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# Connecting India And Vietnam: Vovinam can leave a big impression on the Indian mindscape

October 9, 2020, 7:08 PM IST / Rudroneel Ghosh in Talking Turkey , World, TOI

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It was four years ago that India and Vietnam decided to elevate their ties to the level of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. This was based on a confluence of interests as per India's Act East policy and Vietnam's desire to diversify its foreign relations. Indeed, under the Indo-Pacific construct India and Vietnam are pivotal players. As East Asia with the South China Sea region as the epicentre emerges as the next global

growth hub, both New Delhi and Hanoi have genuine interests in collaborating to ensure an open, transparent, collaborative and productive regional order. Of course, there is also the China factor. But as I have argued before, one shouldn't see India-Vietnam ties purely through the prism of China. For, this makes bilateral ties transactional instead of long-term and durable.

In other words, if India and Vietnam are to collaborate to create a fair, rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, they have to build on their standalone relations. Only then can they generate the synergy and stakes required to counterbalance China as part of a larger geopolitical strategy. Before the Covid-19 pandemic hit, India-Vietnam trade had grown to $13 billion. While there is much headroom for two-way trade to grow further, the real test will be building people-to-people relations. It is unfortunate but true that very few people in India know about Vietnam. Of course, there are Indian academics and scholars who know Vietnam well, and there are Indian states like West Bengal and Kerala with a history of Leftist politics where Vietnam has some resonance. But by and large, ordinary Indians know next to nothing about Vietnam. And part of the problem is that there are no Vietnamese cultural products or brands that ordinary Indians can associate with.

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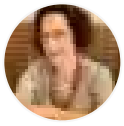
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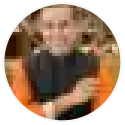
That's not the case with other Asean nations like Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia – the latter two have an Indian Diaspora – or East Asian nations like Japan and South Korea whose brands are clearly visible in India. Add to this the fact that Indian mainstream media is still very much focussed on the subcontinent and the West when it comes to foreign policy news. Very little or nothing is covered of the political and socio-economic developments in East Asia, except when it concerns India-China relations. This clearly must change if India is to be more involved in East Asia.

Coming back to Vietnam's presence in the Indian mindscape, one Vietnamese cultural product that can be readily embraced by Indians is the Vietnamese martial art of Vovinam. The latter was developed by Nguyen Loc in Vietnam in 1938 as an efficient method of self-defence. At the time Nguyen believed that Vovinam could help contribute towards liberating Vietnam which was under French rule. In theory, Vovinam as a martial art is based on the principle of between hard and soft styles. In fact, hard and soft techniques are used equally to adapt to different situations. Overall, Vovinam aims to develop both physical abilities and the spirit. Special emphasis is laid on tolerance and generosity as embodied in Vovinam's salutation 'iron



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hand over benevolent heart'. Technique-wise, Vovinam is known for its leg-grappling moves designed to grab the opponent with one's feet or legs and take him down using a twisting motion.

Interestingly, Vovinam already has a presence in India. Based in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, the Vovinam Association of India was founded in 2009. In fact, I spoke to the general secretary of the association, Praveen Garg, who told me that Vovinam now has a presence in as many as 25 Indian states. The martial art is also included in the school games and has organised five national championships. However, Garg said that recognition of Vovinam as a full-fledged national-level sport is still pending with the Indian sports ministry. And once that is obtained, Vovinam could emerge as the next big martial art sport in India. In fact, Garg said that despite Vovinam in India being just 10 years old, it has been growing at a rate faster than other martial art sports. Plus, according to him, Vovinam is best suited for self-defence training of women given

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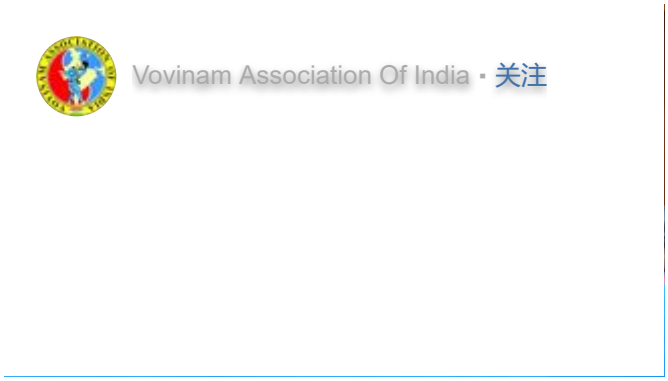
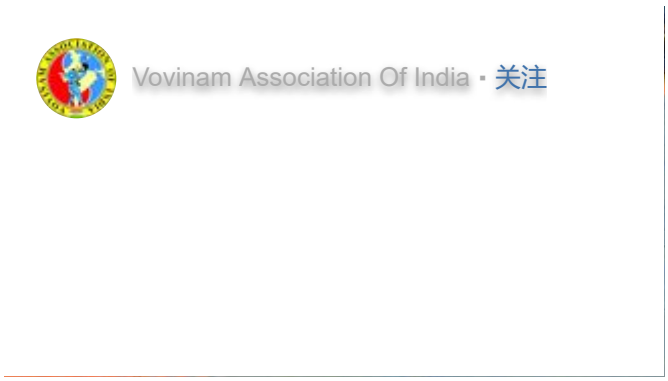
its leg-grappling techniques as well as use of offensive weapons such as knives.




Clearly, if there ever was a Vietnamese cultural product that could be exported to India for adoption by the Indian public at large, it is Vovinam. In fact, I would like to bet that just as yoga has gained immense popularity in Vietnam, Vovinam could have the same impact in India if the sport is given support and promoted correctly. And Vovinam could certainly be a useful entry point for the Indian public to get to know about Vietnam. The fact that Vovinam today is being promoted in Indian schools is perfect. After all, it is better that young children acquaint themselves with Vietnam today so that when they grow up they can be the

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promoters of India-Vietnam relations in the future.

This in turn will lead to organic, durable people-to-people and cultural ties between New Delhi and Hanoi. And that in turn will pave the way for greater two-way trade, tourism, business and strategic cooperation. Therefore, to boost India-Vietnam strategic ties, look to make people-to-people relations a core area of focus. And Vovinam, just like yoga, can certainly help here.

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