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INDIA@75: ASSESSING INDIA'S USE OF SOFT POWER AS A FOREIGN POLICY INSTRUMENT

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Abstract: *The term soft power has become a catch-all-phrase for public and cultural diplomacy since Joseph Nye introduced it in 1990. India has had several historical and cultural advantages regarding its influence in foreign countries. While India and Indians enjoyed goodwill in most countries, the sudden interests in India among the policymakers, businesses, and politicians were mainly after the 1992 economic liberalization that had opened the Indian markets to foreign investments. Besides the nation-branding exercises globally, New Delhi employed soft power instruments in countries it deemed to have more significant interests, from traditional allies like Bhutan and Afghanistan to the countries in the West in the last three decades. Nevertheless, how successful has India been in exploiting its cultural linkages and using its soft power in its branding? This question becomes pertinent as, in recent years, India has often received negative press coverage in international media, and on several freedom/democratic indices, its rankings have gone down. As India celebrates 75 years of independence as Azadi ka Mahotsav (a grand celebration of independence), this paper assesses the scope of its soft power as a foreign policy instrument, points out its shortcomings, and recommends the possibilities.*

Keywords: *Soft Power; Cultural Diplomacy; Public Diplomacy; India; Bollywood; Azadi Ka Mahotsav; Foreign Policy*

INTRODUCTION

"Our 75th year as a free nation is also the starting point to envision where we will be on our centenary", India's External Affairs Minister EM Jaishankar noted at a ceremony organized by the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) to mark the grand celebration of 75 years of independence - *Azadi Ka Mahotsav* - in August 2021 (MEA Media Center 2021). He further stressed: "The bold transformations at home will give us an increasingly salient role in the international system. As a democratic polity, a pluralistic society, an innovative economy, and a culture of unmatched diversity, our contributions have real weight and value. Our ability to harmonize tradition and modernity stands out in particular" (MEA Media Center 2021).

No doubt, India's stature has grown manifold in the international arena in the last few decades as the largest democracy and one of the fastest-growing economies. However, there are often occasions when India makes negative headlines in the international press, besides the strong reactions on social media for alleged violations and abuses of the very features that the EAM took pride in. As India celebrates the completion of 75 years of independence as *Azadi ka Mahotsav* and assumes the presidency of G-20 in December 2022, this paper evaluates its soft power as an instrument of foreign policy. The article critically examines the scope of India's soft power instruments and achievements, explores the challenges, and points to opportunities to strengthen those initiatives further.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Nye defines soft power as a state's "ability to get preferred outcomes through the co-optive means of agenda-setting, persuasion, and attraction", distinct from hard power, which relies on coercion and economic inducements (Nye 2011, 43). He says, "If a state can make its power seem legitimate in the eyes of others, it will encounter less resistance to its wishes. If its culture and ideology are attractive, others will more willingly follow" (Nye 1990, 167). "Power over opinion is the third form of power", according to E.H. Carr, and is "not less essential for political purposes than military and economic power, and has always been closely associated with them" (Carr 2016, 120). Nevertheless, the "ability to force someone to do something" does not always have to be coercive; and can be an attractive power too that influences someone to do certain things. Thus, the "proof of power lies not in resources but in the ability to change the behavior of states" (Nye 1990, 155).

Nye's soft power builds upon the "three-dimensional power" of Lukes (1974) and the idea of "structural power" of Jeffery Isaac (Gallarotti 2011), as well as the "policy of prestige" of Morgenthau (1997). According to Nye, the primary soft power resources are political values, culture, and foreign policies. He points out that universal and shared values are likely to attract more while "narrow values and parochial cultures are less likely to produce soft power" (Nye 2004, 11). Stressing the "role of image and identity in international relations", Simon Anholt argues that the nation's brand can be "enhanced through strategy, substance, and symbolic actions" (Anholt 2013). Consequently, soft power is about the world's perceptions of what that country is all about. "The associations and attitudes conjured up in the global imagination by the mere mention of a country's name is often a more accurate gauge of its soft power than a dispassionate analysis of its foreign policies", according to Shashi Tharoor, author, former diplomat, and ex-minister (Tharoor 2012, 277-78). Hence, a country must invest in public diplomacy and national branding.

STRONG FOOTINGS OF INDIA'S SOFT POWER: SPIRITUAL LEADER OF THE WORLD - *VISHVA GURU*?

The term soft power has become a catch-all-phrase in public and cultural diplomacy. Emphasizing the importance of soft power in foreign policy, India's Union Minister Anurag Thakur noted at a think-tank dialogue in April 2022, "the nation needs to have a hard power but to maintain a friendly relationship and to exist beyond boundaries, the nation needs soft power as well, as it touches hearts" (PIB Delhi 2022a).

India naturally has had several historical and cultural advantages regarding soft power. In *Communicating India's Soft Power: Buddha to Bollywood*, Daya Kishan Thussu writes, "this rare combination of a civilization which has strong Hindu-Buddhist foundations, centuries of Islamic influence, and integration with European institutions, and ideas, gives India unparalleled cultural resources to deal with the diverse, globalized, and complex realities of the twenty-first century" (Thussu 2013, 11). Legacies of Hinduism and Buddhism bind India with its neighbors like Nepal, China, Bhutan, Tibet, countries in East Asia, and so on, even today. Consequently, its cultural linkages, and hence soft power assets, are strongest amongst its neighbors, although there are

also some frictions owing to political and historical reasons (Reyaz 2015a). Further, its unique syncretic culture and Indian Islam have historical linkages with Turkic-Persian culture. India generally enjoys immense goodwill among countries in its West, from Pakistan to Morocco, as well as in Europe and America (Reyaz 2015b).

India's branding as a land of diversity, pluralism, and tolerance began even before independence. Mahatma Gandhi's emphasis on *ahimsa,* leading a principled non-violent freedom struggle, inspired several such movements worldwide. India assiduously invested in its soft power as an instrument of foreign policy, even before the term came into vogue in international relations. It relied on its rich history, heritage, diverse culture, pluralism, etc., in realizing its global ambitions. India was thus projected as a *Vishva Guru* (world leader), "a civilization that could usher in moral values and ethical standards into international relations" (Kugiel 2016, 39). Accordingly, it "pursued a foreign policy agenda backed by the power of moral arguments rather than arguments of power and used soft power to compensate for its hard power deficiencies" (Kugiel 2016, 39).

Soft Power as a Foreign Policy Tool

While India and Indians enjoyed goodwill in most countries, whether in the east or the West, it cannot be denied that the sudden interests in India among policymakers, businesses, and politicians were mainly after the 1992 economic liberalization (Mullen 2015). It opened the large Indian market to foreign investments and goods, besides providing cheap labor. The nuclear tests of 1998 had put India in the elite club of those possessing nuclear weapons. Despite initial sanctions, it forced the United States, European countries, and China to take New Delhi more seriously. Many commentators hence mark 1998 as a "turning point" in India's foreign relations, not just because of "ideological or idealistic reasons" but pure "pragmatic necessity" (Kugiel 2016, 52-53). The Indo-US nuclear deal of 2009 was an acknowledgment of India's rising prestige and power (Pant 2009). In terms of nominal GDP, India is now the fifth-largest economy globally and is slated to become the third-largest by 2050, after the USA and China (Hindustan Times 2020).

Indian IT professionals, a large and influential diaspora population, and the Indian film industry, in general, have emerged as new sources of India's soft power (Thussu 2013). From the 1990s onwards, Hindi films became global, followed by Tamil and other regional languages films, helping create goodwill for India. The "Incredible India" campaign launched in 2002 by the Tourism Ministry has been one of the most successful campaigns of nation branding that helped increase tourism manifold (Amaresh 2021). Sports have always acted as a bridge in diplomacy (Murray and Pigman 2014), and the growing dominance of India in cricket, as also the Indian Premier League (IPL), have helped build a positive image for India as well (Blarel 2012).

Yoga has become a global phenomenon, not just among the Indian diaspora but also among the western population. Terming it an "invaluable gift of India's ancient tradition", Prime Minister Narendra Modi advocated at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2014 to declare 21 June, the day of the summer solstice, as International Yoga Day, which was unanimously approved by the end of the year (United Nations Information Centre 2014). Since then, every year, Indian embassies and counsels worldwide organize annual events besides

promoting yoga training throughout the year. Meanwhile, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has declared 40 World Heritage sites, 32 of which are cultural sites, placing India in the sixth position in terms of most declared heritage sites (UNESCO n.d.).

Public diplomacy has become an essential instrument of nation branding and soft power that help build a favorable narrative in the short run and reputation and goodwill in the long run. The Foreign Ministry's dedicated External and Public Diplomacy Division tackles public diplomacy and media outreach. The MEA and the Ministry of Culture manage India's cultural diplomacy. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) is an autonomous body that works towards fostering and strengthening "cultural relations and mutual understanding between India and other countries; to promote cultural exchanges with other countries and people, and to develop relations with nations" (ICCR n.d.). Besides scholarships for studying in Indian universities and exchange programs, the ICCR also runs 38 cultural centers and 69 chairs of Indian studies in different countries, the former attached to the embassies or counsels and later to universities abroad.

It is a fact that "soft power depends not only on cultural attractions, political values, and a legitimate foreign policy but also on the appeal of a country's political and economic record" (Mullen 2015). As India grew economically more robust, it slowly began to exploit its potential to realize its aspirations of emerging as a regional power by indulging in economic diplomacy, mainly through foreign assistance programs. Although the amount of foreign aid that India offers as a "development partnership" is tiny compared to many western countries, Japan or China, what distinguishes India's assistance is that often it comes without any strings attached; that is, India does not do it at the cost of bringing democracy or demanding regime change, and thus these are not seen with hostility by the ruling regime in those countries (Mathai 2013). The foreign assistance program of India is a "strategic tool to showcase India's technical strengths and achievements and to harness and promote India's political and economic interests in the world" (Sikri 2009, 239). India's largest economic aid goes to Bhutan, Mauritius, Maldives, and Nepal (Statista n.d.). Before the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan too received a significant chunk, though not among the highest, but got disproportionately high media coverage, understandably for strategic gains. However, the events of August 2021 that brought the Taliban back to power exposed the shortcomings of over-reliance on soft power without adequate strategic thinking (Reyaz and Ahamed 2022).

PM Modi and the Image of India Abroad

PM Narendra Modi has brought certain vibrancy in otherwise cold-hearted diplomacy by emphasizing on historical linkages and age-old ties and turning each foreign visit into a spectacle. Leaders of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) often stress that *Vasudhavai Kutumbakam* or the world is one family, is a philosophy determining India's foreign policy (Patil 2022). Buoyed by rapid economic growth, largely non-interfering stances on domestic politics of other countries, and generosity within its limited capacities, India has garnered respectability among world leaders. It is due to the growing stature of India that PM Modi could publicly rebuke Russian president Vladimir Putin over the Ukraine war on the sidelines of the Shanghai

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Cooperation Organisation summit in Uzbekistan. He said that "today's era is not of war (…) [but of] democracy, diplomacy, and dialogue" (PIB Delhi 2022b).

However, in India, the BJP government is often criticized for undermining democratic institutions and abusing the powers of central investigating agencies against opposition leaders and activists. Both the BJP government and their ideologues, however, see those as signs of "the effort for a resurgence of the idea of Bharat" that will truly make it the *Vishva Guru* (world leader) (Nandakumar 2020). Despite efforts by the government and pro-government civil society groups, India often makes international headlines for the wrong reasons questioning the application of its constitutional values in practice. Violence against Dalits (Gettleman and Raj 2018) or minorities (Mogul and Gupta 2022), anti-CAA-NRC protests (Siddiqui 2020), farmers' agitations (Bellman and Roy 2021), and other such critical news end up grabbing international headlines. Significantly, in the wake of the anti-CAA protests and the Delhi riots in 2020, and later during farmers' agitations, social media had gone abuzz with criticisms of the Indian government and its policies, often by activists and celebrities from other countries, putting a "dent in India's soft power image" (Krishnan 2021).

India has traditionally enjoyed goodwill among the Arabs. However, there is no denying that "the over-zealot Hindutva leaders and trolls are denting India's image of tolerance and secularism, particularly in the Muslim world, forcing the foreign office and the diplomats in the gulf capitals to scramble for a concrete response" (Reyaz 2020). In fact, in June 2022, the government faced huge diplomatic embarrassment when India's Ambassador to Qatar was summoned by the Qatari Foreign Ministry, demanding an apology even as Vice President Venkaiah Naidu was in Doha following "derogatory" statements by a few BJP leaders on the Prophet (Scroll Staff 2022). The government was quick to issue statements terming the spokespersons and leaders of the ruling party as "fringe elements" and assuring "strong actions" against them (Scroll Staff 2022). It should be mentioned here that overall, India has improved its bilateral relations with the countries in West Asia in the past decade regarding trade and strategic interests, although those social media rants are reflections of anger on the streets (Kumaraswamy 2022; Quamar 2022).

When Jordan's King Abdullah II visited New Delhi in 2018, PM Modi attended the "Islamic Heritage: Promoting Understanding and Moderation" event with him at the India Islamic Cultural Centre in the national capital. PM Modi emphasized in his address, "Pluralism is what makes India. Our diversity strengthens us. This is the land where people of various faiths and beliefs happily coexist, guided by universal values of harmony and togetherness" (Reyaz 2018). He stressed on the "universal sense of oneness" as India assumed the G-20 presidency in December 2022, hoping that the tenure would bring "healing, harmony and hope" to the world (BBC 2022). However, actions on the ground often do not match the words spoken. PM Modi has also been accused of pushing the Hindutva agenda globally (Daniyal 2022; Sen 2022). The New York Times noted in a column:

> It is India's credentials as the world's largest democracy that Mr. Modi rides on the global stage. But at home, diplomats, analysts, and activists say, Mr. Modi's government is undertaking a project to remake India's democracy unlike any in its 75 years of independence - stifling dissent,

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sidelining civilian institutions, and making minorities second-class citizens (Mashal 2022).

In the Democracy Index of The Economist's Intelligence Unit (2020), India dropped to 53rd position and was labeled a "flawed democracy" in 2020 from once being ranked 27th in 2014. In the Democracy Index of 2022, it did improve its score slightly to come to 46th position but remains under the "flawed democracy" category (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2022). Similarly, Sweden-based V-Dem Institute's Democracy Report 2021 noted that the "world's largest democracy turned into an electoral autocracy" (V-Dem Institute 2021). The government's response to these criticisms has been on expected lines, questioning the parameters of analysis, terming them biased and hypocritical, and stressing that India has "robust institutions and well-established democratic practices" (Biswas 2021). The government has also routinely blamed the anti-government protests as "anti-national" activities of "*Tukde-Tukde* (divisive) gang, Islamists and leftists" funded by "foreign elements" (Ohri 2020; DNA 2021). However, at some level, the government is also "worried India rating may turn junk", impacting its international branding and image, and has pushed for the "narrative management strategy" (Dutta 2022).

CONCLUSION

India had succeeded in projecting itself as the "land of the better story" within its limited resources (Tharoor 2007). Nevertheless, it continues to have a mixed image abroad, where the country and its people generally enjoy much goodwill among foreigners. However, when exploiting them to its advantage, New Delhi has still not been successful in reaping the desired strategic outcomes beyond sweet talks appreciating its rich heritage, culture, films, spiritualism, Yoga, etc. Although institutions like ICCR and the External and Public Diplomacy Division of the MEA have done commendable jobs in nation-branding, there seem to be some gaps between India's ambitions of emerging as *Vishva Guru* (world leader) in the XXI century and its actions on the ground. Politicians and policymakers may use the term soft power sweepingly. However, Indian foreign policy is still primarily dominated by security and trade concerns, and so far, they did not have any concrete policy on soft power (Kugiel 2012).

New Delhi's use of soft power in foreign policy largely remains "indirect and inconsistent" (Blarel 2012); hence difficult to ascertain. For example, during the pandemic, India launched an ambitious Vaccine Maitri Program in January 2021 to provide free vaccines for free or at economical rates to its neighbors and other development partners (Sharma and Varshney 2021). However, when it started facing shortages during the second wave, New Delhi abruptly stopped the export in April of the same year, leaving many countries in the lurch and forcing them to explore other options, including China (it was finally relaunched in November 2021 after seven months halt) (FP Staff 2021). Many hence argue that "Indian soft power has fallen far short of expectations (…) (due to its) inability to capitalize on its soft power resources" (Mukherjee 2014). Nonetheless, Foreign Minister Jaishankar believes that by underlining its "greater capabilities and confidence", India can help build a "unique brand as generous power" (Jaishankar 2020).

India does not yet figure in "The Soft Power 30" - a global ranking of soft power published by Portland Communications and the USC Centre on Public Diplomacy from 2015 onwards. In the 2019 edition, countries from Asia that make it to the list include Japan (8), South Korea (19), Singapore (21), China (27), and Turkey (29). The same report also has "the Asia Soft Power 10", where India is eighth-placed, above Indonesia and the Philippines. In the Global Soft Power Index, published by Brand Finance, India ranked 27 in 2020 but fell nine places to 36 in 2021; it made some improvements in 2022 with 29 rankings, although it is still lower than the 2020 position. Nye pointed out that universal and shared values are likely to attract more while "narrow values and parochial cultures are less likely to produce soft power" (Nye 2004, 11).

Moreover, it is said that foreign relations often reflect domestic politics. If India wants to emerge as a *Vishva Guru*, it must address and resolve the ideological challenges saddling its domestic politics. Otherwise, investments in soft power assets and nation branding may remain insufficient and never yield the desired outcomes.

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COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

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