



CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

INDIA'S OUTREACH TO THE WORLD



V.SRINIVAS, IAS

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V.Srinivas¹²

Introduction

The Prime Minister³ has said that India has to emerge as a vishwa guru, not only to give direction to the world but to protect our own heritage. The idea is to highlight how India straddles ancient history and modernity. “India is the world’s youngest country and its most ancient.” India’s ancient and modern cultures revitalize India’s international image.

India is symbolized by the plurality of its cultures and culture plays a critical role in ultimately shaping the development agenda of a nation. It represents a set of shared attitudes, values, goals and practices. Culture and arts manifest themselves subtly in almost all economic, social and other activities. India’s cultural agenda is facilitated by a network of organizations – attached, subordinate and autonomous institutions under the aegis of the Ministry of Culture. Through its own activities and those of its institutions, the Ministry of Culture aims at the protection, development and promotion of three different aspects our cultural treasures: Tangible Heritage, Intangible Heritage and Knowledge Resource Heritage. In addition, the Ministry is responsible of maintaining Gandhian Heritage and commemoration of important historical events, as well as celebrating the centenaries of great personalities. Through the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), the Ministry is engaged in the protection of monuments of national importance, as also the accomplishment of excavation and exploration programs. The Ministry is also promoting a ‘Museum Movement’ in the country. Most of India’s finest museums, the National Museum, the Indian Museum, the Salar Jung Museum and the National Gallery of Modern Art, are directly under the purview of the Ministry of Culture. In addition, the Ministry promotes regional and local museums by way of providing financial support through grants in-aid.

India is one of the world’s largest repositories of music, dance, theatre, folk traditions,

¹V.Srinivas is an IAS officer of 1989 batch, currently posted as Chairman Rajasthan Tax Board with additional charge of Chairman Board of Revenue for Rajasthan. He has served as Private Secretary to External Affairs Minister and as Joint Secretary to Government of India Ministry of Culture with additional charge of Director General National Archives of India

² The author is grateful to the inputs given by Shri Ravindra Singh, IAS (1979), Shri Dammu Ravi, IFS (1989), Ms. Dayanita Singh and Ms. ShagunButani in writing this paper

³ Martin, Peter., “Yoga Diplomacy – Narendra Modi’s Soft Power Strategy”., Foreign Affairs, May 2015

songs, performing arts, rites and rituals, paintings and writings that are known, collectively, as 'Intangible Cultural Heritage' (ICH). In order to preserve these elements, the Ministry implements a number of schemes and programs aimed at providing financial support to individuals, groups and cultural organizations engaged in theatre and performance, visual studies and literary arts. This endeavor is supported by the three national academies – Sahitya Akademi, Sangeet Natak Akademi and Lalit Kala Akademi, as well as the National School of Drama and the Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts, which represent a confluence of the finest creative minds in the literary, performance and visual arts. The Ministry aims to recognize excellence achieved in these fields through the prestigious awards it has instituted, such as those bestowed by the three Akademies. The seven Zonal Cultural Centers under the Ministry involve themselves in activities focused on the folk and traditional art forms. The National Library, Kolkata, has, as one of its important functions, the acquisition and conservation of all significant books and publications in the country. The Ministry endeavors to promote library development in a big way, and extends grants-in-aid through the Raja Rammohan Roy Library Foundation, Kolkata, to achieve this objective. The National Mission on Libraries and the National Mission on Manuscripts are major efforts in conservation and promotion of ancient and contemporary literary traditions of India.

The maintenance of all archival records of the country is the responsibility of the National Archives of India. The Government of India has undertaken a major initiative in weeding out records, and in training personnel in records management practices. The transfer of official records to the National Archives of India for historical record-keeping is a significant initiative of the government.

The Ministry is also involved in protection and promotion of Buddhist and Tibetan Culture and is doing this through several institutions located at Sarnath, Varanasi, Leh and Dahun as also the Nava Nalanda Mahavihara at Nalanda.

The Ministry of Culture extends its activities in the international arena, by way of organizing various activities abroad, such as exhibitions and performances. It is responsible for implementation of various UNESCO Conventions in the field of Culture, and has entered into bilateral cultural agreements with 126 countries and has initiated 'Cultural Exchange Programs' with 55 countries. Festivals of India abroad have been organized in countries as far-flung as Peru, Cuba, Lao PDR, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, South Africa, China and Japan.

Revival of the Cultural Festivals of India

August 2013 - Barely a few days after I joined the Ministry of Culture, I received a telephone call from my old friend and Joint Secretary (Latin America Division) Ministry of External Affairs Dammu Ravi, that the Vice President of India would be visiting Peru and Cuba, and if it would be possible for the Ministry of Culture to coordinate an international cultural

event on the sidelines of the visit. When I checked the institutional memory of the Ministry of Culture, it appeared that some nascent efforts had been initiated to organize Festivals of India abroad in Venezuela, Colombia, Cuba and Trinidad & Tobago. The Ambassador of India to Venezuela had responded on telephone that conditions there were not conducive for an International Cultural Engagement in August 2013. The Embassy of India in Trinidad & Tobago indicated that it wasn't possible to conduct the event in 2013. The Embassy of India in Colombia did not present any viable options for taking the initiative forward. There was very little response from the Missions to take the Ministry of Culture's initiative forward.

I was eager to take the Festivals of India abroad as I corresponded vigorously with the Embassies of India in Lima and Havana. The Ambassador of India to Peru and the Ambassador of India to Cuba responded enthusiastically to the proposals to host cultural events in Peru and Cuba respectively. We got venues and dates in Peru and Cuba. The Ministry of Culture and its Akademies had to get firm up the events, participants and budgets for conducting the events for the Festivals of India abroad to be revived. The Embassy of India in Lima intimated me that the Inca Sala auditorium was booked for October 26th and 27th 2013. The Vice President of India's participation in the Festival of India abroad ceremonies was confirmed for October 26, 2013.

It was in the backdrop of the Vice President of India's visit to Peru and Cuba that the remarkable revival of the Festivals of India abroad happened. Sustained international engagement could be developed in a short period of time. Small teams working in cohesion enabled generate a significant momentum. Faced with the challenge of conducting 2 major events abroad in a month's time, I met everyone concerned –Joint Secretary (Latin America); Director General Indian Council of International Relations; Secretary SahityaAkademy for the Festival of Letters; Secretary, SangeetNatakAkademy for the Festival of Dance; Member Secretary IGNCA, senior colleagues in the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting for the film festival, officials in ITDC and Ministry of Tourism for the Food Festival to firm up participation and the events. We were racing against time, to coordinate a number of events, financial sanctions, ticketing, in an administrative set-up that had not been used to conducting events of the scale or size we were envisaging.

There was a lot of confusion in the run-up to the events. Culture Minister was to come for the visit, and after considerable preparation her visit did not materialize. The IGNCA exhibition on masks did not materialize either. The folk artists for the event had to be dropped as their quality was poor. When I watched the preparatory full dress rehearsal at the SNA, I found the invocation of Shiva presented in the composition mesmerizing. The mosaic of Indian dances was beautifully choreographed and had a unique resonance about it. Secretary Culture led the Ministry of Culture delegation to Lima and Cuba comprising of myself, 8 writers from SahityaAkademy and 8 artists from SangeetNatakAkademy. The films division forwarded the films for the Film Festival. India Tourism Development Corporation deputed 2 cooks for the

Food Festival to Havana. Thus began the revival of the Festival of India abroad with a limited budget, limited artists and only 4 events.

The first event when we reached Lima was the Festival of Letters, the SahityaAkademy had an impressive array of authors and the Peruvian side too participated with considerable rigor. Day 1 of the Festival of India in Peru, which had the Literary Festival – “Symposium on India and Latin America: Literary Exchanges and Influences” was quite well received by the audience. Day 2 of the Festival of India in Peru, we went to the Festival of Letters. The Symposium on “Contemporary Literary Trends and its Challenges in a Multilingual Society” did not draw the audiences we expected. For a moment it appeared as though the Festival of India in Peru may not be as successful as we had envisaged.

5.30 pm, Lima, 26th October 2013 – Secretary Culture and I were driving from the SahityaAkademy’s Panel discussion to the Inca Sala auditorium in the central part of Lima. The Festival of Dance was to be presented by SangeetNatakAkademy which was to be attended by the Vice Presidents of India and Peru along with a number of Cabinet Ministers from the Government of Peru including the Culture Minister of Peru. The mood was tense. We were uncertain of the response. The Film Festival with the silent film of Raja Harishchandra was screened to very modest audience. The opportunity given to us for reviving the Festivals of India abroad in a distant land, during a VVIP visit, the contours of which we weren’t familiar with, seemed to be slipping away. Secretary Culture said, *“I hope Dance Festival is successful, for on this one event would rest the success of Festival of India, Peru. If we don’t succeed, we would face tremendous criticism for presenting the Festivals of India abroad with inadequate preparation which did not evoke adequate response”*. I mumbled that I had seen the Nrityarooma composition a number of times and felt that it had tremendous appeal to the viewer. The distance seemed unusually long. When we reached Inca Sala auditorium, we noticed that the auditorium was filled to capacity. All that was needed was a performance to aesthetically please the dignitaries. The welcome speeches by the Culture Minister of Peru and Culture Secretary of India were received with courteous applause. **Then the magic began.**

Two hours later, the SNA composition Nrityarooma with a mere 6 dancers of Odissi, BharataNatyam, Chau, Kathak, Manipuri and Kathakali had received a standing ovation from the Vice Presidents of India and Peru and the entire auditorium. The Culture Minister of Peru warmly complimented Secretary Culture. The Ambassador of India to Peru received high accolades from many dignitaries of the host country Government for bringing the event to Peru. The Secretary West MEA said the event was magical and a tremendous success. At the post event reception for hours the artists were applauded and congratulated. The Festival of India abroad was truly reborn as a scheme from that moment onwards.

Two days later we went to Cuba. Havana with its warm climate represented a world of difference from cold temperatures we had encountered in Peru. The Indian cooks had reached

Havana and the Food Festival had commenced, which was added to our enthusiasm as Indian food was available. The Embassy of India in Havana had undertaken considerable efforts for publicity. The response was visible.

Day 1 Literature Festival, in Havana, was graced by full audiences, Cuban writers participating with great vigor and the Culture Minister of Cuba joining the 3 hour long session. The Cubans loved the literature reading sessions. All six Indian authors were received with huge applause. The knowledge filled sessions at the Casa del Alba were extremely memorable.

October 29, 2013 The Theater Mella was the venue for Festival of Indian Dance. When Secretary Culture reached the venue, the Culture Minister of Cuba was already there and they were to address a joint media conference. There were large crowds and long lines, and even in the Theater Mella there was lot of crowd making it difficult to hear the media questions and bilateral discussions. By the time the Vice President of India had reached Theater Mella, it was clear that the Nrityarooma composition would be presented to a packed house and would receive tumultuous response. The performance was awarded the “Best Cultural Event of the Year 2013” by the Ministry of Culture, Cuba. It was a phenomenal achievement for the artists.

The Film Festival in Cuba was well received too. We had dropped the notion of going with dated classical films and chose contemporary Bollywood films some of which were shot in Cuba. The movies of Bollywood stars were huge attractions in Havana. There were additional events like Yoga and Mehendi which were also held and there was good response to these events.

The success of the Festivals of India in Peru and Cuba had largely to do with the commitment to excellence shown by the Ministry of Culture in collaboration with Ministries of Information & Broadcasting, Ministry of Tourism and the Autonomous Institutions. It provided us in the Ministry of Culture the confidence to conduct large events in a short period of time by coordinating with multiple agencies. It also made the “Nrityarooma” artists favorites for performing in many future events of Festival of India abroad. We received a lot of support from the Ministry of External Affairs after the event. Several Missions contacted me and several Ambassadors and High Commissioners wanted to know if we could conduct the Festivals of India in their countries.

By February 2014, the International Cultural Relations division, Ministry of Culture had scheduled Festivals of India abroad in several countries of South East Asia – Lao People Democratic Republic, Cambodia and Vietnam. We now had a template of a successful Festival of India abroad, namely a Literary Festival, a Dance Festival, a Food Festival, a Yoga Festival, a Film Festival and some exhibitions. Given the large number of Buddhist Institutions under the aegis of Ministry of Culture we requested Director Central Institute of Himalayan Studies and

the Director of Nava NalandaMahavihara to present a Buddhist Festival in Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam. The Buddhist Festival comprised of a Buddhist Exhibition, Lama Chanting, Lama Dancing and Sand Mandala. We also presented the Kalakshetra Foundation's Ramayana series in Cambodia and Lao PDR. In Lao PDR, the Ambassador had arranged a river cruise on the Mekong.

It was on this 3 hour river cruise that Secretary Culture and I realized that we could get more ambitious in presenting Festivals of India abroad. We discussed the feasibility conducting prolonged Festivals of India in China, Japan and South Africa. My view was that Ministry of Culture should conduct the Festivals in important countries where we had significant bilateral engagement to present the soft power of India and enhance people to people linkages. Secretary Culture's views were that we should focus on East Asia and Africa after venturing into Latin America. We went with his views and planned all year long Festivals of India in China and Japan and a prolonged event in South Africa in addition to Malaysia and Indonesia.

There is one unforgettable memory of the Buddhist Festival in Ho Chi Minh City. Almost a one kilometer long line of people welcomed the Buddhist monks from India. We met the High Priests of the Ho Chi Minh city monastery and attended the Buddhist Festival that commenced shortly thereafter. The Buddhist chanting, sand mandala and Lama dancing were received with tremendous enthusiasm by the thousands of people in the audience.

The Festival of India in China 2014 was the first time a Festival of India was being conducted in China since 1984. It was held in 5 cities, and had a number of events. The dance festival, the yoga festival, the Buddhist exhibition of the Indian Museum were huge success stories.

The Festival of India in South Africa had some special events in addition to the SNA's hugely popular Nrityarooma performance. These were the Gandhi – Mandela Exhibition of Archival Papers and the Exhibition on India – South Africa Cricket relations.

The Festival of India in Japan was held in 21 cities and had 7-8 events including exhibitions on Indian Cinema and India's Scientific Progress including the Telecom Revolution. By end 2014, Ministry of Culture had lined up events in Malaysia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Korea and Australia. The Planning Commission and Ministry of External Affairs came forward to support a separate Plan Scheme called the Festivals of India abroad with a budgetary allocation of Rs. 100 crores for the 12th Plan. When I look back at where we started in 2013, we had a meager Rs. 2 crores non plan allocation. It was a huge turn around, a huge success story which was sustainable and replicable. The institutional frameworks were well defined and synergy existed to conduct the huge events.

The success story of the Festivals of India abroad goes back to that one wintery evening in Lima, at the Inca Sala auditorium when six motivated artists under the aegis of the SangeetNatakAkademy came forward to wean their special magic on a captivated VVIP audience, resulting in a significant step forward for policy making in people to people contact redefining the contribution of Ministry of Culture to cultural diplomacy on a global arena.

Festivals of India in South East Asia

I vividly remember the day in September 2013, when the new Director of Kalakshetra Foundation met me in ShastriBhavan. I had read about the famous BharataNatyam Dance School, but it was my first meeting with its top management. She mentioned the strengths of the Kalakshetra Foundation and we discussed the possibility of Kalakshetra's participation in the Festivals of India abroad. I promised her that I would take forward the collaboration initiative in the coming months.

My first opportunity to work with Kalakshetra Foundation came in January - February 2014. Ministry of Culture had decided to conduct Festivals of India abroad in the South East Asian countries of Lao People Democratic Republic and Cambodia. The common culture binding India with South East Asian countries was Buddhism and the great epic of Ramayana. We requested Director Central Institute of Himalayan Studies to formulate the Buddhist Festival at That Luang Stupa in Vientienne. The Kalakshetra Foundation was requested to present their repertoire of Ramayana series to the audience in Vientienne, Siem Reap and Phnom Penh. It was the first foray of Ministry of Culture into South East Asia and we were worked on the duration and themes to be presented.

A few days later, the Kalakshetra Foundation informed me that the top 3 selections identified for presenting to the audience in Lao PDR and Cambodia for the 9 shows were "JatayuMoksham", "ChudamaniPradanam" and "MahaPattabhishekam". A meeting was convened in Chennai at the Kalakshetra Foundation headquarters to firm up the details. In my first visit to Institution, I was greatly impressed. I found the Kalakshetra Foundation, a unique Institution - it represented a premier dance school par excellence. The ambience is so intensely focused for learning classical BharataNatyam, the entire Institution resonates with a seriousness of purpose. The work on the Ramayana in the Kalakshetra Foundation dated back to the early 1960's, the repertoire was developed by Rukmani Devi Arundel. The repertoire was so comprehensive that no changes were made even 40 years later. For decades the Post Graduate Students of Kalakshetra Foundation learnt and had perfected the presentations on the Ramayana.

The Kalakshetra Foundation arranged a full dress rehearsal of the "JatayuMoksham" and it was quite spell binding. We finalized the composition of the Kalakshetra delegation, the dance dramas to be presented, the dates of travel and the venues for the performance – the National Cultural Hall in Vientienne, the Sofitel Hotel Auditorium in Siem Reap and Chaktmouk Theater

in Phnom Penh. In all 9 shows were to be presented. In Vientienne, the Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister along with the Minister for Culture, Tourism and Information were to be the Chief Guests at the Inaugural Function. At Phnom Penh the Mission had invited the Deputy Prime Minister to the Inaugural Function at the Chaktmouk Theater.

Lao PDR is the land of Buddhists. There were stupas and monks at many places. The Buddhist Festival was received with huge reverence in the That Luang Stupa premises. The Senior Government functionaries and the Ministers along with many monks attended the performances of Kalakshetra Foundation at the National Cultural Hall, Vientienne. In their speeches the leaders of Lao PDR repeatedly emphasized the cultural threads between India and Lao PDR as Buddhism and the great epic Ramayana. Many of them knew and understood the intricacies of the Ramayana dance depictions. The Deputy Prime Minister of Lao PDR mentioned how keen he was to see the golden deer chased by Lord Rama and the attempted rescue of Sita by Jatayu in his opening address.

The Festival of India in Lao PDR was almost a Text Book Performance. The Festival of Dance, the Buddhist Festival, the Food Festival, the Yoga Festival and the Mehendi artists did very well and were warmly applauded. The South Zone Cultural Centre coordinated the event. It was India's first major cultural foray into Lao PDR in several years. The International Cultural Relations division received a congratulatory e-mail from Secretary Culture after the events.

We reached Phnom Penh on February 13, 2014. The mighty Mekong passes through the entire region and integrates the countries of the region in many ways. Secretary Culture and I called on the Deputy Prime Minister of Cambodia and presented the schedule of events of the Festival of India in Cambodia. He was very excited by the fact the Ramayana was being presented by Kalakshetra Foundation. He advised us to visit Angkor Wat and see the Great Ramayana panel depicting the war between the Vanaras and Asuras. When I saw the Great Ramayana panel in Angkor Wat the next day, it was truly imposing, depicting in great detail the Ramayana battles.

The audience at Siem Reap was extremely knowledgeable. The Cambodia people were very familiar with the Great epic and applauded the nuances of the BharataNatyam performance by the students of Kalakshetra Foundation. While I did not attend the performances at the Chaktmouk Theater, the performance "MahaPattabhiskam" was cited as the performance of the year in Cambodia.

The success of the performances in Lao PDR and Cambodia emboldened us in the Ministry of Culture to work very closely with Kalakshetra Foundation for the Festivals of India abroad events in China, Japan and Malaysia. Presenting students in international fora was huge responsibility that we were taking for ensuring excellence and quality of events. Everywhere the

response was overwhelmingly positive. The Kalakshetra Foundation's performances were also presented in the 3rd meeting of the SAARC Culture Ministers held in New Delhi and applauded by the Culture Ministers of SAARC Countries.

Director Kalakshetra was keen on presenting all 6 Ramayana episodes to the audience in New Delhi. These performances titled "Ramayana" by Kalakshetra were performed to full houses in November 2014. Each episode was nearly 2 hours and yet the enthralled audience lapped each moment. The Ramayana is so deeply ingrained into the Indian psyche that irrespective of age and time, the story always resonated.

The Ministry of Culture worked closely with Director Kalakshetra to streamline the organizational aspects of the Festivals of India. The selection of dance productions circulars were formulated following lengthy consultations resulting in ample opportunities to several aspiring artists seeking to perform in offshore lands.

The success of the Festivals of India in many South East Asian Countries was dependent on the hard work and commitment of the students of Kalakshetra Foundation. That such young artists could excel in the presence of a very distinguished audience indicated their confidence levels and professionalism of the great Institution that Kalakshetra Foundation is. Truly it represents the great legacy of Indian culture and a vital role in propagating and sustaining it over several decades in future.

The Buddha Mahotsava

The Buddha Mahotsava, the Buddhist festival, was celebrated under the aegis of the Festivals of India in Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam in February – March 2013. The Nava Nalanda Mahavihara and the Central Institute of Himalayan Studies conceptualized and developed the Buddha Mahotsava's events in the 3 countries.

The Buddha Mahotsava was conducted at the holiest of shrines in each of the 3 countries. These were the following:

- a) The That Luang Stupa in Vientienne
- b) The Wat Onalun Pagoda in Phnom Penh
- c) The Pho Wuang Pagoda in Ho Chi Minh city

The Buddha Mahotsava included a series of expositions of Dhamma to spread the message of Buddhism, organization of a sand mandala, butter sculpture, Lama chanting, Sacred dance of Cham, and the lively masked and costumed dance associated with the Mahayana sect of Buddhism. In each of these events, the Buddhist monks from the host country participated with great enthusiasm and vigor. There were thousands of people who visited the That Luang Stupa,

The Wat Onalum Pagoda and the Pho Wuang Pagoda. Ho Chi Minh city witnessed the largest attendance running upto almost a kilometer of pilgrims who had come to witness the Dharma Darshan Exhibition, the Lama Chanting and Cham Dancing. Thousands of Wats enrich the landscape of the three countries. The events were attended by the Great Patriarchs of the Major Wats of the host country, Senior Ministers and senior members of Government.

India's cultural heritage is a source of inspiration to people everywhere. India's cultural exchanges with South East Asia, centuries old, continue to inspire people to people relationships. There is a visible impact of the Indian heritage on the scriptures and the way of life of the people of the Mekong region. There is deep conviction about the Buddhist traits of humility, gentleness, justice and charity. There are many similarities in languages of the region and Sanskrit. The Panchatantra and Jataka Tales are narrated with great enthusiasm and part of folklore.

The Dharma Darsana (Experience the Dharma) an Exhibition curated by the Nava NalandaMahavihara was on display at each of the 3 countries. This exhibition showcasing Buddhist Art, Architecture, Sculpture, Paintings aimed to present the life of Lord Buddha as depicted in the art, architecture, sculpture and paintings found in India and the message of Dharma was conveyed to followers of Buddhism the world over.

The exhibits in the Dharma Darshan included photographs of a sacred foot print of the Lord Buddha, with the auspicious symbols of Buddhism from Amaravati in Andhra Pradesh, a Cameo depicting the worshipping scene of Dharma Chakra, the great Stupas at Sanchi, Dhamekha, the preaching Buddha from Sarnath, Painting of the birth of Buddha at Lumbini, a statue of seated Buddha in Bhumi sparsa mudra, the Lion Capital from Saranath, some casing stones from the stupa from Bharhut and some modern paintings, depicting the Jataka stories.

The Dharma Darshan exhibition facilitated and encouraged cooperation in the realms of art, architecture, sculpture and culture on the whole, education including academic activities, in these fields and to foster understanding of the rich cultural legacy of Lord Buddha.

The most popular event of the Buddha Mahotsava was the sacred cham dancing performed by the monks of the Central Institute of Himalayan Studies. The lively masked and costumed dance was one of the highlights of the event and was conducted nearly 3-4 times a day. Indian monks participated along with the monks from the host countries in the Sand Mandala, the Butter Sculpture and Lama Chanting.

The events showcased the rich cultural heritage of India which given its spread has become the common heritage of the countries of South East Asia. Of all the events of the Festival of India, the one which was inspirational in building people to people contact was the Buddha Mahotsava.

SAARC Culture Ministers Meetings

One of the highpoints of my years in the Ministry of Culture handling international cultural relations was the of the SAARC Culture Ministers meeting held in September 2014. India led the SAARC countries to formulate a revised SAARC agenda for culture that would not only address cultural festivals, activities in archives, libraries, museums and performing arts, but go beyond the hitherto done to break new ground in making its online presence felt far and beyond.

The SAARC Culture Ministers reached a Delhi Resolution that said the following:

The 3rd Meeting of the SAARC Culture Ministers was convened in New Delhi on September 25, 2014. The Culture Ministers of SAARC countries unanimously resolved the following:

1. To declare 2016-17 as the SAARC Year of Cultural Heritage;
2. To promote SAARC Culture online by launching a dedicated SAARC website on culture with emphasis on digitization of rare manuscripts, rare books and other articles of intangible cultural value;
3. To strengthen of cultural institutions in the SAARC region, promote cultural festivals showcasing themes that are unique to the region, in SAARC member states, and enable exchange programs for artists, performers, writers and scholars.
4. To establish a SAARC Cultural Heritage Committee and build cultural institutions, which, in turn, will bolster efforts in preservation, maintenance, as well as digital mapping of historic sites in member countries, and simultaneously develop inventories of cultural assets in museums and other repositories of the region and apply best practices and standards.
5. To promote the literatures produced in the local languages of the regions, and make them available to readers across the world through translations, not only into English, but into other major languages of the SAARC region and the world. To provide financial support to writers to work on creative projects, collaborate with other writers and provide them increased exposure to other cultures.
6. To accord the highest priority to the preservation of folklores and other oral narratives that encompass every aspect of civilization.
7. To promote visual and performing arts from the region in other parts of the world to mirror the vast riches – both cultural and geographic - that adorn these lands, as part of a sustained campaign of cultural diplomacy, to attract tourists to these places and stimulate SAARC tourism.
8. To support on mission-mode the improvement of literacy of SAARC populaces, and further, promote a reading habit among the newly educated by providing access to books and other reading material through establishing libraries in remote places.

The time-frame for the accomplishment of these goals has been decided as 2014 to 2017. The ministers further pledged a renewed commitment to cultural diplomacy and meaningful cultural exchange as the cornerstone of a dynamic and rejuvenated SAARC neighborhood, where economic ties and geopolitical alliances are deeply informed by the nuanced cultural connections forged by people-to-people contact.

SAARC remains an important component of India's cultural diplomacy representing multilateralism and people to people contacts. India hosted the SAARC dance festival on the sidelines of the SAARC Culture Ministers meeting in collaboration with the SAARC Cultural Centre, Colombo.

ASEM Culture Ministers Meetings

I attended the 6th meeting of the ASEM Culture Ministers at Rotterdam, The Netherlands in October 2014. The biannual ASEM Culture Ministers meetings have emerged as important fora for multilateral engagement between Asia and Europe. The subject of the 6th ASEM Culture Ministers meetings was "Creative Industries".

The ASEM Culture Ministers agenda contained promotion of Creative Skills, Creative Entrepreneurs and Creative Cities. The recommendations that emanated from the ASEM Culture Ministers meeting said the following:

- (a) Use creative industries for providing new solutions to contribute to societal and economic goals.
- (b) Use creativity for job creation, innovation, trade, social inclusion, cultural diversity and environmental sustainability.
- (c) Create links between the creative industries and the social goals
- (d) Make this cooperation reinforce initiatives at regional and city level reciprocally.
- (e) National policy needs to reflect on the fostering of creative talent to help achieve social goals.
- (f) The necessary alignment of policies in the field of creative industries includes a focus on the required institutional capacity to build stronger collaborations.
- (g) Create partnerships of equivalence between the cultural, creative industries and education sectors to enable the co-creation of a creative skills agenda and a more inclusive, entrepreneurial, confident and resilient creative workforce.
- (h) Governments should generate the enabling conditions for creative entrepreneurs to be able to compete in the market.
- (i) Support and regulation should attend to the fact that the creative industries is predominantly a micro and small business sector.
- (j) Accommodate creative entrepreneurs with a more effective support and regulatory environment to allow for the effective protection of intellectual property rights.

- (k) Be people-centered, inclusive and socially engaged. Deliver the enabling conditions for creativity to flourish, from citizen and community participation to mobilizing creative business.
- (l) Make the creative industries ensure cities leverage their distinctive assets, be active custodians of our heritage and never stand still in their pursuit of sustainable development, resilience, competitiveness and harmony.

The 7th ASEM Culture Ministers meeting was held in Korea in 2016.

India – Russian Federation Cultural Relations

While I have outlined the multilateral initiatives undertaken through the SAARC Culture Ministers meetings, the ASEM Culture Ministers meetings, several bilateral engagements were undertaken to promote India's outreach to the world for promoting people to people relations. The relationship with the Russian Federation was unique in terms of consistency of the engagement. The Joint Working Group meetings were held annually and the protocol of the JWG was integrated into the interactions of the Foreign Ministers and then followed by an annual Heads of Government meet. I headed the Indian delegation for 2 meetings of the Joint Working Group on Culture and was part of the Indian delegation led by the Culture Minister to Moscow and Saint Petersburg. The Protocol of the JWG outlined the following major areas of collaboration:

“The two sides agreed to continue the practice of conducting the mutual festivals of culture, strengthening direct ties between leading museums, libraries and archives of Russia and India, mutual exchange of experts in the field of culture and art and archeology and the preservation of cultural heritage.

Proceeding from the established practice of cooperation in the fields of culture and tourism, the working group proposes to direct its activities in the year 2015 towards fulfilling the following points, which constitute an integral part of this protocol:

1. The two sides will assist each other in sending information on forthcoming international book fairs in both countries to the respective interested organizations;
2. The two sides will seek to conclude the agreement on archives between the National Archives of India and the National Archives of the Russian Federation;
3. The two sides will provide assistance for exchange for film related events, reciprocal participation in the International Film Festivals held in both countries in accordance with their respective regulations. The two sides will also assist in the establishment of direct contacts between the State Museum of the East (Russia), the Hermitage Museum of Saint Petersburg (Russia) and the National Museum Delhi (India) and other Museums of India in implementation of Exhibition projects. The sides will contribute to the implementation of exhibition projects on line of direct contacts.

The two sides will continue to assist in the development of direct ties and contacts between the Russian and Indian travel agencies.

Yoga Diplomacy

That India's soft power stretches beyond the conventional diplomacy channels is best manifested in the Yoga diplomacy practiced since 2015. Yoga has been the forefront of India's efforts at projecting its soft power status. At the UN General Assembly, Prime Minister described Yoga as India's gift to the world and successfully lobbied the forum to declare June 21 as the World Yoga Day. In all 177 member countries supported the proposal. There was massive response in all the 3 Yoga days celebrated since 2015. Similarly, Ayurveda has been promoted. An independent Ministry of Ayush has been created in Government to promote India's practices of traditional medicine.

The Roadmap Ahead

India's soft power status varies with the regions. In South East Asia, Buddhism links India to the people of the region, in the Indian Ocean countries – Project Mausam (the monsoon) linked the people to common traits, in Central Asia – Kanishka, Taimur the Lame and Babar linked the people. There are several new links that have emerged – cricket ties with Australia and South Africa represented by the Cricket Connects Exhibitions. The theoretical framework for the formulation of India's soft power status is best represented in the Government's new ideas – Digital India, Business Promotion, Yoga Diplomacy.

Dayanita Singh⁴, India's famous photographer describes the road map forward in the following words:

“My exhibitions were most appreciated in Japan. It is part of the Japanese people's upbringing to visit Museums and appreciate art. We in India do not train our citizens to see art and appreciate art. When I show the same work in London it has very different viewers. I would want India Culture to focus on Museums, predominantly contemporary art museums. Each of the ICCR Centers abroad can contain a Museum. The ASI has definitely done good work in preserving monuments well. I would also plead for more Bienales like the Kochi Bienale which caters to both local and foreign audience. Cultural diplomacy that India does has to focus on elegance and minimization. A Khadi Exhibition with 108 looms producing different types of white khadi contains a very refined sense of aesthetic elegance. We often wish to tell the world the more colorful aspects of our culture. The Cultural Festivals of India abroad project one kind of a colorful India, there are other India's as well.”

⁴Dayanita Singh interactions with V.Srinivas dated July 28, 2017

India's major initiatives for dissemination of its culture abroad other than ICCR has been through the 'Festivals of India Abroad' series which have been held in China, Japan, Indonesia, Russian Federation, South Africa and a host of other countries. The promotion of cultural festivals offered opportunities for a number of performing artists to perform in foreign countries.

Dammu Ravi⁵, India's senior diplomat says

"India is already well positioned in South East Asia with common bonds of Buddhism and Hinduism. Cultural diplomacy can thrive. A lot of Indian symbols are accepted. For a real appreciation of Indian culture scholarly exchanges are necessary. The ICCR centers need to be considered as investments for cultural dissemination. India has strong Institutions for dissemination of culture, language and art forms. We need to create more facilities to receive artists, journalists and tourists."

ShagunButani⁶, one of the senior artists who participated in the Festivals of India abroad said that

"As a performer my expectations were fulfilled, as we performed to full houses. That said, we need more interaction with schools and colleges in foreign lands with workshops, depicting stories of Indian mythology and dance forms. The presentations should be of world standards."

The UNESCO in its Annual Conference on Cultural Diplomacy has focused on Building Peace through Cultural Diplomacy. The influence of Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King Jr around the world, and the popularity of their idea of harmonious co-existence among various layers of society. Further the UNESCO as focused on the promoting cultural diplomacy in an increasingly unstable world. The language of the arts has been highlighted as an important means for promoting inter cultural understanding and respect for cultural diversity.

To conclude, Cultural Diplomacy is our best hope for overcoming traditional prejudices into attitudes of understanding and cooperation. Culture has the advantage of being a public good that all people can share. Cultural Diplomacy is the best means at our disposal to ensure that power politics is not a dominant force that drives civilizations.

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⁵Dammu Ravi IFS (1989) interactions with V.Srinivas dated July 29, 2017

⁶ShagunButani interaction with V.Srinivas dated July 27, 2017