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TOURISM AS SOFT POWER: REFRAMING INDIA-ASEAN RELATION IN THE ACT EAST POLICY ERA

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Abstract

The importance of tourism has become vital in the global arena, as it offers a range of advantages, including economic growth, job creation, cultural exchange, infrastructure development, and more. Tourism has also become an integral part of soft power diplomacy, especially in the context of India-ASEAN relations in the Act East policy era. This paper explores how tourism operates as a diplomatic tool in reshaping relations between India and ASEAN member states under the Act East Policy. Drawing on Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, this paper explores how cultural heritage, gastronomy, festivals and connectivity initiatives contribute to people-to-people engagement between the two regions. This paper shall also argue that tourism, in the light of the Act East policy, is not merely symbolic but strategically embedded within India's broader strategy to enhance regional influence and strengthen partnerships.

Keywords: Soft Power, Act East Policy, Cultural Diplomacy, Tourism Diplomacy, Strategic Engagement, People-to-people connectivity.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between India and ASEAN has been deeply embedded in civilisational linkages, maritime connectivity, religious transmission and cultural exchanges since time immemorial. For centuries, there has been an exchange of ideas, religion, art forms, architecture, food habits, festivals, and more between India and Southeast Asia. The outspread of Hinduism and Buddhism in the region, along with epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, has profoundly influenced the cultural and social life of the people of Southeast Asia, as we can see even today. India's Look East Policy was introduced in 1992, and since then, India's engagement with Southeast Asian countries has evolved, when it was later upgraded into the Act East Policy in 2014. It signalled a multi-dimensional expansion of engagement between India and Southeast Asia, fostering connectivity, commerce, security, culture, cooperation, and people-to-people ties. Within this framework, tourism has become an essential yet undermined instrument of India's soft power in Southeast Asia.

In the present scenario, India's tourism industry also holds significant potential on the global stage, owing to its rich cultural heritage, natural grandeur, and diverse cultures, making it a popular destination for tourists worldwide. Moreover, the Indian government is also taking steps to promote its tourism sector through initiatives such as "Incredible India" and by easing visa restrictions. In earlier times, tourism was mainly understood only as economically driven, but it offers far more than just economic gain. It serves as a vehicle for projecting a country's culture and identity, enabling the harnessing of its soft power. For instance, a Buddhist walking



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through Bodh Gaya, an Indian attending the Songkran festival in Thailand, or an explorer exploring the remains of the vast Angkor Wat will profoundly shape the person's ideas and perceptions of the country.

Apart from the pilgrimage circuits and heritage monuments, the tourism diplomacy between India and Southeast Asia also incorporates the gastronomic links between the two regions, festivals, cultural exhibitions, performing arts, and day-to-day lifestyle practices. For instance, food diplomacy plays a visible role in shaping cross-cultural linkages. Indian cuisines, especially those of the Northeastern region, such as Manipuri singu, seem to align with Thailand's Som Tam. Other dishes of Malaysia, Vietnam, and Burma also show similarities to other Northeastern dishes. Thus, culinary tourism, food festivals, and chef exchanges may also contribute to cultural familiarity and strengthen people-to-people connectivity. Moreover, the patterns and histories behind the festivals celebrated in the ASEAN region are pretty similar to those of the festivals celebrated in the Northeastern region of India. For instance, the new year is celebrated in different areas across India and Southeast Asia. In Thailand, it is Songkran; in Vietnam, Tet; in Assam, Bihu; and in Manipur, Cheiraoba. Gastronomy and festivals possess a unique soft power advantage, as they are accessible, non-threatening, and inclusive, fostering intimacy and familiarity at the social level. Tourism diplomacy between India and Southeast Asia also intersects with broader strategic and geopolitical considerations, as Southeast Asia occupies a central position in the Indo-Pacific. Because of its geographic location, Southeast Asia plays an essential role in the global maritime network connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans. This region has long functioned as a centre for trade and a stage for geopolitical competition. Thus, in such circumstances, India's influence cannot be sustained solely through military and economic means. Therefore, cultural alignment through soft power, to the extent possible, will lead to a sustainable partnership between India and the ASEAN region. By leveraging tourism, composed with the pilgrim route, the festival, the gastronomic link, and the diaspora network between the two areas, India can position itself as a civilisational partner rather than just a mere strategic actor towards Southeast Asia.

From a theoretical point of view, tourism diplomacy aligns with the concept of Soft Power, which was coined by Joseph Nye, an American Political scientist, in the late 1980s. As defined by him, soft power is "the ability to make someone do something without a gun or an army". So, soft power emphasises attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. So, by promoting tourism as a diplomatic tool, India can reconnect with Southeast Asia at a civilisational level and revive the long-standing cultural ties. By showcasing its culinary practices, festivals and shared heritage, India can not only enhance cultural connectivity with the region but also shape the collective identity and foster a sense of regional affinity. Nevertheless, the success of this notion depends on several factors, including government support through appropriate policies, institutional coordination, and the development of the hospitality sector in India. Despite its growing importance, tourism, including its gastronomic and festival dimensions, remains insufficiently examined within India-ASEAN relations.

This paper argues that, when broadly conceived, tourism can become a strategic instrument within the Act East Policy framework of India. India and Southeast Asian countries can offer a wealth of opportunities for tourists, drawing from their diverse and rich heritage. It can also enhance identity formation and complement geopolitical strategy through properly leveraging the soft power encompassing tourism. Furthermore, tourism built around pilgrimage and heritage circuits, festivals, gastronomy, and diaspora can function as a dynamic instrument of soft power between India and Southeast Asia. Such efforts can lead to shaping perceptions among the people of Southeast Asia and strengthening people-to-people connectivity. Therefore, if tourism is seen as more than just a revenue-earning industry and instead understood as a thoughtful instrument of diplomacy and statecraft, it can take on a much broader role. In this way, tourism can become part of a wider conversation about soft power, cultural regionalism, and the changing realities of the Indo-Pacific amid the rise of certain global powers, such as China. It also brings gastronomy and festivals to the forefront, not as a secondary cultural expression, but as a meaningful bridge that can strengthen India's engagement with Southeast Asia, especially under the framework of the Act East Policy. In doing so, this paper shall seek to demonstrate that tourism diplomacy is not just peripheral to foreign policy and should not be treated as an add-on, but rather a vital part of it, and that sustained people-to-people engagement can deepen trust in ways that formal agreements between officials alone cannot achieve.



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REVIEW OF LITERATURE

(Sahoo, 2025) In his article "India's Soft Power Diplomacy in Southeast Asia: A Study of Tourism Engagement and Strategic Connectivity," Parsuram Sahoo sheds light on how tourism plays a much larger role in India's relationship with Southeast Asia than is often assumed, and it serves as a tool of soft power in India's engagement with Southeast Asian nations. He asserts that India's non-aligned foreign policy, dynamic democracy, and rich culture are the cornerstones of India's soft power, particularly in the view of Southeast Asian countries. The article also integrates the concept of strategic connectivity, highlighting infrastructure development as a supporting factor for sustainable tourism. He further emphasises the notion that when India improves connectivity with Southeast Asia through better transport links, it will become easier for ordinary people to visit, interact, and engage with one another, fostering goodwill and mutual understanding.

(Aaryan, 2025) Opines that China has already established regional power in Southeast Asia, and India is in the process of becoming a regional power in his article "Cultural tourism as a tool of soft power: A study of India's engagement with Southeast Asia since 2014". He underscores that, even though both China and India use various approaches and tools, they share a cultural tourism approach. Aaryan highlights the importance of cultural tourism in light of India's Act East Policy and how the region can be linked with India through Buddhism and Hinduism. The Act East Policy, though, is of greater importance to the economy, Aaryan points out, noting its significance in promoting cultural and religious ties between the two regions. By leveraging cultural tourism, people-to-people connections can be fostered. India faces tough competition, especially from China, while promoting Buddhism as a tool of soft power in the region. However, Aaryan views that, despite challenges, there is also a silver lining: opportunities for India to promote its cultural tourism in Southeast Asia by improving infrastructure, highlighting the cultural and historical significance of its Buddhist sites, and collaborating with Southeast Asian nations.

(Babu, 2020) Critically analysed how the government and bureaucracy during the present times have projected tourism as an engine of growth, as it leads to more foreign exchange and employment of the people. The writer has highlighted areas of tourism that India can harness. They are heritage tourism, pilgrimage tourism, marine tourism, river tourism, medical tourism, eco-tourism, wildlife tourism, and educational tourism. Since time immemorial, Indian culture has been propagated by travellers such as Ibn Battuta, Fa-Hien, Hiuen Tsang, and Marco Polo. Therefore, the prospects for tourism as a form of soft power are tremendous. The writer highlights the impact of creating a positive stimulus in the tourism industry, which, in turn, will lead to employment generation in the region with potential for tourism development and management. Tourism, according to her, is a boon for eradicating poverty and conserving our cultural heritage and natural elements; however, unlike the Southeast Asian nations, India has failed to benefit from it, and this is where proper academic output comes into play.

(Bhonsale, 2019) In his report "Religious Tourism as Soft Power: Strengthening India's Outreach to Southeast Asia", he describes how diverse culture, democracy, and non-aligned foreign policy have been pillars of India's soft power. He underscores that Buddhism and the promotion of the transnational Buddhist circuit have been integral to India's soft power policy towards Southeast Asia, showcasing India as a land of Buddha and a destination for spiritual tourism. The report also emphasises the importance of tourism in Northeast India, as the region is a Buddhist heritage site and features a mix of religions, age-old traditions, and monasteries. Moreover, Bhonsale identifies specific reasons for the low number of tourist visits in Northeast India and signifies its importance to India, as it shares land borders with five countries. Thus, the full potential of Northeast India can be unlocked by opening its international borders to people.

(Nye, 2004) Joseph Nye, in his book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, places soft power within the changing nature of globalisation during the post-Cold War era. Joseph Nye portrays soft power as the ability to shape others' preferences and influence their behaviour to achieve the outcomes one wants without coercion, payments, or threats, but rather through attraction and cooperation. He also emphasises that the ability to establish such preferences is closely associated with tangible assets, such as cultural, political values, institutions, or moral authority. He believes that if a country's culture and ideology appear to be attractive, others



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will be more willing to follow. He identifies three primary sources of soft power: culture, political values, and foreign policy. The book also highlights the importance of public diplomacy as a mechanism for projecting soft power, and that soft power cannot be artificially manufactured through propaganda alone; instead, it should be rooted in authenticity and in consistency between domestic values and foreign policy behaviour.

(Dixit, 1979) Jyotindra Nath Dixit's article "Culture as an Instrument of Diplomacy" explains how culture can be strategically utilised to build and promote diplomatic relationships with other nations. He opines that a stronger culture often dominates a weaker culture by absorbing or changing it, and explains that India's foreign diplomacy depends on India's utilisation of culture as an instrument. Dixit argues that cultural diplomacy through the arts, festivals, educational exchanges, and heritage can build relationships between two regions, fostering goodwill. He also highlights how cultural relationships can break down barriers, build mutual trust, and open the way for political dialogue. He acknowledges India's undeniable cultural footprint in Southeast Asia through religion and that it has been adapted to local contexts rather than remaining an Indian import. Therefore, Dixit argues for a respectful, balanced approach towards Southeast Asia to rediscover India's cultural influence there.

INDIA-ASEAN RELATIONS AND THE ACT EAST POLICY

HISTORICAL TIES AND CIVILISATIONAL CONNECTIVITY

India is a nation with an ancient civilisation dating back to a vast repository of diverse cultures, languages, religions, food habits, and more, holding immense potential in the realm of soft power. Ranging from various philosophies to cuisine, art and architecture, literature, religion, epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and ways of administration, India has a massive asset of soft power rooted in its history. One such region which has a strong influence of Indian culture is Southeast Asia, a region with eleven countries, namely Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines, East Timor and Brunei, and has been historically connected to India through centuries of trade, migration and religious diffusion. During the pre-colonial era, India had strong ties with Southeast Asia. We can trace this back to the time when kingdoms such as Champa, Funan, Sailendra, Ayutthaya, etc., exerted significant influence on Indian culture and tradition. Owing to the strong historical ties, in contemporary foreign policy, India invokes these historical linkages to frame ASEAN countries not simply as strategic partners but as a region with cultural proximity, and tourism becomes the operational channel through which civilisational narratives are transformed from historical ties and civilisational connectivity to lived experiences. When people from both ends visit one another, the historical ties are re-experienced rather than just remembered. The Northeastern part of India, in this regard, offers immense opportunities due to its shared borders and proximity to Southeast Asia. Moreover, the region also shares common patterns in terms of festivals, dress, food habits, and social life. Thus, by tapping Northeast India's assets, India can strengthen socio-economic engagement by utilising tourism as a bridge between the two regions.

FROM LOOK EAST TO ACT EAST

India's Look East Policy was introduced in 1992, following economic liberalisation and the end of the Cold War. This policy initially focused on economic integration and regional cooperation with ASEAN amid ASEAN's growing economic dynamism, during which some countries were referred to as "Asian Tigers". After this, India and ASEAN began to interact in the global arena, and India became a Sectoral Partner of ASEAN in 1992, a full dialogue partner in 1996. The relationship reached Summit Partnership in 2002. However, by 2014, the transformation into the Act East Policy signalled a more proactive and multidimensional engagement. Under the Act East Policy, the Indian government places a strong emphasis on the three Cs, which are Commerce, Connectivity, and Culture, to develop better relations with the Southeast Asian nations through Northeast India, recognising the latter's significance as the gateway to the East Asian countries. Among the three Cs stated above, culture, though often understated, plays an important role in shaping the country's cultural diplomacy. One of the most promising yet underexplored areas here is to harness the tourism sector. Tourism plays a part as a medium of cultural exchange, and cultural tourism is a type of travel that mainly focuses on experiencing the



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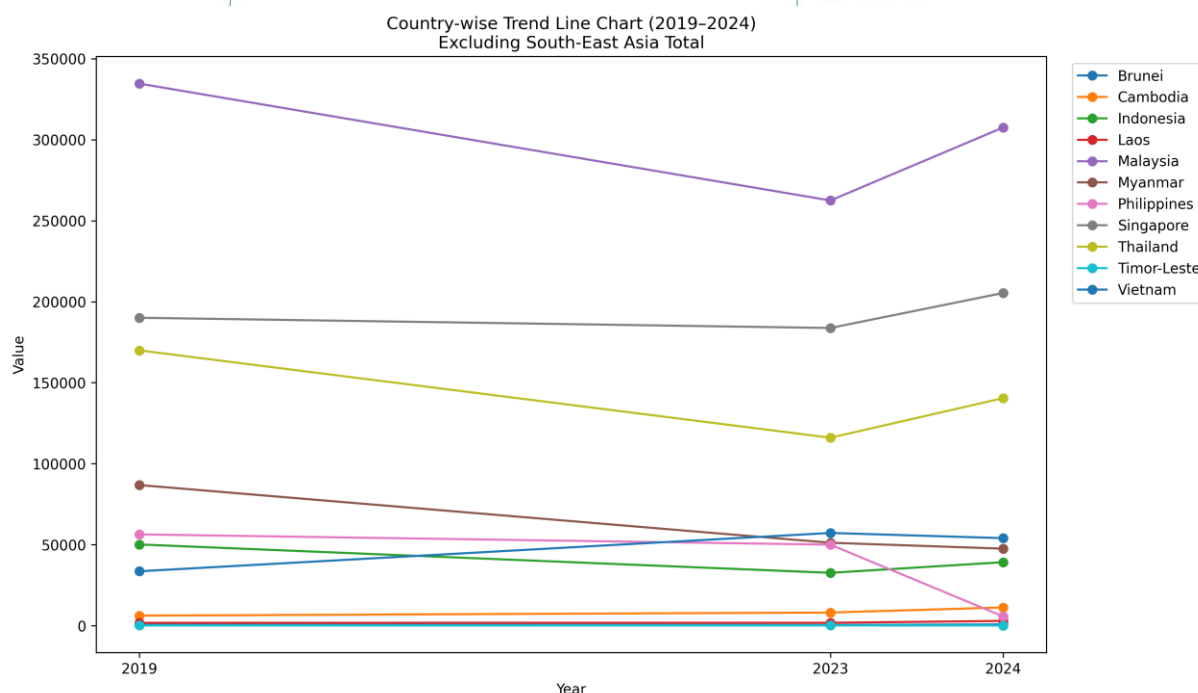
culture, heritage, art, architecture, festivals, cuisine, and ways of life of a destination. Furthermore, cultural tourism is one of the largest and fastest-growing tourism sectors. Through cultural tourism, an already existing ideology or habit can also be directed using suitable channels to educate and enlighten. Specific connectivity projects have also been taken up to connect the two regions geographically, such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Project, which are potential tourism arteries. Furthermore, improved air connectivity, visa liberalisation, and cultural exchange programs can also act as a catalyst.

TOURISM AS SOFT POWER

Tourism can be harnessed as one of India's most important soft-power tools within ASEAN-India dynamics. Heritage and pilgrimage tourism centres on Buddhist circuits and serves as a powerful diplomatic channel, enabling visitors from Southeast Asian nations, particularly Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, to reconnect with sacred Buddhist pilgrimage sites like Bodh Gaya and Sarnath, thereby emphasising India's legitimacy as the civilisational birthplace of Buddhism. Cultural tourism also serves as an important and evolving platform for soft power, and celebrations like Diwali and International Yoga Day can offer opportunities to showcase India's cultural heritage and diversity to the region and to provide a platform for intercultural interaction and people-to-people connections. Food has a unique way of bringing people closer, and in India and Southeast Asia, it reveals how deeply connected the two regions already are. Many dishes from Southeast Asian countries share similarities with a variety of Northeastern foods, especially in the use of local vegetables, herbs, fermented ingredients, and bold flavours. For instance, the Manipuri Singju, a vegetable mixed with herbs, chillies and fermented fish, bears a strong resemblance to Thailand's Som Tam. When such similarities are highlighted through chef exchange, food festivals, or culinary heritage tours, cuisine becomes more than just something to eat or taste, but instead it becomes something to experience together. In this way, gastronomy becomes a source of deepening diplomatic ties. Alongside this, the Indian diaspora across Southeast Asia also plays an equally important role. Through festivals, interactions and social networks, they serve as an informal bridge, keeping historical connections alive. On the whole, these entwined mechanisms between the two regions demonstrate that tourism in the Act East Policy era is not merely an economic exchange but a designed process of attraction which results in deepening the India-ASEAN engagement.

Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTAs) in India by Selected Countries and Territories						
Countries	2019	2023	2024	%change		% Share 2024
				2024/19	2024/23	
South-East Asia	930,540	764,230	867,210	-6.81	13.48	8.71
Brunei	578	443	863	49.31	94.81	0.01
Cambodia	6271	8167	11326	80.61	38.68	0.11
Indonesia	50177	32677	39227	-21.82	20.04	0.39
Laos	1818	1860	2997	64.85	61.13	0.03
Malaysia	334579	262458	307526	-8.09	17.17	3.09
Myanmar	86842	51235	47588	-45.2	-7.12	0.48
Philippines	56393	50064	5752	2.04	14.94	0.58
Singapore	190089	183772	205383	8.05	11.76	2.06
Thailand	169956	116060	140489	-17.34	21.05	1.41
Timor-Leste	201	210	178	-11.44	-15.24	0
Vietnam	33636	57284	54091	60.81	-5.57	0.54

Source: Government of India



According to Data from 2019-2024, Southeast Asian countries reveal a dynamic picture of change, recovery, and growth across the region. While some countries maintained their dominant positions throughout the period, others experienced significant fluctuations that reflect broader economic, social, and political developments. The trends illustrate not only the diversity of Southeast Asia but also the varying capacities of countries to respond to changing regional and global circumstances.

Malaysia experienced a significant recovery in 2024 and was the main contributor over the research period. Even though it was lower in 2023 than it was in 2019, it still oversaw the recovery. Despite its previous losses, its recovery shows that Malaysia is determined to play a major role in the ASEAN regional scene. Additionally, the fact that an improvement followed a period of resumed expansion indicates that the downturn was only temporary. Malaysia has thus shown that it is capable of continuing to be a major economic player in the region by maintaining its significant position within Southeast Asia.

Despite a slight drop in 2023, Singapore too experienced an impressive recovery in 2024, surpassing its pre-pandemic levels. It also rose to the top of the region's ranking after its momentum was restored, but its 2019 numbers surprisingly beat them. Singapore's perseverance and adaptability in seizing new possibilities, particularly in the face of hardship, solidify its reputation as an important economic and strategic hub for the region.

Similarly, a recovery was also experienced by Thailand in 2024 despite a decline from 2019 to 2023. The temporary slump was only a stepping stone in the case of Thailand, indicating that its footing has begun to be regained. Needless to say, the 2019 levels have not yet been exceeded by it, which still suggests that a more stable and sustained path of growth is being moved towards by Thailand.

Among the countries which were examined, Vietnam was proven to be the most consistent and has sustained progress. A sharp increase in tourism arrivals was observed in 2023, followed by relatively high levels in 2024, suggesting a strong growth trajectory. Vietnam's performance reflects its increasing integration into regional and global networks, and its growing significance within Southeast Asia is further highlighted. Moreover, the country's steady rise suggests that it is becoming an increasingly important actor in the region's development.



In contrast, a markedly different picture is presented by the Philippines. The country's figures remained relatively stable between 2019 and 2023, giving the impression of continuity and steady performance. However, the dramatic decline recorded in 2024 represents one of the most striking developments in the dataset. This sharp drop contrasts sharply with the recovery trends observed elsewhere, and important questions regarding the factors that may have contributed to such a downturn are raised. Further investigation would be necessary to understand the underlying causes and implications of this decline. More moderate but equally noteworthy patterns were exhibited by other countries. A decline from its 2019 level was experienced by Indonesia, but signs of recovery in 2024 were shown, suggesting gradual improvement. A downward trend over the period was also recorded by Myanmar, reflecting ongoing challenges that may have affected its performance. Meanwhile, steady growth was demonstrated by Cambodia and Laos, indicating gradual advancement and increasing participation in regional activities. Although their overall figures remain relatively small, encouraging long-term prospects are suggested by their positive trajectories.

The smallest countries in the dataset—Brunei, Laos, and Timor-Leste—were recorded with values that were considerably lower than those of the larger economies. As a result, their trends are often overshadowed when presented alongside countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. This disparity highlights an important methodological challenge: differences in scale can make it difficult to appreciate the progress achieved by smaller countries. For this reason, separate visualisations or alternative scales may be necessary to capture their trends more effectively. Overall, a region characterised by both continuity and change is revealed by the data. Dominance was continued by Malaysia and Singapore, a significant growth story emerged in Vietnam, and signs of recovery were demonstrated by Thailand after a period of decline. At the same time, a reminder that progress across Southeast Asia is neither uniform nor guaranteed is served by the sharp downturn in the Philippines. The complexity of regional development is underscored by these varying experiences, and the importance of examining individual country trajectories is highlighted rather than relying solely on aggregate regional trends.

Region-wise Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTAs) and Their Percentage Distribution across Indian Regions, 2024						
	FTAs in India	North (%)	South (%)	West and Central%	East (%)	North East%
South-East Asia	867,210	31.41	44.1	13.86	10.53	0.1
Brunei	863	26.77	59.33	12.28	1.51	0.12
Cambodia	11,326	71.77	3.73	10.11	14.29	0.09
Indonesia	39,227	39.02	29.59	27.34	3.95	0.11
Laos	2,997	50.02	8.48	4.1	36.97	0.43
Malaysia	307,526	22.24	66.54	8.85	2.29	0.08
Myanmar	47,588	44.27	11.61	3.95	40.04	0.13
Philippines	57,542	28.22	39.74	27.67	4.34	0.05
Singapore	205,383	21.58	55.75	19.19	3.41	0.07
Thailand	140,489	49.53	11.44	12.43	26.38	0.22
Timor-Leste	178	57.87	27.53	14.04	0.56	0
Vietnam	54,091	50.84	11.1	11.46	26.58	0.02

Source: *Government of India*

Regional Distribution of Southeast Asian Tourists in India, 2024
The pattern of Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTAs) from Southeast Asia to India in 2024 highlights clear regional preferences among visitors. Of the 867,210 tourists arriving from Southeast Asian countries, destinations in



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Southern and Northern India were chosen by the majority, while the North-East region was visited by relatively few.

Southern India emerged as the most popular destination, attracting 44.1 per cent of all Southeast Asian tourists. The region's appeal was particularly strong among visitors from Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei. More than half of the tourists from these countries travelled to Southern India, reflecting the importance of cultural and religious connections, medical tourism, and the region's well-developed tourism infrastructure.

Northern India was the second most preferred destination, accounting for 31.41 per cent of total arrivals. A strong preference for the region was shown by tourists from Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, and Timor-Leste. The popularity of Northern India can be attributed to its rich historical heritage, famous monuments, pilgrimage centres, and iconic destinations such as Delhi, Agra, Jaipur, and Varanasi. A smaller share of tourists was attracted by Eastern India overall, but a significant role was played by visitors from Myanmar and Laos. A considerable proportion of tourists from these countries travelled to the East, reflecting historical, cultural, and geographical linkages that continue to influence travel patterns. A moderate share of visitors was attracted by the West and Central region, particularly from Indonesia and the Philippines. The region's appeal among Southeast Asian travellers was contributed to by destinations such as Mumbai, Goa, and other heritage and leisure centres. One of the most notable findings is the extremely low share of tourists visiting India's North-East region. Despite its geographical proximity to Southeast Asia and strong cultural affinities with neighbouring countries, less than one per cent of arrivals from every Southeast Asian country was accounted for by the region. It is suggested that limited connectivity, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient tourism promotion continue to hinder the region's tourism potential. Overall, it is demonstrated that Southern and Northern India remain the principal destinations for Southeast Asian tourists. While arrivals to the South are driven by cultural, religious, and medical tourism, visitors to the North continue to be drawn by historical and heritage attractions. At the same time, the need for targeted policies, improved connectivity, and stronger tourism promotion to unlock the region's considerable potential in attracting visitors from Southeast Asia is highlighted by the underutilization of the North-East.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Despite its potential, tourism as a soft power instrument within the India-ASEAN framework faces several structural, institutional and strategic challenges. One such limitation is infrastructure with connectivity gaps and limited institutional coordination. Even though connectivity is central to the Act East Policy, infrastructure delays and uneven mobility development, especially from the Northeast, remain a risk to tourism diplomacy. This is aided by fragmentation in the bureaucratic system, which can also weaken the effectiveness of soft power. Nevertheless, Southeast Asia is a competitive arena of influence, with major actors like China and the USA playing a considerable role, and the region is also vulnerable to obstructions caused by political crises and security concerns. Nevertheless, despite all the mentioned challenges, India's well-established historical and religious linkages with Southeast Asian nations provide a strong and deep foundation for its relations. Northeast India also plays an important role in serving as a gateway to Southeast Asia owing to its geographical proximity. Cross-border tourism circuits and cultural exchanges between Northeast India and Southeast Asia can further strengthen diplomatic engagement. Moreover, diaspora-led festivals and cultural associations can also act as a channel for a more sustainable engagement in the region. Therefore, while geographical competition intensifies in the Indo-Pacific region, attraction through tourism, culture and shared heritage remains one of the most sustainable approaches.



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CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper argues that tourism can serve as an important instrument of soft power if strategically conceptualised and operationalised to reframe India-ASEAN relations during the Act East Policy era. Moving beyond the economic framing, tourism serves as a medium of attraction and identity reinforcement. Through certain soft power agents like the heritage circuits, pilgrimage, gastronomy, festivals, and diaspora networks, tourism can result in deepening the relational ties by complementing formal diplomatic ties and strategic cooperation with ASEAN nations. Furthermore, in an increasingly competitive Indo-Pacific environment, influence in Southeast Asian countries extends beyond military and economic potential to include specific attributes, such as attraction. This is where tourism diplomacy finds its place by allowing India to stay connected with Southeast Asia through culture, shared history, and human interaction. By encouraging travel, heritage exchanges and cultural experiences, India can nurture relationships in a way that is mutual and respectful through familiarity and trust, providing India with a non-coercive, culturally aligned path to sustain regional engagement without escalating geopolitical tensions with Southeast Asian countries. When effectively integrated into the Act East Policy, tourism can serve both as a bridge between cultures and as a foundation for sustainable, durable trust and shared identity, which can lead to cooperative future-building.

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