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## India's Cultural Diplomacy: Present Dynamics, Challenges And Future Prospects

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### **ABSTRACT:**

*Cultural Diplomacy is an important instrument of foreign policy. It helps in promoting international links with countries and people around the globe. Though it is a newly coined term, it has existed as a practise over centuries. In the globalized and interdependent world, cultural diplomacy is critical to national interest as a part of foreign policy of the countries all over the world. India has recognized the importance of Cultural Diplomacy as a part of its soft power strategy in promoting its national interest and establishing itself as a dominant regional and global power. India's move in this direction can be seen in the celebration of International Buddha Poornima Diwas, opening of cultural centres in different countries, signing of cultural agreements and exchange programmes with neighbouring countries. The basic principal of Cultural Diplomacy is to support foreign policy by the deployment of culture to pursue national interest. It is in this context that an attempt is made in this article to trace the history of the use of culture as a diplomatic tool by independent India in order to analyse its present dynamics and the extent of its success followed by upcoming challenges that India has to face in making its cultural diplomacy a primary diplomatic tool for further diplomatic practice.*

**Keywords:** Cultural Diplomacy; Foreign Policy; Indian Council for Cultural Relations; International Relations; Soft Power.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Diplomacy is 'a means by which States throughout the world conduct their affairs in ways to ensure peaceful relations.'<sup>1</sup> It is not a new concept. It existed even in the ancient period as it helped kingdoms to forge and strengthen relations with other kingdoms. According to *Satow's Diplomatic Practice* "the earliest known 'diplomatic document' is a copy of a letter from the Mesopotamian kingdom of Ebla to that of Amazi (about a thousand km away)."<sup>2</sup> In India the Arthashastra "a treatise on statecraft, military strategy and economic policy by kautilya (c.a 350-238 BC, a Prime Minister of India's first great emperor Chandragupta Maurya), classified diplomatic representatives into plenipotentiaries (fully empowered to represent the king), and envoys with limited negotiating authority and simple messengers."<sup>3</sup> All were to be accorded special international protection.<sup>4</sup> Apart from this, the "Mandala Theory" of Kautilya advised the king on the nature of his diplomatic relations with his neighbours.

In the modern era due to several changes in the international scenario various changes have also taken place in the practice of diplomacy. Earlier the focus was on hard power as a means of diplomatic practice. But with the introduction of the concept of soft power the diplomatic

practice became modernized because the concept of soft power provides an alternative to the diplomatic envoys to conduct diplomatic practice without applying the carrot and stick approach. The term soft power was coined by Joseph Nye during the debate on whether the US was declining in the late 1980s or not.<sup>5</sup> Nye defined soft power as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion.”<sup>6</sup> It arises as a result of the attractiveness of a nation’s ideals, culture, and policies.<sup>7</sup> Nye stated “when you can get others to admire your ideals and to want what you want, you do not have to spend as much as on sticks and carrot to move them in your direction.”<sup>8</sup> Seduction is more effective than coercion and this seduction is provided by soft power.<sup>9</sup> Since its inception, the concept of soft power has quickly become accepted by a wide range of intellectuals as well as the statesmen becoming embedded thoroughly in the conversation about international diplomacy.<sup>10</sup> Since soft power involves role of a country’s culture, ideals and policies we can say that public diplomacy, summit diplomacy, digital diplomacy cultural diplomacy etc are all the different variants of soft power. But before going any further it is imperative to understand what does the word cultural diplomacy stand for and why it is important.

### **CULTURAL DIPLOMACY- WHAT AND WHY**

Cultural Diplomacy is the deployment of a state’s culture in support of its foreign policy goals. According to Fox Cultural Diplomacy implies “the involvement of government ‘to whatever extent’ in the business of projecting the nation’s image abroad is persuasive.”<sup>11</sup> Cultural diplomacy is based on the premise that “good relations can take root in the fertile ground of understanding and respect.”<sup>12</sup> According to Cavaliero “human exchanges are recognized as being the most effective solvent of prejudice or disinformation.”<sup>13</sup> Cultural Diplomacy can facilitate such exchanges as it rests on the assumption that art, education and language are among most significant entry points into culture. They are distinctive and fundamental for individual societies.<sup>14</sup>

Cultural Diplomacy is important for a variety of reasons.<sup>15</sup> It involves an attempt to promote values and image of a country amongst other foreign audiences as well as try to understand values, culture and image of other countries and their people.<sup>16</sup> Through Cultural diplomacy governments of various countries can increase their respect and understanding amongst other countries of the world.<sup>17</sup> There are many benefits of cultural diplomacy programs. For e.g. Cultural diplomacy programs can create forums for interaction between people of different countries, thus laying the ground for the forging friendships and strong connections between people of different nationalities.<sup>18</sup> Cultural diplomacy helps create a “foundation of trust” with other peoples. Policy makers can build on this trust to create political, economic, and military agreements.<sup>19</sup> Cultural Diplomacy programs can also act as a deterrent against ignorance and baseless hatred that people in other countries may bear towards a certain country.<sup>20</sup>

Cultural diplomacy can also help to advance the interests of other countries, not just the interests of the country carrying out the diplomacy.<sup>21</sup> The cultural diplomacy of India, for instance, “with its heavy focus on providing scholarships to students from neighbouring countries to study in India, serves to advance India’s interests and those of its neighbours, as well as the interests of the students themselves.”<sup>22</sup> Cultural diplomacy “incorporates activities undertaken by, or

involving, a wide range of participants such as artists, singers and so on, but also the manifestations of their artistry (such as a film), the promotion of aspects of the culture of a state (language, for instance), and the exchange of people, such as academics.”<sup>23</sup>

Activities which falls within the ambit of cultural diplomacy displays an aspect of the culture of the polity, the government represents.<sup>24</sup> According to Simon Mark “the range of activities is wide and is no longer limited to ‘high culture’; cultural activity is viewed less as being produced for, and viewed by, elites. It now more often includes cultural activity targeted at the wider population.”<sup>25</sup>

“Examples of this broader scope of cultural diplomacy includes educational scholarships, visits of scholars, intellectuals, academics and artists both domestically and abroad, cultural group performances, artist performances and exhibitions, seminars and conferences, the operation of libraries, festivals abroad and support for festivals of other countries held domestically, establishing and maintaining professorships and chairs in universities abroad, the commissioning of busts, statues and portraits of national leaders, the presentation of books and musical instruments to visiting dignitaries and diplomatic missions abroad, an essay award and an annual lecture and sports.”<sup>26</sup>

## BACKGROUND TO INDIA’S USE OF CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

India is not new to cultural diplomacy. Though as a sub variant of soft power Cultural Diplomacy became popular later but India had its encounter with cultural diplomacy long before the word was coined.

According to C. Raja Mohan, “India’s self discovery of its rich cultural heritage and its global reach played an important role in shaping its modern nationalism.”<sup>27</sup> Its civilizational riches attracted artists, writers and philosophers from far and wide.”<sup>28</sup> After Independence “The Indian Council of World Affairs” was established in 1943 as a think tank. It is devoted exclusively for the study of international relations and foreign affairs.<sup>29</sup> Its primary aim is to promote India’s relations with other countries through study, research, discussion, lectures, exchange of ideas and information with other organisations within and outside India engaged in similar activities.<sup>30</sup> The historic Asian Relations Conference was held under the auspices of the ICWA in March 1947 under the leadership of Sarojini Naidu and was addressed by Mahatma Gandhi. In 2009 an initiative was taken to commemorate the Asian Relations Conference under the aegis of ICWA.<sup>31</sup> Another major step towards this direction was taken by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. As the first Prime Minister of India Nehru was quick to recognize the value of cultural diplomacy.<sup>32</sup> He and Abul Kalam Azad, who was minister of education in Nehru’s first cabinet, set up the Indian Council for Cultural Relations in 1950. Since then the ICCR has then much to showcase India’s civilizational heritage.<sup>33</sup> It has presence in 35 countries in the form of cultural centres established in the various regions of those countries.<sup>34</sup>

In later years Rajiv Gandhi gave a new momentum to India’s cultural diplomacy when he launched the Indian festivals around the world.<sup>35</sup> C. Raja Mohan has stated that “amidst India’s globalisation and the intensification of its global footprint since the 1990s, there has been growing popular interest in India’s culture — from yoga to cuisine and from Bollywood to

contemporary art. The economic success of the Indian Diaspora, especially in the developed Western world, has tended to boost India's soft power."<sup>36</sup>

An important part of India's Cultural Diplomacy has been the cultivation of Indian Diaspora living in various parts of the world. The Indian government has taken a number of policy initiatives in order to engage this Diaspora. Take for e.g. the Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas which is held in the month of January every year since 2003.<sup>37</sup> Apart from this India has also signed formal cultural agreements with various countries. For e.g India has signed cultural agreements with Malaysia in 1978, with Philippines in 1969, with Vietnam in 1976, with Laos in 1994 and with Myanmar in 2001; with U.K in 2010 etc.<sup>38</sup> These agreements have provided a basis to officially pursue cultural diplomacy through exchange programmes, performances and several other cultural activities.<sup>39</sup> Another major step towards engaging the Indian diaspora in different countries of the world is the Know India Programme. It is a three week orientation programme under the Ministry of Overseas Affairs for the Diaspora youth conducted with the view to promote awareness on different facets of life in India and the progress made by the country in various field.<sup>40</sup> It provides a forum for students and young professionals of Indian origin to visit India share their views, expectations and experiences to develop closer bond with contemporary India.<sup>41</sup>

In the light of the above discussion, the detailed analysis of the present dynamics of India's cultural diplomacy will further help us in understanding its current role as a tool of diplomatic practice and whether its role in India's foreign policy will increase in future or not.

## **PRESENT SCENARIO**

With the passing of the baton of power from UPA to NDA in 2014 Lok Sabha elections in India the use of culture as a tool of soft power has intensified. Under the banner of India's 'Look East'/'Act East' policy, P.M Modi saw 'culture' as a window in order to appeal people of southeast Asia in particular and Asia in general. One of the best cultural traits which Modi projected was Buddhism during his visits to different south and East Asian countries.

Buddhism has its roots in India and spread across the Asia in ancient and early medieval times. India hosted International Buddha Purnima Diwas on 4<sup>th</sup> May 2015 to commemorate the birth, enlightenment and mahaparinirvana of Lord Buddha.<sup>42</sup> The decision to host the International Buddha Purnima Diwas was initiated by Modi who led the prayers on the day.<sup>43</sup> Modi stated "without Buddha this century cannot be Asia's century".<sup>44</sup> The government also plans to establish a centre for Buddhist worship and learning in New Delhi. Thus, Modi's government is trying to promote India as the spiritual birthplace of Buddhism and home of the Buddha, though he was born in present day Nepal.<sup>45</sup>

New Delhi aims to use Buddhism to neutralize any Chinese soft power advantage.<sup>46</sup> But it is not going to be a cake walk for India as China's attitude towards Buddhism as a diplomatic tool is under transformation. Recently China's Foreign Ministry has elevated the Buddhism's role as a foreign policy tool. Beijing has the advantage of having the world's largest Buddhist population and is believed to be undergoing a Buddhist renaissance under President Xi Jinping while India only has a small number of Buddhists, many from poorer sections of society.<sup>47</sup>

India has deployed cultural diplomacy in its own neighbourhood. Buddhism is used to appeal to Bhutan and Nepal. In Kathmandu, one of the four 'Cs' of Modi's Nepal visit was culture.<sup>48</sup> In recent year there has been a great emphasis on the use of India's cultural heritage of the past to build strong relations with the neighbours. For example the use of Nalanda University as centre piece of India's cultural diplomacy to act as a bridge between the past and the future.<sup>49</sup> The decision was taken in the first meeting of the Parliamentary Consultative Committee on External Affairs for 2013 at Rajgir on 12<sup>th</sup> February, hosted by then External Affairs Minister Mr. Salman Khurshid.<sup>50</sup> According to an MEA release the meeting deliberated upon India's cultural diplomacy and the role envisaged in this regard of Nalanda University.<sup>51</sup> As cultural diplomacy also includes giving scholarship to study in the donor country, the role played by Nalanda University in this regard can be significant especially to students from countries where Buddhist population is in majority. It will help in developing a positive image of India and will further boost up bilateral and multilateral agreements between India and those countries.

Another example of the practical use of ancient Indian cultural heritage as a tool of cultural diplomacy is the use of ancient Indo-Lankan Buddhist ties, dating back to the Mauryan Empire, under Ashoka to further strengthen its relations with Srilanka.<sup>52</sup> For e.g. during his visit to Jaffna, P.M Modi inaugurated the Jaffna cultural centre funded by India.<sup>53</sup>

The contemporary era of globalization has given utmost prominence to popular culture.<sup>54</sup> According to Schneider "popular culture is the greatest untapped resource in the cultural diplomacy arsenal."<sup>55</sup> In the above statement she is talking about America as she states "products of popular culture- films, TV, music-are America's largest export".<sup>56</sup> In the Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy Patricia M. Goff states that "America is not alone as Japan, Brazil and France are some of the countries that export cultural products in great number and thus have the potential to use popular culture to their advantage."<sup>57</sup> In case of India, Bollywood's more exotic charms have proved exportable to many countries.<sup>58</sup>

The specific themes incorporated in the Bollywood films have led to their tremendous popularity.<sup>59</sup> In contrast with the American themes of melodrama and individualism, "the promotion of family and community oriented value has made audiences more receptive to Indians films in many other developing countries".<sup>60</sup> Important themes such as modesty, collectivism and religiosity are prevalent and can be considered as a contributing factor to the growth of Bollywood.<sup>61</sup>

Bollywood as a part of cultural diplomacy which itself is a sub-variant of soft power is swiftly making inroads in Poland. An article on the online page "theindiandiaspora.com" under the heading "Bollywood's soft power visible all over Poland" stated that "Bollywood films have made inroads in Polish society and the soft power of bollywood is visible all over Poland."<sup>62</sup> According to this article the song "Dola Re Dola from 'Devdas prompted many Polish girls to choreograph this number for their dance presentations. In the last eight years many dance groups like Warsaw's Mohini, Krakow's Chameli etc have become very popular and successful.<sup>63</sup> Newly appointed Indian ambassador to Poland, Ajay Bisaria has requested the Indian Council for Cultural Relations to give these dancers more facilities to learn and master their art in India for

few more months.<sup>64</sup> According to Bisaria “they should be encouraged in their pursuit as they have become our envoys of Indian culture in Poland.”<sup>65</sup>

In South East Asian region the greatest influence of Bollywood is in Indonesia. Seeing the increasing popularity of Bollywood in Indonesia, the Zee Entertainment Enterprises has debuted a general entertainment channel in Indonesia to woo the local Indonesian audience with popular Indian daily soaps.<sup>66</sup> Apart from this, the craze of Bollywood and Shah Rukh Khan Movie in Pakistan is well known. According to an article published in “The National” Newspaper in 2010, “Pakistanis want bollywood style wedding. This shows even though the diplomatic relations between India and Pakistan has hit a sour note, the influence of Indian culture is growing.”<sup>67</sup>

Besides this, India has also used other forms of popular culture as a diplomatic tool. For e.g during Xi’s visit to India, China and India signed a memorandum of understanding to coproduce films, the first of which looks set to be the recently announced *Kung Fu Yoga*, starring Jackie Chan. India has also signed an agreement with Vietnam on broadcasting cooperation between India’s “Prasar Bharti” and the “Voice of Vietnam.”<sup>68</sup>

Moreover, in the recent years; there has been an attempt to enlist India’s philosophical and religious traditions in the service of its foreign policy with Yoga at the forefront of this effort.<sup>69</sup> Speaking at the UN General Assembly in September; Modi described yoga as “India’s gift to the world” and successfully lobbied the forum to declare June 21 as World Yoga Day. Around 177 nations supported the proposal, including the United States and China.<sup>70</sup> Thus the celebration of International Yoga day and its links with ancient Indian philosophy and religion will help India to use it as a tool of diplomacy to gain popularity and legitimacy amongst the people of foreign countries. It will improve the image of India before the world as a country with rich cultural, philosophical and religious practices which could be assimilated by the whole mankind for their betterment both spiritually and physically.

Apart from Yoga, Mr Narendra Modi the current Prime Minister of India has also made similar arguments about Ayurveda, which he aims to establish at par with traditional Chinese medicine.<sup>71</sup> Apart from this, Modi also expounded the importance of packaging and preserving Ayurveda to the world more effectively in a briefing with Foreign Service Officers in June 2015.<sup>72</sup>

## CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

Though, the use of Culture as a diplomatic tool by India is on the rise but it has serious challenges before itself to deal with in order to further use culture as a dominant diplomatic tool to gain legitimacy in the international arena. The first challenge is the accessibility- India which boasts of its rising power, has its presence in the form of established cultural centres in just 35 countries, not even near to U.S.A and U.K who have established cultural centres in more than 100 countries. Apart from this, the effort to improve India’s image as a country of rich spiritual and cultural practices and esteemed philosophy through Yoga, is marred by constant cases of rape and other crime related to women.

Moreover, the some extremists are undermining Prime Minister Narendra Modi's cultural diplomacy which is a sub-variant of Modi's soft power strategy with their aggressive promotion of culture of intolerance and politics of hate.<sup>73</sup> The Modi government should distance itself from the efforts of extremist groups at home and at abroad that want to "take back yoga". The attempt to claim exclusive ownership will only invite a black lash, from state and non state actors, elsewhere in the world and it may also cause severe damage to India's image in the international arena.<sup>74</sup>

India's plan to use its ancient links with Buddhism to use it as a part of cultural diplomacy to strengthen its relation with Nepal, Bhutan, Thailand, Myanmar is also facing challenge from China.<sup>75</sup> For e.g. in December 2013 India and Myanmar co-sponsored a three day conference of Buddhist scholars at the Sitagu International Buddhist Academy in Yangoon.<sup>76</sup> In Nepal China is financing a \$ 3 billion project to develop Lumbini the birth place of Buddha with a new airport, a connecting highway, hotels, convention centres, temples and a Buddhist University.<sup>77</sup> Thus, India needs to have a well laid out plan to highjack and outrun China in the use of Buddhism as a tool of Cultural Diplomacy in the International arena. Moreover the success of India's popular culture as a tool of diplomatic practice is overshadowed by the macdonalization of the world and the success, wide reach and popularity of Hollywood movies.

Apart from this, in celebrating India's cultural and historical achievements, some right winger parties risk stretching the limits of credibility.<sup>78</sup> For e.g. claims regarding Hindu god, Ganesh—who sports an elephant's head on a human body—as the evidence that ancient Indians practiced plastic surgery or the claims of nuclear tests in the 2 century BC in India will back fire as there is no scientific proof of the above mentioned claims. Thus, the current Prime Minister of India and his party need to be careful so that they don't let efforts to promote Indian soft power degenerate into farce.<sup>79</sup>

India's ancient links with Buddhism, its ancient philosophical and religious tradition in the form of Yoga, its popular culture etc can be vigorously used as a part of Cultural diplomacy programme to gain legitimacy in the international arena. If the above mentioned challenges are dealt with, then India can further intensify the use of its various tools of cultural diplomacy to strengthen its relation with other countries. The main catalyst in the further intensification of the use of cultural diplomacy is the Indian Diaspora present in various countries which will indirectly be our cultural envoys in their resident countries.

## CONCLUSION

Cultural diplomacy "creates an additional space which softens the sharp edges of foreign policy thus fostering a favourable public opinion impacting foreign policy".<sup>80</sup> In light of above discussion, it can be said that the use of culture as a diplomatic tool by India does not have a bleak future, but India has to face challenges and solve them in order to make intensified use of cultural diplomacy which is a sub-variant of soft power, as unlike hard power even intensified use of soft power will not spur the anger of other powerful countries because it does not involve coercion or the use of military arsenal to get other countries to move them in the direction of its interest. It simply involves exporting the products of popular culture in the form of music, art,

cinema as well as other tools of cultural diplomacy to create favourable public opinion in other countries in advance of its national interest. In the coming years, it will be interesting to see how the Indian Government will use Culture as a diplomatic tool to influence other countries in order to have an edge over the bargain to demand what is in India's best interest.

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