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India's Foreign Diplomacy through the Lens of Soft Power in Global Politics

Dr. Binu Jhanwar

Principal, Siddheshwar Vinayak Kala Mahavidyalay, Rajasthan, India

ABSTRACT: Soft power serves as a catalyst in shaping and strengthening a nation's ideology, culture, and institutions on the global stage. India has long employed elements of soft diplomacy; however, its strategies have not always been as effective as their potential promised. Despite this, soft power has played a crucial role in guiding India's foreign policy decisions and diplomatic approaches. This review paper explores the perspectives of various thinkers, analysts, and observers on the concept of soft power, highlighting how it differs fundamentally from hard power. It examines what India's diplomatic strategy and foreign policy aim to achieve through soft power, the instruments it employs to project this influence, and the effects such efforts have had on international politics. Furthermore, the study considers India's potential for expanding its soft power, with special emphasis on cultural diplomacy as a tool to strengthen its foreign policy and enhance its impact in shaping global political dynamics.

KEYWORDS: Soft Power; Yoga; Diplomacy; Foreign policy.

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of soft power was first introduced by Joseph Nye in the early 1990s and has since become a central theme in international politics. In his book *Bound to Lead* (1990), Nye distinguished between hard power and soft power. Hard power refers to the ability of states to compel others to act in accordance with their wishes, primarily through coercion or inducement. In contrast, soft power emphasizes persuasion and attraction, where states influence others by appealing to shared values, culture, or institutions, rather than through force or threats. Nye highlighted that with the decline in the centrality of military power, influence in global affairs is increasingly dispersed among multiple actors, making soft power a vital tool to shape outcomes without resorting to punitive measures (Nye, 1990).

According to Nye, institutions, ideology, and culture constitute the core sources of soft power. These intangible resources have significantly shaped U.S. foreign policy and have been adopted by several other nations, including India. While India has relied on hard power elements such as economic growth, military strength, and technological progress to strengthen its position in Asia, its leaders have also recognized the importance of soft power in building regional and global alliances. India views soft power as a means to extend its influence beyond Asia, enabling it to cultivate partnerships on the basis of attraction rather than compulsion.

Nye's framework has underlined the importance of this dimension in foreign policy, and no modern nation can afford to neglect it. India, with its rich cultural heritage, democratic institutions, and intellectual capital, is particularly well-positioned to harness soft power as an instrument of diplomacy. Shashi Tharoor (2008) argues that India has vast potential not only in the economic and defence sectors but also in projecting its soft power resources. He observes that India's vibrant democracy, free press, independent judiciary, and active civil society continually attract global attention and strengthen its global image as an emerging superpower.

Other scholars have also debated the dimensions of power in international relations. Nicholas Blarrell (2012) defines power as the capacity of one actor (A) to influence the behavior of another (B), noting that absolute power does not exist. Traditionally, military and economic power were considered dominant factors, but strategic thinkers increasingly emphasize intangible aspects such as culture and ideology. Nye's *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* classified power into three forms: economic incentives, military might, and the ability of a nation to attract others by promoting its values and culture. By this reasoning, states modify their preferences when they admire or find appeal in another nation's narrative and vision.

However, Nye's concept has not gone unchallenged. Janice, in *Why Soft Power Isn't So Soft: Representational Force and Attraction in World Politics*, critiques it for lacking clarity, theoretical rigor, and conceptual precision. Similarly, Steven Lukes (2007), in *Power and the Battle for Hearts and Minds: On the Bluntness of Soft Power*, argues that Nye overlooks the nuanced ways in which attraction and persuasion can operate, thereby reducing soft power to a blunt analytical tool. Earlier, in *Power: A Radical View*, Lukes (2005) introduced the idea of a "third face of power," which



he described as subtle and difficult to detect. Unlike Foucault, who emphasized the diffusion of power, Lukes recognized the causal influence of power while stressing that subjective interests and internalized beliefs can shape consent. This dimension further complicates the understanding of soft power, suggesting that persuasion and attraction may operate in ways that are not easily captured by Nye's framework (Williams, 2007).

II. INDIAN SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY: CURRENT SCENARIO

From the very beginning, soft power has played a prominent role in India's foreign policy, as reflected in numerous historical experiences. India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, envisioned that the country would inevitably assume a greater and more constructive role in international affairs. His diplomatic approach was not supported by the traditional elements of "hard power" such as military strength and economic capacity (Purushothaman, 2010). This was largely due to his and the nation's deep admiration for Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence, which had guided India's freedom struggle. In 1996, then Foreign Minister I.K. Gujral introduced the "Gujral Doctrine," which is widely recognized as a remarkable example of the application of soft power in India's external relations.

As the largest country in South Asia, India has a responsibility to maintain cordial relations with its neighboring states such as the Maldives, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan. At present, India seems to be strategically employing its soft power resources to strengthen its global image. Cultural expressions such as Bollywood, Sufi music, and yoga have reached audiences worldwide. Similarly, India's philosophical and spiritual traditions—non-violence, democracy, yoga, Ayurveda, Buddhism, and Gandhian ideals—have contributed significantly to its soft power diplomacy.

India's long history, culture, and civilization are crucial pillars of its international image, attracting both scholars and lay admirers across the globe. Indology itself thrives because of this appeal. A striking example is Peter Brook's 1980s theatrical production of the Mahabharata, which showcased India's epic heritage to a global audience and left a lasting impression. India's diversity in faith is another unique strength. It is the birthplace of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, while also providing refuge to religions such as Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Events like the Kumbh Mela, which has received significant global media attention, highlight India's ability to preserve and project its cultural traditions to the world.

Religious tourism constitutes another vital aspect of India's international ties. Besides Hindu pilgrimage destinations like Varanasi, Badrinath, Kedarnath, Vaishno Devi, Amarnath, Tirupati, Sabarimala, and Thanjavur, India is also a key destination for Buddhist pilgrims. This is natural, given that most of the important sites linked with the life of Lord Buddha—such as Bodh Gaya and Nalanda—are located here. These places continue to attract steady streams of visitors from ASEAN nations, Japan, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar. Christianity and Judaism have long-established roots in India, with churches and synagogues in South India dating back centuries. Similarly, Islam's legacy in India is reflected in the shrines of revered Sufi saints like Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti and Nizamuddin Auliya, which continue to draw large numbers of devotees.

Yoga and meditation, strongly tied to India's spiritual heritage, have become global phenomena. Their health benefits are now widely studied, with medical professionals acknowledging their relevance. In this context, India's diplomatic initiative to have June 21 recognized by the United Nations as International Yoga Day stands out as a remarkable success. Beyond spirituality, India's cultural wealth—its music, dance, art, and architecture—further contribute to soft power. Although the Taj Mahal is its most iconic landmark, countless other historical and archaeological sites continue to reshape visitors' perceptions of the country. The Ministry of External Affairs, through the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), actively promotes cultural diplomacy and cross-cultural exchange to strengthen India's soft power outreach.

Bollywood occupies a central yet contested position as a soft power tool. While Indian films, music, and dance enjoy global popularity, Indian cinema has not consistently achieved recognition at major international film festivals such as Cannes, Berlin, or Venice. In comparison with Hollywood, Bollywood's reach remains limited, primarily resonating within the Indian diaspora and among niche audiences. Moreover, Bollywood's dominance has occasionally overshadowed regional cinema. Nevertheless, its vibrant music and energetic dance traditions remain valuable assets of India's cultural diplomacy.

Indian cuisine is another powerful dimension of soft power. Renowned for its diversity and sophistication, it appeals to people across cultures. Indian restaurants have flourished in almost every major global city, and dishes such as Chicken Tikka Masala have even become symbolic staples abroad, humorously referred to as the "national dish" of Britain.

The Indian diaspora—comprising over 20 million Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) and Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs)—



also plays a significant role in projecting India's soft power. Spread across continents, the diaspora has emerged as a source of economic, cultural, and political influence. A striking example is their contribution during the negotiations of the Indo-US nuclear deal in the early 2000s, where influential Indian Americans lobbied for Congressional support. The diaspora continues to act as a vital resource for India's soft diplomacy, not only by promoting culture abroad but also by reinforcing India's foreign policy goals. However, the credibility of soft power rests on consistency between words and actions, echoing Gandhi's emphasis on moral authority in international relations.

Scholars have also underscored the cultural dimension of Indian diplomacy. Abraham, in his essay *The Future of Indian Foreign Policy* (2007), argues that India's foreign policy should focus more on cultural production—such as cinema, music, yoga, textiles, and cuisine—rather than military means, given their vast international appeal. Similarly, Jawaharlal Nehru, in his work *Changing India* (1963), emphasized tolerance, friendship, individual dignity, peaceful resolution of conflicts, and consensus-building through persuasion as guiding principles of foreign policy, stressing that the methods of diplomacy are as important as its aims.

Since the beginning of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's tenure, South Asia has assumed greater significance in India's foreign policy. His "Neighbourhood First" approach has revitalized regional engagement, aimed at strengthening ties, improving India's global image, and fostering cooperative development (Sharan, 2017). In this context, the Gujral Doctrine continues to remain relevant, with Modi's policies aligning its philosophy with new strategic imperatives (Sirohi, 2018).

For India's South Asia strategy, strengthening institutions alongside diplomacy is essential for regional integration. Given its demographic and economic weight, India occupies a position of influence in the region. This advantage should be used constructively by playing the role of a "big brother" to foster inclusive development. Initiatives like Make in India highlight the current administration's emphasis on growth, which also reinforces India's credibility as an emerging economic powerhouse. By supporting economic integration in South Asia, India can leverage its market potential to mutual advantage.

Although power asymmetry in the region presents challenges, fostering closer relations based on economic cooperation remains critical. India must also overcome its "statist mindset," which often impedes broader acceptance and regional unity. Strengthening people-to-people contacts and emphasizing shared cultural values can serve as effective means of promoting soft power and deepening regional integration.

III. IMPACT OF INDIA'S SOFT POWER

According to Vuving's work "How Soft Power Works", one of the major misconceptions about soft power arises from resource fallacies. He argues that the essence of soft power lies in three currencies—brilliance, benevolence, and beauty—which together provide a better understanding of the concept (Vuving, 2009). Barnett and Duvall, in their paper "Power in International Politics", emphasize that power does not exist in a singular form, but manifests in multiple forms within international relations. They explore the role of power through various theoretical perspectives, including idealism, liberalism, constructivism, and neoliberal institutionalism (Barnett & Duvall, 2005). Similarly, S. D. Muni, in his paper "India and the Post-Cold War World: Opportunities and Challenges", notes a major shift in India's foreign policy, highlighting a new focus on peaceful economic growth and a redefined neighbourhood policy (Muni, 1991).

Appadorai's article "India's Foreign Policy" outlines India's foreign policy vision during the 1940s. It emphasized an independent approach, non-alignment in group politics, cooperation with peace-loving nations, support for the UN system of collective security, commitment to freedom, and stronger ties with neighbours. This highlights the rational and ethical self-interest underlying India's policy framework. Joshua Kurlantzick, in his book "Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World", defines soft power as extending beyond military and security domains, encompassing international organizations, cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy, and economic engagement strategies (Suri, 2011; Kurlantzick, 2007).

In South Asia, Nepal serves as an interesting parallel case. As a democracy recognized for more than a decade, it has established formal diplomatic relations with 166 nations (MoFA, Government of Nepal, 2019). The Constitution of Nepal (2015) reflects its commitment to the principles of a federal democratic republic grounded in secularism, inclusivity, democracy, and socialism-oriented values following its conflict period of 1996–2006. Nepal's soft diplomacy is built upon persuasion and non-coercive means of projecting its values, particularly through its long-standing contributions to UN peacekeeping missions, which have earned it global recognition (Jaiswal, 2018). However, expanding military strength is not economically viable for Nepal, nor does it possess sufficient resources to



attract significant investment in the short term. Given its modest size yet deep historical legacy, its reliance on soft power remains a central feature of its diplomacy (Jehangir, 2003).

IV. CONCLUSION

India has projected its intellectual and cultural influence globally long before scholars even articulated the notion of soft power. Over the past decade, however, India has begun employing this tool more systematically in the sphere of diplomacy. Since assuming office in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been particularly proactive in leveraging India's soft power, utilizing strategic media management and effective use of social media platforms. These initiatives have enhanced India's global image, although their impact on strengthening bilateral relations has remained somewhat limited. In today's interconnected world of mass communication, international trade, and tourism, soft diplomacy has become an essential element of foreign policy for many nations. Historically, struggles for power have been defined by coercion and conflict, but over time, the very meaning and exercise of "power" have evolved (Wagner, 2005). The growing preference for soft power over hard power has made intellectual and cultural influence an effective diplomatic instrument. In recent years, India has refined its soft power strategy, positioning it as a deliberate and strategic tool in foreign policy. Therefore, any assessment of soft power must consider its role in shaping the trajectory of India's external relations. Looking ahead, it is imperative that India restructure its development finance mechanisms to achieve deeper, more effective engagement in the increasingly competitive landscape of global development financing. India's own developmental experiences—such as the JAM Trinity, Ayushman Bharat, and infrastructure initiatives like Gati Shakti—should be incorporated into its diplomatic portfolio and shared with partner developing nations. This would not only enhance India's credibility but also expand the scope of its soft power diplomacy.

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