การสำรวจกลยุทธ์อำนาจโน้มนำของอินเดียในประเทศไทย: ผลกระทบของสื่อสังคมออนไลน์ต่อการทูตทางวัฒนธรรม

Exploring India's Soft Power Strategy in Thailand: The Impact of Social Media on Cultural Diplomacy

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Abstract

This article conceptualizes India's soft power strategy toward Thailand through the theoretical intersection of cultural diplomacy and digital diplomacy. Drawing on Nye's notion of soft power and subsequent frameworks on networked public diplomacy, the study argues that India's engagement increasingly depends on its capacity to convert cultural resources, such as religion, media, and heritage, into communicative capital within the digital sphere.

While India's strength lies in its cultural continuity grounded in shared ancient civilizational linkages, its digital execution is constrained by institutional fragmentation and limited localization. This incoherence weakens the consistency of India's narrative, allowing regional competitors, China, Japan, and South Korea, to dominate Thailand's attention economy through more coordinated and technologically integrated soft power models. The article concludes that strengthening cross-institutional collaboration, developing localized content strategies, and aligning cultural narratives with digital infrastructures are essential steps for India to enhance its credibility, visibility, and long-term sustainability as a digital soft power actor in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: India, Thailand, Soft Power, Cultural Diplomacy, Social Media

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้นำเสนอกรอบแนวคิดเพื่ออธิบายยุทธศาสตร์อำนาจโน้มนำของอินเดียต่อประเทศไทยผ่านการเชื่อมโยงระหว่างการทูตทางวัฒนธรรมและการทูตดิจิทัล โดยอ้างอิงแนวคิดอำนาจโน้มนำและกรอบแนวคิดการทูตสาธารณะเชิงเครือข่าย เพื่อชี้ว่าการมีส่วนร่วมของอินเดียในยุคดิจิทัลขึ้นอยู่กับความสามารถในการแปลงทุนทางวัฒนธรรม ศาสนา สื่อ และมรดกให้กลายเป็นทุนทางการสื่อสารในโลกดิจิทัลมากยิ่งขึ้น แม้ว่าจุดแข็งของอินเดียจะอยู่ที่ความต่อเนื่องทางวัฒนธรรมซึ่งมีรากฐานมาจากการเชื่อมโยงอารยธรรมโบราณร่วมกัน แต่การดำเนินการทางดิจิทัลยังคงถูกจำกัดด้วยปัญหาความไม่เป็น

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เอกภาพของสถาบันและการปรับเนื้อหาไม่สอดคล้องกับบริบทท้องถิ่น ความไม่สอดคล้องกันนี้ทำให้ความสอดคล้องของเรื่องราวในอินเดียอ่อนแอลง ทำให้คู่แข่งในภูมิภาคอย่างจีน ญี่ปุ่น และเกาหลีใต้ สามารถครอบงำเศรษฐกิจที่เป็นจุดสนใจของประเทศไทย ผ่านรูปแบบอำนาจโน้มนำที่มีการประสานงานและบูรณาการทางเทคโนโลยีมากขึ้น บทความสรุปว่าการเสริมสร้างความร่วมมือระหว่างสถาบัน การพัฒนากลยุทธ์เนื้อหาในท้องถิ่น และการจัดแนวเรื่องเล่าทางวัฒนธรรมให้สอดคล้องกับโครงสร้างพื้นฐานดิจิทัลเป็นขั้นตอนสำคัญสำหรับอินเดียในการเพิ่มความน่าเชื่อถือ การมองเห็น และความยั่งยืนในระยะยาวในฐานะผู้มีบทบาทด้านพลังอ่อนทางดิจิทัลในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้

คำสำคัญ: อินเดีย ไทย อำนาจโน้มนำ การทูตเชิงวัฒนธรรม สื่อสังคมออนไลน์

1. Introduction

In an era where international relations have evolved from the dominance of Hard Power to the dynamics of Soft Power, nations increasingly rely on attraction, persuasion, and shared values rather than coercion or force to achieve diplomatic objectives (Nye, 2008). Soft Power, as conceptualized by Joseph Nye, refers to a country's ability to influence others through cultural appeal, political values, and foreign policies perceived as legitimate and moral. It facilitates cooperation and fosters long-term goodwill that reinforces a nation's global influence.

India stands as one of the most compelling examples of a country effectively deploying soft power in the contemporary international system. With its deep historical, religious, and cultural linkages with Thailand, India's soft power operates on both historical and modern fronts. Historically, India's civilizational influence in Southeast Asia has been evident through the spread of Buddhism and Hindu philosophy, linguistic borrowings such as Sanskrit and Pali roots in the Thai language, and the adaptation of the Ramayana epic into Thailand's Ramakien (Kaewkunok, 2022; Goswami, 2024). These exchanges form a shared cultural foundation that continues to shape the bilateral relationship between India and Thailand in the 21st century.

In the post-independence period, India's diplomacy, guided by the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" (Panchsheel) and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), further strengthened its image as a principled and peace-oriented nation (Auapirojkit, 2022). Within this framework, cultural diplomacy became an essential component of India's outreach strategy to Asia, particularly through initiatives led by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and other state-sponsored bodies. However, the rise of digital communication has transformed the traditional landscape of diplomacy. Today, digital media, especially social media platforms play a central role in facilitating transnational cultural engagement and in extending the reach of India's soft power initiatives (Bjola & Holmes, 2015; Jin, 2024).

Digital diplomacy enables countries to engage directly with foreign publics through interactive, participatory spaces (Manor, 2019). Social media platforms have emerged as powerful instruments of cultural diplomacy, enabling governments and institutions to share cultural narratives, promote events, and engage in real-time dialogue with global audiences (Amaresh, 2024). For India, these tools have become especially vital in promoting its Act East Policy, a concept introduced by Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India, which emphasizes regional engagement with ASEAN countries, including Thailand. In Thailand, India's embassy and affiliated institutions have leveraged social media to highlight key cultural assets, such as Bollywood, Yoga, and Indian festivals, as vehicles for attraction and familiarity. Campaigns such as the International Yoga Day celebrations and the Festival of India in Thailand have effectively showcased India's cultural heritage, values, and traditions while deepening public participation and understanding among Thai audiences (Embassy of India, Bangkok, 2017). These initiatives demonstrate how India's soft power strategy combines traditional cultural diplomacy with contemporary digital engagement to maintain its relevance in a competitive regional context.

Therefore, this article examines how India utilizes social media to project and enhance its soft power diplomacy in Thailand, focusing on how digital media reinforces cultural engagement and influences public perception. By analyzing India's communication patterns, cultural narratives, and online diplomatic activities, the study aims to analyze how India employs social media as a strategic tool to project and enhance its soft power in Thailand through digital diplomacy and to discuss the implications and challenges of India's digital soft power engagement in shaping cultural understanding and bilateral relations between India and Thailand.

2. Literature review
2.1 Soft Power and the Role of Digital Media in Cultural Diplomacy

Joseph Nye's (2008) notion of Soft Power redefines power in international relations as the capacity to shape others' preferences through attraction, persuasion, and cultural legitimacy. Rather than relying on coercive or material resources, soft power derives from intangible assets such as values, cultural capital, and credibility. However, in the 21st century, this concept has expanded beyond Nye's initial formulation. Scholars now recognize that the exercise of attraction increasingly occurs within mediated environments, where communication technologies become sites for symbolic struggle and cultural negotiation (Melissen, 2005; Zaharna, 2010). In this context, power is not merely possessed but performed through representation, visibility, and interaction. Moreover, digital media has restructured the communicative foundations of diplomacy. Building on McLuhan's (1964, as cited in Kaewthep, 2012) concept of the "global village", the diffusion of online

networks and algorithmic platforms has created a condition of simultaneity and connectivity that transcends the traditional state-to-state paradigm. Social media, in particular, transforms soft power from a top-down dissemination of culture into a horizontal, participatory process of meaning-making. As Jin (2024) argues, digital platforms not only amplify cultural symbols but also enable audiences to reinterpret and recontextualize them, thereby turning cultural diplomacy into a co-created narrative.

Within this communicative ecology, digital cultural diplomacy serves as a forum for both persuasion and negotiation. Governments no longer monopolize message control; instead, they engage in a networked dialogue with transnational publics who can affirm, contest, or remix official narratives. This reflects what Bjola and Holmes (2015) describe as networked diplomacy, in which diplomatic influence depends on interactivity and relational trust rather than hierarchical authority. Hence, the integration of digital media into cultural diplomacy marks a paradigmatic shift from the symbolic export of culture to the construction of shared cultural imaginaries.

India's soft power exemplifies this transformation. The diffusion of Indian cultural forms, such as Bollywood, Yoga, festivals, and cuisine, has historically sustained India's cultural presence in Thailand. However, digital media has magnified its visibility and emotional reach. The Embassy of India in Bangkok, through its official Facebook and X accounts, mobilizes these cultural symbols as communicative resources, staging India as both a familiar neighbor and a civilizational partner. Events such as the International Yoga Day campaigns or the Festival of India in Thailand demonstrate how digital mediation translates traditional cultural diplomacy into an effective, networked performance of identity (Embassy of India, Bangkok, 2017; Goswami, 2024). In these digital spaces, attraction is not unidirectional. It is dialogic, negotiated, and continuously reconstructed.

Thus, Soft Power in the digital age should be understood not as a static resource but as a dynamic communicative practice. The use of digital media recasts cultural diplomacy as a hybrid form of political communication where symbolic capital, algorithmic visibility, and audience participation intersect to define the contours of international influence.

2.2 Digital Diplomacy and India's Engagement with Thailand

The emergence of Digital Diplomacy represents a profound reconfiguration of how states engage in international communication. As Bjola and Holmes (2015) contend, digital diplomacy is not simply a technological adaptation of traditional practices, but a transformation of diplomacy's epistemic structure from closed, elite-driven negotiation to open, interactive communication. Digital platforms enable states to shape their national image and construct narratives of legitimacy within the global information order. In this sense, digital diplomacy is the operational dimension of Soft Power, the process through which cultural attraction becomes strategically enacted (Manor, 2019).

Pamment (2013) articulates three analytical dimensions of digital diplomacy: strategic communication, public engagement, and e-governance transparency. The first reflects a controlled dissemination of national narratives; the second redefines diplomacy as a dialogical process; and the third underscores the performative dimension of openness as a source of credibility. Together, these dimensions shift the logic of international influence from broadcasting to relational communication. They also correspond with Nye's (2008) triad of soft power resources, culture, political values, and foreign policy, each of which is now mediated through the interactive affordances of digital media.

India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) institutionalized digital diplomacy as a strategic pillar under its Act East Policy. In Thailand, the Embassy's digital initiatives function as both representational acts and discursive interventions. Its social media campaigns are not merely promotional; they articulate India's identity as a democratic, pluralistic, and culturally rich nation in contrast yet complementarity with other Asian powers. Through Facebook posts celebrating festivals, YouTube videos on yoga, and live-streamed events featuring cultural exchanges, India's digital diplomacy constructs what Nye would call a narrative of attraction. These practices are reinforced by educational and cultural outreach under the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), which bridges state-led and people-to-people communication.

From a critical perspective, these engagements exemplify what Zaharna (2010) terms relational soft power, a form of influence built on empathy, interactivity, and shared symbolic spaces rather than unilateral persuasion. By foregrounding cultural resonance over political assertion, India's digital diplomacy in Thailand operates as an effective network that sustains mutual recognition. Yet, this strategy is not without tension; algorithmic hierarchies, linguistic barriers, and competing narratives from other regional actors such as Japan, South Korea, and China complicate India's visibility and discursive authority (Mattoo, 2023).

In conclusion, India's engagement with Thailand illustrates how digital diplomacy mediates the performative dimension of Soft Power. It transforms diplomacy into a communicative practice of representation, negotiation, and resonance. Within Thailand's digital ecosystem, India's online presence embodies both opportunity and contestation, demonstrating how cultural attraction is maintained, reimagined, and challenged in the networked public sphere.

3. India's Soft Power Strategy in Thailand: Historical Continuity and Digital Transformation
3.1 Civilizational and Cultural Continuities

The foundation of India-Thailand relations is rooted in centuries of civilizational exchange that long predates the establishment of modern nation-states. India's soft power

strategy toward Thailand rests on this profound cultural, spiritual, and historical continuity, which continues to define the trajectory of bilateral relations. As Kaewkunok (2022) notes, India's influence in the region began through religious transmission, linguistic exchange, and artistic adaptation that together shaped the cultural identity of Southeast Asia. These cultural flows represent what Nye (2008) conceptualizes as "soft power through attraction," achieved not through material coercion but through the diffusion of ideas, beliefs, and shared values.

In the ancient period, India's civilizational presence was manifested primarily through the spread of Buddhism and Hindu philosophical traditions. Theravada Buddhism, the dominant faith in Thailand, was transmitted through Sri Lanka but retained its intellectual roots in ancient India's early Buddhist schools. This spiritual connection is reinforced by linguistic evidence, Thai language incorporates numerous Pali and Sanskrit terms, particularly within the domains of religion, governance, and law. Terms such as Dhamma (ธรรมะ) and Amnat (อำนาจ) originate from Indic linguistic structures, reflecting deep semantic borrowings. Literary traditions further strengthened this linkage: the Indian Ramayana was adapted into Thailand's national epic Ramakien, exemplifying cultural reinterpretation and localization (Srichampa, 2015).

Moreover, Indian architectural and artistic influences are evident in Thai temple designs inspired by Gupta and Pallava styles, as well as in the Devaraja (divine kingship) concept that shaped Thai royal ideology. The shared philosophical and spiritual ethos between the two civilizations created an enduring foundation for cross-cultural understanding and mutual respect. As Goswami (2024) observes, these historical ties function as "civilizational capital," forming an intangible yet potent reservoir of goodwill that India continues to draw upon in its contemporary soft power diplomacy.

3.2 Post-Independence Cultural Diplomacy and the Look East Policy

Following independence in 1947, India sought to reimagine its role in Asia by combining moral leadership with pragmatic diplomacy. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's foreign policy was anchored in the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" (Panchsheel), emphasizing sovereignty, non-interference, and mutual respect-principles that resonated deeply with many Asian nations emerging from colonialism (Auapirojkit, 2022). Within this framework, India positioned itself as a proponent of peace and a model of decolonized democracy, which became the philosophical underpinning of its soft power.

To institutionalize its cultural outreach, India established the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) in 1950 to promote international understanding through cultural exchange, education, and people-to-people connections. This early post-independence initiative marked the beginning of India's modern soft power apparatus. The ICCR coordinated art exhibitions, music performances, and scholarship programs designed to

foster intercultural learning and to project an image of India as a pluralistic, democratic, and spiritually rich civilization (ICCR, 2023).

During the Cold War, Thailand occupied a strategically complex position-aligned with Western powers yet maintaining cultural and religious affinities with India. The shared Buddhist heritage and democratic orientation provided a stable platform for India-Thailand dialogue. However, as Auapirojkit (2022) explains, India's adherence to non-alignment limited the depth of its engagement with Southeast Asia during this period. It was not until the 1990s that India's cultural diplomacy in the region gained renewed momentum.

Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao's Look East Policy (LEP), launched in 1992, represented a critical shift. Designed to reinvigorate India's economic and strategic engagement with East and Southeast Asia, the policy also emphasized cultural affinity as a basis for cooperation. Thailand was identified as a key partner within this framework. The LEP thus embodied the dual essence of India's foreign policy-economic pragmatism reinforced by civilizational soft power. The policy aimed to reduce India's dependence on Western economies and reconnect with Asia's historical partners (Bunthorn, 2023).

Under the LEP, India expanded bilateral cooperation with Thailand across trade, education, and cultural exchange. Symbolically, initiatives such as the Festival of India in Thailand (2017-2018) showcased Indian art, dance, and spirituality, reflecting continuity between historical cultural diplomacy and modern soft power outreach (Embassy of India, Bangkok, 2017).

3.3 The Act East Policy and Digital Transformation

The transition from the Look East Policy to the Act East Policy (AEP) in 2014 under Prime Minister Narendra Modi signaled a qualitative transformation in India's external engagement with Southeast Asia. While the LEP emphasized economic connectivity, the AEP expanded the framework to include cultural diplomacy, people-to-people exchange, and digital engagement (Bunthorn, 2023). The policy's emphasis on "acting" rather than "looking" reflects India's shift toward proactive participation in the Indo-Pacific regional order.

Digital diplomacy emerged as a core mechanism within this expanded policy framework. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), recognizing the transformative potential of digital communication, launched a comprehensive digital diplomacy strategy that integrates public diplomacy with online engagement (MEA, 2023). Through official embassy websites, social media accounts, and digital campaigns, India has sought to reach foreign publics directly (Vareemon, 2023).

In Thailand, India's digital outreach has centered on promoting key cultural assets especially, Yoga, Bollywood, and major Indian festivals such as Diwali and Holi. Each serve as a distinct vector of India's soft power projection. For instance, the annual International Day of Yoga, promoted through coordinated campaigns by the Indian Embassy in Bangkok,

has become a recurring event that attracts broad participation among Thai citizens. Similarly, Bollywood film screenings, digital contests, and collaborative cultural content on platforms like Facebook and YouTube have enhanced India's popular cultural visibility (MEA, 2023).

Furthermore, the digital transformation of diplomacy aligns with the broader concept of "smart power," wherein soft and hard power instruments operate synergistically (ICWA, 2025). By integrating cultural diplomacy within a strategic Indo-Pacific framework, India seeks to strengthen its regional identity and position itself as both a cultural and geopolitical partner.

3.4 Institutional Mechanisms and Cultural Diplomacy Platforms

India's soft power architecture in Thailand operates through a network of institutions and partnerships that reflect both state-led and community-driven initiatives. The ICCR remains central, providing scholarships to Thai students, facilitating academic exchanges, and supporting Indian cultural centers. In addition, the Embassy of India in Thailand both in Bangkok and Chiangmai has taken an active role in implementing public diplomacy programs across social media platforms, creating content in Thai and English to reach wider audiences (MEA, 2023).

Key mechanisms of cultural diplomacy include (1) Strategic Communication as a disseminating India's cultural narratives through official embassy accounts, online publications, and collaborative media projects. (2) Public Engagement to encouraging interaction with Thai citizens via digital events, online competitions, and live broadcasts of cultural celebrations. And (3) Collaborative Cultural Promotion for Working with Thai governmental and private organizations, such as the Tourism Authority of Thailand and universities, to co-host exhibitions, festivals, and lectures.

The example of the most effective examples is the digital promotion of Indian Festivals. The Amazing Thailand Diwali Festival (2024) and Holi Festival Pattaya (2025) were widely publicized online, with the Indian Embassy tagging institutions such as Thai PBS and the Ministry of Tourism in its social media campaigns. These events not only celebrated cultural diversity but also created shared digital spaces for bilateral interaction.

Such activities illustrate how India's digital diplomacy blends traditional cultural content with modern communication strategies to reinforce long-term relationships. As the MEA's Digital Diplomacy Footprint Report (2023) highlights, India's external communication strategy is increasingly data-driven, audience-specific, and responsive to local contexts.

3.5 Synthesis: Continuity Through Transformation

India's soft power strategy toward Thailand exemplifies continuity through transformation. From ancient civilizational exchanges to postcolonial diplomacy and digital-age outreach, the underlying principle remains constant-cultural engagement as a tool of attraction and legitimacy. The transition from historical cultural ties to modern digital

diplomacy underscores how India reinterprets its civilizational capital within changing geopolitical and technological contexts. As Auapirojkit (2022) said, India's diplomacy operates on multiple temporal planes: drawing legitimacy from its past while navigating present complexities. The integration of cultural heritage with digital innovation allows India to maintain relevance and competitiveness amid intensifying regional soft power rivalries. The evolution from the ICCR's traditional model of cultural exchange to the MEA's digital strategy epitomizes a broader reconfiguration of soft power in the 21st century-adaptive, networked, and participatory.

4. Challenges and Theoretical Implications for Bilateral Relations
4.1 Emerging Trends: Real-Time Digital Diplomacy and Policy Branding of India

The most recent phase of India's soft power strategy reflects a paradigmatic shift towards what Mohilay (2023) describes as "real-time digital diplomacy." The proliferation of social media has made foreign policy communication immediate, interactive, and visual. As of 2023, India had over 1.2 billion internet users and more than 500 million social media users, making it one of the largest digital constituencies in the world (ICWA, 2023). Platforms like Twitter/X, YouTube, and Facebook have evolved from being auxiliary tools to primary channels of international engagement. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has mastered the performative dimension of digital diplomacy. Modi's personal handle (@narendramodi) is the most followed political account globally, while the Ministry of External Affairs (@MEAIndia) ranks among the world's most active diplomatic Twitter accounts. These platforms are not merely used for public information but for constructing a "brand India" that fuses national identity with digital transparency. Initiatives such as the G20 India Presidency (2023), promoted through coordinated hashtags and video updates, exemplify the fusion of governance and branding. The G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration, which garnered over 2.9 million online views, demonstrates how diplomacy has evolved from closed-door negotiations to a more participatory public spectacle.

India's use of social media in crisis communication further demonstrates the operational value of digital diplomacy. Campaigns such as #OperationKaveri (Sudan conflict, 2023) and #OperationAjay (Israel–Hamas conflict, 2023) leveraged trending hashtags to coordinate rescue efforts and disseminate verified information in real time. These digital interventions highlight the humanitarian potential of online diplomacy, transforming platforms once viewed as tools of propaganda into instruments of protection and solidarity.

Moreover, India's digital diplomacy has expanded into transnational technological collaboration. Agreements with Kenya, Finland, and Vietnam on digital identity and e-governance infrastructures (ICWA, 2023) reflect India's strategic export of its Digital Public

Infrastructure (DPI), including Aadhaar, UPI, and Co-Win, as global public goods. This transformation from cultural to technological diplomacy marks a new phase of soft power, one that redefines attraction through functional credibility rather than cultural affinity.

Nevertheless, the expansion of digital diplomacy also intensifies challenges of disinformation and algorithmic manipulation. As Prime Minister Modi acknowledged during the 2023 virtual G20 Summit, "deepfakes and synthetic media" pose existential threats to democratic communication. Official channels such as PIB India and MyGov have thus been tasked with countering online misinformation and maintaining factual integrity. The recognition of this issue represents India's evolving awareness that digital diplomacy is not only about projecting narratives but also about safeguarding truth as a diplomatic resource.

In conclusion, India's digital diplomacy in Thailand embodies both the promise and paradox of twenty-first-century soft power. It demonstrates how a civilizational state can adapt its ancient cultural repertoire to the demands of digital modernity while confronting structural and technological constraints. As Nye (2008) cautioned, attraction must be credible to be effective. India's task, therefore, is not merely to communicate more but to communicate meaningfully, ensuring that its digital diplomacy does not dissolve into spectacle but remains anchored in the enduring values of pluralism, democracy, and cultural reciprocity.

4.2 Digital Platforms and India's Soft Power related to Thailand

As global communication technologies evolved, these long-standing civilizational linkages found new expression in digital form. Digital diplomacy thus represents not a rupture from the past but rather a technological rearticulation of historical cultural diplomacy. The digital sphere enables India to project its cultural narratives with unprecedented immediacy, transforming what Mattoo (2023) terms heritage soft power into networked soft power. In this sense, India's online cultural diplomacy towards Thailand constitutes a synthesis of history and modernity, where the spiritual and linguistic ties of the past are mediated through social media platforms.

The architecture of India's digital soft power operates across multiple social media ecosystems, each serving a distinct communicative function. As Bjola and Holmes (2015) argue, digital diplomacy is not merely a channel for message dissemination but a "new diplomatic environment" characterized by interactivity, immediacy, and participatory engagement. India's digital diplomatic framework follows a networked model that integrates official communication by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), cultural institutions like ICCR, and embassy-level initiatives in Thailand. India uses social media platforms like Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/IndianEmbassyThailand) (https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064631893976), Twitter/X (https://x.com/IndiainThailand), Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/indiainthailand?igsh=dnFveHRxMnF0MHlind), and YouTube

(https://www.youtube.com/@indianembassybangkokth/featured) serves as the primary vehicle for public diplomacy and cultural dissemination to Thai people. All of official account uses it to publicize events such as the International Yoga Day, Diwali celebrations, and cultural exhibitions, effectively transforming traditional diplomacy into what Manor (2019) calls "micro-diplomacy"-an engagement conducted at the individual user level. All of social media platform, functions as a space for real-time policy signaling, frequently post briefings, joint statements, and emergency updates, creating an immediate and transnational information loop between the Indian state and its global audience. For YouTube play a more narrative role: the former curates India's cultural heritage through long video storytelling.

All of the platform allows India to manage multiple layers of audience engagement simultaneously-governmental, civic, and cultural. It also reflects a conscious attempt to shape what Nye (2008) calls the "context of attraction" rather than the content alone. By combining symbolic diplomacy (yoga, Bollywood, spirituality) with digital interactivity, India positions itself as a "relatable civilization"-an ancient culture that speaks in the idiom of modern media. In the Thai context, this hybrid model of soft power aligns with Thussu's (2019) observation that global cultural flows are increasingly defined by "multi-directional mediation," where audiences co-construct meaning rather than merely consume foreign cultural products.

4.3 Impacts on Bilateral Relations and Perceptions

The emergence of digital diplomacy as a central instrument in India's foreign policy has fundamentally transformed its bilateral engagement with Thailand. No longer confined to traditional channels such as formal negotiations or state visits, India's outreach to Thailand has increasingly operated within a digital ecosystem that allows for continuous, interactive, and multilayered engagement. This transformation aligns with what Nye (2008) described as the "evolution from command to co-optive power," wherein attraction and credibility replace coercion as the primary levers of influence. Through the use of social media platforms, India has sought to reframe its civilizational heritage, economic dynamism, and democratic identity into narratives that resonate with Thai audiences.

In terms of culturally, India's digital diplomacy has contributed significantly to building mutual familiarity. Campaigns celebrating International Yoga Day, the promotion of Bollywood cinema, and online Diwali festivals have fostered what Goswami (2024) terms "everyday cultural diplomacy" or the practice of soft power through habitual, visible, and relatable interactions. This is evident in how Thai users engage with Indian Embassy Facebook posts, repost event photos, and participate in hashtag campaigns such as #YogaForHumanity. According to the MEA's Digital Diplomacy Footprint Report (2023), Thailand ranks among the top ASEAN countries in terms of online engagement with Indian

diplomatic content, particularly during major cultural events. This indicates a gradual normalization of India's image in Thai digital spaces-not as an external actor but as a familiar cultural partner.

Furthermore, digital diplomacy has fostered a new form of "digital Buddhism diplomacy," wherein India's sacred sites are promoted to Thai pilgrims through online campaigns such as Visit Bodh Gaya and The Buddhist Circuit. These digital initiatives, supported by the Ministry of Tourism and the ICCR, have deepened religious and spiritual connectivity. Such spiritual tourism serves as both an economic driver and a symbolic reaffirmation of shared civilizational identity.

4.4 Challenges and Institutional Constraints

Despite its visible achievements, India's digital diplomacy in Thailand faces a complex set of institutional, operational, and strategic challenges that constrain its long-term effectiveness. These challenges span three primary domains: (5.4.1) Fragmentation and Institutional Coordination, (5.4.2) Human Resource and Capacity Limitations, (5.4.3) competitive regional dynamics in Southeast Asia, and (5.4.4) Strategic Integration and Policy Continuity

4.4.1 Fragmentation and Institutional Coordination

As Mattoo (2023) and Goswami (2024) emphasize, India's foreign policy communication apparatus remains highly decentralized. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), the Ministry of Culture, and the Indian Tourism Office often operate with overlapping mandates and limited horizontal coordination. The MEA's Digital Diplomacy Footprint (2023) acknowledges that "digital outreach activities across missions remain uneven due to resource disparities and lack of inter-ministerial integration." This institutional fragmentation leads to inefficiency and message dilution. For instance, multiple agencies may promote similar events such as International Yoga Day without synchronized branding, resulting in redundancy and reduced impact.

To address this, some scholars advocate for a Digital Diplomacy Coordination Cell (DDCC) within the MEA, modeled after Japan's Public Diplomacy Strategy Department or South Korea's Korea Foundation. Such a unit would standardize branding, content management, and data analytics across embassies. Yet bureaucratic inertia and resource constraints have delayed such structural reforms.

4.4.2 Human Resource and Capacity Limitations

Digital diplomacy is inherently skill-intensive. It requires proficiency in data-driven communication, intercultural semiotics, and online crisis management-competencies not traditionally emphasized in diplomatic training. Chairungsrilert's (2023) study on Southeast Asian diplomatic communication notes that India's digital envoys often lack the media literacy necessary for sustained engagement with young, digitally native audiences.

Moreover, embassy staff rotations (typically every 2–3 years) disrupt continuity in digital strategies, resulting in inconsistent tone and quality of engagement over time.

The ICCR's Digital Outreach Fellowship Program (2024) has made some progress by recruiting media professionals to assist missions abroad, but coverage remains limited. Without a dedicated cadre of "digital diplomats," India's foreign missions risk falling into what Auapirojkit (2022) calls "performative communication" activity without analytical follow-up.

4.4.3 Regional Competition and the Attention Economy

According to the Global Soft Power Index (2025), China ranks second globally, Japan fourth, and South Korea twelfth in overall soft power performance, while India lags at thirty-first. These rankings, though quantitative, reflect deeper structural asymmetries in regional soft power ecosystems. In Thailand, the competition for cultural visibility, digital engagement, and narrative influence has intensified as East Asian nations integrate entertainment industries, tourism, and technological narratives into cohesive branding frameworks that appeal to Thai audiences.

4.4.3.1 China

China's influence in Thailand is anchored calls "infrastructural soft power," where economic and technological dominance translate into narrative credibility. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Digital Silk Road, Beijing has embedded its discourse of connectivity, prosperity, and cultural harmony into Thailand's development imagination. This is reinforced through Chinese media networks, as well as Thai-language platforms, which consistently promote positive imagery of China's modernization.

Digital diplomacy, for China, operates as an extension of state-driven information management. Chinese embassies in Bangkok maintain high social media activity. Moreover, Confucius Institutes across Thai universities function not only as educational centers but also as nodes of digital outreach, circulating cultural narratives through online events, live-streamed lectures, and digital Mandarin-learning programs.

As Carminati (2024) explains, China's soft power strategy in Thailand is characterized by an assertive, government-led approach that often blurs the line between soft and hard influence. While her study does not explicitly address digital diplomacy, this assertive style can be interpreted as extending into the online sphere, where Chinese state media and cultural institutions project narratives of shared development and regional harmony. In contrast, India's communication efforts remain fragmented, limiting its ability to achieve similar resonance among Thai audiences.

4.4.3.2 Japan

Japan's soft power dominance in Thailand rests on the pillars of aesthetic appeal, technological sophistication, and institutional continuity. Since the early 2000s, Japan's Cool Japan initiative has constructed a sustainable model of cultural diplomacy that fuses popular culture, creative industries, and official state branding (Chairungsrilert, 2023). Japanese embassies and agencies such as JETRO and the Japan Foundation have consistently invested in multimedia campaigns tailored for local audiences.

Digital adaptation has been a key factor in Japan's success. The Japan Foundation Bangkok, for instance, runs YouTube and TikTok channels that produce Thai-subtitled videos on manga, anime, and cultural exchange programs. This mirrors what Chairungsrilert (2023) refers to as a "localization-first strategy," whereby Japan's digital diplomacy prioritizes linguistic adaptation, cross-platform visibility, and long-term narrative consistency.

By contrast, India's digital diplomacy, though rich in content diversity, lacks comparable production quality and strategic coherence. India's messaging often revolves around events (e.g., Yoga Day, Diwali festivals) rather than sustained thematic storytelling. While Japan's content ecosystem creates continuous audience immersion, India's engagement remains episodic. This distinction reflects a more profound institutional asymmetry: Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs collaborates seamlessly with private creative industries, whereas India's soft power remains predominantly state led.

4.4.3.3 South Korea

South Korea's ascension as a soft power leader in Southeast Asia represents perhaps the most transformative case of cultural globalization in recent decades. As analyzed by Prasirtsuk (2014), the Korean Wave (Hallyu) has transcended entertainment to become a form of affective diplomacy that emotionally and aspirationally binds audiences.

From a digital diplomacy perspective, South Korea's success lies in its hybrid model that fuses state orchestration with industry innovation. The Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange (KOFICE) and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism coordinate closely with private media conglomerates to ensure coherence between cultural exports and diplomatic goals. Moreover, Korean embassies actively utilize short-form content, including Reels, TikTok, and live streams, which are localized for Thai viewers.

4.4.3.4 India's Relative Position Between Heritage and Innovation

In this regional soft power triad, India occupies a distinctive yet vulnerable position. Its civilizational depth offers profound cultural capital, yet the mechanisms for digital dissemination remain underdeveloped. As India–Thailand 2025 reports by the

Embassy of India note, digital diplomacy in Thailand often relies on government-to-public communication rather than co-creation with influencers or civil society organizations.

While Bollywood, yoga, and festivals generate episodic attention spikes, India lacks the infrastructural and institutional mechanisms to convert visibility into sustained engagement. The challenge, therefore, is not one of content scarcity but of communicative agility how to transform cultural richness into algorithmically relevant content.

4.4.4 Strategic Integration and Policy Continuity

Ultimately, the most significant constraint lies in the absence of a long-term, integrated strategy that links digital diplomacy to broader foreign policy objectives. While India's Act East Policy provides a geopolitical framework, its digital articulation remains fragmented. As Goswami (2024) notes, India's soft power diplomacy in Southeast Asia remains underutilized, largely due to fragmented institutional coordination and limited resources, rather than lack of visibility." (Goswami, 2024, p. 740) A forward-looking strategy would entail embedding digital diplomacy within India's broader Indo-Pacific narrative, emphasizing shared values such as democracy, pluralism, and sustainable development. Collaboration with Thailand's own digital policy agenda, could provide thematic synergy. By aligning its soft power messaging with Thailand's developmental vision, India can move from cultural diplomacy to policy convergence.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Synthesis of Findings

This article explored India's evolving soft power strategy in Thailand, emphasizing the intersection between traditional cultural diplomacy and digital transformation. Findings suggest that while India's soft power rests upon a deep civilizational bond manifested in shared Buddhist and linguistic heritages, the mechanisms for projecting this influence have shifted towards digital platforms and participatory media.

The India-Thailand 2025 report notes that India's diplomatic narrative in Thailand is well-received but lacks consistency in digital presence and audience-targeted storytelling. This aligns with ICWA (2023), which highlights how fragmented coordination among agencies such as the MEA, ICCR, and the Ministry of Culture continues to undermine India's strategic coherence in its digital diplomacy efforts.

Compared to the region's leading soft power competitors, such as China, Japan, and South Korea. China-India's engagement remains episodic rather than continuous. Japan's Cool Japan and Korea's Hallyu Wave demonstrate that institutionalized cooperation between government, media, and the creative industries creates a self-sustaining ecosystem of influence (Chairungsrilert, 2023).

5.2 Reframing India's Digital Soft Power

In the 21st century, soft power has evolved from showcasing cultural heritage to co-creating meaning with foreign audiences. Nye (2021) emphasizes that attraction now depends on interactivity and credibility. As Mohilay (2023) argues, India's use of social media, particularly Twitter/X, Facebook, and YouTube, has proven effective for disseminating information and communicating during major international events. However, the current model prioritizes visibility over engagement, resulting in "one-way digital diplomacy" rather than participatory dialogue.

5.3 Policy Recommendations

5.3.1 Establish a Council or Department related to Digital-Cultural

India should institutionalize a Digital-Cultural Council or Department that integrates the initiatives of the Ministry of External Affairs, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, and the Ministry of Culture. This Council or Department would centralize coordination, oversee the localization of digital content, and assess the impact of cultural diplomacy in ASEAN countries. This structure would address fragmentation identified in ICWA (2023) and strengthen India's cultural coherence abroad.

5.3.2 Localize Digital Narratives in the Thai Context

Localized, Thai-language digital content should become a central pillar of India's communication strategy. Rather than translating Indian campaigns, India should collaborate with Thai creators, influencers, and academic experts to adapt messaging in culturally sensitive ways.

5.3.3 Integrate the Creative Economy into Diplomacy

Drawing lessons from Japan and Korea, India should strengthen cooperation between embassies and creative sectors. Bollywood, classical arts, and Indian gastronomy can be integrated into co-branded Thai-Indian projects, such as film festivals, design collaborations, or partnerships with streaming platforms. Such initiatives expand India's cultural footprint beyond elite diplomacy into everyday popular culture.

5.3.4 Foster Academic and Educational Diplomacy

India's ICCR and universities should strengthen exchange programs with Thai institutions in media, international relations, and Asian studies. Joint research, public lectures, and digital storytelling workshops can serve as platforms for cultural co-creation and collaboration, fostering a shared understanding and mutual appreciation. Such initiatives would institutionalize long-term mutual understanding.

5.4 Limitations

This article contributes to the discourse on soft power by bridging classical theories of attraction with the emerging literature on digital diplomacy. It situates India's case within Thailand's competitive soft power landscape, where algorithmic visibility and participatory engagement redefine the nature of influence.

However, the study's reliance on secondary sources limits empirical validation. Future research should include quantitative audience studies measuring Thai perceptions of India's online diplomacy. Comparative studies with countries that have a higher soft power index and are located in Asia, such as China, Japan, and South Korea would further clarify India's relative performance and potential for regional leadership.

5.5 Concluding Reflection

India's soft power in Thailand stands at a critical juncture, anchored in millennia-old civilizational ties yet challenged by new digital realities. To sustain influence in Southeast Asia's competitive cultural marketplace, especially associated with Thailand. Thus, India must evolve from heritage diplomacy to participatory diplomacy, from cultural projection to cultural co-creation.

6. Discussion and Critical Analysis

6.1 Reinterpreting Nye's Soft Power in the Digital Age

The findings of this study reaffirm Joseph Nye's (2008, 2021) central argument that soft power, or the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion, remains a vital tool in international relations. However, in the digital age, the mechanisms of attraction have become increasingly mediated by technology, algorithmic visibility, and audience participation. India's soft power strategy in Thailand, traditionally rooted in civilizational and cultural linkages, has transitioned into a hybrid form that merges heritage-based diplomacy with digital outreach.

While Nye's framework emphasizes values, culture, and policy credibility, the emergence of digital diplomacy demands an expanded theoretical lens. As Bjola and Holmes (2015) note, digital diplomacy introduces interactivity, immediacy, and decentralization, enabling state and non-state actors to participate in shaping a nation's image. India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) exemplifies this transformation through platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and YouTube, moving from one-way public diplomacy to networked engagement with foreign publics (Mohilay, 2023).

However, India's adaptation to digital diplomacy in Thailand reflects both innovation and inertia. The analysis of India's online campaigns shows episodic visibility during events such as International Yoga Day or the Festival of India in Thailand, but limited continuity afterward. This temporal inconsistency weakens India's capacity to sustain long-term cultural narratives compared to Japan's "Cool Japan" or Korea's "Hallyu" frameworks (Chairungsrilert, 2023; Carminati, 2024).

6.2 India's Position within ASEAN's Cultural Ecosystem

Within ASEAN's soft power landscape, Thailand serves as a cultural crossroads where competing Asian powers, such as China, Japan, Korea, and increasingly India, vie for public attention and symbolic influence. The Global Soft Power Index 2025 ranks China

(2nd), Japan (4th), and South Korea (13th) well above India (30th), reflecting structural gaps in strategic communication, localization, and media integration.

India's engagement with Thailand aligns with its Act East Policy; however, the impact remains limited by asymmetrical visibility, as highlighted in the India-Thailand 2025 report by the Embassy of India in Thailand (2025). India has prioritized traditional exchanges, such as promoting Buddhist heritage, fostering educational cooperation, and promoting Bollywood, over sustained digital co-creation. This approach positions India as a heritage power rather than a media-savvy influencer, reinforcing an image of historical kinship but not contemporary dynamism.

In contrast, China, Japan, and South Korea have successfully localized their narratives, adapting language, aesthetics, and emotional tone to Thai cultural sensibilities. China, through its Confucius Institutes and multilingual digital networks, has embedded narratives of shared prosperity and community of destiny into Thai discourse. India's comparative suggests a partial mismatch between its cultural assets and communicative strategy-a gap that limits its influence in Thailand's attention economy.

6.3 Digital Transformation to Collaborative Cultural Production

Social media algorithms privilege virality, frequency, and emotional engagement over authority or expertise. For India, whose diplomatic communication traditionally emphasizes policy clarity and cultural depth, this shift presents both challenges and opportunities, as Mohilay (2023) highlights. Digital diplomacy during recent global crises has demonstrated the MEA's growing agility in real-time communication. However, these successes have not yet translated into consistent cultural engagement within the Thai context.

The Embassy of India in Bangkok maintains active accounts, but its digital messaging remains formal, English-centric, and event-oriented. Thai audiences, especially younger demographics, respond more strongly to interactive, multimedia, and localized storytelling. In contrast, Korean embassies in Bangkok employ hybrid models that blend entertainment with diplomacy. Live concerts, short-form videos, and influencer collaborations allow South Korea to dominate youth-oriented attention spaces (Chairungsrilert, 2023).

For India to remain competitive, it must integrate creative industries into its diplomatic framework, shifting from a state-centric narrative to collaborative cultural production.

6.4 Institutional Coherence and Policy Gaps

Another critical challenge lies in India's fragmented institutional structure. Ministry of External Affairs, Indian Council for Cultural Relations, and Ministry of Culture operate parallel initiatives with overlapping objectives but limited coordination. As

Carminati, (2024) notes, the absence of a unified digital strategy dilutes India's messaging and reduces campaign continuity.

On the other hand, Japan's Japan Foundation or Korea's KOFICE, which function as centralized nodes of cultural diplomacy, India lacks a single agency responsible for integrating culture, communication, and technology. The result is a "patchwork diplomacy", energetic but inconsistent. While embassies occasionally collaborate with local partners or universities, these engagements are often project-based rather than strategically sequenced.

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