

India's Soft Power Strategy: Continuity and Change

Dr. Abhishek Srivastava

Assistant Professor, CIPOD, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the utilisation of soft power by the government of Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India, between 2014 and 2024. It discusses some of the ways the government focused on culture, diaspora, digital outreach, and partnerships to strengthen the State's image. In the 21st century, many have been aware of the country's civilizational traits, which include yoga, spirituality, and harmony among different cultures. But during the reign of Modi, the country's adoption of soft power became more coherent, strategic, and ambitious, with initiatives such as the International Day of Yoga, outreach activities to the Indian community across the globe, and the joining of many organisations. By projecting an image of its democratic nature and promoting partnerships across all continents through technological means, the government has successfully pushed the narrative that India is at the forefront of other emerging economies. This paper describes how, over the years, Modi's government has stabilised India's soft power while addressing the problem of its historical contradictions – the absence of a clear and consistent narrative of outward engagement. It also analyses the country's perspective in the current world, given its difficulties in maintaining its influence, and suggests ways to address India's soft power challenge. The purpose of this analysis is to help understand soft power in emerging economies and, in addition, to explore possibilities for India's soft power in the years to come.

INTRODUCTION

The notion of soft power was proposed by Joseph S. Nye in the latter half of the 20th century, signifying a new conception of foreign relations that also incorporates international power beyond the conventional use of hard power, such as military or economic threats (Nye 2004). Soft power, which Nye coined as “the ability to make someone do something without a gun or an army. Persuasion, and attraction, not coercion”, is a Ministry of Foreign Affairs tool a country employs to alter and positively focus global opinions and actions (Nye 2008). According to Nye, projecting Soft power resides not only in the nation's ability to care for its image but also in its capacity to sell values that people are willing to adopt (Nye 1990).

Out of all the tools of soft power, cultural diplomacy is perhaps the best understood. Nations build their hopes on the promotion of cultural heritage, values, and arts to have an enduring effect on the target audience (Melissen 2005). The soft power of the nations is anchored in the people-to-people relations that cultural diplomacy offers. This has great value in the context of cultural diplomacy in India owing to the vastness of her cultural spectrum, age-old practices and spirituality. It is interesting to observe how, in the Global Soft Power Index, soft power is also “about the work that countries do to shape the world's view of them as real, as reliable and as inventive”.

The narrative and cultural ‘imprint’ that India's historical legacy and its civilisation's identity offer act as an important instrument of exercising soft power. Traditionally, the dissemination of culture, which includes Buddhism and yoga, has always been an attractive proposition for India, which has kept the world interested (Mazumdar 2018). The cultural wealth of India, given to her by the Vedas and her numerous traditions, has the ability to reach many people around the world. This, however, has quite often been the case that it has not been fully exploited. In post-independence India, soft power initiatives were rather limited, concentrating on remaining speech relevant rather than projecting national culture.

In the 1990s, after the advent of globalisation, there was a need to address the image of India abroad, and the cultural and soft power focus of India returned, though the possibilities remained mostly potential until the 21st century (Basrur et al. 2019). Soft power presents itself as an appealing and cheap means of expanding horizons

and increasing diplomatic credibility for emerging countries like India (Chitty et al 2016). To develop this concept further, Wilson uses Nye's typology and argues that soft power is something which most countries aspiring to 'be' in the global power leadership can relate to and use without necessarily having the financial power or military might of a superpower (Wilson 2008). It is thus that India's strategy draws on its culture and the influence of its people; therefore, soft power is an important element in its foreign policy.

It would not be wrong to categorise the period of Narendra Modi as a prime minister (2014-2024) as a turning point in the history of India's soft power (Ganguly & Chauthaiwale 2016). According to Nye's theory of soft power, a country's soft power strength is determined by how far its values and interests are accepted as right by others (Nye 1990). Modi's policies are attempts to paint a picture of the country, quite deliberately and strategically, to project the country's ethnic identity, spiritual ideals, and a model of development around the world, quite similar to the projection of cultural realism which seeks to meet the demands of its audience (Ganguly and Chauthaiwale 2016).

Objectives and Research Questions of the Study

The aim of this paper is to investigate India's soft power approach under Narendra Modi by trying to address the following questions: To what extent has India wielded its soft power from 2014 to 2024?

- To what extent India has been able to wield its soft power in the last decade (2014-2024)?
- In what manner has India invested and utilized its soft power in the previous decade?
- What are the key challenges to India's growing soft power in a fractured world order?

Modi's Way of Soft Power: Civilizational Turn, Communication, and Outreach

Over the years, India's approach to soft power has undergone a great transformation aimed at highlighting more of its civilization, spirituality and culture (Ganguly & Chauthaiwale 2016). Such an approach is quite different from the ones adopted by earlier regimes and seeks to integrate the old ways of thinking and doing things with modern society as a single global identity (Basrur 2019). Modi's strategy resists simplistic categorisation and is premised on intensive cultural elements at different levels of focus, employed through spiritual diplomacy, unsettling the diaspora, and civilizational branding that holds India's past as a convergence of numerous ideologies and religions (Pant & Joshi 2019).

Branding India's Civilizational Identity

The civilizational approach which Modi underlines in his consideration of foreign policy along with the soft power concept, signifies a deliberate repositioning of the world that India intends to inhabit (Sahgal 2020). Singh (2020) observes that this is fresh civilizational realism, for India, is fine thanks to its timeless heritage, but wishes to depart from the globalised norms of diplomatic relations. This is different from hard power or mere economic domination; this civilizational approach develops India as a country that stresses moral high ground, especially during periods of global power conflicts (Los 2019). Pursuing this goal, Modi's administration constructed a narrative, which called India "Vishwa Guru" meaning "the world teacher" (Khushnam 2022).

Such a narrative became part of Modi's wider objective of making India look developmentally modern different from the West. Capitalising on this civilisation's history, India positions itself as having the ability to resolve certain problems, such as environmentalism, clean governance and peaceful existence (Mol et al 2021). It is quite clear from Modi's call of the "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" which means all human beings together constitute one family irrespective of geographical requirements (Pant & Joshi, 2020).

One of the most outstanding features of the soft power dimension in Modi's leadership is the promotion of yoga as a way of life, a cultural and spiritual practice that is based on the Indian ethos and traditions (Mazumdar 2018). In 2015, Modi successfully persuaded the United Nations to proclaim the 21st of June as International Yoga Day, which was supported by 177 countries, indicating India's influence beyond cultural and national lines worldwide (Malhotra 2021). This strategy advances India's soft power narrative as it seeks to promote yoga practice as a

universal phenomenon for health and wellbeing, which is an ideal that cuts across all cultures (Khara 2018). The celebrations of the International Day of Yoga, usually hosted by Indian embassies worldwide, are increasingly becoming calendar events that reinforce India's image as a champion of health and wellness.

The vast popularity of yoga worldwide acts not only as an instrument of soft power but also as a conduit connecting the present India to the past (Kumari 2023). It could be argued that yoga is a kind of spiritual diplomacy, which allows India to take pride in her unique way of life which can contribute to the enrichment of the world. Such insistence on the primacy of spiritual life cuts across boundaries as it appeals to more and more people across the world who are looking for ways to attain health in a more natural and perhaps spiritual manner. Because of the connection of yoga with Indian culture, the Modi government has managed to present India as a country which leads the world in the advancement of wellness practices (Malhotra 2021).

Modi government focussed on the aspect of soft power politics, looking at the vast and rich cultural heritage of India, especially its past in sciences, philosophy and arts (Hall 2019). This is how such branding has manifested in moves like the initiative "India as the Mother of Democracy" which seeks to highlight the country's ancient steadfastness to the ideals of democracy and respect for diversity (Srivastava 2023). Modi aims at patriotising India's civilizational ethos to create a narrative that places India in a different basket, quite unlike other rising powers, especially in Asia (Malhotra 2021). Also, Pant and Joshi (2020) contend that this emphasis on civilizational identity is consistent with the intention of India's foreign policy which is to aim at projecting itself as a good power with an exclusive cultural story.

The civilisation-centred approach also entails projecting the ancient Indian civilisation with scrutiny to advancement in mathematics, astronomy and medical science (Srivastava 2023). For example, the Indian government often talks of people like Aryabhata, who was a mathematician as well as the origins of Ayurveda, to assert the historical continuity of Indian intellect. With these stories, Indian leadership aims to foster feelings of veneration and curiosity about the country's history, thereby increasing its soft power. The narrative positions India as a participant in the growth of the civilizational process worldwide, while at the same time as the centre of culture and knowledge, with lessons applicable to today's world.

Diaspora Engagement Approach

Since assuming office in 2014, Narendra Modi has demonstrated a markedly proactive and strategic approach to foreign policy, with a particular emphasis on leveraging the political, economic, and symbolic capital of the Indian diaspora (Pradhan & Mohapatra 2020). This orientation reflects a broader transformation in India's diplomatic outlook, wherein diaspora communities are no longer viewed merely as expatriate populations but as influential transnational stakeholders capable of advancing India's geopolitical interests, economic aspirations, and global image. The Indian diaspora—estimated conservatively at over 30 million people dispersed across continents—constitutes one of the world's largest and most cohesive migrant communities, possessing substantial influence in sectors such as technology, business, academia, finance, culture, and politics (Srinivas 2019). Recognising this immense potential, the Modi administration has integrated diaspora engagement into the broader architecture of India's foreign policy and soft power diplomacy.

A defining feature of this strategy has been Narendra Modi's direct and highly visible interaction with overseas Indian communities during his international visits. Unlike earlier diplomatic conventions that treated diaspora engagement as peripheral, Modi elevated such interactions into major political and symbolic events. Large-scale gatherings in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, the United Arab Emirates, Australia, and Singapore have often attracted thousands of attendees, including business leaders, professionals, students, and members of influential civic organizations. Events such as the "Howdy Modi" rally in Houston and the reception at Wembley Stadium exemplified the scale and performative nature of this outreach, transforming diaspora engagement into a powerful instrument of public diplomacy.

These events serve multiple strategic purposes. At one level, they function as platforms for mobilizing the diaspora emotionally and politically by fostering a sense of cultural belonging, national pride, and collective identity. Modi's speeches frequently invoke themes of civilizational heritage, India's developmental trajectory, and the global achievements of Indians abroad, thereby cultivating a narrative of shared responsibility toward

the nation's rise on the world stage. At another level, these gatherings help reinforce India's soft power by projecting the image of a confident, globally connected, and economically ambitious nation. The enthusiastic participation of diaspora communities also sends symbolic signals to host countries regarding the influence and electoral significance of Indian-origin populations within their domestic political landscapes.

Furthermore, diaspora-centric diplomacy has yielded tangible strategic and economic benefits. Overseas Indians have increasingly become conduits for foreign investment, technological collaboration, tourism promotion, and policy advocacy in host nations. The administration has also undertaken institutional measures to strengthen these connections through initiatives such as streamlined consular services, diaspora investment schemes, and programs like the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, which celebrate the contributions of overseas Indians to India's development. In this sense, diaspora engagement under Modi transcends ceremonial outreach; it represents an attempt to construct a transnational network of influence aligned with India's broader aspirations for global prominence.

Critics, however, argue that the spectacle-driven nature of some diaspora events occasionally blurs the line between state diplomacy and political image-building. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the Modi era has redefined the role of the Indian diaspora in India's external relations. By transforming overseas Indians into active participants in the country's diplomatic narrative, the government has expanded the scope of India's foreign policy beyond traditional state-to-state engagement and into the realm of people-centric global influence.

The efforts on diaspora engagement have provided India with the means to convey a more favourable narrative and also shift the policy-making in such countries where the diaspora is substantial (Malhotra 2021). For instance, a Modi-organized event in the year 2014 at the Madison Square Garden in New York received extreme attention from the media and showcased the promise of India as a cultural and economic force. In doing so, he reaches out to their brothers and sisters who have taken roots abroad and makes a case for soft power for the Indian state. Modi's regime makes the case that the diaspora is a "soft power multiplier" making it possible for India to reach more people in the US, Canada and the United Kingdom than otherwise (Pradhan & Malhotra 2020).

The present government under Modi has shown an interest in the factors affecting the diaspora due to the understanding of global Indians and how they aid in the achievement of India's ambition both economically and culturally (Mazumdar 2018). Programs like the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas allow an appreciation for the diaspora and their connections thus allowing them to work more with their home country (Prasad 2022). Such engagement does not only build on India's soft power but also creates a worldwide pool of people who share the same goals and beliefs as India, thus expanding its reach further internationally.

Communication and Digital Diplomacy

The impact of advancing technologies on communication strategies is well observed as far as political leadership is concerned. The exchange of information between leaders and citizens has been made much easier by the availability and especially the use of the Internet and social media in particular (Verma & Dawar 2019). Prime Minister Narendra Modi uses the Internet as well as social media platforms to address vast populations of people in different regions of the world with ease, thus enhancing the concept of soft power as advanced by Joseph Nye. These tools make it possible for Modi to remain in contact with millions of his fans across the globe which makes him one of the leaders with the highest number of followers in the social media rise (Verma & Dawar 2019). Using such resources, the Indian Prime Minister's office is able to promote the country's achievements in various cultural activities, its foreign relations and internal policies to the world as a whole in defining the international image of the country.

Efforts in digital diplomacy (Kant 2009) can include aspects such as the promotion of tourism through social networks with the "Incredible India" campaign. This campaign is particularly famous for its promotion of a variety of Indian heritage monuments and festivals. It has played a positive role in furthering the country's tourism potential by building a Nationalistic image of a richly cultural country (Mahapatra 2016). Other than that, the administration of PM Modi has commenced the campaign termed 'Digital India,' which promotes several aspects of present India's technology, including, digitalization, mobile banking, and the country's connectivity

(Verma & Dawar 2019). In doing so, India seeks to understand a leader's image and national branding, especially as a country which offers itself as a digital development example within other developing countries, thus adding to its attractiveness and power (Kant 2009).

New Tools of Soft Power

Between 2014 and 2024, the Modi government used sports diplomacy as a tool to establish India's relations with the world and boost soft power (Das et al., 2024). Using events like the Cricket World Cup, and outreach to cricket-loving nations, sports became a unifying tie. Cricket diplomacy, for instance, especially with Australia, the West Indies and Afghanistan, resulted in the sharing of cultural love for cricket and boosted bilateral ties. The government further developed its sports diplomacy through regional games, collaborating with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal to train athletes and develop infrastructure. Sports exchange and strategic investment in developing countries, especially in Africa and the Caribbean, characterize such efforts (Dubinsky 2019). By adding sports to its agenda, India could find an avenue to promote goodwill, connect with the global youth, and establish itself as a responsible international player both on and off the field. The projection of Indian culture as a soft power with regard to the languages of India. Considering that language is a means of cultural sharing, the government scaled up its efforts to teach Hindi and other Indian languages abroad by establishing language centres and promoting language courses through Indian embassies and cultural centres worldwide (Vyas 2022). International Hindi Conference, supported by the Ministry of External Affairs, has brought India's linguistic heritage to world attention. Annual "World Hindi Day" has enhanced the global exposure of Hindi. Further, under Modi, Sanskrit has been emphasized, as can be seen in the NEP 2020 and has again revived scholarly interest in the ancient language and philosophical texts of India around the world (Vyas 2022). Through language diplomacy, the government has been able to deepen cultural connections and project India's rich linguistic heritage globally by fostering ties with countries interested in Indian languages, particularly in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean.

Continuity and Change

The government currently in power, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has also brought about a paradigm shift in India's soft power strategy, as opposed to that of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. The UPA government was preoccupied with conducting diplomacy and promoting a few cultural activities, without a focused and active soft power policy (Mahaseth et al., 2023). Whereas the NDA's policy signifies a shift from the use of soft power in a passive manner to an active one, where India's cultural, spiritual, and digital resources are combined into a single strategy to improve the country's image and influence across the globe.

Limited Soft Power Outreach under the UPA Government

The use of soft power was noted but was not at the forefront of India's foreign policy during the UPA government between 2004 and 2014. It was projected that India was a multi-ethnic society with a strong respect for democratic principles; however, the UPA administration did not leverage India's rich cultural and historical background as a tool. Diwali and her cultural identity in the movies have largely focused on regionalism and the strengthening of bilateral ties rather than on projecting India's cultural image to enhance its power on a global scale (Mahaseth et al., 2023). This is not to say that the Yoga and Bollywood film industries did not capture the public imagination outside the country – there were just no strategic narratives linking such concerns to India's foreign policy.

The UPA government's limited soft power approach can be explained by several reasons. To begin with, orientation towards non-alignment and strategic autonomy was dominant, therefore soft power strategies at the global level were implemented rather carefully. It is also evident that the UPA did not build its outreach strategy beyond the subcontinental area, including geopolitics, because it mainly pursued economic development and less operationalised international branding. Therefore, India's soft power remained untapped despite its vast civilizational history, rich culture, and democratic system.

Proactive Soft Power Strategy under the NDA Government

The post-1998 Congress-led government's understanding of soft power was transformed by the elevation of civilizational pride and cultural diplomacy in modernity. From 2014, with the arrival of Modi and the rise of soft power in foreign policy, it emerged as, for instance, the 'Vishwa Guru,' or the teacher of the world, with a message worth knowing on spirituality, health, and democracy (Tandon 2016). This tactic is indicative of Modi's intentions to brand India not only as an economic power but also, as an extraordinary culture and religious power in the world.

Perhaps the most significant shift that took place during the NDA regime was the normalization of yoga and spirituality as a response to world events. In this respect, the UPA also engaged in soft diplomacy by promoting yoga, albeit without the benefit of an international campaign such as the one that made yoga famous in the West. Under the UPA government, yoga became a political tool and a vector for promoting Indian heritage, with little focus on the practice's wellness aspects.

The government led by Modi also ushered in a paradigm shift in how the country perceives its diaspora. Rather than merely viewing Indian expatriates as citizens living abroad, the Modi administration sees the Indian diaspora as potential partners in advancing the nation's interests (Pant & Joshi 2019). In the era of UPA, diaspora relations were preserved even though they were very limited; the NDA, however, went on to raise the engagement levels through extravagant rallies and focused programmes as in the case of the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, where Modi on many occasions engaged the diaspora to take up the role of image bearers of India.

This organized approach is in stark contrast to UPA which took a less vigorous approach, using the diaspora as a key element of soft power. In the case of Modi's government, the narrative that catered to the postponed polymath's soft power began to turn towards the active promotion of India's historical achievements and cultural civilization instead. Campaigns such as 'India as the Mother of Democracy' were aimed at showcasing the presence and acceptance of democracy and diversity of religions in the country for ages, projecting India as a superpower not only geographically but also politically.

Such a strategy was to a large extent lacking during the period of UPA, which believed in projecting a healthy image of the country but somehow on the lower side (Mahaseth et al 2023). Modi has more than once stressed the inventions, the advancements in the fields of science, mathematics, and philosophy that India possessed in ancient times, which helped in creating a narrative of India's soft power that sets it apart from other nations such as China that are also regarded as emerging powers (Srinivas 2019).

The NDA government accentuated the aspect of digital diplomacy in India's foreign policy thereby increasing the scope and control of the country vis-a-vis social media and the internet. The former in-person approach of the UPA, which was very effective in its day, is replaced by the active social media involvement of Modi and the digital outreach of the country (Srinivas 2019). Campaigns such as Digital India and Incredible India have been launched worldwide with a projection of India at the forefront of technology-enabled governance and tourism (Verma & Dawar 2019). This latter aspect allows India to connect with the youth and other audiences who are active on digital platforms, which the UPA did not take full advantage of.

The NDA regime has also focused on the enhancement of India's soft power through proactive involvement in such multilateral bodies as the UN, G20, BRICS and the International Solar Alliance (Warwantkar 2023). External diplomacy pursued by Modi is primarily designed to position India at the centre of the global developmental agenda as an advocate of inclusive growth, sustainable development, and institutional reconfiguration of the global order (Gautam 2022). During UPA's rule, India's engagement in such global platforms was more passive with concern only to regional issues. Modi's sufficient participation in those forums is also in line with his vision of countries of the Global South having, and standing for their Global South model, a democratic and development strategy altruistically offered by India to win over the countries of the Global South.

One of the most profound changes has been, perhaps, the conception of India which Modi coined as Vishwa Guru, or the world teacher (Thussu 2020). This idea is expanded in India's civilizational identity, casting India

as a benevolent and ethical power in the present-day multipolar world (Yang & Li 2021). The Prime Minister's use of the phrase 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam', or the world is one family, fits into the larger image-making process of India as a benign power with universal values. India's activity during the period was devoid of this outlook, as the government did not seek to expand the civilizational aspect of the nation's outreach to its international relations. By doing so, Modi is able to identify India not only as an attractive nation but also as a soft power that offers comfort and wise guidance to a world that is becoming increasingly divided.

CONCLUSION

There has been a steady shift in the way India has utilized soft power strategies, beginning with the negative connotation of being underused to currently being put into deliberate practice under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi (Chitty et al 2016). The NDA administration has turned its attention to the country's civilizational values, cultural resources, and cyberspace to project India's distinctive voice in the community of nations. Initiatives such as International Yoga Day, outreach activities among the diaspora, launching sensitization campaigns in support of the US-led coalitions, and multilateral engagements have turned around the perception of India as a country rich in culture, democracy, and creativity to its people. The current outlook is in sharp contrast with the relatively insipid embrace of soft power witnessed during the last UPA government, which was plagued by the absence of a grand strategy to exploit all of India's cultural and diplomatic resources.

The multiple advancements in enhancing India's soft power diplomacy under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi have been quite notable but with a lot of challenges looming over the sustainability and efficiency of this strategy. In an overly divided world order, India is required to pay attention to some geopolitical issues externally as well as some domestic ones and improve on its extensive ways of advertising itself so as to make the most time of its soft power. India must create a comprehensive strategy that combines strategic investment, innovative outreach, and consistent messaging. These are the key recommendations for strengthening India's soft power.

It is, however, noteworthy that India's aspiration to reach the heights of a soft power dominator is fraught with challenges. These include regional tensions, domestic social problems, resource availability, and the presence of other countries such as China, which shape the global environment; hence, a well-rounded and effective strategy will be paramount. The consideration of these factors combined with enhanced devotion towards cultural diplomacy, accessibility of governance, and wider displacement containment will be important in ensuring India's soft power works to its optimal. Even in a divided world, India's faith in peace, inclusiveness, and sustainable development makes for a great story that the world cannot ignore. By trying to reconcile its age-old principles with contemporary outlooks, India is well positioned not only to enhance its soft power but also to set an example of how a regime can be run without compromising on cooperation and respect for people of different religions/cultures/ways of governance (Tandon 2016). There are challenges on the path that will need attention and creative action, nonetheless, the country's history and its active outlook come in support of its incessant power on a global scale.

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