

# Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy: The Influence of India in Malaysia

B. Manoj \*

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, School of Social Sciences, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India

D. Ramakrishnan

Professor and Head, Department of Political Science, School of Social Sciences, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India.

\*Corresponding Author Email: manojtp28@gmail.com

**Abstract:** *India's utilization of soft power and cultural diplomacy has significantly influenced Malaysia, reflecting a strategic approach to strengthening bilateral relations and fostering cultural affinity. This abstract explores the mechanisms and impacts of India's soft power in Malaysia, focusing on cultural, educational, and economic dimensions. India leverages its rich cultural heritage—including films, music, dance, cuisine, yoga, and festivals—to cultivate a positive image and foster a sense of cultural kinship with Malaysia. The Indian diaspora in Malaysia, one of the largest populations outside India, plays a crucial role in sustaining and propagating Indian culture. Cultural festivals, such as Divali, Pongal, and Thaipusam, widely celebrated in Malaysia, serve as platforms for cultural exchange and mutual appreciation. This research paper examines several key inquiries, including how India's soft power and cultural diplomacy have fostered a favorable environment for bilateral cooperation, promoted cultural understanding, and strengthened socio-economic ties between India and Malaysia. Furthermore, it explores the underlying soft power effects resulting from the strategic use of cultural assets and educational initiatives, which continue to shape a positive narrative and enhance India's influence in the region.*

**Keywords:** Bilateral Relations, Culture, Diplomacy, Indian Diaspora, Soft Power

## INTRODUCTION

The contemporary international relations landscape has shifted from traditional hard power approaches—characterized by military might and economic coercion—to soft power strategies emphasizing cultural attraction, diplomatic engagement, and shared values. Joseph Nye's conceptualization of soft power as “the ability to obtain preferred outcomes through attraction rather than coercion” has become increasingly relevant in understanding bilateral relationships in the globalized world. Within this framework, the India-Malaysia relationship exemplifies how historical cultural linkages, combined with contemporary diplomatic initiatives, can create enduring bonds that transcend conventional geopolitical considerations. India and Malaysia share a multifaceted relationship rooted in ancient civilizational connections spanning over two millennia. The establishment of formal diplomatic relations between India and the Federation of Malaya in 1957 marked the beginning of modern bilateral engagement, which has evolved into an Enhanced Strategic Partnership elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2024. This relationship is unique within the ASEAN framework, as Malaysia represents India's third-largest trading partner in Southeast Asia, while India serves as Malaysia's largest trading partner among South Asian nations. Beyond economic metrics, however, the true strength of this partnership lies in its cultural foundations, sustained by a vibrant Indian diaspora of approximately 2.75 million people, representing roughly 9% of Malaysia's population.

The influence of Indian culture in Malaysia is evident across multiple dimensions, including religious architecture, linguistic heritage, performing arts, educational exchanges, and popular culture. From the magnificent Batu Caves Hindu temple complex, which attracts over one million devotees during Thaipusam, to the pervasive influence of Sanskrit on the Malay language, Indian cultural elements have been seamlessly integrated into Malaysian society. This article examines how India leverages its soft power assets to strengthen bilateral relations with Malaysia, exploring the mechanisms, institutions, and impact of cultural diplomacy in fostering mutual understanding and cooperation. The study argues that India's cultural diplomacy in Malaysia represents a successful model of soft power projection, enhancing both nations' strategic interests while promoting regional stability and prosperity.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF SOFT POWER

Joseph Nye's seminal work on soft power establishes the theoretical foundation for understanding cultural diplomacy's role in international relations. Nye

(1990) differentiates between hard power, characterized by coercion through military and economic means, and soft power, which operates through attraction, co-option, and agenda-setting. He identifies three primary resources of soft power: culture (including both high culture and popular culture), political values (when practiced authentically domestically and internationally), and foreign policies perceived as legitimate and morally authoritative. Nye (2008) emphasizes that soft power is descriptive rather than normative, acknowledging its potential to be wielded for diverse purposes and that it does not necessarily contradict realist perspectives in international relations.

### **CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AS AN INSTRUMENT OF FOREIGN POLICY**

Cultural diplomacy represents the operationalization of soft power through deliberate state actions. Schneider (2006) defines it as “the use of creative expression and exchanges of ideas, information, and people to increase mutual understanding.” The Institute for Cultural Diplomacy (2025) expands upon this definition to include “the deliberate and strategic exchange of ideas, values, traditions, and other cultural elements, with the aim of fostering mutual understanding, strengthening relationships, advancing socio-cultural cooperation, and promoting national or international interests.”

Papaioannou’s theoretical analysis examines cultural diplomacy as a pillar of soft power, emphasizing its emergence from national cultural policy-making and its role in contemporary international relations. The study distinguishes between cultural diplomacy conducted by governmental bodies and cultural relations pursued by non-state actors, highlighting the importance of multi-level engagement for effective cultural diplomacy. Borges Carrijo (2016) proposes a rotational model for analyzing cultural diplomacy, integrating agential and structural factors that influence decision-making processes while offering frameworks for statistical analysis of cultural diplomacy actions.

### **INDIA’S SOFT POWER STRATEGY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

India’s soft power approach toward Southeast Asia has evolved significantly from the Look East Policy, initiated in 1991, to the Act East Policy, announced in 2014. Nayak (2024) analyzes India’s increasing emphasis on soft power and foreign policy in the twenty-first century, highlighting the strategic importance of cultural assets, educational excellence, and diplomatic initiatives in elevating India’s regional standing. The study emphasizes India’s efforts to disseminate soft power through bilateral cultural agreements and exchange programs with Southeast Asian nations, recognizing culture as a potent tool for fostering positive relationships in the era of globalization.

Kundu (2022) examines cultural relations within the ASEAN-India thirty-year partnership, tracing influences from its early stages, including the impact of Indian political thought, religious philosophy, art, architecture, and literature on ancient kingdoms in Southeast Asia. The analysis illustrates how the Thai language, Bahasa Indonesia, and architectural monuments such as Angkor Wat and Borobudur represent cultural assimilations between India and Southeast Asia. This historical foundation provides legitimacy and resonance for contemporary Indian cultural

diplomacy initiatives in the region.

### **HISTORICAL CULTURAL CONNECTIONS BETWEEN INDIA AND MALAYSIA**

The historical relationship between India and Malaysia spans two millennia, with the Tamil Chola Empire (9th–13th centuries) establishing extensive maritime trade routes connecting South India with the Malay Peninsula. Chola invasions and subsequent cultural exchanges fostered deep connections reflected in language, architecture, religious practices, and social structures. The Pallava dynasty disseminated Tamil culture and script throughout Malaysia, and Tamil merchant guilds established significant trading networks within the region.

The colonial period witnessed large-scale migration of Indian workers, predominantly Tamil, under the British *Kangani* system to work on Malaysian plantations. This migration established the foundation for Malaysia’s current Indian diaspora, estimated at 2.75 million people, with approximately 2 million Tamil speakers. This demographic presence sustains cultural continuity and provides organic channels for people-to-people cultural diplomacy.

### **INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS FOR CULTURAL DIPLOMACY**

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), established in 1950, serves as India’s primary institutional mechanism for cultural diplomacy. The Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose Indian Cultural Center (NSCBICC), inaugurated in 2010 and renamed in 2015, functions as the operational hub for bilateral cultural activities. The center offers classes in classical Indian music, dance, yoga, and Hindi language, and organizes cultural events, seminars, and workshops that engage both the Indian diaspora and Malaysian nationals.

India’s scholarship programs represent another avenue for cultural diplomacy. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) offers four scholarship schemes for Malaysian students, including scholarships for dance and music, the General Cultural Scholarship Scheme for undergraduate and postgraduate courses, IOR-ARC scholarships for postgraduate studies, and AYUSH scholarships for traditional Indian medicine. Furthermore, the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme (ITEC) provides training opportunities for Malaysian candidates across various fields, and the Indian Scholarship and Trust Fund (ISTF) offers financial assistance to Malaysian Indian students.

### **CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL DIPLOMACY INITIATIVES**

Recent cultural diplomacy initiatives illustrate India’s strategic approach to strengthening bilateral ties. The Cultural Programme Exchange Agreement, signed in 2015, details ten articles specifying exchange programs at governmental levels and identifying areas including performing arts, theater, visual arts, archaeological cooperation, and academic conferences. The International Day of Yoga celebrations, held annually at Batu Caves since 2014, attract over 1,200 participants, representing successful public diplomacy that promotes wellness and strengthens cultural bonds.

Digital initiatives complement physical cultural exchanges. The Memorandum of Understanding between Prasar Bharati and Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM), approved in 2023, promotes cooperation in public broadcasting, facilitating exchange programs in culture, education, science, technology, and news. The visa-free entry arrangement for 2024 enhanced religious and cultural ties, enabling increased travel for pilgrimage and tourism.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design utilizing secondary data analysis to examine India's soft power and cultural diplomacy in Malaysia. The research adopts an interpretive approach, consistent with cultural diplomacy scholarship, which recognizes the importance of understanding meanings, perceptions, and contextual factors shaping diplomatic outcomes. This qualitative paradigm is particularly appropriate for this study, as it allows for a comprehensive analysis of cultural phenomena, policy documents, and bilateral initiatives—those resistant to quantification—and reveals deep insights into soft power mechanisms.

Data collection encompassed multiple secondary sources, including academic literature from peer-reviewed journals, official government documents from India's Ministry of External Affairs and Malaysia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, reports from the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, press releases from the High Commission of India in Kuala Lumpur, cultural exchange program evaluations, and scholarly analyses of India-ASEAN relations. This multi-source approach ensured triangulation, enhancing the validity and comprehensiveness of the findings.

The analytical framework integrates Joseph Nye's soft power theory with cultural diplomacy literature to examine how India's cultural resources translate into diplomatic influence in Malaysia. The analysis focuses on identifying key institutions, programs, and initiatives constituting India's cultural diplomacy apparatus and assessing their effectiveness in achieving strategic objectives.

Thematic analysis categorizes cultural diplomacy initiatives into domains such as educational cooperation, performing arts exchanges, language promotion, religious and spiritual engagement, popular culture dissemination, and institutional capacity building. Each domain is examined for its contribution to overall soft power projection and bilateral relationship strengthening. The study acknowledges methodological limitations inherent in qualitative secondary research, including potential publication bias in available sources, the inability to verify all claims through primary investigation, and temporal constraints limiting real-time assessment of recent initiatives.

## IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

The study offers insights valuable for policymakers, cultural diplomats, and international relations practitioners designing cultural engagement strategies. By identifying successful mechanisms and institutional arrangements in India-Malaysia cultural diplomacy, the research provides a replicable model applicable to other bilateral relationships within and beyond the ASEAN framework. Understanding effective cultural diplomacy approaches is increasingly important as nations seek alternatives to hard power strategies in an interconnected

world, where military and economic coercion face growing limitations and costs.

From a policy perspective, the research informs India's Act East Policy implementation by identifying strengths to be consolidated and gaps requiring attention in cultural engagement with Malaysia and potentially other ASEAN nations. Specifically, the study highlights opportunities for reciprocal cultural diplomacy in Malaysia, leveraging its multicultural society and strategic location within Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the research contributes to ASEAN's cultural cooperation frameworks, suggesting pathways for enhancing regional cultural integration and people-to-people connectivity beyond economic and security dimensions.

This study is particularly relevant to understanding diaspora diplomacy, given that the substantial Indian-origin population in Malaysia serves as both a bridge and a constituency for bilateral relations. Analyzing how cultural initiatives engage diaspora communities and appeal to broader Malaysian society offers insights into inclusive cultural diplomacy that transcends ethnic boundaries.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study pursues the following specific research objectives:

- To analyze the role of India's soft power and cultural diplomacy in strengthening bilateral relations with Malaysia, this study examines mechanisms, institutions, and outcomes of cultural engagement strategies.
- To trace the historical evolution of cultural connections between India and Malaysia, from ancient civilizational exchanges through colonial migrations and contemporary diplomatic initiatives, this analysis establishes the foundation for current soft power projection.
- To explore contemporary challenges and opportunities in India-Malaysia cultural diplomacy, encompassing the impacts of digital transformation, generational shifts in cultural preferences, and evolving geopolitical dynamics within the Indo-Pacific region.

## CULTURAL DIPLOMACY INSTRUMENTS AND IMPACT

### Historical Foundations and Contemporary Relevance

The India-Malaysia cultural relationship is rooted in connections established over two millennia, providing authenticity and depth that contemporary initiatives strategically leverage. Ancient maritime trade routes linked Tamil South India with the Malay Peninsula, facilitating exchanges of goods, ideas, religions, and cultural practices. The Chola Empire's eleventh-century expeditions established political connections while disseminating Tamil culture, a legacy reflected today in architectural styles, linguistic influences, and social practices across Malaysia. Subsequently, the colonial period's mass migration of predominantly Tamil workers under British administration created demographic conditions sustaining cultural continuity across successive generations.

This historical depth distinguishes India-Malaysia cultural diplomacy from relationships lacking comparable foundations. When India promotes classical dance, yoga, or the Hindi language in Malaysia, these initiatives resonate with existing knowledge and appreciation rather than

introducing entirely foreign concepts. The 2.75 million strong Indian diaspora, concentrated predominantly among Tamil speakers but including substantial Telugu, Malayalam, Punjabi, Gujarati, Bengali, and Urdu-speaking communities, maintains organic cultural connections reinforced by diplomatic initiatives, creating multiplier effects where official programs activate and amplify grassroots cultural affinities. This creates multiplier effects where official programs activate and amplify grassroots cultural affinities.

### **Institutional Architecture of Cultural Diplomacy**

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations, founded in 1950 by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, serves as India's primary institutional vehicle for cultural diplomacy globally. In Malaysia, the ICCR operates through the Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose Indian Cultural Centre in Kuala Lumpur, which was inaugurated in 2010 and renamed during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 2015 visit to honor the Indian independence leader. NSCBICC conducts regular classes in Indian classical music (Carnatic vocal), dance forms (Kathak, Manipuri, Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi), yoga, and Hindi language, engaging hundreds of students annually from both the Indian diaspora and Malaysian communities.

The Center hosts leading artists and cultural troupes from India while leveraging Malaysia's accomplished exponents of Indian art forms, many trained in India, to create collaborative platforms that blend authenticity with local adaptation. Annual celebrations of Indian cultural events, including Diwali, Holi, the International Day of Yoga, and ICCR Foundation Day, attract diverse audiences, strengthening cultural awareness and appreciation. The Center maintains a library and resource center, a tourism kiosk, an Ayush cell, and an education help desk, providing comprehensive services beyond performance-focused activities.

Educational cooperation constitutes another key pillar of institutional cultural diplomacy. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) scholarships enable Malaysian students to study Indian dance, music, painting, sculpture, and pursue undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in a variety of fields, excluding medicine. The AYUSH Scholarship Scheme specifically supports Malaysian students in traditional Indian medicine systems, including Ayurveda, Unani, and Siddha. Furthermore, the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme (ITEC) provides training in areas such as banking, information technology, audit, hydrology, management, and journalism, thereby building capacity and exposing Malaysian professionals to Indian expertise and practices. The Indian Scholarship and Trust Fund, bolstered by a Prime Minister Modi allocation of ₹ 5 crore in 2015, furnishes financial assistance to deserving Malaysian Indian students, supporting educational advancement and strengthening community ties.

### **Language and Literary Cultural Diplomacy**

Sanskrit's profound influence on the Malay language exemplifies deep cultural penetration predating modern diplomatic efforts. Linguistic research confirms that between five and seven words in typical Malay sentences derive from Sanskrit origins, impacting vocabulary across religious, governmental, cultural, and everyday domains.

Words such as "raja" (king), "suami" (husband), "putra" (son), "bahasa" (language), and "negara" (country) demonstrate Sanskrit's integration into Malay linguistic structures. This linguistic heritage provides a natural affinity for Hindi language promotion, as Hindi shares Sanskrit roots, facilitating easier acquisition for Malay speakers compared to languages with unrelated origins.

NSCBICC's Hindi teaching programs leverage linguistic proximity by offering courses that attract Malaysian students seeking employment opportunities in India, engagement with Hindi popular culture, and enhanced communication with Indian business partners. Literary exchanges, which include translations of contemporary Indian literature into Malay and introductions of Malaysian works to Indian audiences, foster mutual literary appreciation and understanding. The historical influence of Indian epics—particularly Malay adaptations of the Ramayana and Mahabharata, which constitute foundational texts—provides shared narrative frameworks that cultural programs reference and celebrate.

### **Performing Arts and Popular Culture**

Indian performing arts maintain a vibrant presence in Malaysia through diaspora community initiatives and official cultural diplomacy programs. Classical dance forms, including Bharatanatyam, Kathak, and Kuchipudi, receive institutional support via NSCBICC classes and visiting artist programs. The Temple of Fine Arts, a prominent Malaysian institution, promotes Indian classical and contemporary dance, collaborating with NSCBICC on major cultural events. These collaborations demonstrate effective public-private partnerships, amplifying the reach and impact of cultural diplomacy.

Bollywood cinema represents perhaps India's most pervasive soft power asset in Malaysia. Indian films enjoy widespread popularity across ethnic communities, transcending language barriers through universal themes, emotional storytelling, and spectacular production values. Malaysian politicians and officials acknowledge Bollywood's influence, with superstar Rajinikanth receiving warm welcome from Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and Shah Rukh Khan honored with the "Datuk" title by Malacca state. Film-induced tourism, wherein Malaysians visit Indian locations featured in popular movies and Indians seek Malaysian settings used in Bollywood productions, generates economic benefits and deepens cultural connections.

### **Religious and Spiritual Diplomacy**

Batu Caves, located 13 kilometers north of Kuala Lumpur, constitutes the most important Hindu sanctuary outside India, serving as a focal point for cultural diplomacy intersecting religious practice. The limestone cave complex, estimated at 400 million years old, houses Hindu temples dedicated to Lord Murugan, featuring a 42.7-meter golden statue—the world's tallest Murugan statue—that greets visitors. The annual Thaipusam festival attracts over one million devotees, representing the largest Hindu gathering outside India and providing a spectacular demonstration of cultural continuity across geographical distances.

India's diplomatic missions actively participate in events at Batu Caves, with the International Day of Yoga celebrations held at this iconic site symbolizing the

convergence of physical wellness, spiritual practice, and cultural diplomacy. The 2024 celebration attracted 1,200 participants, including members of the diplomatic community, Malaysian government officials, Indian community associations, and Malaysian nationals, demonstrating yoga's cross-cultural appeal. These events position India as a provider of universal wellness practices, rather than narrowly defined cultural products, thereby expanding its soft power reach beyond diaspora communities.

The preservation and promotion of Hindu festivals, such as Deepavali, Ponggal, and various temple celebrations, receive support through NSCBICC programs and High Commission of India initiatives. These activities strengthen diaspora community cohesion and invite Malaysian participation, fostering inclusive cultural environments that respect Malaysia's multicultural character.

### Digital Cultural Diplomacy

The 2023 Memorandum of Understanding between Prasar Bharati of India and Radio Televisyen Malaysia of Malaysia represents a digital evolution in cultural diplomacy. Broadcasting cooperation facilitates the wider dissemination of Indian cultural content—including films, documentaries, educational programs, and cultural performances—to Malaysian audiences. Digital platforms expand the reach of cultural diplomacy beyond the geographical and temporal limitations of physical events, providing on-demand access to Indian cultural products.

Social media engagement by the NSCBICC and the High Commission of India extends cultural diplomacy into digital natives' preferred communication channels. Online yoga classes, virtual cultural performances during COVID-19 restrictions, and digital promotion of cultural events demonstrate adaptive strategies that maintained engagement despite physical distancing requirements. This digital transformation enables cost-effective scaling of cultural diplomacy and generates measurable engagement metrics, informing program optimization.

### Strategic Outcomes and Challenges

India's cultural diplomacy in Malaysia contributes to several strategic outcomes that support broader foreign policy objectives. First, cultural initiatives enhance the warmth of bilateral relations, creating a positive environment for cooperation in economic, defense, and geopolitical domains. The 2024 elevation of relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership partly reflects the success of cultural diplomacy in building trust and mutual understanding, facilitating deeper strategic engagement.

Second, cultural diplomacy counters potential negative perceptions and promotes favorable images of India as a modern, dynamic society that respects traditional values. For diaspora communities, cultural programs affirm the importance of their identity within multicultural Malaysia while reinforcing connections with their ancestral homeland. For broader Malaysian society, exposure to Indian culture through festivals, performances, and educational exchanges promotes appreciation and understanding, thereby reducing stereotypes.

Third, cultural diplomacy supports India's Act East Policy by positioning India as an integral partner within

Southeast Asian regional architecture. Cultural connections complement economic integration and security cooperation, fostering multi-dimensional relationships that are more resilient to temporary tensions or disputes. Malaysia's role as an ASEAN member and rotating chair amplifies the regional significance of India-Malaysia cultural cooperation.

However, challenges remain and require strategic attention. Resource constraints limit the program's scale relative to demand, as scholarship allocations and cultural center capacity can not accommodate all interested participants. Bureaucratic coordination between multiple Indian ministries and Malaysian counterpart agencies occasionally creates inefficiencies, thereby slowing program implementation. Generational shifts, with younger diaspora members potentially exhibiting reduced engagement with Indian culture, necessitate updated approaches that appeal to contemporary sensibilities while maintaining authenticity. Geopolitical competition, particularly China's growing cultural presence in Southeast Asia, requires continuous innovation and quality improvement within Indian cultural diplomacy programming.

### CONCLUSION

India's soft power and cultural diplomacy in Malaysia illustrate how historical civilizational connections, strategically cultivated through contemporary institutional mechanisms, foster enduring bilateral relationships that transcend conventional geopolitical considerations. This research demonstrates that cultural diplomacy's effectiveness stems not solely from program quantity, but from authenticity, relevance, and adaptive responsiveness to evolving contexts. India's approach leverages unique advantages including ancient cultural linkages, substantial diaspora presence, universally appealing cultural products like yoga and Bollywood, and institutional capacity through ICCR and NSCBICC.

The multifaceted nature of India-Malaysia cultural engagement, encompassing language, performing arts, popular culture, religious practices, education, and digital platforms, fosters both redundancy and resilience, mitigating the impact of temporary setbacks in specific domains on the overall relationship momentum. The integration of diaspora communities as both beneficiaries and agents of cultural diplomacy amplifies the effectiveness of these initiatives, ensuring cultural sensitivity and contextual appropriateness.

Looking forward, India-Malaysia cultural diplomacy faces both opportunities and imperatives for evolution. Digital transformation enables unprecedented reach and engagement, particularly among younger generations comfortable with online cultural consumption. The elevation to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership provides political momentum for enhanced cultural cooperation, potentially expanding scholarship programs, joint cultural productions, and collaborative heritage preservation initiatives. Furthermore, climate change, technological disruption, and pandemic preparedness present new domains for cultural diplomacy to promote cooperation through shared traditional knowledge systems and innovative solutions.

Sustaining the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy

necessitates continuous investment, innovation, and adaptation. Programs should balance tradition and modernity, appealing to contemporary sensibilities while preserving cultural authenticity. Evaluation mechanisms should systematically assess outcomes to facilitate evidence-based program refinement. Strengthening coordination between governmental and non-governmental actors is crucial to leverage diverse stakeholders' comparative advantages and maintain strategic coherence.

In conclusion, India's cultural diplomacy in Malaysia exemplifies successful soft power projection, strengthening bilateral relations, supporting regional integration, and promoting mutual prosperity. As both nations navigate complex Indo-Pacific geopolitical dynamics, cultural foundations provide stability and continuity, reminding policymakers and publics of shared histories, values, and aspirations that transcend temporary divergences. This case study offers valuable lessons for international relations scholarship and diplomatic practice, demonstrating culture's enduring relevance in shaping the twenty-first-century global order.

#### REFERENCES:

1. Ang, I., Isar, Y. R., & Mar, P. (2015). Cultural diplomacy: Beyond the national interest? *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 21(4), 365–381. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2015.1042472>
2. Borges Carrijo, F. (2016). Cultural diplomacy: A theoretical and methodological approach [Doctoral dissertation, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona]. DIVA Portal. <https://doi.org/10.5463/thesis.diga2.1704816>
3. Cevik, S., & Padilha, T. (2024). Measuring soft power: A new global index. IMF Working Paper No. 24/212. <https://doi.org/10.5089/9781513523240.001>
4. Kundu, S. (2022). Cultural relations in ASEAN-India thirty years partnership. ASEAN-India Centre Commentary. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.15306.49604>
5. Gomichon, M. (2013). Joseph Nye on soft power. E-International Relations, March 8.
6. India–Malaysia bilateral relations. (2024). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. [https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Malaysia\\_2024.pdf](https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Malaysia_2024.pdf)
7. India's soft power diplomacy in Southeast Asia: A study. (2025). *International Journal of Applied Management and Humanities*, 12(1&2), 1–9.
8. Malaysia-India bilateral relations. (2023). High Commission of India, Kuala Lumpur. <https://hcikl.gov.in/>
9. Nayak, B. C. (2024). South East Asia's perspective on Indian cultural diplomacy. *Journal of Social and Administrative Research*, 2(2), 45–58. <https://doi.org/10.36641/jsar.2024.2.2.6>
10. Nye, J. S. (1990). Soft power. *Foreign Policy*, 80, 153–171. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580>
11. Nye, J. S. (2008). Public diplomacy and soft power. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616(1), 94–109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716207311699>
12. Papaioannou, K. (2016). A theoretical approach to the terms of cultural policy and cultural diplomacy as pillars of “soft power”. *International Journal of Arts & Sciences*, 09(02), 501–508. [DOI not available]
13. Schneider, C. P. (2006). Cultural diplomacy: Hard to define, but you'd know it if you saw it. *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 13(1), 191–203. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.997121>
14. Singh, S. (2013). Cultural diplomacy and India's soft power in Southeast Asia. *India Quarterly*, 69(2), 151–165. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0974928413479674>
15. Wu, I. S. (2024). Measuring soft power in international relations. Lynne Rienner Publishers. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ps.2024.80>
16. Zhou, J. (2022). The developing role of cultural diplomacy in soft power: A case study of the Japan Foundation in North America [Master's thesis, Lund University]. <https://lup.lub.lu.se/student-papers/search/publication/9102526>