



Research Article

Tourism as an Instrument of Soft Power: A Comparative Study of India and Thailand

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ABSTRACT



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In today's international relations, soft power is not just about economic and military strength; it's also about the power of influence and inspiration, drawing in and captivating people from around the world. In this context, tourism is seen as one of the most effective instruments for soft power, allowing countries to enhance their international image, improve diplomatic relations and project their cultural identity. This research follows Joseph Nye's idea of 'soft power' and investigates the use of tourism as a tool for cultural diplomacy and nation branding in the case of India and Thailand. Considering the qualitative comparative perspective, the paper examines how both countries activate cultural heritage, religious customs, wellness routines, festivals, food and tourism promotions to influence their presence in the world. The analysis shows that the soft power of India is mainly based on its civilizational heritage, spirituality, Buddhist heritage, yoga and the Ayurveda system, whereas Thailand continues to develop its image through hospitality, cultural festivals, culinary diplomacy, wellness tourism and through carefully executed branding of its tourist destinations. While both countries have abundant cultural resources, Thailand has achieved a certain success in converting tourism assets into a consistent and coherent soft power strategy that is recognized internationally. The study also confirms that the effectiveness of the soft power of tourism depends on the infrastructure quality, visitor experience, policy implementation and destination management. It finds that tourism has the potential to be a very effective diplomatic tool if utilised alongside other cultural and branding activities, and recommends that both India and Thailand have opportunities to use it to further enhance their international presence in a globalised world.

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Introduction

International relations have changed drastically in the 21st century. In the realm of foreign policy, countries are increasingly trying to use cultural attraction, public engagement and international goodwill to achieve their foreign policy goals, as well as military strength and economic power. With this change, soft power has become more important and it was introduced by Joseph Nye (2004) that it is the capacity of a nation to attract others rather than coerce or pay them. Today, in a world of globalization, digital communication and an increasing number of people-to-people connections, cultural attractiveness and national image are key factors in international success. Tourism is one of the most evident and effective tools for the projection of national identity and international interaction and engagement, among the several instruments that soft power exerts. Tourism is not looked upon as only an economic sector that creates jobs and foreign exchange. Today, tourism is increasingly viewed as an effective tool for cultural diplomacy and the use of which can influence perceptions, improve international relations and create a country's image abroad (Nye, 2008). Visitors immerse themselves in a country's culture, heritage, customs, cuisine,

religious practices, social values, etc., through tourism. Such experiences tend to have a lasting effect and shape the perceptions of foreign publics. For this reason, public diplomacy, nation branding and image building for the international audience are tightly linked to tourism. With the power states seek in the world, tourism can be a means of creating cultural resources into diplomatic ones.

In Asia, where cultural diversity is rich, history is ancient and tourism industries are booming, the trend of tourism and soft power is evident. Nowadays, countries in Asia have increasingly turned to heritage conservation, cultural festivals, wellness tourism, religious tourism and destination branding to boost their global visibility and attractiveness. In this context, India and Thailand are two interesting examples of the use of tourism as a tool of soft power. Both nations have rich cultural heritage, long-established traditions, world-renowned holiday spots and a long history of interaction with foreign tourists. The means by which they utilise these resources to create international influence, however, are vastly different.

Tourism is one of the soft power sources of India with deep-rooted civilizational heritage and cultural diversity. The nation is

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well known for its spirituality, philosophy and religious pluralism. It's widely recognized all over the world as a symbol of yoga, Ayurveda, Buddhism, historic landmarks, and religious sites of pilgrimage. The cultural resources are now being used more and more for India's diplomatic outreach and tourism promotion programmes. Institutionalising the International Day of Yoga under the auspices of the United Nations in 2014 is one of the most visible and visible soft power diplomacy initiatives of India in the contemporary era (United Nations, 2014). Likewise, the concept of Ayurveda and wellness tourism has furthered the influence of the Indian culture on the tourism sector of the country, drawing travellers who are interested in alternative healing treatments and a more balanced lifestyle.

Buddhism is an important part in the list of cultural resources available in India. India is the cradle of Buddhism and has a special historical and spiritual significance in the region. In fact thousands of pilgrims and tourists from other countries come to these sacred sites associated with Gautama Buddha's life and teachings such as Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar, Rajgir, and Nalanda every year. These pilgrim trails not only stimulate tourist influxes but also help in fostering cultural and diplomatic relations between India and Buddhist countries. Raina and Singh (2023) claim that Buddhist philosophy has played a crucial role in shaping Indian cultural identity by promoting tolerance, moral integrity, peace and harmony, and the exchange of ideas. Thus, the significance of Buddhist heritage remains as a crucial instrument for the soft power of India and cultural diplomacy.

Thailand offers another, but equally successful, example of influence through tourism. Compared to India whose soft power is spiritual and civilizational, Thailand has developed a global reputation on the bases of hospitality, cultural entertainment, cuisine, wellness tourism and destination branding. Tourism has a pivotal role in Thailand's economy and export policy. The country has developed a strong and consistent international image by inculcated with continuous promotional efforts, especially the world-famous Amazing Thailand program. Thailand's tourism strategy is not limited to sightseeing activities, but also includes cultural festivals and traditions, cuisine, wellness, creative industries and entertainment that enhance Thailand's soft power resources.

Thailand's soft power strategy has become much more important to the country's tourism in recent years. The promotion of the Thai culture, cuisine, film, music, fashion and festivals has become a part of a growing number of government initiatives designed to elevate the visibility and competitiveness of Thailand internationally. Such festivals as Songkran and Loy Krathong bring people from all over the world to visit, and also celebrate Thai culture. Likewise, Thai cuisine has emerged as one of the country's most recognizable cultural exports, and is noted as part of "gastronomic diplomacy" by scholars. Thailand has shown an outstanding capability to develop its tourism sites into world-famous symbols of its national identity and culture in these efforts.

A comparative analysis of the tourism and soft power between India and Thailand is also meaningful because of the historical linkages between the two countries. The cultural relationships between the two nations span over two millennia and have been fostered by trade, religion, language, literature and the arts. Buddhism spread from India to Southeast Asia and the cultural connections that lasted have influenced current diplomatic and social ties. These historical links are maintained and renewed with tourism. The shared cultural attributes, pilgrimage routes and cultural exchanges foster mutual understanding and enhance people-to-people relations between the two countries.

The concept of tourism diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, nation branding and soft power in India as well as in Thailand have been

investigated by existing scholarship in great details. Researchers have studied India's application of yoga, Buddhism, Ayurveda and cultural heritage as tools for international influence and research on Thailand has been done regarding the use of destination branding, hospitality, gastronomy and cultural festivals as ways to improve the attractiveness of the country. Although these contributions, little has been done to systematically compare the utilization of tourism as soft power resource between the two countries. The majority of studies have focused on the individual national experiences and do not pay attention to similarities and differences, strengths and challenges between their respective tourism diplomacy strategies.

To fill this gap this study aims at conducting a comparative analysis of India and Thailand as soft power actors in the field of tourism. The paper focuses on the concept of soft power developed by Joseph Nye and how the tourism sector plays a role in the image-building, cultural diplomacy and global influence of both countries. Special focus is placed on cultural heritage, Buddhist tourism, wellness tourism, nation branding and visitors' experiences. The study proposes to pinpoint the determinants of the effective use of soft power in tourism and draw conclusions about what lessons can be learned from each other by India and Thailand vis-à-vis the ever-competitive world of tourism.

Literature Review

One of the most influential approaches to the international influence in the contemporary world is the concept of soft power. Joseph Nye (2004) said that attracting other countries to the desired outcomes is possible not just through military force or economics, but through culture, political values and foreign policy. The concept has been applied extensively to analyse the use of cultural resources, education, media, sports, religion and tourism by the states to enhance their international image since it was introduced. Of these instruments, tourism has received growing scholarly interest due to its potential to stimulate the direct contact between foreigners and the host societies, thus facilitating the process of image building and cultural exchange.

The recent scholarship has shown that tourism does not only serve as an economic activity. It has become an increasingly effective means of public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy for states to spread its identity and values to international audiences. The impact of tourism experiences on the perception of a country is more powerful than diplomatic statements, as these experiences embody a direct encounter with local communities, cultural behaviors, heritage sites and social life, which influence the perception of the country through a personal, subjective and direct experience. Consequently, tourism plays a major role in nation branding and in the building of the international reputation. Research on tourism diplomacy indicates that nations which have a strong tourism industry are often more visible and influential in the international system, where visitors are considered as unofficial ambassadors and share positive experiences of their travels with others (Nye, 2008).

Recent bibliometric analysis of the literature is indicative of the increasing academic interest in the tourism as a soft power resource. A comprehensive study on the publications on tourism diplomacy and nation branding has produced a significant number of academic publications within the last decade, especially when it comes to cultural diplomacy, destination branding and international image construction. The studies show that tourism is seen more and more as a policy tool to create economic advantages and at the same time improve the image of a country in the international arena (Selçuk & Küçükaltan, 2026). The question of how governments are incorporating tourism policies into their overarching diplomatic and cultural policies has therefore been explored.

In the Indian context, the literature has always emphasized on the Indian civilization as a major source of soft power. Indian culture, religious systems, philosophy, historical landmarks and spiritual practices are a part of India's international image. The experts say that yoga, Ayurveda, Buddhism and even the tourism of heritage are evolutionary parts of the cultural diplomacy of India. The growing popularity of yoga around the world, especially since the UN declared the International day of Yoga, has greatly improved India's visibility in the international arena and the image of India as a country of holistic knowledge and well-being. In a similar way, Ayurveda has helped to grow the wellness tourism sector with individuals traveling to look for other methods of healthcare and spiritual experiences.

Buddhism plays a unique role in the talk of India's tourism based soft power. India is the birthplace of Buddhism and has many religious and touristic significance sites which draw pilgrims and tourists from all over Asia and around the world. These locations provide a source of tourism income along with opportunities for cultural diplomacy and international outreach. According to Raina and Singh (2023), Buddhist philosophy has played a significant role in shaping the cultural landscape of India and has fostered values such as peace, tolerance, ethical conduct, and intellectual exchange. The Buddhist tradition that remains continues to serve as a bridge between India and several other societies with Buddhist traditions in Asia, as their study shows. Thus, Buddhist pilgrimage tourism forms part of an integral aspect of the present-day soft-power policy of India.

The literature also points out that cultural diplomacy in India is becoming more and more reliant on engaging with the country's heritage. Relations with Southeast Asian countries have been bolstered by shared religious heritage, historical ties and cultural ties. This has been referred to as "heritage diplomacy" or "temple diplomacy," highlighting the role of cultural and religious heritage in promoting diplomatic efforts and regional cooperation. The tourism that links to these cultures provides opportunities for people-to-people contact, and promotes the image of India as an Asian civilizational hub with historical ties to Asia.

In contrast to India's soft power, which is based on spiritualism and heritage, Thailand offers another model of tourism influence. Thailand is a country that often has been cited as one of the most effective nation branding tools, and tourism is a key one. Thailand has carved out a well-known status for itself in the world with hospitality, culture, cuisine, health and wellness and entertainment. The Thai government has successfully marketed Thailand as one of the world's top tourist destinations due to tourism promotion campaigns, especially through Amazing Thailand, which is one of the most well-known campaigns in the world. The success of Thailand's tourist industry is said to have resulted from the nation's ability to blend cultural authenticity with destination management and effective marketing.

Thai cuisine has been singled out as one of the topics in the literature of soft power and cultural diplomacy. Thailand's external promotion of its gastronomic heritage is called gastronomic diplomacy, in which food is used as a tool to increase cultural visibility and international appeal, according to researchers. Thai restaurants and culinary tourism have helped spread Thailand's culture throughout the world. Like festivals, Songkran and Loy Krathong are another example of tourism events, but they also act as cultural exhibitions, sharing Thai culture and values with the outside world.

Not to be overlooked, Thailand's tourism soft power also encompasses wellness tourism. Thailand has earned an international reputation for spa services, traditional therapies and health retreats. Research indicates that the merging of wellness

tourism and hospitality and destination branding has boosted Thailand's appeal to international tourists. Consequently, tourism is not only a key factor in economic development, but also in the development of a positive image of the nation, which is connected with the perception of relaxation, hospitality, and high-quality service.

Historians and scholars studying the history of Indian-Thai relations have highlighted the historical and cultural ties between the two nations. Buddhism spread to Thailand from India, creating long-lasting civilizational connections that continue to shape today's relationship. From trade, religion, literature, and artistic exchange, there was a strong cultural affinity that existed historically, and persists to this day. Tourism has a critical role in maintaining these links through pilgrimages, cultural exchange and people-to-people exchanges. Such contacts not only help to reinforce mutual understanding but also to advance the general diplomatic goals.

Although there is an increasing number of literature on tourism and soft power, there are certain limitations. Much of the research conducted very few times is on an individual country experience and not comparative analysis. In contrast to studies of India, which usually focus on yoga diplomacy, Buddhist heritage, and cultural diplomacy, studies on Thailand tend to be on destination branding, hospitality, gastronomy and tourism marketing. As a result, little is known about the country-to-country differences in the effectiveness of tourism resource utilization in the generation of soft power benefits. In addition, although scholars recognize the significance of infrastructure, service quality, visitor experiences, and policy implementation, relatively few studies have considered how those impact the success of the tourism diplomacy in various national contexts.

The literature, however, does give a good background to the understanding of tourism as a strategic source of soft power. It shows that cultural heritage, religion, wellbeing practices, festivals, gastronomy, and branding destinations can all play a part in the attractiveness of a destination internationally, when they are properly incorporated into the tourism policy. Concurrently, there is an existing scholarship that emphasizes the importance of a comparative approach that would enable the identification of similarities and differences in tourism diplomacy models. This study fills the gap by examining the differences between India and Thailand, countries with diverse cultural resources but with different strategies in regard to soft power through tourism. Such a comparison can provide clues as to the opportunities and challenges of the international influence of tourism in the modern world.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The study is grounded on Joseph Nye's Soft Power Theory, which offers a valuable framework for understanding the influence of countries on international audiences through attraction, rather than coercion. Nye (2004) also points out that power in international relations is not just economic or military but also the ability to influence the preferences of other through cultural, value, and policy approaches that others like. Soft power becomes when the country does a good job of projecting an image that attracts foreign publics, fosters cultural affinity and generates goodwill. In the modern world, tourism is one of the best instruments to communicate soft power as it introduces people into the environment, traditions and culture of a country, as well as its cultural heritage and social environment.

The tourism industry is a unique sector in the soft power core concept as it includes cultural representation, public diplomacy and economic engagement. Tourism is different from traditional diplomatic tools because it establishes opportunities for

interaction and experience-based learning. The perception of visitors towards historical monuments, religious sites, festivals, cuisine and local communities is not limited to the mere tourist experience. Positive experiences will boost a country's international reputation and negative ones will have the opposite effect on the country's image. Therefore, tourism is now closely associated with nation branding and public diplomacy initiatives around the world.

In Nye's view, one of the most powerful sources of soft power is culture, a way to translate culture is tourism. The countries that have a lot of cultural heritage, historical monuments, arts and crafts, and religious importance also have a lot of tourism benefits. But having cultural resources is not enough to create soft power. Effective management of these resources by the governments, in the form of tourism policies, infrastructure development, destination branding and cultural diplomacy initiatives, is required. Thus, it is essential not only that there is cultural asset but also that the management and presentation of the cultural asset to international audiences are not lacking.

Soft power theory has been applicable especially in the cases of India and Thailand. India's civilizational heritage, its spiritual traditions, its Buddhist heritage, its yoga, its ayurveda and its cultural diversity are closely linked to its appeal to tourists. These elements have emerged as an integral part of India's foreign perceptions and tourism diplomacy. In Thailand, however, the tourist industry has established its impact through hospitality, cultural festivals, food and sustainability of tourism, creating a destination brand. Both countries are rich in tourism potential but have very different strategies for attracting tourists from overseas. This comparative study can be used to evaluate the role of tourism in the realm of soft power in various cultural and policy settings.

The method used in this study is a qualitative comparative method. Because cultural diplomacy and soft power are perceptions, values, cultural meanings and symbolic ways of influencing, they are best suited to qualitative research. The study thus aims at the interpretation of the contribution of tourism to the international image building and diplomatic engagement in the cases of India and Thailand.

All the data used in the analysis comes from secondary sources. Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy documents, government reports, tourism statistics and publications by international organisations including the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), and UNESCO have been consulted. The information presented here has been sourced from official documents of Ministry of Tourism, Government of India and the Tourism Authority of Thailand. Triangulation of sources; greater reliability of analysis.

A comparative analysis has been used to assess the role of soft power in both countries in the context of tourism. The dimensions for comparison are several interconnected dimensions such as cultural heritage, religious tourism, wellness tourism, destination branding, public diplomacy, visitor experience and tourism governance. The dimensions have been chosen because they are frequently cited in the literature as vital factors in the attractiveness of tourism and the process of international image formation. By comparing these factors, a more complete understanding of the tourism as a soft power source can be gained.

The study also focuses particularly on the historical and cultural connection between India and Thailand. The common Buddhist background, centuries of cultural interaction and the current period of tourism exchanges offer important background to the significance of tourism in promoting diplomatic and cultural contacts. The research aims at pointing out both commonality and uniqueness of the experiences of the two countries in the context of using tourism as an instrument of

international influence. This research is a secondary data research because it does not use primary data which is obtained by fieldwork or surveys, but this type of research is suitable for the research objectives. The focus is not on the statistical analysis of tourist behaviour alone, but on the study of policy approaches, the cultural resources and tourism strategies under the soft power theory. This approach enables further understanding of the role of tourism in nation branding, cultural diplomacy and international reputation. With this theoretical and methodological understanding, the subsequent sections look into the use of tourism as a medium of soft power in India and Thailand. The analysis starts with the Indian country, examining the influence of cultural heritage, Buddhist pilgrimage circuits, yoga, Ayurveda and tourism campaigns on the country's image and diplomacy in the international arena.

Tourism as Soft Power in India

The very nature of India's soft power engagement with tourism is a unique amalgamation of continuity of civilizations, cultural diversity, spiritual heritage and historical legacy (Nye, 2004; Sahoo, 2025). While most countries use modern marketing campaigns to draw in tourists, in India, tourism has been rooted in cultural growth for thousands of years. India has an extraordinary variety of cultural assets that can attract international interest, ranging from the ancient Buddhist and meditations sites at Bodh Gaya and Nalanda to the architectural masterpieces of the Taj Mahal, Hampi, Khajuraho and many other UNESCO World Heritage Sites. (UNESCO, 2025) These resources can be a source of revenue for the tourism industry and can also enhance India's reputation as a country that promotes and values intellectual exchange, religious tolerance, and cultural diversity (Mahaseth et al., 2023).

If others consider it attractive, then Nye (2004) would say that culture is a source of soft power. One of the best ways of communicating such attraction internationally is via tourism. International visitors visiting heritage sites, religious destinations, festivals, food, performing arts, and through their everyday encounters with Indian society, experience different aspects of the Indian society—and sometimes perceptions that are deeper than political and economic narratives, as described by Nye (2008). The studies on the destination image formation show that tourism experiences have a great impact on international perceptions and that they play a role in the development of long-term cultural affinity towards the host country (Tasci & Gartner, 2007).

Buddhist heritage tourism is one of the best aspects of India's tourism soft power. The country of origin of Buddhism, India plays a very special role in the religious and cultural landscape of Asia. The sites related to the life of Gautama Buddha, such as Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar, Rajgir and Nalanda, are visited by pilgrims and tourists from Thailand, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Japan, Vietnam, South Korea and other Buddhist countries, among others (Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, 2024). Not only do these pilgrimages facilitate social ties and interpersonal relationships among the people but also they also help in building a strong diplomatic and cultural relationship between India and other countries of Asia (Sahoo, 2025).

It is not only the numbers of people visiting India for tourism purposes that indicate the importance of Buddhism in India's soft power. Raina and Singh (2023) believe that the teachings of Buddhism played a crucial role in shaping the cultural identity of India by emphasizing on tolerance, ethics, harmony, and knowledge. In the past, Buddhism helped spread Indian culture, philosophy, language, art and education throughout Asia and in the process established long-lasting civilizational ties that exist even today in diplomatic relationships (Raina & Singh, 2023). Buddhist pilgrimage tourism thus is not only a religious practice

but also a cultural diplomacy that brings back the historical links with the Buddhist communities all over the world.

Likewise, yoga is become one of the most prominent soft power assets in the contemporary India. International Day of Yoga was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2014 which was a significant step in the international acceptance of Indian culture and heritage (United Nations, 2014). Since then yoga has spread to over 190 countries and India's visibility has increased and its image has strengthened as a source of holistic well-being and spiritual knowledge (McCartney, 2021). Yoga diplomacy is often considered one of the most effective instances of modern cultural diplomacy as it encompasses health, spirituality, culture, and international engagement in a single global context (Manmohan, 2022).

Tourism as Soft Power in Thailand

Thailand has come to be recognised as one of the most effective cases of the use of soft power through tourism in Asia. Indian's tourism appeal is mainly based on its civilizational heritage, spirituality, historical continuity etc. while Thailand has developed the image of the world through hospitality, cultural experiences, gastronomy, wellness tourism, entertainment and destination branding (Nye, 2004). Tourism has grown much more than an economic activity in the last few decades; it is now a tool of cultural diplomacy and nation branding. Tourism is seen as a tool for the Thai government to improve their country's global image, attract investment and increase their country's profile in the international community (Thailand Government, 2023). Tourism can thus be seen as being at the heart of Thailand's soft power agenda and its national development strategy (Tourism Authority of Thailand [TAT] 2025).

One of Thailand's hallmark tourism diplomacy policies is the intentional incorporation of tourism in nation branding activities. The Amazing Thailand campaign, which is well recognized globally, has been instrumental in building the world's perception of Thailand in relation to hospitality, cultural richness, creativity and visitor satisfaction (Promburom & Kimpakorn, 2015). With continuous promotion, Thailand has been able to present itself as an attractive holiday destination that covers all aspects of tradition and modernity, catering to a wide range of travel segments. Attention to the creation of a sustainable tourism industry, the tourism experience and cultural authenticity remain important issues highlighted in recent campaigns of Thailand's international brand (TAT, 2025).

The Government of Thailand's current soft power policy is based on the concept of the 5 Fs: Food, Festival, Film, Fight (Muay Thai), and Fashion, which are Thailand's current cultural assets that can create foreign demand and attract tourists (Thailand Government, 2023). It aims to convert cultural resources into economic and diplomatic assets and boost Thailand's competitiveness in the tourism industry. These cultural sectors build national identity, raise awareness of Thai culture to the international community, and provide memorable experiences for international visitors (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2023).

Thai cuisine is among these cultural assets, and is one of the country's most powerful soft power assets. Thailand is known as one of the most representative countries in gastrodiploamacy, or the use of food as a vehicle for cultural communication and international engagement. Thai cuisine like Pad Thai, Tom Yum Goong, Green Curry and Som Tam have gained worldwide popularity, which has raised the public awareness of Thai culture and boosted tourist demand (Thailand Government, 2023). Gastronomical tourism activities promoted by the Thai government also exemplify the way gastronomy is woven into the

destination branding and travelling promotion strategy (TAT, 2023).

Another aspect of Thailand's soft power is cultural festivals. Celebrations like Songkran and Loy Krathong bring both local and foreign tourists and also serve as a venue to share the cultural, spiritual, and community aspect of Thailand (Thailand Government, 2023). These festivals serve as a potent cultural sign that project Thai identity to the world and help foster a positive perception of Thailand internationally. Thailand's image and tourism competitiveness are increasingly promoted through these festivals as global cultural events through government soft power promotion.

A strong international position of Thailand in wellness tourism has been established as well. The country has established itself as one of the premier wellness retreats in Asia with traditional Thai massage, spa treatments, meditation retreats and holistic healthcare services. In recent years, the tourism strategy has given significant focus to wellness and medical tourism, which are high-value markets that are able to draw international tourists and further solidify Thailand's image as a healing, relaxing and quality of life destination (Thailand Public Relations Department, 2026). Wellness tourism is becoming an integral part of Thailand's tourism diplomacy and soft power campaign, as exemplified by the government's own "Healing is the New Luxury" campaign.

Comparative analysis of Tourism Based soft power of India and Thailand.

Tourism has now become a potent tool of soft power for both India and Thailand, but the two countries take different approaches to use tourism resources to build international influence. The tourism diplomacy in India is mainly based on its civilizational heritage, spirituality, Buddhism, yoga, and cultural diversity, whereas Thailand's strategy focuses on hospitality, destination branding, gastronomy, wellness tourism and visitor experience (Nye, 2004; Sahoo, 2025). These differences are not only due to the distinct paths taken by both countries in history and culture but also to the different strategies adopted by both countries in nation branding and public diplomacy.

India is one of the oldest continuous civilisations, influential in cultural aspects due to religious beliefs, philosophy, historical monuments and rich cultural heritage. The promotion of India's cultural heritage through initiatives like Incredible India, the Buddhist Circuit, Swadesh Darshan, and yoga and Ayurveda tourism aims to showcase India to the world. Tourism projects like Incredible India, the Buddhist Circuit, Swadesh Darshan, and the promotion of yoga and Ayurveda tourism aim to help project India to the world. (Ministry of Tourism, 2024; Sahoo, 2025). India's soft power is more accentuated because of Buddhism which still links India with a major segment of Asia. Researchers state that Buddhist heritage is one of India's longest-standing soft power resources, which nurture values of peace, tolerance, ethical behavior, and cultural exchange (Raina & Singh, 2023). The popularity of yoga worldwide further cements India's international reputation as a hub of spirituality and holistic well-being (Manmohan, 2022).

Thailand, on the other hand, has established a tourism model based on experiential tourism and satisfaction of visitors. Thailand has successfully developed a series of tourism products, not relying heavily on historical depth, but in the fields of hospitality, kitchen, festivals, wellness and entertainment, which the country is famous for with international recognition. The Amazing Thailand campaign, the country's destination branding campaign, has become one of the world's most successful campaigns. The Amazing Thailand campaign, the country's destination branding campaign, has become one of the world's

most successful campaigns (Promburom & Kimpakorn, 2015). The 5F Soft Power Strategy (Food, Festival, Film, Fight, and Fashion) is an initiative by the Thailand Government to promote the tourism industry as part of its overall cultural diplomacy and economic development goals. The 5F Soft Power Strategy is a concept introduced by the Thailand Government to integrate tourism promotion into efforts for broader cultural diplomacy and economic development.

The major gap between the two nations is how cultural resources are shared internationally. The historical continuity, religious importance and achievements of civilizations are often highlighted in India's tourism diplomacy. The places like Bodhi Gaya, Sarnath, Varanasi, Nalanda and Taj Mahal are visited for history, religion and heritage (UNESCO 2025). Yet, it has not always been possible for India to convert its rich cultural assets into a unified image with a global brand (Anholt, 2010; Sahoo, 2025). The presence of exceptional heritage assets does not seem to be sufficient for the challenges facing infrastructure, destination management, sanitation, transportation and visitor services to not impact the overall perception of the tourist experience (World Economic Forum, 2024).

Generally, Thailand has fared better in building a national image out of tourism resources. Thailand is well known by international visitors for its friendly, hospitable and convenient services along with its safety, wellness and cultural richness (TAT, 2025). Part of the credit for that success goes to effective destination management, as well as to a good, consistent tourism marketing strategy. The notion that a positive visitor experience is more likely to achieve soft power outcomes than cultural resources holds true, as visitors can be informal branders who spread the good word to others (according to research on nation branding, Nye, 2008; Anholt, 2010). This focus on service quality and tourism focusing on the visitors have consequently enhanced Thailand's appeal to international visitors.

A second significant comparison is with religious and spiritual tourism. India has a distinct advantage with the fact that it is the birthplace of some of the world's major religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism and Sikhism. Buddhist pilgrimage is also an important type of tourism, drawing visitors from Thailand, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Japan, Vietnam and South Korea, which contributes to strengthening cultural diplomacy and people to people engagement (Sahoo, 2025). According to Raina and Singh (2023), Buddhism continues to be a key element of India's cultural heritage and its international presence, especially in Asia. Buddhism tourism is also a boon to Thailand, in that it makes the country a place where Buddhist traditions are still alive and well, rather than a place where they were formed. Therefore, India's religious tourism is rich with historical layers, which can hardly be matched by other countries.

It's worth noting that wellness tourism also offers a useful comparison. Yoga, Ayurveda, meditation and traditional health care systems are all closely linked with wellness tourism in India. International Day of Yoga greatly contributed to the soft power diplomacy of India (United Nations, 2014) and increased the visibility of Indian culture globally. However, Thailand is home to a highly commercialised and internationalised wellness sector focused on spas, massage, medical tourism and wellness tourism (Global Wellness Institute, 2024). India has a rich philosophical and historical background in the wellness traditions while Thailand has been better at packaging and marketing the wellness experience to foreign tourists.

The gastronomy also emphasizes some of the differences between the two countries. Thai food is now a world heritage and has become an important part of Thailand's soft power marketing. Thai restaurants have spread worldwide and Thai culture is now

known internationally as a result of the government's gastrodiploacy development (Rockower, 2012). While Indian cuisine is popular across the globe, there is no similar strategic coordination found in Indian tourism diplomacy as compared to that of Thailand. As a result, Thailand has been more successful as a means of using food as a tool for nation branding and cultural diplomacy.

The two approaches differ also in terms of digital promotion and international marketing. Thailand's tourism image has always been invested in the branding of tourism, digital promotion and international media presentation which has helped to keep Thailand's image strong and recognizable (TAT, 2025). While initiatives like 'Incredible India' have propelled India's development in tourism, researchers have noted the need for a more coordinated approach between tourism promotion and cultural diplomacy and international branding strategies (Sahoo, 2025). Social media, online reviews and digital storytelling play a crucial role in the tourism decision-making process, making the ability to engage with digital audiences more vital than ever.

These differences notwithstanding, there are also a number of important strengths that both countries have. They also have rich cultural heritages and significant religious practices, as well as internationally recognised tourist sites, and high cultural identities. Tourism is seen as an important key resource for both governments to improve their international presence and economic development. Tourism is viewed as a strategic resource that can improve both governments' international presence and economic development. Moreover, the historical bond between India and Thailand in Buddhism offers a special basis for tourism cooperation, cultural diplomacy, and regional cooperation (Srichampa, 2015).

The comparative study shows that as a whole, India has tremendous cultural and historical resources which can be leveraged for soft power through tourism. As a whole, however, Thailand has been more successful in building an integrated and branded brand that is appealing to visitors and internationally recognisable. The strengths of India are the deep-rooted cultural heritage, spiritual values and cultural diversity, while the strengths of Thailand are destination management, hospitality, branding and experiential tourism. The comparison indicates that the level of effectiveness of tourism as a soft power is not only reliant on the cultural resources but also on their communication, management and marketing. It is important to understand these differences, as they can be the key to strategies that help to improve the capacity of tourism diplomacy and increase the soft power of both countries.

Discussion and Findings

The comparative study has shown that tourism has emerged as an important tool of soft power that helps the states in creating the image of the country with its culture through its heritage promotion and people to people contact. In line with Nye's (2004, 2008) conception of soft power, both countries are using the tourism sector to project goodwill and improve their image internationally; yet there are significant differences in how the resources of tourism are mobilised and communicated to the world. The results show that the effectiveness of the use of soft power for tourism cannot only be achieved by possessing cultural assets but also by creating a coherent national story with strategic packaging, management and promotion of cultural assets.

One of the significant conclusions is that India has more and a deeper pool of soft power resources than Thailand. The tourism diplomacy approach is built on the foundation of India's civilizational legacy, spiritual traditions, Buddhist footprint, yoga, Ayurveda, historical monuments, and cultural diversity, which

India possesses as a unique offering (Nye, 2004; Sahoo, 2025). No other country has cultural resources like India's historical and religious importance. The cultural ties of the country with Buddhism is of special significance as it links India with the majority of Asia and provides an opportunity for cultural interaction and engagement through pilgrimage tourism and heritage exchanges (Raina & Singh, 2023). Likewise, in today's world, the acceptance of yoga and Ayurveda has increased the visibility of Indian culture and grown India's popularity abroad considerably (Manmohan, 2022).

The results also indicate that Buddhist culture tourism is one of the underutilized soft power assets of India. The sites like Bodhi Gaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar, Rajgir and Nalanda have tremendous historical and spiritual significance for millions of Buddhists around the world. These places are not only a source of tourism flows but also evoke India's status as the birthplace of Buddhism, as well as a hub of spiritual education (Sahoo, 2025). Raina and Singh (2023) explain that the values of peace, tolerance and intellectual exchange are still embedded in the culture of India as a result of Buddhist philosophy. As such, Buddhist tourism is a unique instrument to enhance cultural diplomacy and improve relations with nations like Thailand, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Japan, South Korea and Vietnam.

Meanwhile, the research also shows that Thailand has had much greater success in realizing tangible soft power results from tourism resources. Although Thailand has fewer historical and civilizational resources than India, it has built one of the strongest brands in the world for tourism with the effective destination management, the experiences from the visitors' perspective and the consistent international marketing (Promburom & Kimpakorn, 2015). The country's soft power campaign, Amazing Thailand, and the country's overall soft power efforts has resulted in a unified image of Thailand abroad, which is linked to hospitality, cultural richness, wellness, and visitor satisfaction (Thailand Government, 2023). This discovery backs up current research which indicates that perception management and branding are great factors in the effectiveness of soft power (Anholt, 2010).

Another significant discovery is that the experiences of visitors are significant in the development of tourism soft power. The findings suggest that their positive experiences with tourists have a strong impact on international impressions of a country. Unique heritage and spirituality are the reasons for people to visit India; however, issues of infrastructure, sanitation, access, travel and destination management are still impacting their satisfaction in certain destinations (World Economic Forum, 2024). Thailand, on the other hand, has been investing in tourism infrastructure, service quality and hospitality training, which helped it to develop a more streamlined tourism experience. Thailand, therefore, performs better in terms of transforming the arrival of tourists into positive international perceptions and goodwill.

The results also shed light on the evolving global significance of nation branding in the field of tourism diplomacy. The governments of India and Thailand are examples of the power of branding strategies in influencing the world's perception of and attraction to the country. In terms of the comparative analysis, however, the branding efforts appear to be more consistent and more well-known to people outside Thailand. Thailand's tourism marketing tends to accentuate several aspects of its tourism at the same time, in contrast to India, which emphasizes on heritage, spirituality, culture, adventure and wellness, while Thailand is mostly focused on hospitality, cultural experiences and lifestyle tourism (Promburom & Kimpakorn, 2015). This cohesion is a key element in the effectiveness of Thailand's soft power.

The analysis also reveals the growing significance of wellness tourism as a crucial element in establishing soft power in both countries. Wellness diplomacy is rooted in India's traditional medical systems, such as yoga and Ayurveda, and their increasing global prominence (Manmohan, 2022). The International Day of Yoga was adopted by the United Nations, giving a boost to the cultural visibility of India and creating a platform to promote soft power through the United Nations (United Nations, 2014). Similarly, Thailand is known for its excellent spas, traditional massage practices, medical tourism, and wellness retreats, which have earned it a prominent reputation in wellness tourism (Global Wellness Institute, 2024). But the success in Thailand shows that commercialization, accessibility and marketing are vital to the process of turning wellness traditions into global competitive tourism products.

A key result is also related to gastronomy and cultural industries. Thailand has in practice successfully combined food, festivals, film, fashion and Muay Thai into a holistic soft power project, as outlined in the 5F project of Thailand Government (2023). Thai food, especially, is now a cultural heritage recognized globally and an integral part of the nation branding strategy of Thailand. Indian cuisine is popular all around the world, but not much emphasis has been made to include it into the tourism diplomacy with strategic coordination. It means that cultural resources are not enough, governments need to actively support and embed cultural resources in a wider public diplomacy policy to achieve the best soft power results (Rockower, 2012).

The comparison also highlights the need for historical and cultural connections to tourism diplomacy. India and Thailand have a history of centuries of interaction in religion, trade, language and cultural exchange. Buddhism continues to be one of the most important cultural ties between the two nations (Srichampa, 2015). Tourism is thus not just an economic activity, it is a way to maintain historical connections and foster understanding and relationships. The study concludes that the shared heritage tourism can be used as a means to build up regional cooperation and to achieve wider foreign policy goals.

On the theoretical level, the results support Nye's (2004) view that attraction is an increasingly important source of international influence in the world today. Cultural attraction can be realized as a practical mechanism in tourism towards international engagement. The study also brings a new dimension to Soft Power Theory by highlighting the importance of branding, infrastructure, service quality, accessibility and visitor experience in attracting visitors. Cultural resources can be a source of soft power; it is a matter of strategy to make it a reality.

Overall, the results suggest that there are two models of tourism-led soft power in India and Thailand, both different and complementary. India's core strength is its unmatched civilisational heritage, spiritual traditions and depth of culture, whereas the success of Thailand is in effective branding, hospitality and tourism management. The study indicates that the strategies for countries to develop the soft power potential based on tourism should be based on cultural authenticity, quality to tourists experience, tourism marketing and sustainable tourism development. Tourism in today's world is not only a source of income, it has emerged as a powerful tool for expression, relationship and power for countries on the international stage.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The current research was an analysis of the tourism as soft power using comparative approach between India and Thailand. The study drew from Joseph Nye's Soft Power Theory that discussed about the use of tourism as a method to improve international attractiveness, cultural diplomacy, nation branding

and global influence for both nations. The results prove that tourism no longer serves its traditional economic purpose, rather it has emerged as one of the major tools by which states communicate cultural identity, create people-to-people relations, and influence international image (Nye 2004, 2008). Tourism is a link between culture and diplomacy in a world that is becoming more and more connected, providing countries with opportunities to influence through appeal, not coercion.

The analysis showed that both countries, India and Thailand have huge resources for tourism which can be utilized for their soft power development but both are very different in their approach. The soft power of India is deeply embedded in the civilizational legacy, spiritual traditions, religious diversity of India, historical monuments, yoga, ayurveda and the Buddhist heritage. India is also a cultural hub as the birthplace of Buddhism and a part of one of the oldest civilizations in the world, drawing pilgrims, scholars, heritage tourists and wellness seekers from around the world (Sahoo, 2025). Its cultural impact is not limited to its own borders and can be seen in the religious, linguistic, artistic and philosophical beliefs of many Asian nations.

One important implication of the study is its relevance of Buddhist legacy as a source of soft power in India in the present times. Bodhi Gaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar, Rajgir and Nalanda are the sites of pilgrimage for the Buddhist religion and represent India's involvement in the spread of Buddhist philosophy and culture to Asia. These locations are not just meant for international tourists, but also as tools for cultural diplomacy and regional engagement. Raina and Singh (2023) suggest that the ideas of Buddhism had a profound impact on shaping the Indian cultural identity, infusing it with values of peace, tolerance, ethical living and intellectual discourse. These values continue to have great relevance in the current international relations and continue to brighten India's image for the Buddhist majority countries. Hence, Buddhist tourism is one of the most valuable and underutilized tool of soft power in India.

The study also throws light on the increasing role of yoga and Ayurveda in India's globalization. The United Nations Declaration of the International Yoga Day greatly enhanced India's cultural visibility and showcase of the capacity of traditional knowledge systems to create goodwill globally (United Nations, 2014). In recent years, the wellness tourism segment related to yoga, meditation, Ayurveda etc. has grown enormously and China has confirmed India's status as a place of spirituality and wellness. The developments highlight how the traditions of culture can be made a modern-day diplomatic instrument that can boost a nation's stature in the international arena.

The strengths are evident, but the findings suggest that India has not yet maximised its rich cultural assets in the context of soft power through tourism. Infrastructure, transportation, destination management, sanitation and digital promotion, as well as visitor services issues, remain challenges impacting the tourism experience in several destinations (World Economic Forum, 2024). While the various tourism promotion schemes like Incredible India, Swadesh Darshan and the Buddhist Circuit have helped in the development of tourism, the country has yet to establish a unified and internationally popular tourism brand. Hence, the study recommends that the effectiveness of soft power is not only related to the availability of cultural assets but also with the ability to effectively manage and communicate the cultural assets.

Thailand offers an alternative example of tourism diplomacy. Thailand, on the other hand, has effectively developed a soft power development strategy based on its tourism industry's hospitality, gastronomy, wellness tourism, festivals, entertainment and destination marketing through its historical legacy and

spirituality, which is not as prevalent in India. A prominent part of building a positive image for Thailand overseas has been the country's internationally acclaimed Amazing Thailand campaign, which has promoted friendliness, cultural richness, relaxation, and visitor satisfaction (Promburom & Kimpakorn, 2015). Thailand's tourism policies illustrate how culture can be cleverly packaged and marketed to produce a national brand which can generate both economic and diplomatic returns.

The study reveals that Thailand is best known for its capability in creating positive tourist experiences from tourism resources. Through the consistent investment in the infrastructure, the quality of service, hospitality training and destination management, Thailand has developed a competitive tourism environment. The nation has therefore succeeded in particular ways in terms of securing long-term goodwill and favourable international perceptions, from the tourist's arrival. The result reflects the fact that the visitor experience is an important factor in the effectiveness of soft power for tourism, as positive experiences, rather than promotional messages, can have a greater impact on international attitudes (Anholt, 2010).

Additionally, Thailand's embedding of gastronomy, wellness tourism, cultural festivals, film, fashion and Muay Thai in its overall soft power policy illustrates the need for policy co-ordination. The 5F framework by the government shows how the various cultural sectors can be connected to tourism promotion and nation branding (Thailand Government, 2023). Through this integration, Thailand's cultural visibility in the world has been reinforced and it has played a major role in building Thailand's reputation as one of the most appealing cultural destinations in Asia.

The comparison between India and Thailand shows that soft power through tourism is determined by the two interrelated determinants such as cultural resources and the effectiveness of tourism governance. India has an amazing cultural and historical treasures, while Thailand has a strong brand, hospitality, marketing and visitor management approaches. The results accordingly indicate that cultural heritage cannot be automatically considered as a soft power generator. Instead, soft power comes through when cultural resources are effectively conveyed, handled and enjoyed by foreign people. This is an observation that builds on Nye's (2004) conceptualisation of soft power by focusing on the importance of management of tourism and destination governance in developing cultural attraction into international influence.

The study offers some policy recommendations. India needs to enhance the role of cultural diplomacy in its foreign policy framework in the first place. The promotion of tourism should be considered as an economic activity, but also as an instrument of international engagement. There is a need to strengthen tourism diplomacy and improve India's visibility in the world through greater cooperation and coordination between the Ministry of Tourism, Ministry of External Affairs and cultural institutions.

Second, improved infrastructure, destination management, interpretation centres, and reaching out to these through digital channels should be given due importance in developing Buddhist heritage tourism in India. With the increasing significance of cultural connectivity in Asia, Buddhist pilgrimage tourism has the potential to significantly enhance relations with other Buddhist majority countries such as Thailand, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, etc. (Sahoo, 2025; Raina & Singh, 2023). The creation of integrated Buddhist circuits and promotion of transnational pilgrimages can be a great source of soft power outreach for India.

Third, more investment in the tourism and tourist service infrastructure is needed. The World Economic Forum (2024) has

revealed that numerous factors related to transport, such as cleanliness, safety, accessibility and quality of service, have a significant impact on tourists' satisfaction and competitiveness of the destination. Enhancements in these fields will help India to tap the soft power potential of its cultural and historical assets to the fullest.

Fourthly, there is a need to promote yoga and Ayurveda, as well as cuisine, handicrafts and cultural festivals in the world as a part of India's comprehensive programme of Nation branding. The Thailand experience demonstrates the value of coordinated branding in significantly raising international visibility of cultural resources. The need of the hour is to promote a more integrated approach that combines tourism with wellness, food, culture and digital diplomacy, which can help improve India's image in the world and draw in a more diverse tourist population.

Fifth, sustainable development in tourism should be a priority for both India and Thailand. Tourism development can lead to environmental stress, cultural commodification and infrastructure problems. Maintaining the competitiveness of tourism and soft power effectiveness over the long-term term requires sustainable policies for tourism that balance the economic aspect with the preservation of culture and the protection of the environment (UNWTO, 2024).

Last but not least, the study highlights the need for cooperation between regions in tourism diplomacy. The cultural ties, historical syncretism and cultural exchanges are good foundations for collaboration between India and Thailand. People to people contact would be deepened through tourism co-operatives, cultural festivals, academic exchanges and heritage conservation programmes, which would at the same time boost soft power of both the nations. Such collaboration would not only help the development of tourism but also to the overall goal of cultural understanding and regional integration.

To sum up it can be stated that in the twenty first century tourism is one of the most dynamic tools of soft power. India and Thailand prove the ability of tourism to improve the influence of the country by attraction, cultural engagement and public diplomacy. India's success is based on its civilizational depth, spiritual traditions and Buddhist heritage while Thailand's success is through effective branding, hospitality and tourism management. Comparative analysis indicates that the potential of the soft power of tourism will rely on the capacity of the states to link cultural authenticity with strategic promotion, quality tourism experiences, and sustainable development in the tourism sector. In an increasingly competitive world for attention, reputation and influence, tourism will be a greater influence in international perceptions and relationships.

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