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## Soft power diplomacy in India's foreign policy under the Modi government: Challenges and prospects

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### Abstract

Every country aspires to play a significant diplomatic and foreign policy role in world affairs. Interaction with other countries on a bilateral and multilateral basis is foreign policy. Every country develops principles to achieve its national objectives. Foreign policy is the balancing act between morality and governmental objectives. International relations do not always entail a continual foreign policy. It alters in response to domestic political climates and world politics.

Foreign policy therefore entails choosing national objectives and interests and working to control other countries' behaviour in order to attain these objectives. States are interconnected with one another through a variety of relationships, including cultural, commercial, political, geographical, and other relationships. Every state seeks to further its own objectives. In international affairs, these interests are referred to as national interests. It is widely acknowledged that diplomacy is a crucial tool for advancing national interests.

The fundamental means by which foreign policy is carried out is diplomacy. Foreign policy's use of rules is related to diplomacy. In order to attain national interest, diplomacy is a communication process used to manage foreign policy objectives. The strength of nations affects diplomacy. Through the aid of power, national interests and global objectives are tried to be accomplished.

In international relations, power is the capacity of one country to affect the actions of another. In the realism theory of international relations, power and statecraft are crucial components. Realists contend that in the anarchic international system, physical power is maximised in order to achieve and maintain state sovereignty and security. The time of the cold war has been compared to anarchy in the international order.

During the Cold War, power was the major preoccupation of the international system in this regard. It is designed as a self-help system, with the state attempting to safeguard its sovereignty and uphold its interests as a whole. In this realist viewpoint, hard power in international politics is the definition of power. The view of the concept of power has altered since the end of the Cold War. In the age of globalisation, "Soft Power" has developed as a new form of power. Joseph Nye initially used the term "soft power" in his 1990 book "Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power." Cultural values, historical ties to other nations, a shared civilisation, and other factors all contribute to soft power in international politics.

Soft power was overlooked by Indian diplomacy as a crucial tool of foreign policy up till 2014. The current NDA II administration used soft power to guide its foreign policy. In actively marketing India's image as a rising global force, the Modi administration has better utilised India's edge in soft power. The Modi administration has made use of soft power resources like ties to other cultures, Buddhism, the Indian diaspora, yoga, and cultural affinity.

The Modi administration's use of soft power resources to further the national interest is examined in this essay. Study has also been done on the Modi administrations' use of soft power since 2014. This article evaluates the ways in which the Indian government interacts with its diaspora. India has established the Indian Council of Cultural Relations' Center for Soft Power (ICSSR). It is India's first centre solely focused on researching Indian soft power.

**Keywords:** International relations, foreign policy, diplomacy, anarchy, national interest, power, soft power, Modi government, Indian diaspora, yoga, Buddhism, cultural value

### Introduction

Every country adopts and upholds a set of principles for its foreign policy in order to further its own national interests. All of a country's strategies, values, and endeavours to sway other countries are referred to as its foreign policy. Through foreign policy, every nation aspires to alter the behaviour of other nations. The nation's efforts to play a significant role in world affairs are known as its foreign policy.

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Foreign policy, in the words of Joseph Frankel, consists of choices and deeds that to some extent include ties between states. The final outcome of the goals of national interest is foreign policy. It is the procedure by which a state converts its objectives into a detailed plan of action.

According to George Modelski, a country's foreign policy includes all of its efforts to influence the behaviour of other countries and modify its own conduct in the global arena. Guidelines for comprehending international interactions are provided by foreign policy. The nature of the tools that should be employed to advance the national interest. Size, geography, population, economic growth, culture, public opinion, technology, government structure, philosophy, diplomacy, leadership, and other crucial factors all have an impact on a country's foreign policy.

The crucial tool used by countries to carry out their foreign policies is diplomacy. An international actor's endeavour to carry out its foreign policy by interacting with foreign policy is known as diplomacy (Nicholas J. Cull 2008, p. 15)<sup>[29]</sup>. Government to government engagement has historically been viewed as diplomacy. Cull claims that there were five main facets of diplomacy during the Cold War: listening, lobbying, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting. These diplomatic elements were defined by a top-down approach. Public diplomacy has evolved since the conclusion of the Cold War. A long-term tool for improving relations with other countries is cultural diplomacy.

The management of foreign policy objectives with a focus on communication is done through diplomacy. Government to government and diplomat to diplomat engagements were the foundation of diplomatic communication prior to the Cold War. Following the conclusion of the Cold War, diplomacy has extended to include exchanges between governments and the general public. The concept of power has traditionally been emphasised in traditional approaches to international affairs.

Power is the capability to influence others' behaviour in order to attain one's aims or goals. At its most basic level, power is this ability (Uma Purushothaman 2010, p. 1)<sup>[30]</sup>. The ability of a nation in international affairs is included in the concept of power. In international politics, hard power is the classic definition of power. Hard power is emphasised in the classical realist school of international politics. According to the classical realism school, countries should enhance their use of force in order to protect their security and sovereignty.

According to the classical realism school, the international system is anarchic because each country is compelled to look out for itself. The realism school holds that the best use of hard power can maintain state security. The components of hard power include, among others, industrial resources, geographic boundaries, military outposts, and military capability. Hard power is therefore the main issue in anarchic international systems. But since the conclusion of the Cold War, attitudes towards hard power have shifted.

In the years following the Cold War, there has been talk of a new kind of force—soft power. Professor Joseph Nye initially used the term "soft power" in his 1990 book "Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power." Professor Joseph Nye contends that cultural significance, historical ties, domestic policies, globalisation, and other variables all contribute to soft power in international politics. The capacity to achieve national interest through

negotiation rather than coercion is known as soft power. It results from factors that are "actual yet intangible," or from the allure of a nation's culture, political beliefs, and policies (C. Raja Mohan 2017, p. 11)<sup>[31]</sup>.

The importance of a country's culture and its standing as an international player are crucial factors in the effectiveness of soft power. Globalization-related information movement has revealed the existence of soft power in the world order. One of the most recent frameworks via which India could capitalise on its position in the international order is soft power. Anything about a country that appeals to other people, communities, or countries is considered to have soft power (Kugiel 2017, p. 34)<sup>[5]</sup>.

In contrast to the prevalent rhetoric of "hard power" in the theory of international relations, the concept of "soft power" has developed. Realists emphasise the importance of a nation's hard characteristics in pursuing its own best interests. As a result, power becomes a key concept in realism, seen as both a goal of state policies and a mechanism for them to persuade other players to act in a particular way (Kugiel 2017, p. 17)<sup>[5]</sup>. On the other hand, soft power governs a state's capacity to exercise influence in international affairs and realise its own national objectives. The capacity to advance national interest by persuasion rather than coercion is known as soft power.

Everything, with the exception of military capability, is covered. In reality, a nation's legitimacy, reputation, international credibility, etc. are all important factors in soft power success. Multilateralism, national unity, international institutions, and culture have all gained importance in soft power communication (Mazumdar 2018, p. 474)<sup>[2]</sup>. Hard power, on the other hand, operates through "coercion or inducement," whereas soft power relies on "the attractiveness of one's culture and ideology or the ability to manipulate the agenda of political choices in a manner that causes actors to fail to express some preferences because they seem to be too unrealistic" (Nye 1990, p. 267)<sup>[32]</sup>.

In international affairs, soft power coaxes rather than enforces. In contrast to "hard power is push, soft power is draw" (Nye 2011, p.19)<sup>[33]</sup>. India has established the Indian Council of Cultural Relations' Center for Soft Power (ICSSR). It is India's first centre solely focused on researching Indian soft power. India ranks fifth in the globe, per an international soft power poll.

### **Nature and Sources of India's Soft Power**

India has always had a significant amount of soft power. India has enormous potential to use its soft power to increase its worldwide influence, from yoga to spirituality to Bollywood, from bharatnatyam to Buddhism, from cuisine to tourism (Press Information Bureau 2018). Soft Power doesn't use coercion. In a rather subtle way, it has the ability to arouse interest and shape opinions. India has disseminated its culture and knowledge over the entire world. In actuality, foreigners interested in learning came to renowned Indian universities like Takshashila and Nalanda. According to history, India's soft power at the time was its educational strength.

Through his charm and his spiritual and cultural teachings based on timeless and universal Indian principles, Swami Vivekananda was able to influence and draw in a large number of people from all over the world during his attendance at the Parliament of the World's Religions in 1893. Soft power is built on immaterial factors like cultural

value, connections to other civilizations, literature, philosophy, etc.

Due to their common history and culture, Central Asian and South East Asian nations place a great value on India's soft power. Today, these nations are referred to as civilizational neighbours. In these nations, India enjoys a distinct advantage. Indian culture and ideals from ancient civilizations are respected in its close neighbours. For millennia, India's soft power has influenced nations in both its near and wider neighbourhood. Ayurveda, Bollywood, Buddhism, cinema, cricket, cuisine, the diaspora, fine arts (architecture, music, painting, poetry, and sculpture), information technology, performing arts (dance and theatre), and yoga have all been mentioned as sources of India's soft power (Mazumdar 2018, p. 470) <sup>[2]</sup>.

The Indian government's use of soft power in foreign affairs is motivated by a variety of goals. Due to its rich culture and connections to other civilizations, India continues to have a lot of potential for soft power. Its extensive diaspora, well-known movies, music, and art, as well as its historical and cultural ties to many other nations, all contribute to India's soft power (Purushothaman 2010, p. 4) <sup>[30]</sup>.

The most significant source of soft power is culture. A country's distinctive culture can serve as a medium of influence and appeal. National norms and civilizational values are significant examples of culture. These are frequently portrayed in a nation's artistic, literary, and cultural resources. India's many cultural and civilizational contributions to the world include its arts, dance, architecture, food, literature, and languages, all of which are considered soft power assets (Paul 2014, p. 2) <sup>[8]</sup>.

Both traditional and contemporary Indian art are well-liked outside. Indian performers are slowly but surely breaking through in Hollywood. Indian food has already had a significant international impact. The US, UK, Europe, Central Asia, and South East Asia are the regions where Indian food is most popular.

An illustration of India's soft power is the appeal of dosa and butter chicken. Numerous Indian actors are well-known abroad, including the renowned Amitabh Bachchan, Rajnikanth, and Priyanka Chopra. Sports legends like Sachin Tendulkar, M.S. Dhoni, Virat Kohli, and Viswanathan Anand had a similar situation (Kishwar 2018, p. 2) <sup>[6]</sup>. We owe a lot to the Indians who taught us how to count, without which no significant scientific discovery could have been achieved, as scientist Albert Einstein once said.

In terms of culture, India is in a very privileged situation. One of the most vibrant alternatives to Western cultural standards is found in Indian culture. India and the nations of Central Asia and South East Asia have a long history of shared civilizations and cultures. For thousands of years, traders and tourists have been drawn to it by its wealth and splendour (Paul and Nayar 2003, p. 59) <sup>[8]</sup>. The Angkor Wat temple in Cambodia, the temples and pagodas in Thailand and Myanmar, as well as the inclusion of various Sanskrit phrases in languages like Bahasa Indonesia, are all evidence of Southeast Asian nations' continued adherence to Indian traditions.

India's diaspora is a valuable source of soft power. India has a sizable diaspora that spans many nations. Diaspora has been regarded as one of the most important soft power resources in international affairs. The Indian diaspora is really global, with members present in practically every

continent. They consist primarily of blue-collar workers (skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled professionals) in the Middle East and skilled professionals in white-collar positions across various fields in the West, descendants of indentured labourers who worked in former British colonies during the 19th century (Mazumdar 2018, p. 475) <sup>[2]</sup>. Non-resident Indians (NRIs), who temporarily reside overseas for a variety of reasons, as well as people of Indian heritage and their descendants who are not Indian nationals, are included in the diaspora.

The Indian diaspora can be found on every continent and in every country, from the Gulf to Australia and the UK.

India has the largest transnational population in the world, according to a population affairs officer in the Population Division at the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA). It has the most migrants living abroad (18 million), which is a sizeable figure, and another intriguing aspect of the Indian migrant community is how widely dispersed they are. According to the survey, there is a sizable diaspora of Indians living abroad, with the UAE housing the most migrants from India (3.5 million), followed by the US (2.7 million), and Saudi Arabia (2.5 million) (World Migration Report, United Nations, 2021). Numerous other nations, including as Australia, Canada, Kuwait, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, and the UK, have taken in substantial numbers of immigrants from India. The number of migrants living abroad increased for almost all nations and regions of the world between 2000 and 2020.

India saw the biggest increase during that time, at around 10 million, and was followed by Syria, Venezuela, China, and the Philippines in terms of size. Occupational and familial factors are the main drivers of migration from India. In the Gulf countries, where they work in the construction, hospitality, and care industries and play a crucial part in the economies of those nations, there is a sizable presence of migrants who were born in India (Pradhan 2020, p. 10) <sup>[1]</sup>. High-caliber scientists, engineers, and physicians are also a part of the diversified Indian diaspora. The greatest beneficiary of remittances in the world, India, received \$87 billion in 2021. Remittances to India are anticipated to increase by 3% to \$89,6 billion in 2022. (Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 2022).

India is steadfastly devoted to deepening its relationship with the diaspora and meeting their needs. There are several ways for the Indian diaspora to stay connected to their homeland (Moorthy 2017, p. 12) <sup>[7]</sup>. Today, India has one of the largest diaspora populations, with close to 30 million people living throughout the world. India's aspirations to be a worldwide power are significantly aided by the Indian diaspora. The connections with our diaspora were reenergized by Atal Bihari Vajpayee's vision. When he was India's Prime Minister in 2003, the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas festivities got underway. The actions of Atalji have significantly aided in boosting diaspora ties to the homeland.

There has been a worldwide resurgence in interest in Buddhism. India has stressed the importance of Buddhist principles such as equality, nonviolence, open discussion and communication, and righteous behaviour as the cornerstone of an Asian "renewal" and the foundation for positive relations among various Asian nations. Where the Buddha preached was in India.

Through Buddhist monks and intellectuals travelling to India to study at its institutions, Buddhism spread from



India to China and other nations, resulting in a healthy exchange of ideas that was evident in ancient times and continues to have an impact on Asia today (Ramachandran 2007, p. 126) <sup>[34]</sup>. India's proposal to work with Japan, South Korea, and Singapore to revitalise Buddhist temples and historic universities including Sanchi stupa, Vikramshila University, and Nalanda University is an example of India's ongoing soft power in South Asia and East Asia.

Buddhism is seen as the unifying factor among Asian nations, and the Buddha's message of peace holds true today just as it did then. Over the following several centuries, Buddhism—which had its beginnings in India about the fifth century BCE—traveled to East and South-East Asia. India's "Look East/Act East" programme has gained momentum thanks to the emphasis on the shared Buddhist heritage of south-east Asian nations and India. Such references are helpful because Buddhism is deeply related to national identity and cultural legacy in many of these countries.

There are many historical Buddhist pilgrimage sites in India, including three of the four holiest sites, which are Bodhi Gaya in Bihar, where Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) attained enlightenment, Sarnath in Uttar Pradesh, where the Buddha delivered his first sermon, and Kushinagar in Uttar Pradesh, where the Buddha passed away and attained nirvana (passing and entering into nirvana).

One of India's most well-known cultural exports is likely yoga. Yoga is becoming more and more popular due in part to the globalisation of popular culture, the increase in stress levels brought on by modern living, and the desire to improve strength, flexibility, and performance in both the workplace and daily life. In the West, yoga has grown to be a crucial component of the "health and wellness" movement, which aims to provide people a sound body and mind.

Yoga studios that offer classes have proliferated all over the West, especially in the USA. According to a recent poll conducted by the Yoga Alliance, the largest non-profit organisation serving the yoga community in the USA, there were around 37 million yoga practitioners worldwide in 2016, up from approximately 20 million in 2012. (Mazumdar 2018, p. 479) <sup>[2]</sup>. Yoga is a valuable cultural resource because it connects practitioners all over the world to India and, consequently, to the nations where those practitioners live.

### **India's Soft Power Diplomacy under the Modi Administration**

In a resounding win in May 2014, Narendra Modi took office. He has travelled to many foreign countries, including the United States where he met Barack Obama and spoke before the UN General Assembly. He also visited several international capitals, including Canberra, Kathmandu, Suva, Thimphu, Tokyo, and, of course, Washington, DC. He also attended summits for the BRICS in Brazil, the ASEAN in Myanmar, and the Group of 20 in Australia. He addressed special Indian diaspora gatherings in Sydney, Suva, and New York, speaking to each audience member on the local and international priorities of his government.

Continent of South Asia is fractured. A minor percentage of all trade between states takes place on an intra-regional level. Most economies in South Asia are export- and manufacturing-based, which makes them dependent on other countries. Additionally, they are directly competing with one another on a variety of fronts. States in the region

have missed opportunities for collaboration. Antagonism and mistrust between member states have paralysed the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), preventing it from acting decisively on any of its mandates. Additionally, there are no significant political or economic institutions in the area.

According to the Modi administration, Buddhism originated in India about the fifth century BCE and over the following several centuries expanded throughout East and South-East Asia. Buddhist monks from many countries travelled across Asia on their way back to their home countries in order to spread the Buddha's teachings. This demonstrated the long-standing linkages in terms of culture, civilization, and religion between these countries and India. Modi has visited Buddhist temples and shrines during his official tours to China, Japan, Mongolia, and Vietnam. He has frequently brought up Buddhism while visiting Asian countries, especially those where Buddhism is the dominant religion or there is a sizable Buddhist population.

The emphasis on the shared Buddhist heritage of India and south-east Asian countries has given the "Look East/Act East" initiative in India more vigour. Because Buddhism is closely linked to national identity and cultural legacies in many of these countries, such analogies are beneficial. It also demonstrates how, despite India's possible geographical separation from the Asia-Pacific region, Buddhism has allowed it to maintain cultural and spiritual ties to the region. During his visit to Vietnam in September 2016, Modi employed Buddhism as a kind of religious diplomacy. The Modi administration has established special yearly scholarships for Vietnamese students to pursue advanced Buddhist studies at Indian schools for Buddhist Sangha members.

The diaspora has been actively supported by more recent Indian administrations, who use it to locate investors and partners for the nation's economy as well as to communicate with inhabitants of their adoptive nations about developments in India. The Modi administration continues to organise the annual "Pravasi Bharatiya Divas" (non-resident Indian day), which honours the achievements of the Indian diaspora and recognises their commitment to India's growth and development. The administration appears to believe that the diaspora not only strengthens already-existing bilateral relations between India and the countries in which they are based, but also greatly contributes to India's economic development as a source of investment, knowledge, and technology.

### **Conclusion**

Under the Modi administration, soft power tools and resources are being used more frequently in India's foreign policy. This is in line with the Modi administration's efforts to project and integrate many dimensions of India's soft power in support of overall strategic goals. These three soft power assets are the key reason the Modi administration has focused on them; they aid India in achieving its long-standing diplomatic goals. Cultural diplomacy has been used to support India's traditional diplomacy, improve its international reputation, portray it as a peaceful rising power, improve relations with other countries, and help attract foreign investment, technology, and tourists to support economic growth and development. Examples include the promotion of Buddhism and yoga as well as Diaspora diplomacy.

Promotion of Buddhism and its affiliation with it helps India build a favourable image of itself, creates new connections with other Asian countries, attracts visitors, and helps it in its search for cultural similarities with China.

The purpose of the outreach to the diaspora is to make use of their skills, resources, and money to aid India's growth and development. Influence in foreign capitals, the promotion of India as a "talent-supplier" and a growing power, leveraging the diaspora as goodwill ambassadors, and attracting tourism and foreign investment are the key forces behind the outreach to the diaspora. Last but not least, the promotion of yoga seeks to raise awareness of India's ancient culture among non-Indians, encourage them to visit India to learn more about other facets of Indian culture, address the growing commercialization of yoga and its departure from traditional practises (reclaim yoga), and promote India as a country that supports the physical and spiritual wellbeing of others.

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