

Original Article

India's Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

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Abstract

Today in international relations, the power is not used only on the basis of military force and economic power. The states increasingly try to shape international actors by attracting them, appealing to their values, culture and ideas, and engaging them diplomatically. Joseph S. Nye broke the concept down into what he termed "soft power" or the ability of a state to achieve desired results through attraction, not using force or payment. India has significant soft power potential in the form of its civilizational legacy, cultural variation, democratic culture, Yoga, Ayurveda, Buddhism, cinema, music, food, education, tourism and a large global Indian diaspora (~35 million across 200+ countries). This has been the focus of Indian cultural diplomacy and foreign-policy efforts in recent decades. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), International Day of Yoga, the education scholarships and international cultural exchanges are examples of attempts to institutionalize cultural diplomacy in India. In this paper, the concept of Indian soft power and its evolution is explored and the major instruments of cultural diplomacy like yoga and Ayurveda, Indian cinema and music, cuisine, Buddhism, diaspora, education, festivals, tourism and ICCR programmes are analyzed. It also explores cultural diplomacy in India's international relations and the institutional and strategic issues. The study points out that India has a lot of cultural resources that can attract and create goodwill abroad but the full realization of cultural resources into sustained diplomatic influence needs institutional coordination, resources, expertise and long-term strategic planning.

Keywords: Soft Power, Cultural Diplomacy, India, ICCR, Indian Diaspora, Yoga Diplomacy, Indian Cinema, Foreign Policy, Cultural Heritage, International Relations

Introduction

The world of international power has changed considerably in the modern international system. The strength of a state was mainly judged by military strength, economic strength and political influence. But with Globalization and technological progress, states' means of exerting influence on international actors have grown. The components of culture, values, ideas, and education, media and people-to-people relations have become more significant in international influence.

The term "soft power" was coined by Joseph S. Nye to describe the ways in which states attract others rather than force them by means of material incentives or by threats. Nye suggests that soft power comes primarily from such a country's culture, political values and foreign policies as others see them as legitimate and attractive (Nye, 2004). So, soft power is different from hard power, that tries to influence preferences instead of the behavior. The case of India is significant as one of the countries with high cultural and civilizational resources for an analysis of soft power. Consider philosophical traditions from India, Buddhism, Yoga, Ayurveda, Literature, Music, Dance, Films, Cuisines and religious traditions, which have historical linkages which are not geographically bound to India. This cultural impact of India has also been growing due to the expansion of Indian diaspora, Globalization, tourism, education, and digital communication. India's diaspora is estimated at around 35 million people spread across more than 200 countries, acting as a cultural bridge and strategic network. Studies indicate that India has slowly shifted from having soft power resources largely in the latent phase to actively engaging it in foreign policy practices. As per Mahapatra (2016), Indian policy makers have more and more sought to leverage India's cultural assets, including yoga, diaspora and its multicultural heritage, for international engagement.

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Mazumdar (2018) also looks at India's utilization of Buddhism, the diaspora and yoga as soft power tools and states that these vehicles have been utilized to supplement the traditional foreign policy approach and to enhance India's image in the international arena and its relations with other countries. Cultural diplomacy is an important tool to implement such soft power. It is about cultural interaction such as cultural exchanges, educational programmes, artistic performances, exhibitions, festivals and much more. Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) has been at the very heart of promoting India's cultural relations with foreign countries in India. The Parliamentary Committee on External Affairs has also discussed the soft power diplomacy of India, especially that of the ICCR and the Indian diaspora.

Yoga diplomacy is one of the most visible today, contemporary examples of India's cultural diplomacy. The International Day of Yoga was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly on 11 December 2014 by adoption of the resolution (69/131). It was proposed by India and adopted by acclamation with a record 177 co-sponsors (United Nations, 2014). The resolution was adopted without a vote, and attracted very wide international support. In this context, the present study explores the Indian soft power and culture diplomacy and its main pillars, institutional framework, importance and constraints in the international arena.

Research Methodology

The present study uses the qualitative and descriptive-analytical research design to explore the issue of 'soft power' and 'cultural diplomacy' of India. The study has relied mainly upon secondary sources such as research books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government publications, policy documents, parliamentary committee reports, and United Nations documents and publications of other institutions like ICCR.

The research examines the key elements of India's cultural diplomacy such as Yoga, Ayurveda, Indian cinema, music, food, Buddhism, education, tourism, cultural exchanges and Indian diaspora. It will explore the contribution of these cultural resources to India's international image, people-to-people relations and overall foreign-policy goals. Thematic analysis has been adopted to identify major opportunities and challenges in the context of India's soft-power projection. Selected regional case studies from South and Southeast Asia, Middle East, Europe and North America and Africa have been studied to gain insight into the interaction of Indian cultural diplomacy in varying historical, social and geopolitical contexts. The study is not concerned with causality, but rather with the process through which cultural resources become diplomatic tools, and the ways in which institutional and political structures affect their impact.

Concept of Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

Soft power is based on the proposition that states can influence others by making themselves attractive. Nye (2004) sees culture and political values and foreign policy as important sources of soft power. When culture attracts foreign peoples, it becomes a soft power. Cultural diplomacy is more limited than soft power. Soft power is a larger attraction power and cultural diplomacy is the purposeful use of cultural interaction for mutual understanding and relations.

Cultural diplomacy can therefore include:

- Cultural Exchanges,
- International Festivals,
- Academic Exchanges,
- Scholarships,
- Artistic Performances,
- Exhibitions,
- Language Programmes,
- Heritage Promotion and
- People-to-People Contacts.

In the case of India, cultural diplomacy takes place via both a state and non-state mechanism. Bollywood, Indian restaurants, universities, religious institutions and people from the Indian diaspora are involved in India's international cultural presence, and cultural programmes are organized by the government institutions like ICCR and diplomatic missions as well. It is noteworthy that this distinction cannot be seen just in terms of government initiatives since India's soft power cannot be interpreted in isolation. The international cultural impact is spread in India in a natural way, as a result of the consumption of Indian films, food, music, yoga and other cultural elements in the world.

Evolution of India's Soft Power

The influence of culture on India is historical. Buddhism, Indian philosophies, literature, mathematics, medicine and religious practice have all spread to other regions of Asia by means of trade, pilgrimage, and intellectual exchange. After independence cultural relations were institutionalized in India, through the Indian Council for Cultural Relations set up in 1950. Cultural diplomacy got linked with the larger foreign policy of India, such as cultivating good and friendly relations with the new countries of independence.

The post-Cold War era has seen the visibility of Indian culture significantly rise. The economic liberalization, satellite television, Indian migration abroad, and the Indian cinema helped increase the flow of Indian cultural commodities with the rest of the world.

This change, according to Mahapatra (2016), is a shift from India's underutilized cultural assets to a strategic approach to soft power. Digital technology has added another revolution to the 21st century. Indian movies, music, food or cultural material can now be seen by the world. This has indeed lessened the geographical constraints of cultural diplomacy. Yoga is a

quintessential case of India's modern-day cultural diplomacy. With the establishment of the International Day of Yoga by the United Nations on 21 June 2015, yoga got an international institutional platform for a cultural practice belonging to India.

Major Instruments of India's Cultural Diplomacy

Yoga and Ayurveda

Yoga is one of the most visible weapons of India's modern-day soft power. Yoga is an ancient physical, mental and spiritual practice from India that the United Nations has described as such. The International day of Yoga was observed on 21st June in 2015, following the introduction of the UN General Assembly Resolution 69/131 on 11th June 2014. Yoga is universal and hence it has diplomatic significance. In 2014, the United Nations declared Yoga as an International Day of Yoga (United Nations, 2014) and in 2016 Yoga was inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO (UNESCO, 2016).

Researchers have focused on yoga specifically as part of India's 'soft power' policy. Within India's current soft-power diplomacy, Mazumdar (2018) highlights yoga as one of the vital tools along with Buddhism and diaspora involvement. Yet, there have been scholar comments regarding the politicality of yoga as well. Other research supports this notion that inclusion of yoga into national cultural narratives may raise questions of religion, nationalism and political appropriation. Another path to cultural diplomacy is offered by Ayurveda. Traditional knowledge in India can be utilized in international engagement via academic exchange, well-being vacation, and promotion of traditional knowledge. However, it does need an appropriate scientific, regulatory and institutional landscape for its international expansion.

Indian Cinema and Music

Another powerful source of soft power is the Indian cinema. Bollywood has gained popularity in Asia, Africa, Middle East, Europe and North America. International audiences are often introduced to the Indian family systems, festivals, music, costume, landscapes and social traditions in Indian films.

In case of Indian popular cinema, Thussu (2016) discusses its soft power and suggests that Indian popular cinema has affected international perception in the realm of world circulation. Transnational media networks and audiences from the diaspora are more powerful in promoting Indian cinema.

Cinema is not only a means of entertainment but also a medium of cultural communication. It may generate the awareness of Indian society and inspire the interest in tourism, food, clothing and music. But cinema can also represent Indian society in a selective and commercial manner. Hence, the role of cinema in politics is dependent on the variety and authenticity of the stories presented in the movies to foreign viewers (Sharma, Sahay, & Marwah, 2025).

Indian Cuisine

Indian cuisine is a significant informal cultural diplomacy. Indian restaurants and cooking styles have sprung up in many countries. Food can be a medium of social familiarity in daily life and a way of gaining an entry into Indian society. Cuisine is another medium of communication to showcase Indian cultural diversity. Indian cuisine cannot be called a single cuisine as it is a collection of regional cuisines. Culinary Diplomacy is not a formal diplomatic programme, but rather one that takes place at the level of everyday social interaction. It can thus play a role in human relations without the need to directly engage the State.

Buddhism and Spiritual Heritage

Buddhism is a significant historical linkage between India and many Asian societies. Major Buddhist sites of India where Gautama Buddha was born and taught his philosophy are Bodhi Gaya, Kushinagar, Sarnath and Rajgir. These are significant Buddhist pilgrimage focal points in South Asia, in addition to Lumbini, Nepal. There are opportunities for engagement with Buddhist majority and Buddhist influenced societies in South, Southeast and East Asia in this respect.

In the 21st century, one of the main cultural assets that India has relied on in soft power diplomacy is the Buddhist culture, as identified by Mazumdar (2018). So, cultural, diplomatic and economic tools can be used simultaneously for the purposes of Buddhist pilgrimage, heritage conservation, academic exchange, and religious tourism.

Indian Diaspora

Indian diaspora is one of the most significant non-state sources of soft power in India. Communities of people of Indian origin bring culture to life through festivals, food, religious institutions, professional networks, universities and community organizations. The diaspora can serve as a link between India and the host societies since they are linked to Indian culture on one hand, and are involved in the societies they reside in on the other.

The Parliamentary Committee on External Affairs has taken a particular look at the role of the Indian diaspora in the Indian soft-power diplomacy. Its latest report in 2016 focused on India's soft-power diplomacy, involving the Indian Council for Cultural Relations and the Indian diaspora. But, diaspora communities are not monolithic, and should not be assumed as representing the Indian state as a whole. Partnership, cultural connection and mutual interests are the necessary prerequisites for effective diaspora diplomacy.

ICCR and Cultural Exchanges

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations plays a pivotal role in institutional cultural diplomacy in India. The ICCR promotes interaction between the Indian and foreign societies through cultural exchanges, scholarship programmes, art programmes and cultural centers. Every year, ICCR offers between 4,000 and 5,000 scholarships to international students from more than 190 nations, including spots for Indian dance, music, art, yoga, and Ayurveda. As a result of enhanced capability and outreach, ICCR provided 4,047 scholarships in 2025–2026. The Parliamentary Committee on External Affairs also looked into the role of the organization and the broader cultural-diplomacy landscape in India. Cultural exchanges are especially important as they create

direct links between artists, academics, students and institutions. These relationships can be used to create long-term networks of personal relationships, whereas short-term publicity campaigns can only create short-term networks of personal relationships.

Education and Scholarships

Education is a long-term tool of soft power. Foreign students studying in India can build the academic, professional and personal relationship with Indian society. Such connections can persist once students return to their home countries. This is particularly important for educational diplomacy because of its long-term impact via alumni networks, professional ties and academic exchange.

Festivals, Art and Literature

Indian classical music, dance, drama, handicrafts, literature, and festivals are further tools of cultural diplomacy. These events allow global audiences to interact directly with India's live traditions through Indian cultural programs and the network of Indian diplomatic posts. India's cultural diversity has been crucial in portraying a variety of identities, from region-specific and community-based art forms to internationally recognizable icons like Bollywood and yoga. UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity includes some of India's intangible cultural practices, most notably Kumbh Mela (2017), which highlights the country's heritage's international recognition and offers a forum for cultural diplomacy (UNESCO, 2025).

Tourism

Tourism is one of the most obvious tools of cultural diplomacy, which is an essential hub of economic interaction and interpersonal relationships. India offers tourists an immersive experience of Indian culture and promotes intercultural understanding through its historical monuments, temples, Buddhist heritage circuits, festivals, food, yoga centers, and scenic beauty. India's International Tourist Arrivals (ITAs) increased from 17.91 million in 2019 to 20.57 million in 2024.

India's Soft Power in International Relations

Soft power is gaining momentum as a complement to traditional diplomacy in India. Cultural diplomacy does not take the place of the economic or military power, but it can help provide a positive context for political and economic relations. According to Mazumdar (2018), India's soft power projects have been conceived to supplement hard power tools, enhance its image in the world, build ties and promote projects like tourism and investment.

This is where India's cultural diplomacy becomes significant in the context of the Global south. India can have channels of influence beyond material power in the form of hidden ones such as historical ties, educational exchanges, diaspora communities, and shared cultural traditions. Perception is, however, a key factor in the success of soft power. Cultural resources are only politically useful when foreign audiences find them attractive, legitimate or relevant. Hence, for India to use soft power, it is not only important to have cultural resources, it is also important that they are communicated and accepted.

Role of Indian Diaspora in Cultural Diplomacy

The Indian people have some great presence abroad as a result of the Indian diaspora. Diaspora communities host cultural festivals, set up religious and educational institutions, promote Indian cuisine and keep the links with Indian films, music and languages alive. The diaspora also helps in professional/commercial and academic networking between India and the rest of the world. Diaspora diplomacy has been recognized by the Indian policy makers and parliamentary committees. In the report on 'The Diaspora – an asset for India's soft power diplomacy', the Parliamentary Committee on External Affairs discussed the role of the diaspora. However, internal diversity must be taken into account in diaspora diplomacy. There are many differences among Indian-origin communities, both within and across countries, on the basis of generation, language, religion, occupation, and political ideology. A policy that is successful should therefore strive to foster cultural engagement by diaspora communities, not merely as tools of state policy.

India's Cultural Diplomacy in Selected Regions and Countries

India's cultural diplomacy operates differently across geographical regions.

Buddhism, historical ties, Indian film, religious pilgrimages, and educational interactions are especially important in South and Southeast Asia. Cultural diplomacy benefits greatly from shared religious and historical ties (Singh & Sarwal, 2017). Indian cinema, Indian food and the fact that there is an Indian community that is significant in the Middle East, leads to a strong bond between people.

In Europe and North America, yoga, higher education, Indian cinema, cuisine, technology and diaspora networks serve significantly to the visibility of India.

Educational exchanges, diaspora networks, development cooperation and cultural programmes provide opportunities for engaging with people in Africa.

The differences make it clear that the path of cultural diplomacy cannot be universal in India. It is only as effective as: local history, cultural fit, diaspora distribution and foreign interest.

Challenges and Limitations

India, despite its rich cultural assets, is plagued with a number of obstacles in turning soft power into constant influence.

Institutional Coordination

Cultural diplomacy is an endeavor of various institutions such as the Ministry of External Affairs, ICCR, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Tourism and other Governmental Institutions. Insufficient coordination can result in duplication or disjointed efforts. The Parliamentary Committee on External Affairs has discussed institutional issues pertaining to the soft-power diplomacy and ICCR.

Financial and Human Resources

Cultural diplomacy demands long-term financial resources and experts. Long-term investment is needed for cultural programmes, international exchanges and cultural centres.

Measuring Soft Power

A second big hurdle is measuring outcomes. To calculate exactly how much a cultural festival, scholarship or yoga event benefits the country in the diplomatic or economic sphere is hard to pinpoint.

Risk of Cultural Stereotyping

In the name of culture, the Indian language may end up becoming too reliant on a few globally recognized symbols such as yoga and Bollywood. This can make it hard to see the vast linguistic, regional and cultural differences within India.

Domestic and International Perceptions

Soft power relies on credibility. If there is a substantial difference between external cultural messaging and international perceptions of domestic realities, the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy can be reduced.

Politicization of Culture

Political appropriation of cultural traditions can be controversial. The study of yoga diplomacy has brought issues relating to cultural nationalism and political claims on yoga to the fore, for instance.

Opportunities and Policy Recommendations

India has tremendous potential in cultural diplomacy. To make the national cultural-diplomacy policy more unified, it should be integrated between the ICCR, Ministry of External Affairs and other relevant ministries. Secondly, there is a need to invest more in the professional cultural diplomacy expertise. The training for diplomats and cultural officers should be specialized Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam in cultural communication, public diplomacy and digital media. Third, India needs to scale up digital cultural diplomacy. The use of social media, streaming platforms, podcasts, digital archives, can facilitate the introduction of Indian languages and literature, music, film and heritage to younger audiences overseas. Fourth, cultural diplomacy should showcase India's cultural and linguistic diversity in the region. There should be incorporation of folk arts, tribal arts, regional cinema, regional literature, contemporary creative industries in Indian classical traditions. Fifth, India should widen Education Diplomacy via Scholarships, University collaboration, Academic exchanges and India Studies programmes. Sixth, the Indian diaspora needs to be engaged as a strategic partner for cultural diplomacy. Government can encourage cultural activities led by the diaspora, without infringing on the autonomy and diversity of diaspora communities. India needs to put in place organized systems for assessing cultural-diplomacy programmes. International involvement, institutional involvement, student networks, outcomes of cultural exchange, tourism and long-term public perceptions may be considered when evaluating.

Conclusion

There are significant soft power assets in India that emanate from its cultural diversity, civilizational heritage and its current creative industry. There are several avenues by which India can become popular, attractive to foreign visitors, and build people-to-people relationships including Yoga, Ayurveda, Buddhism, cinema, music, cuisine, education, tourism, festivals, literature and the Indian diaspora. The analysis shows how India's cultural diplomacy has seen a shift from a traditional cultural exchange to a more strategic aspect of modern foreign policy. The institution and ongoing working of the ICCR reflect cultural institutionalization in India, and events like the International Day of Yoga exhibit the ability of Indian cultural practices to gain international recognition. A noteworthy case of cultural diplomacy in a multilateral setting is the adoption of Resolution 69/131 by the UN General Assembly in 2014.

India's soft power, on the other hand, cannot be defined as a string of cultural assets at the same time. Just because a culture is rich, it does not automatically translate into an international influence. As Mahapatra (2016) and Mazumdar (2018) have shown, India's soft power is only as successful as policymakers and institutions can make cultural resources into engaging international opportunities. Therefore, the study shows that the biggest opportunity for India is to synergize with its civilizational resources and modern institutions, digital technologies, and education and professional diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy must also be participatory, and reflect India's diverse regional, linguistic and artistic traditions. India can consolidate its focus in the future by going beyond event-driven cultural promotion to long-term cultural partnership. Relationships can be maintained beyond single events of diplomacy through the creation of scholarships, university networks, cultural centers, digital platforms, cultural and artistic exchanges with other countries and their respective diasporas. In conclusion, India's soft power becomes most potent when culture is not just a tool for promotion but a way to foster a sense of mutual understanding and long-term relationships. An effective, well-funded and professionally run cultural-diplomacy policy can help India build international goodwill and influence out of its rich cultural resources alongside its economic, political and strategic muscle.

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Conflicts of interest

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