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Religious Soft Power in Bangladesh's Diplomacy: A Case Study of Islamic and Buddhist Cultural Influence

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Abstract: *Bangladesh, the fourth largest Muslim populated country in the world, is globally well-known for its religious coexistence. Despite Islam being its state religion, Bangladesh maintains religious harmony and pluralism excellently. Focusing on this nature, the present study investigates the strategic role of religious soft power in Bangladesh's diplomacy with special reference to Islamic and Buddhist cultural influences. This study aims to explore religious heritage as a factor in strengthening Bangladesh's global image and international relations. Considering the academic and practical significance, this research addresses the research gap by investigates the relationship between religious identity and foreign policy. A qualitative case study research approach has been applied in this paper to examine the impact of Islamic and Buddhist cultural heritages on Bangladeshi diplomacy. The approach enables this researcher to gain a detailed understanding of soft power in the diplomacy of Bangladesh. In spite of the constitutional debate on secularism, pluralism, and state religion, the government initiatives to strengthen communal harmony create a positive image globally. Government's financial support and safety measures in the observation of religious rituals, providing holidays in festivals, visits to sacred places, conservation of religious heritage sites, cultural exchange programmes with other countries, development of infrastructure, establishment of academic institutions, and so on have invigorated Bangladesh's commitment to harmony and catalyzed effective diplomacy. In this process, Bangladesh not only strengthens its relations with the Muslim and Buddhist-majority countries but also increases its soft power. This results in regional stability and economic development. So, proper investment in religious soft power can assist in policy formulation, economic collaboration, and peace building in this globalized era.*

Keywords*: Soft Power, Diplomacy, Bangladesh, Islam, Buddhism*

Introduction

Bangladesh is a country with a long history of religious and cultural diversity. It is referred to as a unique example of how religious soft power can influence diplomacy. Over the ages, Bangladesh has become a melting point of cultures where major

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world religions and different ethnic cultures have coexisted. This coexistence of religions becomes an integral part of Bangladesh's social system. The historical role of religion in Bangalee society also influences Bangladesh's domestic policies and international relations. So, it is assumed that the role of religious soft power in Bangladeshi diplomacy is an essential area of study. The academic importance of this topic is that there is a scope to examine how Bangladesh can apply religious connections to build diplomatic relations. The practical significance is related to policy formulation, promotion of interreligious harmony and cooperation in international diplomacy.

The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 1972, originally included secularism as one of the state principles (Article 8). But through the 8th Amendment of the Constitution, Islam became the state religion (Article 2A). While the supporters of pluralism acknowledge the coexistence of multi-religions, the principle of secularism demands the separation of religion from state affairs. The Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh has maintained a pluralistic approach in practice. This is observed in government policies to promote and recognize religious harmony and coexistence. Key state figures have direct engagement with religious communities and visit different religious shrines. The Ministry of Religious Affairs in Bangladesh oversees the Islamic Foundation, the Hindu Religious Welfare Trust, the Buddhist Religious Welfare Trust, and the Christian Religious Welfare Trust simultaneously. Different state programs are inaugurated with recitation from the four major religious scriptures (Islam, 2011). In addition, the chief religious festivals are officially recognized, and public holidays are declared on major festival days.

Historically there has been strong and harmonious relationships between groups and individuals of different religions in Bangladesh. In the Language Movement of 1952 and the Liberation War of 1971, people have shown strong interfaith solidarity. Recently, the establishment of the Department of World Religions and Culture at the University of Dhaka exemplifies the importance of the academic study of interreligious relations in Bangladesh. The inclination for religious coexistence is not limited to the national sphere. As famously stated by Otto von Bismarck, foreign policy is indeed the extension of a nation's domestic policy, and thus, religious harmony is also highlighted in Bangladesh's diplomatic relations with others. Religious harmony is important for implementing the principle of Bangladesh's foreign policy of 'Friendship to all, malice to none' (MoFA, 2022). Along with this, Islam being the state religion of Bangladesh, the nation emphasizes religious ties and solidarity when Bangladesh becomes a member of any Muslim organization or maintains close relations with a Muslim-majority country. So, religion cannot be ignored in either the domestic or international policies of Bangladesh.

Research Objectives

However, scholarly literature on religion and diplomacy in Bangladesh is almost absent. Researchers in this field mainly focus on cultural diplomacy and at times discuss heritage tourism (Uchinlayen & Suchana, 2018). In some research, diplomatic activity centering on Buddhist relic exchanges have been discussed (Barua, 2018). While the evidence of historical coexistence and harmony of religions in Bengal from ancient times are studied, their specific relation to Bangladesh's diplomacy is not explored (Islam, 2011). So, a critical gap remains in the role of religious soft power in Bangladesh's diplomacy. This research aims to address this gap by examining the role of religion in international relations of Bangladesh, where Islamic and Buddhist cultural influences are taken as a case study. In addition, focusing on the main aim, this research will also explore the following questions from the perspective of Islamic and Buddhist religious practices in Bangladesh.

- How does religious soft power influence bilateral and multilateral relations?
- What role do religious institutions play in shaping diplomacy?
- How does the Constitution uphold religious freedom?
- How do spiritual tourism and music influence international collaboration?

The remainder of this research article is structured as follows: first, the 'Conceptual Development and Theoretical Framework' section deals with different concepts and theories regarding this topic by reviewing different relevant literature. Next, a logical description of why the case study method is taken for this research is explored. After that, the 'Findings' section deals with the details of this article, where religious diplomacy in Bangladesh's foreign policy and the role of Muslim and Buddhist culture and heritage are broadly discussed. Finally, this paper ends with an analysis of how religious soft power is important, and some recommendations as the outcome of this research are presented shortly.

Conceptual Development and Theoretical Framework

The word 'power' has different dimensions from the perspective of several areas. While it is used in economics, it is termed as money and in physics, it is energy. But in international relations, power implies a state's capacity to shape the actions and decisions of other states and achieve its objectives. In the same vein, Nye Jr. (2004) opined that power is the capability to influence others' behaviors to achieve desired goal. He further added that one state can influence others through various measures– coercion, attraction, and inducement. Power is very difficult to measure. It can be compared to the climate that influences everyone, but nobody knows it properly; people just experience it.

Traditionally, power is measured through the military power of a state. But at present, economic power has also become an expression of a state's power. Generally, a state cannot be militarily strong enough without a potential foundation of economic power. Moreover, the political support of other states and the state's own propaganda play an important role in the enhancement of power of a state. Considering these issues, power can mainly be divided into two types: hard power and soft power. In International Relations, the Realist School perceives power mainly as military power and economic capacity. This is called hard power, which is often accompanied by 'command and coercion' (Nye 2010). Military and economic strength can be intensified by some other resources like territory, population, and natural resources. The use of command and coercion depends on the political motive of the leaders of a state.

The term 'soft power' was first introduced by Nye (1990). In contrast to hard power, soft power uses the motive of intangible attraction. In this power, a state maintains cooperative and cordial relationships. It promotes the state's national values, culture, and ideas in international arenas. Criticizing the Realist School of Thought, the Liberal and Constructivist Schools give less emphasis to military and economic power (Kugiel 2016). The Liberal School criticizes military power, which is the cause of war, and emphasizes a peaceful and stable world. On the other hand, constructivism incorporates ideas and values instead of material reality in international relations. This school does not emphasize power based on tangible resources because people's perception of resources identifies their importance. So, public value and perception should be given priority, according to their opinion.

Culture, values, and foreign policies of a state are highly important factors in soft power (Nye 2004). A state can influence other countries through culture. The influence of popular culture in other countries is very evident nowadays. Export of cultural ingredients and personal communication in export and import business can have a high impact on economic power. For example, Hollywood is highly influential in different countries, and this exemplifies the way economic power, though a form of hard power, can also be achieved by soft power. Religious belief also creates strong bonds among countries.

The pioneer of the soft power concept, Nye (1990), stated that soft power is a state's capacity to shape the action of others through appeal and persuasion instead of coercion. He compares soft power with the childhood socialisation process, where parents use attractive ideas to shape a child's behaviour (1990). Nye (2004) argues that soft power is derived from a nation's culture, political values, and foreign policies. This soft power is viewed as legitimate and appealing in enhancing influence in global politics. The main influencing tools in soft power are diplomacy, media, cultural exchange programmes, education, and so on. Superpowers such as USA and China strategically promote their cultural products,

education, and development initiatives to influence other countries of the world to build a favourable environment for them. In our increasingly interconnected world, soft power has become a crucial tool in international relations.

Cultural Diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy is a type of diplomacy where cultural elements of a state are used to attract or influence other countries to realize its interests. It establishes mutual understanding and influences international relations. This form of diplomacy is rooted in the soft power theory which proposes that ideas, values, and policies can influence global relationships (Nye, 2004). It involves the promotion of a country's culture, religious notions, arts, and education. The main goal is to build long-term relations and enhance the country's image globally (Gienow-Hecht & Donfried, 2010). Cull (2008) argues that cultural diplomacy enhances the soft power of a country, but it needs consistency. British Council, Confucius Institute, Fulbright Scholarships, and Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre are some examples of how different countries promote their respective cultures through arts and education. Thus, cultural diplomacy plays a vital role in promoting international cooperation and a state's global influence in a non-coercive manner.

Religious values, institutions, and networks can also increase cross-cultural understanding and influence international events. Religion-based institutions and leaders establish morality, humanitarian activities and interreligious dialogues. Different faith-based organisations are involved in conflict resolution and social welfare activities. Different countries have alliances with other countries based on religious ideology. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), for example, is an organisation of Muslim-majority countries.

Methodology

This research follows a qualitative case study approach in exploring the role of religious soft power in Bangladeshi diplomacy. The Islamic and Buddhist cultural influences in Bangladesh were taken as a case study. A case study refers to a type of research design, not just a mere data collection method. In a case study approach, an empirical inquiry is conducted with an in-depth study of a case, programme, or any other event (Yin, 2009; Creswell, 2014). A researcher uses a case study design when the researcher needs to examine a deep understanding of the 'how' and 'why' types of questions (Yin 2003). Furthermore, the researcher selects a 'unit of analysis' and uses any data collection method in this process (De Vaus, 2001). The researcher has the opportunity to use 'sociological imagination'. Considering the strengths and potentials of this approach, a qualitative case study approach was undertaken in the present study. By concentrating on a single case, that is Bangladesh, this study found complex relations among religious practices and contemporary diplomatic strategies. The data for this research were collected

from different government websites, newspapers, journal articles, books, research reports, and so on. After data collection, the data were classified thematically and then analyzed. The findings from this analysis can offer valuable practical insights for policymakers.

Findings & Discussion

Religious Diplomacy in Bangladesh's Foreign Policy

Religious diplomacy plays a significant role in Bangladesh's foreign policy. It reflects a long history of interreligious harmony and co-existence. Although it is a Muslim-majority country, the followers of other religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and indigenous religions, live side by side in peace and harmony. This pluralistic environment enhances Bangladesh's soft power internationally. Moreover, due to this pluralism, the Bangladesh government can easily establish and maintain good diplomatic relations with any country, whether it be a Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or Christian-majority country. Other countries of the world are assured that harmony and peaceful coexistence exist in Bangladesh. The nation maintains this environment by providing moral, financial, and administrative support to all citizens of all religions. Furthermore, as there is religious coexistence and all people are friends with each other, religion-based terrorism cannot grow at an intensive level in this country. This results in internal stability in Bangladesh, which produces a positive picture worldwide. That is why foreign direct investment (FDI) flows here without any threat of a security dilemma. Foreigners who are followers of different religions can reside here safely. Religious values such as non-violence, compassion, hospitality, and so on are very integral to the teachings of the major religions. These noble principles are closely aligned with the rules of diplomacy (Fox & Sandler, 2004).

The foreign policy of Bangladesh emphasizes economic growth, cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy, and regional stability. The messages of the different religions do not contradict or oppose these points of emphasis. At the same time, religion may help in fulfilling these aims. It can rightly be said that Bangladesh engages in many bilateral and multilateral relations where religion plays a vital role. For example, Bangladesh is a member country of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. Furthermore, Bangladesh's commitment to humanitarian assistance for persecuted religious minorities around the world improves its image internationally.

To further understand the role of religion in diplomacy, the constitutional provisions , which are the basis of Bangladesh's foreign policy, need to be discussed. Article 25 lays the foundation for Bangladesh's international relations. The article is as follows:

> 25. Promotion of international peace, security, and solidarity
>
> The State shall base its international relations on the principles of respect for national sovereignty and equality, non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, peaceful settlement of international disputes and respect for international law and the principles enunciated in the United Nations Charter, and on the basis of those principles shall –
>
> (a) strive for the renunciation of the use of force in international relations and for general and complete disarmament;
>
> (b) uphold the right of every people freely to determine and build up its own social, economic and political system by ways and means of its own free choice; and
>
> (c) support oppressed peoples throughout the world waging a just struggle against imperialism, colonialism or racialism. (The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 1972, art. 25)

From Article 25, it is clear that Bangladesh is committed to peaceful international relations, non-interference, and respect for human rights. These aspects align closely with the principles of soft power and religious diplomacy. By renouncing the use of military aggression, Bangladesh proves itself as a country that prioritizes dialogue, cooperation, and cultural exchange over coercive force. Moreover, Bangladesh's emphasis on interreligious harmony and peace also aligns with the principles of international law and respect for sovereignty, the rights of oppressed people, and peaceful solutions to disputes.

Islamic Cultural Influence on Bangladeshi Diplomacy

Islamic cultural influence plays a significant role in Bangladesh's diplomatic engagements. Bangladesh is a Muslim-majority nation with a historical and cultural connection to Islam. Although Bangladesh maintains a secular constitution, Islam has an immense influence on its legal, social, and diplomatic systems. Bangladesh has a strong relationship with Muslim-majority countries and international Islamic organisations. Bangladesh has many sacred Muslim heritage sites which are visited by people from different countries. All these cultural elements help to promote the soft power of Bangladesh, which has an impact on Bangladeshi diplomacy.

Islam and the Constitution of Bangladesh

According to the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, the state religion of Bangladesh is Islam. In the original Constitution of 1972, there was no mention of Islam as the state religion but in the Eighth Amendment in 1988, Islam was declared the state religion. Simultaneously, however, the Constitution ensures equal rights for all religious communities (Article 2A). Prior to this change, some new words were included in the Preamble of the Constitution through the Fifth

Amendment. These words are "Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim", meaning "In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful". In its present form, "In the name of the Creator, the Merciful" has also been incorporated through the Fifteenth Amendment (Preamble). At the same time, further articles of the Constitution acknowledge the rights of minority communities. All these articles and words in the Constitution signify that Bangladesh maintains a unique balance between secularism and state religion. This pluralistic view and state religion concept shaped Bangladesh's domestic policy and international diplomatic engagement (Riaz, 2020). Besides, the constitutional principles of social justice, human dignity, and equity have a sharp affinity with the teachings of Islam. These principles guide Bangladesh's foreign policy, especially in humanitarian and cultural diplomacy, and peace-keeping missions.

Bangladesh – OIC Relations and Islamic Identity

The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), established in 1969, is the second largest organisation in the world (OIC, 2025). It was founded to safeguard the interests of Muslims worldwide with 57 member states. Bangladesh became a member in 1974 (Amran, 2018), and its entry into the OIC is an important aspect of its foreign policy. This proves that Bangladesh is committed to Islamic identity and solidarity worldwide and ready to work hand in hand with other Muslim-majority countries.

The relationship of Bangladesh with the OIC has impacted many corners of Bangladesh's diplomacy. The OIC is a key platform for Bangladesh's economic and trade partnerships, cultural exchanges, and humanitarian cooperation. Using the link of the OIC, Bangladesh has developed strong diplomatic relations with Muslim nations, especially in the Middle East and Africa. The country has gained multiple opportunities like securing investment, trading, and worker migration. A huge concentration of the remittance flow comes from the Middle Eastern countries, which account for over 6% of Bangladesh's GDP (World Bank, 2021).

Since getting membership, Bangladesh has been working jointly and cooperatively with the OIC. In different sectors like education, economics, religion, and culture, the OIC is helping Bangladesh. Islamic University of Technology, established in 1978, is the first international university in Bangladesh. This is a project programme of the OIC taken to advance Islamic values among Muslims (IUT, 2025). The Islamic Development-Bangladesh Islamic Solidarity Education Waqf was founded to spread education (IDB-BISE 2025) under which the Islamic Development Bank provided financial assistance, while the Government of Bangladesh provided logistical support. By helping to build information and technological infrastructure, this project has reduced unemployment. Apart from this, the Islamic Development Bank has granted financial support in different projects in Bangladesh, spanning from food security to climate change mitigation.

To set up the Islami Bank Bangladesh, the then Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, signed the IDB Charter in 1974 (Amran, 2018). At present, Bangladesh has a number of Shariah-based Islami banks. These joint activities between the OIC and Bangladesh show that Bangladesh has very successfully used Muslim-majority identity in diplomatic relations with the OIC and other Muslim-majority countries in the world.

The OIC has not only helped in infrastructural and educational development, it has actively participated in the resolution of various international problems faced by Bangladesh. One of the major problems Bangladesh is still facing is the Rohingya crisis at present. At present, nearly one million Rohingya people are residing in Bangladesh, the majority of whom came in 2017 (UNHCR, 2024). The OIC is a key diplomatic partner in gaining international support and legal actions. The OIC supported the Gambia in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) where the Gambia sued a Myanmar for the Rohingya genocide (ICJ, 2025). Recently, the OIC Secretary General sought financial help from its member states for the Gambia so that the country can continue its legal fight for the Rohingyas (UNB, 2023). This position of the OIC signifies a great diplomatic support for Bangladesh.

Economic and Religious Nexus between Bangladesh and the Middle East

The diplomatic relations between Bangladesh and the Middle East have been significantly shaped by economic and religious relations. The Middle East is a significant economic partner of Bangladesh in the field of employment, investment, and energy. About 6 million Bangladeshis are working in the Middle East (Siddiqui & Uddin, 2024). Remittance inflow in Bangladesh from the region is increasing, and the largest share of remittance in Bangladesh arrives from here. Of the total remittance, 49% comes from the Middle East ("Orthobochor", 2024). Historically, different countries of the Middle East have been supporting humanitarian (relief) activities in Bangladesh, from the devastating flood in 1974 to the recent Rohingya crisis (Juhra & Tanzim, 2022). Bangladesh also maintains export and import relations with the countries of the Middle East. Much of its fuel arrives from this region (Siddiqui & Uddin, 2024), and Bangladesh has signed MoUs with the UAE for the supply of LNG (*The Daily Sun*, 2019). In addition, Saudi Arabia has financed the installation of the 100MW solar IPP in Bangladesh in 2019 (Juhra & Tanjim, 2022). Besides these, Bangladesh and the Middle East nations cooperate in the fields of education, socio-economic development, and foreign affairs.

Bangladesh and the Middle East nations have deep diplomatic relations. One of the key factors in this case is that all these states are Muslim-majority countries, and thus there is strong cooperation in the religious and the cultural spheres. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, for instance, has committed to finance the building of nine iconic mosques in Bangladesh (Rahman, 2022). In the past, there was a project to build 560 mosques with Saudi financing, that did not ultimately take

place. Nonetheless, these initiatives attest to the strong diplomatic relations that Bangladesh has with Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, many Bangladeshis go to Saudi Arabia for pilgrimages such as the Hajj, an annual pilgrimage to Mecca, that is one of the pillars of Islam. In 2024, 85225 Bangladeshis went for Hajj (*The Somoy News*, 2024). A great number of people also travel to Saudi Arabia for another pilgrimage, the Umrah.

Spiritual Tourism and Devotional Music

Another form of cultural diplomacy is spiritual tourism where devotees travel to religious places for spiritual contentment. Spiritual tourism can be of several types, such as pilgrimage visits to spiritual places and gathering in heritage sites on religious occasions (Vukonic, 1990). People from the Middle East nations, Turkiye, Indonesia, Pakistan, Malaysia, India, and so on visit different historical mosques like Shaat Tara mosque, Baitul Mukarom mosque, Kakrail mosque, Lalbagh Fort mosque, Kusumba mosque, Binat Bibi mosque and Chhota Sona mosque. (Uchinlayen & Suchana, 2018). The Shaat Gombuj mosque was declared a World Heritage site by UNESCO. These mosques contain the signs of the glorious Mughal Empire and the Sultanate Period in Bengal. In the spread of Islam in the Indian subcontinent, especially in Bengal, the Sufis played a vital role. In commemoration of them, different shrines and *mazars* have developed. These shrines have now become pilgrimage sites. The shrines of Hazrat Shah Jalal, Shah Paran, Shah Amarnat, Shah Ali, Mukhdum Shah, Khan Jahan Ali, and many others are considered sacred to the Muslims. Then the Biswa Ijtema, the second-largest Muslim gathering in the world after the Hajj, takes place in. Tongi of Bangladesh. Thousands of people from home and abroad join this spiritual congregation.

Islamic devotional music plays an important role in national peace-building, which also strengthens Bangladesh's diplomatic image. Devotional music is made of different genres like the *Baul* songs and mystic songs in *mazars* that have gained international attraction. Another form of concerts of *Qawwali* songs have become common in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. Singers from Turkey, Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan perform in these events. These activities enhance the religious soft power of Bangladesh in the international arena.

Buddhism in Bangladeshi Diplomacy

Bangladesh is a pluralist country where people of all religions follow their faith peacefully including the people of the Buddhist religion. Most of the Buddhists in Bangladesh live in the Chattogram Hill Tracts, Cox's Bazar and Chattogram. The domestic and international policies of Bangladesh highlight tolerance, pluralism, and minority rights, which align with Buddhist teachings. Moreover, the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh recognizes and supports several Buddhist festivals and international religious conferences to maintain

goodwill with Buddhist-majority countries. By highlighting these activities to promote religious coexistence and harmony, Bangladesh makes efforts to strengthen trade, tourism, and cultural exchange with several Buddhist-majority countries in South East Asia and South Asia.

Buddhist Legacy and World Heritage Sites in Bangladesh

To maintain good diplomatic relations with Buddhist-majority countries, Bangladesh highlights its pluralistic nature and old historical ties with Buddhism. In its relationship with Thailand, Bangladesh often harnesses its Buddhist legacy (Dipananda, 2017). Hence, the history is often mentioned in official programmes and visits. For example, in 2015 the then Bangladesh Ambassador to Thailand had proudly referred to Atish Dipankar, a Bangalee Buddhist monk, and his role in spreading Buddhism outside of the Indian sub-continent at an event (bdnews24.com 2015). In addition, Bangladesh is rich with significant Buddhist heritage sites. To demonstrate these Buddhist heritage sites, the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh arranged a conference titled 'Developing Sustainable and Inclusive Buddhist Heritage and Pilgrimage Circuits in South Asia's Buddhist Heartland' in collaboration with the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO, 2015). Some of the world-famous heritage sites in Bangladesh are - Paharpur Buddhist Monastery (built in the 8th century and declared by UNESCO as a World Heritage site), Mainamati Shalban Vihara (7th - 12th century), Mahasthangarh (3rd Century BC), Bhasu Vihara (8th century) and Holud Vihara (8th century) (MoFA, 2025). Buddhists from Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Singapore, Japan, and Vietnam visit these heritage places. This can be used as public diplomacy as it is a part of cultural influence. Bangladesh's cultural diplomacy efforts focusing on Buddhist heritage sites have accelerated bilateral and multilateral collaboration. Different countries, like Japan, are keen to help the conservation of these heritage sites.

Exchange of Buddhist relics

As part of cultural diplomany, Bangladesh has played an important role in relic exchange, exhibitions, and conservation. These facts strengthen Bangladesh's diplomatic relations with Buddhist-majority countries such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, and Japan (Dipananda, 2017). The relic exchange with Sri Lanka is an example of how this can work as a diplomatic tool. The Colombo Gangaramaya Temple of Sri Lanka had requested Nondonkanon Buddhist Monastery (Chattogram) of Bangladesh to give some strands of the lock hair of Gautama Buddha, which is believed to be conserved in the temple. The Chattogram Buddhist Association replied that the lock of hair was the national property of Bangladesh which meant that the exchange had to be negotiated through diplomatic channels of the two governments (Barua, 2018). After negotiation through state-level diplomatic channels, a high-level delegation came to Bangladesh to receive

the coveted strand of Gautama Buddha's hair. In another incident, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh arranged an "Ambassadors Outreach Program" for diplomats in Bangladesh to visit the Buddhist monastery Ramu's Rangkut Banashram in Cox's Bazar on 28 February 2024 (Banglanews24.com 2024). In this way, the Bangladesh Government has tried to show that Bangladesh is a pluralist country where people from all walks of life live in coexistence. The Government used Buddhism to strengthen its diplomatic relations with other countries, sepecially with Buddhist-majority countries. In addition to state-led initiatives, different Buddhist organisations and shrines have exchanged Buddhist relics, which develops cultural diplomacy at the grassroots level.

Buddhism in the Bilateral Relations between Bangladesh and Other Countries

The Pew Research Center (2022) in "Religious Composition by Country, 2010 – 2050" has shown that 99% of the total Buddhist population in 2010 resided in the Asia-Pacific region, which would become 98% by 2050. In the present trend of world politics, the world powers are looking at the Asia-Pacific region, due to its blue economy and huge public market. Bangladesh is also considering this matter and has already developed a new policy called "Look East Diplomacy" in its foreign affairs. While Bangladesh tries to develop close diplomatic ties with the countries of ASEAN, namely- China, Japan, and South Korea, Buddhism can play an important role in this context. Buddhism is well-known for its global character. Its monks and teachers had spread it worldwide since ancient times. Different rising powers in the Asia Pacific region are using the diplomacy of Buddhism to establish good relations with countries in this region (Raj 2022). For instance, although China does not promote any religion, it incorporates Buddhism in its soft power. Its cherished "One Belt One Road Initiatives" shows the importance of interdependence - the core philosophy of Buddhism. China uses Buddhist soft power with countries like Nepal (Jackson 2019). At the same time, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi gifted the sapling of the Bodhi Tree to Nepal and South Korea (*The Hindu* 2014; NDTV 2019). In the same manner, Bangladesh, with its rich Buddhist heritage, historical ties to the Buddhist world, and interreligious harmony, has established strong relations with Sri Lanka, Thailand, Japan, and others. Relic exchange with Sri Lanka and the visit of Sri Lankan President Mahindra Rajapaksa as well as Thailand's selection of Bangladesh to give its annual Royal *Kathin Chivar Dan* in celebration of 50 years of diplomatic relations with Bangladesh are some examples of diplomatic bilateral ties with these countries where religious cultures were adopted to strengthen the diplomatic relations (*The Dainik Azadi*, 2022). In addition, Bangladesh has financed the building of a temple in Lumbini, Nepal, which is the birthplace of Gautama the Buddha (*The Business Standard*, 2021).

Buddhist Religious Pilgrimage in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has witnessed Buddhism's development in this land. A Buddhist dynasty named the Pala Dynasty had ruled here. So, different Buddhist world heritage sites have developed over time. Many Bangalee Buddhist monks became famous worldwide. For these reasons, different Buddhist sacred pilgrimage places become spiritual tourists' attractions. People from Sri Lanka, Thailand, Japan, and other countries visit these sacred places on different occasions. When people from these countries come here, they have a connection with local people, which in turn develops public diplomacy. At the same time, there are many transnational Buddhist circuits for arranging spiritual tourism in Buddhist spiritual places. Bangladeshis join with people in these tours. Beyond this, spiritual tourism is also a means of economic diplomacy for Bangladesh. From this sector, Bangladesh earns financial opportunities. The government is taking initiatives to develop this factor.

Limitations

This research has explored the potential role of religious soft power in strengthening Bangladesh's bilateral and multilateral relations in global diplomacy. The focus was mainly on Islamic and Buddhist influences as a case study which has not been addressed in current studies on Bangladeshi diplomacy. This research, therefore, contributes to the existing scholarship by explaining how religion and religious harmony can increase a state's soft power. By dint of the religious soft power, a country can develop its image in promoting bilateral relations and getting investment. This research, however, has some limitations. The study was based on a qualitative case study approach only. If a quantitative method could have been included, a broader picture of the society and state would have been obtained. In data analysis, more focus on economic development would have added more depth to the findings. More importantly, limitations in time and scope did not allow for a comparative analysis of Islamic and Buddhist cultural influences. The geopolitical opportunities and threats in harnessing religious soft power can be investigated further. Bangladesh's perspective can also be compared with other countries' practices. Future research could address these issues.

Conclusion

Diplomacy is an art used by a country in establishing relationships with other countries. It may harness different strategies for different countries, which are appropriate for the respective cases. In diplomacy, there is no strict theory of 'one size fits all' which means that a country must take different steps in different conditions. When dealing with Islamic organisations and Muslim-majority countries, Bangladesh highlights Islam as its state religion and being a Muslim-majority country. While maintaining relations with secular and non-Muslim-majority countries, Bangladesh represents religious coexistence, steps taken for

ensuring peace and harmony, and secular principles of the Constitution. Bangladesh can maintain its positive image worldwide.

The analysis of religious diplomacy in Bangladesh's foreign policy shows that the country has successfully incorporated Muslim cultural heritage in making relationships with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and the Middle East countries. The OIC supports Bangladesh in different international forums. The Middle East nations are significant for Bangladesh for economic development and the labour market. Muslim spiritual tourism and devotional music strengthen its diplomatic relations and enhance its soft power. Besides this, Bangladesh focuses on its secularism and harmony while diplomatic advancements with Buddhist-majority countries. Bangladesh stresses on possessing heritage sites rich with many ancient Buddhist records and it attracts people to visit these places every year. ASEAN countries such as Japan, and South Korea have invested in Bangladesh. Thus, religious soft power can function as a diplomatic asset.

The importance of soft power, especially cultural diplomacy, is gaining popularity in the present world. The example of Japan is very vivid in this case. Japan has integrated cultural diplomacy with economic diplomacy. Japan is thus promoting cultural diplomacy with Bangladesh. As in the case of Bangladesh, religious soft power, an element of cultural diplomacy, contributes to gaining economic interests.

In light of the findings and discussion, this study suggests that policymakers should think more about the aspect of religious soft power in Bangladesh's diplomacy. Some recommendations that can be forwarded are as follows:

- The government should officially recognise the strategic value of soft religious power. Academic research on every religion in Bangladesh to find their potential soft power can be given priority. Joint engagement of academicians and policy-makers in this respect is expected.
- In cultural diplomacy, spiritual tourism to heritage sites plays a significant role. The government should take proper initiatives to conserve these sites. To attract international tourists, the marketing and promotion of these places should be enhanced.
- Interreligious harmony and coexistence are Bangladesh's assets in diplomacy. To boost it, the arrangement of interreligious dialogue, the establishment of academic institutions for such research, and the introduction of comparative religions in the course curriculum at primary and secondary schools can be considered. By these, people will respect each other, and the possibility of religion-based conflict can be reduced.
- Strategic relationships with international organisations such as UNESCO,

OIC, and others should be deepened in promoting cultural diplomacy. Culture exchange programmes can strengthen bilateral diplomatic relations.

- Training programmes for diplomats and cultural ambassadors will enhance their strategic skills in using cultural wealth in bilateral and multilateral bargaining.
- A broader policy framework should be developed, highlighting cultural diplomacy and the role of religion. Probable challenges and their solutions should be discussed.

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