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The India Expands Cultural Diplomacy Through 98 Cultural Exchange Programmes to Strengthen Soft Power and Global Engagement

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Recent Developments:

Cultural Exchange Programmes with 98 Countries:

- The Union Minister for Culture and Tourism informed Parliament that India maintains valid Cultural Exchange Programmes (CEPs) with 98 countries under its broader framework of international cultural engagement
- A Cultural Exchange Programme is a bilateral instrument designed to promote and strengthen cultural relations through reciprocal exchanges and institutional cooperation
- The Ministry of Culture implements the Global Engagement Scheme (GES) to promote India's cultural heritage internationally, strengthen cultural ties, project India's cultural identity and encourage inbound tourism

Revised Global Engagement Scheme:

- The Global Engagement Scheme has been revised and continued for FY 2026–27 to 2030–31 with a total outlay of ₹299.94 crore
- Its four sub-schemes are International Cultural Exchange Programme, Project Mausam, Brihattar Bharat, and Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage and Diverse Cultural Traditions of India
- The revised scheme demonstrates a shift from isolated cultural events towards a more structured framework for international cultural relations and India's soft power

Current Institutional Outreach:

- The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), an autonomous organisation under the Ministry of External Affairs, supports India's cultural diplomacy through Indian Missions, Posts and Cultural Centres abroad
- ICCR promotes Yoga, Indian classical and folk dance, music, Indian languages, academic exchanges, scholarships and Indian Studies Chairs abroad
- In 2024–25, ICCR provided 3,960 scholarship slots to foreign nationals under 20 scholarship schemes, according to the Ministry of External Affairs

Cultural Diplomacy:

Meaning:

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- Cultural diplomacy refers to the use of cultural exchange, arts, education, heritage, language, knowledge and people-to-people contacts to develop mutual understanding, trust and goodwill between countries
- It forms an important component of soft power, through which a country seeks influence and attraction without relying primarily on coercion or material inducements
- India's civilisational heritage, plural cultural traditions, Yoga, Ayurveda, classical arts, literature, cuisine, cinema and contemporary creative industries provide multiple instruments for cultural diplomacy

Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power:

- Soft power, a concept associated with Joseph Nye, refers to the ability of a country to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment
- Cultural diplomacy contributes to soft power by making India's society, traditions, values and creative achievements more familiar and attractive to foreign audiences
- Cultural diplomacy complements hard power and economic diplomacy by creating a favourable environment for broader bilateral engagement

India's Major Instruments of Cultural Diplomacy:

Cultural Exchange Programmes:

- Cultural Exchange Programmes provide an institutional framework for bilateral cultural cooperation between India and partner countries
- They facilitate activities such as artistic exchanges, exhibitions, academic interaction, heritage cooperation, cultural delegations and institutional partnerships
- CEPs are implemented through cooperation between Indian institutions and their foreign counterparts, often using diplomatic channels

Festivals of India Abroad:

- Festivals of India showcase Indian culture abroad through classical and folk dance, music, theatre, films, food, literature, exhibitions, workshops and other cultural activities
- These festivals aim to strengthen bilateral cultural contacts, project India's cultural image, promote Indian artists and encourage inbound tourism
- They also create opportunities for people-to-people interaction beyond formal diplomatic channels

Project Mausam:

- Project Mausam seeks to explore and document historical maritime connections across the Indian Ocean region
- It uses shared histories of maritime routes, cultural interactions and communities to strengthen contemporary cultural linkages
- The initiative can complement India's broader Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean diplomacy by highlighting long-standing civilisational connectivity

Brihattar Bharat:

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- Brihattar Bharat seeks to strengthen cultural and civilisational connections between India and regions historically influenced by Indian cultural interactions
- It provides a framework for studying and promoting India's historical links with South Asia, Southeast Asia and other connected regions
- Such initiatives can help convert shared historical memories into contemporary cultural and diplomatic partnerships

Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage:

- The GES includes a component for Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage and Diverse Cultural Traditions of India
- The component recognises that India's cultural diplomacy should include not only monuments and tangible heritage but also living traditions, performing arts, crafts, languages and cultural practices

Role of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations:

Institutional Role:

- The Indian Council for Cultural Relations is an important institutional instrument of India's cultural and soft-power diplomacy under the Ministry of External Affairs
- ICCR operates through Indian Missions and its network of Indian Cultural Centres abroad to promote Indian culture and facilitate international cultural interaction

Academic and Educational Diplomacy:

- ICCR establishes Chairs of Indian Studies at foreign universities to promote research and teaching on Indian civilisation, culture, languages, society, politics, economy and contemporary developments
- ICCR scholarships bring foreign students to India for higher education and exposure to Indian society and culture
- ICCR currently offers scholarships to foreign students through multiple schemes covering academic disciplines, performing arts and traditional Indian knowledge systems
- Such educational networks create long-term people-to-people and alumni linkages, which can continue to influence bilateral relations after students return to their countries

Contemporary Youth Engagement:

- ICCR has introduced initiatives such as the ICCR Yuva Mitra Prize to recognise foreign scholars who promote Indian culture through social media
- Such initiatives expand cultural diplomacy from traditional institutions towards digital platforms and younger global audiences

Role of Yoga and Traditional Knowledge:

Yoga Diplomacy:

- Yoga has become one of India's most visible contemporary instruments of cultural diplomacy

- The International Day of Yoga, observed annually on 21 June, provides a global platform for India's traditional knowledge and wellness traditions
- ICCR promotes Yoga internationally through Indian Missions and Cultural Centres, alongside Indian dance, music and languages

Ayurveda and AYUSH:

- Ayurveda and other AYUSH systems contribute to India's cultural and knowledge diplomacy by presenting traditional Indian approaches to health and wellness
- ICCR scholarship programmes also facilitate study in traditional Indian systems such as Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy for foreign students

Role of Culture in India's Foreign Policy:

Strengthening Soft Power:

- Cultural diplomacy enhances India's attractiveness, credibility and goodwill, thereby strengthening the broader foundation of its foreign policy
- A positive cultural image can facilitate dialogue in areas such as trade, tourism, education, technology and strategic cooperation

Promoting People-to-People Relations:

- Cultural exchanges connect artists, students, academics, civil society groups and ordinary citizens across national boundaries
- These relationships can create durable societal linkages that remain valuable even when government-to-government relations experience temporary difficulties

Supporting Strategic Partnerships:

- Cultural cooperation can reinforce India's relations with regions such as Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Africa and the Indian Ocean region
- Shared cultural and historical connections can provide an additional layer of engagement alongside economic, strategic and diplomatic cooperation

Supporting Tourism and Creative Economy:

- Cultural diplomacy can increase international interest in India's heritage sites, festivals, cuisine, cinema, crafts, spiritual traditions and wellness systems
- Greater international cultural visibility can support heritage tourism, medical and wellness tourism, creative industries and local livelihoods

Multilateral Cultural Diplomacy:

BRICS, SCO and G20:

- India has used its presidencies and participation in BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and G20 to promote cultural cooperation alongside broader diplomatic objectives

- During India's G20 Presidency, the Ministry of Culture organised Culture Working Group meetings and Culture Ministers' Meeting and associated cultural projects
- The Kashi Culture Pathway advocated culture as a standalone goal in the post-2030 development agenda and was endorsed in the New Delhi Leaders' Declaration
- During India's SCO Presidency, India hosted initiatives such as the Conference on Shared Buddhist Heritage and the SCO Culture Ministers' Meeting

BIMSTEC and ASEAN:

- Cultural engagement with BIMSTEC and ASEAN can strengthen India's Act East policy by complementing connectivity, economic and strategic cooperation with civilisational linkages
- Shared traditions of Buddhism, Hindu traditions, maritime commerce, literature, performing arts and food cultures provide substantial scope for people-to-people engagement

Significance for India:

Diplomatic Significance:

- Cultural diplomacy allows India to project itself as a civilisational state with contemporary cultural capabilities, rather than only as an emerging economic and strategic power
- It strengthens India's diplomatic outreach by adding societal and cultural dimensions to conventional state-to-state relations

Strategic Significance:

- Cultural connections can create strategic depth in regions where India has historical and civilisational linkages
- Shared cultural heritage can provide an additional basis for engagement in the Indian Ocean, South Asia and Southeast Asia

Economic Significance:

- Cultural diplomacy can generate demand for Indian tourism, handicrafts, cuisine, films, creative products and wellness services
- International exposure for Indian artists and cultural institutions can expand the country's creative economy and cultural industries

Developmental Significance:

- International cultural engagement can create opportunities for artists, craftspeople, researchers, educational institutions and cultural entrepreneurs
- Cultural tourism can generate local employment while creating incentives for the preservation of heritage

Challenges:

Fragmented Institutional Coordination:

- Cultural diplomacy involves the Ministry of Culture, Ministry of External Affairs, ICCR, Indian Missions, tourism institutions and State Governments, creating a need for stronger coordination

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- Overlapping mandates or weak coordination can result in duplication, delays and inefficient utilisation of resources

Resource Constraints:

- Sustained global cultural engagement requires adequate funding for artists, exhibitions, cultural centres, digital platforms, heritage projects and international events
- The revised GES allocation of ₹299.94 crore for FY 2026–27 to 2030–31 provides a structured funding framework, but effective utilisation remains important

Uneven Global Reach:

- India's cultural presence remains stronger in some regions than others, creating scope for greater engagement with Africa, Latin America, Central Asia and smaller island states
- Cultural diplomacy should therefore be geographically diversified rather than concentrated in traditionally familiar partners

Excessive Reliance on Historical Heritage:

- Focusing predominantly on ancient civilisation and classical traditions may underrepresent India's contemporary cultural dynamism
- Modern Indian cinema, digital content, literature, design, gaming, fashion, cuisine and creative entrepreneurship can broaden India's appeal among younger audiences

Measuring Soft-Power Outcomes:

- Cultural diplomacy often produces long-term and intangible outcomes, making its impact more difficult to measure than conventional economic or diplomatic initiatives
- Evaluation should therefore consider indicators such as people-to-people networks, tourism flows, educational partnerships, cultural collaborations and international perceptions

Way Forward:

Develop a Coordinated Cultural Diplomacy Strategy:

- India should establish stronger coordination among the Ministry of Culture, Ministry of External Affairs, ICCR, Indian Missions and State Governments
- A coordinated strategy can align cultural diplomacy with Act East, Neighbourhood First, Indo-Pacific and Global South priorities

Expand Digital Cultural Diplomacy:

- India should use digital archives, virtual exhibitions, virtual reality, online performances and multilingual educational platforms to expand access to Indian culture
- Digital diplomacy can reach audiences beyond the geographical limits of physical Cultural Centres and festivals

Promote Contemporary India:

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- Cultural diplomacy should combine classical heritage with contemporary cinema, literature, music, gaming, fashion, design, cuisine and digital creativity
- Greater participation of young creators can make India's cultural outreach more relevant to younger global audiences

Strengthen Public-Private Partnerships:

- Public-Private Partnerships, corporate social responsibility and philanthropic foundations can supplement public funding for international cultural initiatives
- Private participation can particularly support artist residencies, exhibitions, cultural festivals, digital projects and creative-industry exchanges

Deepen Regional Cultural Networks:

- India should develop joint cultural initiatives with South Asian, Southeast Asian, Central Asian, African and Indian Ocean countries
- Joint heritage conservation, maritime research, academic exchanges and cultural festivals can transform shared heritage into contemporary diplomatic capital

UPSC Relevance:

GS Paper I – Indian Heritage and Culture:

- Indian cultural heritage, performing arts, intangible cultural heritage, civilisational linkages and cultural exchanges
- Role of cultural institutions in preserving and projecting India's heritage globally

GS Paper II – International Relations:

- Soft power, cultural diplomacy, people-to-people relations, India's foreign policy and multilateral diplomacy
- Role of ICCR, Cultural Exchange Programmes and Indian Missions in India's external cultural relations
- Cultural diplomacy as an instrument supporting Neighbourhood First, Act East, Indo-Pacific and Global South engagement

GS Paper III – Indian Economy:

- Contribution of tourism, creative industries, handicrafts, cultural enterprises and wellness sectors to employment and economic growth
- Potential of cultural diplomacy to expand India's creative economy and cultural tourism

Essay:

- Culture as an instrument of diplomacy can convert civilisational heritage into contemporary international influence
- Soft power complements military and economic capabilities by creating attraction, trust and long-term societal partnerships

Value Addition for UPSC:

Key Concept – Soft Power:

- Soft power = Attraction + Culture + Values + Foreign Policy + People-to-People Linkages
- India's cultural diplomacy converts its civilisational capital into diplomatic goodwill and international influence

Key Institutional Distinction:

- Ministry of Culture: Leads major government initiatives for international cultural relations, including the Global Engagement Scheme and Festivals of India
- Ministry of External Affairs: Provides the broader diplomatic framework through India's foreign missions and oversees ICCR
- ICCR: Functions as a major institutional instrument for cultural and educational diplomacy, including scholarships, Indian Studies Chairs and cultural programmes abroad

Prelims Facts:

- Global Engagement Scheme: Revised for FY 2026–27 to 2030–31
- GES Outlay: ₹299.94 crore
- GES Components: International Cultural Exchange Programme, Project Mausam, Brihattar Bharat, and Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage and Diverse Cultural Traditions of India
- International Day of Yoga: 21 June
- ICCR: Autonomous organisation under the Ministry of External Affairs
- Cultural Exchange Programme: Primarily a bilateral instrument for strengthening cultural relations between India and partner countries

Mains-Ready Conclusion:

- India's cultural diplomacy represents a shift from viewing culture merely as heritage preservation towards using culture as a strategic instrument of international engagement, soft power and economic opportunity. The effectiveness of this approach will depend on sustained funding, institutional coordination, digital innovation and the ability to combine India's civilisational heritage with its contemporary creative strengths