



CULTURE AS SOFT POWER IN INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS NEPAL

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Abstract

India–Nepal relations are frequently portrayed as exceptional due to deep civilizational, religious, linguistic, and socio-cultural ties that long predate the modern nation-state. Indian foreign policy discourse consistently frames these shared cultural foundations as the core of its cultural diplomacy and soft-power engagement with Nepal. Yet, recurrent political tensions, sovereignty-centric nationalism in Nepal, and Nepal's increasing diversification of external partnerships complicate this narrative. This paper critically examines whether India's cultural diplomacy towards Nepal functions as a substantive instrument of influence or remains largely rhetorical. Drawing on a qualitative and interpretive methodology, the study analyzes India's principal cultural diplomacy instruments—including educational exchanges, cultural institutions, heritage and pilgrimage initiatives, symbolic festivals, and people-to-people ties—against Nepalese perceptions shaped by historical memory and political experience. The paper argues that while India's cultural diplomacy is institutionally extensive and historically grounded, its effectiveness is frequently undermined by credibility deficits arising from policy incoherence and perceived asymmetry. The findings contribute to debates on soft power and public diplomacy in asymmetric regional relationships and suggest that cultural proximity alone does not guarantee diplomatic influence without sustained reciprocity, local ownership, and alignment between cultural messaging and foreign policy practice.

Keywords: *Cultural diplomacy; Soft power; India–Nepal relations; Public diplomacy; South Asia; Credibility; Asymmetry*

1. Introduction

Cultural diplomacy has acquired renewed significance in contemporary international relations as states increasingly seek to complement material capabilities with instruments of attraction, legitimacy, and normative influence. In an era marked by strategic competition, information flows, and identity politics, the ability to shape preferences through culture has become a critical component of foreign policy. India's external engagement, particularly within South

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Asia, has increasingly emphasized culture as a foundational pillar of its diplomatic strategy. This emphasis is most visible in India's relations with Nepal, where shared history, religion, language, and social interaction are frequently invoked to describe the relationship as "unique" or "special."

Among India's neighbours, Nepal occupies an unparalleled position in terms of cultural intimacy. The two countries share an open border that facilitates migration, trade, and everyday social interaction. Millions of Nepali citizens live and work in India, while Indian pilgrims, traders, and tourists regularly travel to Nepal. Sacred geographies such as Lumbini, Janakpur, and Pashupatinath transcend political boundaries and are embedded in the religious imagination of both societies. Linguistic overlap, kinship networks, and intermarriage further blur the distinction between domestic and foreign spaces (Baral, 2012; Jha, 2016).

Indian political leadership and diplomatic discourse consistently foreground these connections as evidence of deep-rooted affinity. Cultural diplomacy, in this framing, appears almost natural—an inherited resource requiring minimal cultivation. India's promotion of Hindu–Buddhist linkages, educational exchanges, and cultural festivals is often presented as a continuation of civilizational ties rather than as deliberate statecraft. However, this narrative coexists with recurrent political frictions, public resentment, and strong assertions of Nepalese sovereignty. Periods of diplomatic strain have repeatedly exposed the fragility of assumed cultural goodwill, raising critical questions about the actual effectiveness of India's cultural diplomacy.

The paradox is striking: how can a relationship characterized by unparalleled cultural proximity also be marked by persistent mistrust? This question lies at the heart of the present study. It challenges the assumption that shared culture automatically translates into soft power and invites a more nuanced examination of how cultural diplomacy operates in asymmetric regional relationships.

This paper therefore asks: Is India's cultural diplomacy towards Nepal primarily rhetorical, relying on symbolic invocations of shared heritage, or does it constitute a substantive and effective instrument of influence? Addressing this question is analytically important for several reasons. First, it advances theoretical debates on soft power by examining the limits of cultural affinity in generating attraction (Nye, 2004; Gallarotti, 2011). Second, it contributes to South Asian studies by systematically analyzing cultural diplomacy as a distinct policy domain rather than as a residual by-product of proximity. Third, it offers

policy-relevant insights for India's neighbourhood diplomacy at a time when Nepal's foreign policy is increasingly shaped by diversification and strategic hedging.

The paper advances the argument that India's cultural diplomacy towards Nepal is institutionally real but politically fragile. India has invested in a wide range of cultural diplomacy instruments—scholarships, cultural institutions, festivals, and heritage initiatives—that constitute a dense infrastructure of engagement. Yet, the effectiveness of these instruments is contingent on credibility, reciprocity, and alignment with broader foreign policy behaviour. Cultural diplomacy succeeds not merely through the presence of shared culture, but through how that culture is mobilized, interpreted, and experienced by the target society (Melissen, 2011; Cull, 2008).

Culture as soft power

The concept of soft power, introduced by Joseph Nye (2004), refers to the ability of a state to influence the preferences and behaviour of others through attraction rather than coercion or material inducement. Culture constitutes one of the principal sources of soft power, alongside political values and the perceived legitimacy of foreign policy. Nye argues that cultural attraction operates most effectively when it resonates with the values and identities of target audiences.

Subsequent scholarship, however, has problematized simplistic understandings of soft power. Gallarotti (2011) emphasizes that soft power is conditional rather than automatic, dependent on credibility, consistency, and context. Cultural resources do not translate seamlessly into influence; they must be mediated through institutions, narratives, and sustained engagement. Moreover, attraction is inherently relational—it depends on how cultural signals are received rather than how they are projected.

Melissen (2011) further develops this argument by conceptualizing cultural diplomacy as dialogic rather than monologic. Effective cultural diplomacy requires listening, co-creation, and mutual recognition. When cultural engagement is perceived as unilateral projection, it risks undermining rather than enhancing attraction. This insight is particularly relevant in asymmetric relationships, where disparities in power heighten sensitivity to influence.

Public Diplomacy, Credibility, and Asymmetry

Public diplomacy literature places credibility at the centre of effective influence. Cull (2008) argues that public diplomacy succeeds when a state's words, deeds, and values align over

time. Conversely, credibility erodes when cultural or normative messaging contradicts foreign policy behaviour. This erosion is cumulative and difficult to reverse.

In asymmetric regional relationships, credibility is especially fragile. Smaller states often interpret cultural initiatives by larger neighbours through a lens of historical experience and power imbalance. Rose's (1998) neoclassical realist perspective highlights how domestic perceptions mediate external signals, shaping foreign policy responses. Cultural diplomacy that ignores these perceptions risks being interpreted as hegemonic rather than benign.

Postcolonial and constructivist scholars further emphasize the role of identity and historical memory. Katzenstein (2005) notes that regional orders are shaped not only by material power but also by shared norms and contested identities. Cultural diplomacy that invokes civilizational unity without acknowledging asymmetry can inadvertently reproduce hierarchical narratives, generating resistance rather than attraction.

India–Nepal Relations

The academic literature on India–Nepal relations consistently highlights the coexistence of deep interdependence and persistent mistrust. Baral (2012) describes the relationship as one of “intimate asymmetry,” characterized by open borders and social integration alongside political unease. Jha (2016) emphasizes how Nepal's domestic politics and identity formation are deeply intertwined with perceptions of India.

Studies focusing on post-2015 relations underscore the lasting impact of political crises on public sentiment. Pant (2018) documents how disruptions in cross-border flows reshaped Nepalese perceptions of India, reinforcing narratives of vulnerability and sovereignty. Kapur (2020) similarly notes that trust deficits continue to influence Nepal's foreign policy orientation, even as cultural and social ties remain intact.

Despite this rich body of scholarship, cultural diplomacy has often been treated implicitly rather than as a distinct analytical category. Most studies focus on strategic, economic, or security dimensions, leaving the cultural domain under-theorized. This paper addresses this gap by systematically examining India's cultural diplomacy towards Nepal through the lenses of soft power, public diplomacy, and asymmetry.

Theoretical framework

This study is anchored in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates soft power theory, public diplomacy, and constructivist approaches to international relations. This combination allows for a nuanced understanding of cultural diplomacy not merely as an

instrument of foreign policy, but as a socially embedded process shaped by identity, perception, and power asymmetry.

Soft Power and Cultural Influence

Joseph Nye's (2004) formulation of soft power provides the conceptual foundation for analyzing India's cultural diplomacy towards Nepal. Soft power, in this view, rests on the ability of a state to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion or material inducement. Culture is central to this process, particularly when it embodies values and practices that resonate with external audiences.

However, Nye (2011) later cautions that soft power is neither automatic nor cost-free. Cultural assets must be actively cultivated, credibly communicated, and supported by consistent foreign policy behaviour. Where cultural messaging is contradicted by political action, attraction diminishes. This insight is critical in the context of India–Nepal relations, where periods of political tension have repeatedly disrupted assumed cultural goodwill.

Gallarotti (2011) further refines the concept by identifying conditions under which soft power is effective. These include legitimacy, credibility, and receptivity. Soft power fails when audiences perceive cultural initiatives as manipulative or self-serving. In asymmetric relationships, where disparities in power are pronounced, receptivity cannot be taken for granted. Cultural proximity may heighten expectations, making perceived violations of norms more damaging.

Public diplomacy and credibility

Public diplomacy literature complements soft power theory by emphasizing process over projection. Cull (2008) conceptualizes public diplomacy as a long-term relationship-building exercise that depends on credibility, dialogue, and mutual understanding. Unlike propaganda, effective public diplomacy requires consistency between rhetoric and behaviour.

Melissen (2011) argues that contemporary public diplomacy has moved beyond one-way communication toward networked and participatory engagement. Cultural diplomacy, as a subset of public diplomacy, is most effective when it facilitates co-creation rather than unilateral cultural export. This perspective is especially relevant in Nepal, where cultural initiatives perceived as India-centric or paternalistic have sometimes provoked resistance.

Credibility occupies a central position in this framework. Once credibility is eroded, even well-intentioned cultural initiatives may be reinterpreted through a lens of suspicion. This

helps explain why India's cultural diplomacy towards Nepal has produced uneven outcomes despite deep historical ties.

Constructivism identity and memory from history

Constructivist approaches emphasize that international relations are shaped by shared ideas, identities, and narratives rather than material power alone. In the context of cultural diplomacy, constructivism draws attention to how cultural meanings are socially constructed and politically contested (Acharya, 2014).

Nepal's national identity has been shaped by a long history of balancing proximity to India with assertions of sovereignty. Cultural closeness, therefore, does not operate in a neutral space. Instead, it is interpreted through historical memory, domestic politics, and evolving notions of nationhood (Jha, 2016; Sharma, 2017).

Katzenstein (2005) highlights that regional orders are sustained not only by power distributions but also by shared norms and contested identities. Cultural diplomacy that invokes civilizational unity without acknowledging Nepal's distinct identity risks reproducing hierarchical narratives. This theoretical insight is crucial for understanding why India's cultural diplomacy can simultaneously generate familiarity and resentment.

Asymmetry and the politics of proximity

The concept of asymmetry is central to this study. India and Nepal share one of the most asymmetrical relationships in South Asia in terms of size, economic capacity, and regional influence. While asymmetry does not preclude cooperation, it conditions perception.

Rose's (1998) neoclassical realist framework suggests that domestic interpretations mediate external signals. In Nepal, domestic political actors often frame India's actions—cultural or otherwise—through narratives of autonomy and resistance. As a result, cultural diplomacy cannot be divorced from broader political context.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives suggest that cultural diplomacy operates at the intersection of attraction and anxiety. Cultural proximity may enhance soft power under conditions of trust, but it may also intensify sensitivity when credibility is questioned. This framework guides the empirical analysis that follows.

India's cultural diplomacy towards Nepal: Instruments and practices

India's cultural diplomacy towards Nepal operates through a diverse set of instruments that range from long-term educational engagement to highly visible symbolic initiatives. These instruments draw upon shared civilizational narratives while attempting to institutionalize

cultural interaction through formal mechanisms. This section examines how these instruments function in practice and how they are perceived within Nepal's political and social context.

Educational and academic diplomacy: Elite socialization and its limits

Educational diplomacy constitutes one of the most substantive and enduring components of India's cultural diplomacy towards Nepal. Since the early decades of bilateral engagement, India has offered scholarships, fellowships, and professional training opportunities to Nepali students and officials. These initiatives are designed to foster long-term interpersonal networks and cultivate familiarity with Indian institutions, norms, and professional practices (Muni, 2015; Thussu, 2013).

From a soft power perspective, educational diplomacy is particularly effective because it operates through sustained exposure rather than episodic symbolism. Alumni of Indian universities often occupy influential positions within Nepal's bureaucracy, academia, media, and civil society. This creates informal channels of communication and cooperation that persist beyond changes in political leadership (Nye, 2011).

However, the impact of educational diplomacy is not uniform. Access to scholarships and elite institutions tends to favour urban, English-speaking, and socio-economically privileged groups, limiting broader societal penetration. As a result, educational diplomacy generates influence that is deep but narrow. Moreover, alumni goodwill is not immune to political context. During periods of bilateral tension, personal experiences and professional networks may be reinterpreted through nationalist narratives, diminishing the soft power dividend (Pant, 2018).

Educational diplomacy thus illustrates both the potential and limitations of cultural engagement. While it produces durable elite-level influence, it remains politically contingent and socially constrained.

Cultural Institutions and Embassy-Led Programs

India supports cultural diplomacy through a network of cultural institutions, embassy-led programs, language courses, and artistic exchanges. These initiatives aim to provide continuity beyond high-level political engagement and to normalize cultural interaction at the societal level (Melissen, 2011).

Institutionalized cultural engagement offers several advantages. It signals long-term commitment, reduces reliance on symbolic gestures, and facilitates routine interaction.

Cultural centres function as spaces for dialogue, artistic collaboration, and intellectual exchange, contributing to a sense of familiarity and shared cultural space.

Yet, the effectiveness of cultural institutions depends heavily on local context. In Nepal, perceptions of Indian cultural institutions fluctuate with the broader political climate. When bilateral relations are stable, such institutions are viewed as benign facilitators of exchange. During periods of diplomatic strain, however, they may be perceived as instruments of influence or soft coercion (Bhatia, 2016).

This sensitivity underscores the importance of reciprocity and co-creation. Programs that actively involve Nepali artists, scholars, and institutions tend to generate greater legitimacy than those perceived as unilateral projections of Indian culture. Cultural diplomacy, in this sense, is not merely about presence but about partnership.

Heritage and pilgrimage diplomacy: Sacred geography and political sensitivity

Heritage and pilgrimage diplomacy represent one of the most visible and symbolically powerful dimensions of India's cultural engagement with Nepal. Shared religious geography—particularly Hindu and Buddhist sacred sites—provides India with a distinctive soft power resource unmatched by most external actors.

Initiatives linking sacred sites through Ramayana and Buddhist pilgrimage circuits seek to transform shared heritage into tourism, economic opportunity, and symbolic connectivity (Chakraborty, 2020). These initiatives have significant mass appeal, reaching audiences beyond elites and policymakers. Pilgrimage flows embed cultural diplomacy in everyday practices, making it potentially more durable than elite-centric engagement (Nye, 2004).

At the same time, heritage diplomacy is politically sensitive. Sacred geography is closely tied to national identity, and civilizational narratives can easily be interpreted as claims of cultural ownership. In Nepal, where sovereignty and cultural autonomy are central to national discourse, such initiatives must be framed carefully to avoid perceptions of appropriation or hierarchy (Sharma, 2017).

Operational challenges further complicate outcomes. Infrastructure gaps, border management issues, and inconsistent coordination can undermine pilgrim experiences, converting symbolic potential into frustration. These factors demonstrate that heritage diplomacy's effectiveness depends as much on execution as on narrative.

Educational Diplomacy and the Politics of Elite Influence

Educational diplomacy offers a useful lens for examining how cultural engagement translates into influence over time. Indian scholarships have historically created a cohort of Nepalese professionals with personal and institutional ties to India. These ties facilitate informal cooperation and policy dialogue, particularly in technical and administrative domains (Muni, 2015).

However, elite socialization also generates vulnerabilities. In Nepal's domestic political discourse, elite connections with India are sometimes framed as dependency or ideological alignment. During periods of heightened nationalism, individuals with Indian educational backgrounds may face political scrutiny, reducing their willingness to act as informal bridges. This case demonstrates that educational diplomacy produces latent influence—durable but activated only under favourable political conditions. It highlights the importance of broadening cultural engagement beyond elites to mitigate political volatility.

Lumbini and Buddhist Cultural Diplomacy

Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha, occupies a central place in Nepal's cultural identity and global religious significance. India's engagement with Lumbini through cultural events, academic collaboration, and heritage initiatives reflects an attempt to leverage Buddhist diplomacy as a shared civilizational platform (Ogura, 2009).

Buddhist diplomacy possesses global resonance, extending beyond bilateral relations to involve broader Asian networks. For India, engagement with Lumbini reinforces its image as a custodian of Buddhist heritage. For Nepal, Lumbini represents both national pride and economic opportunity.

Yet, this shared space is politically delicate. Nepal's role as the sovereign custodian of Lumbini requires explicit recognition. Cultural diplomacy that appears to subordinate Nepalese agency risks provoking nationalist resistance. This case underscores the importance of symbolic equality and shared governance in heritage diplomacy.

Pilgrimage Circuits and Mass Cultural Engagement

Pilgrimage circuits linking sacred sites across India and Nepal represent one of the most ambitious attempts to institutionalize mass cultural engagement. These initiatives aim to convert shared religious heritage into sustained people-to-people connectivity, tourism revenue, and regional integration.

From a soft power perspective, mass engagement offers distinct advantages. Large numbers of participants create habitual interaction, embedding cultural diplomacy in routine practice. However, mass engagement also magnifies risk. Negative experiences—whether due to infrastructure failures, administrative hurdles, or political rhetoric—can rapidly erode goodwill.

This case demonstrates the fragility of mass-level cultural diplomacy. While potential is high, outcomes depend on coordination, political sensitivity, and consistent implementation.

Comparative Insights

Taken together, the case studies reveal recurring patterns. Cultural diplomacy initiatives that emphasize partnership, reciprocity, and institutional depth tend to produce more sustainable outcomes. Those that rely heavily on symbolism or assume automatic goodwill are more vulnerable to political disruption.

Discussion: Rhetoric, Reality, and the Limits of Cultural Proximity

The preceding empirical analysis reveals a persistent gap between the institutional presence of India's cultural diplomacy towards Nepal and its political effectiveness. This gap is not the result of absence or neglect; on the contrary, India has invested extensively in cultural engagement with Nepal through education, heritage, symbolic initiatives, and people-to-people ties. Yet, the outcomes of these efforts remain uneven and contingent. This section synthesizes the empirical findings through the theoretical framework developed earlier and situates them within broader debates on soft power and regional diplomacy.

A central insight of the study is that cultural proximity does not automatically translate into attraction. While shared culture can provide a foundation for engagement, it can also intensify sensitivity in asymmetric relationships. In the India–Nepal case, cultural intimacy heightens expectations regarding respect, reciprocity, and restraint. When these expectations are perceived to be violated, cultural closeness amplifies resentment rather than mitigating it. This finding challenges deterministic assumptions within soft power theory that cultural similarity inherently produces influence (Nye, 2004; Gallarotti, 2011).

The analysis also highlights the centrality of credibility. Public diplomacy literature emphasizes that credibility is cumulative but fragile (Cull, 2008). In Nepal, political crises have had long-lasting effects on how Indian initiatives are interpreted. Cultural diplomacy initiatives launched or continued during periods of strained relations are often reinterpreted through nationalist narratives, regardless of their original intent. This dynamic illustrates

Melissen's (2011) argument that public diplomacy cannot compensate for contradictory political behaviour.

Another key finding concerns the elite bias of many cultural diplomacy instruments. Educational and academic exchanges generate deep but narrow influence. While elite socialization produces long-term networks, it also creates vulnerabilities when domestic politics shift. The perception that cultural diplomacy benefits only select groups undermines its legitimacy and limits its capacity to generate broad-based goodwill (Pant, 2018).

Heritage and pilgrimage diplomacy demonstrate both the promise and perils of mass-level engagement. While such initiatives possess significant symbolic and economic potential, they are politically sensitive and operationally demanding. Poor coordination, inadequate infrastructure, or insensitive framing can rapidly erode goodwill. This underscores the importance of execution and narrative alignment in cultural diplomacy.

Finally, the discussion reveals that India's cultural diplomacy has often been framed in civilizational terms, emphasizing historical continuity and shared heritage. While this framing resonates at a symbolic level, it risks reproducing hierarchical narratives if it does not explicitly acknowledge Nepalese agency and sovereignty. Constructivist perspectives remind us that identities are negotiated, not inherited (Acharya, 2014). Cultural diplomacy that assumes unity without negotiation may inadvertently provoke resistance.

Conclusion

This paper set out to examine whether India's cultural diplomacy towards Nepal represents a substantive instrument of soft power or remains largely rhetorical. The analysis demonstrates that the answer lies between these two extremes. India's cultural diplomacy is institutionally real, historically grounded, and extensive in scope. Few external actors possess comparable cultural resources or societal embeddedness in Nepal.

At the same time, the effectiveness of these resources is politically fragile. Cultural diplomacy operates within a context shaped by historical memory, sovereignty concerns, and asymmetric power relations. Shared culture does not function as neutral terrain; it is interpreted through lived experience and domestic political narratives. As a result, cultural proximity can both enable and constrain influence.

The findings contribute to soft power theory by emphasizing that attraction is not an inherited asset but an ongoing practice. Cultural diplomacy succeeds not when culture is invoked as

destiny, but when it is practiced as partnership. In the absence of credibility, reciprocity, and policy coherence, even the most deeply rooted cultural ties cannot guarantee influence.

Policy Implications

The Nepal case offers broader lessons for India's neighbourhood diplomacy and for cultural diplomacy in asymmetric regional relationships more generally.

First, cultural diplomacy must be insulated from political coercion. Cultural platforms should not be activated instrumentally during crises, nor should they be expected to compensate for political pressure. Decoupling cultural engagement from short-term political signalling can help preserve credibility.

Second, India should shift from unilateral projection to co-creation. Joint cultural governance—particularly in heritage and pilgrimage initiatives—can enhance legitimacy and reduce perceptions of hierarchy. Explicit recognition of Nepalese agency is essential.

Third, cultural diplomacy should move beyond elite networks to achieve broader societal reach. Expanding sub-national exchanges, civil society partnerships, and grassroots initiatives can reduce elite bias and build more resilient goodwill.

Fourth, cultural diplomacy must be aligned with consistent neighbourhood policy. Symbolic gestures cannot substitute for restraint, predictability, and respect in state behaviour. Policy coherence remains the foundation of credibility.

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Table 1**India's Cultural Diplomacy Instruments and Observed Outcomes in Nepal**

Instrument	Intended Objective	Observed Outcome
Educational scholarships & academic exchanges	Long-term goodwill and elite socialization	Durable interpersonal ties, but elite-centric and politically contingent
Cultural centres & embassy-led programs	Institutionalized cultural engagement	Stable presence, impact varies with political context
Heritage & pilgrimage diplomacy	Mass-level people-to-people connectivity	High symbolic and economic potential, vulnerable to politicization
Cultural festivals & symbolic events	Visibility and symbolic bonding	Short-term impact without sustained follow-up

Source: Author's compilation based on policy documents and secondary literature (Nye, 2004; Pant, 2018; Melissen, 2011).

Table 2
Timeline of Key Perception Shocks in India–Nepal Relations

Period	Event	Impact on Cultural Diplomacy
2015	Disruption of cross-border flows	Major erosion of trust; cultural gestures reinterpreted
2019–2020	Boundary and cartographic disputes	Heightened nationalist narratives in Nepal
Early 2020s	Nepal's diversification of external partnerships	Relative dilution of India's soft-power primacy

Source: Compiled from Baral (2012), Jha (2016), Pant (2018), Kapur (2020).

Table 3
Comparative Case-Study Matrix

Case	Level of Engagement	Strength	Limitation
Educational diplomacy	Elite	Long-term influence	Narrow social reach
Lumbini (Buddhist diplomacy)	Global-symbolic	Transnational legitimacy	Sovereignty sensitivity
Pilgrimage circuits	Mass	Broad participation	Operational & political fragility

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