



India's cultural diplomacy and soft power: Exploring their role in strengthening foreign relations

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Abstract

This paper examines the growing role of India's cultural diplomacy and soft power in strengthening its foreign relations and global presence. It focuses on how India uses its culture, traditions, arts, films, yoga, and diaspora communities to build connections with other countries. The study also discusses the role of institutions such as the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) in promoting cultural exchange and mutual understanding. Initiatives such as the International Day of Yoga, Bollywood's global popularity, and engagement with the Indian diaspora show how culture can build positive relationships without force. However, India also faces challenges, including maintaining credibility, measuring cultural influence, and responding to different political and cultural environments. Moreover, the paper highlights how cultural diplomacy and soft power can support dialogue, partnerships, and India's global presence.

Keywords: India, cultural diplomacy, soft power, foreign relations, ICCR, diaspora, Bollywood, International Day of Yoga, global influence, public diplomacy

Introduction

Foreign relations depend not just on military, economic, or political power, but also on how well a country builds a positive image and connects with other societies. Cultural diplomacy and soft power have become key tools for international relations. India's rich heritage, diverse traditions, literature, music, cinema, yoga, Ayurveda, cuisine, and democratic values give it strong cultural resources to share with the world. Through cultural diplomacy, India can introduce these elements to global audiences and build mutual understanding. Soft power is the ability to influence others through attraction, values, culture, and diplomacy instead of force. By using both cultural diplomacy and soft power, India strengthens its international relationships, improves its image, and encourages greater cultural understanding worldwide. India promotes its culture worldwide through various institutions and projects, with the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) playing a key role. Founded in 1950, the ICCR is a government agency that supports artistic, language, and academic exchanges between India and other countries to boost cultural connections. The ICCR also establishes Indian cultural centers and organizes international events, art shows, and performances to share Indian traditions. These centers offer workshops in Indian music, dance, yoga, and languages, helping immigrants and the Indian community connect (Khara, 2018) ^[4]. The council also builds academic partnerships with foreign universities, offers scholarships to international students, and runs exchange programs. Programs like Pravasi Bharatiya Divas and the Know India Program (KIP) involve the Indian diaspora and show India's cultural influence through its people abroad. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other cultural groups also organize film festivals, tours, and historical exhibits to support cultural diplomacy (Mahapatra, 2016) ^[5]. Together, these efforts create a strong network that supports India's cultural diplomacy, builds its global image, and maintains strong diplomatic and cultural relationships. By highlighting its rich heritage, India increases its soft power and gains international respect and goodwill without relying on military or financial strength.

Background

Deeply rooted in ancient rituals, spirituality, art, and philosophy, India's long-standing cultural heritage has earned respect as a nation of diversity and expertise. From the entrance of Buddhism in ancient times to the present worldwide popularity of yoga, India's cultural exports have often helped to establish its reputation overseas. As globalization and connectivity have expanded, India has come to prioritize cultural diplomacy to raise its global reputation. Joseph Nye argues that this strategy aligns with the broader definition of soft power, where a country's influence stems from seduction rather than force (Nye, 1990; 2004) ^[8, 9]. The importance of non-military and non-financial instruments of influence is driving India's strategic emphasis on soft power. Along with its popular cultural assets such as Bollywood, yoga, and cuisine, India leverages its diaspora as a powerful link between India and nations worldwide. With the help of the ICCR, the Indian government has institutionalized many initiatives, including cultural diplomacy efforts like the International Day of Yoga. However, India's soft power strategy must also address issues like regional conflict, local socio-political concerns, and global competitiveness. Still, India has strong potential to increase its global influence through non-coercive policies, so its soft power strategy is important to its foreign policy. This study investigates how yoga, the diaspora, and culture have become vehicles for projecting India's influence on the global stage. By doing so, they have fostered goodwill, forged alliances, and built mutual respect, all of which have contributed to understanding India's soft power diplomacy.

The Global Significance of Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power

In the competitive world, soft power is an important tool of international relations, complementing traditional hard power like economic and military strength. Many countries now realize that military or economic dominance alone is not enough to lead or influence the world. Instead, shaping

preferences, building cultural appeal, and encouraging global cooperation have become more important. Soft power helps nations grow by promoting shared values, using peaceful diplomacy, and connecting with people worldwide. As information spreads easily and public opinion help to develop foreign policy, soft power is vital for earning respect (Paul, 2014) ^[10]. This is especially important as countries such as China, the United States, and India compete for influence and drive global competition. As more powers rise, the world has become more multipolar. Soft power sets nations apart, especially those with strong histories, cultures, or diplomatic ties, without relying on force. Its less aggressive approach also builds national pride, partnerships, and teamwork. For developing countries like India, soft power offers a way to lead in international forums and form strategic partnerships. By using cultural strengths, countries can achieve their goals and have a lasting global impact through cultural diplomacy, media, and public engagement. In this way, soft power diplomacy is now essential for managing complex global issues and promoting understanding, prosperity, and peace (Wagner, 2010) ^[15].

Modern Geopolitics and the Impact of Soft Power

Geopolitics is changing from a focus on military and economic power to the growing importance of soft power. As the world becomes more connected, influencing others through culture, diplomacy, and shared values matters more. While military and economic strength still matter, they are not enough for lasting influence and leadership. Countries now see how diplomacy, cultural exports, and a strong global image develop international relations. Soft power has become a key way to build alliances, encourage cooperation, and gain influence without using force (Mazumdar, 2020) ^[6]. The United States, once mainly reliant on military and economic strength, has boosted its soft power through cultural exports like Hollywood, music, and universities. China has also used soft power through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Confucius Institutes, and promoting Chinese culture abroad, which helps build political and economic ties and projects a peaceful, cooperative image. As digital technology and media have expanded, soft power has become even more important, letting countries reach people worldwide through the internet, social media, and international news. In today's fast-changing world, both rising and established powers are moving away from expensive military conflicts and tough economic competition, focusing more on public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, and global engagement (Mullen, 2015) ^[7].

Soft Power as A Strategic Tool In Global Governance

Soft power has become an important tool of international relations. Countries do not always need military or economic pressure to influence others; culture, values, ideas, and diplomacy can also influence them. India has increasingly used cultural diplomacy to showcase its heritage and connect with people worldwide. The 2023 G20 Presidency is a good example. India organized more than 200 cultural events in different parts of the country. These included dance, music, crafts, food, yoga, and Ayurveda. It was not only about formal meetings. People were brought into the process. The idea of a "People's G20" highlighted inclusivity, diversity and people-to-people connections. At

the same time, India presented itself as the "Voice of the Global South". Culture became part of a broader diplomatic narrative. Social media and digital platforms made these activities visible beyond national borders. India also used cultural exchanges within BRICS, where art, cinema, yoga, wellness and shared historical experiences created opportunities for interaction. These efforts show that diplomacy can sometimes begin with something simple—a cultural performance, a film, a yoga session or even a shared meal. India's soft power also works through its diaspora, creative industries, Buddhist heritage, digital innovation, yoga and Ayurveda. These resources help create familiarity and open space for dialogue. Cultural diplomacy, therefore, is not separate from foreign policy. It is becoming an important part of how India communicates with the wider world, builds relationships and encourages cooperation.

Instruments of Cultural Diplomacy

Bollywood and Popular Culture

Bollywood, India's lively film industry, plays a key role in the country's cultural diplomacy and soft power. Its impact goes beyond entertainment, as its films, songs, actors, and stories help shape how people around the world see India. Bollywood is especially popular in the Global South, including the SAARC region, West Asia, Africa, and some Western countries. The mix of music, dance, drama, and emotional stories appeals to people from many backgrounds. While Bollywood often tells Indian stories, themes like love, family, struggle, ambition, and hope are easy for people everywhere to relate to. Movies such as *Lagaan*, *Dangal*, and *Slumdog Millionaire* have shown international audiences different sides of Indian society and dreams. Indian films have also been popular in Russia and other former Soviet countries since the 1950s. More recently, *Dangal*'s success in China has shown how far Indian cinema can reach. Bollywood stars also help raise India's profile by taking part in international films, festivals, and events. Through all this, Bollywood shares Indian culture, music, fashion, language, and ways of life, building cultural ties across countries.

Global Reach of Indian Festivals and Art

Festivals are one of the most visible ways India shares its culture with the world and supports its cultural diplomacy. Diwali is a clear example. Once mainly linked to Indian traditions, it is now celebrated in many countries. In cities like Sydney, New York, and London, Diwali has become a public event with music, dance, performances, lights, and Indian food. People from different communities join in these celebrations. For many, it is a joyful occasion, but it also gives people a chance to learn about Indian traditions and values. Holi has spread in a similar way. The festival of colors is now popular in places like the UK, Canada, and the USA. People from many backgrounds take part with enthusiasm, even if they know little about its traditional meaning. Still, the experience sparks curiosity and encourages cultural exchange. Indian art also plays a role in this exchange, though more quietly. Traditional art forms like *Pattachitra* and Mughal miniature painting, as well as works by modern artists such as M. F. Husain, have reached international museums, exhibitions, and cultural centers. Through colors, images, symbols, and stories, people around the world can experience different parts of India's cultural heritage. These exchanges build familiarity, encourage

dialogue, and help strengthen India's cultural presence abroad. In this way, festivals and art become simple but meaningful ways to connect people across cultures.

Diaspora and Development Diplomacy

The Indian diaspora has become an important part of India's development diplomacy. Its contribution is not limited to sending money home. It is also about skills, ideas, investment and connections. Every year, Indian migrants send billions of dollars to India through remittances. These funds support families and also contribute to education, healthcare, housing and local economic activity. For many families, this support makes a real difference. Then there is investment. Members of the diaspora invest in real estate, education, healthcare and new businesses. Someone living thousands of kilometers away may still have a business, property, or development project in India. These activities create jobs and support local communities. Money is only one side of the story; skills matter too. Indian professionals working in the United States, Europe and other parts of the world often maintain links with Indian universities, companies and research institutions. They share knowledge and professional experience, particularly in areas such as information technology, biotechnology and healthcare. Over time, these networks have helped strengthen India's position in the global technology sector. The diaspora also gives back through charitable activities. Organizations such as the American India Foundation and the UK India Business Council support initiatives in education, healthcare and rural development. Their work reaches communities that often need support most (Pradhan & Mohapatra, 2020) ^[11]. The Indian government has increasingly engaged with the diaspora to support development goals. In this way, diaspora members are not only economic contributors but also cultural ambassadors. Their work, relationships and everyday interactions help strengthen India's global image and contribute to its soft power.

International Day of Yoga

India's proposal for the International Day of Yoga (IDY) at the United Nations was more than a cultural initiative. It was also a significant diplomatic move. In 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi proposed 21 June as the International Day of Yoga while addressing the UN General Assembly. The idea received an unusually broad response. Later that year, the United Nations adopted the resolution, with 177 member states supporting it, one of the highest numbers of co-sponsors for a UN resolution (Khanna and Moorthy, 2017) ^[3]. The choice of 21 June was meaningful. It is the summer solstice and the longest day in the Northern Hemisphere. The date also carries importance in yogic traditions. Then came 2015 ^[7]. The first International Day of Yoga was celebrated across the world. People gathered in parks, public spaces and iconic locations. From Times Square in New York to the Eiffel Tower in Paris and Red Square in Moscow, yoga became a shared global activity. Millions participated. For a moment, the focus was simply on breathing, movement and wellbeing. Over the years, the event has expanded to more than 190 countries. It presents India's ancient traditions in a modern and accessible form. As Davis (2021) ^[2] notes, the celebrations often create a peaceful atmosphere centred on health and harmony. Yoga therefore works as a quiet form of cultural diplomacy. It connects people without political pressure. At the same time, it strengthens India's image as a country associated with wellness, spirituality and peace.

Media and Digital Diplomacy

Digital media has changed the way countries communicate with the world. India is part of this change. Through social media, streaming platforms and digital news, Indian culture now travels much faster than before. A film, song or television programme can reach viewers in another country within minutes. It feels simple, but its cultural impact can be significant. Bollywood is a good example. Platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime and YouTube have made Indian films and entertainment accessible to international audiences. People who may never have visited India can still experience its stories, music, festivals and social values through these programmes. Indian television networks, including Doordarshan International, ZEE TV and NDTV 24X7, also connect audiences abroad with Indian news, entertainment and cultural life. For the Indian diaspora, these channels offer something more personal. They provide a connection with home. Social media has added another layer. Indian embassies, diplomats and government institutions regularly use platforms such as X, Instagram and Facebook to communicate with people across countries. The Ministry of External Affairs and Indian diplomatic missions share information about cultural programmes, international visits and foreign-policy activities. It makes diplomacy feel a little closer and less formal (Thussu, 2020) ^[13]. The International Day of Yoga is one example. Online classes and digital campaigns have helped people in different countries participate in yoga without travelling to India. Such initiatives promote Indian cultural traditions while creating opportunities for international interaction. Digital diplomacy is still developing, but its reach is already wide. Through screens, India is telling its story to a global audience, one post, film and programme.

Challenges

Soft power is now a key part of modern foreign policy, but using it well comes with several challenges. Unlike military or economic power, soft power is hard to measure, control, and maintain. Nye (2011) notes that while soft power may seem less risky than force, it is often hard to use well, can be weakened easily, and is expensive to rebuild if credibility is lost. Cooper (2004) ^[1] points out three main limits. First, a country's culture may be popular, but that does not always lead to political influence or strategic gains. Second, the results of soft-power efforts depend a lot on political, social, and international factors that countries cannot always manage. Third, the effects of cultural influence and agenda-setting can take a long time to show, sometimes lasting for generations. Besides these broad limits, a country's own situation can also affect how well it uses soft power. For India, differences in social conditions, regional interests, how strong its institutions are, and how it carries out cultural diplomacy can all shape its image abroad. In the Indian Ocean region, India also has to work with many different societies and outside influences. Because of this, keeping credibility, cultural appeal, and long-term engagement is a major challenge for India's soft power.

Conclusion

India's cultural diplomacy and soft power have gradually become important parts of its foreign relations and global image. The story is not only about government meetings or formal agreements. It is also about culture. India's heritage, music, films, yoga, traditions and diaspora communities

create everyday connections with people across the world. Initiatives such as the International Day of Yoga, the global reach of Bollywood and engagement with the Indian diaspora show how cultural resources can create goodwill without relying on force. A yoga session in another country, an Indian film watched by millions, or a diaspora event can open a small door for dialogue. These connections may appear simple, but over time they can contribute to mutual understanding and closer relationships. At the same time, soft power is not something that can be achieved once and then forgotten. It needs credibility, regular engagement and sensitivity towards different cultures. Sometimes the message may not reach everyone in the same way. Global politics is changing too. A more multipolar and interconnected world creates new opportunities, but also new challenges. India therefore needs to keep adapting its cultural diplomacy. Its success will depend partly on how effectively it combines cultural traditions with contemporary global expectations. The road ahead is not always easy. Still, sustained cultural engagement can help India strengthen international connections, encourage dialogue and contribute to a more cooperative global environment.

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