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The Limits of India's Soft Power in South Asia

S Y Surendra Kumar^{1,*}

¹Professor, Department of Political Science, Bangalore University, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India

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* Corresponding author.

S Y Surendra Kumar

surendradps@bub.ernet.in

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ABSTRACT

Since its independence, India could count itself among the few nations with strong cards in the arena of soft power like its culture, civilisation, democratic credentials, secular values, pluralistic society, professional expertise, free media, independent judiciary, dynamic civil society and so on. Ironically, India did not use this soft power strategy rigorously to achieve its national interest. In the 1990s, India has been pro-active in pursuing its soft power strategy than ever before to achieve its strategic interest. India, to a certain extent, has been successful in strengthening its ties with Southeast Asia, Africa, US and European countries through its soft power tools like promotion of culture, support towards democracy and involvement with the diaspora, increasing aid and investment and so on. However, India's soft power strategy in South Asia had mixed results. In this context, the article attempts to identify the need for India to engage in more such tactics rather than hard power in South Asia. India's plans to use soft power in South Asia and its limitations in achieving her foreign policy objectives in the region will be critically analysed too.

Keywords: Soft Power; India; South Asia; Diaspora; Democracy; Tourism

SOFT POWER IN TRANSITION

The key writings on international relations have been dominated or are centred around 'power politics', making the discourses hard power-centric.¹ As a result, realist and neo-realist theorists have always emphasised on the need to augment military strength to expand national authority. Proponents of neo-liberalism and constructivism, however, suggest an alternative vision of power derived from a more "intangible and enlightened source and positive image in world affairs, that makes a nation attractive to other nations". Peter Katzenstein argues that both neo-realists and neo-liberals emphasised more on physical capabilities, institution and State, ignoring influential factors such as collective identities and cultures of society.² Following a similar line of argument, the liberal institutional scholars underlined soft power as an essential source of statecraft.³ Since then,

the term soft power has been gaining popularity amongst policymakers and academicians across the globe.

Against the backdrop of scholars like E.H. Carr (1939) who stressed on 'power over opinion', Gramsci (1988) on 'cultural hegemony', Bourdieu (1989) on 'symbolic power' and Foucault (2000) on 'disciplinary power' thereby highlighting on the need for both material and non-material power resources,⁴ Joseph S Nye, an American scholar, formulated the concept of soft power "when one country gets other countries to do what it wants" (1990).⁵ He explained that the over-emphasis on military force as the key factor in determining power relations diverts one from looking into other factors like technology, education, economic growth. In 2006, he further elaborated that "power is the ability to alter the behaviour of others to get what you want, and there are three ways to do that: coercion (sticks), payment (carrots) and attraction (soft power)".⁶



The definition of soft power and its features have expanded over the years. Joshua Kurlantzick provides a broader definition: "anything outside the military and security realm, including not only popular culture and public diplomacy, but also more coercive economic and diplomatic levers, like aid and investment and participation in multilateral organisation".⁷ For G. Lee soft power is "to construct the preferences and images of self and others through symbolic resources that lead to behavioural changes of others".⁸ Thus, Lee attempts to use resources to separate hard and soft power. Huang and Ding (2006) proposed economic prosperity rather than cultural diversity as the core of soft power. Hymans (2009) argues that consensual, cooperative and peaceful policies are the essence of the soft power.^{9,10}

Joseph S. Nye identified culture, values, and foreign policies as the core of soft power, however, other aspects such as economics, politics, development assistance, transnational investment, and peace keeping operations have been also vital soft power tools.⁶ Moreover, the Rapid Growth Markets Soft Power Index Report (2012) identified 13 variables of soft power, which is classified into three categories - global image (popularity globally), global integrity (respect for its own citizen and respect for other neighbour), and global integration (country's interconnectivity with the rest of the world).¹¹ Similarly, the Portland's The Global Ranking on Soft Power Index (2023), which was first launched in 2015 with the framework of soft power analysis included government, digital, culture, enterprise, engagement, education and so on. As per the 2023 report, US, UK and Germany tops the list of 100 countries with a score of 62.2, followed by Japan and China, and UAE entered the top 10, as first nations from Middle East. India made marginal progress to 29th Rank (earlier 28th).¹² Thus, soft power has emerged as a key concept in international relation studies.

In the process, soft power has emerged as a vital tool to achieve foreign policy goals. The reason for this is the fundamental differences between soft and hard power: (a) soft power is more human (b) the hard power can be measured and easier to be used¹³ (c) hard power uses coercion to get things done (d) soft power enables a change of behaviour in others without competition or conflict, using persuasion and attraction (e) soft power takes long time to materialise, but useful as effective instruments to attain the goals of the state (f) transnational issues such as climate change, poverty, hunger, plight of refugees and so on can be better addressed through soft rather than hard power.

With regard to the limitations in the effectiveness of soft power, scholars like Ogoura, Gallarotti and Bilgin reiterate about the "difficulties in measuring soft power, obscurity in the differentiation between hard and soft power".¹⁴ Moreover, historian Niall Ferguson emphasises that soft power is too soft, i.e., in the case of Islamic countries, though

kids enjoy US products and culture, the latter do not enhance their love towards the US.¹⁵ Thus, no country can fully rely on the success of soft power alone.

INDIA'S SOFT POWER

As one of the oldest civilisation, a land of spirituality, spices, gold, diamond, languages, and a country where religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism have originated, India has been a soft power since ages. Dalai Lama attests these traits by observing, "India's long tradition of religious tolerance can be a role model for rest of the world".¹⁶ Post-independence India consolidated its position as a soft power further in the global arena by its leadership over the third world; anti-colonial history; non-alignment policy; commitment to nuclear disarmament; and being a pluralistic, non-violent and peaceful democracy.

Ironically, in recent times, the upholding of Hindu culture at the cost of religious minorities, including instances of lynching (particularly Muslims/Dalits), increasing number of caste and gender-based violence, restriction of foreign funds for selected NGOs (primarily Christians), implementation of Citizenship Amendment Act 2019 and National Register of Citizens (NRC), which are not necessarily inclusive policies and undermine human rights, have been detrimental to India's image at the international arena.

Nevertheless, India's democratic institutions, vibrant civil society, multi-ethnic society and polity, secularism, pluralism, large English-speaking population and IT professional, rich handicrafts, Yoga, Ayurveda, and so on, illustrates the utility of India's tools of soft power worldwide. Australian Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, observed, "India's non-threatening posture to the international community is a key factor in Australia's decision to sell uranium for India's nuclear power reactors".¹⁷ In addition, we need to remember India's role in the maintenance of peace and harmony in the world through the contributions of icons like Mahatma Gandhi towards non-violence and non-cooperation movement; B.R. Ambedkar for empowering the marginalised communities; Jawaharlal Nehru for Non-Alignment and pan Asian solidarity; Rabindranath Tagore for his thoughts on nationalism; Mother Teresa for being the messiah of the underprivileged and so on.

India's folk culture, classical and modern music and dance, Bollywood, television shows are gaining popularity in the West and the East in general and amongst the Indian diaspora, in particular. The Indian television serials (Hindi and regional language) have larger audience in South Asia and Southeast Asia. Bollywood movies, along with movies of other languages like Tamil and Telugu, have moved beyond South Asia in terms of its reach. Moreover, Bollywood produces the highest number of films [than Hollywood] and has worldwide releases in the US, UK, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia and Middle East. At the same time, India is emerging as one of the popular film shooting



destination for Hollywood films like *Slumdog Millionaire*, *Million Dollar Arm*, *The Hundred Foot Journey*, *Life of Pi*, *Mission Impossible-IV* and so on.¹⁸ Hence, to a certain extent, Indian movies have boosted Indian tourism, created jobs and provided revenues for the economy.

Indian cuisines like the Italian, Japanese and Chinese have made their mark globally, particularly in the UK, the US, Thailand, South Korea, Germany, France and Japan.¹⁹ The most popular Indian cuisine are chicken tikka masala, biryani, kababs, chaat, samosa and other South Indian dishes. In the UK, in 2001, chicken tikka masala was recognised as the British national food. There are more than 10,000 Indian curry houses, involving more than 70,000 staff; the Indian food industry is worth billions of pounds in the UK.¹⁶ However, it is a known fact that most of the Indian restaurants are run/owned by the Bangladeshi diaspora (mostly belonging to Sylhet). Similar is the case in the US, as majority of the Indian restaurants in New York are owned by Bangladeshis. Nevertheless, from time to time, successive governments have organised international events to showcase and promote Indian music, food and movies; the 'Festivals of India Abroad', as arranged by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, deploys India's soft power strategy to strengthen bilateral and multilateral ties.

TRANSFORMATION OF SOFT POWER POLICY

Since independence, successive governments of India despite efforts to incorporate soft power effectively in its foreign policy, have failed to maximise soft power potentials to strengthen bilateral ties with immediate and extended neighbours, and enhance India's image globally. Publications on the relevance, importance and utility of soft power in foreign policy, remains insignificant as well. In this regard, Harish Pant, argues that although previous (prior to Modi's regime) Indian governments "understood and recognised the value of soft power to further India's foreign policy goals, ... attempts have been largely ad hoc".²⁰ On a similar note, Shashi Tharoor aptly stated that the "goodwill for India abroad has largely been generated in an unplanned manner. It does not have the capacity to accentuate soft power through public diplomacy, by which a government seeks to influence public attitude in a manner that they become supportive of its foreign policy and national interest".²¹

Nevertheless, the rigorous push for soft power in its foreign policy began since the 1990s due to the economic crisis of 1991; collapse of the Soviet Union, which was India's reliable partner since its independence; and the end of a bipolar world, leading to a unipolar world, dominated by the US. Moreover, as Ian Hall argues, since the beginning of early 2000s, Indian public diplomacy also saw changes like reaching out to the diaspora, wooing and building foreign business interest, increasing foreign aid and development programmes, showcasing brand India, and utility of new social media to reach out to the younger generations.²² Since

then, consecutive governments have been deploying and capitalising on soft power tools.

Apart from this, successive governments also have brought about structural changes and ensured soft power as a critical component of India's foreign policy. For instance, in 2006, under the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), the Public Diplomacy Division was established with four officials, along with a joint secretary and around 40 supporting staff, with a budget of US\$5 million.²³ Since then, the MEA has more than 3.75 million followers on Twitter (Jan 2021), 2.15 million on Face book (Jan 2022) and about more than a million viewers on YouTube.²⁴ The MEA is also making use of social media platforms by uploading lectures, videos and pictures in YouTube, Instagram, linkedin, Facebook page and other channels. Although these efforts have boosted India's image, in what way it has benefitted its foreign policy objectives remains to be seen. However, in February 2020, the MEA unveiled its plans to reforms further and one of the key components was to rebrand the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) as a soft power vehicle of the government.²⁵

In recent times, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been successful in effectively using the social media; he has more than 50 million followers on Twitter and prior to his visit to Beijing, China (May 2015), he used public diplomacy in a way, projecting soft power, to connect with Chinese citizens through Sina Weibo. Modi has always addressed the Indian diaspora during his foreign visit, hosting foreign leaders in different locations in India like Xi Jinping and Donald Trump in Gujarat, Shinzo Abe in Varanasi. Moreover, Modi government's flagship programmes like Make in India, Digital India, First Development India (FDI), make use of the Indian culture.²⁶ In addition, he has been successful in initiating the International Yoga day (21 June) as declared by the UN. The new policy initiatives like Act East Policy, Neighbourhood First policy, connecting Central Asia and Africa have been imbedded with soft power strategy.

As India has been able to use its soft power strategy to achieve its foreign policy goals reasonably well, it is important to understand her soft power policy towards South Asia and the extent to which the bilateral ties have strengthened and her image in the region has boosted.

INDIA'S SOFT POWER IN SOUTH ASIA

Though there has been strong historical and cultural links between India and South Asia, since the 1990s the successive governments in India emphasised on incorporating the region in India's foreign policy calculations and extend soft power to achieve the foreign policy goals. The reasons using soft power actively can be identified as: India's growth and prosperity is considered to be connected with the development of the region {South Asian}. A significant policy initiative towards the neighbours was proposed by the then Prime Minister I.K. Gujral, whose 'Gujral Doctrine'



(1997) emphasised the need for India to engage with South Asian countries on a 'non-reciprocity' principle. Former Prime Minister A. B. Vajpayee reached out to Pakistan and even attempted to resolve the longstanding bilateral disputes. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh went one step forward and stated, "We can choose our friends but not our neighbours,"²⁷ and his 'Neighbourhood policy' gave South Asia the much-needed priority in India's foreign policy.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is no different in this regard, as he rightly pointed out: "a nation's destiny is linked to its neighbourhood",²⁸ and came up with Neighbourhood First policy; Modi made a unique gesture by inviting all the heads of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) governments for his swearing-in ceremony on 26 May 2014. Moreover, Modi also undertook bilateral visits to Nepal (after 17 years), Sri Lanka (after a decade), and subsequently a short visit to Pakistan followed by full-fledged visits to Afghanistan, Bangladesh and the Maldives. The Modi government has also inspired other countries to advance friendship and cooperation with their neighbours. At the same time, India demonstrated that while extending soft power, she has refrained from using hard power in dealing with neighbours (except Pakistan and China), which has helped to strengthen the ties with her neighbours.

Second, despite giving due importance, India has not been successful in sustaining its ties with most of the countries in the region. For instance, except India's ties with Bhutan and Afghanistan, its relations with Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Maldives and Sri Lanka have remained unstable. Moreover, the bilateral ties are also affected due to the frequent political instability in our neighbours. In this regard, S. D. Muni summarises India's approach towards its neighbours as "lack of balanced political perspective; the power differentials; India's economic clout; extra regional powers and mindset, diplomatic styles and personalities".²⁹

Third, rather than pushing soft power, India relied more on hard power till the end of the twentieth century as evident from her military intervention in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, exertion of economic pressures on Nepal, Maldives and Bhutan and her decision to hold virtually no talks with Pakistan. Such policies have damaged India's image in the region considerably. Fourth, China's increasing influence—strategic, political, military, economic - in the region and also usage of its soft power had really compelled India to rethink its strategy and about the need to deploy more soft power to counter China's footprints.

Hence, the Indian government has been using certain soft power tools, as discussed subsequently, thereby trying to engage with her neighbouring countries positively.

Tourism

Tourism is one of the vital tools for promoting India's soft power, as it tends to connect people and several religious places. Portland's "The Soft Power 30": a global ranking of

soft power in its report (2018) uses tourism an indicator of soft power in addition to music and sporting power.³⁰ In this regard, India has lots of religious places and cultural monuments, including places of worship like mosques, temples, Gurdwara, which are known for its magnificent art and architecture. Subsequently, the beautiful wildlife sanctuary, deserts, waterfalls, jungles and so on, continues to attract millions of tourists from abroad. In 2002, the Union Ministry of Tourism introduced the 'Incredible India' campaign to promote India as a tourist destination.

The tourism sector received a further boost with the creation of the exclusive Ministry of AYUSH in November 2014, to develop and propagate the AYUSH system of health care including Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Naturopathy, Siddha and Homeopathy. In March 2018, the 'Incredible India 2.0' campaign was launched, which aimed at a "shift from generic promotion undertaken across the world to market-specific promotion plans and content creations".³¹ Subsequent, government initiatives include tax refunds for foreign tourists and the launch of Dekho Apna Desh webinars as part of the Incredible India campaign in April 2020.

As a result of these measures and initiatives, India is successful in attracting a large number of tourists across the globe and the total international tourist arrival is 6.33 million (2020) with a good annual growth rate, but it slow down (-76.9%) due to Covid-19 pandemic. Post-Covid period, India received 6.19 million foreign tourists during 2022 (1.52 million in 2021).³² The tourist from SAARC countries is increasing and according to the Ministry of Tourism, it constitutes around 20-25 per cent of the total tourist arrivals to India (2020), of which tourist from Bangladesh constitute 20.01 per cent (first position) and Sri Lanka 2.50 per cent (tenth position). The key factor for attracting more South Asian tourist is geographical proximity, affordability, reduced visa barriers, mobility (bus and flight) and cultural affiliations. Majority of the tourists from the region visited for religious, medical and leisure purposes.

To attract more tourists from the South and Southeast Asia, the government has been pushing for the 'Buddhist Circuit' and Buddha Express (Indian railways' Mahaparinirvan express), to connect the Buddhist destinations in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh, with the intention to attract the Buddhist from neighbouring countries such as Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan. The Ministry of Tourism has also produced two films 'The Land of Buddha' and 'Following the Path of Buddha'. In addition, the government has conducted events such as the Fifth International Buddhist Conclave (2016) at Varanasi, which was attended by 240 delegates from 39 countries and 'Buddhism in Twenty-first Century' (2017) at Rajgir. India also organised Two-day Global Buddhist Summit in April 2023.



At the same time, according to the FICCI Report 2019, medical tourism is expected to touch US \$9 billion by 2020 and the major source of visitors for this form of tourism is from the Middle East, Southeast Asia and South Asian nations, the majority of whom come from Bangladesh.³³ In this regard, Modi government has made attempts to use tourism as a vital soft power tool to deepen the ties with South Asian countries. Although the tourism ministry is attempting to attract more Buddhist followers from the region, little efforts are made to promote the core values of Buddhism like equality, non-violence, discussion and dialogue and righteous conduct. At the same time, Buddhism diplomacy is targeted mainly towards Japan, Southeast Asia and the west but in the process Buddhists from Bhutan and Sri Lanka are also attracted.

Strengthening Democracy

India, being the largest democracy in world and also successful in sustaining the democratic norms, continues to be the model for many countries turning to democracy, particularly in Asia and Africa. This was well articulated by the former prime minister of India, Manmohan Singh, at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in 2011 “a democratic, plural and secular India can contribute to tolerance and peaceful co-existence among nation”. Apparently, India do not have any doctrine on ‘democracy’, but continues to support any democratic movement in the region, particularly encouraging inclusive democracy.

Thus, from time to time, India has always extended support to South Asian countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, Afghanistan and so on. It has also provided necessary support/assistance for the establishment of democracy like Panchayat Raj in Nepal and Bangladesh and pushed for inclusive democracy in Sri Lanka and Bhutan. India has also been pro-active in strengthening democracy in Afghanistan by constructing Afghan Parliament, providing the expertise in drafting its constitution, sending observers for the conduct of free and fair elections and so on. Several delegates from the SAARC countries have visited India to understand the constitution and functioning of Elections Commission of India.

India is also the founding member of United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF) in 2005 and has contributed around US\$ 32 million (as of 2022) and is the Fourth largest contributor to UNDEF and a recipient of the funds. India has contributed US\$150,000 for the year 2022.³⁴ Although India is an active member of UNDEF, it is not as pro-active as the US in exporting democracy around the world. The reason for this is explained by S. D. Muni: India's main intention has been to campaign and isolate both Pakistan and China by using democracy, rather than export democracy.³⁵ Ironically, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) 2021, Democracy Index, India despite being the largest democracy is ranked 46, perhaps due to the ‘erosion

of civil liberties’, thereby making it ‘flawed democracy’ and is classified as flawed Democracy”, along with US, France, Belgium and Brazil.³⁶ Thus, India's democratic credential has taken a back seat in recent times. Nevertheless, India's commitment to democracy and its sustenance has been a vital soft power tool in the enhancement of its global image.

ICCR and ICWA

In the initial years of India's independence, the Nehru government was only concerned with tracking Indian citizens abroad. However, in 1950, the government established the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), to “establish, revive, and strengthen cultural relations and mutual understanding between India and other countries”.³⁷ Since then, it has set up more than 40 cultural centres, which are working under the respective Indian mission and has also established 93 chairs of Indian studies at various universities abroad with some deputed Indian academicians/scholars. Moreover, it also provides scholarships to foreign students, willing to study in India. As of August 2022, it offers more than 3900 scholarships under 21 scholarship schemes to students from 190 countries. Prior to independence, the government had established Indian Council for World Affairs (ICWA) in 1943, aimed to “promote India's relations with other countries through study, research, discussion, lectures exchange of ideas and information with other organisation within and outside India”. Since then, the ICWA has emerged as one of the leading think-tanks in promoting research and organising seminar/conferences both within India and abroad. Thus, both ICCR and ICWA are contributing significantly to India's soft power strategy.

Although, both ICCR and ICWA was not necessarily targeted towards South Asia, over the decades, the region has significantly benefited. For instance, the ICCR has sponsored Indian chairs in Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh. It also has cultural centres in Colombo (1998), Kabul and Kathmandu (2007), Dhaka and Thimpu (2010) and Male in 2011. Thus, India has culture centres in all the SAARC countries, except Pakistan. The centres have facilities like library and information; offers courses and conducts classes on yoga, Indian dance and music. It is also responsible for conducting/organising cultural events, film and food festival, seminar and workshops. In addition, ICCR has been providing scholarships for SAARC students to pursue their studies in India. Scholarships are not provided to Pakistani students due to the prolonged unstable Indo-Pak ties. The ICCR awards annually thousands of scholarships, of which the majority goes to SAARC countries, particularly to Afghanistan in recent times.

Aid and Assistance

Although since independence, India was the aid receiver, in the past few decades, it has also emerged as key provider



of foreign aid and assistance to South Asian and African countries and beyond. It allocated approximately US\$ 1.14 billion in the 2019-2020 budget, with an increase of 26 per cent (US\$ 0.95 billion) compared to the 2018-2019 budget.³⁸ The major aid goes to Bhutan and Indian littoral states like Mauritius, Maldives and Seychelles, and few African states. However, the 2022-2023 union budget has allocated 2 billion cr to Afghanistan, which is being under the control of Taliban regime (August 2021)

Generally, India gives aid/grant and concessional Line of Credit (LoC) to South Asian and African nations with the aim to ensure mutual interests and benefits. Most of Indian foreign aid goes to SAARC countries, followed by the African nations. Apparently, the largest aid recipient in the last decade in South Asia includes Bhutan (approx US\$ 4.61 billion), Afghanistan (approx US\$ 0.69 billion), Nepal (approx US\$ 0.59 billion), Sri Lanka (approx US\$ 0.33 billion) and the Maldives (approx US\$ 0.26 billion). In February 2022, Sri Lankan government signed an agreement, which under negotiation since August 2021, was finalised with India for US\$ 500 million credit line to overcome its present financial and energy crisis.³⁹ India is key regional donor to Afghanistan and had contributed around US\$ 3 billion towards the Afghan Parliament, Salma dam, highway to Iran's Chabbahar port and so on. India's developmental assistance to six neighbouring countries - Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka in South Asia over the last four fiscal years amounted to be US\$ 3014 million. Most of the projects undertaken under economic assistance are focussed in South Asia; since 2014, 167 assistance projects worth 14,393 million rupees were undertaken and 60 per cent have been completed.⁴⁰

Some of the significant development projects undertaken by India in the region, includes the Raxaul-Kathmandu rail link and the 900MW hydropower project in Tumlingtar. When Nepal was hit by earth quake in 2015, India extended 1.6 billion aid for rebuilding earthquake-hit houses and other buildings.⁴¹ Moreover, the transnational petroleum pipeline of 69km from Bihar to Nepal was launched in September 2019 to enhance the energy security of the region and cut down transit cost. At the Fifth Nepal-India Joint Commission (set up in 1997, the Indian government offered US\$ 2 billion to Nepal (August 2019) for various infrastructure projects.⁴² In January 2020, the Prime Ministers of both countries launched the second integrated check post at Jogbani-Biratnagar, which were to be built with Indian assistance to improve trade and people-to-people contacts. The notable projects of India Maldives include Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital; faculty of engineering and technology, Institute for Security and Law Enforcement Studies; India-Maldives friendship of Hospitality and Tourism Studies; in December 2019, the Modi government extended US\$1.4 billion assistance to the Maldives.

The development projects in Sri Lanka include the restoration of Jaffna library; construction of Omanthai-Jaffna railway line (US\$ 800), Kanaksenthurai port and harbour Pallai Airport and 50,000 houses for war-displaced people. In May 2019, the Sri Lankan government signed a deal with India and Japan to develop deep Sea Container Terminal or East Container Terminal in Colombo port.⁴³ During the official visit (November 2019) by President Gotabaya Rajapakse to New Delhi, India announced US\$400 million Line of Credit for infrastructure and around US\$50 million to fight terrorism in Sri Lanka. With Bangladesh, in October 2017, India extended US\$ 4.5 billion of Line of Credit for its infrastructure and social sector development and again gave US\$500 million Line of Credit in April 2019.⁴⁴

In October 2019, both the governments inaugurated three new projects (in New Delhi)— import LPG from Bangladesh, Vivekananda Bhavan at Ram Krishna Mission in Dhaka and Bangladesh-India professional institute at the Institute of Engineers in Khulna in Bangladesh. India's aid and assistance programme to Afghanistan has been a significant show of soft power with the focus on humanitarian assistance, infrastructure, community, education and capacity development projects. Some of the infrastructure projects include Zaranj-Delaram highway, Pul-e-Khumri transmission line and the restoration of telecommunication facilities in most of the provinces.⁴⁵

Humanitarian Diplomacy — The first responder

Given that the South Asian region is vulnerable to natural calamities, India's humanitarian assistance is largely directed towards the South Asia. Moreover, India continues to be the first responder to all the humanitarian disasters (natural/man-made) that have happened in the region like 2004 Tsunami in Sri Lanka and Maldives, earthquake in Pakistan (2003) and Nepal (2015), floods and cyclone in Bangladesh (2007) and Sri Lanka (2003 & 2016), civil war in Sri Lanka and Nepal, refugee crisis in Bangladesh (2017) and Sri Lanka (2009), water crisis in Maldives (2014), drought in Afghanistan (2018) and so on.⁴⁶ The key reasons for India being the first responder in the region are its geographical proximity, unconditional commitment towards humanitarian assistance and aid, and adequate infrastructure and expertise in carrying out the operations, mainly bilateral. In addition, India intends to deepen the bilateral ties and strengthen its claim as a regional and global power. Overall, to a certain extent, India has been able to deploy critical soft power tools to reach out to the neighbours and enhance its influence in the region.

India's neighbours continue to regard her as a 'big/elder brother' and look forward to the 'India first policy'. However, India's relations with her neighbours have witnessed ups and downs, and irritants have intensified in the recent times. In addition, according to Pew Global Attitudes Survey



2012, both Pakistan and China's perceptions of India were declining since 2006–2012. Though Afghanistan and Bhutan thought positively about India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka complained of trust deficit and Pakistan and Nepal was critical of India's hegemonic disposition, acting like a big brother.⁴⁷ Although the survey was conducted in 2012, such perceptions among our neighbours do not seem to have changed even now. In this context, the question arises why India's soft power towards South Asia is not successful in achieving its foreign policy objectives.

LIMITATIONS

India's soft power strategy in South Asia is not free from limitations, which have curtailed the former in achieving its foreign policy goals vis-à-vis its neighbours.

ICCR and ICWA: Ignoring the region?

Although, successive governments have made efforts to use ICCR as a soft power tool to project its image, but with regard to South Asia, it is still lacking. For instance, the ICCR has 69 chairs of Indian studies at various universities abroad, but in the South Asia region, it has only three chairs in Dhaka University (Bangladesh) and one at University of Kelaniya, Colombo (Sri Lanka).⁴⁸ Under the distinguished visitors' programme, since February 2015–September 2019, only six were awarded to this region—Nepal (1) Maldives (1) and Bangladesh (4). Even in the case of academic visitors' programme there had been only 13 visitors since 2017 of which none were from South Asia.⁴⁹ Moreover, foreign students coming through ICCR scholarship are mainly from Nepal, Bhutan and Afghanistan, and very few are awarded to the remaining SAARC countries.⁵⁰ Thus, the ICCR key policies and programmes are often targeted towards the US and EU. Nevertheless, the ICCR needs to give priority to the South Asian region, since it is important for a country like India to project its image and strengthen people-to-people contact with its neighbours.

From time to time, the ICWA has conducted several seminars/conferences/workshops on the theme concerning South Asia, and also has invited speakers from SAARC countries to participate at academic events in India, but has not organised much joint programmes/events with SAARC countries to promote academic and research works/networks. Although most ICCR programmes are generally targeted towards the West and few to the South Asian region, nevertheless, it is vital for ICCR to also give priority to the South Asian region, if it intends to emerge as a major power. Thus, both ICCR and ICWA need to give priority to the region to achieve India's foreign policy goals.

Lack of infrastructure

India is attracting more and more foreign tourists in the recent times, but it needs to be more proactive in terms

of marketing and promotions, establishing connectivity and upgrading tourist spots to boost India's tourism sector and India's global image further. Apparently, India is planning to set up a regional tourist office in China on a similar line and the same can be done in all SAARC countries.⁵¹ Buddhist temples, shrines and landmarks need to be equipped with adequate infrastructure, washrooms, petrol pumps, eateries, safety measures (bomb blast in 2013 and 2018) and tourist-friendly sign boards like the use of Sinhala language sign at Buddhist tourist places, to make these places more tourist-friendly. At the same time, the Buddhist circuit can also be expanded to north-east India, particularly Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, which has a tourist share of less than 0.03 and 0.18 per cent respectively.⁵² In addition, India has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with ASEAN, and one of the objectives have been to augment tourism; similar MOUs can be worked out with the SAARC nations. Thus, lot more needs to be done to ensure tourism remains a vital tool to boost India's soft power in the region.

The Neglected Diaspora

India's diaspora is the largest in the world, with two-thirds of them living in Europe or Asia. Over the decades, the diaspora population has been increasing. As per the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA), in 2012, there were more than 21 million Indians living in 205 countries around the world (Mohan and Chauhan 2015: 4), but by December 2018, the Indian diaspora has spread to 208 countries and the strength is around 32,100,340, with 13,459,195 Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) and 18,683,645 People of Indian Origin (PIOs) (MEA 2020). The government has also merged two cards issued to the PIO and Overseas Citizen of India in 2002 and 2005, offering dual citizenship and, in recent times, have issued them Aadhar cards as well. In addition, unlike the earlier governments, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is being pro-active in engaging with the diaspora. Thus, the diaspora has emerged as one of the vital tools in shaping India's foreign policy.

The diaspora is vital not just from remittance and economic point of view, but to a certain extent they uphold the Indian culture and tradition, like they follow and adhere to their norms, values, culture and prefer their own cuisine, observe national festivals and watch Indian movies, in way boosting India's image abroad. In South Asia, the Indian diaspora are fewer in number, but can be a vital soft power tool.

The diaspora population in the region is more than 8 lakhs, but the successive government have not given due importance, as it gives to its diaspora in the West. The reasons could be that the diaspora are not politically influential in the host countries and most of them being unskilled and semi-skilled labourers, are also socially and economically weaker, which gives them less scope in contributing to India's national interest. As a result, Prime Minister Modi,



Table 1: Indian Diaspora in South Asia (as of December 2020)

Country	NRI	PIOs	Overseas Indians
Afghanistan	3,087	19	3106
Bangladesh	10,385	9	10,391
Bhutan	60,000	0	60,000
Maldives	25,000	108	25,108
Nepal	600,000	0	600,000
Sri Lanka	14,000	1,600,000	1,614,000
Pakistan	—	—	—
		Total	8,59,605

Source: MEA 2021

who has always addressed the Indian diaspora during his foreign visits, has not done even one rally in the region.

At the same time, neither are the successive Indian government gestures encouraging for the diaspora. For instance, the major share of the recipients of the Pravasi Bhartiya Samman Award (PBSA), which is the highest honour given to overseas Indians since 2003, until 2015 has gone to residents of the US, Europe, Southeast Asia, but the recipients from South Asia is just one (of 179) from Sri Lanka (2011); in 2019 of the 30 PBSA awards, only one recipient was from Bhutan and similar is scenario in 2021, with only one recipient from Maldives.⁵³ Hence, the government needs to make sincere efforts to hold rallies to address the diaspora in the region; identify eligible NRI/PIO from the region for awards; and organise Regional Pravasi Bhartiya Divas (PBD) to engage with the diaspora, so that India can strengthen her ties with host countries.

On a weak wicket

Although, India continues to inspire her neighbours as a democratic country, she lacks in other fronts. In the UN Human Development Index 2022 her rank is 132 and in the 2021 Democracy Index, as prepared by the Economic Intelligence Unit, her rank is 46 (was 39 in 2012), with a score of 6.90, due to the erosion of civil liberties in India.⁵⁴ Moreover, excessive use of hard power (police and arms) in the Naxal-affected areas, northeast region and J&K, violence against minorities and women and caste discriminations, have hurt India's image across the globe as well as in the region.

This is aptly pointed out by a well-known academician C. Rajamohan that the Modi government's efforts towards the projection of soft power has taken a hit due to "free run to groups that seek to anchor India's rich cultural inheritance on a narrow and religious basis and inflect India's democratic culture with the virus of majoritarianism".⁵⁵ In addition, revoking of Article 370 and implementation of Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 by the Modi government have lead to severe criticism not only from the US, EU, but also within the region. For instance, apart from Pakistan, Bangladesh's

prime minister called the CAA as "unnecessary", and former President of Afghanistan Hamid Karzia urged the Indian government to treat all minorities equally. Although the Modi government has argued that revoking of Article 370 and implementation of CAA are part of internal affairs, it contradicts itself by inviting foreign delegates to visit J&K and also attempting to convince the governments of the western countries on these two issues. Hence, in this scenario, it has become difficult for India to harp on her soft power tools like tolerance, human rights and freedom. Moreover, celebrating the UN International Yoga day has been welcomed across the globe, the issue of concern remains in "Promoting yoga at huge cost and repackaging political Hinduism in the form palatable to the world., and increasing commoditisation of yoga and deviations from original teachings".⁵⁶

Delay in completing Projects

Although, India has undertaken several development projects, there has been a prolonged delay in the execution of some of the vital ones, which has affected India's push for soft power in the region. For example, the Rampal Power plant (a.k.a. Maitri), a 50–50 joint venture with Bangladesh's state-owned Power Development Board and India's National Thermal Power Corporation was signed in 2010, and supposed to be completed by 2016, but as of now only 60 per cent of the project has been completed.⁵⁷ On the contrary, the China signed an MOU in 2014 on Payra Power Plant with Bangladesh and the construction began in 2017; it is operational from January 2020. Thus, to a certain extent there remains a wide gap between India and China's completion of projects in the neighbouring countries.

It has been more than a decade that India had promised assistance to build the Nepal Police Academy, but it has yet to take off; the Transnational Petroleum Pipeline was proposed in 1986 and concluded only during Prime Minister Modi's visit to Nepal in 2014 and finally launched in September 2019. In April 2019, Bhutan signed the tariff protocol with India for the output of Mangdechhu hydroelectric project, which is a 720MW run-of-river power plant; it was funded by India and was initiated in 2010, but concluded only in 2019.⁵⁸ The slow implementation of overseas projects was highlighted by India's Parliamentary Standing Committee on MEA, the ministry has been 'doing little' in projecting India's soft power. But the reasons cited by MEA was lack of funds, need to spend much on administration rather than on overseas projects and failure of other ministries like culture and tourism in projecting India's soft power.⁵⁹

At the same time, the delay is not just from the Indian side, but also from the host countries. For instance, in some of the highway and power projects, Nepal government is struggling to acquire land. In October 2018, Prime Minister Modi directed the Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe to expedite the Indo-Sri Lanka projects



which were signed in 2017; the key projects included LNG terminal in Kerawalapitiya, near Colombo; Solar Power Plant in Sampur, Oil Tank Farm in Trincomalee and Container terminal in Colombo port.⁶⁰ Moreover, due to change of regimes, political instability and economic slowdown has also delayed projects. Hence, there remains a yawning gap between signing and implementation of projects, which curtails India's push for soft power.

Is India successful in exerting influence?

Apparently, the deploying of soft power is to exert influence, but in India's case it is mixed baggage of success. Despite India being successful in pushing soft power in the region, it is yet to exert influence in getting what it wants. For instance, in the case of Sri Lanka, the demand for devolution of powers in the northeast region remains a distant dream and Sri Lanka continues to tilt towards China at the cost of India. Both the countries are yet to successfully negotiate the Economic and Technology Agreement (ETCA), which goes beyond trade-in goods, to include services, investment and technical cooperation. Although the Memorandum of Cooperation (MOC) on joint development of East Container Terminal (ECT) project at the Colombo Port was signed by Sri Lanka, India and Japan in 2019, Mahinida Rajapakse's government is yet to take a final decision on implementing the project.

Bhutan is always regarded as a close ally of India, but it is reluctant to sign the Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA) since 2015, under the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN), despite India's request. Now Bhutan, for the first time, has imposed Visa fees for Indian tourist, i.e., levying a daily ₹1,200 (US\$ 17) fee (Sustainable Development Fee) for regional tourists since July 2020. In spite of the goodwill for India in Afghanistan, the latter's strategic and security concerns remain unaddressed. In Nepal, the plight of the Madeshi community and the playing of the China card continue to be a concern for India. Subsequently, Nepal's new political map which included territories of Kalapani, Lipulekh and Limpiyadhura (335 sq km), as claimed by India as well, on 2 November 2019, has been a major issue that remains unresolved in the bilateral ties. India and Pakistan's ties are presently at an all-time low; unilateral and tit-for-tat actions are now a common scenario; without high commissioners, diplomatic activities have shut down and the Indian government's decision to reduce the staff strength in the Pakistan High Commission in New Delhi by 50 per cent has hit new low owing to bilateral ties. Moreover, owing to 'no talks' since 2015, India has withdrawn MFN to Pakistan, though there has been ceasefire violations and Pakistan has been building up more troops across borders, escalating tensions on both sides of the border. The deepening of the ties between the Maldives and Bangladesh with China at the cost of India, indicates the limitations of India soft policy.

Thus, many of India's foreign policy goals are not achieved, despite the push for soft power in the region. In addition, Christian Wagner highlights the limitation of India's default and defensive soft power, which does not promote its political model abroad and uses it to attract foreign investors rather than exert influence elsewhere.⁶¹ On a similar note, David Malone, states "defensiveness of the government in the use of India's soft power".⁶²

In a nutshell, India's soft power strategy in the region is yet to contribute significantly in deepening her ties with her neighbours. At the same time, India's commitment and enthusiasm in deploying its soft power tools in the US, EU and Southeast Asian region, is not visible in the South Asian region. Joseph S. Nye emphasises on the need for "Smart power" and states that "it is a mistake to rely on hard power or soft power alone, the best situation is when the two are effectively combined as smart power". In this regard, India has to come up with a broader soft power policy, exclusively for the region with the focus on building infrastructure, attracting more tourists across the region, utilising the diaspora as strategic assets (including PIO), effective use of public diplomacy, adhering to the policy of non-interference and more importantly putting its own house in order on human right issues. Interestingly, at this juncture, there is greater need for deploying India's soft power tools in Pakistan to improve the bilateral ties, as it is a gateway towards growth and prosperity of region in general and the world in particular.

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