

Razia Sultana

THE ART OF MAXIMISING DIPLOMACY THROUGH CULTURE: POTENTIALS FOR BANGLADESH

Abstract

The paper aims to explore the potential of cultural diplomacy in Bangladesh in contemporary time when global crises loom larger than ever before. Cultural diplomacy—is claimed to be an alternative approach to soft power and public diplomacy acts as a source of crisis management and positive labelling which assist in upholding a country’s image in the world arena. Despite the significance of cultural diplomacy, research in this domain of Bangladesh has been notably sparse since its independence in 1971. Drawing upon a synthesis of both primary and secondary data sources, the paper substantiates that there is a little systematic discussion on the extent to which cultural diplomacy can be utilised by government apparatuses, non-state actors, cultural associations, as well as other cultural actors to serve the country’s national interests abroad. Unlike other Asian countries, Bangladesh lags in optimising the potential of cultural diplomacy in the global context due to some formidable challenges in the cultural arena, for example, fund constraints, failure to create additional value of cultural resources, dominance of foreign culture, etc. Therefore, there is a compelling need for Bangladesh to glean insights from other regional countries on how to use culture as a resource for its diplomacy with a view to exploring avenues for the country in this regard. Since the spectrum of cultural diplomacy is continuously widening, the paper underscores the need of scrutinising interconnected gaps in the context of Bangladesh. The paper offers some niche areas (in language, music, film, tourism, etc.) as focal points for further inquiry and knowledge acquisition on this subject.

Key Words: Culture, Diplomacy, Foreign Policy, Branding, Public Diplomacy, Cultural Relations, Cultural Diplomacy

1. Introduction

“If we are to preserve culture, we must continue to create it.”- Johan Huizinga (1872-1945)

Johan Huizinga—one of the pioneers of modern cultural history—articulated this statement long back emphasising the need for cultural preservation through intercultural dialogue for a better understanding of each other’s culture. It cannot be denied that amid the ever-increasing complexity of international relations, each

Razia Sultana, PhD is Senior Research Fellow at Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS). Her e-mail address is: razia@biiss.org

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country desires to engage itself with communities and regions by various means overcoming distance and space. Cultural diplomacy—an integral part of diplomatic initiatives—has been an important instrument of foreign policy by which a country reinvigorates alliances with others to derive mutual benefits. In the 21st century, the role of culture in foreign policy or diplomacy is immense for addressing shared global challenges (e.g., COVID-19, conflicts and wars, energy crises, climate change, etc.). Back in 1945, when the United Nations (UN) came into existence, it had only 50 founding member states while the number has now burgeoned to encompass 195 member states which has widened opportunities for interstate interaction, particularly with the advent of globalisation and digitalisation. It is observed that in this increasingly interdependent world, one of the powerful instruments that largely influence the opinions of global citizens is cultural diplomacy.¹

Cultural diplomacy—a vibrant academic field of research in International Relations (IR)—brings significant impacts on the areas of foreign policy including attaining political and economic goals.² Instead of military power, Joseph Nye, the renowned scholar of this discipline, identified the significance of cultural diplomacy in international politics that has a greater appeal to other countries.³ Worldwide, the significant role of culture has been noticeable over the last few decades, especially in crisis management (e.g., conflicts and wars) emanating from ethnic, cultural, and religious beliefs. For example, in 2004, cricket diplomacy was used as a significant tool to diffuse tension between the governments of India and Pakistan.⁴ On the contrary, exclusion from the major international sports events has been used as a powerful step against the countries for giving chastisement by the international community. The banning of Russian and Belarusian players from the FIFA World Cup 2022 as a result of the attack on Ukraine and the exclusion of South African players from international sports events during the apartheid era are two examples to mention.

Many countries pursue active cultural diplomacy and invest substantial financial and human resources to achieve their desired goals in modern international politics. Some countries have been utilising cultural resources for a long time by setting up cultural institutions. Examples include the *Institut Français* (France, 1910), the

¹“Cultural Diplomacy: A Pillar of our International Relations,” Department of Sport, Arts, and Culture, South Africa, 2020, http://www.dac.gov.za/content/cultural-diplomacy-pillar-our-international-relations_

² Erik Pajtinka, “Cultural Diplomacy in Theory and Practice of Contemporary International Relation,” [file:///C:/Users/Dell/Downloads/CulturalDiplomacyinTheoryandPracticeofContemporaryInternationalRelations%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/Dell/Downloads/CulturalDiplomacyinTheoryandPracticeofContemporaryInternationalRelations%20(1).pdf).

³ Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

⁴ Seema Guha, “India–Pakistan Cricket Diplomacy Takes a Back Seat,” *Outlook*, 22 November 2022, <https://www.outlookindia.com/sports/india-pakistan-cricket-diplomacy-takes-a-back-seat-magazine-234259>.

Deutsch Akademie (Germany, 1925), the British Council (Britain, 1934), and China's rigorous initiatives of setting up over 100 Confucius Institutes and Cultural Centres around the world. As of now, more and more countries have been taking various initiatives (e.g., introducing formal cultural diplomatic policies) to formalise or institutionalise international cultural relations. According to the 2011 Cultural Diplomacy Outlook, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom (UK) are the top five countries that nurture cultural diplomacy worldwide.⁵ Among Asian countries, India, Thailand, Japan, China, South Korea, Russia, Iran, Turkey, and Singapore are significantly influencing other countries utilising cultural resources ranging from music to drama. These countries have dedicated goal of popularising their cultures within Asia and beyond by using diplomatic maneuvers at various stages (e.g., both at Track I or Track II levels).

Like many other Asian countries, Bangladesh is endowed with enormous cultural resources. The diversified cultural capitals such as arts, crafts, language, literature, movies, cuisine, etc. are crucial components of the country's cultural strengths. Some of Bangladesh's intangible cultural heritage (7th March speech of the Father of the Nation, International Mother Language Day, *Baul* songs, and *Jamdani Sari* enshrined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO⁶) have been internationally recognised as cultural assets that give the country a distinct identity and position in the global arena.

Considering the aforementioned observations, the present study is an attempt to deal with the areas of culture that are not much focused in diplomacy literature in Bangladesh. In the case of Bangladesh, cultural diplomacy deserves attention for several reasons. First, cultural diplomacy is comparatively a less discussed and unexplored topic in the domain of the country's foreign policy and the sphere of international public relations.⁷ More focus is given to the areas of peace, development, climate, and other diplomatic issues.⁸ Second, a detailed discussion of cultural resources in the diplomatic sphere is needed since it is inextricably intertwined with the idea of 'nation branding'. As we live in a global village, it is pertinent to transcend the strength of culture and create the country's distinct identity by surpassing existing challenges ranging from economy to policies. Third, there is a need to assess the degree to which cultural tools or resources are practiced by the government, non-state

⁵ Institute for Cultural Diplomacy (ICD), "Cultural Diplomacy in the Public Sector," *Outlook*, 1 January 2011, http://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/culturaldiplomacynews/content/pdf/Cultural_Diplomacy_Outlook_Report_2011_-_01-01.pdf.

⁶ The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

⁷ Md Talebur Islam Rupom, "Public and cultural diplomacy".

⁸ Md Talebur Islam Rupom, "Public and cultural diplomacy".

actors, and cultural institutions to maintain international cultural relations and preserve country's national interest abroad. Since, the contemporary crises are more complex (traditional, nontraditional, inter and intra-state in nature), it is difficult for a country to handle such challenges alone. Finally, there is a relative absence of research on how Bangladesh can learn from countries that are successfully practicing cultural relations worldwide. It is evident that unlike several of its Asian counterparts, cultural diplomacy is under-researched and under-explored in Bangladesh. Recognising the gap, the present paper endeavours to uncover these neglected niche areas for harnessing the inherent strength of its cultural resources and bolstering its diplomatic outreach.

Taking all the points into account, the key argument of the paper is that cultural diplomacy, apart from conventional diplomatic practices, can be a significant means for Bangladesh to achieve its foreign policy goals. Drawing upon valuable insights from Asian countries, the paper advocates for an intensified focus on expanding and maximising the role of cultural diplomacy in Bangladesh. At this juncture, the paper delineates a specific aim: How can Bangladesh strengthen its capacity in the arena of cultural diplomacy to reach its desired foreign policy goals? The paper has also dealt with the subsequent questions:

- What are the key areas in which Bangladesh can strengthen its cultural diplomacy?
- What are the underlying factors that contribute to the success of cultural diplomacy in Asia, and whether those factors can be adapted to Bangladesh's cultural diplomacy context?
- How can Bangladesh strategically incorporate lessons learnt from successful cultural diplomacy practices in Asia to optimise its diplomatic effort?

The objectives of the paper are to:

- Explore the potential areas in which Bangladesh can reinforce its cultural diplomacy;
- Highlight some good practices of the culture in diplomatic domains in Asia;
- Identify the key challenges and suggest some probable initiatives for Bangladesh to achieve its desired foreign policy objectives by taking the lessons from cultural diplomatic efforts from Asia.

The primary limitation of the paper is its spatial constraint since the discussion is confined exclusively to the Asian region despite realising the strength of culture

across different regions including Europe and the Middle East. Asian countries, in particular, have been chosen due to shared cultural similarities, geographical proximities, and historical connections with Bangladesh. Asia, the biggest continent of the world, comprises 48 independent countries in six sub-regions that offer diverse cultural resources. Asian countries are rising and Asian models of cultural diplomacy hold relevance for Bangladesh to set up connections with the rest of the world. Countries like China, India, and South Korea have demonstrated effectiveness in terms of cultural dissemination. To get a comprehensive overview and streamline the scope, the study's discussion has primarily been confined to the 8 countries identified as having the most significant cultural heritage influence by the Lowy Institute Asia Power Index and Global Soft Power Index published in 2023.⁹

The study has curated data from both primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources comprise an array of books, newspapers, documents, reports, and other scholarly works. To gather primary data, qualitative research method was adopted due to its suitability for exploratory studies.¹⁰ Within the realm of qualitative research methodologies, the case study approach was employed to gain new insights into the themes of the topic. To explore the cultural components and diplomatic tools of multiple cases, cross-case and thematic underpinnings are chosen as key focuses. In-depth interview was used as the primary tool to gather first-hand information on the culture and diplomacy of Bangladesh and other Asian countries. Interviewees were purposively selected from different ministries, academia, and cultural institutions.¹¹

The rest of the paper has been divided into seven sections. Section two provides a detailed discussion of conceptual issues of cultural diplomacy and its salient components, tools, and mechanisms. The third section elucidates the importance of cultural diplomacy in Bangladesh including its recent trends and developments to underscore the evolving role of cultural diplomacy in the country's foreign policy agenda. The fourth section identifies the exemplary instances of cultural diplomacy across Asia while section five, based on those best practices, distills some potential areas, tools and associated challenges that warrant consideration in Bangladesh's

⁹ "Global Soft Power Index 2023," Lowy Institute Asia Power Index 2023, Lowy Institute, <https://power.lowyinstitute.org/>.

¹⁰ Uwe Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (Sage Publications: London, 2009).

¹¹ Interviewed with: Md Shah Alom Khokon, Director, MoFA; Mujtaba Ahmed Murshed, Former Adviser, BIMSTEC Secretariat (2018-2022), Writer; Syed Anwar Husain, Professor (Retd.), Department of History, Dhaka University; Dr. Amena Mohsin, Professor (Retd.), Dhaka University; Dr Intiaz A. Hussain, Professor, Global Studies and Governance, Independent University; Shadat Hossain Nipu, DG, Bangla Academy; Kazi Nurul Islam, Additional Secretary (Cultural Exchange Wing), Ministry of Cultural Affairs; Afsana Mimi, DG, Actress, Model, Shilpakala Academy; and Brig Gen (Rtd) Hasan Md. Shamsuddin, Lead Researcher, Rohingya Myanmar and ASEAN Affairs, CBGA.

cultural diplomatic pursuits. The subsequent section offers probable suggestions intended to enhance Bangladesh's efficacy in cultural diplomacy and finally, in section seven, the paper culminates with a comprehensive conclusion.

2. Cultural Diplomacy: Some Conceptual Clarities

2.1 *Linking Diplomacy with Culture in IR*

The meaning of the term 'cultural diplomacy' is hard to realise without the explanation of the interrelated words-'culture' and 'diplomacy'. Culture as a diplomatic tool, is not a new concept in the realm of IR and it has been closely tied up with diplomatic history for a long time. It is also regarded as a specific set of behaviours of people and elements which are uniform among the members of a certain society.¹² In brief, culture covers a wide range of issues including beliefs, customs, rituals, ceremonies, tools and techniques that have recently come back into the domain of IR through the discussions of 'public diplomacy' and 'soft power'.¹³

In general, culture creates a distinct identity and separate belief system of a country. Given the diverse cultural landscapes, what holds for the West may not necessarily apply to the Muslim World. However, divergent perspectives persist regarding the role of culture within the field of IR. On the one end of the spectrum, some scholars espouse positive views about the power of culture; conversely, some analyse the term from the opposite point of view. For instance, Samuel P. Huntington—a prominent scholar of international affairs-remarked that cultural factors are the ultimate source of present and future conflicts and the clash of cultures will certainly dominate the global political system.¹⁴ Other scholars emphasise the discourses of 'cultural nationalism', 'cultural imperialism' and 'cultural aggression' which are also significant culture related dimensions.¹⁵

Similar to the meaning of culture, the word 'diplomacy'- known as the extended form of domestic policy- has a variety of connotations in the study of IR. Quite often, it is associated with diplomatic or foreign service or is used as a synonymous word of foreign policy. Long back, Adam Watson merely defined the term as the dialogue between the states.¹⁶ In broader terms, diplomacy is defined as an art and a practice

¹² Marta Ryniejska-Kieldanowicz, "Cultural Diplomacy as a Form of International Communication," 2001, file:///C:/Users/Dell/Downloads/Clutural%20Diplomacy%20-%20PDF%20Article%2001.pdf.

¹³ Merriam Webster, "Collegiate Encyclopedia," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture>.

¹⁴ Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no.3 (1 June 1993):22-49.

¹⁵ Ien Ang, Yudhishthir Raj Isar, and Phillip Mar, "Cultural diplomacy: Beyond The National Interest?," *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 21, no. 4, (September 2015):365.381.

¹⁶ Adam Watson, *Diplomacy: The Dialogue between States* (Routledge: UK, 1982).

of dealing with negotiations between the spokesmen of states and international actors in the discipline of IR.¹⁷ The concept, in essence, is a means for a country to avoid conflicts, strengthen cooperation and ensure peace and security between and among nations. Culture affects diplomacy or *vice versa*; hence, in the world of diplomacy, cultural aspects have been an unavoidable phenomenon. In the realm of IR, cultural diplomacy is a two-way process and it has a causal relationship. Culture—a norms-oriented idea—is viewed as a diplomatic tool on one hand, to enhance mutual understanding between states; on the other, diplomacy—a term related to politics—is more likely a way of showcasing a country's culture through consensus.

2.2 Cultural Diplomacy and Its Evolution

Cultural diplomacy, unlike public diplomacy or soft power diplomacy, is as old as human civilisation. Due to increased interconnectivity between states and non-state actors, its appeal is increasing day by day. The formal effort to spread culture, be it music or art, has always been observed among the states. Hence, it is conceived as one of the communications and operational tools of states in achieving their foreign policy outcomes in the competitive international order.

Cultural diplomacy is 'diplomacy between cultures' and has existed for centuries through trade, migration and conquest.¹⁸ Anybody (such as merchants, teachers, travellers, and explorers) who interacts with various cultures is quite often regarded as an 'informal ambassador' or 'cultural diplomat'.¹⁹ In modern times, the extended definition of cultural diplomacy means the reflection of shared culture, art, and heritage that does not follow any political boundaries or borders. It is considered to be a powerful tool that unites people instead of dividing communities. It is conceived as "a course of actions, which are based on and utilise the exchange of ideas, values, traditions and other aspects of culture or identity, when a country intends to strengthen relationships, enhance socio-cultural cooperation, promote national interests, and beyond".²⁰ Moreover, the expanded form of this term includes an exchange of goods and services, cultural institutions, and ministries whose key goal is to advance greater geo-political interests or support trade policies.²¹ Prominent scholars such as Ang *et*

¹⁷ Ronald Peter Barston, *Modern Diplomacy*, (New York: Routledge, 2014): 17-20.

¹⁸ "What is Cultural Diplomacy? What is Soft Power?," Institute of Cultural Diplomacy, https://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/index.php?en_culturaldiplomacy.

¹⁹ Institute of Cultural Diplomacy, 'What is Cultural Diplomacy? What is Soft Power?'

²⁰ Institute of Cultural Diplomacy, 'What is Cultural Diplomacy? What is Soft Power?'

²¹ Ang, Ien, Yudhishthir Raj Isar, and Phillip Mar, "Cultural Diplomacy: Beyond the National Interest?," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 21, no.4 (2015): 365-338.

al define cultural diplomacy as “the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their people to foster mutual understanding.”²²

Although the concept of cultural diplomacy has been practiced formally in recent times, the evidence of its practice dates back early history. During the old times, cultural linkages were facilitated through cultural exchange programmes in certain arenas ranging from arts, language, sports, literature, music, and so forth. The sign of cultural diplomacy can be marked in the activities of medieval Byzantine missionaries who not only disseminated their religious doctrines but also upheld their values and beliefs.²³ Around 1200 CE, the Mongols like Genghis Khan, Kublai Khan, and European merchants (e.g., Marco Polo) travelled hundreds of miles, identified Silk Route, set up cross-cultural ties, and brought back pleasing stories to the East. Likewise, in the early fifteenth century, Christopher Columbus—the first man to cross the Atlantic Ocean—found various routes of India and made Europeans to discover other parts of America. The Columbian Exchange was seen as a turning point in human civilisation since it helped to grow the new global economy that we are witnessing today. In the late fifteenth century, Vasco da Gama was the first European who reached India and brought direct economic impacts through cultural exchange and by setting a connection between the West and the East. Apart from these instances from the earlier times, the rise of the Roman Empire and the Italian Renaissance carried the legacies of identities and distinct cultures.

The origin of modern cultural diplomacy can be traced in the 19th century when French diplomat P. Cambon founded *Alliance Française*—a non-diplomatic body—for promoting the French language abroad in 1883.²⁴ During the first world war (WWI) and the subsequent interwar period, the specialised cultural diplomatic institutions took proper shape for the first time by the actors of France, Britain, and the USA. Following the Second World War (WWII), international relations underwent notable changes and culture has evolved into a powerful tool in this field.²⁵ During the Cold War era, culture had been a vibrant and contesting tool between two

²² Ien Anga, Yudhishtir Raj Isara, and Phillip Mar, “Cultural Diplomacy: Beyond the National Interest?,” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 21, no. 4 (2015): 365–381.

²³ Keith Hamilton and Richard Langhorne, *The Practice of Diplomacy. Its Evolution, Theory, and Administration* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Erik Pajtinka, “Cultural Diplomacy in Theory and Practice of Contemporary International Relation.”

²⁴ Jean Paul Pancraccio, *Dictionnaire de la diplomatie* (Paris: Dalloz, 2019).

²⁵ Papaioannou, Katerina “Cultural Diplomacy in International Relations,” *IJASOS- International E-Journal of Advances in Social Sciences* III, no. 9 (December 2017): 942-944.

power blocks in dictating countries' foreign policy agenda.²⁶ After the Cold War era, when the bipolar system collapsed, the appeal of cultural diplomacy reduced notably due to a lack of motivation between the two superpowers but after the terrorist attack in the US on 11 September 2001, the impetus to improve cultural diplomacy received renewed attention. In recent times also, due to some ongoing global events (e.g., COVID-19 and the Russia-Ukraine War) as well as major geo-political transformations, cultural diplomacy started to receive renewed importance.

2.3 Approaches, Tools, and Components of Cultural Diplomacy

The discussion of cultural diplomacy as discourse and practice is widely noticed in the lexicons of History, Cultural Policy Studies, and IR. There are debate among scholars on whether culture is a part of foreign policy or diplomacy, how it acts as a soft power or differs from the public diplomacy domain. From traditional lense, cultural diplomacy is viewed as an important technique of soft power by which a country attempts to achieve its foreign policy objectives.²⁷ Nowadays, countries are investing more resources and time in building their soft power capacity.²⁸ Joseph Nye redefined cultural diplomacy in the context of neo-liberalism. He viewed the term as one of the best examples of soft power and emphasised on its specific values to connect with the foreign nationals.²⁹ Departing from this idea, many scholars analysed this as a state-centered approach and a significant part of foreign policy.³⁰ Academics, diplomats, and other experts opined that cultural diplomacy is a major sub-area of public diplomacy—a traditional way of government-to-government activities—through which the government contacts with the foreign people to influence their attitudes through media or collaboration with other non-state entities.³¹ Cultural diplomacy can be seen as a transversal and intrinsic element across public diplomacy. All these debates, however, are distinctly used in international architecture with some specific points. In brief, soft power diplomacy, public diplomacy, and cultural

²⁶ Shifat Sadeque, "Cultural Diplomacy as a Way of Strengthening Diplomatic Relations: US-Bangladesh Relations as a Case Study,"

https://www.academia.edu/12166275/Cultural_Diplomacy_and_US_Bangladesh_Relation.

²⁷ Raj Yudhishthir Isar and Anna Triandafyllidou, "Introduction to this Special Issue Cultural Diplomacy: What Role for Cities and Civil Society Actors?" *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 34 (2021):393–402.

²⁸ Yudhishthir Raj Isar and Anna Triandafyllidou, "Introduction to this Special Issue Cultural Diplomacy: What Role for Cities and Civil Society Actors?" 2021.

²⁹ Joseph S. Nye, *The Paradox of American Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³⁰ Mariano Martín Zamorano, "Reframing Cultural Diplomacy: The Instrumentalization of Culture under the Soft Power Theory", *Culture Unbound* 8, (2016): 166–186.

³¹ Jarol B. Manheim, *Strategic Public Diplomacy & American Foreign Policy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

diplomacy are claimed to be synonymous, intersectional, or entangled concepts that have some overlapping areas and are changed interactively.³²

‘Not one size fits all’—cultural components differ from country to country and even the extent of influence through cultural resources varies over time depending on how society and politics change. However, in this paper, the above concepts are linked and elaborated based on Lasswell’s model of communication in which certain steps are added to understand the perspectives of communication actors, inter-communicating parties, message providers, and recipients.³³ In this model, nation-states are observed as the primary units of communication for promoting cultural diplomacy. Going beyond the state-centric activity known as the one-way flow of information by representatives of foreign services, the concept of cultural diplomacy in the 21st century is now practiced by influential individuals, communities, institutions, and other ministries.³⁴ Besides, the global events or policies at the local level increased the importance of supra-national organisations (e.g., UNESCO or EU) which challenge the monopoly of central governments in the realm of cultural diplomacy.³⁵ With all these actors and processes in mind, the Lasswell Communication Act—a simple model of communication—can be seen in a befitted manner:

‘Who (communicators such as state or any other actors) → Says What (content analysis) → Through Which Channel (media such as press, exchange of programmes, scholarships, etc.) → To Whom (audience) → With What Effect (effect analysis)?³⁶

In this model, information is managed by actors who look into certain factors which are analysed as content in which media is used as a channel of communication to convey positive information about the nation-state to foreign audiences.

³² Hasan Saliu, “Public Diplomacy and Related Concepts from the Perspective of Lasswell’s Communication Model,” *JHR*, 11/2, no.22 (2022):357-375; Hwajung Kim, “Bridging the Theoretical Gap between Public Diplomacy and Cultural Diplomacy,” *The Korean Journal of International Studies* 15, no.2 (2017): 293-326.

³³ Hasan Saliu, “Public Diplomacy and Related Concepts from the Perspective of Lasswell’s Communication Model,” 2017.

³⁴ Corneliu Bjola and Markus Kornprobst, *Understanding International Diplomacy - Theory, Practice and Ethics* (New York; Routledge, 2018), 4.

³⁵ Mariano Martín Zamorano, “Reframing Cultural Diplomacy: The Instrumentalization of Culture under the Soft Power Theory,” 2016.

³⁶ Harold Lasswell, “The Structure and Function of Communications in Society,” in *The Communication of Ideas*, ed. Bryson Lyman (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948), 84-85.

Figure 1. Components, Approaches, and Tools of Cultural Diplomacy³⁷

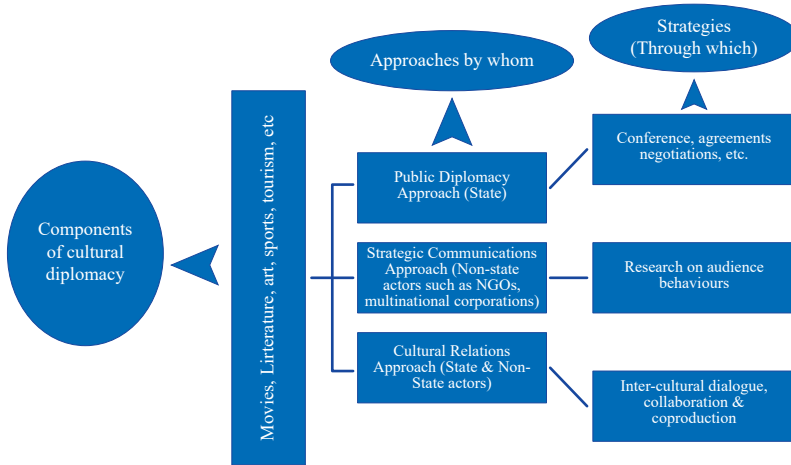


Figure 1 shows three types of approaches to understand communication through cultural diplomacy in a systematic manner. In ‘public diplomacy approach’ governments of some countries have monopolistic power to set up some models (such as cultural exchange programmes or sports competitions). The goal of this approach is to promote cultural diplomacy beyond the country’s border to achieve global policy objectives. It is an important institutional framework to execute cultural diplomatic activities mostly by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) in collaboration with the Ministry of Cultural Affairs. In the ‘strategic communication approach’, non-state actors play a significant role in advancing cultural diplomacy. In the ‘cultural relations approach’, states play a key role in close interaction of civil societies, as well as other actors. It can be regarded as ‘track two’ or ‘second track’ diplomacy which is implemented by the government or indirectly by non-governmental actors.

In the above-mentioned model, ‘cultural attractiveness’, ‘identity’ and ‘value’ are significant strengths of cultural diplomacy.³⁸ These three are cores to win the hearts of global audiences by forging good relations at various scales. However, experts working in the cultural arena consider the ‘cultural relations approach’ as the most appropriate and ideal analytical framework whose main goal is not to influence decision-makers but rather to change the attitudes and behaviours of the host country and people.³⁹ Visual art, craft, music, movies, theatre, dance, and books are

³⁷ Rendering by the author from EUNIC, 2016.

³⁸ Felix Berensköetter, *Identity in International Relations Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

³⁹ EUNIC, “Cultural Diplomacy as Discipline and Practice: Concepts, Training, and Skills.”

considered key components of influencing other countries by creating a positive image in the international arena. It is said that in all the strategies, the core of cultural diplomacy is ‘nation branding’. However, the components, strategies and intensities of cultural diplomacy vary from country to country and are based on what image a country wants to promote.

2.4 Contextualising Cultural Diplomacy in Bangladesh

The goal of all forms of diplomacy, regardless of country, is to represent national interest abroad. It is also true for Bangladesh, in which public diplomacy and cultural relations approaches, mentioned above, are mostly utilised to promote its national interest. In Bangladesh’s foreign policy, the term ‘cultural diplomacy’ is not separately dealt with, rather it is intertwined and annexed with the framework of public diplomacy whose key role is to directly set up communication with foreign audiences. Being the ‘subset’ and ‘linchpin’ of public diplomacy, MoFA adopts various plans and executes them with the help of a number of institutions (Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, Bangla Academy, Nazrul Institute, Public Library, National Archive, Folk Arts and Craft Foundation, Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism, and Ministry of Cultural Affairs) with a view to maintaining cultural relations with other countries. To promote and utilise cultural resources, the MoFA and the Ministry of Cultural Affairs have so far taken several cultural initiatives. These include cultural exchange programmes, seminars, symposiums, signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), use of media and photo exhibitions, book fairs, sending gifts (e.g., sending mango and *Hilsha* fish to India as a goodwill gesture) and arranging various national events on special occasions (e.g., *Pohela Boishakh*) by Bangladesh Embassies abroad.

Primarily, cultural resources contribute to Bangladesh’s public diplomacy and converge with foreign policy in numerous ways: First, these resources serve as important tools to achieve the country’s socio-economic aspirations, promote national interests and execute overarching foreign policy strategies⁴⁰. Second, they facilitate a conducive environment appropriate for dialogue or negotiation with other countries across diverse cultural contexts.⁴¹ Third, Bangladesh strongly adheres to the foreign policy dictum of ‘friendship to all, malice towards none’ which underscores the country’s commitment to maintaining amicable external relations. Cultural diplomacy, by harnessing cultural resources, can assist Bangladesh in fostering trust and cultivating a positive image in the world arena. Finally, Bangladesh’s foreign

⁴⁰ Md Talebur Islam Rupom, “Public and cultural diplomacy,” *New Age*, 01 March 2020.

⁴¹ Lam-ya Mostaque and Syeda Tanzia Sultana, “Exploring Soft Power Potentials of Bangladesh: Resources, Limitations, and Options,” *BISS Journal* 38, no. 4 (October 2017): 379-406.

policy vision aimed at development, sustainability, and prosperity underlines the intrinsic importance of cultural diplomacy as a strategic tool. Cultural diplomacy can serve as a linchpin in a country's foreign policy apparatus which enables it to project its identity and pursue aspirations for recognition on a global scale.

It cannot be denied that in the age of media realities, societies are more connected with widespread visibility and it brings a distinct capacity to influence public opinion and shape the beliefs of individuals across the world.⁴² It is also observed that certain areas of culture (*e.g.*, tourism) in Bangladesh are associated with economic dividends and political goals; therefore, a great change is noticeable in the country's foreign policy agendas. Due to the emergence of various challenges (energy shortage, climate change, etc.) and increased level of engagement, the country wants to make more rapport with other countries. For example, the reopening of the Argentine embassy in Bangladesh after 45 years of closure, has shown that sports diplomacy is indispensable to strengthening trade and cultural relations with the unexplored South American region.⁴³ Again, Bangladesh's attempt to open a new visa centre in Greece on 04 July 2023 showed its eagerness to promote trade, tourism and employment opportunities with this European country.⁴⁴ Likewise, while visiting Bangladesh in September last year, French President Macron expressed his keenness to enjoy the beauty of the country and folk song.⁴⁵ These examples demonstrate that Bangladesh seeks to consolidate all forms of cultural resources in national strategies for upholding its image and promoting branding all over the world.

At present, significant attention to cultural diplomacy is paid in numerous official documents. For instance, Article 23 of the Bangladesh Constitution states, "The State shall adopt measures to conserve the cultural traditions and heritage of the people, and so to foster and improve the national language, literature and the arts that all sections of the people are allowed to contribute towards and to participate in the enrichment of the national culture". Article 23(A) further added, "The State shall take steps to protect and develop the unique local culture and tradition of the tribes, minor races, ethnic sects, and communities".⁴⁶ In the recent Perspective Plan 2021-2041, it is clearly stated that in today's global village, it is the responsibility of citizens to showcase their cultural heritage and make some footprints for future generations. In

⁴² Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁴³ "Reopening embassy a step towards better ties with Bangladesh: Argentina," *New Age*, 27 February 2023.

⁴⁴ "Greece starts accepting visa applications in Dhaka," *The Business Standard*, 06 July 2023.

⁴⁵ Porimol Palma "Macron to visit Dhanmondi Lake, enjoy folk music," *The Daily Star*, 09 September 2023.

⁴⁶ "The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh," <http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/act-367/section-41506.html>.

the report, it is also mentioned that Bangladesh is rich in cultural history since it has some archeological sites that can uphold the country's distinct characteristics in the global arena. Apart from this document, the importance of cultural diplomacy is also reflected in Section 13 of the 8th Five-Year Plan in which the exchange of culture with its neighbouring countries is given utmost importance. The Annual Development Programme (ADP) allocation for the Ministry of Cultural Affairs increased from BDT 2.7 billion in 2021 to BDT 5.3 billion in 2025. In all the above documents, the role of culture in nation-building is identified as immense; hence, it is featured in national plans aligned with the 2030 agenda.

Overall, cultural diplomacy in Bangladesh can be defined as an instrument to implement the country's foreign policy in peaceful ways.⁴⁷ In Bangladesh's foreign policy, the soft approach always gets priority instead of harsh political strategy; and cultural diplomacy is such kind of mechanism to preserve its national interest in the international arena. Even in crisis management, the country prefers a peaceful way (such as good education, cultural understanding, and dialogue) to solve the long-standing problems either national (e.g., Rohingya repatriation), or global (Russia-Ukraine War) in nature. Bangladesh believes that peace is the cornerstone of the country's foreign policy and cultural diplomacy boosts this pathway. In brief, cultural diplomacy is needed in Bangladesh for: (a) fostering mutual understanding and building trust with other nations; (b) creating a more positive image of the country; (c) allowing communication and engagement in a more informal setting; and (d) building the soft power base of the country in a more meaningful way. Against this backdrop, the ensuing section focuses particularly on the cultural resources within Bangladesh's diplomatic framework.

3. Cultural Resources in Bangladesh's Diplomacy: Past and Present

Bengali culture is thousands of years old. Some cultural tools and resources have been adopted from time to time and this has raised some pertinent questions: How did colonisation and post-colonisation periods shape the Bengal region of the Indian subcontinent that we know as Bangladesh today? What is the uniqueness of the culture of Bangladesh as a new nation-state? Looking at history, it can be observed that the infiltration of cultural resources was pronounced during the 18th and 19th centuries. During the ancient period, even before the Aryans, people had cultural life and left their marks in language, literature, religion (mostly Hinduism and Buddhism), food, folk songs, dance, drama, sculpture (e.g., terracotta), and painting. It is argued that the practice of cultural diplomacy was deeply rooted in the Medieval Age. When the

⁴⁷ Erik Pajitinka, "Cultural Diplomacy in Theory and Practice of Contemporary International Relations."

Muslim rulers came into power, religious culture became strong and deep-rooted in the minds of the people. Mostly, Bengali literature and language flourished to a wider extent during that time. It is argued that Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah (1393 AD-1411 AD)—the third Sultan of Bengal—was known as the proponent of the cultural diplomacy of small states. During that time, he set up diplomatic ties with the Ming Empire of China, pursued cultural linkage with the prominent thinkers of Persia, and conquered Assam.⁴⁸ In this Sultanate reign, Bengali literature was patronised and ‘Yusuf-Zulekha’, ‘Sree Krishna Vijoy’, and other finest Bengali works widely flourished. During the Mughal empire, dresses, ornaments and architecture (Choto Sona Mosque, Adina Mosque, Shat Gambuj Mosque, etc.) received special attention.

During the British colonial period (1492–1763), a great transformation was seen in the area of culture in India, especially in Bengal since it was the cultural hub of the British Raj. The undivided Bengal observed a form of hybrid culture reshaped by British ethos.⁴⁹ The touch of modern Bengali culture of bridging the thoughts of the West and the East was seen in the writing of poets (e.g., short stories of Rabindranath Tagore), activities and institutions. In this period, some grand examples of architecture and fine arts were built across Calcutta and Bengal being symbols of power.⁵⁰

During the Pakistan period, language and other cultural resources were strongly denied by successive Pakistani rulers.⁵¹ During the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, the role of culture was immense. Language and music (e.g., popular songs of the Liberation War) were used by *Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra* (Free Bengal Radio Centre) as important instruments and binding forces to motivate freedom fighters constantly to fight against the Pakistani Army.⁵²

Immediately after the independence, a cultural arrangement was made in 1972 through which a group of performers visited India. In the 1990s, cultural aspects again came to the forefront when 110 performers from drama, arts, educational and technical sides visited India. Over time, cultural exchange programmes began in other Asian countries, especially in Japan when it offered higher education facilities to Bangladeshi students. However, since independence, secularism, being a fundamental

⁴⁸ Salahuddin Ahmed, *Bangladesh: Past and Present* (New Delhi: A.P.H. Publishing Cooperation, 2004).

⁴⁹ Arundhati Patra, “Representation of Colonial Bengali Culture as Depicted in Rabindranath Tagore’s Short Stories,” *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences* 5, no. 4 (2020).

⁵⁰ Farhat Afzal, “British Colonial Architecture in Bengal,” *The Daily Star*, 19 February 2018.

⁵¹ Enamul Haq, “Bangladesh: The goal of culture and civilization,” *The Daily Star*, 26 March 2017.

⁵² Dorothy Deb, “Language, Culture and the Creation of Bangladesh,” *Journal of Defence Studies*, 15, no. 4 (October–December 2021): 59–76; Interviewed with DG, Bangla Academy.

principle, has been given utmost importance, and accordingly, cultural resources have undergone spectacular change. In contemporary times, a form of *Bangaliana* along with a distinct identity is observed in the orbit of culture (cinema, song, drama, etc.).

Although Bangladesh's cultural components are continuously evolving, holistically no specific cultural resources have been featured in government documents. In the constitution of Bangladesh, the national language, literature, and the arts are mentioned as the intrinsic parts of the country's identity. The Perspective Plan 2021-2041 mentioned 'archeological sites' as well as 'literature, music, arts, and the intellectuals of the country' as the major components of culture.⁵³ The document has also added 'religious beliefs and practices' as the cultural fabric of the fundamental segment of the country. According to experts interviewed, cultural resources mean incorporating information sharing and exchange of art, language, literature, and other cultural capital to foster mutual understanding with other countries. Besides, in the last 20-30 years, other aspects (e.g., tourism, food, sports, etc.) have been given utmost importance to achieve the country's social, economic, and political goals.⁵⁴

While giving a holistic concept, Lenczowski mentioned several elements of culture (arts, education, ideas, history, science, medicine, technology, religion, customs, manners, commerce, philanthropy, sports, language, professional vocations, hobbies, etc. and the various media⁵⁵) that can attract foreign people and policymakers. In the context of Bangladesh, many of those components are applicable but there are hardly any academic documents, which have dealt with the components in a systematic or comprehensive manner. Linking to the discussion of soft power approaches in Bangladesh, Mushtaque and Sultana mentioned cultural resources as a key component of achieving foreign policy objectives. Concerning cultural value, the authors mentioned some tangible and intangible resources including "the language movement (in 1952), folk songs, crafts, food, traditional festivals, and numerous cultural and archeological sites".⁵⁶ While emphasising cultural diplomacy, Jasim Uddin argues that since the country has a hard power capacity deficit, diplomacy in

⁵³ General Economics Division (GED), Bangladesh Planning Commission, Ministry of Planning, "Making Vision 2041 a Reality: Perspective Plan of Bangladesh 2021-2041", 2022 URL: <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/bgd202215.pdf>, accessed 14 February 2023, p.61.

⁵⁴ Schendel, Willem van, *A History of Bangladesh*, 2020, (Cambridge University Press: UK).

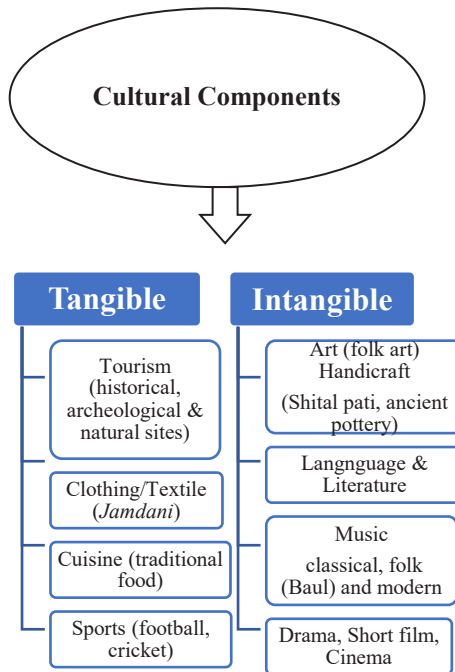
⁵⁵ J. Lenczowski, "Keep the purpose clear," in *The Public Diplomacy Reader*, ed. J. M. Waller (The Institute of World Politics Press: Washington, 2007): 196.

⁵⁶ Lam-Ya Mushtaque and Tanzia Sultana, "Exploring Soft Power Potentials of Bangladesh: Resources, Limitations, And Options," *BISS Journal* 38, no. 4 (October 2017): 379-40.

this arena can be regarded as an ‘important pillar of soft power diplomacy’.⁵⁷ According to him, “language, arts and paintings, cuisine, drama, and various festivals (*Pohela Baishakh*)” are key cultural resources that create a base of soft power. Likewise, Ashfaqur Rahman emphasised both ‘cultural and public diplomacy’ interchangeably to boost the global outreach of the country.⁵⁸

Based on the above analysis, it can be argued that the basic components of culture in Bangladesh are increasingly evolving by encompassing both old and new components. Although the prime cultural components have not changed drastically in the last five years, more new components have been incorporated to make it more appealing considering the shifting global dynamism.

Figure 2. Cultural Components of Bangladesh in the Recent Context⁵⁹



⁵⁷ Md. Jasim Uddin, “Soft Power: Exploring Its Potentials In Bangladesh’s Diplomacy,” *NDC Journal* 14, no.1 (2015), <https://ndcjournal.ndc.gov.bd/ndcj/index.php/ndcj/article/view/139>.

⁵⁸ Ashfaqur Rahman, “Repositioning Bangladesh using soft power,” 2011, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-187604> 29.

⁵⁹ Compiled from different resources sources by the Author 2024. Also, Interviewed with a Additional Secretary, Ministry of Cultural Affairs; a Former Adviser, and the BIMSTEC Secretariat; an academic from the History Department, Dhaka University.

4. Best Practices of Cultural Diplomacy across Asia

It can be asserted that the 21st century is the Asian century. Countries like China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and Thailand are progressing well because of launching remarkable diplomatic initiatives that cannot be seen in the West (Table 1). For Russia—the largest country in the world—cultural diplomacy is an integral part of its foreign policy. In the country, cultural diplomacy acts as a network during crisis management such as its involvement in war in eastern Ukraine and annexation of Crimea in 2014.⁶⁰ Amid the crises, Russia maintained extensive cultural programmes with the EU namely Austria, Germany, and UK. Russia believes in collective identity and wants to create Russian-centric community through language, culture and glorious history.

Japan, for instance, has made plenty of efforts at Track I and Track II levels to promote its soft power resources such as comic books, fashion, food, cosplay, and animated characters (e.g., Hello Kitty, Anpan Man, and Pokemon) which have made her one of the biggest producers of culture in Asia and East Asia.⁶¹ Japanese cultural industry (branded as ‘Cool Japan’) not only in Southeast Asian countries but also throughout the entire world. China, on the other hand, views cultural diplomacy as an important tool of its foreign policy and a crucial ingredient that helps to create a positive image in the world arena. One of its important sources of promulgating cultural diplomacy across Asia is through the establishment of Confucius Institutes and the teaching of the Chinese language.⁶² Similarly, the core of South Korea’s cultural diplomacy practiced by the government, private sectors and civil society is integrating and blending traditional and pop culture and successfully promoting *Hallyu* (Korean Wave).⁶³ Among Korean Wave industries, Korean drama since the 1990s and K-pop (from the mid-2000s to the early 2010s) industry came up as a global craze worldwide by winning the hearts of the young generation.

Under cultural diplomacy, Thailand promotes tourism, cuisine and sports (e.g., Muay Thai) to attract the international community.⁶⁴ The Thai silk industry and

⁶⁰ Beata Ocieпка and Justyna Arendarska, “Cultural Diplomacy as a Network and Networking in International Relations: The Case of Cultural Diplomacy in Russia,” *SAGE Open* 11, no. 4 (2021): 1–12.

⁶¹ Nissim Kadosh Otmazgin, “Contesting soft power: Japanese popular culture in East and Southeast Asia,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 8 (2008): 73–101; “Geopolitics and Soft Power: Japan’s Cultural Policy and Cultural Diplomacy in Asia,” *Asia-Pacific Review* 19, no.1 (2012): 37–61.

⁶² Poonam Mann, “China’s Engagement in Central Asia: Cultural Diplomacy,” *Defence and Diplomacy Journal* 5, no. 4 (2016): 43–51.

⁶³ TY Kim and DY Jin “Cultural policy in the Korean Wave: an analysis of Cultural Diplomacy embedded in presidential speeches,” *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 5514–5534.

⁶⁴ J. William Jones and Pawinpon Theerawong, “Muay Thai Diplomacy: Thailand’s Soft Power Through Public Diplomacy,” *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences* 11, no.1 (2021): 99–124.

exports of this product are seen as a popular cultural and diplomatic event.⁶⁵ Singapore harnesses cultural (*e.g.*, museum exhibitions, tourism) and technological soft power to advance its economy.⁶⁶ Indonesia—a country of more than 700 ethnic groups—has a rich cultural and indigenous value and the Ministry of Tourism relentlessly promotes culinary and coffee diplomacy to establish the country as a popular tourist destination.⁶⁷ Besides, in collaboration with MoFA and civil society, art, tourism, and democratic values are relentlessly promoted to build modern Indonesia's image worldwide.

⁶⁵ Wasin Praditsilp and Naren Chitty, "Civic Motivation, Cultural Diplomacy & Sustainable Development: The Case of Thai Cultural & Creative Industries," Paper presented at the IAMCR 2018 Conference in Eugene, Oregon, USA, June 20-24, 2018.

⁶⁶ Yunci Cai, "The Art of Museum Diplomacy: The Singapore–France Cultural Collaboration in Perspective," *International Journal of Politics Culture and Society* 26, 2 (2013): 127-144.

⁶⁷ N. Viartasiwi, A. Trihartono, and A. E. Hara, "Unpacking Indonesia's Cultural Diplomacy: Potentials and Challenges," *International Journal Sustainable Future for Human Security* 7, no. 2 (2020): 23-31.

Table 1: Cultural Diplomacy across Asia⁶⁸

No.	Name of Countries	Cultural Resources (What resources)	Cultural Diplomacy Events (Through which channel)	Actors/Institutes involved (Who)	Targeted Audience (To Whom)	Effect Analysis (With What Effect)
1.	Russia	Language, art, ballet, painting, toys	Modern art exhibition, 'year' or 'seasons' of cultural celebration	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russian Centre of Science and Culture	European countries	'Networking' was the main tool to expand its culture in European countries during crises
2.	Japan	Fashion, food, cosplay, animated cartoons, comics, fine arts, drama, computer games, archeological sites	Promoting Japanese scholarship, industrial policies, exporting cultural goods	MoFA, cultural industries, media companies, Japan Foundation	Mostly neighbours (e.g., China and South Korea)	Japan has been successful in winning the hearts of global audiences through its cultural industry
3.	China	Language, archeological sites, cuisine, scholarship, social media apps (e.g., TikTok), etc.	Youth and non-governmental exchange programme, scholarship, organising international events (Olympic Games, 2008)	Government, Confucius Institutes, universities, social media, think tanks	Global audience	Creating an image of peaceful China through diplomatic policies
4.	South Korea	K-pop, traditional art, heritage, TV drama, films, games, dance and ballet, food and tourism	Scholarship, organising cultural festivals, broadcasting via media, YouTube, and other social network services	Ministry of Culture, Korean Cultural Centre, Hallyu-related organisations, K-pop fan clubs (BTS, ARMY, BLACK PINK)	Global audience	The spread of 'Hallyu' worldwide is a success from the side of the Korean government

⁶⁸ Compiled by the Author from various sources, 2023.

5.	Thailand	Tourism, sports, handicrafts (silk and wickerwork), food, dance and music	Cultural events (Thailand Week, Thai Film Festival), Thai Symphony Orchestra, Royal Khon (Thai classical dramatic dance) and Thai film festivals in neighbouring countries	Government, cultural and creative industries, civil society, cultural export promotion bureau, think tanks	Global audience	Thailand's tourism and culinary diplomacy influence the whole world
6.	Singapore	Art, architecture, museum, tourism	Cultural cooperation, museum exhibitions and exchange, art week	Government or quasi-government bodies like the National Arts Council (NAC), the Esplanade, museums, and the Singapore Tourism Board (STB)	Southeast Asian countries	Singapore is pioneering cultural diplomacy in Asia and beyond through arts and tourism
7.	Indonesia	Tourism, film, painting, traditional clothing, Indonesian art and cultural scholarship (Beasiswa Seni dan Budaya) and diversity day	Public diplomacy, Coffee diplomacy, multilateral dialogues, organising Jazz events, Muslim clothing fashion shows, etc.	MoFA, Ministry of Education and Culture, Ministry of Tourism, Indonesia Cultural Center, and civil societies	Mainly ASEAN and South Asian countries	Promote Indonesian cultural values and products by setting up cultural centres abroad
8.	India	Books, cinema, yoga, religion, Sanskrit, tourism, food, movies, etc.	Inter-cultural dialogue, concerts, establishing Yoga centres, religious tourism	Government, Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and Indian Council for World Affairs (ICWA), diaspora	Middle East, South Asia and Southeast Asia	Spreading culture through films and Yoga by successfully maneuvering multiculturalism and cultural diversity

South Asia is an important region where a wide range of soft power resources are nurtured and meticulously utilised. Among the countries, India has successfully

attracted foreign visitors by promoting tourism, film, and music. Primarily, the 3Cs (commerce, culture, and connectivity) of India are regarded as the main pillars of its foreign policy. Also, represented as the world's largest democracy, India has world-class novelists (*e.g.*, Arundhati Roy) who glorify the country's image in the world arena. The comparative study on the emerging powers of the global South by Lidija Kos-Stanišić and Viktorija Car⁶⁹ shows how the Indian embassy uses digital public diplomacy to attract the EU nationals. For the Indian embassy, yoga was a diplomatic tool predominantly used as a soft power resource. In cultural orbits, promotion of Bollywood and Sufi songs marks a part of the soft power strategy of this country.

5. Lessons Learnt from Asia: Identifying Tools, Areas and Associated Challenges for Bangladesh

The above discussion demonstrates how cultural diplomacy in major Asian countries serves as a strength in wielding significant influence in the world arena. In the case of Bangladesh, notwithstanding various initiatives undertaken, the country lags in this sector due to a wide range of bottlenecks in policy, economy, and other institutional mechanisms. Insights gleaned from the expert interviews revealed that limited coordination among the government and non-government bodies coupled with a dearth of coherent strategies and policies often create barriers to promoting the country's cultural dissemination abroad whereas in many Asian countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, etc., public-private initiatives are robust and help to promulgate cultural diplomacy to a great extent. Japan in this case stands out as an example that has introduced the 'Cool Japan Fund' as a public-private partnership scheme to strengthen its global cultural footprint. Like its regional peers, Bangladesh lacks in adopting such forms of proactive measures or successful models to strengthen its cultural diplomacy endeavours.

It is evident that some Asian countries have set up dedicated cultural centres to augment their art, literature, and language at international level by sharing information and arranging events (*e.g.*, exhibitions, concerts, workshops, academic and scientific exchange programmes, movie shows, etc) on the global stage. In China, South Korea and Russia, cultural centres play a pivotal role in fostering cultural ties with other countries through diplomatic channels. Mention can be made of China's Confucius Institutes which work as a significant platform to popularise and expand the Chinese language worldwide by spearheading various cultural and educational initiatives. Concurrently, China actively participates in events arranged by its neighbouring

⁶⁹ Lidija Kos-Stanišić and Viktorija Car, "The Use of Soft Power in Digital Public Diplomacy: The Cases of Brazil and India in the EU," *Politička Misao* 58, no. 2 (2021): 113-140.

countries to increase its credibility and trust in the international stage. It is also observed that in those countries, cultural linkages have been set up at three levels: domestic; external actors with allies of the home country; and the people in the host countries. In stark contrast, Bangladesh is yet to establish noteworthy cultural centres abroad to facilitate robust cultural exchanges.⁷⁰ Moreover, insignificant resource allocation⁷¹ and limited cultural input from the concerned ministries fails to carry out notable cultural diplomatic maneuvers.⁷² For Bangladesh, language stands as a formidable strength; regrettably, the absence of language learning centers dedicated to propagating the Bengali language is a notable gap, particularly given its global ranking and the substantial Bengali diaspora spanning Europe, North America, Africa, and the Middle East.

Besides, some other specific areas such as gastronomy, fashion, tourism, education, sports, and festivals, can be regarded as major cultural resources. In the case of gastronomy and culinary heritage, several Asian countries such as India, China and Indonesia have effectively promoted their cultural diplomacy. Notably, Indian cuisine has achieved widespread popularity, with more Indian restaurants in London than in Mumbai and Delhi, and certain Indian dishes even being adopted as British national dishes, such as Chicken Tikka.⁷³ Similarly, Thailand has pioneered ‘gastro diplomacy’ or ‘tourism diplomacy’ leveraging its culinary prowess to bolster economic dividends. Through initiatives like the ‘Global Thai Programme,’ Thailand has positioned itself as the ‘Kitchen to the World’ or the ‘Food Basket of Asia,’ reaping economic benefits from its culinary diplomacy endeavours. Deplorably, Bangladesh is yet to undertake any such comprehensive effort to promote this sector. This shortfall represents a missed opportunity for the country to showcase its culinary traditions on the global stage.

Education is another significant domain where numerous Asian countries excel as a means of fostering cross-cultural connections and strengthening their economies. Countries such as Russia, China, South Korea, and Singapore have implemented such ventures by attracting foreign students with full scholarship programmes. Likewise, in 1978, Indonesia introduced the Darmasiswa scholarship to advance its foreign policy goal of ‘A thousand friends and zero enemies’ and it has now expanded to 126

⁷⁰ Interview with the Director General of Bangla Academy.

⁷¹ Interview with a Researcher of The KRF Center for Bangladesh and Global Affairs.

⁷² Interview with the Director General of Shilpakala Academy.

⁷³ Debidatta Aurobinda Mahapatra, “From a latent to a ‘strong’ soft power? The evolution of India’s cultural diplomacy,” 2016, 17 import d india imp From_a_latent_to_a_strong_soft_power_The.pdf.

countries.⁷⁴ In this programme, participating students act as informal cultural ambassadors upon returning to their home countries. Historically, Dhaka University also welcomes international students for higher education, but the sustained effort to maintain a global network has waned gradually because of a lack of cohesive vision and initiatives.

Needless to say, in the age of digitalisation, cultural diplomacy has emerged as an integral part of many countries' foreign policy agenda. Digital tools/platforms are used as an indispensable instrument to reach the target audience. South Korea is an example in this regard. In this country, national broadcasters contribute immensely by covering cultural events in foreign countries. They telecast the country's special events, spread core values and create a positive image in the outside world. In this country, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are considered popular channels among the youth for cultural communication. Moreover, in certain Asian countries (*e.g.*, India), robust people-to-people connectivity contributes immensely to strengthening trust among people and creating opportunities for inter-governmental exchanges and dialogues. Additionally, the government website is used as a crucial platform to disseminate cultural information.

Diaspora plays a significant role in managing cross-cultural connections and worldwide, this phenomenon is observed within the Indian and Indonesian diasporas that demonstrated crucial impacts on global cultural diplomacy efforts. In India, Prime Minister Modi emphasised the diaspora's role in its foreign policy-making recognizing its substantial influence as the second largest diaspora globally, following China.⁷⁵ Notably, during the Liberation War in 1971, the role of the diaspora was crucial in garnering international support for East Pakistan and refraining Pakistan from atrocity.⁷⁶ At present, Bangladeshi diaspora frequently undertakes various cultural initiatives on special occasions (*e.g.*, celebration of Pohela Boishakh, the first day of spring, International Mother Language Day, etc.) in collaboration with Bangladeshi missions abroad. Even during the crises, (*e.g.*, COVID-19 pandemic), the diaspora played a significant role in promulgating vaccine diplomacy efforts. But there exists a lack of synchronisation and coordination in these efforts highlighting the need for greater collaboration within the diaspora community to maximise its influence on cultural diplomacy initiatives.

⁷⁴ Romina Eloisa Manabat Abuan, "Cultural Diplomacy of Thailand and Indonesia in The Philippines," *Malaysian Journal of International Relations* 9 (2021): 88-104.

⁷⁵ Junuguru Srinivas, "Modi's Cultural Diplomacy and Role of Indian Diaspora," *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 13, no. 2 (2019): 74-90.

⁷⁶ Dorothy Deb, "Language, Culture and the Creation of Bangladesh."

In many cases, cultural diplomacy is intertwined with the concept of nation branding since both share similar objectives of influencing the global audience. Unfortunately, Bangladesh has a deficit in promoting its cultural values in regional or global markets because of the laps in branding strategies and lack of creativity and innovation in cultural sectors. Dissimilar to Korea, Japan, and India which have successfully industrialised their culture using soft power, public diplomacy and nation branding, Bangladesh struggles to generate additional value for its cultural products in globally competitive markets despite possessing lots of potential. Cultural strength is robust in India which also affects Bangladesh profoundly due to the cultural similarity and geographical proximity. India's cultural products such as food, clothes, and cinemas strongly dominate the country which casts a shadow on Bangladesh's cultural identity abroad.⁷⁷ This phenomenon known as cultural aggression is a setback in creating a unique cultural posture as mentioned by one of the interviewees from Shilpakala Academy.

Absence of a coherent cultural policy and insufficient investment in cultural infrastructure further hinder Bangladesh's ability to promote its cultural heritage and attract tourists. Unlike countries such as China, Korea, India, and Thailand, which have made substantial investments in their cultural sectors and implemented specific cultural policies, Bangladesh struggles to allocate adequate resources to this area due to budgetary constraints.

6. Way Forward: How to Strengthen Cultural Diplomacy in Bangladesh?

Cultural resources and strengths are not unilateral, therefore the input from each country is distinct. Some countries have limited economic strength while others have the capacity of making regional and global influences (*e.g.*, India and China) through unique cultural products. Therefore, the most obvious problem for Bangladesh is making a balance while learning the best practices from these countries. Despite that, there are some cultural commonalities and convenient geographical factors that can keep Bangladesh in an advantageous position to cooperate with others. Keeping in mind the potential areas and their existing challenges simultaneously, the following are specific suggestions for the country to strengthen cultural ties with other countries.

6.1 Coordination among Ministries and Other Cultural Institutes

Usually, government apparatuses promulgate cultural diplomatic initiatives. However, civil society and other cultural institutions also need to work to bridge the

⁷⁷ Interview with a KII respondent.

relationships with other countries. In Bangladesh, the will of the government is paramount in promoting both regional and global cultural cooperation. To reinvigorate the diplomatic initiatives, MoFA has a public diplomacy wing in which it orchestrates the entire cultural initiatives in collaboration with representatives abroad. Similar to the efforts of China and Russia, Bangladesh can be inclusive rather than exclusive to advance its cultural initiatives as per the values, preferences and key interests of host countries. The country can intensify its efforts at Track II or Track 1.5 levels to achieve its national interest. On this note, ministries, business communities, NGOs, and other relevant cultural institutions can work as nodes of the cultural diplomacy network to cultivate economic dividends. They can provide substantial resources, finance, and technical assistance. Additionally, similar to the cases of China and Thailand, Bangladeshi universities can create new horizontal ties by interacting with other similar institutes and hosting education exchange programmes for enhanced cultural cooperation. They can revitalise educational initiatives and actively engage in internship or scholarship programmes to cultivate global connections.

6.2 Setting up Cultural Institutes

Setting up cultural institutes across the world akin to China and Russia is a matter of available resources and funds. Nonetheless, even small-scale initiatives in this aspect would help Bangladesh to explore new markets and safeguard its overall cultural investment. It is worth highlighting that in the 1990s, Bangladesh had a plan to establish Cultural Centre in the USA, Europe, and India; however, it is yet to materialise.⁷⁸ Although not on a large scale, Bangladesh can reconsider similar sorts of initiatives to shape global and regional public opinions. With such a venture, the country could arrange cultural seminars, workshops and training arrangements for enhancing bilateral cultural linkage and fostering its culture abroad.

6.3 Role of Diaspora and Their Creative Development

The Bangladeshi diaspora along with expatriates including Bangladeshi students' associations, and business entities can organise cultural events to spread the country's rich cultural heritage abroad. These endeavors could range from organising homemade cake festivals to publishing online cultural news, thereby facilitating the dissemination of Bangladeshi culture on a global scale. Some known figures from the Bangladeshi diaspora like Kishwar Chowdhury (MasterChef Australia 2021), Tommy Miah, and Nadiya Hussain (Great British Bake Off, 2015) have successfully showcased Bengali cuisine on the international platform transcending the

⁷⁸ Interview with the Director General of Bangla Academy.

geographical boundaries and garnering widespread recognition. Such kinds of glaring examples show that if significant investment, support and proper rooms are created, the country's culture abroad will flourish inevitably. In the future, individuals like them have the potential to serve as cultural players or informal cultural ambassadors abroad. Collaboration with Bangladeshi Missions can provide noteworthy support and resources to promote the country's culture internationally.

6.4 Use of Social Media

Social media platforms (*e.g.*, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, etc.) are a crucial channel for fostering connections between cultures. Remarkably, Bangladesh has already been a part of such popular wave to showcase its cultural heritage and attract international attention. Recently, it has been observed that foreign bloggers have visited Bangladesh and created content on Bangladeshi culinary arts. Similarly, by making video content, some Bangladeshi youth (*e.g.*, 'Nadir On the Go') have created a positive influence on travel lovers which has a positive impact on the tourism sector. In this way, social media coverage can transcend the border and help to rebrand the country on the international stage. This sort of platform needs to be encouraged further to create a strong influence on the global audience and disseminate information about Bangladesh's culture effectively within a short time.

6.5 Nation Branding

In the era of globalisation, Bangladesh has to align with the heightened globalisation process and needs to identify the potential areas for competing with the global market. Planning for nation branding as a significant marketing approach by state officials can be a part of cultural diplomacy.⁷⁹ Focusing more on branding as a part of advertising endeavours will add some emotional value and highlight the quality attributes of the product. Despite the inherent challenge of cultural diversity, India and Indonesia are successfully branding their national slogan 'unity in diversity' and selling cultural products by attracting foreign tourists. Unlike these countries, Bangladesh boasts a relatively homogenous society. Thus, language promotion activity can be a crucial facet of cultural diplomacy to reach the foreign public by offering some accessible Bangla courses abroad. For branding of special days (*e.g.*, International Mother Language Day, the first day of spring, and *Pohela Baishak*) appointing a cultural attaché in each embassy is the demand of time who will disseminate the vibrant hues of culture. Since Bangladesh has several development visions ahead, some areas can be emphasised for brandings such as clothing and

⁷⁹ Peter Van Ham, "The Rise of the Brand State: The Postmodern Politics of Image and Reputation," *Foreign Affairs* 80, no. 5 (2001): 2–6, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20050245>.

fashion by securing Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) or boosting export activities. To attain this target, the government needs to take the necessary initiatives by engaging civil society.

6.6 Promotion of Cultural Tourism

For promoting cultural tourism, a long-term strategic view is needed instead of short-term goals. The tourism sector is related to multiple actions related to infrastructure development, preservation of archeological sites, water-based tourism (e.g., in *Haor* areas) and the security and safety of tourists. China, in this case, revived its ancient Silk Roads by connecting Asia and beyond through rail, road and sea routes for the promotion of tourism.⁸⁰ Likewise, Bangladesh has already increased its focus on infrastructural development and has taken several development projects to create a conducive environment for promotion of tourism in the country. However, more initiatives can be taken to spread and revive the 'Visit Bangladesh' slogan propagated by Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation in the 1980s. Rangamati, Bandarban, Khagrachhari and Chattogram are some of the potential areas for which proper investment is needed to attract foreigners. As discussed earlier, cultural diversity is viewed as a powerful component of cultural diplomacy and for Bangladesh, culture of small ethnic communities can be a treasure for the country. Hence, a specific plan is indispensable to make hilly areas a tourist hub with a view to uphold the colours of the cultural diversity of 11 small ethnic groups.

6.7 Utilising Public Support

In the era of conflicts and crises, organising events is essential in the domains of art, fashion, gastronomy, literature, sports and so on. Sports, for instance, can make a difference, and sports diplomacy is nowadays regarded as an important part of cultural diplomacy for creating windows of opportunities for cultural exchanges and mutual understanding amidst geopolitical tensions. For Bangladesh, sports can be an important tool for cultural diplomacy as was witnessed during the FIFA World Cup 2023. The courage of sports and the enthusiasm for this game worked as a strength by showing respect for one another's culture. For instance, despite the physical absence in the FIFA World Cup, Bangladeshi football fans for Argentina brought global attention and transcended a greater unity with the Argentine people despite having cultural diversity and geographical distance. This has also facilitated the dialogue at the Track I level. This great achievement has shown that regardless of

⁸⁰ Titu Datta Gupta, "World weighs gains as China's Xinjiang gears to be New Silk Road gateway," *The Business Standard*, 03 August 2023.

race, religion, and language, sports have the power to bring people together. Likewise, Bangladesh can foster bilateral dialogue with regional countries for the preparation of sporting events (such as football tournament of the South Asian Football Federation (SAFF)) to maintain peaceful relations with its neighbours and others at the international level by showing respect for each other's culture.

6.8 Focusing on Underexplored Cultural Resources

In its more than 50 years of journey, Bangladesh has witnessed the unfolding of various cultural facets (cuisine, festivals, traditional songs, films, fashion, science, technology, etc.). Nevertheless, the country is yet to fully optimise these cultural assets to reap the dividends they offer. Thus, Bangladesh must patronise these areas to realise their full potential and establish strong cultural connections. Movies and dramas, for example, represent emerging sectors with significant potential in which the country should focus more on catching the global market. Similarly, to capture the attention of the audience, it must have a robust policy to connect strongly with neighbours and other Asian countries. It is worth noting that a significant number of Indian television channels are broadcast in Bangladesh, whereas, Bangladeshi channels are not promoted in India. Thus, it is high time for the country to take proactive initiatives and allocate substantial funds to flourish in these areas so that it can compete in both regional and global markets.

6.9 Specific Cultural Policy

Currently, Bangladesh deals with cultural issues under the broader umbrella of the Public Diplomacy Wing alongside the press and media affairs. Since culture is a strength of a country, Bangladesh needs to have a specific cultural policy to promote its rich heritage, tradition, and values abroad and uphold national interests. Many Asian countries have a precise cultural policy that has always been reformed to navigate relationships with their next-door neighbours. Japan serves a notable example in this case which created a sophisticated cultural strategy (*bunka gaiko*) to advance its national interest with its neighbouring countries. Earlier, Taiwan, Korea, and some parts of Northern China were Japan's colonies but gradually the latter has increased its positive influence through promoting education and language programmes known as 'Japanese Sprit'.⁸¹ Similarly, for Bangladesh, a specific cultural policy is required highlighting research, actions, laws and specific events to ensure the flourishing of

⁸¹ Nissim Otmazgin, "Geopolitics and Soft Power: Japan's Cultural Policy and Cultural Diplomacy in Asia," *Asia Pacific Review* 19, no. 1 (2012): 37-61

innovation and creative sectors. Already, the government has invested a significant amount of grants for non-commercial filmmaking endeavours reflecting an initial step towards cultural development. Likewise, substantial investment is required to develop other cultural sectors (for example, arts, music handloom industry, etc.).

7. Conclusion

This article draws on the scenario of how cultural diplomacy has reemerged its appeal and grown its currency in the international relations and cultural disciplines considering major global issues, such as the Covid-19 and the Russia-Ukraine War. In the changing global scenario, it has become apparent that for an emerging economy like Bangladesh, there is a need to foster soft power or cultural diplomacy effort for mutual understanding with other countries and making a balance with major global powers. For Bangladesh, cultural diplomacy can play a significant role in the country's foreign policy. Although the scope of cultural diplomacy has widely been expanded, scant scholarly attention is given in the context of Bangladesh. Till now, there are ambiguities as to why culture is pertinent for Bangladesh, how it works and what kind of cultural practices need to be incorporated into the country's foreign policy landscape to achieve its desired national interest.

Cultural diplomatic practices taken by the governments across Asian countries are interest-driven and various other actors are also actively involved from Track II levels to materialise their national objectives. It is also perceived that each country has created a sphere of influence by coming up with distinct cultural products which helped them to showcase differently to the global audience. Based on those examples given from Asia, the paper has attempted to find out Bangladesh's niche areas of culture in which the country needs to reinvigorate its efforts. While comparing cultural diplomacy practices in Bangladesh and other Asian countries, some divergences are observed; notwithstanding that, there are some commonalities in the areas of diverse networking bodies, cultural resources and the scale of government investment. Thus, it is the right time for Bangladesh to take innovative initiatives at various levels and create a distinct appeal to the global public. The diversified cultural capitals, such as arts, crafts, language, literature, movies, cuisine, etc. are the country's cultural strengths. Hence, Bangladesh needs to overcome the existing challenges, disseminate its traditional cultural values, and take various initiatives to reap the full benefits of this interconnected world. Some major initiatives include coordination among ministries and other cultural institutes, setting up cultural centres, nation branding, increased role of the diaspora, etc. to advance the country's footprint on the global stage.