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India's Soft Power: Bollywood, Yoga, and Cultural Diplomacy

Investigate how India uses cultural exports to build its global image and relationships

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ABSTRACT:

India's role in global affairs has been significantly shaped by its use of soft power, a concept introduced by Joseph Nye in the 1980s. Unlike hard power, which relies on military and economic strength, soft power influences global perceptions and diplomatic relationships through culture, values, and foreign policy. India, with its rich civilizational heritage, diverse traditions, and democratic values, has successfully leveraged soft power to enhance its international standing. This paper explores India's strategic use of soft power, examining its historical evolution, key cultural elements, and its impact on diplomacy. India has long been a hub for trade, knowledge, and spirituality, impacting parts of Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Among the first instances of educational diplomacy were ancient establishments like Takshashila and Nalanda universities, which drew academics from China, Korea, and Persia. Similarly, one of the first examples of India extending its intellectual and cultural impact throughout Asia was Emperor Ashoka's Buddhist diplomacy. India's diplomatic interactions have always been guided by the idea of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (The World is One Family), which emphasizes inclusivity and peaceful cooperation. India has taken an active position in multilateral organizations like the United Nations, BRICS, and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in addition to its cultural and educational activities. India has supported sustainable development, international cooperation, and South-South cooperation through several venues. Humanitarian aid and development assistance are also part of India's diplomatic endeavors; it supports infrastructure, education, and healthcare in surrounding and African countries. To promote goodwill and deepen diplomatic connections, the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program, for example, provides professionals from poor nations with training and capacity-building programs. India's dedication to international health and humanitarian assistance was further evidenced by its vaccine diplomacy during the COVID-19 epidemic. India provided vaccines to more than 100 nations as part of the "Vaccine Maitri" campaign, enhancing its reputation as a responsible and caring global player. This program not only improved India's standing abroad but also

established it as a major force in worldwide healthcare diplomacy. Education and digital diplomacy are two other important pillars of India's soft power. With universities like Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) drawing students from all over the world, India has become a significant center for higher education. India's technological innovations in recent years, especially in the areas of IT and digital services, have increased its influence internationally. India is becoming a leader in digital governance and innovation thanks to programs like Digital India and the success of Indian tech firms like Infosys, Wipro, and TCS. Through multilateral institutions like the UN, BRICS, G20, and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), India has also improved its standing internationally. India promotes South-South collaboration, climate action, and sustainable development through several venues. India's humanitarian aid and development assistance initiatives, especially in South Asia and Africa, improve its standing as a responsible global player. Considering these achievements, India still confronts a number of obstacles to realizing its full potential as a soft power. Significant obstacles include poor policy execution, domestic sociopolitical problems, and competition with other superpowers like the US and China. India lacks a coherent and well-organized plan to effectively utilize its soft power assets, despite having a solid cultural and ideological base. Key research gaps are identified in this work, especially with regard to comprehending the evolution of India's soft power from antiquated diplomatic customs to contemporary geopolitical engagements. The study also looks at how India's worldwide influence is influenced by its humanitarian endeavors, technological innovations, and cultural diplomacy. Despite these successes, India faces several challenges in maximizing its soft power potential. Inconsistent policy implementation, internal socio-political issues, and competition from other global powers like China and the United States pose significant hurdles. While India has a strong cultural and ideological foundation, it lacks a cohesive and structured strategy to fully harness its soft power resources.

This paper identifies key research gaps, particularly in understanding how India's soft power has evolved from ancient diplomatic traditions to modern geopolitical engagements. The study also examines how India's cultural diplomacy, technological advancements, and humanitarian efforts contribute to its international influence.

Keywords: Soft power , India , Yoga , Cultural diplomacy , Bollywood

STRUCTURE OF PAPER:

- **Summary of the Introduction:** Examines how India uses culture, media, education, and wellness practices to increase its worldwide impact as a diplomatic tactic known as "soft power."
- **Contextual History:** Explores India's long history as a hub for education and spirituality, emphasizing the growth of Buddhism, medieval colleges like Nalanda and Takshashila, and trade networks as early examples of soft power.
- **Current Techniques for Soft Power:** Highlights contemporary soft power tactics, like as Ayurveda, yoga diplomacy, Bollywood's worldwide appeal, digital outreach, and educational impact through scholarships and IITs.
- **Engaging in Multilateral Activities:** analyses how India promotes global development, humanitarian relief, and vaccine diplomacy through its involvement in the UN, BRICS, G20, and South-South Cooperation.
- **Problems and Suggestions:** suggests policy-driven cultural diplomacy and digital involvement while identifying obstacles such internal sociopolitical problems, geopolitical competitiveness, a lack of a formalized soft power program, and uneven worldwide branding.
- **Final Thoughts:** comes to the conclusion that India is a growing soft power with a more organized and long-term approach because of its rich cultural legacy and smart diplomatic initiatives.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

- **Research Approach:** In order to comprehend the development and significance of India's soft power, the study incorporates case studies, historical analysis, and policy evaluation.
- **Data Collection Methods:** includes secondary data analysis , case study and comparative analysis.
- **Data Analysis Techniques:** containing content analysis which revolves around reviewing speeches , government report and media articles then trend analysis and policy reviewing

INTRODUCTION:

India attained its independence on August 15, 1947, after enduring decades of colonial subjugation. This hard-won freedom was the result of years of relentless struggle and immense sacrifice, guided by visionary leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and many others. However, independence came at a heavy cost—the tragic partition of British India into India and Pakistan. This division led to widespread displacement, loss of life, intergenerational trauma, and innumerable harrowing incidents. Despite these

tumultuous beginnings, India laid the groundwork for its emergence as a cultural and economic powerhouse on the global stage. Known for its unparalleled cultural diversity and a history steeped in richness, India has earned acclaim for its ancient traditions, including Ayurveda, yoga, and artistic heritage. These timeless practices, intertwined with its ethos, continue to elevate India's global stature as a beacon of cultural diplomacy and soft power. This paper primarily explores the concept of soft power in the context of Indian diplomacy, highlighting how it is advanced through various cultural elements such as cuisine, media, traditions, and practices. These elements gradually shape a favorable influence on foreign policy, albeit at a slow and steady pace.

One of the earliest steps in India's strategic use of soft power can be traced back to the ancient Vedic philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, which translates to "The world is one family." This concept embodies India's inherent spirit of brotherhood and inclusivity, serving as a foundational principle in its diplomatic engagements.

The term "soft power" was first introduced by Harvard University professor Joseph Nye in the 1980s. In his seminal 2004 book, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, Nye delves deeply into the nuances of this concept. A defining characteristic of soft power is its non-coercive nature, relying on cultural influence, political values, and foreign policy rather than force or intimidation. This approach to international relations is highly effective in fostering goodwill and shaping global perceptions, emphasizing attraction and positive engagement over conflict or coercion.

Soft power became especially influential and widely discussed after the end of the Cold War, when the United States emerged as the world's only superpower. This period, often referred to as the "unipolar moment," signified a time when the U.S. stood alone in global dominance following the collapse of the Soviet Union. With no immediate rival to challenge its authority, the U.S. had the freedom to shape international politics, trade, and cultural influence in ways that were previously contested during the bipolar struggle of the Cold War. As this new world order took shape, national borders became increasingly flexible, allowing for the rapid spread of economic liberalization and the growth of capitalism. Globalization became a defining force, connecting nations more closely than ever through trade, technology, and cultural exchange. At the same time, non-state actors such as international organizations, multinational corporations, and activist groups began playing a more significant role in shaping global discourse. These actors started raising awareness about

social injustices and systemic inequalities, including gender discrimination, racial bias, economic disparity, and human rights violations.

Amid these transformations, scholars like Joseph Nye Jr. introduced and popularized the concept of soft power as a way to rethink traditional statecraft. Unlike hard power, which relies on military force and coercion, soft power focuses on the ability of a nation to influence others through attraction, persuasion, and shared values. Countries increasingly sought to achieve their strategic interests by leveraging culture, diplomacy, education, and economic partnerships rather than relying solely on military strength. This shift was also driven by the recognition that economic growth and stability were now top priorities for most nations, leading them to explore ways of strengthening their global influence without direct confrontation. However, the use of soft power is not a modern invention. Even before the establishment of modern nation-states, ancient empires and powerful kingdoms understood the significance of non-military means in achieving their goals. They used culture, religion, trade, and diplomacy to extend their influence, forge alliances, and maintain stability. From the Roman Empire's use of Latin and legal systems to China's historical reliance on Confucian values and the spread of its silk trade, civilizations have long recognized the power of ideas, traditions, and economic ties in shaping the world around them. Today, in an era of globalization and interconnectedness, soft power remains a critical tool in international relations, allowing countries to project their influence in a way that fosters cooperation rather than conflict.

An old Indian saying in Hindi which says: “jahan kaam aaye sui kaha kare talwari” (if you can get your work done through a needle, you do not need a sword.)

Mark Twain's words vividly capture this bewildering phenomenon called India:

“This is indeed India! The land of dreams and romance, of fabulous wealth and fabulous poverty, of splendor and rags, of palaces and hovels, of famine and pestilence, of genii and giants and Aladdin lamps, of tigers and elephants, the cobra and the jungle, the country of hundred nations and a hundred tongues, of a thousand religions and two million gods, cradle of the human race, birthplace of human speech, mother of history, grandmother of legend, great-grand mother of tradition”

Mark Twain's words paint a fascinating picture of India and its ability to attract visitors throughout history. India has always been known for its deep-rooted culture, wisdom, and

influence, which have drawn people from all over the world. One of the most powerful examples of India's soft power is Mahatma Gandhi, who championed non-violence (ahimsa) and inspired global movements for peace and justice. However, the concept of soft power in India goes back even further—its ancient epics, such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata, contain lessons of morality, righteousness, and diplomacy that have influenced generations.

India has also produced legendary scholars and thinkers whose impact is felt beyond its borders. Kalidasa, the great Sanskrit poet and playwright, is often compared to Shakespeare for his literary genius, while Kautilya (also known as Chanakya) is regarded as India's equivalent of Machiavelli for his political and economic strategies. Kautilya's disciple, Emperor Ashoka, is another example of India's shift from hard power to soft power. Once known for his military conquests and aggressive rule, Ashoka later renounced violence and embraced Buddhism. He then spread Buddhist teachings across Asia, using philosophy and spiritual influence rather than force to shape the world around him.

Even India's many names reflect its rich cultural and spiritual heritage. The name "India" comes from the Indus River, which was home to one of the world's earliest civilizations. Other names, such as Bharatavarsha, Aryavarta, and Hindustan, carry religious and philosophical meanings. The term Hindu has Persian origins, as Persian traders mispronounced "Sindhu" (the local name for the Indus River) as "Hindu." Meanwhile, Bharat comes from an ancient Vedic interpretation: Bha means knowledge, and Rat means engaged—together, Bharat signifies "the land of people engaged in knowledge."

Throughout history, India's greatest strength has been its ability to influence others through wisdom, spirituality, and culture rather than force. This legacy of soft power continues today, making India a unique and influential presence on the global stage.

INDIA'S ROLE IN MULTILATERAL ORGANIZATION:

India's soft power impact has grown even more as a result of its participation in global institutions like the UN, BRICS, and the Non-Aligned Movement. India has established itself as a responsible global leader by promoting South-South collaboration, climate action, and sustainable development.

India provides aid to neighboring and African countries in areas like infrastructure, healthcare, and education through its development assistance programs. For instance, the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) initiative promotes goodwill and

enduring diplomatic relationships by offering professionals from developing nations training and capacity-building assistance.

India's dedication to world health was further evidenced by its leadership in vaccine diplomacy, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. India strengthened its reputation as a humanitarian power by providing vaccines to more than 100 nations as part of the "Vaccine Maitri" campaign.

Literature review:

Joseph Nye coined the term "soft power" in the 1980s to describe a nation's capacity to influence the tastes and actions of other people by attraction and appeal as opposed to extortion or force. Soft power is based on political beliefs, foreign policy tactics, and cultural influence as opposed to hard power, which is based on economic and military might. India has become a significant force in international diplomacy throughout the years by utilizing its rich history, cultural legacy, and philosophical traditions.

Soft Power's History and Significance for India

In his 2004 book *Soft Power-The Means to Success in World Politics*, Joseph Nye describes how countries affect international relations through cultural diplomacy, values, and policies. India's diplomatic strategy has always been based on intellectual traditions, spirituality, and

non-violence. India's foreign policy has been influenced by ideas such as Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam ("The world is one family") and Ahimsa (non-violence), which have made the country renowned for its moral leadership as opposed to its aggressive expansionism.

The Development of India's Soft Power through time

India has always been a hub of culture and knowledge, drawing tourists, traders, and academics from all over the world. Global hubs of study, ancient institutions like Takshashila and Nalanda attracted students from Korea, China, and Persia. These establishments enhanced India's intellectual clout and showed how education was a key component of its long-standing soft power.

Academic Institutions of Ancient civilizations:

- Academics from China, Korea, and Persia were drawn to universities like as Nalanda and Takshashila, which increased India's intellectual clout.

Buddhist diplomacy:

- One of the first instances of India's use of soft power was Emperor Ashoka's acceptance of Buddhism and subsequent propagation of the religion throughout Asia.

Trade and Cultural Exchange:

- India established connections with far-flung civilizations through the Silk Road and maritime trade, which contributed to propagating Indian customs, language, and culture.

Bollywood and Media:

In particular, has a huge global fan base, particularly in Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Indian films influence how people throughout the world view Indian culture, customs, and values in addition to being a source of entertainment.

- India's reputation around the world has been greatly influenced by the Indian film industry, especially Bollywood. In South Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and even Latin America, Indian films enjoy immense popularity. Bollywood stories frequently highlight themes of love, family, and resiliency, which appeal to viewers all across the world.
- Indian cinema's popularity around the world promotes goodwill and deepens cultural ties, through streaming services and digital platforms, the Indian media and television sectors support the nation's soft power.
- Acclaim from throughout the world for films like Lagaan, Slumdog Millionaire, and My Name is Khan has strengthened India's cultural diplomacy. Bollywood stars also represent their culture by influencing fashion, travel, and lifestyle around the world. Bollywood has become even more popular thanks to the growth of internet streaming services, which have made Indian entertainment available to viewers everywhere.

Yoga and Ayurveda:

- One of India's most effective diplomatic ploys has been to promote yoga as a universal wellness practice. An important turning point in India's soft power diplomacy occurred in 2015 when the UN declared June 21 to be International Yoga Day.
- Influence of Culture also resulted in the health sector for example Yoga integrates physical, mental, and spiritual well-being and is marketed as a holistic wellness practice.
India has established yoga research institutes and certificates around the world in partnership with international organizations.
- India's traditional medical system, Ayurveda, has also become more well-known as a component of its soft power approach. Ayurveda's popularity has grown due to growing interest in alternative medicine and holistic healthcare worldwide, which has

resulted in its incorporation into the global pharmaceutical and wellness sectors. To promote traditional treatment methods, India has partnered with other governments and set up Ayurvedic research facilities. India has strengthened its standing as a place of learning, health, and spirituality through the use of yoga and Ayurveda.

- International Outreach Initiatives like Yoga classes and instruction are offered by Indian embassies and cultural institutions such as the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR).

Outreach in Education and Diplomacy:

- India's Geopolitical Soft Power India has established itself as a center for education, drawing in foreign students to Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs). Long-term diplomatic relationships with foreign countries are facilitated by exchange programs and scholarships. Furthermore, India's dedication to globalization and international cooperation is proven by its active membership in institutions such as the UN, BRICS, and the Non-Aligned Movement.
- India has moral power on the international scene since it is the largest democracy in the world. India's dedication to human rights, democracy, and international collaboration strengthens its soft power.
- India promotes developing countries and fortifies diplomatic ties by actively participating in international organizations including the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), BRICS, and the United Nations (UN).

ADVANTAGES:

Although India has effectively used its cultural legacy to improve its standing internationally, there are issues that limit its soft power influence.

Advantages:

- A rich and varied cultural legacy that speaks to many parts of the world.
- India is positioned as a leader among developing countries due to its strong democratic culture.
- A developing economy that raises its stature in international affairs.

CHALLENGES:

India has a lot of cultural and ideological clout, but it has a few obstacles to overcome before it can fully utilize its soft power potential:

- Uneven Policy Implementation:
- India's soft power assets are sometimes limited by their uneven diplomatic efforts.
- India's credibility may be impacted by internal conflicts, governance challenges, and socioeconomic inequality.
- Competition from other countries for instance In order to stay competitive, India must improve its tactics against nations that actively practice cultural diplomacy, such as the United States and China.

Research gap:

Although the idea of soft power has been studied in great detail, especially in relation to international diplomacy, the majority of the literature that has been written so far has concentrated on nations such as the United States, China, and European countries. Although studies have recognized India's soft power, they frequently focus on general cultural aspects like yoga, Bollywood, and spiritual traditions without delving deeper into their geopolitical significance.

The following voids are attempted to be filled by this report:

Historical Development of India's Soft Power:

Although earlier research has acknowledged India's use of cultural influence, little is known about how India's soft power tactics changed over time, from ancient times (such as Ashoka's Buddhist diplomacy or Nalanda University's international appeal) to the current diplomatic environment. The purpose of this paper is to make a connection between India's current global outreach and its past soft power tactics.

India's Soft Power Goes Beyond Exporting Cultures :

This study broadens the conversation to include India's philosophical traditions, democratic principles, and educational institutions as significant sources of influence, in contrast to the

majority of research that concentrates on India's soft power in terms of Bollywood, yoga, and cuisine.

In India's foreign policy, soft power Few studies examine how India actively incorporates soft power into its foreign policy, diplomatic ties, and multilateral engagements, despite prior study acknowledging the country's potential for soft power. This study evaluates how well India's diplomatic efforts—such as the International Day of Yoga, partnerships in education, and humanitarian initiatives—have shaped opinions around the world.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

1. What are the main obstacles and constraints preventing India from achieving its full potential as a soft power?
2. In what ways does India's soft power differ from that of other powerful nations such as China and the United States?
3. How has India's international standing been affected by its humanitarian initiatives, such as development assistance and vaccine diplomacy?
4. What tactics might India use going forward to strengthen and maintain its influence as a soft power?

KEY OBSERVATIONS:

India's rich cultural and historical heritage is the foundation of its soft power:

- South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia have all been impacted by India's longstanding status as a hub of knowledge, trade, and spirituality.
- Scholars from China, Korea, and Persia were drawn to ancient universities like Nalanda and Takshashila, which helped establish India as a major intellectual hub.
- India has historically based its diplomatic relations on the idea of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (The World is One Family), which supports its inclusive and nonviolent international strategy.

India's cultural influence has grown thanks to Bollywood and the media:

- The way the world views India has been greatly influenced by the Indian film industry, especially Bollywood.
- Bollywood has a sizable following in South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. In nations like Egypt, Russia, and Indonesia, Indian films and television series are well-liked.
- Bollywood's global appeal has been further enhanced by the emergence of streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Prime, which have made Indian entertainment more widely available.

Ayurveda and yoga have developed into effective soft power diplomatic tools:

- Yoga has been adopted in more than 190 countries as a result of India's promotion of the practice through campaigns like International Yoga Day, which was established by the UN in 2015.
- Ayurveda has become well-known as a comprehensive medical approach, and India is working with global research institutes and wellness enterprises.

India's influence is growing globally through its educational and digital diplomacy:

- India has established itself as a center for education, drawing students from the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa to universities like JNU, IITs, and IIMs.
- India has improved its standing as a technical pioneer worldwide thanks to its Digital Diplomacy programs, such as Start-up India and Digital India.
- Indian tech firms like TCS, Wipro, and Infosys are enhancing India's standing in the global IT and digital governance arena.
- Multilateral Activities Have Improved India's Position in the World: Multilateral organizations including the UN, BRICS, G20, and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) have all had substantial participation from India.
- India uses various venues to advance South-South collaboration, climate action, and sustainable development.

FINDINGS:

India's most powerful soft power asset is still its cultural heritage:

- India's cultural heritage, which includes Bollywood, yoga, Ayurveda, and food, still shapes its diplomatic ties and global influence.
- Indian customs have gained widespread acceptance abroad, enhancing its allure as a soft power in places like South America, Africa, and Southeast Asia.

Bollywood and the media have increased India's soft power internationally:

- -India's global influence and cultural outreach have been reinforced by Bollywood's popularity abroad and internet streaming services.
- Celebrity ambassadors, co-productions, and Indian film festivals all contribute to its attractiveness on a global scale.

Ayurveda The Soft Power Diplomacy of India is Being Transformed by Yoga and Ayurveda:

- India is becoming a pioneer in international health and wellness diplomacy thanks to its Ayurvedic partnerships with WHO and its UN-recognized International Yoga Day.
- India's diplomatic involvement in health and well-being have increased as a result of the global wellness industry's growing interest in meditation, alternative medicine, and traditional healing.

The development of education and technology has improved India's standing internationally:

- Foreign students are drawn to India's universities, fostering enduring diplomatic links.
- India's IT sector is a major contributor to the global digital infrastructure and has an impact on economies all over the world.
- India's technological reputation has increased because to its startup environment and digital governance.

India's Influence in Multilateral Organizations Is Growing:

- India's dedication to international collaboration and development is further demonstrated by its leadership in the BRICS, G20, UN, and NAM.
- India's reputation as a responsible power has grown as a result of its initiatives in disaster relief, vaccine diplomacy, and humanitarian aid.

The following issues need to be resolved if India is to reach its full potential as a soft power:

- For India to increase its diplomatic and cultural influence, a well-thought-out, long-term policy approach is required.
- India's international reputation depends on how its internal political and socioeconomic problems are handled.
- India will need to increase its efforts in international outreach initiatives in order to compete with the U.S.'s cultural diplomacy techniques and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

CONCLUSION:

With a strong foundation in its philosophical, cultural, and historical traditions, India's soft power approach has developed over centuries. India has long been a hub of learning, spirituality, and international interaction, from the introduction of Buddhism under Emperor Ashoka to the founding of historic universities like Nalanda and Takshashila. India still has an impact today through Bollywood, yoga, Ayurveda, food, education, digital innovation, and cultural diplomacy. Bollywood, which has spread its influence outside of South Asia into Africa, the Middle East, Russia, and Latin America, has been one of India's most successful soft power instruments. In a similar vein, yoga and Ayurvedic diplomacy have made India a global leader in wellness, and its international legitimacy has been bolstered by programs like International Yoga Day and WHO partnerships for traditional medicine. India's stature in international relations has been further enhanced by its multilateral involvement.

Participating actively in institutions such as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), BRICS, G20, and the United Nations (UN), India has established itself as a link between developed and developing countries. India has strengthened its reputation as a leader in science and humanitarianism through programs like Vaccine Maitri, in which it supplied COVID-19 vaccinations to more than 100 nations. Aside from that, India's educational system, which includes universities like JNU and IITs, is drawing students from all over the world and building strong diplomatic relationships.

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