

# Reconnecting India and Vietnam Through Cultural Heritage Tourism

H. Sudhir

Professor, Department of History, Manipur University, Canchipur, India

**Shamjetshabam Babeena Chanu\***

Assistant Professor, Department of Southeast Asian Studies, Manipur University, Canchipur, India

**Moirangthem Monica Devi**

Assistant Professor, Department of Southeast Asian Studies, Manipur University, Canchipur, India

\*Corresponding Author Email: sbchanu16@gmail.com

**Abstract:** *The relationship between India and Vietnam is characterised not only by its historical depth but also by a harmonious and peaceful history, with neither country perceiving a threat from the other. Building upon this affinity, the promotion of heritage and cultural ties between the two countries will improve mutual relations and people-to-people connections and ensure strategic development. Cultural heritage tourism, a subtle yet powerful form of diplomacy, has gained recognition for its potential to foster international relations (IR). India and Vietnam can both promote mutual understanding and enhance diplomatic ties by recognising their cultural narratives and resources. Cultural heritage tourism in this respect provides a significant opportunity to encourage interaction between the people of both countries. Thereby, fostering a deeper understanding of both sides and, most importantly, strengthening bilateral relations.*

**Keywords:** Tourism, Cultural diplomacy, Cultural Heritage, Buddhism, India, Vietnam.

## INTRODUCTION

India-Vietnam historically had a time-tested relationship of thousands of years, which has been built upon shared cultural affinities, spiritual kinship, and civilizational links. This has become crucial in recent years for strategic, economic, and cultural reasons. In this context, tourism is viewed as a potential area for cooperation between the two countries. This study aims to explore ways in which India's expanding engagement with Vietnam could extend beyond the economy to a broader connection between the two countries, during which it would also become important to see their shared history as an asset. One may wonder how many cultural and heritage connections can sustain a relationship in the 21st century, but it is definitely a strong base for rekindling connections. The relationship between India and Vietnam is marked not only by its historical depth but also by a harmonious and peaceful trajectory, with neither country perceiving a threat from the other. Building upon this foundation, the promotion of heritage and cultural ties between the two countries could strengthen mutual relations, people-to-people engagement, and ensure strategic development. Tourism focusing on culture and heritage can enhance this aspect.

## METHODOLOGY

This study is primarily a qualitative research-based work. This study is based on an analytical review of the existing literature and has evoked conceptual foundations on cultural diplomacy and soft power, particularly to illuminate the interface between cultural heritage tourism in India and Vietnam. Considering the limited availability of sources directly related to the topic, we have relied mainly on government publications, particularly the Ministry of Tourism (both India and Vietnam), cultural organisations, diplomatic visit reports, and interviews available on the web as such. The paper is also based on secondary data from diverse sources, such as books, articles, journals, blogs, web newspapers, and project reports.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A fundamental idea of cultural diplomacy involves utilising a nation's culture as a tool within its foreign policy, particularly to realise the objectives of foreign policy goals (Naskar, 2018). In present diplomatic theory and practice, the phrase cultural diplomacy has numerous explanations.

Erik Pajtinka held that these diverse definitions of the term signify the endeavour among academics and practitioners to focus on diverse features of this phenomenon. The author further stated that defining the essence and nature of cultural diplomacy depends on the “country of origin” and the nation’s interest and foreign policy (Pajtinka, 2014). It is pertinent to mention Robert Fox’s contribution to the field, where he highlights the importance of culture as the key component of diplomacy. However, he further points out a ‘semantic baggage’, which denotes the absence of a consensus in the acceptance of this term and the challenges in the attempt to define it (Fox, 1999). He further states that cultural diplomacy as a concept relies on numerous elements such as resources, cultural context, education of those involved, and specific government policies of the nation-state as such (Fox, 1999). G. R. Berridge and A. James, is of the view that cultural diplomacy is “the promotion abroad of state’s cultural achievements” (Berridge and James, 2003). Another view on cultural diplomacy could be attributed to M. C. Cummings defines cultural diplomacy as ‘the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding’ (Cummings, 2003). Cultural diplomacy in this regard can be understood as the advancement of mutual understanding amidst nation-states with the objective of realising their respective foreign policy interests.

An important perspective on cultural diplomacy is the country’s capability to develop culture in shaping its foreign policy to extend itself as a soft power. Joseph Nye introduced the term soft power in 1990 which denotes a nation’s capacity to realise its objectives by means of attraction and persuasion instead of coercion. It has become a domain of international relations, whereby a country’s influence can encompass beyond military and economic strength. Culture is an integral constituent of diplomacy, particularly as a soft power. Powerful countries, especially the United Kingdom and United States, have a cooperative culture as a significant instrument for maintaining relations with international society and have steadily integrated it into public diplomacy (Naskar, 2018). Asian countries have also used their culture and heritage to promote their national interests and foster mutual relations with other nations. The promotion of culture and heritage through tourism constitutes a significant aspect of cultural diplomacy. It increases the strength of a nation and promotes relations with other countries.

Cultural heritage tourism, a subtle yet powerful form of diplomacy, has gained recognition for its potential to foster international relations (IR). India and Vietnam can both promote mutual understanding and enhance diplomatic ties by recognising their cultural narratives and resources. Cultural heritage tourism in this aspect provides a significant opportunity to encourage interaction between the people of both countries, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of both sides and, most importantly, strengthening bilateral relations.

## **EXPLORING THE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL LINKAGES**

The historic ties between India and Vietnam go back to the ancient past, based on the principles of culture

and civilisation. Buddhism brought Indian art, architecture, and the Sanskrit language into Southeast Asia, including Vietnam. The integration of ethnic, religious, and cultural elements of Southeast Asia into Indian civilisation was a work of centuries. For centuries, Indian merchants, monks, and scholars have travelled to Southeast Asia, establishing crucial cultural exchanges. The Indian Ocean trade routes were crucial corridors for cultural interchange, and the imprint of Indian culture remained evident in many Southeast Asian countries centuries later, as in Vietnamese architecture, sculpture, and literature. A key representation of India’s historical bond with Vietnam is the Indian cultural contributions to Champa civilisation, an ancient Indian-influenced kingdom that thrived in Central and Southern Vietnam from the 2nd century to the 19th century (Van, 2020). Temple architecture is heavily inspired by Indian art and architectural designs, with the renowned My Son Sanctuary, recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage site, serving as a prominent example of this Indo-Vietnamese relationship.

The spread of Buddhism can be signified as one of the strongest links between India and Vietnam. Buddhism made its way to Vietnam approximately 2000 years ago. As early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, many Indian Buddhist scholars and monks travelled to Vietnam to spread Buddhism; at the same time, several Buddhist monks from Vietnam travelled to India for pilgrimages and to learn more about religion. Reliable documents and numerous reputable studies verify that Buddhism in Vietnam originated directly from India rather than from China, even though it has been blended and localised, resulting in a form of Buddhism that combines elements of Buddhism, Taoism, Chinese spirituality, and traditional Vietnamese beliefs (Sindhe, 2025). Both the Mahayana and Theravada branches of Buddhism are practiced in Vietnam.

Buddhist sites in both countries constitute a significant part of both archaeological purposes and religious practices (many of which are UNESCO World Heritage Sites). It is evident that being designated as a World Heritage Site significantly boosts tourist activity. There are around 22 Buddhist sites in India and around 465 Buddhist pagodas across Vietnam. Visiting Buddhist Pilgrimage circuits located in the India-Nepal corridor, which includes the four main Buddhist sites of Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, Sarnath and Kushinagar, once in a lifetime has been a goal for many devoted Buddhists across the world. Aside from this, many Buddhist festivals, Buddhist art, and architecture represent a significant cultural and religious attraction for tourism. Buddhist art as a tourism prospect is not particularly emphasised in contemporary visits. Buddhist art as a focal point for tourism activities is primarily found only in areas with an active and living Buddhist practice. The spread of Buddhism from India to Vietnam, and the continued permeability of Indian philosophies and religions, further affirms the shared culture between these two countries. The historical accounts of these interactions provide an opportunity for heritage tourism that highlights the connections between Indian and Vietnamese history, resulting in a wealth of both tangible and intangible heritage and an avenue for cross-border collaboration (Sindhe, 2025).

Although the relationship between the two countries waned significantly during the colonial period, a

common bond persisted because of the shared struggle against colonialism. In the post-colonial period, this connection was revived, marked by mutual political ideologies (communism) and respect between the leaders of Nehru, Gandhi, and Ho Chi Minh. In 1954, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru laid the foundation for formal relations between the two countries. This was followed by President Ho's 1958 visit to India. The visit was of utmost significance for India-Vietnam relations, since India at that stage officially extended its support to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (Pradhan, 2020). The cultural relationship between the two was deepened in 1959, when India's first President, Rajendra Prasad, visited Vietnam on the invitation of Ho Chi Minh. Dr. Prasad took along a sampling of the bodhi tree from the holy place of Bodhgaya to Tran Quoc and planted it together with President Ho. Besides political relations, the prominence was now on cultural ties between the two countries. The cultural connection established since then serves as the foundation for the unique bond between the two nations (Pradhan, 2020).

### CONTEMPORARY TRENDS AND POLICY INITIATIVES

There is no doubt that India and Vietnam have historically shared proximate and amicable bilateral relations. From the 2000-year-old linkages to the shared history of colonialism and nationalist struggle, the relationship between the two countries has been remarkable. The two leaders of Mahatma Gandhi and President Ho Chi Minh, who guided their nations in the fight for independence, exchanged messages with one another. Even before the institution of official diplomatic ties with Vietnam on 7 January 1972 India upheld consulate-level relations with North Vietnam and South Vietnam (Embassy of India, Hanoi, Vietnam). In 2007, the relationship between the two was raised to 'Strategic Partnership', signifying the mutual importance these two countries have for each other. In 2016, the level of India-Vietnam was uplifted to 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership'. Subsequently, on 21 December 2020 the Prime Ministers of both countries approved a "Joint Vision for Peace, Prosperity and People" which will direct the advancement of India-Vietnam relations (Embassy of India, Hanoi, Vietnam). The 'Act East Policy' also initiated various collaborative steps in the tourism sector, particularly focusing on the importance of cultural heritage. Both countries have established diplomatic relations and have been focusing on advancing multidimensional cooperation. In an effort to strengthen the relationship between India and Vietnam, the Prime Minister of Vietnam, Pham Minh Chinh, visited India from 30<sup>th</sup> July – 1 August 2024. The two countries signed nine agreements on numerous sectors that were of strategic importance to both countries. Among these agreements, tourism is one. This visit further reiterates a similar course of direction between the two countries to shape the future together.

Improvements in the tourism sector can be seen between the two in recent years; however, the potential must be realised at the optimum level. The two countries have 50 plus direct flights, as highlighted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the above-stated meeting between the two countries. Indians who want to travel to Vietnam can take advantage of the e-visa facilities introduced by the

Vietnamese government. In recent years particularly post-covid pandemic there has been a significant increase in demand for air travel between India and Vietnam. This resulted in an increase in the bilateral air service agreement from 28 to 42 weekly flights. As expressed by Jitendra Nath Misra, there is growing attention from Indian tourists to visit Vietnam (ISAS Events, 2023). Many travellers from India are now considering Vietnam as their international destination, following extensive trips to Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore (Ahmed, 2025). According to the official website of the Embassy of India, Hanoi, and Vietnam, India ranks the 8<sup>th</sup> largest in the tourist market to Vietnam. In 2024, there was significant growth in bilateral tourism between the two countries. An estimate of around 500,000 Indians arrived to Vietnam and approximately 55,000 Vietnamese tourists visited India (Embassy of India, Hanoi, Vietnam). This surge in demand has been driven by airlines such as IndiGo, Air India, VietJet, and Vietnam. At present, seven Indian cities (Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Ahmedabad, Kochi, Bengaluru, and Hyderabad) and three Vietnamese cities (Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and Da Nang) are connected by direct flights (ibid). The increase in travel between India and Vietnam indicates a change in the preferences of Indian travellers. An increasing number of Indians are exploring new international locations instead of sticking to traditional spots in Southeast Asia. With the broadened bilateral agreement, air travel between India and Vietnam is expected to expand even further in the years ahead (Ahmed, 2025). This could expand the tourism sector on both sides.

Mention could also be made of the Cultural Centre of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations of India in Hanoi, which was founded in September 2016. In August 2018, the Ministry of External Affairs renamed the cultural centre Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre (SVCC) to commemorate the 125th anniversary of Swami Vivekananda's notable speech in Chicago in 1893 (Embassy of India, Hanoi, Vietnam). The primary goal of the SVCC is to devise and execute policies and initiatives concerning India's cultural interactions with other nations; enhance and fortify cultural relations and mutual harmony between India and various countries; facilitate cultural dialogues; build and nurture relationships with domestic and international organisations engaged in cultural activities; and implement any necessary actions to advance these goals. SVCC's primary focus is on strengthening Buddhist ties between India and Vietnam through its collaborative works with the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, the Vietnam University of Buddhism, and other such organisations. Furthermore, the SVCC partners with Buddhist organisations in Vietnam to celebrate major festivals, such as Vesak and Asadha Purnima. Additionally, the Centre collaborates with numerous institutions and organisations in Vietnam engaged in Indian studies, universities, the National Library of Vietnam, and other regional or national friendship associations (Embassy of India, Hanoi, Vietnam). In line with this collaboration, the Government of India has provided support through the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) for the conservation of three groups of cham temples located in My Son, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Quang Nam Province. The restoration initiative, which took place from 2017 to 2022, had a budget of US\$ 2.25 million (Embassy of India, Hanoi, Vietnam).

My Son Sanctuary, once the religious and political heart of the Champa Kingdom, is nestled in a scenic hilly area within Duy Phú Commune of Duy Xuyên District, approximately 70 kilometres southwest of Da Nang and 40 kilometres from the ancient town of Hoi An. The temple complex consists of eight clusters of 71 monuments and was declared a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site in 1999. The restoration project was carried out over six years with the help of Indian experts, who targeted three tower groups: A, H, and K. This project, which has successfully restored the targeted site, enables tourists to appreciate the exceptional Chàm art and architecture that flourished during the 7th to the 13th centuries. In the year of completion alone, an estimated 105,000 tourists visited the site, exceeding the target by 110 percent (Vietnam News, 2022). Another reference could be made of “Ladakh Unveiled”- which is a cultural exchange and tourism partnership initiative between Lam Dong Province, Vietnam, and Leh Ladakh, India, in Da Lat on December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2023 (Administration of Union territory of Ladakh, 2024). Besides the above-mentioned initiatives, both countries possess rich and diverse heritage such as music, dance, and cinema, particularly Bollywood, which serves as a form of soft power, fostering cultural diplomacy and promoting cultural heritage tourism between India and Vietnam.

## OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN HERITAGE TOURISM

The role of heritage tourism in preserving and promoting cultural identity and heritage cannot be overlooked. Engaging in cultural heritage tourism allows people to appreciate different cultures, customs, and architectural designs that, in turn, inspire reverence for history. Heritage tourism is a bridge that connects the past to the present, helping tourists connect with their roots and educating people about human history and civilisation. It also plays a vital role in protecting architectural treasures, creating economic opportunities, and fostering cross-cultural conversations. Heritage tourism has a substantial impact on India's economy as it generates revenue, encourages employment, and stimulates local business. (Team Kaarwan, 2025).

Heritage tourism impacts indicators such as GDP, job generation, foreign exchange earnings and other economic variables. The economic value created when tourists explore cultural heritage sites translates directly to increase GDP at the regional and national level. Moreover, the effects of heritage tourism multiply through sectors such as hotel, transport and retail, increasing overall economic activity and GDP. Heritage tourism also provides employment opportunities for local communities in diverse sectors such as accommodation, tour guides, transportation services, and handicraft industries. Foreign exchange income earned from international tourists also positively impacts a country's balance of payments.

Heritage tourism impacts indicators such as GDP, job creation and foreign exchange earnings and other economic indicators. The economic impact resulting from tourists visiting the cultural heritage sites immediately reflects as growth in regional and national GDP. Additionally, the impacts of heritage tourism are a catalyst to other sectors such as hotel and transport and retail, which

contribute overall increase in economic activity, hence increasing the GDP. Heritage tourism also offers employment opportunities to local people in several areas, including lodging, guides, transportation and handicraft industries. International tourism also brings in foreign exchange earnings, which favourably contribute to the country's balance of payments. Heritage tourism further attracts investment in various sectors, such as infrastructure and services, which not only uplifts the local communities but also brings regional development (Sharma et al., 2024). Heritage tourism provides a platform for dialogue, mutual understanding, and collaboration among diverse communities over their shared heritage, such as Buddhism in the case of India and Vietnam (Team Kaarwan, 2025).

These two countries possess a shared yet unique Buddhist heritage landscape. Although Buddhism originated and flourished in India during the ancient period, it is no longer a living religion with less than 2% Buddhists in India. Most Buddhist heritage sites in India are located in ruins, conserved mainly for their archaeological importance. There is a lack of properly preserved intangible Buddhist heritage in India that requires compensation through various initiatives. In contrast, Buddhism in Vietnam is a living religion that fosters a vibrant culture. Vietnam provides a combination of archaeological and cultural experiences through festivals, events, performances, and the arts, which are major resources for Buddhist tourism (Sindhe, 2025).

While the expansion of cultural heritage tourism has various positive effects, we should not ignore the fact that it also confronts several challenges, such as the sustainability of tourism, cultural heritage conservation, to name a few. Both India and Vietnam are dealing with the threat of over-tourism, which could lead to environmental degradation, deterioration of historical sites and loss of cultural authenticity, etc. In this context, India and Vietnam should work together to promote sustainable tourism. Clear guidelines need to be established regarding the management of tourist overcrowding; we, as a people, should be sensitised to the significance of cultural heritage and its conservation; suffice it to say, in all tourism ventures, local community engagement should assume precedence. Engaging local stakeholders in efforts to preserve heritage ensures that the advantages of tourism reach the grassroots level while protecting the integrity of heritage sites. As mentioned by various scholars, the knowledge of these shared cultures and heritage between the two countries is mainly limited to scholars and practitioners. There is a need to disseminate this knowledge through various policies and platforms, such as digital heritage promotion. Thus, it is important to give more focus on sustainable and responsible tourism practices in order to safeguard our cultural heritage for future generations. Responsible tourism policy will not only guarantee the sustainability of culture, tradition and environment, but at the same time mitigate the negative impacts of our heritage sites and ensure positive outcomes for tourists as well as the locals (Sharma et al., 2024).

## CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that India and Vietnam have shared extensive culture and history, which provides enormous opportunities for tourism partnerships, especially incultural heritage tourism. To strengthen the economic,

diplomatic, and cultural relationship between India and Vietnam, the countries should explore the arena of cultural heritage tourism by recognising the shared historical and cultural elements between them. The promotion of cultural heritage tourism as a form of diplomacy will strengthen the historical affinities between the two countries. There is a need to foster a collective sense of responsibility for safeguarding cultural heritage through sustainable tourism practices, which will, in turn, augment admiration for our heritage as well as the environment. Cultural heritage tourism is an influential avenue in today's global tourism sector and cultural diplomacy. In this regard, India and Vietnam can provide examples for other nations with similar historical backgrounds to emulate.

## REFERENCES

- Administration of Union territory of Ladakh (1 January 2024). Historic Cultural Exchange and Tourism Collaboration Launched between Vietnam's Lam Dong and India's Leh Ladakh. <https://ladakh.gov.in/historic-cultural-exchange-and-tourism-collaboration-launched-between-vietnams-lam-dong-and-indias-leh-ladakh/>.
- Ahmed, Arfath. (March 20, 2025). India and Vietnam Market Sees Surge Amid 42 Weekly Flights Bilateral. <https://aviationa2z.com/index.php/2025/03/20/india-vietnam-market-sees-surge-amid-bilateral-expansion/> accessed on 21<sup>st</sup> April 2025.
- Berridge, G.R. and James, A. (2003). *A Dictionary of Diplomacy*. Second Edition. Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillen. ISBN 978-1- 4039-1536-8.
- Cummings, M. C. (2003). *Cultural Diplomacy and the United States Government: A Survey*. Washington: Center for Arts and Culture.
- Embassy of India, Hanoi, Vietnam. Bilateral Relations, India-Vietnam Relations. <https://www.indembassyhanoi.gov.in/page/bilateral-relations/>.
- Embassy of India, Hanoi, Vietnam. Heritage Conservation Cooperation. Developmental Partnership. <https://www.indembassyhanoi.gov.in/page/heritage-conservation-cooperation/>.
- Embassy of India, Hanoi, Vietnam. Many attractive opportunities for Indian tourism for Vietnamese tourists. <https://www.indembassyhanoi.gov.in/page/many-attractive-opportunities-for-indian-tourism-for-vietnamese-tourists/>.
- Embassy of India, Hanoi, Vietnam. Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre. Tourism & Culture. <https://www.indembassyhanoi.gov.in/page/svcc/>.
- Embassy of India, Hanoi, Vietnam. India-Vietnam Cultural Relations. Tourism and Culture. <https://www.indembassyhanoi.gov.in/page/india-vietnam/#:~:text=The%20cultural%20restoration%20work%20of,Indian%20cultural%20imprint%20in%20Vietnam.>
- Fox, R. (1999). *Cultural Diplomacy at Crossroads. Cultural Relations in Europe and the Wider World*. London: The British Council.
- Hitchcock, Michael et.al. (2010). *Heritage Tourism in Southeast Asia*. University of Hawaii Press.
- ISAS Events, Jul 4, 2023 "ISAS Seminar: Vietnam's Ties to India" <https://youtu.be/YR9CoIHBfYg?si=QTRDjWH3DkwlMOFy>.
- Kundu, Sampa. (October 2021). Promoting Tourism between ASEAN and India in Post-COVID. AIC Commentary. No. 22.
- Ministry of Culture Sports and Tourism, Vietnam National Authority of Tourism. (Aug 02, 2024) Vietnam and India: Development of culture, tourism cooperation and people-to-people exchanges. <https://vietnamtourism.gov.vn/en/post/20242> accessed on 10th May 2025.
- Naskar, Ishani. (2018). Act East Policy and India's Cultural Diplomacy with ASEAN. *Celebrating the Third Decade and Beyond New Challenges to ASEAN-India Economic Partnership*. Routledge.
- Nye, Joseph Jr (1990). *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. Basic Books: New York.
- Pajtinka, E. (2014). Cultural Diplomacy in Theory and Practice of Contemporary International Relations. *Politickévedy*, 17 (4), 95-108.
- Pradhan, SD. (May 14, 2020). Role of Ho Chi Minh in fostering India-Vietnam relations. India. Times of India. <https://timejulyindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/author/sdpradhan/>.
- Sharma, Sweety. Mishra, Ar. Harshita Mishra. Patil. Anjali S. Patil. (2024). A Role for Heritage Tourism in Economic Development and Growth in India. *IJSRD-International Journal for Scientific Research & Development*. Vol. 12. Issue 4.
- Shinde, KAugustn. (2025). Regional Diversity of Buddhist Heritage Tourism in South Asia and Southeast Asia. *Heritage*, 8, 121. <https://doi.org/10.3390/heritage8040121>
- Team Karwan. (May 17. 2025).Heritage Tourism in India: Discovering the Rich Architectural Legacy. <https://www.kaarwan.com/blog/architecture/heritage-tourism-in-india?id=433>.
- Van, Vu Hong. (2019) The Foundation of Vietnam and India Relation, Historical Values. *Asian Social Science*, Vol. 16, No. 1; 2020. Published by Canadian Center of Science and Education. URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v16n1p1>.
- Vietnam News. (December 24. 2022). My Son heritage site restoration project: evidence of Vietnam-India friendship. <https://vietnamnews.vn/life-style/1439664/my-son-heritage-site-restoration-project-evidence-of-viet-nam-india-friendship.html>.