



Cultivating Connections: India's Soft Power Diplomacy in Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT: This paper investigates India's strategic utilization of soft power in Southeast Asia, a region of paramount importance for its foreign policy objectives. Soft power, emphasizing cultural attraction and influence, has gained increasing prominence compared to traditional hard power strategies. Since the initiation of the "Look East Policy" in the 1990s, India has actively employed its rich cultural heritage, growing economic prowess, and strategic partnerships to foster closer ties with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Utilizing secondary data from various sources, including the Indian Parliament website, relevant ministries, and academic databases, this study assesses India's efficacy in translating its soft power assets into actual outcomes. By analyzing key policy initiatives such as cultural exchange programs and regional security dialogues, the research evaluates the effectiveness of India's soft power diplomacy. Furthermore, it investigates how India's soft power initiatives align with the evolving geopolitical dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region.

The study aims to explain the role of India's soft power in shaping regional relationships, promoting cooperation on shared concerns, and contributing to the stability and prosperity of the broader Indo-Pacific landscape. Findings reveal India's adept leveraging of cultural assets, educational excellence, and diplomatic initiatives to elevate its soft power standing. Additionally, it highlights key recommendations from the 2022 Parliamentary Report, emphasizing the restructuring of institutions like the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and enhancing inter-ministerial coordination as essential steps for strengthening India's soft power projection. Identifying limitations such as resource constraints and bureaucratic silos, the study underscores the

importance of addressing these challenges to fully harness India's soft power potential. Overall, the research provides valuable insights into India's soft power diplomacy in Southeast Asia, offering recommendations for enhancing its effectiveness and solidifying India's position as a global leader in cultural diplomacy and international relations.

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy, Indo-Pacific, Look East Policy, Soft Power, Southeast Asia,

I. INTRODUCTION

The MEA itself defines soft power as the ability to influence through non-coercive means, particularly through cultural heritage [1]. Established in 1950, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) plays a vital role in promoting cultural relations and pursuing cultural diplomacy initiatives [2]. The importance of soft power has not gone unnoticed by the Indian government. The Committee on External Affairs recently presented its 16th report, highlighting the need for a dedicated policy document and a "Soft Power Matrix" to evaluate the effectiveness of India's soft power initiatives [3]. The report also emphasizes the need for improved coordination between the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and other relevant agencies involved in cultural diplomacy efforts [4].

Soft power, the ability to influence through attraction rather than pressure, has become the dominion of international relations, a nation's influence can extend beyond military and economic power [5], [6]. India, with its rich cultural heritage and vibrant traditions, possesses a significant amount of soft power that contributes to various fields like art, literature, and philosophy, as well as its ancient history and diverse culinary traditions [7]. This inherent soft power allows India to engage in cultural diplomacy. By investing in its cultural assets, India can build bridges of understanding



with other nations, fostering cooperation and enhancing its international image [8].

The global appeal of Indian arts, culture, and spiritualism precedes the term "soft power" itself. Concepts like "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" (the world is one family) vibrate with the idea of global citizenship and cultural exchange, highlighting India's long history of fostering connections across borders. India's approach to soft power goes beyond mere cultural exchange [9], [10], [11]. It is based on five interconnected pillars: Samman (Dignity), Samvaad (Dialogue), Samriddhi (Shared Prosperity), Suruksha (Regional and Global Security), and Sanskriti evam Sabhyata (Cultural and Civilizational Links) [12], [13]. These pillars, encompassing elements like promoting mutual respect, encouraging open communication, and building economic partnerships, support India's broader political and economic goals. Prime Minister Modi's vision of India as a "visvaguru" (world teacher) further underscores the country's ambition to contribute to a peaceful and prosperous Asia through its soft power strategy [14], [15].

Therefore, the present study holds significance due to several key factors. Firstly, Southeast Asia is strategically important for India's foreign policy objectives, especially within its "Act East" policy framework. Secondly, India's rich cultural heritage and traditions are pivotal in its soft power projection, making it essential to understand how these assets are leveraged in the region to foster bilateral relations and enhance India's image. Thirdly, Southeast Asia offers substantial economic opportunities, and analyzing India's soft power diplomacy can identify avenues for economic cooperation aligned with cultural strengths. Moreover, soft power initiatives contribute to regional stability by fostering people-to-people connections, making it imperative to examine their impact. Lastly, lessons from India's soft power diplomacy in Southeast Asia offer valuable insights for global diplomacy and effective engagement with diverse cultures and societies.

II. Methodology:

A systematic review examined India's evolving soft power strategies, analyzing recent scholarly literature and government documents to identify strengths, weaknesses, and recent government efforts. The analysis focused on scholarly literature from the past two years, accessed through targeted searches in databases like JSTOR, ERIC, Google Scholar, and Academia. Key aspects examined included cultural heritage,

educational institutions, diaspora networks, and foreign policy initiatives. Additionally, government documents, including the Sixteenth Report by the Indian Parliament's Committee on External Affairs, were critically reviewed to complement the academic perspective and gain insights into official policy direction. Relevant reports from the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and other ministries were consulted for a comprehensive analysis. This multifaceted approach aimed to identify India's soft power projection strengths and weaknesses while highlighting recent government efforts to enhance its overall strategy.

III. Results and Discussion:

The examination of scholarly literature from 2022 to 2024 provided valuable insights into how India strategically utilizes its cultural heritage, educational institutions, diaspora networks, and foreign policy initiatives to bolster its soft power. Several key components of India's soft power and cultural diplomacy emerged from the review.

1. **Yoga:** One prominent aspect is India's dissemination of yoga and meditation practices, which has garnered global recognition. The widespread adoption of yoga, highlighted by the celebration of International Yoga Day on June 21st, exemplifies India's cultural diplomacy efforts aimed at promoting wellness and mindfulness worldwide [8], [16].

2. **Indian cinema:** Indian cinema, particularly Bollywood, stands out as another influential soft power asset. With a massive international following, Indian films have successfully reached audiences in diverse countries, facilitating cross-cultural exchanges and expanding India's soft power reach on a global scale [16],[17] [18].

3. **Literature and art:** India's rich literary tradition and artistic heritage also play a significant role in its soft power projection [19]. Works by renowned authors like Rabindranath Tagore and R.K. Narayan have achieved international acclaim, while Indian art forms such as classical dances have captivated audiences worldwide, contributing to India's cultural influence [20], [21].

4. **Indian cuisine:** Indian cuisine is known for its diverse flavors and regional specialties, and has experienced growing popularity globally, with Indian restaurants becoming ubiquitous in many countries. This culinary appeal is another avenue through which India enhances its soft power presence [7], [22].

5. **Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR):** The Indian Council for Cultural



Relations (ICCR), operating under the Ministry of External Affairs, serves as a key institution in advancing India's soft power objectives. Through cultural exchanges, scholarships, and performances by Indian artists abroad, the ICCR actively promotes India's cultural heritage and fosters international goodwill [2]. (<https://iccr.gov.in>).

6. **Education and Language:** Finally, India's educational institutions, including prestigious universities like the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), attract many foreign students [23], [24], [25]. Additionally, the widespread use of English as a global language further amplifies India's soft power influence [26], [27]. In summary, the study underscores India's proficient leveraging of its cultural assets, educational excellence, and diplomatic initiatives to enhance its soft power standing on the world stage. These findings highlight the importance of continued investment in cultural promotion and educational diplomacy to sustain and expand India's influence in the global arena.

Key Recommendations from the 2022 Parliamentary Report: The 2022 report from the Parliamentary Committee on External Affairs provides crucial insights and recommendations aimed at bolstering India's global image and influence through soft power and cultural diplomacy. Here are the key observations and suggestions highlighted in the report:

- **Restructuring the ICCR:** The report identifies the necessity for a comprehensive overhaul of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR). This involves restructuring its structure, mandate, and operational methods to ensure more effective promotion of Indian culture worldwide [28],[29], [30].
- **Enhanced Coordination:** Emphasizing improved collaboration among various ministries and departments involved in India's soft power initiatives, the Committee recommends establishing a dedicated Coordination Committee under the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) [1]. This committee would facilitate better cooperation and coordination. Additionally, the report suggests forming a working group between the MEA and the Ministry of Culture to jointly plan and coordinate cultural diplomacy activities [28],[29].
- **Promoting Authentic Yoga:** Acknowledging the global popularity of yoga, the Committee proposes the establishment of a Yoga Certification Board in collaboration with the Ministry of AYUSH and the MEA [31]. This board

would certify authentic Indian yogic practices and therapies [28], [29].

- **Engaging the Diaspora:** Highlighting the significance of proactive engagement with the Indian diaspora, the report recommends strengthening ties and leveraging the diaspora's potential in promoting Indian culture and interests through initiatives facilitated by Indian missions and posts abroad [28],[29].
- **Boosting Tourism:** The Committee stresses the importance of expanding India's tourism offices abroad to facilitate a more targeted approach to tourism promotion. Tailoring promotional efforts to specific countries and their preferences would be key to this strategy [7],[19], [28],[29].
- Implementation of these recommendations holds the potential to significantly enhance India's soft power and cultural diplomacy endeavors. Improved coordination, institutional reforms, and strategic engagement with stakeholders can pave the way for a more impactful projection of India's rich cultural heritage and the forging of stronger global connections.

Limitations Hobbliing India's Soft Power Projection

The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) defines soft power as the ability to cultivate influence through attraction and appeal, rather than coercion. While India possesses significant soft power potential due to its rich cultural heritage, several limitations hinder its effective projection:

- **Resource Constraints:** Inadequate funding for cultural diplomacy initiatives limits India's ability to effectively showcase its soft power assets. This can restrict participation in international cultural events, outreach programs, and scholarships for foreign students [29]. (<https://prsindia.org>).
- **Inter-institutional Silos:** Lack of coordination between various government agencies involved in soft power initiatives creates inefficiencies. This fragmentation can lead to duplication of efforts and hinder the development of a cohesive national soft power strategy [28],[29].
- **Skilled Manpower Shortage:** A scarcity of skilled personnel with expertise in cultural diplomacy and international relations can limit India's ability to effectively manage and execute soft power initiatives [28],[29].
- **Unclear ICCR Mandate:** The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), a key player in promoting cultural diplomacy, lacks a clear and well-defined mandate. This ambiguity can hinder its effectiveness in achieving national



soft power objectives. Addressing these limitations is crucial for India to unlock the full potential of its soft power and establish a stronger global presence through cultural diplomacy [28],[29].

IV. Conclusions:

In conclusion, India's soft power and cultural diplomacy have proven instrumental in enhancing the nation's global standing, fostering international cooperation, and attracting investment and partnerships. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, India's cultural assets serve as a crucial tool for shaping its relationships with other nations and enriching the global cultural landscape. To further boost its soft power projection, several recommendations have been proposed, including the establishment of a Yoga Certification Board in collaboration with the Ministry of AYUSH and MEA to ensure the authenticity of Indian yoga practices. Additionally, developing proactive engagement mechanisms with the Indian diaspora through missions abroad and expanding the network of tourism offices with a country-specific approach to promotion are essential steps. The report also emphasizes the significance of striking a balance between soft power and hard power, as both are essential for a nation's overall strength. While soft power lays the cultural foundation, hard power provides the necessary support for its expansion. Looking ahead, India's rich cultural heritage and tradition of tolerance offer ample opportunities for future soft power initiatives, contributing to a more peaceful and prosperous global order. Continued investment in soft power, alongside the development of hard power capabilities, will be pivotal for India to navigate its complex regional environment and solidify its position as a global leader.

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