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A Decadal Snapshot of India's Soft Power Strategies (2014–2024)

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Abstract

This report evaluates India's soft power strategies under the tenure of Prime Minister Narendra Modi from 2014 to 2024. It looks into the ways in which the government has promoted cultural connectivity, diaspora engagement, and partnership building to strengthen India's global image. It underlines the growth of India's soft power in the past decade, becoming more coherent, strategic, and ambitious. In the past decade,

India has initiated, for example, the marking of International Yoga Day, reached out to the Indian diaspora, and engaged in various international forums such as the International Solar Alliance and Global Traditional Medicine Centre. The report also analyses the shortcomings of India's worldview and suggests means of addressing the challenges to India's soft power projection.

Introduction

The notion of ‘soft power’ was first proposed by Joseph S. Nye in the latter half of the 20th century, signifying a new dimension of foreign relations that incorporates global power beyond the conventional use of ‘hard power’, such as military or trade-related economic dominance.¹ ‘Soft power’, as coined by Nye, refers to “the ability to make someone do something without a gun or an army.” He suggests that “persuasion and attraction, not coercion”, can be a tool for countries to alter perceptions about themselves and obtain global positive focus.² According to Nye, for any nation, projecting soft power means not only nurturing a positive image but also being able to sell its values and influencing people enough to adopt them.³

Soft power is about the work that countries do to shape the world’s view of them as real, reliable, and inventive. Soft power is a means for emerging countries like India to expand their influence and increase diplomatic credibility.⁴ As social scientist Ernest J. Wilson observes, countries aspire to use soft power to be counted among global power leaders without necessarily having a superpower’s financial power or military might.⁵

Many tools are used to project soft power, of which cultural diplomacy is perhaps the best understood. Nations hope that promoting their cultural heritage, values, and arts will have an enduring effect on the target audience.⁶ A state’s soft power is anchored in the people-to-people relations that cultural diplomacy offers. Seen in this context, India has great riches it can exploit, given the vastness of its cultural spectrum, age-old practices, and spirituality.

The dissemination of elements of its culture—for example, Buddhism and yoga, which have historically been of global interest—has been an attractive proposition for India.⁷ The country's great epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, for example, can connect people and societies across borders. In post-independence India, however, soft power initiatives were limited and fell short in projecting culture as a foreign policy discourse.

In the 1990s, after the advent of globalisation, India began utilising its cultural ethos and civilisational and historical values as tools of foreign policy discourse to connect with people beyond the borders. Even so, the use of soft power in India's foreign policy was minimal until Narendra Modi became prime minister. This report argues that Modi's tenure so far (2014-2024) can be regarded as a turning point in India's use of soft power as a component of foreign policy discourse.^{8,9}

Branding India's Civilisational Identity

As part of its soft power politics, the Modi government has taken stock of India's vast and rich cultural heritage, especially its early contributions to the sciences, mathematics, philosophy, and the arts.¹⁰ Modi aims to create a narrative about India's civilisational ethos that places the country in a different basket from that of other rising powers.¹¹ It contends that this emphasis on civilisational identity is consistent with the intentions of India's foreign policy.¹²

The civilisation-centred approach entails projecting ancient Indian achievements in areas like mathematics, astronomy, and medical science.¹³ To assert the historical continuity of the Indian intellect, for example, India now often recalls figures such as Aryabhata, a mathematician of the 5th-6th century CE credited with the invention of the numeral 'zero', as well as the origin of Ayurveda, India's age-old system of medicine and wellness. The government has also nurtured the country's space programmes like Chandrayaan-3 and Gaganyaan that help buttress India's image as a country with scientific excellence.

India has used its Ramayana epic to conduct cultural diplomacy with countries in Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia and Thailand where, despite the populations being majority-Muslim and Buddhist, respectively, aspects of Hindu culture are still visible in everyday life. Since 2015, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) has been holding an annual Ramayana Festival, mostly in Delhi. Speaking at the 2018 India-Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Commemorative Summit in Delhi, the prime minister rightly noted that the Ramayana was a treasured shared legacy of the ASEAN region and the Indian subcontinent. India has also suggested creating a ‘Group of Ramayana’, which would include experts from Southeast Asia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Russia.¹⁴

Western leaders are also becoming familiar with the epic: while launching the virtual Diwali celebration in 2020, for instance, the then British Prime Minister Boris Johnson declared that his country would fight COVID-19 the way Lord Rama and Sita vanquished Ravana. Similarly, in a letter to PM Modi during the pandemic, the then Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro referred to the Ramayana as an allegory to India’s fight against the health emergency.¹⁵

India’s trade participation in ancient times was considerable, and its exports included diamonds, gold, spices, and ivory. Leaders today hope that publicising this will create feelings of veneration and inquisitive interest towards India’s history, effectively increasing its soft power. This narrative positions India as a participant in global civilisational growth and a centre of ancient culture and knowledge, some of which remain relevant today.

One of the most outstanding features of the soft power dimension under PM Modi has been the promotion of yoga as a way of life.¹⁶ In 2015, India successfully persuaded the United Nations to proclaim 21 June (the summer solstice) as International Yoga Day; the proposal was supported by 177 countries.¹⁷ This strategy advances India’s soft power narrative, as yoga and traditional medicine can be a universal recipe for health and well-being.¹⁸ Indian embassies, celebrating International Yoga Day across the world, are making it an annual calendar event.

Yoga's global popularity connects India's present to its past¹⁹—a kind of spiritual diplomacy that allows India to take pride in its way of life. The government has presented India as a country that leads the world in advancing wellness practices.²⁰ There is also the 'Khelo India' programme, which has created an impact in encouraging the youth to be more competitive in various games.

The propagation of soft power represents India's deliberate repositioning.²¹ Promoting its timeless heritage is very different from exercising hard power or dominating economically. Rather,

the incumbent administration has constructed a narrative of India as 'Vishwa guru', meaning 'the world's teacher'.^{22,23} The narrative is part of the government's broader objective of presenting India as developmentally different from the West. India has positioned itself as able to promote environmentalism, clean governance, and peaceful co-existence.²⁴ This is seen in the prime minister's repeated references to 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam', which means that all living beings are interconnected and constitute one family; it was the theme of India's G20 presidency in 2023.²⁵

Communication and Outreach

Politicians' use of technology to improve their communication strategies has been much analysed. The Internet and social media have made it easier for leaders and citizens to exchange information.²⁶ For India, its efforts at digital diplomacy include promoting tourism through its 'Incredible India' campaign,²⁷ highlighting, among others, the country's wealth in heritage monuments and festivals.²⁸ This projection of India's technological prowess enables the present government to connect with the youth and other audiences active on digital platforms.

The Modi government has also promoted the 'Digital India' project itself, thereby publicising India's technological triumphs, including direct

benefit cash transfers in its welfare schemes, mobile banking, and connectivity.²⁹ It is setting an example for other developing countries, thus adding to its attractiveness and soft power.³⁰

The Indian government has also been actively leveraging the potential of the Indian diaspora,³¹ conservatively estimated at more than 30 million—one of the biggest in the world.³² It was in 2003 when the prime minister at the time, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, at the helm of the first NDA government, started the Pravasi Bhartiya Diwas as a diaspora outreach programme. The present government has built on the programme—rather than merely viewing Indian expatriates as people of Indian origin living abroad, the administration regards them as potential partners in fostering the nation's interests.

The prime minister regards the diaspora as a “soft power multiplier”, enabling India to reach more people in places such as the US, Canada and the UK, where there are substantial numbers of people of Indian origin.³³

Indeed, India’s officials frequently engage with members of India’s diasporic communities in different parts of the world, participating in many high-profile events in the US, the UK, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and elsewhere, using these gatherings to mobilise support, instil patriotism, and assure official support to overseas Indians.

Diaspora engagement has provided India with the means to convey a more favourable narrative and, to some extent, influence decision-making in countries where the diaspora is substantial.³⁴ For example, New York City in the United States declared Diwali as an official school holiday on 1 November 2024 for the first time. This was possible due to the diasporic community’s advocacy. Meanwhile, former US President Joe Biden and former First Lady Jill Biden hosted a Diwali celebration at the White House on 28 October 2024, to which they invited Indian-Americans from across the United States.³⁵

A decade earlier, also in the US, the Modi government organised an event in September 2014 at Madison Square Garden in New York, within months of his becoming prime minister in his first term. The event received immense attention in the US media, showcasing India’s promise as a cultural and economic force.

The NDA regime has also focused on enhancing India’s soft power through proactive engagements in multilateral bodies such as the UN, the G20, and BRICS. Furthermore, it was India, along with France, who moved the creation of the International Solar Alliance (ISA), set up in November 2015 at the COP21 to promote global generation and use of solar energy. ISA particularly focuses on the countries between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic Capricorn, regions that are abundant in sunshine.³⁶ Over 100 countries have signed the framework agreement, and more than 90 have ratified it, as ISA plays a crucial role in helping countries meet their renewable energy targets and reduce carbon emissions.

Conclusion

Soft power shapes how states and their people view one another, influencing the conduct of diplomacy. The Indian government, in the past ten years, has tapped into the country's soft power resource by highlighting the strengths of its civilisational values, cultural resources, and contributions to the sciences. Connecting all these efforts is a palpable grand strategy that seeks to exploit India's cultural and diplomatic resources.

However, India's aspiration to rise with its soft power is fraught with challenges, including scarcity of resources. A well-rounded and effective strategy is paramount. More emphasis on cultural diplomacy and accessible governance will be important to ensure India's soft power works optimally. India's faith in peace, inclusiveness, and sustainable development makes for a great story, especially in a polarised world. [ORF](#)

Endnotes

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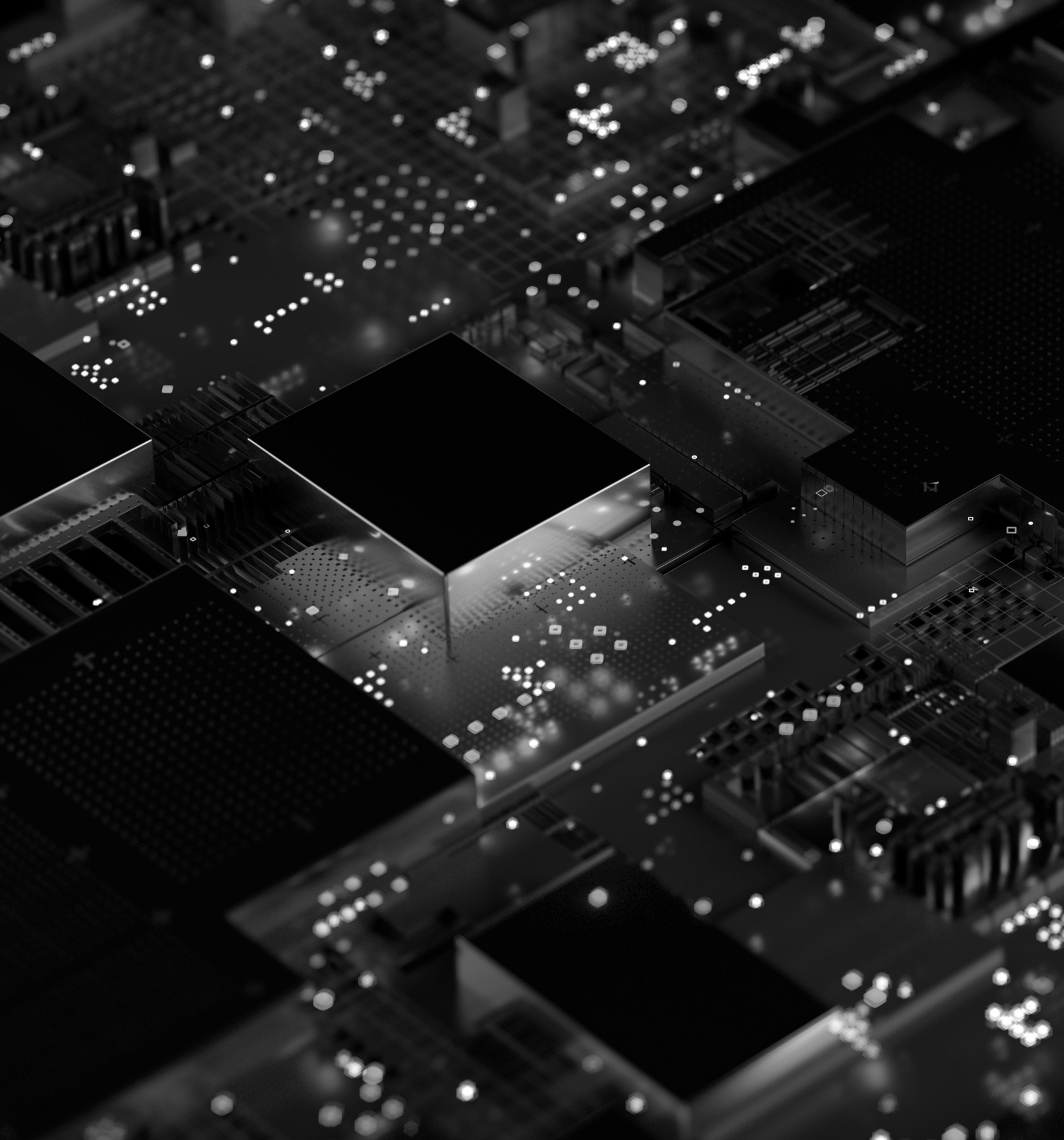
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