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FOREWORD

It is with immense pride and a deep sense of purpose that I present the inaugural issue of the Shibli National Academic Journal (SNAJ) to the global community of scholars, researchers, and students. Named in reverence to the towering legacy of Allama Shibli Nomani — a scholar whose intellectual contributions transcended boundaries of language, discipline, and geography — this journal aspires to carry forward that same spirit of rigorous, cross-cultural inquiry.



SNAJ was conceived from a simple but pressing conviction: that meaningful scholarship should not be confined by the language in which it is written, nor by the discipline from which it emerges. India's intellectual tradition has long thrived at the confluence of languages — English, Hindi, and Urdu among them — and it is this confluence that our journal seeks to honour. By welcoming original research across the humanities, social sciences, education, and emerging interdisciplinary, multilingual fields, we hope to build a genuinely inclusive platform for academic dialogue.

As Chief Editor, I have had the privilege of witnessing the dedication of our editorial board, reviewers, and contributors, whose collective commitment has shaped this first issue. Every article herein has passed through a rigorous double-blind peer review/ indexed process, and each is assigned a Crossref indexing, registered DOI, reflecting our unwavering commitment to academic integrity, originality, and permanence in the global research ecosystem.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to our esteemed reviewers, editorial board members, and the scholars who entrusted us with their research. It is through their collective effort that this journal has moved from vision to reality. I also invite researchers, academicians, and students from across disciplines and linguistic traditions to consider SNAJ as a home for their scholarship in the issues to come.

It is my sincere hope that this journal will serve not merely as a repository of research, but as a living, evolving conversation — one that bridges languages, disciplines, and generations of scholars in pursuit of knowledge.

With warm regards,

Dr. Mohammad Zahid

Chief Editor
Shibli National Academic Journal (SNAJ)

Heritage Diplomacy and India's Foreign Policy: Reconnecting Civilizational Links through Culture and Memory

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of heritage diplomacy in shaping India's foreign policy, focusing on how culture, memory, and civilizational identity are used to build global legitimacy. Drawing on the idea of soft power proposed by Joseph Nye, it argues that India uses its rich cultural heritage such as Buddhism, ancient trade networks, and shared historical experiences as tools of diplomatic engagement. Initiatives like Project Mausam highlight efforts to reconnect countries of the Indian Ocean region through common cultural and historical ties.

The study also explores how selective use of historical memory helps India present itself as a civilizational state, enhancing its moral authority and international image. Cultural elements such as religious diplomacy, diaspora connections, and globally recognized heritage sites further strengthen India's non-coercive influence.

However, the paper critically examines the limitations of this approach, including the risk of over-reliance on symbolic narratives and the politicization of culture. It argues that while heritage diplomacy is an effective strategy, its success depends on balancing cultural projection with practical foreign policy goals. Overall, the paper highlights how India combines culture and strategy to redefine its role in global politics.

Keywords: Heritage Diplomacy, Indian Foreign Policy, Soft Power, Cultural Diplomacy, Civilizational Identity, Global Legitimacy, Historical Memory, Project Mausam

Introduction

In the contemporary global order, foreign policy is no longer confined to military strength or economic power; it increasingly incorporates cultural and historical dimensions. India, with its rich and diverse civilizational heritage, has strategically employed culture, memory, and identity as tools of diplomacy. This approach, often termed as “heritage diplomacy,” reflects the use of historical narratives, shared cultural ties, and civilizational connections to foster international relationships and enhance global legitimacy.

India’s foreign policy has undergone a gradual transformation from traditional non-alignment to a more dynamic and multidimensional approach. In this shift, heritage and memory have emerged as key instruments of soft power. By emphasizing ancient connections through Buddhism, maritime trade routes, and shared traditions, India seeks to strengthen its ties with countries across Asia, Africa, and beyond. Initiatives such as Project Mausam exemplify efforts to revive historical linkages and position India as a central player in the Indian Ocean region.

However, this strategy is not without challenges. While heritage diplomacy enhances India’s global image, it also raises questions regarding the selective use of history, politicization of culture, and the balance between symbolic narratives and practical interests. This paper critically examines how heritage, memory, and civilizational identity shape India’s foreign policy, evaluating both its strengths and limitations.

Research Methodology

This research paper is based on a qualitative and analytical approach. It relies on secondary sources such as academic journals, books, policy reports, and government documents. The study adopts a descriptive as well as interpretative method to understand how heritage and memory are integrated into India’s foreign policy framework.

The research includes case study analysis, particularly focusing on initiatives like Project Mausam and Buddhist diplomacy. Comparative insights are also drawn from global practices of cultural diplomacy to situate India’s approach within a broader international context. The methodology emphasizes critical analysis by examining both supportive arguments and counter-perspectives, ensuring a balanced and comprehensive understanding of the subject.

Literature Review

Scholars have increasingly focused on the role of culture and heritage in international relations. The concept of soft power highlights how countries use non-coercive means such as culture, values, and diplomacy to influence global politics. Studies on India's foreign policy suggest that cultural diplomacy has become a central component of its global engagement strategy.

Research on heritage diplomacy emphasizes the importance of historical narratives and shared memory in building international partnerships. Scholars argue that India uses its civilizational past—particularly Buddhism and ancient trade connections to foster goodwill and cooperation with other nations. The revival of Nalanda University and restoration of cultural sites in Southeast Asia are often cited as examples of this approach.

At the same time, critical literature points out the selective nature of memory in foreign policy. Some scholars argue that historical narratives are often constructed to serve contemporary political objectives. The idea of India as a “civilizational state” has also been debated, with some viewing it as a source of global legitimacy, while others see it as a form of identity-based politics.

Overall, the literature suggests that while heritage diplomacy offers significant advantages, it must be carefully balanced with pragmatic considerations in foreign policy.

Heritage as a Tool of Soft Power

India's cultural heritage serves as a significant source of soft power¹, enabling it to influence other nations through attraction rather than coercion. The country's long-standing traditions, philosophical systems, art, architecture, and spiritual practices contribute to a positive global image. Unlike Western models of influence, India's soft power is deeply rooted in its civilizational continuity.

Cultural elements such as Yoga, Ayurveda, classical dance forms, and Indian cuisine have gained global recognition, strengthening India's presence internationally. International Yoga Day, for instance, reflects how cultural practices are institutionalized into global diplomacy. These cultural exports create familiarity and goodwill, which indirectly support India's strategic interests.

Moreover, heritage acts as a “non-political” entry point into diplomacy. Countries are more receptive to cultural engagement, which makes heritage a subtle yet effective diplomatic tool. Thus, India transforms its cultural capital into diplomatic advantage.

Buddhist Diplomacy and Religious Heritage

Buddhism occupies a central place in India's heritage diplomacy due to its transnational appeal². As the birthplace of Buddhism, India shares deep historical and spiritual connections with countries across Asia. Sites such as Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, and Kushinagar serve as important pilgrimage centers, attracting international visitors and leaders.

India strategically uses Buddhist heritage to strengthen relations with countries like Sri Lanka, Japan, Thailand, and Myanmar. High-level diplomatic visits to Buddhist sites and participation in cultural events reinforce these connections. The revival of Nalanda University symbolizes India's attempt to re-establish itself as a historical center of learning and intellectual exchange.

Importantly, Buddhist diplomacy projects India as a peaceful and inclusive civilization. It helps create a non-threatening image, especially in contrast to power-driven geopolitical strategies. However, it also reflects how religion can be used as a diplomatic resource in contemporary international relations.

Project Mausam and Maritime Connectivity

Project Mausam represents a key initiative in India's effort to revive its historical maritime linkages³. It focuses on reconnecting countries of the Indian Ocean region through shared cultural, commercial, and historical ties. Ancient maritime routes facilitated not only trade but also the exchange of ideas, religions, and cultural practices.

By highlighting these connections, India positions itself as a historical hub of global interaction. The project emphasizes that India has long been a central player in regional connectivity, thereby reinforcing its contemporary strategic relevance.

In addition, Project Mausam carries geopolitical significance. It provides a cultural narrative that complements India's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean. Instead of relying solely on economic or military influence, India uses shared heritage to foster cooperation and trust. This approach makes its diplomacy more acceptable and less confrontational.

Memory and Foreign Policy Narratives

Memory plays a crucial role in shaping how India presents itself in global politics. Historical experiences such as colonialism, the freedom struggle, and leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement influence India's diplomatic identity. These memories reinforce values like sovereignty, anti-imperialism, and peaceful coexistence.

India often invokes its colonial past to advocate for equality and justice in international relations. Similarly, its leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement is used to project an image of strategic autonomy and moral leadership.

However, memory is not neutral. It is selectively constructed and strategically used⁴. Certain aspects of history are emphasized to support present objectives, while others are downplayed. This selective use of memory allows India to craft narratives that enhance its legitimacy and strengthen its diplomatic position.

Civilizational Identity and Global Legitimacy

India's projection as a "civilizational state" is a key element of its foreign policy. Unlike modern nation-states, a civilizational state derives its identity from a long historical and cultural continuum. India uses this identity to differentiate itself and claim a unique role in global politics.

This narrative enhances India's moral authority and global legitimacy. By emphasizing its ancient traditions, philosophical contributions, and cultural diversity, India presents itself as a source of wisdom and stability in a rapidly changing world ⁵.

Furthermore, civilizational identity helps India build stronger ties with regions that share historical connections, such as Southeast Asia. It creates a sense of cultural familiarity and mutual respect, which strengthens diplomatic engagement.

At the same time, this approach raises questions about inclusivity and the risk of privileging certain narratives over others.

Role of Diaspora in Cultural Diplomacy

The Indian diaspora plays a crucial role in extending India's cultural influence globally. Spread across continents, diaspora communities act as carriers of Indian traditions, languages, and values. They maintain cultural practices while integrating into host societies, thereby creating a bridge between India and the world.

Diaspora networks contribute to strengthening bilateral relations by promoting cultural exchange and economic cooperation. Events such as cultural festivals, religious celebrations, and community organizations help sustain India's cultural presence abroad.

In addition, the diaspora enhances India's soft power by shaping perceptions in foreign societies⁶. Their success and visibility contribute to a positive image of India, which indirectly supports its foreign policy objectives.

Thus, diaspora functions as “living heritage,” continuously reinforcing India’s cultural and diplomatic connections.

Criticism

Despite its advantages, heritage diplomacy faces several criticisms. One major concern is the over-reliance on symbolic narratives. While cultural connections are important, they cannot replace concrete economic and strategic policies. Excessive focus on the past may divert attention from present challenges.

Another issue is the politicization of culture. Heritage and history can be used to promote specific ideologies, leading to biased or exclusionary narratives. This raises questions about the authenticity and inclusiveness of cultural diplomacy.

Additionally, there is a gap between cultural projection and material capabilities. While India promotes its civilizational identity globally, it must also address domestic and economic challenges to maintain credibility.

Finally, critics argue that heritage diplomacy may not always yield tangible results. Cultural initiatives often take time to translate into strategic gains, making their effectiveness difficult to measure.

Conclusion

Heritage diplomacy has emerged as a significant component of India’s foreign policy, reflecting a shift towards a more holistic and multidimensional approach. By leveraging its rich cultural heritage, historical memory, and civilizational identity, India seeks to enhance its global influence and legitimacy.

Initiatives such as Project Mausam and the promotion of Buddhist heritage demonstrate how culture can be used as a strategic tool in international relations. These efforts help India build strong and lasting connections with other countries, particularly in Asia and the Indian Ocean region.

However, the success of heritage diplomacy depends on its integration with practical foreign policy objectives. While culture and memory provide valuable resources, they must be complemented by economic strength, political stability, and strategic planning.

In conclusion, India’s foreign policy reflects a growing synthesis of culture and strategy, where the past is actively reinterpreted to serve present and future goals. Heritage diplomacy, if used effectively and responsibly, has the potential to strengthen India’s position in the evolving global order.

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ABOUT THE JOURNAL

The Shibli National Academic Journal (SNAJ) is an international, multidisciplinary and multilingual research publication dedicated to advancing rigorous scholarship across the humanities, social sciences, education, language and emerging interdisciplinary fields. Published biannually in fully open access online format, SNAJ upholds a double-blind peer review process to ensure the highest standards of academic integrity, originality and scholarly merit. Every article published in the journal is assigned a Crossref-registered Digital Object Identifier (DOI), ensuring permanent discoverability and citation traceability in the global research ecosystem.

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