Eurasian Research Unit
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Nile – Eurasian International Journal of Humanities (NEIJH)

Narrating the Maritime Past: Heritage, Cultural Diplomacy and India's Engagement With the Indian Ocean

Moitrayee Devi Baruah[1*], Shrey Shaurya Singh Bisht[2]

*[*1]Center for the Study of the Americas, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India.*
[2]Department of Political Science, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India.

[*]Corresponding author

ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Received : 20 September 2026
Revised : 09 October 2026
Published : 23 October 2026

Keywords:

Heritage Diplomacy, Project Mausam, Indian Ocean, Civilizational Discourse, ASEAN–India Relations

[*]Corresponding Author

Email: moitrayeedevibaruah3638@gmail.com

DOI: *10.68283/neijh.v1.i2.a06*

How to cite: *Moitrayee Devi Baruah, Shrey Shaurya Singh Bisht (2026) 'Narrating the Maritime Past: Heritage, Cultural Diplomacy and India's Engagement With the Indian Ocean', Nile - Eurasian International Journal of Humanities, 1(2), pp. 68 – 84. https://doi.org/10.68283/neijh.v1.i2.a06*

ABSTRACT

Since 2014 the Indian state has presented the history of the Indian Ocean as a resource for present partnerships in the region. This article asks how that history is selected, organized and used in cultural and heritage diplomacy, and what the process reorganizes and leaves out. Its main case is Project Mausam, a transnational heritage initiative launched by India's Ministry of Culture in 2014, with ASEAN–India cultural cooperation as a comparative case. Drawing on a qualitatively coded corpus of 19 official documents (58 passages) from 2014 to 2025, an audit of recurring historical claims against Indian Ocean and Southeast Asian historiography, and the UNESCO World Heritage record, the article makes three arguments. First, vocabulary is institutionally located: India's heritage agencies describe a plural 'Indian Ocean world' of routes and exchanges, whereas 'civilizational' language appears in diplomatic and jointly negotiated texts. Second, Mausam's selectivity lies not in how it describes the past but in what it acts upon: its plural Afro-Arab-Asian frame persists from 2014 to 2025, yet the nomination themes on the parliamentary record are Indic in origin and outward in direction. Third, Mausam exemplifies declarative heritage diplomacy: twelve years after its launch at UNESCO, no Mausam-derived entry appears on India's Tentative List, while in ASEAN–India texts the civilizational clause survives but its operational vehicle passes to ASEAN-owned instruments. The article concludes by considering what a heritage diplomacy that treats partners as co-authors of the connected past would require, and sets out the resulting policy implications for India's heritage diplomacy.

1. Introduction

In the thirty-eighth session of UNESCO's World Heritage Committee held on 20 June 2014 in Doha, India's Ministry of Culture announced the launch of Project Mausam (PIB, 2014). The objective of the project was described as "a Transnational Mixed Route (including Natural and Cultural Heritage)" to be included in the UNESCO World Heritage List (Ministry of Culture, n.d.). According to the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), the topic covered by the project is "Indian Ocean 'world' from the African, Arab and Asian-world perspectives" (IGNCA, n.d.a). In November 2025, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) announced the organization of the national workshop in New Delhi under the title "Islands at the Crossroads of Maritime Networks within Indian Ocean Region". Again, the description of this region as "connecting Africa, Arabia, East Asia and South East Asia", the source of the project name (Arabic "mausim") and the purpose of the workshop were "to explore potential Transnational World Heritage Nomination proposals" (PIB, 2025b). In the period between these two dates, the only two nomination themes that have entered the parliamentary record were "Routes followed by the Cholas in the Southeast Asia region" and "Spread of Buddhism through land and sea routes in the South and Southeast Asian region" (PIB, 2021). As of September 2026, the Indian Tentative List of nominations, the inventory on which the nominations are based, did not include any item related to this project (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026b).

This chronology poses the puzzle which is addressed in this article. Since the Look East policy of the 1990s and even more noticeably since 2014, the Indian state has presented the history of interactions in the Indian Ocean as a resource for the partnership in the present. Monsoon navigation, port networks and the spread of religions and textual traditions are mentioned in ministerial speeches, summit declarations and heritage programmes as "shared heritage" and "civilizational linkages". Much work in the scholarship reads such initiatives as instruments of Indian soft power (e.g. Hall, 2012), but it usually does not consider how the past is selected and organized in order to serve as an instrument, nor it compares the resulting narratives with what is shown by the historiography of the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia. That historiography has emphasized for decades the polycentric character of exchanges, the agency of Southeast Asian societies in choosing and adapting Indic models and the central role of Muslim merchants in the connective process. Official narratives that stress origin and continuity of Indic tradition do not fit this historiography well.

Therefore, the research gap is quite specific. Studies of Indian heritage and cultural diplomacy seldom distinguish which institutions produce which vocabulary, seldom audit the historical claims made in official texts against the scholarship, and seldom trace how a negotiated clause develops in successive joint texts. The literature on heritage diplomacy has focused mostly on the cases in which states create the infrastructure of their initiative, most prominently China's revival of the Silk Roads (Winter, 2019; Nakano, 2023). Recently, the literature has traced how civilizational discourse travels into UNESCO's programmes (Singh and Winter, 2023). The Indian Ocean case gives an opportunity to examine what happens when a heritage narrative gets ahead of the institutions which are meant to deliver it.

This article examines how the Indian state turns the history of interactions in the Indian Ocean into the civilizational connectivity narrative for cultural and heritage diplomacy, and how such selection, reorganization and omission occur. Three things are analytically separated: historical maritime connectivity demonstrated in scholarship, the civilizational narrative through which contemporary official texts articulate this connectivity, and the heritage and cultural diplomacy into which those narratives enter. Statements like "India and Southeast Asia share civilizational linkages" are the object of analysis, not the premise. Three research questions follow:

RQ1. Where, institutionally, does civilizational vocabulary about the Indian Ocean history appear in India's official discourse, and where does it not?

RQ2. How do the historical claims made in the official texts compare with the historiography of the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia, and where in Project Mausam's record does selection occur: in description or in operational choice?

RQ3. What does the trajectory of Project Mausam and the survival of the civilizational clause in ASEAN-India texts tell us about the relationship between heritage in diplomacy and heritage as diplomacy?

Three claims, obtained through coding of official discourse between 2014 and 2025 against the scholarship and UNESCO record, answer these questions. First, civilization language is institutionally distributed. In the Indian heritage bureaucracy – composed of the Ministry of Culture, the ASI and the IGNCA – one will find references to the "Indian Ocean world" of connections and landscapes; civilizational language appears in diplomatic texts, either produced independently or jointly by ASEAN and India. In other words, civilization narrative comes in as the past passes from heritage administration to diplomacy. Second, the selection of Project Mausam is not made in its description but in its operation. Multicultural, Afro-Arab-Asian description of the Indian Ocean persists throughout the project, but the operational choice is Indic in origin and outward-oriented. Third, Project Mausam is the case of what this article calls declarative heritage diplomacy: heritage diplomacy is declared with promises of shared nominations, databases and managed routes, but what has been delivered is rather heritage in diplomacy – deployment of vocabulary in declarations and speeches (see the distinction

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below). The ASEAN-India case presents a parallel. The civilizational linkages persist through all renegotiations of the text, but the operational role of India in them retreats into instruments of ASEAN.

Such claims modify the hypothesis which drove the research: India constructs regional narratives of familiarity and belonging through the maritime heritage. Narratives are constructed, but primarily in unilateral Indian texts, and the text negotiation results in fewer civilizational claims and more reciprocity. There is also no consistent narrowing of Mausam narrative over time. What is found in the record, rather, is the persistent gap between pluralistic description and selective practice.

The structure of the article is as follows. Section 2 describes the bodies of knowledge connected in this research – that of soft power and cultural diplomacy, heritage diplomacy and critical heritage studies. The historical scholarship against which official claims are tested is described in Section 4, and the civilizational frame's genealogy is provided in Section 5.

2. Soft Power, Cultural Diplomacy and Heritage Diplomacy

This section outlines the three bodies of literature which this article connects: on soft power and cultural diplomacy, on heritage diplomacy, and on critical heritage studies. Historical scholarship against which official claims are tested is outlined in Section 4, and the civilizational frame's genealogy in Section 5.

2.1. Three Concepts

Three concepts of the section's heading are used interchangeably in the literature on Indian foreign policy. However, they designate quite different things, and the distinction between them determines what can be said.

Soft power, according to Joseph Nye, is both a resource and an outcome: the ability to influence preferences of others through attraction and not through force or payments (Nye, 2004). The soft power perspective directs attention to whether the cultural resources work. Document analysis cannot answer this question, and the literature on Indian soft power is mostly enumerative. However, Ian Hall's study of Indian public diplomacy provides an especially valuable account of the limitations of the government programmes in this field (Hall, 2012). In this article, soft power is treated as a category of practice, i.e. the state's own theory of what heritage is good for, as stated in official and think-tank discourse.

Cultural diplomacy refers to an activity: the state-organized exchange of cultural products, performances, fellowships and people. Cultural diplomacy describes the ASEAN-India programme in many respects, with its festivals, youth summits and fellowships, and recently it was questioned whether this exchange serves national interest or mutual benefit (Ang, Isar and Mar, 2015).

Heritage diplomacy, according to the theory proposed by Tim Winter, is the set of ways in which the material and institutional past (sites, restoration projects, nominations, routes) becomes the means of international relations (Winter, 2015, 2016). Winter distinguishes heritage in diplomacy, where the past works as rhetoric and setting, and heritage as diplomacy, where heritage cooperation becomes the substance of the relation through shared nominations, conservation assistance and shared institutions. This is the key analytical distinction of the current article. Project Mausam was announced as the latter; the question is what happened to it. Winter's later study of China's Silk Roads revival describes how the state can build heritage infrastructure around the historical route (Winter, 2019), providing a point of comparison here. The influential scholarship on heritage diplomacy, such as on China's Silk Roads, focuses mostly on the cases in which states create at least some part of the infrastructure of their initiative. The Indian case presents an opportunity to examine what happens when the narrative is ahead of the institutions behind it.

Heritage diplomacy also has its diplomatic site. The World Heritage Committee is a venue of bargaining in which states negotiate nominations as much as experts evaluate them (Meskell, 2018), and transnational serial nominations can become instruments of geocultural competition, as it was seen in the responses of Japan and South Korea to China's Silk Roads initiative (Nakano, 2023). Mausam was launched in the same place, at the session of the Committee.

2.2. Supporting Concepts

Two additional bodies of scholarship provide the theoretical tools for analysis of selection. Critical heritage studies, in particular Laurajane Smith's concept of the authorized heritage discourse, show how institutions – expert and state – authorize certain pasts as heritage and how this authorization affects the discourse around them (Smith, 2006). This concept is useful in the present case because Project Mausam has moved through institutions with different authorizing discourses, from research-oriented arts center to the national archaeological authority. Scholarly work on the heritagization of the Indian Ocean world, in particular the collection of essays in Schnepel and Sen (2019), has examined how the making of heritage from the maritime past serves identity, political legitimization and geopolitics across the region, including China's Maritime Silk Road and Mausam (Ray, 2019).

The second body of literature is concerned with civilization. Instead of treating civilizational narrative as an analytical tool, this article sees civilization as a historical category. The concept of the "Greater India" extending throughout Southeast Asia has been developed by Indology and by Indian nationalists' intellectuals in the colonial period (Bayly, 2004; Stolte and Fischer-Tiné, 2012), and Marieke Bloembergen has traced how such "moral geographies"

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survived in scholarship and museums while obscuring Indonesian Islamic culture (Bloembergen, 2021). Bloembergen has warned that oceanic approaches focused on cultural flows may exaggerate cultural coherence of the region, thus reproducing the geographies they seek to challenge. This warning guides the method used here: the scholarship used to test the official narratives should be taken critically.

Two concepts suggested initially by the framing of the research were not very productive. Theories of collective or cultural memory assume the existence of a remembering community, and the material analyzed here concerns past projected onto other societies by state institutions; the memory theory would therefore assume what should be shown. The idea of imagined region is partially retained: it is necessary to understand how the Indian Ocean and the "Asia" within it is constructed.

2.3. Operationalization

These concepts are operationalized as follows. Heritage as diplomacy is distinguished from heritage in diplomacy by function: the passages and activities concerning nomination, conservation and shared institutions are included in the former category, and passages invoking the past to justify partnership in the latter. Authorized heritage discourse is recognized as the authorship recorded in the text. Civilization as a category of practice is traced lexically, by registering the usage of the word, and substantively, by naming the traditions, actors and directions of movements in each passage.

These concepts link the three parts of the analysis. Distinction between heritage in and as diplomacy organizes the analysis of Mausam's trajectory (Section 6) and of ASEAN-India instruments (Section 7); the concept of authorized heritage discourse motivates the coding by register (Sections 3 and 8); and treating civilization as a historical category motivates the audit (Section 4) and genealogy (Section 5) of civilizational claims.

3. Sources and Methods

3.1. Corpus

The analysis is based on a purposive corpus of nineteen official documents published between 2014 and 2025, fifty-eight passages in them related to the maritime past, heritage or civilizational connection were coded. The corpus consists of three strands corresponding to three institutional registers. The first strand is the Project Mausam record: the description of the project by the Ministry of Culture and IGNCA; the government's press release on launching it; the written replies to parliamentary questions in 2016, 2017 and 2021, published by the Press Information Bureau (PIB); and the PIB announcement of the ASI's 2025 workshop. The second strand includes six ASEAN-India texts negotiated jointly: three plans of action for 2016-2020, 2021-2025 and 2026-2030, and three statements adopted at the critical junctures in the partnership: the Delhi Declaration celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2018, the 2022 Joint Statement on the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and the 2023 Joint Statement on Maritime Cooperation. The third strand includes the unilateral diplomatic statements of India, including the Prime Minister's op-ed published in ASEAN newspapers in January 2018, his remarks opening the ASEAN-India Summit in October 2025, the title of a 2015 conference inaugurated by the External Affairs Minister, and other statements. The record kept by the UNESCO World Heritage Centre on India serves as an external control on what the project has delivered. The scholarly and Southeast Asian assessment of the project serves as evidence of reception.

The corpus is created to enable comparison between registers, not for statistical representativity. The documents included in the corpus have been selected because they are official texts of the period referring to the maritime past, heritage or civilizational connection between India and the Indian Ocean/Southeast Asia, and belonging to one of the three registers compared. Therefore, the numbers reported in Table 4 describe the coded passages, not the estimates of Indian official discourse as a whole. The findings are bounded by the composition of the corpus.

3.2. Unit of Analysis and Coding

The unit of analysis is the passage: the portion of the official text referring to the maritime past, heritage or civilizational connection. Each passage was coded for the authorship (heritage bureaucracy, diplomacy or joint); the use of "civilization" in any form; and for the time depth invoked, the agents mentioned, the movement direction implied, the religious and cultural traditions selected, the space constructed, its register and function. The passage was coded as linking the maritime and heritage registers if its own text links them.

3.3. Supplementary Analyses

Three additional analyses complement the coding. Inter-textual analysis, according to the approach developed by Lene Hansen for foreign policy discourse, describes the migration and transformation of phrases from one joint text to another in a series (Hansen, 2006). Omissions analysis registers, for thirteen out of nineteen documents, the presence, implication or absence of particular traditions and actors: networks of Islam, East African connections, Southeast Asian polities as agents, named ports and the colonial period. A tradition or an actor is considered 'present' in a text if it is named there; 'implied' if it is referred to in the text without being named, i.e., the reference to 'the routes followed by the Cholas' implies the existence of the Southeast Asian polities to which these routes led; and 'absent' if it is neither named nor referred to. Claims audit enumerates the historical claims found repeatedly in the official texts and classifies them

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according to the support they get from the scholarly literature: 'supported', 'supported with qualification', 'contested' or 'framing device'.

Classification proceeds according to straightforward criteria. A claim is classified as 'supported' if it is supported by the cited scholarly literature, and as 'supported with qualification' if the phenomenon mentioned in the claim is supported but not its time depth, direction or agency. A claim is classified as 'contested' if it is contradicted by the cited scholarly literature. A claim is classified as a 'framing device' if it is not a proposition about history at all but something else, for instance, the projection of a contemporary geographical category into the past. Both the omissions analysis and the claims audit are interpretations, and their findings are presented in a way that allows for further discussion of the interpretation rather than a measurement.

Absence is treated throughout as a bounded result. That a particular tradition or actor is absent from the selected texts is a demonstration that these texts did not name it. It does not imply deliberate exclusion, a policy motive, the failure of a project or the reception of a narrative by the partners. Where the article discusses possible explanations of the absence (Section 6.3), they are considered only as possibilities that cannot be ranked on the basis of the documents analyzed.

3.4. Official Versions, Translation and News Mediation

Wherever available, primary texts have been used; newspaper reports have only been used for dating purposes. The corpus uses the official English versions of Indian and ASEAN–India texts, which is important specifically for speeches made in Hindi. The reason why newspaper reports have not been treated as evidence of official vocabulary usage is due to the corpus itself. The Prime Minister's remarks made in Hindi in October 2025 at the summit as reported in the PIB text are described by the PIB as an approximate translation of his statement in Hindi, and the PIB text does not mention the 'civilizational ties'; instead, it uses the formulation of 'deep historical ties and shared values' (PIB, 2025a). In contrast, the Tribune newspaper report carried by ANI paraphrases the Prime Minister as 'highlighting that the partnership between the two sides goes beyond trade and is deeply rooted in cultural, historical, and civilizational ties' (The Tribune, 2025). The news mediation thus made explicit the very vocabulary studied. Since both the PIB and The Tribune reports are English translations of a statement made in Hindi, the comparison illustrates a difference between mediations rather than the original and its translation.

3.5. Periodization

Periodization is based on the documentary evidence: 2014–2016 (the launch and the academic phase), 2017–2020 (the institutional transfer and the bureaucratisation) and 2021–2026 (the selection and current framing). The first period begins with the launch of Mausam at the World Heritage Committee in June 2014; the second – with the parliamentary reply of December 2017, which mentions ASI as the nodal agency and the diplomatic missions as the implementing instrument; and the third – with the parliamentary reply of March 2021, which states the nomination themes. The period boundaries are much sharper than the processes they separate: they indicate the point of appearance of a change in the documents analyzed rather than the actual dates when it happened. The last period ends in 2026 since the UNESCO documentation checked in September 2026 is used to show the outcome of the documents of 2021–2025; the coded discourse corpus ends in 2025.

3.6. Limitations of the Evidence

Using publicly available official texts has well-known limitations. Such texts contain only the decisions that have been taken, but not the deliberations behind the decisions. Thus, they cannot demonstrate why certain decisions were made. Parliamentary replies selectively provide information relevant to specific questions. Joint texts reflect negotiated outcomes, not the positions of individual parties. Sources on the partner side, including heritage authorities, parliaments and press of Southeast Asian countries, are used only where they have been identified (Daniel, 2015; Dash, 2023; Teh, 2026); the evidence of reception, therefore, is correspondingly limited (Section 8.3).

4. Connectivity without a Centre: What the Historical Record Supports

Official documents assert the time depth and nature of the connection in the Indian Ocean. This section identifies what the scholarship supports on these points. It is structured by claims and not as a survey of the scholarship, and its conclusions are summarized in Table 1.

The first kind of claim concerns the time depth of the connection. According to the official documents, the connection between India and Southeast Asia has existed 'over several millennia' (ASEAN–India, 2018, preamble) or 'more than two millennia' (Modi, 2018), while the movement across the Indian Ocean using the monsoon has occurred 'at least for the last five thousand years' (PIB, 2025b). Archaeology confirms the exchange between South and Southeast Asia over two millennia. Five millennia can only be claimed regarding the northwestern parts of the ocean, where the maritime exchange between the Indus Valley and the Gulf and Mesopotamia has taken place during the third millennium BCE. Those exchanges, however, were primarily coastal ones, and the use of the monsoon for open sea crossings is dated later (Ray, 2003; Seland, 2013). The 'five millennia' formula conflates two different kinds of connection.

The general claim that the Indian Ocean 'was a hub of commercial and cultural exchanges connecting Africa, Arabia, East Asia and Southeast Asia' (PIB, 2025b) is easily verifiable. It is the underlying assumption of the modern

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historiography of the Indian Ocean that has been developed since the publication of K. N. Chaudhuri's economic history of Indian Ocean trade, Janet Abu-Lughod's pre-European world system and Michael Pearson's synthesis (Chaudhuri, 1985; Abu-Lughod, 1989; Pearson, 2003). But what this historiography fails to support is a single center. The system described in it has had many nodes and many carriers (Arab, Persian, Gujarati, Tamil, Malay, Chinese and East African ones, among others), and for much of the second millennium CE Islam has played an important part in connecting the system. In the study of the Malabar Coast, Sebastian Prange speaks of 'Monsoon Islam', the religion of merchants and of Muslims living in non-Muslim societies (Prange, 2018); Engseng Ho demonstrates how the Hadrami diaspora has been tied together by genealogy and Islamic learning (Ho, 2006).

The scholarship on the relationships between South and Southeast Asia has moved away from the paradigm of George Coedès's 'Indianized states', created by Indian colonization or influence (Coedès, 1968). The theory of O. W. Wolters about localization has shown that Southeast Asian societies have selected and reinterpreted elements of Indic culture (Wolters, 1999). Sheldon Pollock described a 'Sanskrit cosmopolis' where the political culture has spread without conquest or migration (Pollock, 2006). Monica L. Smith, speaking from the Indian side, has discredited the idea that Indian influence has created Southeast Asian state formations, but has insisted that the impact of trade requires an explanation (Smith, 1999). The contributors to Manguin, Mani and Wade (2011) have focused on reciprocal relations and local agency, and Bellina's discovery at Khao Sam Kaeo of South Asian-trained artisans creating objects for Southeast Asian demand confirms the pattern (Bellina, 2017). The official document that calls Angkor Wat a 'grand symbol of our ancient historical, religious and cultural links' (Modi, 2018) refers to a fact but attributes to a shared 'our' what historians call a Khmer creation.

There is no disagreement over the origin of Buddhism in the Ganga valley, but the maritime history of the religion has been multidirectional. The Chinese monk Yijing has studied in Srivijaya both before and after he studied in India in the late seventh century, and in the ninth century the Śailendra king Bālaputradeva has founded a monastery at Nalanda for which the Pāla king Devapāla has granted villages. Sri Lanka has been a major node of Theravāda lineages, and exchange has occurred in more than one direction (Frasch, 2017). The maritime Buddhism has been organized around the masters, texts and icons of the eastern ocean, and not due to diffusion from a single source (Sen, 2003; Acri, 2016). In this sense, a nomination that would be based on the 'spread' of Buddhism from South to Southeast Asia (PIB, 2021) will capture only one side of the exchange.

The official description of the relations between India and Southeast Asia as 'forged in peace and friendship' (Modi, 2018) is another way to describe an exchange that has been peaceful and religious. But there is evidence of coercion too, and the best-known example is chosen as a nomination theme in the Mausam project. Historians interpret the naval expedition of the Chola king Rajendra I against Srivijaya and the ports of the Malay Peninsula, recorded in his inscriptions, as a military campaign taking place in the context of commercial rivalry and relations with Song China (Kulke, 2009; Sen, 2009). Ray (2020) situates the 'much-celebrated Chola invasion of Srivijaya' as part of a broader pattern of 'popular history' created for contemporary geopolitical interests. The Chola-era connections have not been only military ones: a Tamil inscription of 1088 at Lobu Tua near Barus in Sumatra refers to the merchant guild called the 'Five Hundred' (Ainnurruvar) (Karashima and Subbarayalu, 2009). The 'heritage route' that would be centered on 'the routes followed by the Cholas' would have to decide whose presence it wants to emphasize.

Finally, the official phrase about 'long-lost ties' to be 'rekindled' (IGNCA, n.d.a) implies a tie that was once broken. Sunil Amrith's history of the colonial era tells a different story: in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries some of the largest migrations in the history of the Bay of Bengal have taken place, when Indian laborers, traders and moneylenders have moved to Burma and Malaya (Amrith, 2013). The 'lost ties' discourse skips the period of the densest migration, which led to the Indian diaspora of over six million people in the region mentioned in the Prime Minister's 2018 op-ed itself (Modi, 2018).

There is one caveat that should be applied to everything above. As noted by Bloembergen, the historiography of connectivity cannot be simply used to refute state versions of history, because studies of oceanic 'flows' can be equally misleading as to unity (Bloembergen, 2021; see also Hofmeyr, 2012). The claims audit in this article, therefore, examines plural claims as well as civilizational ones, and Table 1 reflects it.

Table 1: Recurring historical claims in official documents and what the scholarship supports

Claim (Source)	What the scholarship shows	Assessment
'Over several millennia' (ASEAN–India, 2018, preamble)	Sustained South–Southeast Asian exchange attested from the last centuries BCE (Manguin, Mani and Wade, 2011; Bellina, 2017)	Supported with qualification: about two millennia

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Claim (Source)	What the scholarship shows	Assessment
'More than two millennia' (Modi, 2018)	As above	Supported
Monsoon-guided movement 'for the last five thousand years' (PIB, 2025b)	Third-millennium BCE exchange largely coastal; open-sea monsoon crossings later (Ray, 2003; Seland, 2013)	Supported with qualification
A hub 'connecting Africa, Arabia, East Asia and South East Asia' (PIB, 2025b)	Founding premise of Indian Ocean historiography (Chaudhuri, 1985; Abu-Lughod, 1989; Pearson, 2003)	Supported
Ties 'forged in peace and friendship' (Modi, 2018)	Record includes the Chola expedition of c. 1025–26 (Kulke, 2009; Sen, 2009)	Contested
'Spread of Buddhism' from South into Southeast Asia (PIB, 2021)	Multidirectional networks; Southeast Asian patronage at Nalanda; Sri Lankan and Burmese roles (Acri, 2016; Frasch, 2017)	Supported with qualification
Angkor Wat as a symbol of 'our' links (Modi, 2018)	Indic idiom, Khmer creation; localisation (Wolters, 1999; Pollock, 2006)	Supported with qualification
Epics 'visible across the entire landscape of Indonesia' (Modi, 2018)	Distinct Javanese and Balinese tellings (Richman, 1991); Islamic cultures elided (Bloembergen, 2021)	Supported with qualification
'Long-lost ties' to be rekindled (IGNCA, n.d.a)	Colonial-era Bay of Bengal circulation intensified (Amrith, 2013)	Contested
Past linkages 'encompassing the various seas and oceans of the Indo-Pacific' (ASEAN–India, 2023, preamble)	'Indo-Pacific' is a twenty-first-century strategic concept	Framing device, not a historical claim

Source: Authors' synthesis of the official documents and the scholarship cited in the table; grading criteria as set out in Section 3.3.

5. A Genealogy: 'Greater India' and its Afterlives

The civilizational frame was not invented by the Indian governments that are the subject of this article. Origins of its modern version should be found in the Greater India Society, founded in the 1920s in Calcutta, and the French and Indian groups of scholars who have reconstructed a history of Indian cultural empire covering Southeast Asia (Bayly, 2004). The Asianists of early twentieth-century Indian nationalism viewed Asia as a space of civilizational kinship with India at its center, a perspective that has gone hand in hand with anti-colonial internationalism (Stolte and Fischer-Tiné, 2012). As demonstrated by Bloembergen, scholars, collectors and museums have sustained those 'moral geographies' through decolonization, eliding Indonesian Islamic cultures (Bloembergen, 2021; see also Bloembergen and Eickhoff, 2020). Coedès's 'Indianized states' have given scholarly formulation to the civilizational frame (Coedès, 1968).

The diplomatic use of the frame also predates 2014. 'Civilizational links' have been one of the motifs of ASEAN-India relations under the Look East policy: the 2012 Commemorative Summit called for 'the study, documentation and dissemination of knowledge about the civilizational links between ASEAN and India' (ASEAN–India, 2012, para. 18), and the revival of Nalanda as an international university, legislated in 2010, has drawn on the same imagery. One of the most notable events of the 2012 commemorative year has been the voyage of the Indian Navy's sail training ship INS Sudarshini to ASEAN countries. What changed after 2014 has been less the vocabulary than its institutional location and maritime orientation. The first occurrence of the combination of 'maritime' and 'civilizational' in the corpus examined in this article has been the title of the 2015 conference in Bhubaneswar launched by the External Affairs Minister: 'India and the Indian Ocean: Renewing the Maritime Trade and Civilizational Linkages' (RIS, 2015). Since the launch documents describe a plural ocean, this article does not analyze Mausam as the reincarnation of Greater India. It analyses, however, where in the discourse of the project the older frame resurfaces.

Since 2014 there has been a substantial scholarship on the influence of Hindu nationalist ideology on the presentation of Indian foreign policy (Hall, 2019), and Singh and Winter (2023) have traced a 'civilizational internationalism' via which Hindu civilizational discourse circulates in UNESCO's programmes. The genealogy above indicates that the civilizational frame is older and wider than any particular government. What the post-2014 record analyzed in this article indicates is the shift in accent and institutional base, elaborated in the sections that follow.

6. Project Mausam: A Plural Frame and a Narrow Selection

6.1. The Launch Frame, 2014–2016

The documents that have marked the launch of Project Mausam envisaged an ocean without a center. The project has

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been described as 'a significant step in recording and celebrating this important phase of world history from the African, Arab and Asian-world perspectives' (IGNCA, n.d.a). The IGNCA, its nodal agency at launch, has described the project's field as 'the diversity of cultural, commercial and religious interactions in the Indian Ocean – extending from East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, the Indian subcontinent and Sri Lanka to the Southeast Asian archipelago' (IGNCA, n.d.b). The project has aimed at the most challenging form of World Heritage listing, a transnational mixed route including natural and cultural heritage (Ministry of Culture, n.d.), and its plans have included 'a comprehensive database and UNESCO web platform on Maritime Cultural Landscapes and Routes' (IGNCA, n.d.b).

Two aspects of this frame have mattered for what has followed. The first one is its plurality and research orientation, manifest in the IGNCA's series of public lectures on the project's themes (PIB, 2017a). The second one is the project's restorative temporality: it 'rekindles long-lost ties across nations of the Indian Ocean', aims to 're-connect and re-establish communications between countries of the Indian Ocean world' and, 'at the micro level', focuses on 'understanding national cultures in their regional maritime milieu' (Ministry of Culture, n.d.; IGNCA, n.d.a). Its oceanic past assumes breakage and repair, and even within the plural frame the project is organized around modern nation-states.

In early Southeast Asian commentary, the lack of details has attracted more attention than the frame in the launch documents. In a commentary published by the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia, Thomas Daniel noted that 'the specifics of Project Mausam have yet to be officially released' and concluded that it was 'India's direct response in countering and confronting China's MSR', the Maritime Silk Road (Daniel, 2015). The ministry's own account of the launch, however, names China as the first country whose ambassadors 'expressed great interest' in the project (Ministry of Culture, n.d.).

6.2. Institutional Transfer and Bureaucratisation, 2017–2020

By December 2017, the project has transferred to another institution. A written reply in the Rajya Sabha stated that Mausam was 'implemented by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) as the nodal agency with research support of' the IGNCA and the National Museum (PIB, 2017b). The same reply has listed thirty-nine countries 'identified under Project Mausam', from Comoros, Mozambique and South Africa in the west, through the Red Sea, the Gulf and the Levant, to Pakistan, China and Viet Nam in the east. It also reported that Indian missions abroad have been 'requested to identify appropriate authority/experts for dialogue and to identify potential sites for preparing Tentative List proposal' (PIB, 2017b). Three and a half years after the launch, the instrument of the project has been the diplomatic network and its goal a Tentative List proposal.

This reply has been the source of the financial figures used in this article. It states that the Standing Finance Committee (SFC) allocation of Rs 150,244,502 (about Rs 15 crore) has been approved for 2015-16 and 2016-17, and that Rs 2,394,600 (about Rs 24 lakh) has been utilized up to March 2017 (PIB, 2017b), about 1.6%. The figure should be interpreted with caution, as other parliamentary replies provide different figures of utilization at different dates (PIB, 2017a; PIB, 2018), and the series has not been reconciled. It is consistent, however, with Madhu Bhalla's assessment, in the 2020 special issue of India Quarterly devoted to the initiative, that Mausam 'has not met the expectations with which it was announced' and that its programmatic framework remains unclear (Bhalla, 2020; see also Ray and Bhalla, 2020).

The change has been significant not only administratively. In Smith's (2006) terms, the authority to define the project's heritage has moved from a research center whose idiom is interdisciplinary and interpretive to the national agency responsible for monuments protection and for India's World Heritage dossiers. In her 2019 chapter, Ray raised a related question: what role disciplinary specialists should play in framing the themes of World Heritage dossiers, and which agency should initiate them (Ray, 2019).

6.3. Selection, 2021

In March 2021 the Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Culture and Tourism has informed the Rajya Sabha that 'several countries including' Bangladesh, Cambodia, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, Indonesia, Oman, Qatar, Singapore, Malaysia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Myanmar, the Philippines and Jordan had nominated resource persons for the project. The reply then specified the two themes proposed: 'It is proposed to prepare two transnational nominations namely; (a) Routes followed by the Cholas in the Southeast Asia region and; (b) Spread of Buddhism through land and sea routes in the South and Southeast Asian region' (PIB, 2021). The project has been extended to 31 March 2023. No later parliamentary information about the project has been found in the course of this research.

The contrast between the launch frame and these two themes is evident. Both themes are Indic in origin and outward in orientation; neither one is linked to Africa, Arabia, Islam or China; and neither one names a Southeast Asian polity as an agent. The first refers to a south Indian dynasty famous, inter alia, for the maritime venture described in Section 4 above. The second relates to the 'spread' of Buddhism, a process that historians have reconstructed as a multidirectional interaction wherein, for example, the Śailendra king contributed to a monastery in Nalanda, and monks from Pagan revived monastic practice in Sri Lanka (Frasch, 2017).

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There are some possible explanations for these choices, but the available information does not allow one to establish their validity. One of them is partner response: the chosen topics may respond to the preferences of the interested countries. But of the fourteen countries mentioned, six are West Asian states that are not directly linked with the proposed themes, even though the list is not meant to be exhaustive. Another possible explanation is the feasibility of the selected themes under UNESCO's criteria: serial transnational nominations require clear topics and characteristics, and Buddhist and Chola sites are extensively studied and often protected. This factor does matter; however, it would work equally well for topics on Islam or ports, for which there is abundant material on the Malabar coast and in several partner countries (Prange, 2018). A third reason is the focus on Southeast Asia stipulated by India's Act East policy. Both selected topics match that geographical focus. Finally, the ideology of the Indic past (as seen in the genealogy of Section 5) can explain the choice. Clearly, these possible explanations are not mutually exclusive. Moreover, the available information provides no reason for prioritizing one of them.

6.4. The Frame Returns; the Nomination Does Not, 2025–2026

The latest document in the Mausam archive preserves the pluralist framework but does not fill the gap in the project's delivery. Reporting on the November 2025 workshop, the ASI recalled that 'Project Mausam is derived from the Arabic word mausim' and described the region as 'a hub of commercial and cultural exchanges connecting Africa, Arabia, East Asia and South East Asia', providing examples of intangible heritage, including 'languages, scripts, medical traditions, festivals, dress, cuisine and customs' (PIB, 2025b). The pan-oceanic vision of 2014 returned to the narrative, together with the new claim that the monsoon winds facilitated travels across the ocean 'at least for the last five thousand years. The new theme introduced in the narrative was that of islands.

The workshop was a national event. In addition to UNESCO's Regional Office for South Asia and ICOMOS India, among the participating organizations listed in the report were Indian institutions – the Ministry of External Affairs, the National Institute of Oceanography, the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, the IGNCA and the Wildlife Institute of India (PIB, 2025b). Its purpose was 'to explore potential Transnational World Heritage Nomination proposals' (PIB, 2025b). Eleven years after its launch in Doha, the project was still exploring the proposals it had sought to make. As of 20 September 2026, India's Tentative List included no transnational maritime route and no Mausam-derived entry (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026b).

Buddhist heritage, the topic of one of the 2021 themes, has meantime progressed through the national dossiers. The Ancient Buddhist Site of Sarnath entered the World Heritage List in 2026, while the serial nomination of the Buddhist Triangle Sites of Odisha, described in the Tentative List as 'illustrating Odisha's role in the Buddhist network of Asia', was included in the Tentative List in December 2025 (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2025, 2026a). Neither of the two records refers to Mausam, and no causal relationship is claimed here. Nonetheless, the consistency of the pattern is obvious: themes announced as transnational were pursued, if at all, as national. Table 2 below summarizes the stated aims of the project and its delivery.

Table 2: Project Mausam: stated aims and recorded delivery, 2014–2026

Date	Record	What it shows
June 2014	Launched at the 38th session of the World Heritage Committee, Doha, with the aim of a 'Transnational Mixed Route' (PIB, 2014; Ministry of Culture, n.d.)	Heritage as diplomacy announced
2014	Plural Afro-Arab-Asian frame; research-led programme under the IGNCA (IGNCA, n.d.a, n.d.b)	Research-led framing
2015–2017	About Rs 15 crore approved for 2015–16 and 2016–17; about Rs 24 lakh utilised by March 2017 (PIB, 2017b)	Low early expenditure
December 2017	ASI recorded as nodal agency; thirty-nine countries identified; missions asked to identify sites for a Tentative List proposal (PIB, 2017b)	Institutional transfer; bureaucratisation
March 2021	Fourteen countries named as having nominated resource persons; Chola and Buddhist themes proposed; extension to March 2023 (PIB, 2021)	Operational selection
November 2025	ASI national workshop to 'explore potential' nominations; plural frame restated (PIB, 2025b)	Frame restored; delivery pending
September 2026	No Mausam-derived entry on India's Tentative List (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2026b)	Declarative heritage diplomacy

Sources: Authors' synthesis of the documents cited in the table; financial figures from PIB (2017b), discussed in Section 6.2.

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7. ASEAN–India: The Civilizational Clause in a Negotiated Register

None of the six joint documents reviewed in this section, from the 2016–2020 Plan of Action to that of 2026–2030, makes any reference to Project Mausam. This section therefore does not continue the case study proper. It considers another context of the use of the same past under different conditions: every word is negotiated with the ASEAN member states, and ASEAN participates in its formulation.

7.1. A Formula and its Vehicles

The civilizational clause is the most stable component of ASEAN–India cultural cooperation. In the 2016–2020 Plan of Action, the partners undertake to 'Promote the study, as well as the documentation and dissemination of knowledge, about the civilizational links between ASEAN and India' (ASEAN–India, 2015, item 3.4.7), wording very similar to that of the 2012 Commemorative Summit quoted in Section 5. The commitment recurs in the 2021–2025 Plan of Action (ASEAN–India, 2020, para. 64), and, with the adaptation of 'civilizational links' into 'civilizational linkages', in the 2023 Joint Statement on Maritime Cooperation (ASEAN–India, 2023, para. 15). What varies is the means of implementation, and this change follows a certain logic (Table 3).

In the 2016–2020 Plan of Action, the means of implementation were specific and Indic. The partners undertake to 'preserve, protect and restore symbols and structures representing civilizational bonds between ASEAN and India, including Angkor Wat temples in the Kingdom of Cambodia, Borobudur and Prambanan temples in the Republic of Indonesia, Wat Phu in the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Bagan in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Sukhothai Historical Park in the Kingdom of Thailand, and My Son sanctuary in the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam' (ASEAN–India, 2015, item 3.4.8). All seven sites are Hindu or Buddhist monuments; none is Islamic or port-related, and none is located in Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines or Singapore.

The 2018 Delhi Declaration does not specify the list of monuments. The partners commit to 'preserve, protect and restore cultural and historical symbols and structures which are of mutual interest in reflecting the ASEAN-India cultural and historical connection, including through India's proposal on mapping inscriptions along the Mekong river' (ASEAN–India, 2018, para. 25). Two new qualifications were added: 'which are of mutual interest' and the specification of the means of operation as India's proposal. In the 2021–2025 Plan of Action, only the study commitment survives. The 2022 Joint Statement includes the activities 'such as the ASEAN Culture Heritage List' (ASEAN–India, 2022, para. 20), and the 2023 maritime statement mentions ASEAN Heritage Parks and the ASEAN Cultural Heritage List (ASEAN–India, 2023, para. 14). The 2026–2030 Plan repeats nearly verbatim the 2018 Delhi Declaration paragraph, except that 'India's proposal on mapping inscriptions along the Mekong river' is substituted with 'the feasibility study of the envisaged ASEAN Cultural Heritage List (ACHL) led by the Senior Officials' Meeting on Culture and Arts (SOMCA)' (ASEAN–India, 2025, item 3.4.5).

The civilizational commitment remains stable in every renegotiation, but India's control over it diminishes over the ten years. The vehicle of its implementation goes from the restoration of specific Hindu and Buddhist monuments, through monuments 'of mutual interest', to a mechanism owned and implemented by ASEAN. One explanation is institutional absorption: ASEAN accepts the vocabulary as a diplomatic courtesy but implements its consequences via its mechanisms. Another explanation can be that ASEAN's drafting norms, emphasizing 'ASEAN centrality' in all its dialogue partnerships, would yield the same result irrespective of India's intention; the comparison of Plans of Action for other partners would help to test this hypothesis. In a commentary on the latest Plan, published by the ASEAN–India Centre in 2026, it is argued that 'the implementation of the Plan still focuses on preservation' and that treating intangible heritage mainly as something to preserve underestimates its potential (Teh, 2026). Whichever the owner of the vehicle may be, the commitment remains preservation-oriented.

Table 3: The civilizational clause and its operational vehicles in ASEAN–India texts, 2015–2025

Text (year adopted)	Clause	Named sites	Operational vehicle	Owner of vehicle
Plan of Action 2016–2020 (2015)	Items 3.4.7–3.4.8	Seven Hindu or Buddhist monuments	Restoration of named monuments	Joint (unassigned)
Delhi Declaration (2018)	Para. 25	None; 'of mutual interest'	Mapping inscriptions along the Mekong	'India's proposal'
Plan of Action 2021–2025 (2020)	Para. 64	None	Study and documentation only	Joint

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Text (year adopted)	Clause	Named sites	Operational vehicle	Owner of vehicle
CSP Joint Statement (2022)	Para. 20	None	Activities such as the 'ASEAN Culture Heritage List'	ASEAN
Maritime Joint Statement (2023)	Paras 14–15	None	Underwater heritage; ASEAN Heritage Parks and ASEAN Cultural Heritage List; exhibitions and digital resources	ASEAN and joint
Plan of Action 2026–2030 (2025)	Item 3.4.5	None	Feasibility study of the ASEAN Cultural Heritage List, led by SOMCA	ASEAN

Note: Paragraph and item numbers follow each document's own numbering; the 2022 statement uses the form 'ASEAN Culture Heritage List'. SOMCA = Senior Officials' Meeting on Culture and Arts. Source: Authors' synthesis of ASEAN–India (2015, 2018, 2020, 2022, 2023, 2025).

7.2. Maritime and Heritage: Juxtaposed, Not Fused

One might expect that if maritime heritage were emerging as a diplomatic vocabulary, then maritime provisions of the joint documents would draw upon it. However, they do not. The maritime provisions of the Plans for 2016–2020 and 2021–2025 talk about maritime security and safety, freedom of navigation, UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, counter-piracy and search and rescue, but none of the three Plans makes use of the heritage vocabulary in their maritime sections (ASEAN–India, 2015, sec. 1.5; ASEAN–India, 2020, paras 14–16; ASEAN–India, 2025, sec. 1.4). The 2026–2030 Plan commits the parties to promoting the implementation of the Joint Statement on Maritime Cooperation, and does not refer to its heritage provisions (ASEAN–India, 2025, item 1.4.2).

However, fusion occurs in the preambles. The 2022 Joint Statement acknowledges 'the deep civilizational linkages, maritime connectivity, and cross-cultural exchanges between Southeast Asia and India which have grown stronger over the last 30 years' (ASEAN–India, 2022, preamble). The 2023 Joint Statement recognizes 'the deep civilizational linkages and cross-cultural exchanges, facilitated through both land and maritime routes between Southeast Asia and India, encompassing the various seas and oceans of the Indo-Pacific' (ASEAN–India, 2023, preamble), and the operative text of this document contains the sole reference to maritime heritage in the joint corpus – a commitment to cooperation for the 'conservation and preservation of underwater natural and cultural heritage' (para. 14). Two aspects of these provisions are worth mentioning. First, the wording of the 2022 text measures the strengthening of civilizational linkages against the thirty years of the dialogue relationship rather than against millennia, thus presenting civilization as something diplomacy can enhance. Second, the wording of the 2023 text projects the 'Indo-Pacific', a construct of twenty-first-century strategic thought, onto the past, recognizing the fact that the connections went not only by sea but also by land.

The declaration of the Prime Minister that 2026 will become the 'ASEAN-India Year of Maritime Cooperation' provides an additional illustration of this distinction. He justified the choice by the rapid development of cooperation 'in HADR, maritime security, and the blue economy'; the commitment to the 'preservation of our shared cultural heritage' came separately (PIB, 2025a). In these texts, the two vocabularies are juxtaposed: maritime heritage complements maritime strategy rather than is incorporated in it.

7.3. The Unilateral Register

Texts addressed to ASEAN audiences in a non-negotiative context sound differently. A prominent example is the op-ed of the Prime Minister in January 2018, marking twenty-five years of the partnership and published in the leading dailies of the ASEAN member states (Modi, 2018). Its historical references are broader than those of any joint text:

> "India's partnership with ASEAN may be just 25 years old. But, India's relations with Southeast Asia go back more than two millennia. Forged in peace and friendship, religion and culture, art and commerce, language and literature, these enduring links are today present in every aspect of the magnificent diversity of India and Southeast Asia, providing a unique envelope of comfort and familiarity between our people. (Modi, 2018)"

This op-ed also sets forth something that the joint texts lack: a discourse of belonging. 'More than two decades ago, India opened itself to the world with tectonic changes. And, with instincts honed over centuries, it turned naturally to the East. Thus began a new journey of India's reintegration with the East' (Modi, 2018). All along, the subject is 'India', a modern state embedded in the past.

Selection is clear from the country-specific sections of the op-ed. The word 'civilizational' is used in two of them. 'India and Indonesia share a continuity of civilizational relationship that stretches over two millennia. Visible in the legends of Ramayana and Mahabharata that are part of the entire

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landscape of Indonesia, these unique cultural threads umbilically bind the peoples of Asia's two largest democracies' (Modi, 2018). Relations with Cambodia are characterized by the 'deep sense of civilizational ties' there, and Angkor Wat becomes 'a glorious testimony and grand symbol of our ancient historical, religious and cultural links' (Modi, 2018). Relations with Myanmar are described as 'reflecting our deep sense of kinship and our common Buddhist heritage', citing the ASI's restoration of the Ananda Temple in Bagan (Modi, 2018). Relations with Viet Nam, however, have roots in 'the common struggle for liberation from foreign rule and the national struggle for independence', even though the Cham sanctuary of My Son was included in the list of monuments standing for 'civilizational bonds' in the 2016–2020 Plan of Action. 'Strong traditional and cultural ties' are recognized in Brunei, while Singapore is called 'a window to the heritage of India's ties to the region'. Lao PDR, Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand are considered in terms of trade, investments and cooperation. The op-ed is silent on Islam, despite discussion of the world's largest Muslim-majority country.

There are two possible interpretations of this pattern, and they are compatible with each other. One may assume that the selection is based on the Hindu–Buddhist principle – the use of civilizational and kinship idioms is reserved for those partners who have monuments which could be regarded as Indic. Alternatively, the op-ed may reflect adaptation to the national narratives of partners, as demonstrated by the case of Viet Nam, where anti-colonial national historiography is more important than Cham heritage. In either case, the claims of familiarity and belonging, which this research expected of India's heritage diplomacy in general, belong, in this corpus, to its unilateral register. The joint texts discuss 'links', 'linkages' and 'exchanges.

The relevant literature discusses these claims in the ways indicated above. The Javanese and Balinese versions of the epics should be treated as distinct literary creations rather than traces of the original Indian version (Richman, 1991), and the absence of mentions of Islam repeats a pattern that characterized older geographies of Greater India (Bloembergen, 2021).

8. Registers, Functions and Limits

8.1. Where the Word 'Civilization' Lives

Across the three registers, the vocabulary is institutionally situated (Table 4). In the twenty-four coded passages of the heritage bureaucracy, the word 'civilization' in any form is absent; the texts speak of the 'Indian Ocean world', of 'interactions', 'routes', 'landscapes' and 'ties'. Ten out of twenty coded passages of the joint ASEAN–India documents use the word, as well as five out of fourteen passages from Indian diplomatic texts. The vocabulary of 'long-lost ties' to revive carries its own assumptions, but it is not civilizational vocabulary.

Table 4: Vocabulary by institutional register in the coded passages, 2014–2025

Register	Passages coded	Passages using 'civilization (al)'	Passages linking maritime and heritage	Passages naming Indic traditions	Passages naming plural (Afro-Arab-Asian) actors
Indian heritage bureaucracy (Ministry of Culture, ASI, IGNCA)	24	0	n/a	1	4
Indian diplomacy (Prime Minister's Office, MEA)	14	5	2	4	0
Joint ASEAN–India	20	10	3	1	0
Total	**58**	**15**	**5**	**6**	**4**

Notes: Cells give numbers of coded passages; n/a = not applicable, so the total number of passages linking maritime and heritage covers the diplomatic and joint registers only. Source: Authors' synthesis (coding of the corpus described in Section 3).

This finding lends empirical grounding to the distinction central to this paper. Among the records examined, the transition from interaction to civilization occurs neither in heritage documentation nor in heritage administration. It occurs in diplomacy: in a ministerial conference title, in the writings of the Prime Minister and in texts negotiated with partner states. The selectivity of the heritage bureaucracy is of a different nature, as shown in Section 6: it is the selectivity of actions rather than the texts.

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8.2. Functions

The joint texts identify one of the functions explicitly. Repeatedly, the past is described as 'a strong foundation' for current cooperation (ASEAN–India, 2018, 2022, 2023, preambles); in other words, historical connectivity legitimizes partnership. The unilateral texts provide a second function: familiarity and belonging: India's turn to the East is a 'reintegration' (Modi, 2018).

The third function is positional. The op-ed notes that India and ASEAN nations 'have relations free from contests and claims' (Modi, 2018). The claim concerns the present, but, read in conjunction with two millennia of ties 'forged in peace and friendship', it implies a distinction from a power whose relations with some ASEAN states include maritime disputes. Southeast Asian commentary saw Mausam in these terms from the start (Daniel, 2015), and comparisons of scholarly literature have juxtaposed Mausam with China's Maritime Silk Road (Ray, 2019; see also Winter, 2019). The evidence presented here warns against interpreting Mausam in such a way: according to the official record, China was one of the countries whose ambassadors showed interest at the launch of Mausam, and one of the thirty-nine states named under the project (Ministry of Culture, n.d.; PIB, 2017b).

The fourth function is internal, and, according to the available record, it is the most developed one. Apart from its announcement in Doha, all activities of Mausam have occurred in India, from the national conference in Kochi in November 2014 (PIB, 2017a) to the national workshop of 2025 (PIB, 2025b); the Buddhist heritage included in the World Heritage system was put forward via national nominations; and the long-term claims of 'two millennia' and 'five thousand years' concern the history of India as well as of its partners.

It is necessary not to confuse the declaratory nature of Mausam with the nature of India's heritage diplomacy in general. India's major heritage-diplomatic practice is of a different kind: bilateral conservation. Restoration work of the ASI in Angkor Wat (1986–1993), Ta Prohm and the Ananda Temple in Bagan, mentioned in the op-ed (Modi, 2018), and its work on Hindu and Buddhist monuments in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Viet Nam in general (Dash, 2023) exemplify heritage diplomacy in Winter's terms: cooperation over heritage that creates a relationship. Comparison is illustrative: where India worked bilaterally on monuments controlled and valued by the partner states, it implemented the projects; where India suggested a transnational project implying consensus on the shared narrative among several states, it declared the project only.

8.3. Limits

The same evidence indicates the limits of this form of heritage diplomacy. The first one is the tension between India-centric narratives and partner countries' own history. The polities treated by historians as active agents of Southeast Asian history, such as Srivijaya, the Khmer kings and the Śailendras, are not mentioned in any of the texts and occur only implicitly, as the target of Chola's campaign. Angkor and Borobudur are regarded as symbols of 'our' connections, but they belong to the national heritage and heritage politics of Cambodia and Indonesia (Winter, 2007; Bloembergen and Eickhoff, 2020). No partner-side reaction to these claims was found in this study, but a nomination based on 'the routes followed by the Cholas' would need the participation of heritage authorities of states whose historical ports were targeted in this expedition.

The second limitation is procedural. Serial transnational nominations imply documented attributes, agreed upon boundaries, joint management and, most importantly, the involvement of several States Parties. A project that selected thirty-nine states, drew resource persons from at least fourteen and chose two themes faced a structural limitation that rhetoric alone could not overcome.

The third limitation is intrinsic to the project. The pan-oceanic perspective that Mausam has reintroduced since 2014 is the biggest historical asset of the project and the aspect least represented in its operational decisions. Across the thirteen texts used for the analysis of omissions, Islamic networks are not mentioned, East Africa does not occur in the nomination themes, and no historic port is mentioned. As a bounded finding, this means that the selected texts do not mention these traditions and actors; it does not mean by itself that they were deliberately omitted. Even the name of the project comes from an Arabic word whose maritime world is not represented in its selections.

The fourth limitation concerns evidence of reception of these narratives in partner societies. The only Southeast Asian strategic assessment of Mausam found in this study is Daniel (2015), and the interviews conducted by Sarita Dash with Indonesian scholars at the Samudraraksa museum at Borobudur are the only partner-side fieldwork conducted (Dash, 2023). Without evidence collected in partner societies, any claim about the credibility of India's heritage diplomacy in the region is internally consistent, but externally unsubstantiated.

9. Conclusion

This paper asked how India transforms a documented maritime past into diplomatic narrative, and what this process selects and omits. Its answers to the three research questions can be summarized.

First (RQ1), the transformation happens at different institutional sites. India's heritage agencies describe a pluralistic ocean; India's diplomats, alone and jointly with their ASEAN partners, describe a civilizational bond. Analyses that consider Indian civilizational discourse as a

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unitary voice overlook this division of labor and, thus, fail to identify the location of the transformation.

Second (RQ2), selectivity occurs in actions, not rhetoric. From its launch in 2014 to its most recent workshop in 2025, the description of the Indian Ocean by the project Mausam remained pluralistic, but its operational decisions, the only nomination themes identified in this study, were Indic and outward-oriented. A critique based only on rhetoric would see Mausam as more pluralist than it actually is in practice; a critique based only on practice would overlook the plural perspective that the project maintains.

Third (RQ3), the Indian case provides another addition to the study of heritage diplomacy in the form that has received less attention than, for instance, China's revival of the Silk Roads, in which states build much of what they declare. Declarative heritage diplomacy introduces heritage as diplomacy, in the form of shared routes, nominations and databases, and delivers heritage in diplomacy: the vocabulary of connection in speeches and declarations, without the institutional infrastructure to sustain it. At the multilateral level of ASEAN–India relations, the same vocabulary is incorporated in partner's infrastructure.

These findings allow answering the initial question of this study: Is the credibility of heritage diplomacy related to the difference between historically established linkages and homogenizing civilizational ones? The material provided by this study cannot answer the question of credibility, which requires evidence of reception. However, it shows that the historically strongest interpretation of India's maritime narrative, an ocean connected by Arab, African, Southeast Asian, Chinese and Indian actors, by merchants and monks, is present in the heritage documentation produced in India but has not yet shaped the project's operational decisions. The diplomacy based on this interpretation, which would treat the polities of Southeast Asia as creators rather than receivers of the connected past, would stand on a firmer historical ground.

9.1. Implications for India's Heritage Diplomacy

Findings allow making three evidence-based observations. First, in the examined documents, the gap between announcements and delivery in Mausam lies in operational decisions rather than in descriptive frames. Second, where India works bilaterally with partners on specific monuments, projects are implemented, while the transnational initiative has not yet resulted in nominations. Third, in the negotiated texts, the operational carriers of the civilizational clause are shifting toward ASEAN-owned mechanisms.

Recommendations based on these observations are:

1. To align operational themes with the plural frame maintained by the project, e.g., by providing port cities, Islamic and merchant networks, and East African connections an equal place among candidate themes for nominations next to Chola and Buddhist themes.
2. Engage the partner heritage authorities in defining the themes and attributes at the outset, such that the transnational dossier starts from a story that partners already share, rather than an Indian proposal.
3. Work within ASEAN's own frameworks, such as the proposed ASEAN Cultural Heritage List, where India takes on a role as a partner rather than as the owner of the mechanism.
4. Regularly publish reconciled reports on the objectives, expenditure and outputs of Mausam, so that performance can be assessed relative to declarations.
5. Learn from the experience of bilateral conservation, the type of heritage cooperation that India appears to have implemented successfully, while being aware of the Indic selectivity that it entails.

9.2. Methodological Contribution and Further Research

The article also provides a methodology for analyzing official heritage narratives. Such narratives tend to be studied in either an ideological way, without consideration of the historical claims made, or as a bad history, without considering the institution making the claims. By combining the analysis of the narrator, claims audit, and clause tracing, it is possible to address both aspects. The methodology might be applied to other maritime heritage projects in the Indian Ocean, such as Chinese Maritime Silk Road programmes.

There are three avenues for future research following from the article. First, the reception of the narratives among the heritage authorities and audiences in the partner countries, along with triangulation of data from the official and press sources in these countries. Second, a comparison of ASEAN Plans of Action with India and other dialogue partners, which will allow us to see if the absorption identified here is unique to India. Third, the legacy of Mausam's academic phase, especially in terms of the conferences and the ASI's thematic studies 2025 framework.

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