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Institutional architecture and strategic framework of Indian Public Diplomacy

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Abstract

Public diplomacy has been identified as a key tool and instrument of Indian foreign policy allowing the country to reach and impact the publics of other nations and propagate its cultural and democratic values in a more radiant and persuasive manner around the globe. The topic to be covered in this research paper is the institutional framework and structure surrounding public diplomacy in India and the contribution of various important institutions such as the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), media and the diaspora, and research and research-based think tanks in public diplomacy and the overall imagery of India abroad in the current and changing world scenario.

Keywords: Public diplomacy, soft power, cultural diplomacy, digital diplomacy, diaspora engagement

1. Introduction

Public diplomacy has become an essential element of modern international relations, defined in a broad sense as the engagement of foreign publics to influence perceptions and advance national interests [1-2]. It is different from traditional diplomacy, which is mainly state-centric, since public diplomacy communicates with civil society, media, academia, and non-state actors to build trust, legitimacy, and long-term relationships [3].

In the case of India—a country with civilizational depth and cultural diversity, democratic governance, and rapidly growing international presence—public diplomacy is an institutional tool for engendering soft power, advancing politico-economic interests, and influencing world public opinion [4-5]. The gradual institutionalization of public diplomacy reveals that India, whose earlier approach to public diplomacy was largely informal, specifically through cultural outreach, has acquired a formal and multi-agency format with a connect to foreign policy imperatives. This change has been facilitated by globalization, improvement in communication technologies, and India's desire to project itself as a responsible and influential global player [6].

India's Public Diplomacy: Cultural promotion, media engagement, diaspora outreach, educational exchanges, strategic partnerships. These are all intertwined in an effort to advance people-to-people ties, reinforce the credibility of India as a state player, and feed into greater diplomatic and geopolitical objectives amidst an increasingly competitive international environment.

2. Institutional architecture of Indian Public Diplomacy

2.1 Ministry of external affairs

The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) is the chief coordination unit of the Indian government for its public diplomacy efforts and a key player in aligning its strategic communications with its overall foreign policies. Through its various diplomatic networks and specialized units, namely its Public Diplomacy Division, MEA manages India's public interactions with different international communities and environments [7], ensuring consistency and coordination of Indian international messaging with various stakeholders and actors of the country's overall foreign policies and strategies and the changing global environments of international communications and interactions in the modern international age and changing times to adapt to the latest developments and technologies of international

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communicative environments, and the shift to digital environments of international communications and interactions [8, 2-9].

2.2 Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR)

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations, established in 1950, forms one of the founding pillars of India's cultural diplomacy and its soft power strategy. ICCR promotes Indian culture and values abroad through cultural exchanges, scholarships, academic collaborations, language instruction, and international cultural festivals. The ICCR cultural centres overseas work like an institutional hub for people-to-people engagement, facilitate sustained interaction with foreign societies, and help improve the visibility of Indian culture. Thus, by creating the right institutional arrangement for cultural exchange and education diplomacy, ICCR brings about a situation of long-term relationship building and projection of India's civilizational identity in global cultural space [10-11, 4].

2.3 Media Institutions

Media channels like the All India Radio (AIR) and Doordarshan play an important part in the public diplomacy machinery of India in sharing news, cultural shows, as well as educational content in foreign markets as well. Its external broadcasts in the wake of new media platforms allow it to present its' views on various issues that unfold in the global scenario in addition to countering disinformation in the increasingly competitive global information space that is characterized by fragmentation in the present-day scenario. This again underscores the importance of media in the present-day public diplomacy tools [8, 12].

2.4 Diaspora Networks

India's large and spread-out diaspora in various corners of the world adds to its essential informal framework of public diplomacy. Indian diaspora communities have been found to play important roles in furthering international relationships through fostered business links, culture exchange, political lobbying, and facilitating joint educational endeavours [13]. Serving as messengers of Indian culture and business

connectors, Indian diaspora networks help negotiate international perceptions of India as a democratic and pluralistic community with international reach. Academic literature explains diaspora diplomacy can be found to be a rising significant part of Indian foreign policy in key hosting countries where diaspora power meets political and economic engagement [4, 14].

2.5 Think Tanks and Academic Institutions

Think tanks and academic bodies constitute an essential intellectual stratum in the overall architecture of India's public diplomacy. Bodies like the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) and the Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS) engage with policy research, analysis, and training as it relates to international engagement. An intellectual policy force to be reckoned with, such bodies help shape more informed and evidence-based policies by analyzing international trends, appraising international policy measures, and engaging with informed discussion on India's role in international affairs. By promoting discussion between policymakers, academics, journalists, and international interlocutors, think tanks add intellectual substance to India's policy of public diplomacy [10, 4, 2].

2.6 Integrated Institutional Framework

Collectively, these institutions represent a multi-levelled and interlinked 'architecture' that brings together policy guidance through government channels, cultural promotion, media outreach, the impact of the diaspora community, and finally, research-informed strategy. The available architecture allows India the opportunity to undertake cohesive public diplomacy efforts while addressing the ever-shifting contemporary communication realities of the global environment. The fact that questions have been raised over questions of 'coordination, resource distribution, and the reach and effect' of these institutions notwithstanding; the existing architectural set-up is a sound basis for the furtherance of India's public diplomacy efforts in the more complex and contested global environment of today [8, 11].

Table 1: Institutional Roles in Indian Public Diplomacy

Institution	Role	Key Activities
Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)	Central coordination, policy guidance, strategic oversight	Manages embassies, cultural centres, media outreach, multilateral engagement
Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR)	Cultural diplomacy, soft power promotion	Cultural exchanges, scholarships, festivals, language programs
Media Institutions (AIR, Doordarshan)	Dissemination of India's narratives and information globally	International broadcasting, news, cultural programming, digital engagement
Diaspora Networks	Informal diplomacy and outreach	Mobilizing overseas communities, trade and investment promotion, policy support
Think Tanks (ORF, RIS)	Policy research and strategic support	Research, training, program design, evaluation of public diplomacy initiatives

Source: MEA website

3. Strategic Framework of Indian Public Diplomacy

India's public diplomacy strategy encompasses several interconnected dimensions, each designed to enhance the country's soft power, global influence, and international engagement [15-16]. Cultural diplomacy emphasizes the promotion of yoga, classical music, dance, festivals, and other forms of intangible heritage to foster cultural understanding and international goodwill. Through

initiatives such as the International Day of Yoga, cultural festivals, and scholarship programs for foreign students, India projects its historical and cultural richness to diverse audiences worldwide [16]. Media and digital diplomacy leverage traditional broadcasting platforms like All India Radio and Doordarshan, as well as social media, digital campaigns, and online content, to engage global audiences, counter misinformation, and promote India's policy

narratives and international initiatives.

Diaspora diplomacy engages with overseas Indians as non-official agents to promote trade, investment, educational exchanges, and political partnerships. The Indian diaspora community is considered a conduit between India and foreign nations, which helps to increase people-to-people diplomacy efforts, lobbying activities to fulfill policy priorities, and enhanced two-way cooperation between India and foreign nations. Educational diplomacy encompasses scholarships, student exchange programs, and international studies to provide a platform to engage with Indian studies at foreign institutions to nurture collaboration and understanding at a cultural level with future decision-makers in foreign nations. Lastly, partnering with international

institutions, multilateral bodies, think tanks in foreign nations, and international cultural institutions helps to extend India's soft power reach at the global level. Such collaborations not only increase mutual understanding between India and international bodies but also help India to be actively engaged in international policy debates, global sustainable development processes, and international cultural partnerships. All five aspects described above are inter-linked in a coordinated and synergized manner to provide a holistic framework to shape India's global image and reinforcing its effectiveness in international affairs. Digital diplomacy has further changed the nature of public engagement activities for India, as it has made it possible for it^[17].

Table 2: Strategic Dimensions and Activities

Strategic Dimension	Objective	Key Activities / Examples
Cultural Diplomacy	Promote Indian culture, Heritage, and values	Yoga Day, classical music/dance, cultural festivals, ICCR programs
Media & Digital Diplomacy	Shape global perceptions, counter misinformation	Broadcasting (AIR, DD), social media campaigns, online content
Educational Diplomacy	Strengthen people-to-people connections	Scholarships, student exchanges, Indian studies programs
Strategic Partnerships	Collaborate internationally, enhance soft power	Multilateral forums, think tank collaborations, cultural partnerships
Diaspora Diplomacy	Mobilize overseas Indian communities	Investment promotion, cultural advocacy, policy lobbying

Source: MEA website

4. Challenges in Indian Public Diplomacy

India's public diplomacy, despite its considerable advantages and strong institutional base, is riddled with several persistent issues that hinder its overall efficacy. The coordination between various institutions like the MEA, ICCR, media organizations, diaspora networks, and think tanks is still complicated, as it often leads to the launching of overlapping projects, inconsistent messaging, or duplication of efforts^[18]. Although every institution has its own mandate, the absence of a fully integrated framework sometimes makes it difficult to achieve strategic coherence and implement public diplomacy campaigns in a timely manner. Cultural, media, and research institutions' capacity to carry out global campaigns at a large scale is further limited by resource constraints, both financial and human^[19]. Insufficient funding, lack of professional training, and shortfall in the number of public diplomacy specialists are some of the factors that lower the quality and limit the geographical spread of India's initiatives. The situation is especially noticeable when India is compared to other global powers, which are investing heavily in soft power. Moreover, India's public diplomacy is affected by an increasingly competitive global environment, where rival narratives, great power competition, and information warfare create obstacles to the effective projection of soft power^[20]. Another major challenge is the measurement of the impact of public diplomacy initiatives. Soft power results are, by nature, intangible and often take years to show. The effectiveness of cultural programs, media outreach, and diaspora engagement is hard to quantify, which makes it difficult to justify budgets, refine strategies, or accurately assess global influence.

Besides that, digital adaptation is still somewhat of a concern. India may have done well in online engagement, but the fast changes in social media, misinformation, and the worldwide digital media environment require more advanced communication strategies, analytics, and a

professionalized digital diplomacy team.

5. Conclusion

India's public diplomacy represents a dynamic and evolving component of its foreign policy architecture, blending historical legacies, cultural richness, and modern strategic communication tools to project the nation's soft power globally. The analysis of India's institutional framework demonstrates that the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), as the central coordinating body, provides strategic oversight and policy alignment, ensuring that India's diplomatic messaging is consistent, coherent, and adaptive to global challenges. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) serves as the cornerstone of cultural diplomacy, promoting India's heritage, facilitating educational exchanges, and fostering sustained people-to-people engagement across diverse regions of the world. Media institutions, including All India Radio and Doordarshan, play a complementary role in shaping international perceptions by disseminating narratives that highlight India's democratic values, development achievements, and cultural pluralism. Diaspora networks function as informal yet influential agents of public diplomacy, bridging India with host countries through economic, cultural, and political channels. Think tanks and academic institutions provide the necessary research, policy insights, and intellectual support that strengthen the evidence-based design of India's public diplomacy initiatives.

Strategically, India's public diplomacy combines cultural outreach, digital engagement, diaspora diplomacy, educational programs, and strategic international partnerships into an integrated framework aimed at enhancing global influence. This multi-dimensional approach not only projects India's soft power but also reinforces its image as a responsible, pluralistic, and globally engaged nation. The five pillars of public

diplomacy cultural, media, diaspora, educational, and strategic partnerships operate in tandem to create a holistic and coherent narrative, enabling India to navigate the complex interplay of international politics, global media, and public opinion.

However, the effectiveness of India's public diplomacy is constrained by persistent challenges. Coordination among multiple institutions remains complex, and resource limitations, insufficient professional training, and evolving digital landscapes pose ongoing obstacles. Measuring impact continues to be difficult due to the intangible nature of soft power and the long-term horizon required for outcomes to materialize. Despite these challenges, India's institutional architecture provides a strong foundation that, if further strengthened through inter-agency collaboration, professional capacity building, and sophisticated digital strategies, can significantly amplify the nation's influence in the international arena.

In conclusion, India's public diplomacy exemplifies a strategic blend of culture, communication, and policy that reflects the country's aspirations as a major global actor. By systematically leveraging its historical heritage, democratic values, and global networks, India is well-positioned to enhance its soft power, shape global perceptions, and actively participate in international governance and cultural discourse. Future success will depend on the ability to integrate emerging communication technologies, foster collaborative institutional mechanisms, and develop robust frameworks for monitoring and evaluating the outcomes of public diplomacy initiatives. Strengthening these elements will enable India to assert its role not only as a regional leader but also as a globally recognized actor in cultural, political, and economic spheres.

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