
India's Soft Power: Cultural Diplomacy, Diaspora, and Global Leadership

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Abstract

This paper critically explores India's soft power strategy, emphasizing its cultural diplomacy, democratic values, and the Indian diaspora. By focusing on cultural elements such as yoga, Bollywood, and the global Indian diaspora, India has successfully used soft power to enhance its global influence. India's leadership in technology, development aid, and democratic governance has strengthened its global image, even as internal challenges such as inequality, corruption, and religious tensions persist. This paper examines the ways India leverages soft power to build relationships with both the Global North and South, while navigating challenges from rising powers such as China. Recommendations are provided for how India can further expand its soft power through creative industries, educational diplomacy, and digital engagement.

Key Words - soft power, cultural diplomacy, diaspora, global politics, public diplomacy

Introduction

In international relations, power has traditionally been viewed in terms of military or economic might, often referred to as "hard power." However, the concept of "soft power," coined by political scientist Joseph Nye in the 1990s, emphasizes the ability to influence others through attraction, persuasion, and the appeal of cultural values and diplomatic engagement rather than coercion (Ikenberry & Nye, 2004). Soft power operates by shaping the preferences of other states or global actors through the legitimacy of influence rather than force or payment.

The 21st century has seen the growing importance of soft power in global politics. In an interconnected world where military dominance and economic strength alone are insufficient, nations increasingly rely on non-coercive means to foster relationships, influence global outcomes, and advance national interests (Fan, 2008). Soft power has become essential to building alliances, promoting international cooperation, and shaping global narratives. This paper explores how India has embraced soft power strategies, leveraging its rich cultural heritage, democratic ideals, and the influence of its global diaspora to assert itself on the world stage.

India's soft power success lies in its ability to blend its ancient traditions with modern values, combining cultural diplomacy, technological leadership, and its diaspora's influence to project an image of a responsible global player. India's rise in soft power is not only a product of its historical legacies but also the result of deliberate policy choices and strategic diplomacy. This

paper critically analyzes India's soft power assets and how they contribute to its global influence while addressing the internal and external challenges that India faces in maintaining and expanding its soft power.

India's Soft Power Assets

Cultural Diplomacy: An Ancient Heritage in a Modern World

India's cultural heritage has long been one of its most powerful assets. From the teachings of the Buddha to the artistry of classical Indian music, dance, and architecture, India's culture has influenced civilizations for millennia. Today, India continues to project its cultural influence globally through the promotion of yoga, Ayurveda, Bollywood, and Indian cuisine.

The global appeal of yoga, for example, has significantly contributed to India's soft power. Yoga, once seen as a niche spiritual practice, is now a global phenomenon. In 2014, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership, the United Nations declared June 21st as the International Day of Yoga, underscoring India's ability to export its cultural practices to the global stage (Thussu, 2020). Similarly, Ayurveda, India's traditional system of medicine, has found its way into global wellness industries, further enhancing India's cultural footprint.

Bollywood, India's prolific film industry, is another key element of India's soft power. Bollywood films reach audiences across Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and even the Western world, portraying India as a vibrant, diverse, and dynamic society. Bollywood's global reach exemplifies the power of cultural products to transcend borders, promote Indian values, and foster goodwill toward India.

Indian cuisine is another pillar of India's cultural diplomacy. With its rich diversity of flavors and regional variations, Indian food has become a global favorite. Indian restaurants are found in major cities worldwide, and Indian spices are sought after in global markets. These cultural exports create an image of India as a culturally rich and diverse nation, contributing to its soft power appeal (Hurn, 2016).

Democratic Values: The World's Largest Democracy

India's democratic values significantly bolster its soft power on the global stage. As the world's largest democracy, India provides a unique model of governance that emphasizes pluralism, tolerance, and inclusive participation. India's constitution guarantees fundamental freedoms such as freedom of speech, expression, and religion, while also protecting minority rights. The country's diversity—encompassing hundreds of languages, ethnicities, and religious communities—has become a defining feature of its democratic identity.

India's commitment to democracy, despite its challenges, is a source of admiration and respect globally (Akther, 2023). India's ability to manage its diversity through democratic governance sets it apart from authoritarian regimes, positioning it as a beacon of stability and resilience, particularly in a region that has experienced political upheaval. India's democratic credentials enhance its soft power by presenting an alternative to rising authoritarianism worldwide (Cartwright, 2009).

India's democratic values are not only internal strengths but also shape its foreign policy. India's leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War allowed it to emerge as a champion of the Global South, advocating for a more equitable and multipolar world order (Arndt, 2018). Today, India continues to promote multilateralism, human rights, and democratic governance as part of its global diplomacy. This commitment to democratic values strengthens India's image as a responsible global actor and a key player in shaping the international system.

The Diaspora Advantage: A Global Network of Influence

India's diaspora, numbering over 32 million, is one of the largest and most successful in the world. The diaspora plays a pivotal role in promoting India's cultural, economic, and political influence globally (Garha & Domingo, 2019). In 2023, India topped the global remittance charts with \$125 billion in remittances, which accounted for 3.4% of India's GDP (India News Network, 2023). These financial contributions are a testament to the diaspora's economic impact, but their influence extends far beyond economics.

Prominent figures such as Sundar Pichai (CEO of Google), Satya Nadella (CEO of Microsoft), and Kamala Harris (Vice President of the United States) exemplify the diaspora's success and its capacity to enhance India's soft power by occupying leadership roles in influential sectors. These individuals contribute to global business and politics while reinforcing India's image as a hub of technological innovation, diversity, and excellence (TheUNN, 2023).

The diaspora also plays a crucial role in cultural diplomacy. In countries like the U.S., U.K., and Canada, Indian-origin communities actively promote India's cultural heritage through festivals like Diwali, Bollywood films, yoga, and Indian cuisine. These activities foster a deeper understanding of Indian culture, further strengthening India's soft power (Bhatta, 2018).

Politically, the diaspora wields considerable influence. Indian-American lobbying was instrumental in securing the U.S.-India nuclear deal in 2008. Indian-origin politicians have also risen to prominent positions globally, including Rishi Sunak, the Prime Minister of the U.K. These political successes further enhance India's soft power by shaping foreign policy decisions that are favorable to India.

India's Soft Power Strategies in Action

Cultural Diplomacy at the Core

India has institutionalized cultural diplomacy through the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), established in 1950. The ICCR promotes Indian culture globally through educational programs, cultural exchanges, and the establishment of cultural centers worldwide. The *Incredible India* campaign, which markets India as a premier tourism destination, further enhances this effort by showcasing India's natural beauty, historical sites, and cultural diversity (Thussu, 2020).

Economic and Technological Leadership: The Digital Frontier

India's technological and economic advancements form another key pillar of its soft power strategy. Over the past three decades, India has emerged as one of the world's fastest-growing economies, with cities like Bengaluru becoming global hubs for software development and innovation. Initiatives like *Digital India*, launched in 2015, further cement India's position as a

leader in the Fourth Industrial Revolution. By advancing digital infrastructure, AI, and biotechnology, India projects an image of innovation and economic strength (Ohnesorge, 2020).

Championing Global Development

India's leadership in international development further enhances its soft power. The Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program, established in 1964, provides technical training and development aid to countries across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. This initiative strengthens ties with developing nations and builds goodwill in regions critical to India's global strategy (Mol et al., 2021).

India's contributions to global healthcare, particularly as the "pharmacy of the world" through the production of affordable generic medicines, have further bolstered its soft power. India's vaccine diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic, exemplified by the *Vaccine Maitri* initiative, which supplied millions of vaccine doses to countries across the Global South, highlights India's humanitarian role in global health diplomacy (Chattu, 2023).

Challenges and the Path Forward

Despite India's vast potential in leveraging soft power, significant internal challenges affect its ability to fully harness this influence. Issues such as poverty, inequality, religious tensions, and corruption undermine the country's efforts to project a positive global image. Reports of religious intolerance and human rights violations have strained India's image as a pluralistic and tolerant society (Jaffrelot, 2018).

Externally, India's soft power ambitions are challenged by China's growing influence, particularly through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Confucius Institutes. China's economic and cultural influence in regions like Africa and Southeast Asia poses competition for India. However, India's focus on sustainable development, democratic values, and cultural diplomacy provides a compelling alternative to China's infrastructure-driven approach (Bhatta, 2018).

Conclusion

India's soft power is deeply rooted in its cultural richness, democratic values, and the strength of its global diaspora. Through cultural diplomacy, development assistance, and its leadership in technology, India has projected a positive global image that fosters cooperation and furthers its national interests. However, to fully realize its soft power potential, India must address its internal challenges and continue to refine its strategy in a competitive geopolitical landscape. By expanding its soft power outreach in creative industries, education diplomacy, and digital leadership, India is well-positioned to further enhance its global standing in the 21st century (Shetty & Sahgal, 2019).

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