



## INDIA-BHUTAN : HISTORICAL, UNIQUE AND SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP (A PICTUREQUE GLIMPSES)

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### Abstract

This paper highlights the role of soft power diplomacy in the enduring India-Bhutan relationship. It emphasises cultural affinities, historical connections, and shared values that have fostered deep bonds. The article underscores the influence of yoga as a cultural bridge and environmental conservation as a mutual goal. It showcases the power of soft power diplomacy in shaping a resilient partnership, transcending political boundaries, and nurturing enduring connections built on common understanding and friendship.

**Keywords :** India, Bhutan, History, aspects, relationship

### Introduction

India and Bhutan share unique and exemplary bilateral relations, which are based on mutual trust, goodwill and understanding. Formal diplomatic relations between India and Bhutan were established in 1968. The basic framework of India Bhutan relations is the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation signed in 1949 between the two countries, which was renewed in February 2007. In the complex landscape of international relations, soft power diplomacy has emerged as a potent tool for nations to strengthen bonds, foster goodwill, and exert influence without coercion. Within the pages of the *Arthashastra* by the venerable Kautilya, there exists discourse about the Six Stratagems, known as *Shadgunyas* (excellences), alongside the four *Upayas* (approaches), which can be understood as strategic tools. These comprise *Saam* (conciliation), *Daan* (charity), *Bhed* (divide), and *Dand* (punishment). Among these, the initial two options are inclined toward peaceful methodologies and incentives. Joseph Nye coined 'Soft Power' in 'Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power', noting three dimensions: military might, economic persuasion, and cultural assimilation. Military strength is typically seen as strong but not favourable in Soft Power. However, its use in peacekeeping and disaster relief is valued. Promoting culture is generally positive, yet imposing it forcefully on



smaller neighbours can be seen as imperialism. The key is how tools are used. The soft power diplomacy approach's outcome has been the cultivation of goodwill, thereby reducing the potential for misinterpretations. Conversely, it can be argued that isolating soft power as a distinct policy instrument is counterproductive. Instead, it serves as the foundational element that underpins a nation's comprehensive policy architecture. This article explores the multifaceted role of soft power diplomacy in shaping the India-Bhutan relationship. India and Bhutan share deep-rooted historical ties that have served as the foundation for a resilient diplomatic partnership. Their proximity, cultural similarities, and shared values have forged a unique bond that transcends political boundaries. The role of cultural diplomacy, encompassing elements such as shared traditions, religious practices, and cultural exchanges, has been instrumental in cultivating people-to-people connections and mutual understanding. Ever since the 8th century, when the renowned Indian saint, *Swami Padmasambhava*, recognised as the 'Second Buddha' or 'Rinpoche', introduced Buddhism to Bhutan, the influence of this religion has profoundly shaped every aspect of Bhutanese life, fostering enduring ties between the two nations. Since the 1950s, India and Bhutan have maintained a particular relationship. Their official ties were established in 1968, though the essential foundation of bilateral relations was laid out in the 'Treaty of Perpetual Peace and Friendship' signed in 1949. The soft power diplomacy from India has helped to build strong commercial and cultural relations with Bhutan since then. Throughout Bhutan's five-year plans and investments in hydroelectric projects, India has been Bhutan's major development partner. The former having supported the country's seamless transition to democracy. A mutually beneficial collaboration between the Indian and Bhutanese governments has resulted in both countries greatly benefiting from Bhutan's hydroelectric capabilities.



Bhutan's distinct cultural identity has been diligently conserved, evident in its policy landscape. Bhutan's distinct cultural identity, highlighted by its concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH), has captured international attention. This emphasis on holistic well-being, social harmony, and sustainable development aligns closely with the principles of soft power diplomacy. The exceptional notion of GNH exemplifies this uniqueness, and India should create platforms for the exchange of knowledge. India has acknowledged and appreciated Bhutan's cultural uniqueness, thereby fostering a sense of respect and mutual admiration that forms the bedrock of their diplomatic ties. Through these platforms, India can glean insights from this indigenous concept, which presents a balanced trajectory between materialistic and spiritual aspirations.

A number of Bhutanese pilgrims travel to Bodh Gaya, Rajgir, Nalanda, Sikkim, Udayagiri, and other Buddhist sites in India. As a part of the 50th anniversary celebration of diplomatic relations, GOI sponsored a visit by 18 Lam Netens (Buddhist monks) and representative of the Central Monastic Body of Bhutan to India. His Holiness the Je Khenpo (the head monk of Bhutan) visited Rajgir in November 2018 to preside over the Salang. or ground breaking ceremony to construct a Bhutanese Lhakhang (temple) and for World Peace Prayer in Rajgir in Bihar. The Zhabdrung Statue, currently on exhibition at the Simtokha Dzong in Bhutan, has been loaned by the Asiatic Society, Kolkata to the Royal Government of Bhutan. (Dharma Raja or Zhabdrung, is the title of Ngawang Namgyal, a 16th century Buddhist monk – a revered figure in Bhutan, regarded as the founder of the modern nation

state of Bhutan). Recently king of Bhutan visited India and took holy dip in Sangam at Prayagraj on 3<sup>rd</sup> Feb. 2025.

Indian and Bhutanese connections have always been based on the importance of education and learning. India's role in supporting Bhutan's education system through scholarships, exchange programs, and technical assistance has been a significant soft power instrument. 4,000 Bhutanese students are now enrolled in Indian colleges, making India the most preferred destination for Bhutanese students. Four Memorandums of Understanding on academic exchanges and science, technology engineering, and mathematics collaboration between Bhutan and India have been signed by the two governments to help young people in the Himalayan nation find jobs based on their education and skills. Students from Bhutan can now apply for special permission from the Indian



government to study at prestigious universities like St. Stephens College, University of Delhi, and AIIMS after being nominated and recommended by the MEA and the Royal Government of Bhutan. Additionally, in Jan 2020, the two nations inked an agreement to prolong the Nehru-Wangchuck Scholarship Programme for an additional five years. The Indian government invites Buddhist students from Bhutan to India's famed Nalanda University, thus, extending the priceless spiritual tradition and ties that bind the two nations.



There is close bilateral cooperation in the educational and cultural fields between India and Bhutan. Over 1000 scholarships are being provided annually by GoI for Bhutanese students to study in India in a wide range of disciplines including medicine, engineering, etc. It is estimated that approximately 4,000 Bhutanese are studying in undergraduate courses in Indian Universities on self-finance basis. Under the Nehru Wangchuck Scholarship Scheme since its inception in 2010, 8 slots are annually allotted to students and scholars from Bhutan. 25 slots are

provided every year to students from Bhutan under the ICCR Scholarship. Ambassador's Scholarship is granted to deserving Bhutanese students, who are studying in India on self-financed basis and also for undergoing vocational training in India. The outlay under this scholarship has been doubled since 2023. 30 scholarships slots are being provided every year for Bhutanese students to study at Nalanda University. Most recently, 03 new scholarships have been introduced for Bhutanese youth to pursue M. Tech. courses at IIT Kanpur from the current academic year onward. Further, 02 seats are reserved for Bhutanese students every year at the St. Stephens college. Under the ITEC program, about 300 slots have been utilized annually by Bhutan for upgrading administrative and technical skills of government officials and private sector employees in Bhutan. India-Bhutan Foundation was established in August 2003 with the aim of enhancing people to people exchanges in areas such as education, arts and culture and environment protection. A number of cultural, educational, scientific activities are undertaken under the auspices of the Foundation to promote greater people to people exchanges and understanding. About 50,000 Indian citizens are working in Bhutan, mainly in the construction sector, education

and technical consultants involved in infrastructure projects. Some Indian daily-workers also enter and exit Bhutan every day in the border towns, as a sign of the close economic interdependence between both countries.

The enduring influence of Buddhism and the propagation of yoga serve as pillars of soft power diplomacy between India and Bhutan. The government's adoption of the notion of '*Panchamrit*' (five nectares), which includes five themes: 'Dignity', 'Dialogue', 'Shared Prosperity', 'Regional and Global Security', and 'Cultural and Civilisational Ties', has opened new pillars in India's foreign policy architecture.

"The common spiritual legacy here between two states is an unchangeable constant in their long age-relationship and complements India for their greatest gift of Buddhism to its people", says Bhutan. As a result of the two nations' strong ties in terms of culture and religion, there have been numerous cultural exchanges, including the annual celebration of Bhutan Week in India, pilgrimages to Buddhist holy places in both countries and the holding of Buddhist conferences.

Also, the common Buddhist background of the two countries has enabled them both to connect better and develop their humanitarian ties. Indian expands the pursuits of Indian connections with the Himalayan country based on the ideals of integration and unity derived from the ancient cultural and civilisational concept of '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*' (The World is One Family) India's commitment in providing ongoing technical help and critical medical supplies to Bhutan during the current COVID-19 outbreak exemplifies the notion in practical reality.

The ancient practice of yoga is another important cultural link between India and Bhutan. Yoga, an ancient practice rooted in Indian culture, has emerged as a significant cultural link between India and Bhutan, strengthening the enduring bonds of their diplomatic relationship. This connection showcases the power of soft power diplomacy, fostering mutual understanding and friendship. Yoga's global popularity has resonated strongly with Bhutan, leading to collaborative efforts to promote physical and mental well-being. Additionally, the spiritual connection between the two nations through Buddhism fosters a shared sense of values and ethics that contribute to their diplomatic synergy.

Mutually beneficial hydro-power cooperation with Bhutan is a key pillar of bilateral economic cooperation. For Bhutan, hydro-power development continues to be a vital catalyst for socio-economic development. Revenues from Hydropower constitutes a significant portion of the total revenues of the Royal Government of Bhutan.

The mutual commitment of India and Bhutan to environmental conservation and sustainable practices further strengthens their diplomatic ties. Collaborative initiatives in preserving the Himalayan ecosystem and addressing climate change demonstrate shared values and a



common goal, reinforcing the narrative of cooperation and mutual benefit. This connection underscores the potency of soft power diplomacy in fostering mutual respect and collaboration. Both nations prioritise sustainable development and environmental preservation, echoing common values. Bhutan's commitment to maintaining carbon neutrality aligns with India's efforts to combat climate change. Such shared environmental objectives have facilitated a natural bridge for diplomatic cooperation. Collaborative initiatives, like joint conservation projects and knowledge exchange, demonstrate the tangible impact of their soft power approach. This environmentally conscious partnership showcases how cultural and value-based ties can transcend political boundaries, fostering goodwill and friendship.



The Indian government emphasised the importance of capacity-building and decided to expand and diversify the collaboration between India and Bhutan to include new fields such as education, space research, information technology, digital payments, disaster management, and others in order to maintain the long-term relationship between the two countries. Building strong ties and an information highway among people, India's government emphasised the need to establish collaboration between India's National Knowledge Network and Druk Research and Education Network.

For the sake of promoting a better understanding of the two nations and their inhabitants, both countries hold annual youth summits to bring together the next generation of diplomats and policymakers. In contrast, events like the India-Bhutan Start-up Conference help in establishing stronger future economic relations and foster more cooperation between the two countries' corporate sectors. India also signed light MOUs to ease economic pressure and promote trade, connectivity, space cooperation and people to people relation.

There are about 30 Indian companies in Bhutan operating in various sectors - banking, manufacturing, electricity generation, agri/food processing, ITES, pharmaceuticals, hospitality, and education – such as Punjab National Bank, State Bank of India, Tata Power Company Ltd., General Insurance Corporation, Apollo Educational Infrastructure Services, Azista Industries, Meghalaya Oxygen, etc.

## Conclusion

The India-Bhutan relationship exemplifies the profound impact of soft power diplomacy in building and nurturing bilateral ties. Historical, cultural, and geographical affinities, along with shared values, education initiatives, cultural exchanges, and collaborative projects, have collectively contributed to the growth of a relationship rooted in mutual respect and understanding. As both nations continue to harness the potential of soft power diplomacy, they pave the way for a future of enduring cooperation and shared prosperity.

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