



SOURCES OF INDIA'S SOFT POWER

Radjabov Jaloliddin Jurakulovich

Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies

PhD Independent Researcher

Phone: +998930033011

Email: jaloliddinradjabov036@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

India's soft power represents a multidimensional construct encompassing its foreign policy ethos, cultural heritage, diaspora influence, democratic traditions, and economic modernization. Over the past decades, India has increasingly relied on attraction rather than coercion to enhance its international image and influence. Drawing upon historical legacy, cultural assets, technological progress, and strategic multilateral engagements, India has cultivated a distinctive global presence. This article examines the major sources of India's soft power, including its civilizational heritage, democratic political system, diaspora networks, cultural industries, technological innovation, and economic growth. It also analyzes how India utilizes these elements in international diplomacy and global governance. Furthermore, the study evaluates both the opportunities and limitations associated with India's soft power projection in the twenty-first century..

Introduction

The concept of soft power has become one of the most influential analytical tools in contemporary international relations, particularly in the study of emerging powers. The term "soft power" was introduced by the American scholar Joseph S. Nye, who defined it as the ability of a state to influence the preferences and behaviors of others through attraction, persuasion, and legitimacy rather than coercion or military force. In contrast to hard power, which relies on economic sanctions or military capabilities, soft power derives from culture, political values, diplomacy, and moral authority.

In the era of globalization, where information flows rapidly and societies are increasingly interconnected, soft power has become an essential instrument of foreign policy. Countries that are able to project appealing values, culture, and political systems often enjoy greater influence in shaping international agendas. In this context, India represents a compelling case study. Despite facing numerous developmental challenges, India has emerged as a significant global actor with considerable soft power resources.

India's soft power is rooted in its ancient civilization, cultural diversity, democratic traditions, and expanding economic capabilities. As one of the oldest continuous civilizations in the world, India has historically influenced vast regions through religion, philosophy, and trade. In the modern era, these historical foundations have been complemented by India's democratic governance, vibrant cultural industries, and growing technological sector. Together, these factors have strengthened India's global image and enhanced its ability to shape international perceptions.

This article explores the key sources of India's soft power and analyzes how these elements contribute to the country's growing international influence. The discussion focuses on cultural heritage, democratic values, foreign policy principles, diaspora networks, economic development, and technological innovation as the primary foundations of India's soft power.

One of the most significant sources of India's soft power is its rich civilizational heritage. India's cultural and philosophical traditions date back thousands of years and have profoundly influenced societies across Asia and beyond. Ancient Indian texts, philosophical schools, and religious traditions have shaped intellectual and spiritual thought in many parts of the world. The historical spread of religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism illustrates the early forms of India's cultural influence. Buddhism, which originated in India in the 6th century BCE, spread throughout Asia through trade routes and missionary networks. Indian monks, scholars, and merchants carried Buddhist teachings to regions such as Sri Lanka, China, Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia. Through this process, Indian philosophical ideas and cultural practices became embedded in the social and religious traditions of many Asian societies. The reign of Emperor Ashoka represents one of the earliest examples of soft power in Indian history. After witnessing the devastation caused by the Kalinga War, Ashoka renounced violence and adopted Buddhism. He promoted a policy known as "conquest by dharma," emphasizing ethical governance, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence. Ashoka sent emissaries and scholars to various parts of Asia to spread Buddhist teachings and principles of moral leadership. His policies demonstrated that influence could be achieved through moral authority rather than military expansion.¹

In addition to religion and philosophy, India's cultural traditions continue to play a major role in shaping its global image. Practices such as yoga and Ayurveda have gained immense international popularity. Yoga, originally developed as a spiritual and physical discipline in ancient India, is now practiced by millions of people worldwide. In recognition of its global significance, the United Nations declared June 21 as the International Day of Yoga. This initiative, supported by the Indian government, illustrates how traditional cultural practices can serve as instruments of international cultural diplomacy. Indian classical music, dance, literature, and art also contribute to the country's cultural appeal. Dance forms such as Bharatanatyam, Kathak, and Odissi represent centuries-old artistic traditions that continue to attract international audiences. Similarly, Indian literature and philosophy have influenced global intellectual discourse. Writers such as Rabindranath Tagore introduced Indian cultural and philosophical ideas to Western audiences, helping to strengthen India's cultural presence in global literary circles.

¹ Strong J.S. The Legend of King Ashoka. – Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983. – 330 p.

India's political system constitutes another important source of its soft power. As the world's largest democracy, India presents a model of governance based on pluralism, constitutionalism, and respect for civil liberties. Since gaining independence in 1947, India has maintained a democratic political system characterized by regular elections, an independent judiciary, a free press, and an active civil society. The adoption of universal adult suffrage at the time of independence was a remarkable achievement for a newly independent country with vast social and economic diversity.²

Despite widespread poverty and illiteracy, India successfully conducted democratic elections and established strong constitutional institutions. This democratic experience has enhanced India's credibility and attractiveness on the global stage. India's democratic identity is particularly significant in the context of developing countries. Many post-colonial states struggled to maintain democratic governance after independence, often experiencing political instability or authoritarian rule. In contrast, India has managed to sustain democratic institutions for more than seven decades. This resilience reinforces the perception of India as a stable and responsible international actor.

The concept of "unity in diversity" has been central to India's political philosophy. The country is home to hundreds of languages, numerous ethnic groups, and multiple religious communities.³ Managing such diversity within a democratic framework has been one of India's greatest achievements. The ability to accommodate cultural and religious pluralism strengthens India's reputation as a tolerant and inclusive society. India's democratic values also influence its foreign policy. Indian diplomacy often emphasizes respect for international law, peaceful conflict resolution, and support for multilateral institutions. These principles align with the broader goals of global governance and enhance India's legitimacy in international affairs.

India's foreign policy traditions also contribute significantly to its soft power. Since independence, India has pursued a foreign policy based on strategic autonomy, peaceful coexistence, and cooperation among developing countries. These principles were reflected in India's leadership role in the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War. The Non-Aligned Movement sought to provide an alternative to the bipolar rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. By advocating independence from major power blocs, India positioned itself as a voice for newly independent states in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This leadership enhanced India's moral authority and diplomatic influence among developing countries. India's commitment to multilateral diplomacy is also evident in its active participation in international organizations. The country has consistently supported the United Nations and has contributed significantly to UN peacekeeping missions. Indian peacekeepers have served in numerous conflict zones around the world, including Africa and the Middle East. These contributions reinforce India's reputation as a responsible and constructive international partner.

In the twenty-first century, India has expanded its diplomatic engagement through participation in various multilateral forums such as BRICS, IBSA, and the G20. These platforms

² Khilnani S., Kumar R., Mehta P.B., Menon P. A Foreign and Strategic Policy for India in the Twenty First Century. – New Delhi: Centre for Policy Research, 2012. – 120 p.

³ Thussu D.K. Communicating India's Soft Power: Buddha to Bollywood. – London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

allow India to cooperate with other emerging economies and shape global economic governance. Through such engagements, India seeks to promote a more inclusive and multipolar international order. Another critical component of India's soft power is its extensive global diaspora. With more than 30 million people of Indian origin living abroad, the Indian diaspora represents one of the largest and most influential migrant communities in the world.⁴ Indian diaspora communities play a significant role in shaping global perceptions of India and strengthening economic, cultural, and political ties with host countries. Many members of the Indian diaspora occupy prominent positions in fields such as business, technology, academia, and politics. In countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, individuals of Indian origin have achieved remarkable success in various sectors. Their achievements contribute to the global perception of India as a source of talent, innovation, and entrepreneurial energy. Diaspora communities also act as cultural ambassadors, promoting Indian traditions, cuisine, festivals, and languages in their host societies.

Celebrations of events such as Diwali and Holi in major global cities illustrate how Indian cultural practices have become part of international cultural landscapes. In addition to cultural influence, the diaspora contributes significantly to India's economic development through remittances and investments. Financial flows from overseas Indian communities support domestic economic growth and strengthen economic connections between India and the global economy. Economic transformation has been another crucial factor in enhancing India's soft power. The economic reforms introduced in 1991 marked a turning point in India's development trajectory. These reforms liberalized trade, encouraged foreign investment, and integrated India more deeply into the global economy. Since the reforms, India has emerged as one of the fastest-growing major economies in the world. The growth of sectors such as information technology, telecommunications, and services has significantly improved India's international reputation. Cities like Bangalore, Hyderabad, and Pune have become major technology hubs, attracting multinational companies and global talent.

India's information technology industry, in particular, has played a key role in transforming global perceptions of the country. Indian IT companies provide services to businesses around the world, demonstrating India's technological capabilities and skilled workforce. The success of Indian technology professionals has further reinforced India's image as a center of innovation and expertise. India's achievements in space technology also contribute to its soft power. The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has conducted several successful space missions, including lunar and Mars exploration projects. These accomplishments demonstrate India's scientific capabilities and enhance its prestige in the international scientific community.⁵

India's entertainment industry is another powerful instrument of soft power. Bollywood, the Hindi-language film industry based in Mumbai, is one of the largest film industries in the world. Indian films are widely watched in regions such as South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia, and increasingly in Western countries. Bollywood films often emphasize universal themes such as family relationships, love, morality, and social harmony. Their colorful musical

⁴ Tharoor S. *India: From Midnight to the Millennium and Beyond*. – New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2008. – 448 p.

⁵ Das D.K. *The Indian Economy: Transition from Growth to Development*. – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. – 320 p.

sequences and emotional storytelling make them appealing to diverse audiences. As a result, Bollywood has become a key medium through which global audiences engage with Indian culture. In addition to cinema, Indian television programs, music, and digital media platforms contribute to the international spread of Indian culture. Streaming services have further expanded the global reach of Indian entertainment, enabling audiences worldwide to access Indian films and television series. Through these cultural channels, India has been able to build a recognizable global cultural identity that enhances its soft power.

Conclusion

India's soft power is derived from a complex interaction of historical, cultural, political, and economic factors. Its ancient civilizational heritage, vibrant cultural traditions, democratic governance, and dynamic diaspora networks form the foundation of its global attractiveness. At the same time, economic growth, technological innovation, and cultural industries have strengthened India's international reputation in the modern era.

Although challenges remain, including social inequality and developmental disparities, India possesses significant potential to expand its soft power in the coming decades. By effectively integrating cultural diplomacy, democratic values, and economic progress, India can continue to enhance its influence in international relations and contribute to a more cooperative and inclusive global order.

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