

INDIA'S SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY IN SAARC: EMERGING TOOLS AND TRENDS

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Abstract: Soft power is an important dimension of a country's foreign policy, and the same is true for India. India is an exponent of the "Neighbourhood First Policy" based on the principle of 5S (Samman, Samvad, Shanti, Samridhhi, and Sanskriti). Under the "Neighbourhood First Policy," India focuses on building its relationship with the countries of the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Moreover, China's increasing political and economic manifold in South Asia has redirected India's attention to the subcontinent. India's hard power capabilities have established its image as a "regional hegemon" among the SAARC countries. Therefore, India started using soft power diplomacy to win the trust of its neighbors and establish itself as a credible leader. Indian culture, yoga, Bollywood films, political values, and foreign policies, among other soft power strategies, have all strengthened India's position in South Asia.

Keywords: Culture, Foreign policy, Neighbourhood First Policy, Soft Power, SAARC.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Soft power holds a significant position in international relations and India's foreign policy. Although country generally uses hard power to exert their dominance in global politics, soft power is no less important. Soft power can be defined as the ability of a country to influence other nations using culture, values, and policies without using force. Soft power relies on attraction and adoption in contrast to hard power, which works on coercion and rewards. Eminent International Relations Scholar Joseph Nye coined the term soft power in the early 1990s in his book "**Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power.**" The book mentioned three facets of power: coercion by military force, influence by offering economic incentives, and the ability to co-opt other states by the nation's appeal based on its culture and values. In short, soft power is a process in which a country projects its values, ideals, and culture across borders to promote goodwill and strengthen partnerships. In the post-cold war epoch, soft power became more realistic in international affairs. Several countries have embraced soft power strategies to influence global public opinion.

India's soft power draws its roots from its ancient culture and civilisation. India's vibrant cultural and civilizational heritage and global Diaspora represent its soft power. Soft power is crucial for boosting regional and international cooperation and is particularly pertinent in South Asia. India's philosophical concepts of ahimsa, non-violence, culture, political values, spirituality, yoga, Ayurveda, classical dance forms, fashion, Bollywood films, Indian cuisine, etc., have demonstrated its soft power worldwide. India

acknowledges the importance of soft power to advance their foreign policy. At present, India is taking a strategic approach towards using its soft power resources to enhance the nation's image abroad. The Prime Minister Modi, during his first term, reoriented Indian soft power diplomacy by integrating five pillars of soft power, that is, Samman (dignity), Samvaad (dialogue), Samridhhi (shared prosperity), Suruksha (regional and global security), and Sanskriti evam Sabhayata (Cultural and civilizational links). 2014 Soft power is a vital instrument in India's foreign policy. It is a tool India uses to project and convey its willingness to play a bigger role in the international community.

India stands for regional development. Neo-realist and Neo-liberal thinkers emphasised the importance of regional powers. Neo-liberal thinkers such as Joseph Nye focused on soft power to influence the regional powers. One of the features of Indian foreign policy is the Neighbourhood First Policy. Based on this policy, India, with other South Asian countries, formed SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation). India has close cultural and historical ties with the SAARC nations. However, India's relations with SAARC members have always been in contention, for instance, the India-Pakistan conflict over border and water issues, the Indo-Bangladesh water issue, the India-Sri Lanka fishing dispute, etc. India initially applied hard power to solve the differences; nevertheless, from the beginning of the 21st century, India has shifted from hard power to soft power to improve its standing in the South Asian regions. To achieve its strategic interest in the SAARC region, India is using Soft Power diplomacy. Introduction to Globalisation and liberalisation in 1991 gave new impetus to India's soft power diplomacy. India always seeks to increase regional collaboration among SAARC nations to strengthen its economic growth and capacity building. India is the centre of South Asia, sharing water borders with Sri Lanka and the Maldives and land borders with Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bhutan, and Nepal; therefore, India is vigorously using its soft power assets to maintain balance, expand its influence, and strengthen its relationship with South Asian countries.

This research paper is significant for understanding India's implementation of soft power in building its relationship with the SAARC countries. It sheds light on emerging tools India uses to project its soft power among SAARC members and focuses on the success of Indian soft power in exerting its dominance in the SAARC region.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

The following works of literature have been reviewed to complete the research article:

1. **Patryk Kugiel's book India's Soft Power: A New Foreign Policy Strategy, published in 2017, provides** a detailed analysis of India's soft power from an international relations perspective. It emphasized on changing nature of India's Foreign policy with a special focus on its soft power strategy. Moreover, the book intrigue into India's soft power tools to achieve its national interests.

- II. **India's Soft Power Diplomacy: Prospects, Challenges and the Way Forward**, authored by **Saranpreet Kaur**, highlights the importance of soft power for India to assert its role in international politics. It evaluates the nature, prospects, and challenges related to India's soft power approach.
- III. **India's Strategic Interest in SAARC Countries: Soft Power Approach**, a research article by **Pooja Raghav & Trishna Rai**, summarises the theoretical underpinnings of India's foreign policy towards other South Asian nations, including the concepts of soft power and power transition.

3. OBJECTIVES:

This research article aims to explore the significance of soft power diplomacy in fostering international and regional cooperation and influence in the 21st century. It thrives on discovering India's soft power approach in the South Asia region, through which it is aspiring to restructure its image and assert its dominance against China.

4. METHODOLOGY:

The study applies descriptive and analytical methodologies to accomplish the objectives associated with the research topic. For the collection of data, the study relies on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources involve data from government sources, and secondary sources include information collection from books, journals, websites, online theses, etc.

5. INDIA AND SAARC: SOFT POWER APPROACH:

- **Background**

South Asia is strategically located between the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. It is the densely populated region, containing 25% of the world's population. Strategically, from an Indo-Pacific perspective, South Asia is essential because of the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC). The countries of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka make up the South Asian region. The South Asian countries share strong trade and cultural ties. These countries have a connected landmass and an integrated economic space. Hence, to promote regional cooperation, foster regional prosperity and development, the South Asian countries sown the seed of SAARC.

Bangladesh President Ziaur Rahman championed the idea of SAARC in 1980. It was officially established on 8 December 1985, with its first summit held in Dhaka. The SAARC is headquartered in Kathmandu, Nepal. With Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka, the SAARC association was formed. Afghanistan joined SAARC in 2007. The SAARC organisation was formed with the objectives to accelerate economic growth, social progress, and cultural development; to improve the quality of life; to live with dignity; to strengthen cooperation with other developing

countries; and to cooperate with other regional and international organizations with similar aims and purposes.

India occupies a predominant position in the SAARC. The growing economy, largest democracy, central location in South Asia, and international stature make India central to SAARC. India accounts for over 70% of the population and more than 75% of the region's GDP. It has a high level of territorial reliance and a vast military force in comparison to other nations in the area. India, being one of the founding members of SAARC, plays a vital role in fostering regional integration. However, SAARC nations see India as “Big Brother Syndrome.” They fear the dominant nature of India. Moreover, India shares political differences and historical conflicts with the SAARC members that hinder effective cooperation. These all have allowed China to expand its influence in the region. China has increased its influence in the Least Developed Countries (LDC) of South Asia by investing billions of dollars and providing loans with subsidies. For instance, the China-Sri Lanka contract of Hambantota Port and Colombo Port, China-Bangladesh agreements for assistance and investment in Bangladesh. India initially used its hard power capabilities to improve its bilateral ties with each of the member nations. Nonetheless, with the changing times, India has adopted a soft power approach towards the region to change the SAARC countries' perspective of “big brotherly attitude” towards India, to maximize its possible extent in the region, and to contain China’s intervention in South Asia. The soft power approach of India has contributed to strengthening the ‘positive image’ of India, leading to a relationship of trust and cooperation between them.

- ***India’s Soft Power Diplomacy with SAARC nations***

Under the soft power approach, India seeks to engage with South Asian countries through expanding cultural diplomacy, fostering people-to-people contact, implementing capacity-building measures, promoting trade and investment in development projects, providing humanitarian assistance, and offering diplomatic support. In the contemporary period, Buddhism and yoga are strengthening India’s ties with South Asia countries. Indian think tanks, sports, Indian diaspora are fostering goodwill and regional integration. India’s soft power has a significant impact on its bilateral relations with each SAARC nation.

Cultural Exchange: classical and contemporary music, dance, Bollywood films, Indian cuisine, and fashion have contributed to portraying a positive image of India. India signed a Cultural Cooperation Agreement with Sri Lanka in 1977. India established the India Cultural Centre (ICC) in Colombo and in Male, Maldives (2011) to foster awareness of Indian culture. With Bhutan, the Nehru–Wangchuck Cultural Centre, part of the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR), has been playing a significant role in maintaining cultural relations. The Swami Vivekananda Centre for Indian Culture in Kathmandu has promoted cultural ties between India and Nepal. Concerning Pakistan, despite sharing a strained relationship with India, Indian culture, e.g., films, music, and cuisine, are very widespread across

Pakistan. Bangladesh and India also have a cultural agreement which includes the Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre (IGCC) IN Bangladesh. 'Bharat Bichitra', an India Bengali literary print monthly magazine, is widely read in Bangladesh.

Buddhist Influence and Yoga: Buddhism is an integral part of India's cultural identity. Buddhism diplomacy has been used by the government to manifest its soft power. The Government of India (GOI) granted an aid of \$15 million to Sri Lanka for the advancement of Buddhist relations between the two nations. Buddhism has added a segment of connection between India and Nepal. Numerous Nepali citizens travel to India each year to visit places of worship like Bodh Gaya, Hrishikesh, Kedarnath, and others. The Indian government, in collaboration with the International Buddhist Confederation (IBC), hosted the First Asian Buddhist Summit (ABS) IN November 2024 to celebrate the rich Buddhist heritage. In September 2023, India organised the first International Conference on 'Share Buddhist Heritage' aimed at bringing together Central Asian, East Asian, South Asian, and Arab countries. Through the promotion of yoga at the international level, India is trying to enhance its standing in the South Asia region. India is fostering its position in South Asia through yoga as a soft power tool. Countries like Nepal and Sri Lanka are actively participating in promoting Yoga Day.

Humanitarian aid: As a peace-building measure, in February 2022, India provided 40,000 metric tons of wheat; in March 2023, it offered an additional 20,000 metric tons. India made an imperative initiative during COVID-19 by providing about 29.44% of the vaccines to the South Asian countries under the 'Vaccine Maitri' program. To prevent a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan during the COVID-19 pandemic, India sent 45 tons of medical aid in October 2022, including 50,000 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine, winter clothing, anti-TB medications, and other life-saving medications. Following the earthquake in June 2022, India provided relief supplies of 28 tonnes. In its budget of 2023-2024, India made a special allocation of \$25 million in aid to a development package for Afghanistan.

Economic cooperation: India is regarded as the economic powerhouse of South Asia. It is trying to enhance regional integration through economic cooperation. It is fostering its economic cooperation through trade, connectivity, energy partnerships, and development assistance. India has been a key player in advocating for enhanced trade and connectivity with SAARC nations. This effort is reflected in India's increased focus on BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation). India has culminated in several preferential and free trade arrangements with South Asian countries like India-Afghanistan PTA, India-Bhutan FTA, India-Sri Lanka FTA, India-Nepal FTA, India-Maldives FTA, and India-Pakistan FTA.

Development aid: India's development aid operates through Line of Credit (LoCs), technical assistance, and project implementation. Between 2008 to 2020, India provided development assistance of \$ 15 billion to the neighbouring countries. India provided aid of \$2 billion for the development of the Salma Dam in Herat, the parliament building and the Children's Hospital in Kabul, the Stadium and the

agriculture University in Kandhar, etc. India completed the construction of the Afghan-India Friendship Dam in Herat province, which provides irrigation, drinking water, and electricity to the Afghan population. In Nepal, India has contributed to road and railway projects, and in Bangladesh, it has financed the pipeline project.

Education: Every year, India provides Sri Lankan students with a variety of scholarship opportunities. For dentistry and medical admissions, Sri Lankan students have been permitted to take the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) since 2017–18. Sri Lanka has also been hosting IIT JEE (Advanced) entrance exams since 2017. Similarly, A significant portion of Bhutanese students are enrolled in a variety of courses in India. The ITEC Training Program Scheme, Ambassador's Scholarship, Aid-to-Bhutan ICCR Scholarship, Nehru-Wang Chuck Scholarships, and Undergraduate and Post-Graduate Scholarships have strengthened bilateral educational links for many years. India provides thousands of scholarships every year to Nepali students in different courses and subjects. For Maldivians, India continues to be the preferred destination for medical and educational care. In 2011, the Government of India inked an agreement with the Maldives for a US\$5.30 million project for the Technology Adoption Programme in the Education Sector. To countries like Bangladesh, India provides scholarships to meritorious students in courses like Ayurveda, Unani, and Homeopathy.

Diaspora engagement: The Diaspora shapes Indians' perception globally. Diaspora has significantly formed strong diplomatic relations between India and South Asia. The Indian diaspora is regarded as one of the significant assets in ameliorating its economic interests in the region. By celebrating cultures and festivals, the Diaspora increases awareness of Indian heritage in South Asian countries. Nepalese, Gujaratis, Punjabis, and Biharis have spread into different parts of South Asia. Indians are the second-largest expatriate community in the Maldives, with an approximate strength of around 26,000. In places like Karachi, Colombo, and Dhaka, Indian traders contributed to the development of a strong trading network. In countries like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Indian workers contribute to agriculture, infrastructure development, etc. A majority of the Indian expatriate community consists of semi/unskilled workers. In addition, there is a sizeable number of professionals, like doctors, teachers, accountants, managers, engineers, nurses, and technicians, etc., spread over South Asian regions. These skilled labourers play a significant role in shaping the education, healthcare systems of their host countries.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS:

Hard power is complemented by soft power. To become a smart power, a nation must successfully combine both soft power and hard power in a complete external policy. In the post-Cold War international context, soft power became particularly significant. Countries frequently need more than a robust economy or a powerful army to achieve their goals. With the free flow of people, money, and ideas in this information age, perceptions are more important than ever.

India cannot rise to prominence in the global order of the twenty-first century solely through hard power. The soft power investment in the SAARC region has and will help India in nation-branding, creating a positive image and goodwill. Conclusively, India has successfully employed its soft power to increase its influence in the region; however, to ensure stability in the SAARC region and to achieve its goal of becoming a regional power, India needs to work more on its soft power.

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