



Cultural Diplomacy: Tapping Potential of Traditional Sports

Cultural diplomacy and people-to-people (P2P) connect are important tools for strengthening ties between two regions. These forms of diplomacy promote understanding and build trust & goodwill. Given the common socio-cultural ethos, cultural diplomacy and people to people connect holds immense potential to boost ASEAN-India relations. This commentary looks into the components of traditional sports as part of cultural diplomacy and P2P cooperation between ASEAN and India and recommends ways to promote it.

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The historical relations between India and its Southeast Asian neighbours dated back to more than 2000 years. Relations have been based on maritime trade and commerce, religions like Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, architectural similarity, language, food, and lifestyle. In the modern era, the diplomatic relations between India and the ASEAN participants have been flourishing since the post-World War II era. India was a key participant at the 1955 Bandung Conference and supported the independence of Indonesia, Myanmar, and Singapore. India and Southeast Asian countries share enduring historical and civilizational linkages which can be utilized to strengthen economic and political relations.¹ Relationships forged through cultural and religious connections provide the foundation for a strong partnership.

A strong and sustainable relationship can be built through strategic people-to-people exchange diplomacy. In an age of technology and the evolution of new channels and means of communication, people-to-people exchange is a remarkably effective diplomatic policy. It is

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defined as two or more individuals sharing a conversation in an effort to understand what they share in common as well as develop a mutual respect for their respective differences.²

With the help of advanced communications technologies, nations are able to bring their citizens together, particularly through international exchanges in fields like entrepreneurship, science, and technology. People-to-people exchange has the potential to initiate a new wave of innovation and economic growth by creating avenues for collaborations in multiple areas. Diplomacy must move from being completely in the hands of governments into the hands of citizens. People-to-people relationships have the power to break barriers, build friendships, and change the world. These relationships often lead to enduring partnerships based on mutual understanding, respect, and shared interests.³

People-to-people exchange plays an instrumental role in promoting political and mutual trust. It is also a vital element for effective and enduring cooperation between countries. People-to-people exchange can guarantee strengthening economic and trade ties. It creates a deep bond, as does friendship, which derives from close contact between people. It can solidify national-level diplomatic relations, as relationships between countries will eventually be reflected in the bonds between peoples. There is no better bridge than people to people exchange for mutual learning among civilisations. Effective people-to-people exchanges, and mutual learning can help not only eliminate alienation but also promote mutual understanding and political trust between nations. The people-to-people exchange should cover the fields of education, technology, culture, health, sports, women, youth, and entrepreneurship.⁴

Diplomatic relations are significantly influenced by culture. The intangible components of a culture are represented by its stories and narratives, games and songs, music, and all the knowledge that is typically passed down in both traditional and modern civilizations. Traditional sports and games can be regarded as cultural and social capital. They reflect the values, customs, and relationships of a society, which shape a local, national, or regional identity.⁵ Traditional games help promote social interactions and social engagement. They enhance physical development, brain stimulation, concentration, and problem-solving skills. There are many fun traditional games enjoyed by children throughout India and ASEAN. The most popular games are congklak and marble shooting (goti).

Congklak is a well-known traditional game that was introduced by the Arab or Indian traders centuries ago and is now quite common in Southeast Asia and India. It is known as "Kyway" in Myanmar, congkak in Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, and congklak in Indonesia; sungka in the Philippines; mak khom in Thailand; and o an quan in Vietnam. The game is played on a special board with two rows of circular indentations and head indentations on each end. Players must fill each indentation with rocks or shells, and every indentation has its own count. It is best to play with two players, however, it can also be enjoyed by a group of players. It enhances the mathematical and observation skills of the players. Marble shooting, or goti, is a traditional Indian game that is widely played in Southeast Asian countries. A group of players can enjoy this game. It is played using multiple coloured glass marbles. These marbles are placed in a circle. The goal is to hit a specific marble with another marble from outside the circle.

Traditional games are a dynamic form of living heritage. Stakeholders from local communities, government, and national and international institutions should work together to reintroduce the traditional games, which is a significant aspect of intangible culture, to the young generation, both through formal and non-formal education. Social media, movies, and songs are effective channels to promote the traditional games that are almost forgotten. The Squid Game, a popular South Korean drama series, is an outstanding illustration of how to showcase the culture on a global scale. It featured traditional Korean folk games. "Mugunghwa kkoci pieot seumnida (the hibiscus flower bloomed in English) which has become a global sensation. Our traditional games, which act as a cultural bridge between India and ASEAN members, should also be appreciated worldwide. In order to present our shared culture of traditional games on the global stage, these games should be reinvented and reintroduced in state institutions (schools, sports clubs) in the region to ensure that the new generations are engaged with these traditional games. The traditional games should be preserved in their own countries and collaborate regionally to be included in prominent events such as sports tournaments and national youth conferences.

Traditional games serve as a bridge between communities and evidence of shared cultural roots. It promotes community spirit, fosters a sense of familiarity, and plays a vital role in people-to-people exchange at the local, national, and regional levels. People-to-people exchange is one of the most strategic diplomacies of the new era. Preserving and promoting the shared culture through traditional games will make substantial progress in strengthening the existing ties between ASEAN and India and building a community with a shared future.

ASEAN's cultural diplomacy efforts have been successful in promoting understanding and cooperation among its member states. The organization's cultural programs have helped to build bridges between the peoples of ASEAN and have created a more cohesive and unified region. The ASEAN Cultural Fund, the ASEAN Cultural Heritage Fund, the ASEAN Youth Festival, the ASEAN Film Festival are some instances of ASEAN's cultural diplomacy. In these efforts, ASEAN's dialogue partners including India have a lot of scope to widen the horizons of cultural diplomacy and P2P with the ASEAN members. The synchronization and harmony between civilizations would depend on that.

Snippets from the ASEAN-India Cultural Diplomacy

In 2017, India and ASEAN launched the "ASEAN-India Cultural Year" to commemorate the 25th anniversary of their dialogue partnership. The year-long program included a wide range of cultural events, such as art exhibitions, film festivals, and music concerts.

In 2018, India and ASEAN signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the Field of Culture. The MoU aims to promote cultural exchanges between the two regions, including through the sharing of traditional art forms, music, and dance.

In 2019, India and ASEAN held the first ever "ASEAN-India Buddhist Conclave" in New Delhi. The conclave brought together Buddhist leaders from all over ASEAN to discuss ways to promote Buddhist education and culture.

Endnotes

- ¹ '30 years of ASEAN- India Relations', The ASEAN Editorial Team, 2023.
- ² Brown, J. (2002) 'The purposes and cross-purposes of American public diplomacy', *American Diplomacy*.
- ³ Payne, J. Gregory (2009) 'Reflections on Public Diplomacy: People to People Communication', *American Behavioral Scientist*, 53(4), pp. 579-606.
- ⁴ Xing, Liju (2020) 'People-to-people Exchange and Building a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind', *China International Studies*.
- ⁵ Groll, M., Bronikowska, M., & Savola, J. (2015) 'Cultural aspects of traditional sports and games', *International Journal of Physical Education*, 52(3), pp. 25-36.

Further Reading

Civallero, E. (2007) 'Traditional games, music, and oral tradition: Intangible tools in multicultural libraries', *IFLA Satellite Meeting 2007. Conference on Innovative Multicultural Library Services for All*. IFLA.

About AIC



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Considering the work of the ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Group (AIEPG), and its Report with recommendations for forging a closer partnership for peace, progress and shared prosperity, the Heads of the State/Government of ASEAN and India at the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit 2012, held at New Delhi on 19-20 December 2012, recommended the establishment of ASEAN-India Centre (AIC), which was formally inaugurated by the Hon'ble External Affairs Minister of the Government of India on 21 June 2013 at RIS. AIC serves as a resource centre for ASEAN Member States and India to fill the knowledge gaps that currently limit the opportunities for cooperation. AIC works with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India and undertakes evidence-based policy research and provide policy recommendations.

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