



Nation image building of 'new India': digital diaspora and foreign policy

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Abstract

In this paper, the discussion will focus on how the digital diaspora contributes to forming the international image of the 'New India' and how the latter interacts with Indian foreign policy strategies. It seeks to understand the role of online diasporic communities who act as informal ambassadors and use digital mediums to help project, contest, and co-create the image of India in the world. Through attention to the constructing narrative of 'New India,' this study critically evaluates the design of mutually constitutive nation branding by the Indian government and its diaspora citizens across the world. This paper seeks to argue that the Indian digital diaspora has become an important instrument of soft power in the era of networked diplomacy. By solving social media, online mobilization, and transnational communication, the diaspora not only magnifies the voice of the state but also shapes foreign public opinion and policymaking in host nations. Simultaneously, the ambivalences of the diaspora discourse, particularly regarding nationalism, human rights, and minority rights, create problems in the way of a coherent national image. The study employs the qualitative approach, examining government policy reports, diaspora online campaigns, and some case studies, which include International Yoga Day, the story of Article 370 revocation, and COVID-19 diplomacy. It establishes that although the digital diaspora plays a significant role in increasing the visibility of India on the global landscape, the image of the New India is multifaceted and conflicting as it emerges as a result of both state-led diplomacy efforts and the agency of the diaspora.

Keywords: Digital diaspora, nation branding, Indian foreign policy, public diplomacy, new India, soft power, image building

Introduction

The image building of a country in the age of globalization and digital interconnectedness is no longer a reserve of traditional diplomacy but is increasingly getting affected by a complex interrelationship of state discourses, transnational communities, and digital media. In the case of India, the idea of a New India, a concept that has gained currency over the last few years to denote desires for economic prowess, technological superiority, cultural confidence, and geopolitical swagger, has taken centre stage in its publicity campaign in the international arena. This new image promotion is much in line with the dynamics of the foreign policy objectives of India that focus on soft power, cultural diplomacy, and outreach to the Indian community in the diaspora. (Ashok & Veerababu, 2024) ^[1] One of the largest Indian diasporas in the world has stopped being a passive population in foreign countries and has become an active subject in the expression of national identity and external policy interests. (Pradhana & Mohapatra, 2020) ^[3] This worldwide community has become what is now known as a digital diaspora, able to conduct discourse in real time, marshal opinion, and shape the global views of India. The diaspora has become a source as well as a co-producer of the Indian image in the world through social media, virtual campaigns, and online advocacy. (Bhattiprolu Murti & Zaharna, 2014) ^[2] The paper at hand dwells upon the cooperation between the diplomatic efforts of the Indian state and the activities of the digital diaspora in the process of forming the image of 'New India.' It evaluates that foreign policy is not merely discussed but also co-produced in the digital space, where diaspora communities are strategic partners in advancing national narratives, addressing international critique, and advancing bilateral relationships. Concurrently, this paper also attends to the tension in the diaspora engagement, such as ideological

rifts, political disagreement, and the inability to signify a pluralistic nation within a fractious digital territory. Through its emphasis on the role of the digital diaspora, the study illuminates a novel aspect of image-building that is cross-border and unofficial and redefines the practice of nation branding in the 21st century.

The main aim of the paper is to critically evaluate how the digital Indian diaspora contributes to the construction and projection of the international image of 'New India' and analyze how this new identity suits the current foreign policy approaches of India. It tries to comprehend how diasporic communities, enhanced by digital platforms, can be seen as informal agents of diplomacy and the ways they can be involved in nation branding in the context of an ever more globally connected world.

The central research questions guiding this study are

1. How does the Indian digital diaspora participate in constructing and disseminating the image of 'New India'?
2. What role does India's foreign policy play in engaging and mobilizing the diaspora for public diplomacy purposes?
3. To what extent does the digital diaspora influence or challenge the official narratives projected by the Indian state?

The paper further explores what these dynamics mean to India in terms of perception of the outside world, particularly in geopolitical spots. Organized into a few thematic parts, the paper starts with the conceptualizing and theoretical framework of nation branding, digital diaspora, and soft power. It subsequently follows the development of the national image of India and the foreign policy interaction with the diaspora. The further sections will

concentrate on particular digital campaigns, diaspora-driven advocacy, and case studies, including COVID-19 diabetes, Yoga Day diabetes, and diaspora reactions to controversial political events. The paper ends with a critical evaluation of the advantages and shortcomings of using a digital diaspora towards image-building and provides an understanding of how such an involvement can be intensified and be more inclusive in the future.

Background of India's Changing Global Image

Since independence, the image of India in the world has largely changed, as it was a postcolonial country facing economic and social development challenges, whereas now it is an emerging global power with growing geopolitical ambitions and influence. Early on, India had forged its identity through Non-Aligned Movement leadership, Gandhian philosophy, and democratic counterbalance during the Cold War. Since the economy was liberalized in 1991, India started to rebrand itself as a centre of IT services, skilled workers, and outsourcing, which helped to project an image of a technologically competent and economically viable country. (Heng, 2023) ^[4] At the same time, its soft power resources, including Bollywood, yoga, spirituality, and a rich culture, started coming to the fore on an international scale. Though these were gains, the image of India was still disjointed as it swung between the actual state of affairs in India of internal socio-economic disparities and the broadcasting of progress and modernity. In the 21st century, and particularly after 2000, successive governments have made a determined attempt to ensure that a more unified and assertive global image is being actively managed and projected, consistent with Indian aspirations of being a dominant power in the multipolar world order. (Khurshid & Khawaja, 2022) ^[5]

Rise of the 'New India' Narrative under Recent Governments

The rise of the 'New India' discourse has become especially sharp with the rule of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has clinically combined the policy of internal change and foreign engagement. New India is an idea of a self-confident, technologically developed, globally competitive, and culturally assured country. It is based on political nationalism, economic reform, digital governance, and activist foreign policy. To project this image, the Modi government has used a mix of high-profile international travels, smart messaging, diaspora affairs, and digital diplomacy. Such programs as "Digital India" and "Make in India," as well as "Atmanirbhar Bharat" (self-reliant India), are not focused on internal change only: these initiatives are supposed to help India to be seen as an innovative, modern, and powerful state. Symbolic acts, like hosting the International Day of Yoga event at the United Nations and co-chairing the major dialogues on climate change and technology, have been employed to reaffirm India as a moral and cultural leader. (Kumari, 2023) ^[6] This rebranding exercise of India as a confident civilizational power as opposed to a developing nation is core to the New India narrative in which identity and diplomacy are becoming closely intertwined.

Importance of the Digital Diaspora in Shaping Perception

In this discursive context, the Indian diaspora, and in particular, the digital diaspora, has become instrumental in

extending and supporting the imagery of 'New India.' The Indian diaspora of more than 18 million people overflowing in foreign nations is not only large but also well distributed in powerful nations like the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and the Gulf states. Such communities are very active on digital platforms, whereby they perform functions of identity-building, political advocacy, and public diplomacy. (Gulati, 2016) ^[7] The digital diaspora has been able to bridge the gap between India and the global citizenry in a way that it has become an advocate of Indian interests and stories in the international discourse through the use of blogs, Twitter campaigns, YouTube videos, and online forums. To the Indian government, particularly the Modi regime, the diaspora has been regarded as a periphery of the state machinery in diplomacy—able to neutralize the negative discourse, advocate positive policies, and create soft power. Such events as Howdy Modi in the U.S. that gathered thousands of members of the diaspora were live-streamed and magnified throughout the world, proving that digital diasporic participation has the potential to shape the way people perceive things. This influence is, however, not monolithic. Diaspora is also internally diverse, and on some occasions, the same diasporic voices have expressed anxiety on matters relating to religious intolerance, democratic slippage, and civil freedoms in India, as a result of which it can be seen that the digital diaspora is as much of an opportunity as it is a burden in terms of controlling the India image globally.

Nation Image and Nation Branding

Nation image is the collective perception or image of a nation as viewed by world audiences and is determined by cultural, political, economic, and social indicators. It is something intangible yet a strong aspect of international relations that affects diplomatic relations, trade relations, tourism, and foreign investment. National image is not a constant, but it is subject to change depending on domestic events and external publicity campaigns. In the case of India, the world image has traditionally been comprised of mysticism, poverty, democracy, and pluralism. But in the age of globalization and the digital revolution, nations have become more deliberate about how they want to be seen, and this is done by careful branding. A more conscious and organized effort in managing global perceptions by using symbolic acts, policy stories, and public diplomacy is nation branding as created by Simon Anholt. It is the transfer of marketing methods to the political sphere, which tries to produce a specific and positive image of a country. Nation branding means announcing soft power resources such as culture, values, technology, and type of government in a way that coincides with the interests of the nation. India has also been spending more on branding itself as an emerging power with a civilizational depth, modern capabilities, and global responsibility. The promotion of International Yoga Day, the digital governance projects such as the promotion of the idea of a "Digital India," and outreach to the international diaspora are all a part of this strategic branding effort. (Thapliyal *et al.*, 2022) ^[8] The branding of New India would mean creating a certain image of the country that stands on the balance between being traditional and modern, economically powerful and morally authoritative in the multipolar world.

Concept of Digital Diaspora

The word "diaspora" is normally coined to refer to a group of people who have settled in a country other than the one they originated in, but they still have an emotional, cultural, and political attachment to their homeland. Over the last few decades, the notion has transformed with the advent of digital technologies and social media, resulting in what researchers call the digital diaspora. A digital diaspora is defined as a technologically networked group of migrants that utilize digital space, including Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, and diaspora-specific discussion groups, to connect with the homeland and the rest of the world. These people are actively engaged in political discourse; they foster cultural heritage, answer to foreign media discourse, and shape the opinions of domestic and international audiences. (Dhiman & Paliktzoglou, 2024)^[9] The digital diaspora, namely India, is particularly high in terms of numbers, economic power, and geographical concentration in powerful democracies, such as the United States, Canada, the UK, and Australia. This diaspora is well represented in the technological industry, academia, the media, and policymaking, which provides them with a rare ability to shape narratives about India in the diaspora. Online, the digital diaspora members intensify the actions of the Indian government, spread Indian culture and Indian values, and even react to the criticism of foreign governments or media. Meanwhile, other sections of this community also express alarm at the turn of events inside India, like the problem of minority rights, freedom of speech, and majoritarian nationalism, which proves that the digital diaspora is not a monolithic entity but a dynamic and diverse political force. (Adamson & Han, 2024)^[10]

Role of Foreign Policy in Soft Power

The concept of soft power has been popularized by Joseph Nye and means the capacity of a country to influence the preferences and behaviours of others without coercion, payment, or use of attraction. It originates in the culture of a country, political values, and foreign policies regarded as legitimate or having moral authority. In the case of India, soft power has long been a supplement to its foreign policy—whether it was the exportation of Buddhism in ancient times or the popularity of yoga, Bollywood, and Indian food in contemporary times. (Sinha, 2024)^[11] Foreign policy serves as a major tool in the implementation and makeshift of soft power. A country tries to increase its international attraction and power by using embassies, cultural centres, high-level visits, and multilateral participation. The foreign policy of India in the 21st century has gone to greater extents of projecting India as a knowledge-based, peaceful, and responsible power. Actions such as Vaccine Maitri (vaccine diplomacy), development cooperation in Africa and Southeast Asia, and the constructive contribution to the climate talks are part of strategic investments in goodwill and trust abroad. Contact with the diaspora has become a part of India's foreign policy as well. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has established specific diaspora engagement policies and initiatives, such as Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, and has increased consular services and outreach via social media. The engagement of the diaspora communities in public diplomacy events has become a regular practice by Indian embassies all over the world, which now see them as important collaborators in the dissemination of Indian soft

power. When such communities get in line with official messaging, they serve as informal cultural ambassadors and changers of perception to make India strong in its soft image overseas. (Challagalla, 2017)^[12]

Theoretical Approaches: Constructivism, Soft Power, and Public Diplomacy

In order to comprehend the mechanisms of nation image-building via the digital diaspora, one should resort to the related theories of international relations (IR), namely constructivism, soft power theory, and public diplomacy approaches.

Constructivism argues that international relations are socially constructed based on ideas, norms, values, and identity and not necessarily material power. Constructivists argue that states are not merely rational actors trying to advance strategic interests but are shaped by their perception and that of others. National image is thus a creation that is formulated by discourse, symbols, and common meanings. In the case of India, applying this, the image of New India is not only the outward projection but also the inward one that the state is trying to develop, both nationally and internationally. Digital diaspora is instrumental in this procedure, serving as a platform over which the narratives of identity are disseminated and negotiated. (Durrani, 2023)^[13] The theory of soft power as advanced by Nye is useful to understand the reason why nations invest in the creation of images and the development of cultural bridges. Examples of soft power in the case of India include promoting yoga and Indian customs and values of democracy, technological advances, and humanitarian diplomacy. The digital diaspora complements soft power because it plays the role of a credible and emotionally interested intermediary of Indian culture and political discourses. (Kos-Stanišić & Car, 2021)^[14] Soft power is, however, delicate—when the behaviours of the state or the diaspora are perceived to be contrary to what has been proclaimed, it may end up causing reputational harm.

Public diplomacy has been defined as the communication of states to foreign publics to inform and influence. Compared to the traditional form of diplomacy, which is government-to-government, public diplomacy is government-to-people. It consists of cultural programs, international broadcasting, digital outreach, and diaspora affairs. The digital era has witnessed a marked change in the public diplomacy efforts by India, as MEA, Indian missions, and political leadership turned to Twitter, YouTube, and other platforms in order to communicate with the world. (Mazumdar, 2020)^[15] In this case, the digital diaspora tends to complement the action of the state—it extends messages, converts them to the local populations, and discusses in real-time global matters that concern India.

The combination of these theoretical frameworks aids in realizing the multilayered process of nation image construction and projection of India in the digital age. They emphasize that image-building is a two-way process, not a monologue of the state, society, and transnational actors such as the diaspora engaging in a dialogue. This paper proposes an inclusive way of examining the construction of the Indian identity (constructivism) as the culture of soft power and the message strategy of communicating (public diplomacy). The image of New India is being constructed and projected in the global domain.

Digital Diaspora and the Making of New India's Global Image

The way India is perceived internationally has undergone a dramatic transformation: where an early postcolonial India found its identity in being a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement, today India is being projected as a confident and assertive international actor under the banner of 'New India.' India aligned itself in the decades after independence as a peaceful democracy, dedicated to decolonization, neutrality, and South-South solidarity. (Gajendra & Chaubey, 2024) ^[17] These ideals, though morally important, tended to restrain India in the power politics of the world. The opening up of the economy in the 1990s was the first major change, which enabled India to take a steady transition from being an aid recipient to a global trade and technology partner. However, the most revolutionary stage has been witnessed under the Modi era, which prioritized strategic communication, symbolism, and branding as the main instruments of foreign policy. The foreign trips of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, large-scale rallies of the mass diaspora, and the messaging around events such as the International Yoga Day have indicated a careful reconceptualization of the Indian identity—as a reactive state to a proactive global actor. This change can be seen not only in policy but in the practice of diplomacy itself: the transition from conventional state-centric diplomacy to the digital one has provided new opportunities for engaging in real-time with foreign publics, world leaders, and diaspora groups. Especially important in this change of image has been the role of the digital diaspora. Located in powerful states, such as the USA, UK, and Gulf countries, the members of the Indian diaspora are now using Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp to influence discourse and state narratives, as well as mobilize political forces. (Kriti, 2023) ^[16] These websites allow the diaspora to act as an unofficial diplomatic service, carry out advocacy work, debunk myths, and promote culture. The digital diaspora has swung into action in times of geopolitical importance, either to present the Indian government line in international media and policy forums (abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu & Kashmir or the Vaccine Maitri program during the COVID-19 pandemic). (Bjola *et al.*, 2022) ^[18] As another example, the diaspora medical professionals in the time of the COVID-19 crisis mobilized relief efforts, propagated India-positive messages, and made the international press tone down the rhetoric. In the same manner, the digital communication of space successes of India, such as the Chandrayaan-3 mission, and the stories about Indian leadership in the Global South at the G20 summits were promoted online by diaspora influencers and scholars. Such a tactical alignment of online platforms, diaspora activism, and state messaging depicts how foreign policy and national image are becoming increasingly co-produced in the digital environment in India. The Indian government has promoted such a symbiotic relationship through programs such as Bharat Ko Janiye (Know India Programme), a diaspora investment platform, and increased consular digital outreach. Nevertheless, this relationship is not unblocked by contradiction—criticism of the diaspora of democratic regression, religious extremism, or social strife occasionally serves to undermine the cohesive vision of the state that it attempts to present. However, the combination of the Indian diplomatic machine and the digitally empowered Indian diaspora has become a formidable force in the creation of

the narrative of the 'New India,' and as such, a case study in the nation branding in the 21st century and networked diplomacy. (Khare, 2025) ^[19]

Foreign Policy and India's Strategic Image Projection

The foreign policy conducted by the new leadership in India has put an unexpected focus on strategic image-building utilizing new tools of public diplomacy and involvement in the digital space. Organizations such as the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) have begun to ramp up their outreach by using social media platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram as a means of directly communicating with the world and the Indian diaspora. This online diplomacy has redefined international communication in India in that real-time communication is made possible and the successes and policies, as well as the cultural stories of India, can be disseminated fast. One of the components of this strategy is that India has maintained consistent contact with its diaspora by organizing flagship events such as the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, which acknowledges the accomplishments of overseas Indians and helps foster their emotional and professional connections with the motherland. (Pandey *et al.*, 2022) ^[20] This participation is not restricted to ceremonial duties; it runs deep in foreign policy as an ongoing consultation that turns the diaspora into a force that represents the interests of India in the global arena. Beyond that, programs such as the "India Stack," which is an integration of digital infrastructure governing systems, financial systems, and identity systems, have become strong rhetoric of modernity and innovation in India. An example of India demonstrating how it is taking advantage of technology to achieve inclusive growth, especially in international meetings, is the so-called India Stack, which has been promoted actively in international meetings to great effect. (Watson, 2024) ^[21] Foreign policy initiatives that are undertaken with the specific aim of improving the image of India in the world have received a lot of international attention. India has many examples of soft power, and the triumph of a proposal to create an International Yoga Day at the United Nations is an example of how cultural heritage can be mixed with policies of health and wellness worldwide. Likewise, the active "Vaccine Maitri" initiative as part of the COVID-19 pandemic response helped India to demonstrate its desire to be a global citizen, providing vaccines to more than 100 countries, which once again strengthened its reputation as a reliable and responsible member of the global health community. (Ramachandran, 2021) ^[22] Such efforts, promoted with the help of the selective use of digital media and diaspora networks, have helped to rebrand India as an emerging global superpower with moral and technological authority, rather than a developing nation. This updated diplomacy that takes traditional cultural values and mixes them with the advanced forms of digital outreach has assisted India in engraving a unique identity on the international map, boosting bilateral relations and multilateral coordination. The foreign policy of the Modi government can therefore be viewed as an advanced form of nation branding, diaspora relations, and creative diplomacy that is making India feel like a confident, dynamic, and inclusive global citizen.

Challenges and Complexities in Diaspora Engagement and Digital Representation

Alongside these achievements, India-building efforts in these cases encounter the issues of diversity and plurality of the diaspora, along with digital access and representation. Though the diaspora of Indians has mostly been in favour of the growth and international ambitions of India, it is not a homogenous entity. There are also conflicting views on political and social matters and this sometimes leads to the critical voice of opinion in foreign countries. To illustrate, issues such as regional autonomy, and politics of caste and identity have caused debates and dissension among diasporic communities, projects that show the complicated truths of the Indian socio-political landscape. This diversity warrants a subtle policy response on the part of the Indian foreign policy, neither too close nor too distant, striking a balance between reaching out and accommodating diverse views of the members of the diaspora, instead of expecting their blanket support. The active participation of the diaspora on online platforms implies that such debates have a high visibility outside the country and such perceptions of India are shaped outside the official discourse. Meanwhile, the high population of India and the digital divide between the regions of India (as well as within diaspora communities) means that the potential audience of digital diplomacy activities remains somewhat narrow and exclusive. A challenge that still exists is ensuring that the digital outreach of India is reflective of the entire Indian society. More so, even though nationalism and pride in cultural heritage have served India well in galvanising support of the diaspora and giving the country a strong nation branding, the expressions have not been received well in other countries, particularly those practising multicultural societies where different communities coexist. Certain sections of the diaspora are apprehensive on the tone of political nationalism, and the effects it may have on social unity and inclusiveness, wherein dialogue and empathy must form an important part of the external communication of India. However, strategic utilization of the digital space and purposeful foreign policy measures still continue to create bridges between India and its international societies to enhance mutual understanding and cooperation. How these issues are handled will be crucial to keep up the image of India as a vibrant democracy and global partner, and to make sure that its foreign policy and relation to the diaspora show the complexity of the country and its ambitions towards inclusive growth and international collaboration.

Conclusion

To conclude, the study has obviously emphasized that India has experienced an extreme makeover in terms of its national image and that this has been occasioned by a number of strategic foreign policy moves as well as the involvement of the digital diaspora. Public diplomacy, digital engagement, and diaspora integration, which became the hallmark of the Modi era, have helped cement India in its position on the global stage by creating a modern, innovative, and culturally diverse image of a 'New India.' Efforts like International Yoga Day, Vaccine Maitri, and India Stack have been excellent examples of soft power in action, and the digital activism of the diaspora has ensured that India's voices are louder in the international arena,

which does create positive perceptions about India in foreign lands. Nevertheless, it is not a smooth sailing cess of image building. The heterogeneity of the diaspora community and different politics often make the situation quite complicated, which does not allow for being represented as a monolith, which eventually leads to the emergence of critical voices that oppose official narratives. Also, digital inequalities both in India and among diasporas ensure that the inclusivity and scope of digital diplomacy are restricted. Nevertheless, even with these shortcomings, the combination of Indian diplomacy and the Indian digitally engaged diaspora is a potent mechanism for increasing Indian soft power and influence abroad. In the future, it would serve the foreign policy interests of India to have more sophisticated forms of engagement that recognize the diversity of the diasporas, facilitate inclusive conversations, and find ways to bridge digital divides. The enhancement of institutionalizing machinery of sustained interaction with the diaspora and the use of emerging technologies to enable more people to participate can further cement the perception of India as a pluralistic and progressive country. In the short and long term, dynamic as well as inclusive policies will be the key to ensuring that India stays positive and continues to build on its image in a more interconnected but complex world.

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