy, religious diplomacy, people-to-people exchanges, and civilizational narratives. To understand the differences and similarities between the cultural diplomacy practises of Vietnam and India, comparison between the two nations was used to analyse the cultural diplomacy.

Such a methodology can be used since cultural diplomacy is conveyed via discourse, symbolism, and narrative of policies instead of using quantifiable data. The triangulation of the literature with the government publications and the activities of the public diplomacy enables the study to offer interpretive but at the same time grounded knowledge on how the Buddhism and Yoga influence bilateral relations.

VIETNAMESE CULTURAL DIPLOMACY POLICY

Several Vietnamese scholars are of the opinion that, the positive results in economic development of Vietnam are not only due to its internal strength but also due to its foreign policy of multilateralization and diversification of international relations. By November 2024, Vietnam had established diplomatic relations with 192/193 countries in the world and signed Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with 9 countries including China (2008), Russia (2012), India (2016), Korea (2022), the US (2023), Japan (2023), Australia (2024), France (2024) and Malaysia (2024) (Vietnam News Agency, November 21, 2024). Vietnam also participated in many free trade agreements with countries and regions around the world. Vietnam has signed 17 FTAs with more than 60 countries and territories; is negotiating 03 other FTAs and 01 economic framework (Indo-Pacific Economic Framework – IPEF) (Thế Hải, June 1, 2024).

Along with economic diplomacy, Vietnam has effectively implemented its cultural diplomacy strategy to enhance its international image. On February 14, 2011, the Prime Minister of Vietnam issued the Decision No. 208/QĐ-TTg on “The Cultural Diplomacy Strategy to 2020”, which affirmed that cultural diplomacy was one of the three pillars of Vietnam’s comprehensive and modern diplomacy, side by side with the economic and political diplomacy.

On November 30, 2021, the Government of Vietnam issued the Decision No. 2013/QĐ-TTg on ‘the Cultural Diplomacy Strategy to 2030’ which affirmed, ‘Cultural diplomacy is a common task of the

entire political system, to be implemented synchronously along with the pillars of State diplomacy, (Communist) Party diplomacy and people's diplomacy. All mechanisms and policies of cultural diplomacy must help promote the proactiveness, positivity and creativity of all organizations and individuals; effectively exploiting the potential of the whole society and of all classes of people, including the overseas Vietnamese'.

The overall objective of the Cultural Diplomacy Strategy to 2030 is to use cultural tools in diplomacy to deepen and stabilize Vietnam's relations with partners; pursuing national interests; creating and maintaining a peaceful and stable environment; mobilizing external resources; turning favorable conditions into resources for socio-economic development; and at the same time using diplomatic means to honor the values and beauty of Vietnamese culture; absorbing the quintessence of human culture, thereby arousing the aspiration to develop the country of Vietnam; enhancing soft power and international position of the country of Vietnam (Thư viện Pháp luật, November 30, 2021).

INDIAN CULTURAL DIPLOMACY POLICY

The reforms in the 1990s has helped the Indian economy overcome serious crisis and enter a period of rapid growth. Growth was particularly accelerated since the first decade of the 21st century. In the second decade of the 21st century, India aims to become the third largest world economy by 2030. Recent reports showed that India's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2023 reached around 3,5 trillion USD in fiscal year 2023 (Tradingeconomic.com, January 9, 2024). It is forecasted to reach 5 trillion USD by March 2026 if it maintains a growth rate of 6.5 – 7% in the coming years (Hương Thảo, July 15, 2023). The International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicted that India will become the world's third largest economy by 2030, possibly reaching this position as early as 2027. And by Goldman Sachs' estimate, India will become the second largest world economy by 2075 (Hương Thảo, July 15, 2023).

Along with the impressive economy development, India's prestige and international position have been increasingly enhanced. India's positive views on international issues, its balanced foreign policy as well as its skilful cultural diplomacy have helped enhance India's image to a large extent. Cultural diplomacy has been integrated within India's overall foreign policy in its engagement with other countries as well as in multilateral cooperative mechanism like ASEAN and Quad etc. As soft power is becoming an indispensable driving force to enhance the international status of countries in the world, the Indian Government has also been mindful of leveraging its rich cultural heritage to increase its soft power. The development of Buddhism and Buddhist heritage sites in recent years has bolstered India's connections with other nations. The Indians are also proud of Bollywood, Yoga, Hinduism as well as its rich tradition of philosophical thinking. In addition, India has a big wealthy and politically active Indian diaspora in many political and economic centers of the world (Ngô Xuân Bình, 2019, p. 286). However, for many years, these 'soft power assets' had not been harnessed optimally and mainstreamed within State policy goals.

India's soft power policy has changed remarkably since Narendra Modi became the Prime Minister of India in 2014. In seeking to strengthen India's international stature, Prime Minister Modi advocated the use of soft power to build 'India's own brand' (Ngô Xuân Bình, 2019, p. 290). Henceforth, PM Modi's soft power policy focused on three goals, i.e. proactively shouldering global responsibilities; increasing outreach to Indian diaspora and developing cultural diplomacy. Within these, cultural diplomacy focused on two main aspects: traditional culture and contemporary culture. In terms of traditional culture, the emphasis was to focus on civilisational philosophical and religious traditions that effectively serve cultural diplomacy. India recognizes the significance of religious traditions embedded in Buddhism as special cultural resources. It recognized Buddhism as an important diplomatic tool to promote connectivity with countries in Asia, especially South East and East Asia, where Buddhism occupies an important place in the spiritual life of the people. Even today, Buddhism continues to be state religion in several countries in East and South East Asia. At the Global Hindu – Buddhist Initiative Conference held on 03-05 September 2015 at New Delhi and Bodhgaya, Prime Minister Modi as the host of the Conference declared that, 'Without Buddhism, this century cannot be

the century of Asia' (Đỗ Khương Mạnh Linh, 2017, pp.17-23). Prime Minister Modi hoped that through Buddhism, India would become an important connecting link among different South East Asian countries (Đỗ Khương Mạnh Linh, 2017, pp.17-23).

The implementation of India's cultural diplomacy aims to restore and strengthen India's cultural ties with the rest of the world, by interweaving its ancient values for global peace and harmony. A distinctive feature of Indian culture is that its reach was so peaceful that it became seamlessly ingrained into the indigenous cultural stratum of the host society. ICCR President Karan Singh once asserted, 'Culture has no boundaries and using it as a way to interact with the masses is the most effective way to win people's hearts in the era of globalization' (Paramjit Sahai, 2013).

PROMOTING VIETNAM – INDIA CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

Vietnam – India diplomatic relations were officially established on January 7, 1972 and have undergone more than 50 years of development and achieved many important results in all fields. Over the past five decades, Vietnam – India bilateral relations have continuously developed, from full diplomatic relation in 1972, the two countries gradually upgraded bilateral relations to Comprehensive Partnership in 2003, Strategic Partnership in 2007 and Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2016. On December 21, 2020, the two countries signed the Joint Vision for Peace, Prosperity and People which is the guideline for current and future Vietnam – India relations.

Cultural diplomacy tools have been effective in realizing the third important pillar, i.e., the 'People' pillar of the 2021 Joint Vision. In Vietnamese perspective, Vietnam – India cultural diplomacy is conducted at two levels, i.e. the State level and the people's level. This article approaches Vietnam – India cultural diplomacy promotion through the aspects of Buddhism and Yoga.

Buddhism

One of the most popular religions worldwide is Buddhism. The teachings of Siddhārtha Gautama, also called Gautama Buddha or just Buddha, who lived in India from approximately 563 BCE to 480 BCE, are the foundation of this India-born religion. While Buddhism is viewed as a religion in countries as Thailand, Myanmar, it is a philosophy to others. It has been documented, according to a 2019 Pew Research Center article, that while many Asians may adhere to Buddhist rituals and practices but do not identify as Buddhists. Worldwide 6.6 percent of people are Buddhists; these constitute approximately 506 million of the global population (World Population Review, Buddhist Countries 2024).

India and Vietnam have had religious interactions very early in history. Buddhism is believed to have been introduced to Vietnam around the 3rd century BC, during the reign of Emperor Ashoka in India. After being introduced to Vietnam, Buddhism soon became a popular religion, having a strong influence on the thinking and consciousness of the Vietnamese people. With the passage of time, Buddhism has blended into the traditional culture of Vietnam and become an inseparable part of Vietnamese culture. In the authors' opinion, Buddhism has become an invisible but solid thread connecting the two countries today. Therefore, cultural diplomacy between Vietnam and India in the field of Buddhism constitutes an important element of the bilateral relationship.

Indian Buddhist cultural diplomacy is demonstrated by the fact that the Government of India granted scholarships to Vietnamese monks and nuns. Since Vietnam's independence in 1945 and India's independence in 1947, a large number of monks and nuns from Vietnam went to India to study Buddhism. They returned to Vietnam and in their different positions contributed significantly to promoting the Buddhist connection between the two countries in modern times.

In post-independence Vietnam, the Most Venerable Thích Minh Châu was perhaps the first monk to go to India to study Buddhism in the years 1955-1963. He was the topper of the masters program in Pali and Abhidhamma. He continued his doctoral studies and successfully completed the doctoral program. He was awarded the doctoral degree with praise by the President of India, S. Radhakrishnan

at the graduation ceremony. After graduation, he was invited to stay as a lecturer at Nava Nalanda Mahavihara, Bihar University. After returning to Vietnam, he compiled the Theravada Tripitaka and exerted a great influence on Vietnamese Buddhism.

Both countries have a sizeable Buddhist population. In India, they have a major presence in Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Maharashtra and Himachal Pradesh. In 2024, there were close to 10 million followers of Buddhism in India. Vietnam has 15.6 million followers of Buddhism (World Population Review, Buddhist Countries 2024).

In recent decades, there have been Buddhist exchange activities between Vietnam and India, including the organizing of international Buddhist conferences, festivals and visits by Buddhist leaders from both countries. Vietnam hosted the World Buddhist Congress, the Great Buddhist Festival of India, organized cultural festivals, academic seminars on Buddhism as well as Buddhist cultural heritage, interaction of Buddhist monks and nuns, pilgrimages to Buddhist holy places etc. Buddhist delegations from Vietnam have regularly visited India to learn about Buddhism, increasing mutual understanding and cooperation. In 2007, the Vietnamese Buddhist delegation led by the Most Venerable Thích Tấn Đạt joined a pilgrimage of more than 100 people from five countries in the Mekong region (Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia). The delegation visited and worshipped Buddhist relics in the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh such as the ruins of Nalanda Buddhist University, Mahabodhi Stupa, Sarnath ruins etc. (Lê Nghiê, 2007). Vietnam hosted Vesak Day in 2008, 2014 and 2019 with the participation of Buddhist delegations from more than 100 different countries, including India. The next Vesak is to be organized in Ho Chi Minh City of Vietnam in May 2025. These events received high appreciation from Indian Buddhist delegations. The events honored not only the life and teachings of the Buddha but also were the special occasions for countries, especially Vietnam and India, to demonstrate religious solidarity and cultural diplomacy.

Hence, Buddhist diplomacy has become a prominent aspect of India's foreign policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Visits to Buddhist sites has acquired prominence during official visits of Vietnamese and Indian leaders. On September 3, 2016, during a one-day visit to Hanoi and amid a very busy schedule, Prime Minister Modi still took time to visit Quán Sứ pagoda, recalling the age-old Buddhist connections between the two countries. In May 2019, the Indian President Venkaiah Naidu visited Vietnam to attend the 16th Vesak, demonstrating the Indian Government's respect for Buddhist activities. India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar visit to Vietnam from October 15-18, 2023, included meetings with dignitaries of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha and visiting Phật Tích pagoda in Bắc Ninh province. On the Vietnamese side, in March 2018, President Trần Đại Quang commenced his visit to India by visiting Bodhgaya, where the Buddha attained enlightenment. Many visits to India by Vietnam's leaders also included a visit to the land of the Buddha in their itinerary.

Over the years, hundreds of Vietnamese monks, nuns and Buddhist followers travel to India to study Buddhism at various universities. To take an example, The Most Venerable Thích Đức Thiện, Vice-President cum General-Secretary of the Executive Council of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, spent many years studying in India and graduated with a doctorate in Buddhist studies from University of Delhi. Since returning to Vietnam, he has made significant contributions to promoting the bilateral relationship. He was awarded the prestigious Padma Shri Award by the Government of India in 2018. In addition, many monks and nuns in different positions in the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha and in Vietnam Buddhist Universities in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City have been actively contributing to strengthening the connection between Vietnam and India. In our opinion, Buddhist cultural diplomacy plays an important role in strengthening friendship among our peoples.

Yoga

Along with Buddhism, Yoga is a bridge connecting Vietnam and India. Buddhist philosophy holds that, the greatest assets of a person are health and wisdom, both of which can be attained through the practice of Yoga. It is this convergence and acceptability that has brought popularity for Buddhism and Yoga among the Vietnamese people. Both nations perceive the value of Yoga as an effective tool

of cultural diplomacy strengthening bilateral relations.

Yoga is a school of Indian philosophy and symbolizes Indian spirituality. It is a method of training and practice to attain a comprehensive physical, mental and spiritual development of each individual. Yoga is considered a priceless gift of ancient Indian tradition to the world. After it was introduced to Vietnam, the Vietnamese people realized the outstanding effects of Yoga in improving an individual's overall health and well-being. The adoption of yoga as an enabler of holistic fitness has garnered huge acceptance by young Vietnamese. Over the past decade, International Yoga Day has been held annually in Vietnam. Yoga has also become one of the themes mentioned in the meetings of leaders during discussions on cultural relations and people-to-people exchanges.

The popularity of yoga in Vietnam has expanded at a phenomenal pace. From housing societies to sports centres to recreational clubs, Yoga classes are being held. Short term Yoga courses at the (SVCC), Yoga seminars organized by SVCC in coordination with other institutions have made significant contributions to promoting and spreading Yoga in Vietnam. Along with the spread of Yoga, Indian culture has also blended and permeated the Vietnamese way of life. As pointed out by Sandeep Arya, former ambassador of India to Vietnam, while in history, Buddhism and Hinduism were the major cultural links between Vietnam and India, in the present times, Yoga is seen as a bridge in the new era to connect the friendship between the two countries (Thành Đạt, August 13, 2023). Given that yoga embodies life's philosophy, these ideas also get disseminated, thereby bringing Indian culture closer to the host people (Thành Đạt, August 13, 2023). The meditative practices embodied in Buddhism coalesce with Yogic postures, hence providing the practitioner with mental and physical well-being.

According to the Vietnam Yoga Federation, as of 2021, Vietnam had over 4300 Yoga Clubs with about 555,000 people practicing regularly. With more than 70 organizational members and over 300 official individual members, many Yoga clubs and groups have been established, along with millions of people practicing this sport on their own at their homes (*Tạp chí Việt Nam hội nhập*, December 02, 2021).

As a Comprehensive Strategic Partner of India and also a supporter of the United Nations Resolution on establishing the International Yoga Day, Vietnam has played an important role as India's partner in promoting and celebrating the International Yoga Day over the years. Vietnam was selected by the Government of India as one of the countries included in the Global Yoga Ring. On International Yoga Day every year, the Embassy of India in Hanoi organized the event to facilitate the participation of many Yoga enthusiasts. Simultaneously, the Consulate General of India in Ho Chi Minh City organized Yoga Day event in many southern provinces of Vietnam, including Ho Chi Minh City, An Giang, Cần Thơ, Khánh Hòa, Bình Thuận, Ninh Thuận, Đắk Nông, Đồng Tháp, Bình Định, Đắk Lắk, Phú Yên, Tiền Giang, Sóc Trăng, Đồng Nai, Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu. On August 12, 2023, the Yoga Festival at Mỹ Đình National Stadium in Hanoi set a record for the number of participants and performers at the largest Yoga event ever in Vietnam, with the presence of about 5000 people.

Buddhism and Yoga are not just cultural artefacts but also a strategic tool that was placed in the changing diplomatic practise. To India they strengthen a civilizational identity at the heart of its soft-power politics; to Vietnam they form arenas through which to draw external allies outside of the politics of major powers. The Vietnam-India relationship, unlike any other ASEAN-India relations, i.e. Singapore (economic-driven), Thailand (Theravada-driven), or Indonesia (diaspora-driven) one, is influenced by a peculiar combination of historical memory, the Cham heritage, and shared Buddhist narratives. This mix enables cultural diplomacy to act as a stabilising system that cushions the relationship against the changes in the regional geopolitics to the same end that it facilitates larger-scale cooperation between ASEAN and India.

DEBATES AND CHALLENGES IN BUDDHIST AND YOGA DIPLOMACY

Regardless of a good trend of the Vietnam cultural diplomacy with India, there are various controversies and constraints that should be noted.

Promoting Vietnam – India Cultural Diplomacy through Buddhism and Yoga

To begin with, the religious disparities of Buddhism influence relations in discrete forms. Vietnam adheres to a syncretic tradition of Mahayana Buddhism, folk customs and Confucian-Taoist influences, whereas the modern Buddhist resurgence of India builds on therapeutic Buddhism traditions of the Ambedkarite Neo-Buddhist school and the Theravada tradition. Such divergences on doctrines and history can restrain serious institutional cooperation among the Buddhist institutions.

Second, Buddhist diplomacy is not practised in empty geopolitical space. Both India and China make use of Buddhist legacy as soft-power in Southeast Asia. The China push to popularize Nalanda Studies and Buddhist talks sponsored by state has developed the competition of the narratives of diplomatic practitioners. The fact that Vietnam is balancing its relations with India and China implies that Buddhist diplomacy should be waged carefully so as not to seem geopolitically aligned.

Third, there is Yoga diplomacy which has sensibilities. Some countries of Southeast Asia have discussed Yoga in terms of its religious roots, commercialization and it being culturally appropriated. Even though the Yoga trend in Vietnam has been adopted mostly positively, some academics believe that this trend of speedy privatisation and understanding of Yoga as a form of fitness threaten to take the cultural meaning of Yoga and undermine its role as soft-power on behalf of India.

Fourth, there is institutional limitation with people-to-people diplomacy. Pilgrimage and monastic interactions thrive, but there are few research projects and academic facilities linking Vietnamese and Indian Buddhist organisations. Further limitations to deeper academic participation are the language barriers and funding limitations.

The consideration of these difficulties contributes to the balance in the analysis and corresponds with the academic requirements of the critical discussion.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The following are some policy suggestions for Vietnam and India to advance bilateral relations from the standpoint of cultural diplomacy in the areas of Buddhism and Yoga:

First, in terms of perception, it is important to recognize that the connection through Buddhism and Yoga helps promote bilateral relations directly in the fields of educational and cultural cooperation. In recent years, hundreds of Vietnamese monks and nuns have enrolled for Buddhist studies in India. The authors of this paper are of the opinion that, it is the people's connection that is the most important factor creating qualitative changes in bilateral relations in the long term. Concurrently, connections through Buddhism and Yoga indirectly help promote bilateral cooperation in trade, investment and tourism, thereby facilitating greater economic engagement. Buddhism and Yoga are reflective of Indian culture and philosophy, which enable people of both countries to improve the understanding of each other's lifestyles, perspectives, and worldviews. Evidently, this has the potential to harness positive emotions and a desire to collaborate.

This would also help both sides overcome barriers arising from prejudices about each other which have long been formed due to lack of authentic information and exposure to negative media. The ultimate aim of cultural diplomacy is to ensure inclusive and comprehensive development. Buddhism and Yoga, hence must become pillars of mutual partnership, with the objective of realizing the goals of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and the 2024-2028 Action Plan (already signed by the leaders of the two countries).

Thus, cooperation in educational, training and human resource development, especially high-quality human resources, must be prioritized. This would facilitate the exchanges of teachers and students and sharing of information between universities in Vietnam and India, particularly between Vietnamese and Indian Buddhist institutions, including those universities and institutions far from the capital New Delhi. This would contribute to creating more cohesion in the relationship between the two countries on a people-centered basis.

Second, promoting research cooperation, joint research projects, sharing of academic materials and

information, exchanges of scholars between Vietnam and Indian research institutes must be facilitated. The study of Vietnam in India and of India in Vietnam remains modest and limited to a few scholars, despite the upswing in bilateral ties. A strong Vietnamese research group on India and a strong Indian research group on Vietnam would help identify the potential, opportunities, challenges, strengths and weaknesses for solidifying cooperation. They would also help connect domestic partners of the two countries. Understanding each other in the right way is not easy, especially in the age of information technology when we have access to different and contradictory sources of information today. The two sides need to comprehend each other's aspirations, limitations and possibilities, thereby promoting bilateral cooperation in all fields.

Third, SVCC should facilitate more Yoga classes and workshops in Hanoi and other provinces of Vietnam. Although Yoga is very popular in Vietnam, the number of Vietnamese who understand and practice Yoga in the correct way remains limited.

Fourth, India and Vietnam have already intensified efforts to foster stronger people-to-people exchanges, employing measures such as the expansion of direct flights to and from major cities as New Delhi, Mumbai, Ahmedabad from India and Hanoi, Danang and Ho Chi Minh city through Vietjet, Vietnam Airlines as well as the Indian carrier Indigo airlines. Additionally, there has been simplification of visa procedures for enhanced travel facilitation, and proactive promotion of tourism. Given that there is immense scope for boosting tourism related to several Buddhist sites, tour operators can be incentivized to include these in the itinerary. Visits to Buddhist centres in Vietnam such as Bái Đính – Tràng An (Ninh Bình province) and Tam Chúc (Hà Nam province) has been made much easier through highways and other logistics facilities. The Indian Government has announced special budgetary provision in the budget speech on February 1, 2025, for promotion of infrastructure in locations that hold specific significance to the life and times of Lord Buddha. Bodh Gaya, Rajgir, Vaishali, and Nalanda in Bihar, Sarnath and Kushinagar, Shravasti in Uttar Pradesh, and Buddhist sites located in other parts of the country will attract tourists from Vietnam (Abhishek Kumar, Feb 01, 2025).

Fifth, India can also initiate a journey for the relics of Lord Buddha to Vietnam, as had been organized by India's Ministry of Culture, when in February 2024, a 26-day exposition was undertaken in cities of Thailand (Ministry of Culture, PIB Delhi, Feb 20, 2024). Evidently, an initiative of this nature must be with the consensus of the host country. Vietnam can promote its Buddhist connection with India by welcoming such initiative.

CONCLUSION

Thus, Buddhism and Yoga can become significant pillars of cultural diplomacy, invigorating Vietnam – India relations in areas beyond the realm of traditional aspects of Cham connections, architectural and ritual observances. It is crucial to stress that the relationship between Vietnam and India is not just historical but also cultural and civilizational. The current revivalism of India – Vietnam cultural and civilizational ties is an embodiment of recognizing the importance of Buddhist connection in bilateral engagement. This has also resulted in the Government of India's vision for bringing tourists to Buddhist sites in India; this is embodied in the 2025 budget document which also seeks to beef up infrastructure in 50 tourist spots.

Based on cultural commitments in the agreements, the two countries have successfully implemented many cultural, educational and religious exchange programs, and responded positively to grave challenges as the COVID-19 pandemic. Nurturing the Buddhist connection will also help to strengthen linkages between Indian and Vietnamese architects and artists who can help preserve Buddhist temples, pagodas, monasteries and statues. The physical connections through frequent flights, identification of Buddhist sites, and exchange of yoga teachers will fortify the cultural and religious narratives of India and Vietnam thereby fostering mutual understanding and appreciation between the two societies.

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