

India's 'soft power' play with BIMSTEC nations: observing education diplomacy as an instrument of foreign policy

Abstract

South Asia as a region has a deficient Human Resource base, which jeopardizes its developmental ambitions and socioeconomic progress. Due to the fragile geopolitical context of the region, low spending for human development and increased expenditures for militarism sustain such a state of affairs in the subregion. As a result, large educational interventions are needed in the region. Education is the stumbling block to progress. Education and culture have always served as vital lines of communication between India and the BIMSTEC member states like Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, etc. India became the world's second-largest provider of higher education after independence, and it continued to attract students from the BIMSTEC countries. The chapter will examine several aspects of educational collaboration between India and the BIMSTEC countries in this context. This collaboration in the field of education will allow India to use soft-power diplomacy to strengthen its relations with its BIMSTEC partner.

Keywords: India, BIMSTEC, soft power, education diplomacy

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Debasish Nandy,¹ Alik Naha²

¹Department of Political Science, Kazi Nazrul University, India

²Department of Political Science, Vidyasagar College, India

Correspondence: Debasish Nandy, Associate Professor & Head, Department of Political Science, Kazi Nazrul University, Asansol, West Bengal, India, Email debasishnandy.kc@gmail.com

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Introduction

Soft power diplomacy includes education as a key component. The International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century in its 'Delors Report'¹ highlights higher education's enormous potential to leverage globalization as a tool for bridging the knowledge gap and enriching cross-cultural discussion. The cause of human rights and democracy is furthered when young people are exposed to a liberal society and a pluralistic democracy like India. Capacity building is the most difficult task for the countries of South and Southeast Asia, and India, with its long history of knowledge power, can make a huge contribution.

India is one of the oldest 'knowledge societies',² with roots dating back to the Taxila University and Nalanda, that drew students from all across Asia, including China, Korea, and Indonesia. India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, saw the value of education in realizing India's potential and achieving self-sufficiency. Higher education and research institutions were given special attention by him. Nehru and his Education and Culture Minister, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, were acutely aware of India's soft-power potential. Nehru also recognized the value of education and training as diplomatic tools. In 1949, a program for awarding scholarships to international students, particularly those from underdeveloped nations, was established.³ India has become a popular destination for developing countries seeking higher education and holistic training.

Education and culture have always served as a link between India and the BIMSTEC member states. According to Jataka stories, scriptures, inscriptions, palm-leaf records, and accounts of foreign travelers, Taxila, Nalanda, and Vikramshila drew academics from all over the region in ancient times.⁴ India became the world's second-largest provider of higher education after independence, and it continued to attract students from the BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) countries.⁵ The government offers foreign students scholarships through a variety of

programs, including the General Cultural Scholarship, the Colombo Plan, and bilateral agreements and exchange programs. The AYUSH scholarship scheme, which offers thirty scholarships each year, was established in 2005–6 for the six BIMSTEC member countries to pursue technical courses in traditional systems of medicine, such as Ayurveda, Unani, Homoeopathy, and Siddha.² In this framework, the chapter will examine the role of education as a tool of soft power diplomacy, as well as India's education diplomacy with some selected BIMSTEC countries. The chapter is written utilizing the content analysis method, which involves gathering information from books, journals, newspaper articles, government papers, and other secondary data sources.

Arguments of the study

This study is based on some arguments-(1) Stephen Cohen has observed that the success of the Indian democratic approach to state-and-nation-building should be the core factor in its relations with democratic allies. Democracy is a key factor in exercising a successful soft power-based relationship between the two countries; (2) Culture played a very important role in India's relations with BIMSTEC countries. India has had a long cultural relationship with these countries. Over the last few years, India concluded several educational and cultural agreements through these the 'soft power' diplomacy has been exercised successfully; (3) The open and free society is a pre-condition in the establishment of the educational relationship as a part of 'soft power'; (4) India's educational diplomacy is almost one-sided. To get support from these countries India has extended its relations with the BIMSTEC members; (5) India's educational diplomacy is not only a reflection of the genericity of India's foreign policy but also an initiative of capacity building of the potential manpower of the BIMSTEC members. Therefore, Soft power can be pivotal for India's relations with these countries. The use of educational diplomacy as a tool of soft power in diplomacy is considered an alternative channel. Soft power is not only used for eliminating mistrust but is useful for confidence-building among the countries, at also very helpful for bilateral economic interest.

Contextualizing the study

Michel Foucault observed, "who use power as an instrument of coercion, and even away from the discreet structures in which those actors operate, toward the idea that 'power everywhere' diffused and embodied in discourse, knowledge and 'regimes of truth'".⁶ To Foucault, "knowledge is power". Following the concept of the power of Foucault, it can be said knowledge can be used as power or soft power. The concept of 'soft power' was first coined by Joseph Nye Jr. in 1990 in his book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. According to Nye, "If a state can make its power legitimate in the perception of others and establish international institutions that encourage them to channel or limit their activities, it may not need to expend as many of its costly traditional economic or military resources".⁷ A country's economy, culture, values, and pedagogical elements are considered soft power. In other words, soft power is based on intangible influences such as culture, values, ideology, one's occult knowledge, and the like.⁸ In application, education can be a more effective instrument of the foreign policy of any country. India is not only assisting the potential scholars of the BIMSTEC countries by offering scholarships and confidence-building process but also by emphasizing exploring a knowledge-based economy. The various educational and professional institutes are pulling the students from BIMSTEC countries. In this way, India is not only generating revenues but also probing that it is an inevitable destination for the scholars of the BIMSTEC countries.

Education as an instrument of soft power

Over the last century, the definition of diplomacy has broadened to incorporate the concept of 'public diplomacy,' which encompasses a wide range of actors and activities aimed at improving international relations. For a country, to improve its international standing and prestige, as well as create favorable conditions for long-term socioeconomic development, it employs a variety of hard and soft power foreign policy instruments.⁹ Soft Power is defined as "the ability to get what you want by attracting and persuading others to adopt your goals. It differs from hard power, the ability to use the carrots and sticks of economic and military might to make others follow your will."¹⁰ It has been observed that, since the collapse of the bipolar international system, many states have turned to soft power to achieve their foreign policy objectives. The main drivers of this trend are growing interdependence among states and the high cost that countries pay for accomplishing foreign policy goals through the deployment of hard power. In this setting, soft power tools have begun to play a more effective role in conducting foreign policies, and we anticipate that this role will continue to grow in the future.

Many people today regard 'international higher education, research, and knowledge as a source of power - a type of soft power'.¹¹ Using education as a tool to achieve national interest dates back to colonialism when colonial powers attempted to sway subaltern popular opinion. This was the case in South and Southeast Asia during British colonization. Education was a means to develop a favorable social mindset and consolidate power. This introduction of European knowledge systems cultivated a progressive mindset among Indian elites and youths, and it was essential in ending societal injustices such as the system of sati and child marriage. Education plays a significant part in the expansion of national influence even in the postcolonial age. The British Council, for example, as an affiliate of the British embassy, presents itself as an international organization promoting educational opportunities and cultural exchanges. Likewise, the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) are the backbones of India's educational

diplomacy. To influence elite opinion, the ICWA hosts seminars and conferences on international relations and issues. The ICCR, on the other hand, provides financial assistance to international students through educational scholarships and cultural exchanges.

In today's world, a state's ability to assist in the development of its neighbors is becoming increasingly important. Furthermore, states must fight for the right to determine the values and regulatory components of the modern world order during the transition period of the world political system. One of the fundamental aspects of the new millennium is competition between different values and paradigms of national and socio-economic development. This type of leadership is now impossible to achieve without improving human development, which is the bedrock of the new knowledge-based economy.¹² This is why countries such as India are emphasizing modernizing and internationalizing their educational systems.¹³

India's various scholarship programs for students from BIMSTEC countries are a great example of Knowledge Diplomacy that is furthered through higher education. Knowledge diplomacy focuses on "the role of international higher education and research in building and strengthening relations between and among countries."¹¹ The aim has always been to create mutual understanding between people and nations, and it has always been a blend of government and citizen-generated soft power. This has been referred to as one of India's greatest diplomatic assets. Students from other countries who come to India to study become familiar with and drawn to the country's history, culture, and ideals, and they become effective transmitters of these values and cultures back to their home countries. Simultaneously, these students also impart some degree of their domestic culture into Indian society. As a result, it has become a more persuasive weapon for pursuing foreign policy, and these students are sometimes referred to as "Trojan Horse".¹⁴ In a people-to-people spirit, these study-abroad students take on the role of cultural ambassador to improve communication and establish relationships among individuals. As a result, today's educational system is inextricably linked to the concepts of politics and/or geopolitics.¹⁵

India's education diplomacy with BIMSTEC

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is a regional organization that brings seven Bay of Bengal countries together. BIMSTEC is a bridge connecting South and South-East Asia. The economic bloc was founded with four members and was given the initials BIST-EC. After Myanmar was added to the group in 1997, it was renamed BIMST-EC. After Nepal and Bhutan were joined the grouping in 2004, the name was changed to BIMSTEC. For India BIMSTEC is an obvious choice to meet its core foreign policies of 'Neighborhood First' and 'Act East'.

BIMSTEC is one of the least integrated regional bodies among the regional frameworks. But it cannot be achieved only through intergovernmental interactions. The most important component of integration includes business-to-business and people-to-people communication. The South Asian University was established in 2010 in response to a suggestion made by India at the 13th SAARC Summit in 2005 to foster regional integration via people-to-people contact and intellectual exchange between researchers and academicians. However, it is a letdown in the manner in which it was planned. Students are traveling from all around South Asia, yet there is only one-way traffic. As a result, interactions between academics and students exposed to ideas from other countries were limited, and the process of overcoming prejudices continued.¹⁶ There will be no

new Bay of Bengal narrative unless academics are encouraged to go into the past and rediscover the vibrant sense of community that characterized the region until the twentieth century.¹⁷

M. N. Srinivas once spoke of 'people on the wrong side of the border', referring to the population and ethnic groupings that overlap in South Asian countries. Educational interactions among students can help to strengthen this cultural overlap. After all, today's students will be the future leaders of their countries, and knowing each other during their initial days will better prepare them to relate to one another. Interactions with people from surrounding nations will not only aid in mutual understanding but will also assist India in reintegrating into the region through cultural commonalities. When viewed through the prism of India's sub-regions, the BIMSTEC fits perfectly in New Delhi's geo-strategic interests. The BIMSTEC connects India with three major sub-regions: the Himalayan sub-region with Nepal and Bhutan, the Bay of Bengal sub-region with Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, and the Mekong sub-region with Myanmar and Thailand.¹⁸ In the words of Former Thai Ambassador Chutikul, "when we imagine a bridge spanning the Bay of Bengal it is not only physical infrastructure—a two-lane highway for trucks—but also a bridge of the mind, a bridge for imagination."¹⁹ So, India's pursuance of educational diplomacy as a means to foster greater people-to-people contact should be viewed in this respect.

Here we will look into India's educational diplomacy with some selected BIMSTEC partners.

Bhutan

India and Bhutan have a long and cordial relationship that is marked by kindness and peace. They've been through a lot of cultural clashes together. Guru Padmasambhava, an Indian Buddhist saint, came to Bhutan to help spread Buddhism and restore ancient relationships between the country's people. The India-Bhutan Foundation, founded in 2003, aspires to improve people-to-people contact in areas such as environmental protection, scientific and technical research, education, and culture. The Nehru-Wangchuk Cultural Centre, which is part of the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR), has also been instrumental in sustaining cultural ties between Bhutan and India. The Ngultrum "complete solution" initiative in Bhutan, funded by India, aimed to foster the development of a knowledge-based Bhutanese society.

In India, a considerable number of Bhutanese college students are enrolled. Approximately 4000 Bhutanese are projected to be enrolled in self-financing undergraduate courses in Indian universities.²⁰ Every year, the Indian Government awards undergraduate scholarships to Bhutanese students to study in leading Indian institutions. A substantial number of slots have been allotted for Bhutanese students to pursue Undergraduate studies in India under this initiative. The Government also provides completely financed scholarships to deserving Bhutanese students in many professional fields such as MBBS, Engineering, LLB, B.Sc. (Nursing), B.Sc. (Agriculture), BDS, and so on. In addition, the government awards many fully financed Post Graduate Scholarships to eligible Bhutanese students in their chosen field of study each year. The 11th Five Year Plan has approved the implementation of 191 long-term ex-country slots for studying Post-Graduation in India and 7777 short-term training slots, both in-country and ex-country.²⁰

To strengthen this educational partnership, India offers many scholarships to Bhutanese students interested in studying in India. The prestigious Nehru-Wangchuk Scholarship is given to eligible and outstanding Bhutanese people who wish to study in India's top

educational institutions. The scholarship sum was doubled to INR 2 crore in 2014.²⁰ The Ambassador's scholarship is given to deserving Bhutanese students who are pursuing self-financed courses in India. Every year, the ICCR Scholarship provides twenty fully financed places to Bhutanese students. Bhutan has been using the Aid-to-Bhutan ICCR Scholarship scheme since the 2012-13 academic year. Students accepted into this program are placed in India's leading engineering universities. The scholarship is awarded at the suggestion of the Department of Adult and Higher Education Royal Government of Bhutan and is based on the student's merit ranking in Class XII. In addition, the Indian government provides 200 ITEC training slots and 60 TCS Colombo Plan training slots to Bhutanese students to help them develop their administrative and technical skills. Flights, tuition costs, housing, and a living allowance are all provided by the government for trainees.

To further commemorate this special friendly relation, the then crown prince of Bhutan, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk was awarded the honorary D. Litt degree at the 2010 Calcutta University convocation.⁴ India is committed to the 'Bharat to Bhutan' (B2B) policy, under which it seeks to diversify the relationship beyond hydropower and the Himalayan strategic alliance. When Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Bhutan in 2019, he underlined the importance of education in the relationship since ancient times, with Buddhist instructors and academics serving as a learning bridge. This emphasizes the importance of knowledge in improving people-to-people ties between the two countries. PM Modi further stressed that the people are at the heart of this partnership and that they are the true source of power and energy in the India-Bhutan connection.

The signing of several MoU in the sphere of education will pave the door for new areas of bilateral collaboration.²¹ Education and technology are two of Bhutan's most important areas. The signing of an MoU between the National Knowledge Network and the Druk Research and Education Network would help to connect intellectuals and academics from both countries, thereby increasing the educational quality of Bhutanese students. Bhutan's e-Library, which was launched in 2016, was built with a contribution of Rs 14.5 crore from India. Across Bhutan's 20 Dzongkhags/districts, the project would assist 49 schools and 12 institutions.²²

Bhutan is a major partner in India's 'Neighborhood First' policy and India appreciated the importance of Bhutan and its geographical location. Bhutan's topography makes it vulnerable to the effects of climate change on its people's lives and livelihoods. As a result, India is currently seeking to diversify its connections with Bhutan. Bhutan's biggest problem is the youth unemployment problem, and hydropower is not a job-creating industry in Bhutan since it lacks skilled workers.²² Thus, education diplomacy between India and Bhutan has the potential to improve the skills of Bhutanese youth and provide more job possibilities, which will assist Bhutan's economy. For India's strategic goals in the Himalayas, a stable and friendly Bhutan is essential.

Thailand

The relationship between India and Thailand is not new. For nearly two millennia, religious, cultural, linguistic, mythical, and commercial ties have existed. Thailand has been referred to as Swarnabhumi, or the Golden Land, in ancient Indian literature. People in Thailand and India share similar socio-cultural traditions and events. The Thai tradition of Ramakien, a local variation of the Ramayana, and Buddha's wisdom has a deeply profound impact on the people-to-people relations.²³ In Thailand, Hinduism and

Buddhism coexisted and have a major influence. Sanskrit has a deep and lasting influence on Thai culture. The civilizational foundation on which India-Thailand relations have been maintained for so long is a remarkable witness to the many commonalities that exist between the two countries. These ties have served as tangible enablers of cultural and public diplomacy, helping to bring New Delhi's 'Act East Policy' and Bangkok's 'Look West Policy' together.²⁴ The North American Cultural Diplomacy Initiative published an interesting annual report that argued how cultural diplomacy and soft power might catapult greater bilateral trade. Historically, trade has also played a significant influence in the spread of Indian culture to Southeast Asia.

In 2005, a Memorandum of Understanding on Education Cooperation was signed. During the academic year 2018-19, the Indian government provided 72 scholarships to Thai students through various initiatives. Apart from Chulalongkorn University, Mahidol University, and Chiang Mai University, Thailand has built an India Studies Centre at Thammasat University and a Sanskrit Studies Centre at Silpakorn University. In addition, India offers 100 doctoral fellowships to Thai nationals at the prominent Indian Institutes of Technology.²⁵ Under the cultural assistance scheme, India offers Thai academics the opportunity to obtain an education in India and learn about Indian culture. Thai students are eligible for scholarships from India under the BIMSTEC framework. In addition, fifty scholarships are available under the Mekong-Ganga Scholarship Program.²⁶ Under several general schemes, such as the Commonwealth Scholarship Scheme, the Cultural Exchange Program, and the Colombo Plan, the ICCR also gives fellowships to Southeast Asian students and academics. Five scholarships are also awarded to Thai students for undergraduate and postgraduate studies in Ayurveda, Unani, Siddha, and Homeopathy. The ICCR's General Cultural Scholarship Scheme awards 55 scholarships to Southeast Asian countries, with 10 of them going to Thailand.

One of the important areas of India-Thailand collaboration is the development of the knowledge economy. In February 2006, an Indo-Thai Program of Cooperation (POC) in Science and Technology was signed. Through bilateral exploratory visits, cooperative R&D projects, joint seminars and workshops, training, fellowships, and participation in international conferences, it encourages bilateral cooperation between scientists and researchers from the two countries. Following the signing of an information technology cooperation memorandum in 2001, a joint task force on IT was formed in 2003 to explore IT education and training, as well as cross-certification of IT workers and business goods. In the Kasetsart i-Community Project, the National Informatics Centre (India) assisted the Operations Management Department of Kasetsart University (Thailand). With Indian government support, an Electronic Design Centre (EDL) was established at Chulalongkorn University.

Apart from government cooperation, one-to-one institutional collaboration is important for reciprocal human resource development. The increasing number of Thai students at Indian colleges/universities throughout the years reflects the level of education cooperation between India and Thailand. Several Indian students attend the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) in Thailand, which also has a few faculty members of Indian descent. Indian academic institutions such as the Indian Institutes of Management in Ahmedabad, the Indian Institutes of Management in Calcutta, Sir Padampat Singhanian University, and Shivaji University have partnered with AIT. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed in 2011 by the Sam Higginbottom Institute of Agriculture Technology and Sciences (SHIATS) in India and AIT for a unified Bachelor's and Master's program, short and long-term faculty and student exchange, collaborative academic

and research program, scientific information exchange, and joint academic events.²⁷ In addition, the Central Institute of Hindi in Agra (India) offers four slots to Thai students interested in learning Hindi. An agreement was signed between Nagaland University of India and the Chiang Mai University of Thailand in 2016 to enhance educational collaborations between India and Thailand.

To this day, India and Thailand have a special friendship that is visible to all. This link has been carefully kept and passed down through the generations. Soft power ties have traditionally bolstered India-Thailand's strong civilizational ties. Thai culture has been inspired by a variety of Indian literary genres. It was a way for India to strengthen ties with Thailand and the rest of the ASEAN area, and these links would only strengthen as time goes on.

Sri Lanka

India and Sri Lanka have close cultural bonding. To enhance cultural linkages between India and Sri Lanka the 'Cultural Cooperation Agreement' was signed between the two countries in November 1977. By this agreement, it was decided that India and Sri Lanka will promote their cultural relations through various exchange programs. The Indian Cultural Centre in Colombo is actively promoting awareness of Indian culture by offering classes in Indian music, dance, Hindi, and Yoga. As a part of a friendly gesture in the wake of the 150th Birth Anniversary Celebrations of Mahatma Gandhi, Sri Lankan Prime Minister has released special commemorative postal stamps on Gandhiji. People to people contact has been enhanced through cultural and religious linkages.

The Government of India is doing a lot for capacity building India now offers about 710 scholarship slots annually to Sri Lankan students, including those studying in Sri Lanka and India. Besides, under the ITEC Scheme and the Colombo Plan, India offers 400 slots annually to Sri Lankan nationals for short and medium-term training courses in a wide variety of technical and professional disciplines. Sri Lankan students have been permitted to take the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) for dental and medical admissions since 2017-18. In Sri Lanka, IIT JEE (Advanced) admission exams have been held since 2017.

In a major boost to bilateral scientific and technical cooperation, India and Sri Lanka have signed an agreement in October 2020, to hold workshops and seminars as well as exchange visits by scientists and research workers. The agreement has facilitated fellowships for the training of young researchers on an exchange basis and will also facilitate joint identification of the potential for research cooperation stemming from scientific and technical challenges in trade and industry, including joint research projects, exchange of experience, and organization of exhibitions. The Ministry of Science, Technology, and Research (MSTR), the Government of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, and the Department of Science and Technology (DST), Government of India concluded a Program of Cooperation (POC) in Science and Technology, in 2019. In the Indo- Sri Lanka Joint Research Program, some emerging scientific cooperation was framed such as Food Technology, Plant base medicines, Metrology, Space Research & Applications, Industrial Electronics, Renewable Energy, and Information and Communication Technology. The MSTR and DST had invited Sri Lankan and Indian scientists/researchers to submit proposals for Joint Research Projects and Bilateral Workshops.

New Delhi and Colombo have a long history of cooperation in education. Under the Colombo Plan, currently, India is offering 50 training opportunities in technical fields for the Sri Lankan youths. Under the India- Sri Lanka cultural exchange program, India is offering

60 annual scholarships to study in India at UG and PG courses. Under the ICCR's South Asian Regional Cooperation Scholarship Scheme, India is offering one scholarship every year to Sri Lankan students. The government of India has offered special training programs for Sri Lankan Tamils. India Sri Lanka knowledge initiative has been launched in June 2020. The knowledge exchange programs should be based on the policy of 'two-way formula'. The Sri Lankan President Rajapaksa had given a proposal to open up the Centre for Contemporary Indian Study at the campus of Colombo University.⁴ There is no doubt, that this is a very positive initiative to understand Indian culture, society, polity, and economy. Some new scholarships have been introduced by the government of India to address the special needs of Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka. India offers special assistance to Sri Lankan youths in using satellites for societal services. India is build-up some schools in the Tamil-concentrated areas of Northern Sri Lanka. To enhance cultural peaceful thinking among the Sri Lankan students. India established Rabindranath Tagore Memorial Auditorium at the Ruhuna University and the Mahatma Gandhi International Centre in Matale.⁴

Bangladesh

India is trying a lot for the capacity building of Bangladeshi youths. Currently, India is offering some scholarships through ITEC, TCS of Colombo Plan, ICCR, AYUSH, Commonwealth, SAARC, and IOR-ARC. India-Bangladesh educational dialogue at a high level is going on. In June 2015, during the visit of PM Modi, emphasis was put on furthering bilateral cooperation in higher education and research. India has announced the second Line of Credit (LoC) worth US\$2 billion for Bangladesh, to aid 15 development projects in different sectors, including education. The India-Bangladesh Education Dialogue encourages strategic institutional linkages in science, engineering, social sciences, humanities, and gender studies. In 2015, India and Bangladesh signed a joint proclamation that stresses "Notun Projonmo-Nayi Disha" and emphasizes the importance of education in bilateral relations between the two countries.²⁸ Many students of Bangladesh are availing of various Indian scholarships. Indian educational diplomacy with Bangladesh is not only helpful to the potential scholars of Bangladesh but also helps them gather broad ideas about India. They are dedicated to the objective of "Education for All". The Indian government has been training 1800 Bangladeshi civil officials and 1500 judicial officers. Bangladesh is a significant ITEC partner country, with around 800 Bangladeshi trainees attending training courses each year. In addition, the ICCR awards 200 scholarships each year to Bangladeshi students to pursue higher study in Indian educational institutions such as the IITs and NIITs.

In the state of West Bengal (India) many Bangladeshi students come for their higher education. Due to the geographical proximity, the educational cooperation of Bangladesh with the various educational institutes of West Bengal is very frequent. In 2018, Kazi Nazrul University, West Bengal has conferred an honorary D. Litt. to Sk. Hasina, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. This university has concluded MoU with the Jatio Kobi Kazi Nazrul University of Bangladesh for academic exchange programs. Many joint collaborative activities have been done by both sides. A team of research scholars of Dhaka University, Bangladesh visited the Department of Political Science, Kazi Nazrul University to interact with the faculty members and research scholars. The research scholars' team also paid an academic visit to the Vidyasagar University. The faculty and student exchange programs are going on between Bangladeshi universities and Indian universities. The government of Bangladesh has established "Bangladesh Bhavan" on the Visva-Bharati campus to foster bilateral cultural and educational ties. In the honor of Sk. Mujibur Rahman, the

Bangladeshi government has suggested establishing the 'Bangabandhu Chair' in a leading West Bengal university. The father of the nation of Bangladesh, Sk. Mujibur studied at Maulana Azad College, Kolkata. Many noted Bangladeshi leaders and academicians studied in Indian universities. So, historically, the educational relationship between India and Bangladesh is very strong.

Nepal

Over the years, India is contributing a lot to developing human sources in Nepal. Every year, India offers around 3000 scholarships to Nepalese students and scholars for the UG, PG, and Ph.D. programs. These scholarships are provided in the fields of Engineering, Medicine, Agriculture, Pharmacy, Veterinary Sciences, Computer Application, Business Administration, Music, Fine Arts, etc. The government of India has taken several initiatives to increase people-to-people contacts in the fields of art & culture. To promote academic and cultural relations regular cultural exchange programs are being organized by India in Nepal. Some seminars, conferences, and symposiums are being organized jointly by the two countries with the involvement of academicians, artists, and journalists. The Hindi language is being promoted in Nepal through various programs.²⁹ Nepal received nearly thirty million from India in 2019 for the construction of a school in the Udayapur district.³⁰

Mass-Media is the fourth pillar of democracy. The free acts of journalists are significantly essential to promoting democracy. To make linkages between the two sides journalists and editors of both countries have taken some initiatives. Nepalese journalists are visiting India and Indian journalists are also frequently visiting Nepal for exchanging their views and working methods. The India-Nepal Friendship Organizations are working to promote Indian culture and India-Nepal bilateral relations. India and Nepal have jointly taken some initiatives to increase bilateral cultural and academic cooperation which are as follows--

1. India is establishing an e-library system across Nepal. To ensure e-library access across Nepal an agreement has been signed between Indian Sahitya Kala Akademi and Nepal Academy.
2. An MoU has been signed between Doordarshan and Nepal TV.
3. To exchange views among the media houses, an agreement has been signed between the Press Council of India and the Press Council of Nepal.
4. The Indian Lalit Kala Akademi and Nepal Academy of Fine Arts have agreed to promote the fine arts of both sides.
5. Both governments are emphasizing cooperation in youth affairs.
6. The Indian Sangeet Natak Akademi and Nepal Academy of Music & Drama have taken some joint programs.
7. New Delhi and Kathmandu are trying to make more connectivity between Kathmandu-Varanasi, Lumbini-Bodhgaya, and Janakpur-Ayodhya looking to century old-mythological linkages.

As Arun Kumar Sahu has observed that predominantly a land of believers in Hindus and Buddhism, Nepal shares a long and enduring cultural history with India. The Hindus of India hold Pashupatinath in high esteem and those of Nepal the Char Dham of India (the four important abodes of the Hindu pantheon in India, namely Jagannath Puri, Dwarka, Rameswaram, and Badrinath).³¹ Both for India and Nepal,

culture is closely linked with religion. Every year, the pilgrims of both countries use to visit the religious-cultural places situated in both countries. Nepal-Bharat Library was founded in 1951 in Kathmandu. It is regarded as the first foreign library in Nepal. Its objective is to enhance and strengthen cultural relations and information exchange between India and Nepal. In August 2007, The Swami Vivekananda Centre for Indian Culture was set up in Kathmandu to promote the Indian rich cultural heritage in Nepal. The B.P. Koirala India-Nepal Foundation was set up in 1991 through an MoU signed between the Governments of India and Nepal.²⁹ The Foundation aims to accelerate the educational, cultural, scientific, and technical cooperation between India and Nepal.

Critical comparative study of education as India's soft power diplomacy

The power realignment of the twenty-first century is becoming more of a reality by the day, with Western nations' influence declining to some extent and rising powers like China and India taking a more active role in the global setting. External perceptions of India have shifted as a result of the country's exponential economic growth and acceptance of its de-facto nuclear status by the US and other powers (following the Indo-US nuclear pact). India is now seen as an emerging power with growing global weight. India's attempt to enhance its soft power through popular diplomacy becomes critical in this circumstance.

In the twenty-first century, states have had a greater need to employ soft power to increase their appeal in the international arena and to portray their better side to promote cooperation and reduce resistance, particularly when it comes to security measures. In this setting, public diplomacy has emerged as a critical weapon of Indian foreign policy as well as a key instrument of soft power. The undercurrent of Indian public diplomacy is to portray India as a rising power with undeniable international significance and influence, which is consistent with India's request for a permanent seat on the UNSC.

Even when it lacked hard power, India was one of the few countries that could always count itself among the few nations with strong soft power cards. India lacked hard power resources during Nehru's period, due to a poor economy and limited military capabilities. Despite this, India had unrivaled soft power among developing countries because its foreign policy was more idealistic and strongly advocated for peaceful coexistence and economic equality in the global economy. Nehru's diplomatic expeditions into far-flung crises around the world were many, and they quickly established India as a responsible Asian power working to solve global problems.

India is frequently referred to be a 'culture superpower' with an abundance of soft power assets. Few countries can equal India's rich history, culture, and civilization, which generates unrivaled interest and appeal in the rest of the world. India's robust and blooming democracy, independent and open media, democratic institutions, and increasingly aware and pulsing civil society all contribute to the country's soft power. India's beliefs in nonviolence (ahimsa) and peace, as well as its employment of these measures in its fight against colonialism, have inspired and continue to inspire generations of leaders around the world.

Educational exchanges facilitate the cross-pollination of culture at the people-to-people level, which can help garner appreciation and, on a larger scale, translate into diplomatic efforts and economic cooperation. Multiple Heads of State have studied in India, including Aung San Suu Kyi from Myanmar, General Hussain Muhammad Ershad of Bangladesh, John Samuel Malecela of Tanzania, Sitiveni

Rabuka of Fiji, and countless others, hailing from places as diverse as Bhutan and Nepal to Ghana and Malawi. These leaders all have a special connection with India, which results in better diplomatic relations.

Increased funding for cultural programs in Indian consulates and embassies can help boost India's soft power diplomacy. India could also aim to establish educational and cultural institutions around the world, similar to the British Council, American Information Resource Centers, Alliance Francoise, and China's Confucius Institutes. These institutes boost their countries' soft power by using public relations to convey a positive picture of their countries to the rest of the world. In the areas of cultural and academic exchanges, India has well-established public diplomacy institutes. The ICCR was established in 1950, shortly after the country's independence. It now has 24 international offices and 14 regional offices in India, with plans to open 14 more in East and Southeast Asia, Europe, and Africa. The ICCR also has primary responsibility for managing academic exchanges. It currently offers financial support for around 2,300 foreign students at Indian universities. The ICWA has a distinct function. Founded in 1943 as an independent think tank, it has recently taken on a semi-official function and was designated as a national institution by an Act of Parliament in 2001. The ICWA's major job is to do foreign policy research and disseminate it, as well as to arrange seminars and produce briefing papers, but it also plays an important and expanding role in outreach. The ICWA is also a member of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP), which facilitates Track 2 dialogues between scholars and officials concerned with regional security, as well as research on issues of mutual concern.

The National Education Policy (NEP) aims that India is advertised as a global study destination that offers high-quality education at a reasonable price, recasting it as a 'Vishwa-Guru' once more. Some of the significant measures in this area include high-performing Indian universities establishing campuses in other countries, inviting 100 of the world's top universities to operate in India, and allowing joint degrees and credit transfers from foreign universities to Indian universities. The policy highlights the need of providing students with learning experiences that span countries and cultures to prepare them to become global citizens and engage in world events.

Conclusion

This chapter concludes that education is a vital asset in soft-power diplomacy. Due to its English language, cost advantages, vibrant open culture, pluralistic ethos, longstanding friendship ties, civilizational linkages, and geographic proximity, India has tremendous potential to develop as a major higher-education destination for students from the Afro-Asian region. A clear vision, resource allocation, and a time-bound action plan are all necessary to become a big player in this industry.

New Delhi may begin to regard BIMSTEC as a credible alternative to SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation), which has been hampered by Pakistani opposition. This is especially critical at a time when China is striving to encourage India's neighbors to join its Belt and Road Initiative, including Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and others. C. Raja Mohan may have made this observation in the context of India's perceived obligation to lead BIMSTEC, "the moment for turning the Bay of Bengal into a zone of regional cooperation may finally be with us."¹⁷

BIMSTEC should strive to become a more sustainable regional forum for sharing education-related knowledge, skills, and best practices. India might launch a new initiative for regional education

collaboration, based on lessons learned from the group's existing bilateral education cooperation. Such educational ties will not only boost the region's long-term development but will also aid cultural reconnection. As PM Modi observed, "BIMSTEC not only connects South and South-East Asia, but also the ecologies of the Great Himalayas and the Bay of Bengal. With shared values, histories, ways of life, and destinies that are interlinked, BIMSTEC represents a common space for peace and development. For India, it is a natural platform to fulfill our key foreign policy priorities of "Neighbourhood First" and "Act East".¹⁷ Fostering educational collaboration within the BIMSTEC can thus play a transformative role in increasing cultural connections and establishing stronger and more constructive regional ties. To drastically increase the number of international students in the country's higher education sector, notably from BIMSTEC countries, New Delhi must realize this and take corrective action. Transforming BIMSTEC into a dynamic regional grouping whose successes can have a multiplier effect on global politics is crucial.^{32–34}

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Conflicts of interest

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