

Project Mausam and Sri Lanka: Accessing India's Cultural Diplomacy through Shared Maritime Heritage

Aishik Bag

Doctoral Fellow, Department of International Relations, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Author Email: bg.aishik@gmail.com

Abstract—In the contemporary international relations geopolitics is not only confined to hard powers but also expanded to the realm of soft power. In this scenario, Project Mausam as a crucial part of India's cultural diplomacy in the Indian Ocean Region becomes immensely important. This paper therefore critically examines India's outreach strategy to Indian Ocean Region, specifically in relation with Sri Lanka through the lens of Project Mausam. At the core, this paper argues Project Mausam is not only an initiative for the revival of heritage, rather it aims to use cultural ties, civilizational bonds, shared maritime history to give strength to its regional presence. At the beginning, this paper discusses the concept of soft power and cultural diplomacy and how it impacts international relations. Then it goes onto analysing the idea, objectives and aims of project Mausam, that widen the vision of Indian Ocean Region as a historical sphere not only shaped by commercial trade, but also by pilgrimage, monsoon routes and cultural exchanges. This paper further explores the centrality of Sri Lanka within the framework of Project Mausam due to its geostrategic location, civilizational bond, Shared cultural heritage, connectivity and Crisis assistance. At the end it argues the possibilities of deepening the ties through the smart use of soft power in the region, specifically with Sri Lanka, at the same time need to cautious about unregulated institutional structure, lack of cooperation and unsustainable cultural engagement.

Keywords: project mausam; cultural diplomacy; soft power; sri lanka; indian ocean

I. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary international relations soft power has gained prominence as one of the most key concepts as in the present-day world, influence cannot solely be secured by military strength or economic might. The most impactful foundation to the concept of soft power was given by Joseph Nye, who defines soft power as the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion or payment (Nye 2017). In this view, influence is secured through culture, values, legitimacy, trustworthiness of foreign policy. Although, scholars have eventually exhibited that soft power is also immersed into politics, communication and representation. Janice Bially Mattern portrayed attraction as a socially and politically constructed phenomenon. Joshua Kurlantzick pointed out the growing use of image, diplomacy and public outreach as tool of influence in global politics (Bially Mattern 2005; Kurlantzick 2007). Soft power, therefore, is best understood not as an alternative to power politics, but as one of its most subtle and effective forms. Within this broader framework, cultural diplomacy occupies a particularly significant place. Milton Cummings' classic definition describes cultural diplomacy as the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and peoples in order to foster mutual understanding (Cummings 2003). More recent scholarship has deepened this understanding by showing that when culture is consciously mobilized by states to advance national interests, it becomes a strategic diplomatic resource rather than mere exchange. Tim Rivera distinguishes cultural diplomacy from broader cultural relations by emphasizing its closer connection to government purpose, foreign policy goals, and national projection (Rivera 2015). Patricia Goff similarly points out that cultural diplomacy matters because it can create channels of communication, soften political distrust, and generate receptivity where conventional diplomatic instruments



may be limited (Goff 2013). In that sense, cultural diplomacy is not outside geopolitics. It is one of the ways states compete, persuade, and position themselves in the contemporary geopolitical race. This wider significance of soft power and cultural diplomacy is especially visible in the Indian case. Since Narendra Modi's rise to power in 2014, India has increasingly projected culture as a major component of its global and regional presence, and this trajectory acquired renewed continuity after his return for a third term in 2024. The growing prominence of yoga diplomacy offers one of the clearest examples. The United Nations General Assembly adopted the International Day of Yoga resolution in December 2014 with support from 177 member states, and by 2023 the observance had reportedly spread to 192 countries with 23.44 crore participants worldwide, according to official Indian figures (Government of India 2024). These numbers are not merely symbolic. They demonstrate how a cultural and civilizational practice was transformed into a recurring global diplomatic platform under active state sponsorship. Alongside yoga, India has expanded the strategic use of cultural centres, educational exchange, Buddhist linkages, scholarship programmes, and diaspora engagement, all of which reinforce the image of India as a civilizational state with contemporary diplomatic relevance. South Asia becomes crucial in this context because it is the primary space in which India's soft power claims are tested and observed. If attraction, legitimacy, and credibility are central to soft power, then India must demonstrate these qualities first and most convincingly in its own neighbourhood. For this reason, cultural diplomacy in South Asia cannot be treated as ornamental or secondary. It is part of the effort to shape regional familiarity, reduce distrust, and frame India's role in terms broader than asymmetry or hard security. Among the countries of the region, Sri Lanka holds a particularly important position. It brings together civilizational connection, Buddhist linkages, deep people-to-people contact, maritime proximity, and strategic visibility in the Indian Ocean. India's cultural outreach in Sri Lanka reflects this long-term importance. The Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre in Colombo, established in 1998, has served as a major institutional platform for classes, performances, exhibitions, lectures, yoga, and cultural exchange, while the High Commission of India also documents continued outreach through scholarships, Buddhist educational engagement, and public cultural programming (High Commission of India, Colombo n.d.a; n.d.b). The significance of Sri Lanka becomes even clearer when placed within the larger framework of the Indian Ocean. For India, the ocean is not a peripheral zone but a central strategic and civilizational space. Official Indian statements increasingly describe it as a "common maritime home" and place it within the broader vision of SAGAR, or Security and Growth for All in the Region, linking maritime security with neighbourhood policy, regional cooperation, and shared development (MEA 2015; MEA 2023). This maritime emphasis is also grounded in hard material realities. According to official Indian data, around 95 percent of India's trade by volume and 70 percent by value is carried through the maritime sector, which underlines why the Indian Ocean occupies such a vital place in India's strategic imagination (PIB 2024). Yet in such a region, maritime influence cannot be sustained through naval capability and trade routes alone. Littoral politics also depends on trust, memory, legitimacy, and the ability to present India as a partner whose presence is culturally intelligible and politically acceptable. It is here that soft power and cultural diplomacy acquire special importance from the Indian point of view, particularly in relation to the littoral states. Sri Lanka is one of the clearest examples of this overlap between strategy and cultural diplomacy. India's engagement with Sri Lanka in recent years has shown that influence in the Indian Ocean is strengthened when historical and cultural affinity is supported by tangible acts of assistance. During the pandemic, India extended medicines and vaccines to Sri Lanka, and during the 2022 economic crisis it provided support that official Indian documents place at close to USD 4 billion through credit lines, currency support, food, fuel, fertilizer, and medical assistance (MEA 2024; MEA 2025). This material support was important, but it also amplified the persuasive force of India's cultural and civilizational outreach. Soft power becomes more credible when the language of shared history and regional friendship is matched by visible support in moments of crisis. In that sense, cultural diplomacy is not detached from strategic purpose. Rather, it helps strategy acquire legitimacy, emotional resonance, and durability. It is precisely within this larger context that Project Mausam and Sri Lanka must be understood.

II. PROJECT MAUSAM: CONCEPT AND DIPLOMATIC LOGIC

Project Mausam is a Government of India initiative under the Ministry of Culture that uses maritime heritage, cultural routes, and historical memory across the Indian Ocean as a framework for contemporary cooperation (Archaeological Survey of India n.d.). In official terms, it is a multi-disciplinary and transnational project designed to "rekindle long-lost ties" across the Indian



Ocean world and to create new avenues of cooperation and exchange. Its basic logic is that the Indian Ocean was historically not a barrier, but a shared space linked by monsoon winds, trade, pilgrimage, ideas, and cultural circulation. The project was launched in June 2014 at the 38th Session of UNESCO's World Heritage Committee in Doha, Qatar. A Press Information Bureau release from 21 June 2014 records that it was launched by the Secretary, Ministry of Culture, and presented as a major initiative to reconnect the countries of the Indian Ocean world through shared history. The name "Mausam" itself is significant. Official explanations connect it to the monsoon system, the seasonal wind pattern that historically enabled movement across the Indian Ocean. The term therefore symbolizes the natural rhythm that made the circulation of people, goods, and ideas possible across the oceanic world. In that sense, the title carries the project's central argument that the Indian Ocean has long been a connected civilizational space shaped by recurring maritime movement. Institutionally, Project Mausam has been anchored in the Ministry of Culture, but the official record shows an administrative evolution. Early official descriptions identified the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), New Delhi, as the nodal coordinating agency, with support from the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and the National Museum as associate bodies. Later government documents and parliamentary responses describe the ASI as the nodal agency, with IGNCA and the National Museum providing research and institutional support. This shift matters because it shows that the project gradually moved toward stronger heritage-administrative and archaeological coordination within the state structure. The official objectives and aims of the project are ambitious. It seeks to revive lost linkages among Indian Ocean countries, document and celebrate common cultural values and economic ties, and transcend present-day national and ethnic boundaries through a shared maritime past. It also aims to understand how knowledge of the monsoon winds shaped maritime interaction, how coastal centres and hinterlands were linked, and how shared traditions, technologies, and ideas travelled through these routes. At a more practical level, the project is tied to research, documentation, transnational nomination strategies, and the identification of maritime cultural routes and landscapes. Although, what the Government of India seeks to achieve through Project Mausam goes beyond heritage preservation. Official language repeatedly suggests that the project is meant to strengthen current ties across the Indian Ocean, create new bridges of cooperation, and place India within a broader Afro-Arab-Asian maritime history. It is therefore both a heritage initiative and a diplomatic instrument. By foregrounding shared civilizational connections rather than only strategic competition, India seeks to present itself as a historically rooted and culturally legitimate partner in the Indian Ocean region. The project's aim is not intended as a one-time symbolic launch, but as a long-term cultural and diplomatic platform. Shared maritime heritage forms an important bridge between Project Mausam's civilizational narrative and Sri Lanka's continuing relevance in the Indian Ocean. India and Sri Lanka have been connected not only by geography, but also by centuries of interaction across the sea through trade, pilgrimage, Buddhist traditions, and the circulation of people, goods, and ideas. These long-standing exchanges helped create a shared littoral world in which the ocean functioned as a space of contact rather than division. By invoking this historical experience, Project Mausam presents the Indian Ocean as a region shaped by interaction, mobility, and mutual influence. In this context, Sri Lanka appears not merely as a strategically located island in contemporary geopolitics, but as a vital element of a common maritime heritage that lends greater historical depth and diplomatic legitimacy to India's cultural outreach.

III. POSITIONING SRI LANKA IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION AND ITS RELEVANCE TO PROJECT MAUSAM

Sri Lanka's importance to Project Mausam begins with a simple but decisive fact, it sits at the heart of the northern Indian Ocean, close to some of the busiest sea lines of communication in the world and immediately adjacent to India's southern maritime flank (Brewster et al. 2024). That location gives Sri Lanka a dual value. Historically, it made the island a nodal point in the circulation of merchants, pilgrims, goods, and religious influences across the Indian Ocean. Strategically, it has made Sri Lanka a critical littoral state for every power seeking influence in the Indo-Pacific and the wider Indian Ocean Region. For Project Mausam, this makes Sri Lanka more than a participant in a heritage narrative. It makes Sri Lanka one of the clearest living examples of how maritime geography, civilizational exchange, and present-day strategy overlap. Sri Lanka's contemporary strategic importance is visible in the way multiple major powers engage it. China's stake is the most discussed example. The Hambantota Port agreement and the 99-year lease granted in 2017 to China Merchants Port Holdings turned Sri Lanka into a central case in debates



over maritime infrastructure, debt, and geostrategic competition in the Indian Ocean. The Colombo Port City project added another layer to this strategic-economic presence. The United States has also treated Sri Lanka as important to Indian Ocean security. In the Fifth U.S.-Sri Lanka Partnership Dialogue held in Washington on 12 July 2024, both sides explicitly discussed maritime security, a safe and prosperous Indo-Pacific, cooperation under Sri Lanka's chairmanship of the Indian Ocean Rim Association, and deeper engagement on regional security issues. These examples show that Sri Lanka is not strategically important in the abstract; it is actively courted by major powers because of its location and maritime relevance. Sri Lanka has also used this geostrategic position actively rather than passively. It has participated in bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral forums that reinforce its image as a maritime actor. At the multilateral level, Sri Lanka took part in MILAN 2024, the major multilateral naval exercise hosted by India, where the Sri Lanka Navy deployed SLNS Sayurala from Trincomalee. At the bilateral level, Sri Lanka has remained a regular participant in SLINEX, the annual India-Sri Lanka naval exercise. The 2024 edition was held at Visakhapatnam from 17-20 December 2024, with harbour and sea phases focused on maritime interoperability, and the 2025 edition continued this security coordination. At the minilateral level, Sri Lanka remains central to the Colombo Security Conclave, a regional security platform that links India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, and now other partners around shared Indian Ocean challenges. The conclave's founding documents were signed in Sri Lanka in August 2024, underscoring Colombo's role as an institutional anchor in Indian Ocean security cooperation. For India, Sri Lanka's strategic value is especially acute. The two countries share not only maritime proximity but also a common interest in the stability of the waters stretching from the Palk Strait to the wider Bay of Bengal and the central Indian Ocean. India's official 2025 brief on bilateral relations makes this clear indirectly through economics: in April-November FY 2024-25, bilateral trade stood at USD 3.67 billion, and India remained deeply involved in connectivity, energy, security, and recovery cooperation with Sri Lanka. But the strategic dimension goes beyond trade. Sri Lanka matters to India because Colombo Port remains vital for Indian transshipment, because external military or quasi-strategic presence in Sri Lanka affects India's maritime security calculus, and because both countries have an interest in secure sea lanes, humanitarian assistance cooperation, coastal security, and a relatively balanced regional order (Senaratne 2016). Since the launch of Project Mausam in 2014, India's engagement with Sri Lanka has acquired a stronger maritime-cultural layer, even if that layer has not always been explicitly branded as Project Mausam. The relationship has increasingly combined strategy with civilizational outreach (Prime Minister's Office 2024). The India-Sri Lanka Joint Statement of December 2024 explicitly reaffirmed that bilateral ties are rooted in "deep-rooted cultural and civilizational ties, geographical proximity and the people-to-people relation." During Prime Minister Modi's April 2025 visit to Sri Lanka, both sides again emphasized partnership grounded in history as well as future-oriented cooperation. This has been reinforced by concrete cultural measures, such as India's long-running cultural presence through the Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre in Colombo, continuing scholarship and Buddhist linkages, the USD 15 million grant announced in 2020 to promote Buddhist ties, the later announcement of grant assistance for the Sacred City Complex in Anuradhapura, and the 2026 exposition of the sacred Devnimori Buddha relics in Sri Lanka, presented officially as a step to deepen spiritual and cultural ties. Maritime connectivity has also been revived through the ferry link between Nagapattinam and Kankesanthurai, relaunched in August 2024; by June 2025 it had carried over 15,000 passengers, giving historical links a tangible mobility dimension. India clearly has a comparative advantage in Sri Lanka in the realm of civilizational intimacy, Buddhist linkages, linguistic-cultural familiarity, and people-to-people memory. That is precisely why Sri Lanka is so relevant to Project Mausam. Yet cultural diplomacy will remain limited if it is not institutionalized more systematically. India could improve this by linking Project Mausam more directly with Sri Lankan ports, museums, universities, Buddhist circuits, digital archives, maritime archaeology collaborations, and regular India-Sri Lanka heritage dialogues. At present, India's cultural engagement is visible and meaningful, but it is still less structurally integrated than infrastructure-led strategies pursued by others. Project Mausam gives India the conceptual framework to correct that gap. Sri Lanka, because of its geography and history, is where that effort could become most convincing.

IV. CONCLUSION

In a nutshell it argues that Project Mausam is more than a heritage initiative. It is also part of India's effort to use shared history and cultural connection as a basis for regional engagement in the Indian Ocean. The larger point is that in today's international

environment, influence does not depend only on military strength or economic capacity. It also depends on whether a country can build trust, present itself as a legitimate regional partner, and draw upon ideas and symbols that others recognize and value. Seen from this perspective, Project Mausam reflects an important shift in India's approach. By drawing attention to old maritime routes, monsoon-based exchanges, and shared cultural landscapes, the project presents the Indian Ocean as a historically connected space rather than only a strategic arena of rivalry. Its diplomatic value lies in this effort to reconnect the present with a deeper regional past. In doing so, India seeks to place itself within a wider history of exchange and interaction that links South Asia with the broader Indian Ocean world. Sri Lanka occupies a central place in this argument. Its location, maritime history, and contemporary strategic relevance make it one of the most important states in the region. It is significant not only because of its place in present-day geopolitics, but also because it represents, in a very concrete way, the overlap between maritime heritage and current regional politics. The discussion has shown that India's engagement with Sri Lanka since the launch of Project Mausam has combined strategy with cultural and civilizational outreach, especially through Buddhist ties, public diplomacy, connectivity, and crisis support. At the same time, the article has also shown that cultural diplomacy cannot succeed on symbolism alone. Shared heritage may create goodwill, but its long-term value depends on sustained institutional work, deeper cooperation, and visible public engagement. For that reason, the real promise of Project Mausam lies not simply in remembering the past, but in turning that past into a meaningful framework for present cooperation. If the project is developed more seriously and more consistently, it can strengthen not only India's cultural presence in the Indian Ocean, but also a broader regional understanding built on connection rather than competition.

REFERENCES

1. Archaeological Survey of India. n.d. "Project Mausam." Accessed April 14, 2026. <https://asi.nic.in/pages/Project-Mousam/HQ>.
2. Bially Mattern, Janice. 2005. "Why 'Soft Power' Isn't So Soft: Representational Force and the Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 33, no. 3: 583–612. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298050330031601>.
3. Brewster, David, Simon Bateman, and Anthony Bergin. 2024. *Governing Sri Lanka's Maritime Space: An Assessment of Sri Lanka's Maritime Challenges and Maritime Domain Awareness Capabilities*. Canberra: ANU National Security College. https://nsc.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/2024-09/LOW%20RES_NSC_Sri%20Lanka_Report_2024_web-compressed.pdf.
4. Britannica. 2025. "Hambantota Port." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Accessed April 14, 2026. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Hambantota-port>.
5. Cummings, Milton C. 2003. *Cultural Diplomacy and the United States Government: A Survey*. Washington, DC: Center for Arts and Culture. <https://www.americansforthearts.org/sites/default/files/MCCpaper.pdf>.
6. Goff, Patricia M. 2013. "Cultural Diplomacy." In *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy*, edited by Andrew F. Cooper, Jorge Heine, and Ramesh Thakur, 419–435. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199588862.013.0024>.
7. High Commission of India, Colombo. n.d.a. "India-Sri Lanka Cultural Relations." Accessed April 14, 2026. <https://www.hcicolombo.gov.in/page/india-sri-lanka-cultural-relations/>.
8. ———. n.d.b. "Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre." Accessed April 14, 2026. <https://www.hcicolombo.gov.in/page/swami-vivekananda-cultural-centre/>.
9. ———. 2025. "Transcript of Special Briefing by MEA on Prime Minister's Visit to Sri Lanka (April 05, 2025)." April 5, 2025. <https://www.mea.gov.in/mediabriefings.htm?dtl%2F39378%2FTranscript+of+Special+briefing+by+MEA+on+Prime+Ministers+visit+to+Sri+Lanka+April+05+2025>.

10. Kurlantzick, Joshua. 2007. *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
11. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. 2015. "External Affairs Minister's Address at International Conference on 'India and Indian Ocean: Renewing the Maritime Trade and Civilizational Linkages' in Bhubaneswar." March 20, 2015. https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl%2F24994%2FExternal_Affairs_Ministers_address_at_International_Conference_on_India_and_Indian_Ocean_Renewing_the_Maritime_Trade_and_Civilizational_Linkages_in_Bh.
12. ———. 2023. "Remarks by EAM, Dr. S. Jaishankar at the Opening Session of 23rd IORA Council of Ministers." October 11, 2023. https://www.mea.gov.in/SpeechesStatements.htm?dtl%2F37181%2FRemarks_by_EAM_Dr_S_Jaishankar_at_the_opening_session_of_23rd_IORA_Council_of_Ministers.
13. ———. 2024. "Question No. 391: Humanitarian Assistance to Sri Lanka." Rajya Sabha, July 25, 2024. https://www.mea.gov.in/rajya-sabha.htm?dtl%2F38001%2FQUESTION_NO391_HUMANITARIAN_ASSISTANCE_TO_SRI_LANKA.
14. ———. 2025. *Brief on India-Sri Lanka Bilateral Relations*. New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs. https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Sri_Lanka-2025.pdf.
15. Nye, Joseph S., Jr. 2017. "Soft Power: The Origins and Political Progress of a Concept." *Palgrave Communications* 3: 17008. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2017.8>.
16. Press Information Bureau, Government of India. 2024. "Milestones of International Yoga Day." December 2, 2024. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2079777>.
17. ———. 2024. "Sagarmanthan 2024: India's Maritime Vision." November 19, 2024. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2074644>.
18. Prime Minister's Office, Government of India. 2024. "India-Sri Lanka Joint Statement: Fostering Partnerships for a Shared Future." December 16, 2024. https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl%2F38797%2FIndia_Sri_Lanka_Joint_Statement_Fostering_Partnerships_for_a_Shared_Future.
19. Rivera, Tim. 2015. *Distinguishing Cultural Relations from Cultural Diplomacy: The British Council's Relationship with Her Majesty's Government*. Los Angeles: USC Center on Public Diplomacy. <https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/sites/uscpublicdiplomacy.org/files/useruploads/u33041/Distinguishing%20Cultural%20Relations%20From%20Cultural%20Diplomacy%20-%20Full%20Version%20%281%29.pdf>.
20. Senaratne, Bhagya. 2015. "Sri Lanka's Strategic Relevance in the South Asian Region: An Analysis of India's Indian Ocean Strategy and China's Maritime Silk Route Initiative." In *Proceedings of the 8th International Research Conference*, 94–99. Ratmalana, Sri Lanka: General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University. <https://ir.kdu.ac.lk/bitstream/handle/345/1249/dss-134.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=1>.