

THE CONCEPT AND EVOLUTION OF INDIA'S SOFT POWER

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ABSTRACT:

The concept of soft power was introduced by Joseph S. Nye Jr. in the late twentieth century as an alternative dimension of power in international relations. Unlike traditional forms of power that rely on military force or economic coercion, soft power emphasizes the ability of a state to influence the behaviour and preferences of others through attraction, persuasion, and legitimacy (Nye, 1990). Nye defines soft power as the ability to achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or payment, arguing that culture, political values, and foreign policy constitute its principal sources (Nye, 2004). In this context, power is exercised not through threats or inducements but through the appeal of a country's ideals, institutions, and cultural achievements.

According to Nye (2004), nations that successfully project soft power are able to shape the preferences of other actors and gain international support for their objectives. Soft power therefore involves cultivating a positive national image, promoting attractive values, and generating credibility in the international arena. As global politics becomes increasingly interconnected, the significance of soft power has expanded beyond conventional diplomacy, enabling states to enhance their influence through cultural exchange, public diplomacy, educational outreach, and international cooperation (Nye, 2017). Consequently, soft power has emerged as a crucial component of contemporary foreign policy, complementing rather than replacing traditional hard power resources. In the case of emerging powers such as India, soft power provides an effective means of enhancing global visibility, strengthening diplomatic relations, and promoting national interests through attraction and goodwill rather than coercion.

KEYWORDS: *interdependence globalization attraction, cinema, music, language, education, confrontation cooperation, diplomacy, strategy, Panchsheel, Bollywood films, Indian cuisine, yoga, spiritual practices, Vaccine Maitri, goodwill, Multilateralism, Vaccine Maitri, Act East, Neighbour-hood First.*

INTRODUCTION:

The concept of soft power has become an important framework for understanding influence in contemporary international relations. Unlike hard power, which relies on military and economic capabilities, soft power operates through attraction, persuasion, and legitimacy. It derives from a country's culture, political values, and foreign policies, enabling it to shape the preferences and behaviour of others without coercion. India represents a significant example of soft power in practice. Its rich cultural heritage, democratic traditions, pluralistic society, and commitment to peaceful coexistence have contributed to its global appeal. The worldwide popularity of yoga, Ayurveda, Indian cinema, cuisine, spirituality, and the influence of the Indian diaspora have strengthened India's international image and cultural presence. Over time, India's approach to soft power has evolved in response to changing domestic and international circumstances. Different governments have utilized soft power in varying ways, ranging from moral leadership and non-alignment to cultural diplomacy, diaspora engagement, and strategic global partnerships. This chapter examines the evolution of India's soft power across different political periods and assesses its role in enhancing the country's foreign policy objectives and international standing.

The concept of soft power emerged as one of the most influential contributions to contemporary international relations theory. Coined by Joseph S. Nye Jr. in the late twentieth century, the term challenged the traditional understanding of power that had long been dominated by military strength and economic capabilities. During the Cold War era, power was largely measured in terms of military resources, strategic alliances, and economic dominance. However, the changing nature of global politics, characterized by increasing interdependence, globalization, and the rise of non-state actors, necessitated a broader understanding of how states influence one another. In this context, Nye introduced the concept of soft power to explain how countries can achieve their objectives through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or force (Nye, 1990).

According to Nye (2004), soft power is the ability of a country to shape the preferences and behaviour of others through attraction rather than coercion or payment. It arises when a nation's culture, political values, and foreign policies are perceived as legitimate, credible, and morally attractive. Unlike hard power, which relies on military intervention, economic sanctions, or other forms of compulsion, soft power functions by encouraging others to willingly support or emulate a country's goals and values. It is therefore based on the capacity to influence through ideas, norms, institutions, and cultural appeal.

Nye identifies three primary sources of soft power: culture, political values, and foreign policy. Culture becomes a source of attraction when it possesses universal appeal and resonates with international audiences. Literature, cinema, music, language, education, religion, and lifestyle practices often serve as important instruments of cultural influence. Political values contribute to soft power when they are consistently practiced both domestically and internationally. Countries that uphold democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and social justice are generally viewed more favourably by the international community. Similarly, foreign policy enhances soft power when it is perceived as legitimate, ethical, and oriented toward global welfare rather than narrow national interests (Nye, 2004).

The significance of soft power increased considerably after the end of the Cold War. The collapse of the bipolar world order reduced the prominence of military confrontation and highlighted the importance of cooperation, diplomacy, and international institutions. Globalization further accelerated the spread of information, culture, and ideas across national boundaries. As Thomas Friedman (2005) argues, globalization has created an interconnected world in which communication technologies and transnational networks enable states to reach global audiences more effectively than ever before. In such an environment, a country's reputation, cultural influence, and diplomatic credibility have become crucial determinants of international standing.

Soft power also plays a vital role in public diplomacy. Governments increasingly seek to engage foreign publics directly through educational exchanges, cultural programs, international broadcasting, and digital communication platforms. These initiatives help shape international perceptions and foster long-term goodwill. Educational institutions, research collaborations, tourism, and cultural festivals serve as important channels through which countries project their values and strengthen international relationships. In the twenty-first century, social media and digital diplomacy have further expanded the scope of soft power by allowing states to communicate directly with global audiences and influence public opinion beyond traditional diplomatic channels.

The relationship between soft power and hard power has been the subject of extensive scholarly debate. Nye emphasizes that soft power should not be viewed as a substitute for hard power but rather as a complementary resource. Effective foreign policy often requires a combination of both forms of power, a strategy that Nye later termed smart power (Nye, 2011). While military and economic capabilities remain essential for national security and strategic influence, soft power enhances a state's legitimacy and credibility, making its actions more acceptable to the international community. A country that successfully combines hard and soft power resources is often better positioned to achieve its foreign policy objectives.

India's soft power in different Governments periods

1. Nehru Era (1947-1964) : Idealism, Moral Authority and civilizational Diplomacy

In the immediate post-independence period, India faced significant constraints in terms of military capabilities and economic resources when compared with the major powers of the Cold War. Nevertheless, under the visionary leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, the country cultivated international influence through the promotion of anti-colonialism, non-alignment, peaceful coexistence, and democratic values.

Nehru's foreign policy was guided by principles such as Panchsheel (peaceful coexistence), non-alignment, and respect for sovereignty. India became a founding leader of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), positioning itself as a voice for newly independent nations. This enhanced India's image as a neutral, peace-oriented, and principled actor in a bipolar Cold War world. (Ganguly, 2015; Malone, 2011).

India also played a major role in supporting decolonization movements in Asia and Africa, thereby gaining moral legitimacy. Cultural diplomacy was promoted through educational exchanges, art, literature, and institutions. India's ancient traditions of Buddhism, yoga, and spirituality added to its civilizational appeal (Tharoor, 2012; Wagner, 2010)..

The 1962 India's war with China emphasized the necessity of balancing idealism with military strength, it did not diminish the broader legacy of Nehru's foreign policy. His commitment to non-alignment, peaceful coexistence, and anti-colonial solidarity helped construct a durable global image of India as a responsible, ethical, and peace-oriented actor in international relations. (Maxwell, 1970; Ganguly, 2015)..

2. Indira Gandhi Era (1966–1977; 1980–1984): Assertion, Pragmatism and Selective Soft Power

During the tenure of Indira Gandhi, India's approach to power became more realist and pragmatic, yet soft power continued to play a supporting role.

The most significant event was the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, where India intervened on humanitarian and strategic grounds. This enhanced India's image as a protector of human rights and regional stability. The creation of Bangladesh elevated India's moral and political standing globally.

India continued to engage actively in the Non-Aligned Movement, maintaining leadership among developing countries. Cultural diplomacy, though less emphasized, remained present through cinema, education, and diplomatic exchanges (Muni, 2009)..

At the same time, India's nuclear test in 1974 signalled a shift towards hard power assertion, which somewhat diluted its soft power image as a purely peace-oriented nation. Domestically, the Emergency period (1975–77) also affected India's democratic image internationally.

Thus, this era represents a transition phase, where soft power was increasingly complemented—and sometimes overshadowed—by strategic and military considerations.

3. Post cold war period (1991-2004) : Economic liberalization and Global Cultural Expansion

The economic reforms of 1991 marked a turning point in India's soft power trajectory. With liberalization, privatization, and globalization, India began integrating into the global economy, significantly enhancing its attractiveness.

This period saw the rise of India as a knowledge economy, particularly in information technology, education, and services. Indian professionals gained global recognition, especially in countries like the United States, contributing to India's image as a hub of talent and innovation (Tharoor, 2012)..

The Indian diaspora expanded and became more influential, acting as informal ambassadors of Indian culture and values. Bollywood films, Indian cuisine, yoga, and spiritual practices gained widespread popularity across the world.

India's foreign policy also became more pragmatic, focusing on economic partnerships and regional cooperation. While nuclear tests in 1998 initially led to international criticism, India managed to rebuild its image through diplomatic engagement and economic growth.

This period highlights the emergence of economic and cultural soft power, where global integration played a central role.

4. UPA Government (2004–2014): Multilateralism, Credibility and Inclusive Global Engagement

Under Manmohan Singh, India's soft power was characterized by credibility, stability, and multilateral engagement. The government emphasized economic growth alongside responsible global behaviour. India actively participated in global governance through institutions like the United Nations, the WTO, and climate negotiations. Its role in peacekeeping operations and international cooperation strengthened its reputation as a responsible stakeholder. (Mohan, 2015; Malone, 2011).

The India-US civil nuclear agreement marked a significant diplomatic achievement, enhancing India's global legitimacy. India also promoted development partnerships with African and Asian countries, reinforcing South-South cooperation (Pant, 2008).

Culturally, India continued to expand its influence through media, education, and diaspora engagement. The emphasis on inclusive growth and democratic governance further enhanced its global appeal. This phase represents the consolidation of soft power through economic credibility and institutional participation, projecting India as a stable and reliable partner (Mohan, 2015; Malone, 2011)..

5. NDA Government (2014–Present): Assertive and Strategic Soft Power

Under Narendra Modi, India's soft power has become highly visible, organized, and strategically integrated with foreign policy (Tharoor, 2020). A major achievement is the global recognition of the International Day of Yoga, which symbolizes India's cultural leadership. Yoga, Ayurveda, and traditional knowledge systems are promoted as global public goods, strengthening India's cultural identity (Nye, 2004).

The government has significantly expanded diaspora diplomacy, engaging Indian communities abroad through large-scale events and direct outreach. This strategy has strengthened India's influence and goodwill in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Gulf region (Hall, 2019; Mohan, 2015).

Another important dimension is digital diplomacy. The extensive use of social media platforms and direct communication by political leaders and diplomatic missions has transformed India's global outreach, making foreign policy more accessible, transparent, and people-centric (Manor, 2019; Hall, 2019).

India has also used humanitarian and development diplomacy effectively. Initiatives such as "Vaccine Maitri" during the COVID-19 pandemic, disaster relief operations, and development assistance to neighbouring and African countries have strengthened India's image as a responsible and caring global actor (Ministry of External Affairs, 2021; Chaturvedi, 2022)..

Strategic initiatives like "Act East," "Neighbourhood First," and Indo-Pacific engagement combine soft power with geopolitical goals. India's role in climate diplomacy and global forums further enhances its international standing (Jaishankar, 2020; Pant, 2019).

According to S. Jaishankar (2020), India's contemporary foreign policy seeks to combine civilizational influence, strategic autonomy, and global engagement in a manner that enhances both its hard and soft power capabilities. Strategic initiatives such as the Act East Policy, Neighbourhood First Policy, SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), and India's expanding engagement in the Indo-Pacific reflect an approach that integrates cultural outreach, economic cooperation, connectivity initiatives, and security partnerships with broader geopolitical objectives (Jaishankar, 2020).

Jaishankar emphasizes that India's foreign policy increasingly projects the country as a "leading power" rather than merely a balancing power, capable of shaping international agendas and contributing to global governance. India's leadership in establishing the International Solar Alliance (ISA) demonstrates its commitment to sustainable development and climate action, while simultaneously enhancing its global reputation as a responsible stakeholder in addressing shared challenges (Jaishankar, 2020).

Furthermore, India's active participation in the G20, BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Quad, and the United Nations reflects its efforts to strengthen multilateralism and build cooperative partnerships across regions. Jaishankar argues that India's ability to serve as a bridge between developed and developing countries enhances its diplomatic influence and reinforces its image as a representative voice of the Global South (Jaishankar, 2020).

However, challenges remain. Critics argue that domestic political issues and inconsistencies between internal policies

and external messaging can affect credibility. Despite this, the Modi era represents the most proactive and institutionalized use of soft power in India's history, blending culture, diplomacy, and strategy.

India's soft power has evolved significantly across different political phases. From the moral idealism of Nehru, to strategic pragmatism under Indira Gandhi, to economic and cultural expansion after 1991, followed by institutional credibility during the UPA era, and finally to assertive cultural diplomacy under the NDA government, soft power has adapted to changing Soft power has emerged as a crucial dimension of international relations, emphasizing attraction, persuasion and legitimacy over coercion. The theoretical framework, particularly as articulated by Joseph Nye, highlights culture, political values and foreign policy as the core pillars shaping a nation's global influence. In the Indian context, these elements are deeply rooted in its civilizational heritage, democratic ethos and commitment to peaceful coexistence. India's perspective on soft power is unique, as it combines ancient traditions such as non-violence and pluralism with modern democratic practices and developmental aspirations.

Across different periods of government, India's approach to soft power has evolved from a largely passive and value-based orientation to a more structured and strategic deployment in foreign policy. While earlier governments emphasized moral leadership and non-alignment, recent phases have witnessed a more assertive projection of culture, diaspora engagement and global partnerships. Despite these shifts, the essence of India's soft power remains consistent in its emphasis on inclusivity, diversity and cooperation.

Overall, India possesses significant potential to leverage its soft power in achieving foreign policy objectives and enhancing its global standing. However, the effectiveness of this power ultimately depends on the coherence between its domestic values and international actions. By aligning its internal practices with its external image, India can strengthen its position as a responsible and influential global actor. Global and domestic contexts.

This evolution demonstrates that soft power is not static but dynamic, shaped by leadership, policy priorities, and international conditions. While its sources remain rooted in culture, values, and diplomacy, its application has become increasingly strategic. For India, the challenge lies in maintaining credibility, balancing hard and soft power, and sustaining its global attractiveness in an increasingly competitive international system.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, soft power represents a fundamental shift in the understanding of power in international relations. By emphasizing attraction, persuasion, legitimacy, and cultural influence, it broadens the traditional conception of power beyond coercive military and economic capabilities. In an increasingly interconnected and globalized world, the ability to shape preferences, build goodwill, and influence international perceptions has become as important as military strength and economic resources.

The significance of soft power is particularly evident in the case of India, whose civilizational depth and cultural diversity have endowed it with unique sources of global influence. Rooted in a rich cultural heritage, democratic traditions, pluralistic values, and a long-standing commitment to peaceful coexistence, India possesses substantial assets that enhance its attractiveness in international affairs. The global appeal of yoga, Ayurveda, Indian cinema, cuisine, literature, and spiritual traditions has enabled India to transcend geographical boundaries and establish meaningful connections with diverse societies across the world. These cultural resources not only strengthen India's international image but also contribute to its capacity to build goodwill, foster mutual understanding, and advance foreign policy objectives through attraction rather than coercion.

Moreover, India's democratic governance, constitutional values, vibrant civil society, and active participation in international institutions further enhance its credibility and legitimacy on the global stage. Together, these factors illustrate how soft power can be effectively utilized to strengthen diplomatic relations, promote national interests, and enhance international prestige without relying exclusively on military or economic instruments. As India assumes an increasingly prominent role in global governance, its soft power serves as a vital mechanism for projecting its values, shaping international perceptions, and reinforcing its position as a responsible, influential, and respected global actor.

Therefore, the study of soft power is essential for understanding contemporary international relations and the evolving nature of global influence. In the Indian context, soft power remains a valuable strategic resource that complements traditional forms of power and contributes significantly to the country's foreign policy objectives. Consequently, soft power continues to be an indispensable component of contemporary diplomacy and global governance, offering India a powerful means of enhancing its international standing and shaping the emerging global order.

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