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British Journal of Contemporary Research

BEXFORD PUBLISHING

From Khmer Independence to Act East Policy: Civilizational Narratives, Cultural Diplomacy, and the Transformation of India-Cambodia Relations

Original Research Article | Volume 1 | Issue 6 | 2026 | Article Number: 059

Accepted: 31 October 2026 | Published: 10 November 2026 | ISSN: 2979-8582 (Online)

Crossref : **https://doi.org/10.67693/BJCR-ZYZY9QWD**

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Abstract

This article chronicles the evolution of India-Cambodia relations from Cambodian independence to the implementation of India's Act East Policy. It posits that shared civilizational narratives have transcended static inheritances or ornamental claims. Instead, they have served as a versatile diplomatic instrument, enabling political leaders, religious figures, conservators, educators, and cultural institutions to interpret bilateral relations in response to evolving regional dynamics. A historical-interpretive analysis of scholarly works, official statements, bilateral agreements, and heritage records identifies five overlapping phases: the adaptation of Indic cultural forms in pre-modern Cambodia; post-independence solidarity and non-alignment; the rupture and selective continuity during the Cambodian conflicts; the recognition, reconstruction, and heritage conservation efforts post-Khmer Rouge regime; and the institutionalization of cultural diplomacy through the Look East and Act East policies. The article underscores that India's recognition of the People's Republic of Kampuchea and its conservation initiatives at Angkor Wat and Ta Prohm fostered exceptionally enduring political goodwill. Under the Act East policy, this historical capital has been integrated into capacity building, development cooperation, ASEAN-led institutions, tourism, education, and limited security engagement. However, civilizational affinity alone has not automatically led to high levels of trade, sustained connectivity, or decisive strategic influence. Consequently, the relationship should be understood best as one of asymmetrical complementarity: culture provides trust and legitimacy, while material cooperation determines the sustainability of that trust as an enduring interdependence. The article concludes that future cooperation should prioritize Cambodian agency, co-created historical knowledge, living heritage, human-capital networks, and practical connectivity, rather than relying on origin-centered narratives of Indianization.

Keywords: India-Cambodia Relations, Act East Policy, Civilizational Narratives, Cultural Diplomacy, Heritage Diplomacy, Soft Power

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1. Introduction

India-Cambodia relations are frequently characterized as civilizational, a term that evokes over two millennia of religious, linguistic, artistic, and commercial exchanges. Angkor Wat, Sanskrit inscriptions, Buddhist networks, Khmer adaptations of the Ramayana, and courtly concepts with South Asian origins serve as illustrative examples of this shared cultural heritage. In contemporary official discourse, these inheritances contribute to portraying India and Cambodia as inherently connected societies whose modern partnership revitalizes an older cultural geography. This language is politically advantageous because it imbues the relationship with historical depth, distinguishes India from newer external partners, and elevates Cambodia's status as a significant center of Asian civilization rather than a mere recipient of foreign influence (Bunthorn, 2019, 2023; Muni & Mishra, 2019). Despite the apparent continuity, a history of transformation lies beneath the surface. Premodern cultural circulation differed fundamentally from modern diplomacy, and the Khmer adoption of Sanskritic, Hindu, and Buddhist forms did not establish a permanent bilateral relationship between territorially defined nation-states. Instead, the ties between India and Cambodia in the twentieth century were shaped by decolonization, the Bandung spirit, non-alignment, the wars in Indochina, the Khmer Rouge catastrophe, Vietnam's intervention, the contested status of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), and Cambodia's post-1991 reconstruction. Since the 1990s, the relationship has also been influenced by India's eastward engagement, Cambodia's membership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Mekong sub-regionalism, and a regional order significantly impacted by China's material influence (Acharya, 2012; Chandler, 1991, 2008; Gottesman, 2003). This article examines three interconnected questions. Firstly, it investigates how civilizational narratives have evolved over different periods of India-Cambodia relations. Secondly, it analyzes the institutions and practices that have facilitated the transformation of cultural affinity into diplomatic cooperation. Lastly, it evaluates the accomplishments and limitations of cultural diplomacy within the framework of India's Act East Policy. The central argument posits that civilizational narratives have served as relational infrastructure, mitigating the symbolic cost of engagement, providing recognizable scripts of friendship, and legitimizing cooperation during periods when India's physical presence in Cambodia was limited. Their most significant impact has been observed when historical claims have been substantiated by credible actions, such as India's diplomatic engagement in the post-Khmer Rouge period, conservation efforts at Angkor, educational exchanges, and capacity-building programs. In this context, culture has not emerged as an autonomous source of power but as a medium through which consistency, respect, and practical cooperation acquire political significance. Furthermore, the article emphasizes Cambodian agency as the focal point of analysis. Cambodia does not merely receive Indian soft power. Cambodian rulers, monks, intellectuals, conservators, artists, and officials have actively selected, localized, and repurposed cultural connections to bolster domestic legitimacy, heritage preservation, tourism, international recognition, and diversification of foreign policy. The Reamker is not merely an overseas adaptation of the Ramayana; Angkor is not an expatriate Indian monument; and contemporary Cambodian diplomacy cannot be reduced to competition among external powers. A relationship characterized solely by India's cultural projection perpetuates the very hierarchy that critical histories of Indianization have challenged (Mabbett, 1977; Smith, 1999; Wolters, 1999).

2. Methodology and Analytical Framework

The study employs a qualitative historical-interpretive approach. It integrates secondary scholarship on Cambodian history, Southeast Asian cultural development, Indian foreign policy, soft power, and heritage politics with official Indian and Cambodian documents, records of bilateral visits, ASEAN-India statements, and information published by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), the APSARA National Authority, UNESCO, and cultural institutions. The research spans from the transition to

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Cambodian independence in the early 1950s to bilateral consultations and conservation activities through 2025-2026. Since official sources sometimes compress or ritualize complex events, they are treated as diplomatic texts rather than objective chronicles. Their value lies in both the factual information they provide and the recurring narratives they endorse. Three key concepts guide the analysis. The first is soft power, defined as the ability to influence preferences through attraction, legitimacy, and identification rather than coercion or payment (Nye, 2004). While soft power is a valuable tool, it is insufficient if viewed solely as a collection of attractive cultural assets. Temples, Buddhism, yoga, dance, and epics do not automatically generate influence. Their impact depends on effective transmission, credibility, reception, and consistency between a state's cultural message and its actions (Bunthorn, 2023; Khanna & Moorthy, 2017; Kugiel, 2017). Consequently, this article explores cultural diplomacy as an interactive process in which actors strategically mobilize cultural resources to establish relationships, signal status, and foster cooperation. The second concept is heritage diplomacy, which highlights the political dimensions of conservation. International restoration requires expertise, funding, institutional access, and narratives of stewardship. While it can foster trust and professional networks, it can also create hierarchies between donors and recipients or prioritize monumental heritage over living communities (Fauveaud & Esposito, 2021; Winter, 2007, 2015). At Angkor, conservation operates within Cambodian sovereignty and multilateral coordination. Consequently, India's projects should be viewed as negotiated and co-produced interventions rather than unilateral cultural gifts. The third concept is complex interdependence. India-Cambodia relations encompass multiple channels, including diplomatic, educational, religious, developmental, commercial, and cultural, with no single issue dictating the others (Keohane & Nye, 2012). This explains why political warmth and cultural familiarity can coexist with modest trade and limited strategic convergence. It also clarifies Cambodia's interest in diversified external relationships. Engaging with India can complement relations with China, Japan, the United States, the European Union, and ASEAN without necessitating exclusive alignment. Therefore, the relationship should be evaluated based on the interaction of symbolic capital and material delivery rather than a simple measure of geopolitical loyalty.

3. Civilizational Connections and the Problem of Indianization

3.1 From diffusion to localization

Previous scholarship frequently characterized early Southeast Asian state formation as Indianization. In its most extreme interpretations, this framework posited that Indian traders, Brahmins, or colonists introduced advanced religious and political institutions to relatively passive societies. While the term acknowledged the visible presence of Sanskrit, Hindu-Buddhist cosmology, South Asian literary forms, and temple architecture, it also reflected colonial-era assumptions about civilizational centers and their subordinate peripheries (Coedes, 1968; Mabbett, 1977). However, subsequent scholarship significantly revised this account. While maritime exchange did connect South and Southeast Asia, evidence does not support a single colonizing movement or a one-directional transfer of cultural elements. Instead, local rulers and communities selectively adopted foreign forms that aligned with their indigenous political, ritual, and economic needs, adapting them within their existing social structures (Bunthorn, 2022a; Hall, 1982; Smith, 1999; Wolters, 1999). This revision holds crucial implications for contemporary diplomacy. If ancient connections are portrayed as the export of a complete Indian civilization, India emerges as the cultural origin and Cambodia as its beneficiary. Conversely, if these connections are understood as a process of circulation and localization, Khmer civilization is seen as an active participant in an interconnected Asian world. The latter perspective offers a more historically robust and diplomatically sustainable narrative. Sanskrit's prestige, Hindu and Buddhist imagery, models of kingship, ritual specialists, and cosmological concepts served as resources that Khmer elites used to construct unique institutions. Their integration

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resulted in new cultural syntheses rather than a mere replication of Indian culture (Higham, 2001; Pollock, 2006).

Premodern Cambodia exemplifies this creative process. Early polities, conventionally labeled Funan and Chenla, were integral to maritime and overland networks connecting the Mekong basin to South Asia and the broader South China Sea. Sanskrit inscriptions and religious iconography emerged as symbols of authority, while Old Khmer remained central to administration and social life. During the Angkorian era, rulers employed a dynamic synthesis of Shaiva, Vaishnava, and Mahayana Buddhist traditions. Angkor Wat's cosmological plan and narrative reliefs drew upon Sanskritic influences, yet its engineering, aesthetics, labor organization, political objectives, and subsequent Buddhist life were distinctly Khmer. Jayavarman VII's Buddhist kingship similarly integrated transregional Mahayana concepts with a Cambodian imperial program of temples, roads, hospitals, and reservoirs (Higham, 2001; Kulke, 2014).

3.2 Language, religion, and political imagination

The cultural relationship persisted through language and religious practice even when direct contact varied. Sanskrit and Pali significantly contributed to Khmer religious, legal, and courtly vocabulary. Inscriptions reveal bilingual or functionally differentiated uses of Sanskrit and Old Khmer. These linguistic relationships do not indicate Khmer cultural incompleteness; instead, they exemplify Pollock's (2006) concept of participation in a Sanskrit cosmopolis. This cosmopolis involved elites across much of Asia adopting a prestigious transregional language while simultaneously creating locally grounded political worlds. Buddhism further enhanced this connectivity. Theravada Buddhism gained prominence in Cambodia after the Angkorian period through networks encompassing Sri Lanka, mainland Southeast Asia, and the Indian sacred geography of Buddhism. In the twentieth century, pilgrimage, relic diplomacy, monastic travel, and Buddhist education provided postcolonial India with a language of Asian solidarity. Nehruvian India's Buddhist diplomacy transcended mere religious promotion. It presented India as an anti-colonial, peaceful, and culturally resonant Asian power (Ober, 2019). Cambodian monks and royal patrons actively participated in this exchange. Marston's (2022) study of Dharmawara Mahathera illustrates how religious figures could establish connections between Sihanouk-era Cambodia and India through networks that defied the conventional boundaries of state-to-state diplomacy.

3.3 Ramayana, Reamker, and living heritage

The Ramayana and the Cambodian Reamker, two renowned epics, have long been regarded as symbols of shared heritage. However, their diplomatic significance extends beyond their similarities to encompass their distinct differences. The Reamker uniquely situates its characters, ethical principles, performance conventions, and episodes within the Khmer Buddhist and courtly realms. This distinctiveness enables the Reamker to be adapted and performed in various forms, including literature, the Royal Ballet, mural painting, shadow puppetry, temple art, and popular culture. One notable instance of the Reamker's adaptability is the encounter between Hanuman and Sovann Maccha. This episode exemplifies the creative potential of Cambodian adaptation, demonstrating how the Reamker can be reimagined and presented in diverse ways. The relationship between the Ramayana and the Reamker establishes a shared narrative field that allows each society to recognize familiar characters through their unique artistic expressions. This shared narrative field fosters a sense of reciprocity and cultural exchange, rather than promoting cultural homogenization. For instance, India's 2017 Festival of India in Cambodia featured a classical dance presentation of the Ramayana alongside Buddhist exhibitions, music, dance, and culinary events in various cities, including Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, and Battambang. This event exemplified the potential of cultural exchange and reciprocity by showcasing the Reamker in a different artistic context and engaging audiences from both India and Cambodia.

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More recently, Indian support for conserving Reamker murals at Wat Raja Bo in Siem Reap demonstrated the tangible impact of cultural conservation. By preserving these murals, India helped safeguard a living Cambodian religious site, highlighting the significance of cultural heritage and its preservation. These projects are most effective when they prioritize Khmer interpretation and avoid presenting the Reamker as evidence of India's unaltered cultural reach. By doing so, they foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Reamker's cultural significance and its role in shaping the shared narrative field between India and Cambodia.

4. Independence, Bandung, and Postcolonial Solidarity

4.1 The early diplomatic relationship

Modern bilateral relations between India and Cambodia emerged during Cambodia's transition from French protection to sovereignty. Indian official accounts generally date the establishment of diplomatic relations to 1952, before Cambodia's full independence on November 9, 1953. However, a recently updated embassy account provides a different date, 1951. The most defensible historical point is that formal contacts began during the final phase of colonial rule and took on political significance after independence. (Embassy of India, Phnom Penh, 2026; Ministry of External Affairs, 2023)

Jawaharlal Nehru's visit to Cambodia in 1954 and Prince Norodom Sihanouk's engagement with India placed the relationship within a broader context of Asian decolonization. The leaders' use of civilizational language played a crucial role in shaping the political landscape. Nehru's encounter with Angkor reinforced his perception of Cambodia as an integral part of an interconnected Asian history. Conversely, Sihanouk leveraged Cambodia's cultural stature and non-alignment to secure autonomy in a volatile region. Archival diplomatic reports indicate that Angkor's cultural associations influenced Indian thinking during the recognition process. Nevertheless, cultural affinity was not the sole factor; strategic judgment regarding Cambodia's effective independence and its role in the post-Geneva order also played a significant role. (U.S. Department of State, 1982) In this case, civilizational memory reinforced sovereign recognition rather than replacing it.

4.2 Non-alignment and the Geneva framework

The Bandung Conference of 1955 and the emergence of the Non-Aligned Movement provided India and Cambodia with a shared diplomatic lexicon: anti-colonial sovereignty, peaceful coexistence, opposition to bloc politics, and a platform for newly independent states to assert their agency. Cambodia’s immediate security circumstances influenced Sihanouk’s neutrality, while India's non-alignment reflected broader aspirations in Asian and global politics. Although their interests were not identical, the language of postcolonial autonomy facilitated manageable differences.

India also chaired the International Commission for Supervision and Control established under the 1954 Geneva settlement for Cambodia, with Canada and Poland representing opposing Cold War perspectives. This role extended beyond ceremonial friendship, creating an institutional presence. However, it also revealed tensions. Cambodian officials were not always receptive to the commission's scrutiny, and India's position as an honest broker was contested by the conflict's parties. Despite these challenges, this episode established a recurring pattern: cultural familiarity fostered access, but credibility hinged on India's political conduct and commitment to engagement. Consequently, the Sihanouk-Nehru relationship intertwined personal diplomacy, Asianism, Buddhism, and non-alignment. Official commemorations later elevated this period as a golden age of bilateral friendship. While this memory remains valuable, it should not overshadow disagreements or the structural vulnerabilities of the relationship. India's limited economic capacity in Southeast Asia, coupled with Cambodia's escalating pressures from the Vietnam War, made it

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difficult for cultural warmth to shield bilateral ties from domestic upheaval.

5. Rupture, Recognition, and Reconstruction

5.1 War and the destruction of institutional ties

The 1970 overthrow of Sihanouk, the escalation of the Indochina conflict, the Khmer Rouge's triumph in 1975, and the widespread violence of Democratic Kampuchea devastated Cambodia's institutions and disrupted its international relations. Cultural heritage, religious institutions, and professional communities suffered catastrophic losses. The Khmer Rouge targeted Buddhist clergy, educated individuals, and symbols associated with previous social structures, even as the regime selectively manipulated Angkorian imagery for nationalist purposes (Chandler, 1991, 2008).

Vietnamese forces ousted the Khmer Rouge government in January 1979 and supported the establishment of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). This intervention sparked a profound international dispute. Numerous Western states, China, and ASEAN opposed Vietnam's actions and withheld recognition from the Phnom Penh government, while the Soviet bloc and Vietnam backed it. Representation at the United Nations became a morally and strategically complex issue because opposition to Vietnamese occupation contributed to the continued international standing of a coalition that included the Khmer Rouge (Amer, 1990; Gottesman, 2003).

5.2 India's recognition of the PRK

India formally established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) and reopened its embassy in Phnom Penh in 1981. Indian official narratives portray India as the first democratic nation to recognize the post-Khmer Rouge government (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023). This decision positioned India more closely with Vietnam and the Soviet Union than with ASEAN regarding the Cambodian question. It failed to resolve the legitimacy issues stemming from Vietnam's military presence. However, from the perspective of many Cambodian officials associated with the post-1979 state, India's recognition signified engagement during a period of isolation and national devastation.

The significance of this decision in fostering later bilateral goodwill lies in its combination of timing and memory. India could be seen as a nation that refused to abandon Cambodia after genocide. At the same time, post-1979 Cambodian leaders could recall India as a partner that accepted the political realities in Phnom Penh. This retrospective narrative simplifies a highly contentious conflict, but it has remained diplomatically productive. It distinguishes India from states whose policies were associated with continued recognition of Democratic Kampuchea or the anti-PRK coalition. Additionally, it demonstrates a general principle of soft power: attraction becomes credible when linked to conduct that recipients perceive as costly, consistent, or solidaristic.

However, historical caution is still warranted. Recognition of the PRK cannot be viewed as an uncomplicated humanitarian act. It was intertwined with Cold War alignments, India's close relationship with Vietnam, and competing interpretations of sovereignty. The PRK itself was an authoritarian state heavily influenced by Vietnam, and Cambodian experiences in the 1980s were diverse (Gottesman, 2003). Therefore, a comprehensive account should distinguish the diplomatic legacy of recognition from a definitive moral judgment on every aspect of the regime.

5.3 Angkor Wat conservation as diplomacy through presence

Between 1986 and 1993, India's conservation efforts at Angkor Wat solidified its political presence. During a period of Cambodia's insecurity and limited international engagement, the Archaeological Survey

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of India (ASI) undertook structural and chemical conservation. Indian accounts highlight the technical challenges and symbolic significance of this work, which later heritage scholarship also acknowledges. This work sparked debates about conservation methods and the politics of expertise (Archaeological Survey of India, 1994; Winter, 2007).

Despite technical controversies, the project became a cornerstone of bilateral relations. Restoration connected three narratives: the ancient cultural connection between India and Cambodia, India's early recognition of the post-1979 government, and practical support for Cambodian reconstruction. The work addressed a site central to Cambodian national identity and global visibility, generating a form of credibility by presence that cultural festivals alone could not achieve. India was remembered not only for its affinity with Angkor but also for committing personnel and resources when such involvement was challenging.

The symbolism of Angkor's restoration was particularly powerful because it was intertwined with post-conflict recovery. Heritage conservation played a crucial role in reconstructing state capacity, professional knowledge, tourism, and national identity. However, Angkor's global prominence also attracted competing international agendas, which could reproduce existing power imbalances (Winter, 2007). India's subsequent projects operated within a more institutionalized Cambodian and UNESCO-led framework, emphasizing co-production and professional accountability.

6. From Look East to Act East

6.1 post-1991 normalization and regional institutionalization

The 1991 Paris Peace Agreements, the establishment of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia, and the 1993 restoration of the monarchy significantly altered Cambodia's international standing. India played a crucial role by providing personnel to the UN operation and supporting post-conflict reconstruction efforts. In 1999, Cambodia joined ASEAN, deepening the integration of its foreign policy into Southeast Asian regionalism. These developments coincided with India's Look East Policy, initiated in the early 1990s as New Delhi pursued economic reforms, strengthened ties with ASEAN, and sought a more prominent role in the emerging Asian order (Acharya, 2012; Haokip, 2011; Muni & Mishra, 2019). For Cambodia, Look East created a broader institutional framework for a relationship that had previously been centered around historical memory and bilateral diplomacy. India's status within ASEAN evolved from a sectoral dialogue partner in 1992, to a full dialogue partner in 1995, a summit-level partner in 2002, and finally, a strategic partner in 2012. Cambodia could now engage with India through various ASEAN-led mechanisms, including summits, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, and others. This multilateral approach reduced Cambodia's reliance on sporadic high-level visits and positioned bilateral ties within the broader context of ASEAN centrality.

The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC), established in 2000 by India, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam, established a subregional institution that significantly influenced civilizational geography. Its name connected two river systems that were associated with rich cultural and historical narratives. Initially, the MGC focused on tourism, culture, education, and transportation. However, its cooperation later expanded to include capacity building and Quick Impact Projects. The MGC exemplifies both the strengths and weaknesses of India's approach. On the one hand, it provides a culturally resonant and non-threatening platform. On beside this, its strategic impact depends on sustained financing, implementation, and coordination with other Mekong mechanisms, such as the Ministry of External Affairs (2012, 2025a).

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6.2 The Act East transition

Prime Minister Narendra Modi introduced the transition from Look East to Act East at the East Asia Summit in Nay Pyi Taw in November 2014. Official explanations emphasize a more action-oriented policy centered around commerce, culture, connectivity, and capacity building. This policy also places greater emphasis on strategic and security cooperation and views India's Northeast as a bridge to Southeast Asia (Ministry of External Affairs, 2019, 2025a). Scholars debate whether this represented substantive change or merely accelerated continuity. Act East expanded the policy's strategic vocabulary. It linked it to the Indo-Pacific, but its implementation has been uneven, and India's economic integration with Southeast Asia has not matched its political aspirations (Bajpaee, 2023; Rajendram, 2014).

Cambodia holds a unique position within this policy. Geographically, it is distant from India's immediate land-connectivity projects. Its bilateral economic relationship is relatively small, and it maintains exceptionally close ties with China. Despite these factors, Cambodia is a member of every central ASEAN-led forum, a core member of the Mekong Group of Countries (MGC), a major site of Buddhist and Hindu heritage, and an influential voice in mainland Southeast Asia. Consequently, India views Cambodia less as a conventional strategic partner and more as an institutional and civilizational bridge within ASEAN and the Mekong region (Bhati & Murg, 2018). Act East has not supplanted the older repertoire of friendship. Instead, it has superimposed contemporary policy language onto post-independence and post-conflict memory. Official statements depict Cambodia as a pivotal pillar of Act East and India's Indo-Pacific vision. They evoke Angkor, Buddhism, the Ramayana, Sihanouk-Nehru ties, and India's role after 1979 (Ministry of External Affairs, 2025b). This results in a composite narrative: ancient connections provide depth, Nehruvian solidarity offers moral authority, restoration demonstrates commitment, and Act East provides a forward-looking institutional framework.

6.3 Periodization of the relationship

The transformation can be summarized as a sequence of overlapping diplomatic repertoires rather than a linear progression from culture to strategy.

Premodern-Before1500 to nineteenth century	Connected sacred and commercial worlds	Trade, pilgrimage, Sanskrit and Pali, court ritual, art, literary adaptation	Created deep cultural references, but not modern bilateral diplomacy; Khmer localization was decisive.
1952-1969	Asian solidarity and postcolonial sovereignty	Nehru-Sihanouk diplomacy, Bandung, non-alignment, Buddhist networks, Geneva commission	Produced political intimacy and mutual recognition, but limited economic depth and vulnerability to regional war.
1970-1980	Rupture, conflict, and cultural memory	Limited or broken official ties; symbolic survival of older connections	Demonstrated that civilizational affinity could not overcome state collapse and geopolitical conflict.

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1981-1991	Recognition and solidarity in reconstruction	Recognition of the PRK, embassy presence, Angkor Wat conservation	Generated durable goodwill, while remaining embedded in contested Cold War politics.
1992-2013	Normalization and regional institutionalization	ASEAN dialogue, MGC, ITEC, ICCR, development credit, Ta Prohm restoration	Broadened cooperation beyond symbolism, though economic and connectivity outcomes remained modest.
2014-present	Act East, Indo-Pacific, and diversified partnership	Heritage conservation, capacity building, Quick Impact Projects, direct flights, ASEAN mechanisms, limited defense and health cooperation	Makes culture operational across policy sectors, but material scale and public reach still lag behind diplomatic rhetoric.

7. Cultural Diplomacy as Relationship Infrastructure

7.1 Ta Prohm and the institutionalization of heritage cooperation

The Archaeological Survey of India's (ASI) work at Ta Prohm, initiated under a bilateral agreement in 2002 and commencing in 2003, extended the restoration relationship into the post-conflict era. Ta Prohm presented a unique conservation challenge. The temple's international image was dependent on the visual harmony of stone and large trees, but vegetation, unstable masonry, drainage failures, and visitor pressure posed significant threats to the site. Conservation decisions required careful consideration of structural safety, archaeological integrity, landscape aesthetics, and the concept of authenticity. The project encompassed documentation, excavation, drainage management, anastylosis, structural consolidation, visitor management, and negotiations regarding tree treatment (D'Monte, 2003; Winter, 2007). Unlike the earlier Angkor Wat project, the work at Ta Prohm operated within the authority of the Archaeological Survey of Cambodia (APSARA) and the International Coordinating Committee for Angkor, under UNESCO's broader safeguarding architecture framework. This arrangement held diplomatic significance. It integrated Indian expertise into Cambodian governance and international peer review, thereby mitigating any perception that India possessed the site due to historical influence. APSARA publicly recognized the ASI as a partner at Ta Prohm, and recent collaborative efforts have included the restoration of western galleries, excavation and consolidation of the southern gate, and ongoing third-phase activities (APSARA National Authority, 2024, 2025a, 2025b).

The completion and inauguration of the Hall of Dancers in 2022 constituted a significant bilateral event during the seventieth-anniversary celebrations of diplomatic relations. Its significance transcended architectural accomplishments. The sustained conservation efforts facilitated recurring interactions among Cambodian and Indian archaeologists, engineers, laborers, administrators, and political representatives.

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This professional convergence engendered a distinctive heritage diplomacy that demonstrated remarkable resilience. Despite the infrequent nature of high-level visits, the project maintained a robust working relationship on the ground. Heritage diplomacy, while advantageous, entails inherent risks. Monumental projects can become mere ceremonial backdrops for donor visibility, potentially overshadowing Cambodian expertise and local community interests. Furthermore, the allure of Angkor can divert resources away from less prominent heritage sites, such as living religious practices and provincial locations. Additionally, conservation decisions are inherently political, influencing tourism, access, aesthetics, and the recognition of knowledge (Fauveaud & Esposito, 2021; Winter, 2015). Consequently, India's contribution to heritage diplomacy is most credible when it focuses on strengthening Cambodian institutions, promoting collaborative research, training conservators, and ensuring transparent decision-making processes.

7.2 Living heritage and cultural performance

India's contemporary cultural diplomacy in Cambodia extends beyond mere monuments. Festivals, exhibitions, film, yoga, dance, cuisine, Buddhist events, and Ramayana performances transcend abstract civilizational ties and facilitate public encounters. Notably, the 2017 Festival of India demonstrated a broad geographic and artistic reach. International Yoga Day events and visiting cultural troupes have further expanded these avenues of engagement. The ICCR Chair in Sanskrit and Buddhist Studies at Preah Sihanouk Raja Buddhist University adopts a unique approach by connecting historical study to a Cambodian institution, rather than treating shared heritage solely as a spectacle (Embassy of India, Phnom Penh, 2026; Indian Council for Cultural Relations, 2023). While these programs contribute to familiarity, their impact should not be underestimated. Cultural presentations are often concentrated in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, reaching officials, students, monks, and already interested audiences more effectively than the wider public. Furthermore, origin-centered performances can inadvertently communicate hierarchy, portraying India as the "classical" source while Cambodia appears as a regional adaptation. Reciprocal curation offers a more balanced approach. Joint Ramayana-Reamker productions, Khmer-language interpretation, exchange residencies, and collaborative research foster a coexistence of similarity and difference. The conservation of Reamker murals at Wat Raja Bo serves as a testament to the potential of this approach. India provided specialized conservation services, but the focus was on a Cambodian visual narrative within an active pagoda. Inaugurated in November 2023, the restored paintings bridge literary circulation, local religious life, heritage expertise, and tourism (Embassy of India, Phnom Penh, 2023). Although the project may not have the same financial scale as major infrastructure projects, it holds high relational value by demonstrating a genuine commitment to Cambodian ownership of a shared narrative tradition.

7.3 Education, training, and alums networks

Scholarships and technical training are among the most impactful yet least visually striking instruments of bilateral relations. Cambodian students have studied in India through ICCR scholarships, while officials and professionals have participated in the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program. These programs cover various fields, including public administration, information technology, entrepreneurship, policing, diplomacy, and development management. Indian-supported institutional projects, such as the Cambodia-India Entrepreneurship Development Institute, link capacity building to local economic needs (Embassy of India, Phnom Penh, 2026; Ministry of External Affairs, 2022a).

These programs transform cultural language into human connections. Alums who have lived and studied in India possess knowledge that cannot be conveyed through official publicity. They can become translators between bureaucratic and social systems, professional collaborators, or critical observers of

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India. While the diplomatic outcome is not guaranteed, scholarship recipients may have mixed experiences, and fragmented alum engagement can waste long-term value. Nevertheless, education aligns particularly well with Cambodia's development priorities and India's comparative advantages in higher education, digital technology, English-language training, healthcare, and public administration.

Recent scholarship awards indicate ongoing demand. In 2025, the Indian embassy reported that forty Cambodian students had been selected for undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral studies under ICCR schemes (Embassy of India, Phnom Penh, 2025a). While this number may seem modest in national terms, it holds potential significance in a bilateral relationship with limited migration and business networks. Strengthening alum associations, establishing joint degrees, facilitating faculty mobility, recognizing academic credits, and providing Khmer-language pre-departure support could enhance the sustainability of this channel.

7.4 Development partnership and Quick Impact Projects

India's development cooperation in Cambodia encompasses concessional lines of credit for water-resource development, electricity transmission, and water pumps, as well as grants and Quick Impact Projects under the MGC. The Indian embassy reports a cumulative line of credit of approximately US$65.2 million for water and transmission-related projects (Embassy of India, Phnom Penh, 2025b). While these amounts are relatively modest compared to the scale of Chinese infrastructure finance or Japanese development assistance, the impact of these projects extends beyond mere financial support. Locally visible projects in water, sanitation, education, health, agriculture, and community infrastructure have the potential to forge a stronger connection between bilateral cooperation and the everyday needs of the Cambodian people.

Furthermore, development projects serve as a test of the credibility of the Act East initiative. While heritage can generate goodwill, delays, inadequate maintenance, or poor coordination in material projects can undermine it. Conversely, reliable delivery allows cultural affinity to become tangible evidence of partnership rather than a mere substitute for performance. The most successful Indian projects strike a balance between leveraging comparative advantage, addressing Cambodian demands, and ensuring manageable implementation. Digital public infrastructure, health systems, agricultural technology, water management, vocational education, and mine-action support present more viable niches for Indian projects compared to direct competition with China's large-scale construction finance.

7.5 Connectivity, tourism, and the missing middle

For several decades, the absence of direct air connectivity underscored the disparity between diplomatic rhetoric and social interaction. Pilgrimage, tourism, student mobility, and business travel relied on routes through third countries. Consequently, the commencement of the inaugural direct Phnom Penh-New Delhi service on June 16, 2024, held significance beyond aviation (Embassy of India, Phnom Penh, 2024). It transformed a longstanding diplomatic aspiration into practical mobility, opening up opportunities for Buddhist pilgrimage, Angkor tourism, family travel, education, and commerce. While additional airline initiatives have sought to connect Indian cities with Siem Reap, the commercial viability of these routes remains contingent upon demand. Connectivity serves as the bridge between elite diplomacy and public familiarity. India and Cambodia boast renowned cultural landmarks, yet there is limited understanding of each other's contemporary society. Tourism campaigns that primarily focus on Angkor and Buddhist pilgrimage perpetuate a museum-like relationship. A more enduring connection would integrate heritage with universities, creative industries, entrepreneurship, wellness, cuisine, and contemporary arts. Additionally, it would necessitate simplified payment processes, visa information, tour coordination, and reliable flight schedules.

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8. Cambodia's Agency and the Regional Strategic Context

8.1 Beyond the image of a passive recipient

Cambodian agencies have played a pivotal role in shaping every phase of the relationship. In the premodern era, rulers localized transregional cultural materials. Sihanouk harnessed Asian solidarity and personal diplomacy. Post-1979 leaders utilized recognition and reconstruction partnerships to overcome isolation. Contemporary officials position Cambodia as an active member of ASEAN, the MGC, and the Global South. Cultural diplomacy serves Cambodia's interests by validating national heritage, attracting technical assistance, diversifying partnerships, and enhancing international visibility (Bunthorn, 2022b).

This perspective offers a fresh perspective on evaluating India's soft power. An Indian festival, scholarship, or restoration project succeeds not when it demonstrates cultural ownership, but when Cambodian actors find it beneficial, respectful, and aligned with their priorities. This distinction is crucial because small states are not mere backdrops for major-power projection. They carefully evaluate offers, establish relationships, and leverage external partnerships to expand their autonomy. Cambodia's engagement with India can be meaningful even when it does not directly influence Phnom Penh's stance on a strategic issue of paramount importance to New Delhi.

8.2 China, diversification, and false binaries

China's economic, political, and security ties with Cambodia are significantly more extensive than those with India. Chinese influence in Cambodia is attributed to various factors, including finance, trade, investment, tourism, infrastructure development, and elite connections. Scholars have characterized Cambodia's policy as band wagoning, patron-client alignment, or hedging under asymmetric dependence. Cambodia's positions during ASEAN debates on the South China Sea have further reinforced the perception of its unusually close alignment with China. However, it is crucial to recognize that India-Cambodia relations should not be reduced to a simplistic contest where every Indian cultural activity is perceived as offsetting China's influence. This oversimplification exaggerates India's resources, instrumentalizes Cambodian heritage, and overlooks Phnom Penh's own strategic considerations. Cambodia benefits from expanding its relationships with multiple partners, including Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, the European Union, the United States, and other ASEAN members. India offers a unique combination of political acceptability, cultural familiarity, education, development cooperation, and support for ASEAN centrality that distinguishes it from China's approach. India's value lies in providing options rather than demanding a choice. This logic aligns with Cambodia's small-state diplomacy. Even when Cambodia maintains close alignment with a partner, it can still pursue selective diversification, particularly when the partner operates in different sectors. While India may not be able to replace China as Cambodia's primary economic patron, it can become a more significant partner in areas such as heritage, human capital development, health, digital cooperation, water management, and multilateral diplomacy. Therefore, strategic patience is more appropriate than engaging in competitive symbolism.

8.3 ASEAN centrality and the Indo-Pacific vocabulary

India's Indo-Pacific vision emphasizes a free, open, inclusive, and rules-based region, while ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific highlights ASEAN's centrality, dialogue, connectivity, sustainable development, and practical cooperation. The 2022 ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership effectively connected these concepts and identified key areas for collaboration, including maritime cooperation, digital transformation, education, health, and connectivity (Association of Southeast Asian Nations & Government of India, 2022). Cambodia's role as ASEAN chair in 2022 brought bilateral engagement to the forefront. Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar's visit involved participation in

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ASEAN-related summits, bilateral talks, cultural agreements, and the inauguration of the restored Hall of Dancers at Ta Prohm (Ministry of External Affairs, 2022b). This event exemplifies how multilateral and civilizational diplomacy complement each other: ASEAN provided the political platform, while heritage offered a symbolic link between the two nations.

The official Indian language increasingly portrays Cambodia as a pillar of Act East and a partner in the Indo-Pacific and the Global South. The third Foreign Office Consultations in Siem Reap in March 2025 will review cooperation across various domains, including political, defense, development, trade, culture, consular matters, and regional issues (Ministry of External Affairs, 2025b; Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia, 2025). While the scope of these consultations is impressive, it is crucial to ensure that they lead to meaningful implementation. Regular consultation mechanisms will only be effective if they establish priorities, monitor progress, and facilitate communication between ministries and non-state actors, particularly between high-level visits.

9. Achievements and Structural Limitations

9.1 What cultural diplomacy has achieved

Initially, cultural diplomacy has cultivated a resilient reservoir of goodwill. The relationship endured prolonged periods of limited trade and infrequent strategic attention because political elites and cultural actors could rekindle shared reference points. Recognition of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and conservation efforts at Angkor Wat provided these references with behavioral credibility. Bunthorn (2023) persuasively argues that India's soft power has been more effective in projecting a benign image than in exerting direct political influence. This distinction should be regarded as an achievement rather than a failure, as trust and a non-threatening presence can be strategically valuable in their own right. Secondly, heritage cooperation has fostered institutional continuity. The extended duration of work at Angkor Wat and Ta Prohm has maintained technical relationships across political cycles. India's participation in multilateral conservation frameworks further demonstrates that civilizational diplomacy can operate through professional standards and Cambodian authority rather than unilateral claims. Thirdly, culture has broadened the scope of development cooperation. Scholarships, ITEC training, Buddhist studies, entrepreneurship programs, mural conservation, and Quick Impact Projects connect elite narratives to human and local capacities. These initiatives provide India with opportunities to make a modest impact with limited resources. Fourthly, the relationship supports plural regionalism. India's presence offers Cambodia an additional partner and reinforces ASEAN-led engagement with multiple powers. Cambodia, in turn, provides India with access to mainland Southeast Asian institutions and a society where India's historical and religious references are particularly evident.

9.2 The rhetoric-delivery gap

The first limitation lies in the persistent disparity between symbolic warmth and material depth. Bilateral commerce and investment remain modest, business networks are sparse, and project implementation has not always aligned with high-level declarations. While culture can facilitate access, it cannot indefinitely compensate for weak logistics, limited market knowledge, or inconsistent private-sector engagement. Act East's credibility hinges on translating the language of action into predictable delivery (Bajpaee, 2023). The second limitation is narrative asymmetry. References to Greater India, civilizational expansion, or Indian cultural ownership may be well-intentioned but can stifle Khmer creativity. They also overlook the diverse sources of Cambodian civilization, including indigenous foundations and connections with other parts of Southeast and East Asia. A narrative that treats Angkor Wat primarily as evidence of Indian influence risks alienating the very audience cultural diplomacy aims to engage. The third limitation is selective memory. Bilateral commemorations often focus on Nehru, Sihanouk, recognition after 1979, and

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restoration, while giving less attention to disagreements, the contested politics of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), conservation criticism, or the uneven social reach of official programs. Diplomatic narratives necessarily involve selective choices, but scholarship should strive to preserve complexity. Mature friendship is strengthened, not weakened, by the ability to discuss difficult history. The fourth limitation is elite concentration. Diplomatic ceremonies, university chairs, and restoration inaugurations frequently involve officials, specialists, and urban institutions. Rural communities, young creators, independent researchers, and audiences outside Phnom Penh and Siem Reap may have limited access. While digital dissemination can broaden participation, it can only be effective if content is produced in Khmer and designed collaboratively rather than translated after the fact. The fifth limitation pertains to measurement. Governments often count events, scholarships, agreements, or visits without considering reception and long-term outcomes. For instance, a festival may attract a large crowd but fail to foster enduring collaboration. Similarly, a scholarship might transform a career but remain disconnected from bilateral networks. Cultural diplomacy necessitates evaluation that aligns with professional partnerships, alum engagement, language access, public perception, conservation capacity, and repeated institutional cooperation.

10. A Forward Agenda for India-Cambodia Relations

The foremost priority should be to replace origin-centric civilizational rhetoric with a language of shared creation. Official and educational materials should depict Khmer actors as selectors, translators, and innovators. Joint research on Sanskrit and Old Khmer inscriptions, Buddhism, maritime exchange, the Reamker, dance, and architectural knowledge can substantiate this principle. Publications and exhibitions should be bilingual or multilingual, with Cambodian scholars leading the intellectual charge. The second priority is to transform heritage projects into a robust professional infrastructure. The completion of the current phase at Ta Prohm should be accompanied by jointly accessible documentation, conservation laboratories, preventive-maintenance planning, and sustained training for Cambodian specialists. Collaboration can extend beyond internationally renowned monuments to living pagodas, museum collections, archives, and climate adaptation for heritage sites. Community consultation should be a mandatory conservation requirement, not an optional public-relations activity. Third, India and Cambodia should establish a cohesive education and alums corridor. Scholarships should be linked to joint degrees, faculty exchanges, internships, research grants, and post-study alum programs. Priority fields could include archaeology, conservation science, Buddhist studies, public health, digital governance, agricultural technology, water management, and entrepreneurship. Reliable credit recognition and student support would enhance the appeal of Indian institutions. Fourth, the Act East initiative should establish a connection between culture and practical mobility. Direct flights necessitate coordinated tourism promotion and stable demand. Buddhist circuits can connect Cambodian travelers to Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar, and Nalanda, while Indian travelers can be introduced to Cambodia beyond a brief Angkor itinerary. University travel, film and creative-industry exchanges, and business delegations can reduce reliance on pilgrimage and heritage tourism alone. Fifth, development cooperation should focus on high-value niches rather than engaging in symbolic competition over project size. Areas such as water, health, digital public goods, mine action, vocational skills, solar energy, agriculture, and small community infrastructure align Indian capabilities with Cambodian needs. Transparent timelines and maintenance plans would enhance India's reputation more effectively than a larger number of under-resourced commitments. Sixth, bilateral mechanisms should incorporate evidence about reception. The Joint Commission, Foreign Office Consultations, MGC, ICCR, ASI-APSARA cooperation, and embassy programs could benefit from a shared monitoring framework that covers delivery, participation, geographic reach, gender and youth inclusion, professional capacity, alum outcomes, and Khmer-language access.

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Independent Cambodian and Indian researchers should actively contribute to the evaluation process.

Finally, both governments should maintain strategic modesty. The relationship does not need to become an anti-China alignment to be significant. India's comparative advantage lies in being a trusted, plural, and non-exclusive partner whose engagement expands Cambodia's choices. Cambodia's value to India extends beyond cultural familiarity or geopolitical location; it lies in its agency within ASEAN and its ability to shape how India's regional role is perceived.

11. Conclusion

India-Cambodia relations have not been a straightforward journey from ancient cultural influence to a modern strategic partnership. Instead, they have been a series of reconstructions. In the past, Khmer societies localized transregional religious, linguistic, and political elements. After independence, leaders translated this interconnected history into Asian solidarity and non-alignment. However, conflicts and genocides revealed the limitations of cultural affinity. India's recognition of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) and conservation efforts at Angkor provided historical credibility. The Look East Policy integrated bilateral ties into ASEAN and Mekong institutions, while Act East expanded the relationship across various domains, including culture, capacity building, development, connectivity, and strategic dialogue. Civilizational narratives have played a significant role in making cooperation understandable and memorable. They have helped India be perceived as a familiar and generally benevolent power in Cambodia, while also allowing Cambodia to present itself as a major civilizational actor and a valued ASEAN partner. However, their impact is limited. When combined with long-term presence, respectful conservation, educational opportunities, and reliable projects, they transform into relationship infrastructure. Conversely, when used as substitutes for delivery or as assertions of cultural ownership, they become rhetorical liabilities.

Therefore, the most significant transformation under Act East is not the strategic rebranding of an ancient alliance. Instead, it is the gradual transformation of memory into institutions. These institutions include ASI-APSARA cooperation, the ICCR and ITEC networks, MGC projects, ASEAN mechanisms, foreign office consultations, and direct mobility. While these institutions may not be as robust as the diplomatic language surrounding them, they provide a practical foundation for growth. A mature partnership will depend on recognizing Cambodia not as the eastern endpoint of Indian civilization but as a co-author of a connected Asian history and an autonomous partner in shaping its contemporary future.

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