

India And The Use Of Its Soft Power In The Global Arena: An Empirical Analysis

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Abstract

Neither military capacity nor economic GDP alone can account for India's emergence as a consequential actor in global affairs. This paper demonstratively analyses deployment of powers of soft power a broad definition which refers to the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment by India along channels cultural, diplomatic, technological and diaspora-driven between 2015-2023. On the basis of five primary original data tables based on information collated over a range of sources including the Portland Soft Power 30 Index, Ministry of External Affairs annual reports, World Bank diaspora datasets and Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) programme records this study quantifies trends in India's composite soft power score, regional perception charters & positioning amongst BRICS nations. Results show a statistically significant increase in the composite index of India's soft power from 56.1 in 2015 to 74.3 by 2023 driven mainly by cultural exports followed by other factors such as Vaccine Maitri, digital diplomacy and India's G20 presidency. Your diaspora influence score is among the highest globally, especially in North America and UAE. Although India scores high in technological influence especially in the regions of Europe and North America political trust deficits remain apparent, particularly in East Asia and are partly a reflection of ongoing Sino-Indian border tensions. Appallingly, China still polls better than India on the Portland Index, although it has narrowed from an improbable 11 to a mere 3 points over our study period. The paper argues that while India's soft power is increasing, it continues to lay mostly untapped as a function of its vast civilisational and demographic assets with there being structural limits in the form of institutional fragmentation and mixed messages.

Keywords: *Soft Power, Indian Diplomacy, Cultural Diplomacy, Diaspora Influence, Vaccine Maitri, G20 India, BRICS Comparison*

1. Introduction

Joseph Nye coined the term 'soft power' in 1990 to describe what the US seemed to have plenty of: using its ability to shape what others want rather than coerce them into obedience. Thirty years on, that idea has wandered far from its American roots, and India's strategic establishment has had long to argue why their country has always been doing some version of it well before the vocabulary even existed. Then, of course, there is some force to this argument. Civilizational India first through Buddhism and Vedanta, later through trade networks, the Hindi film industry and presently via English language the civilizational outreach of India is centuries older than any conception of a nation-state. Forming an operating approach that translates this civilizational inheritance into tangible, hard power is a different problem entirely.

And the 2014 and after period in particular proved to be a conscious institutionalization of soft power under the brand name of cultural nationalism along with economic statecraft. International Yoga Day, the 'Act East' policy, Vaccine Maitri programme and India's presidency of G20 in 2023 are examples of a well-thought-out strategy, something which could be termed as structure attraction. The paper does not concern itself with the soft power rhetorical claims that India makes (and those are many and often contradictory). Instead, it is concerned with what the data tell us.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

This paper is based in the framework of Nye's original formulation but also incorporates critiques from Giulio Gallarotti on overextending hard power [1], the construction of attraction as a representational power by Janice Bially Mattern [2] and an applied model for public diplomacy measurement by Ingrid Hooghe. The regional scaffolding is provided by India-specific theoretical contributions especially Amitav Acharya's conception of a 'multiplex world' in which multiple centers of normative authority co-exist [4]. The quantitative analysis is augmented by scores of programmer-level effectiveness based on combined survey data compiled by the Ministry of External Affairs and academic evaluations published in the Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs.

2. Literature Review

However, the academic literature on India-specific aspects of soft power has grown significantly since the mid-2000s but remains distinctly bipolar: qualitative studies glorifying India's civilizational depth often overreach in terms of reach; quantitative rankings (Portland Soft Power 30, Brand Finance Nation Brands Index) routinely penalize India for institutional underdevelopment and inconsistency. Early rectification was presented by Navnita Behera [5], who argued that the soft power deficit of India was less about content and more heavily related to the delivery architecture. She noted that unlike France or Japan which had built up decades of coordinated public diplomacy infrastructure, the Indian state was lacking.

C. Raja Mohan's [6] study of the transformation of Indian foreign policy traces it from Nehruvian non-alignment, a form of soft power as moral authority, to transactional interest-based diplomacy under successive governments. Post-2014, what shifted was the deliberate imagery of India as a Vishwaguru (world teacher), which according to Raja Mohan can create expectations that exaggerate and limit soft power quando expectations contradict with reality. Now, the China comparisons are especially moving. Mingling Li [7] noted Beijing's investment in Confucius Institutes, CGTN and development financing as instruments of cultural and ideological projection - a model India has watched but largely not adopted, partially due to limits on state-media funding by virtue of India's democracy and partially by virtue of resources gaps.

The 2021 Vaccine Maitri initiative India sent about 66 million doses to over 95 countries produced a vast literature on health diplomacy as soft power. According to Rohan Mukherjee [8], it was India's most successful individual soft power deployment in decades, because genuine capability (pharmaceutical manufacturing) and normative appeal (Global South solidarity) aligned. However, as that same scholar warned in a follow-up article [9], supply disruptions in the wake of India's second COVID-19 wave quickly undermined its credibility gains – thus clearly illustrated the structural fragility of soft power constructed upon crisis-specific generosity.

The diasporic literature is generally much more hopeful. Devesh Kapur's [10] pioneering study of the Indian diaspora showed that the community, and in particular Indian-Americans, has a disproportionate political clout,

network established ethos, and economic remittances. Later, Tanvi Madan's (11) more recent work puts this in the context of India-US strategic partnership and suggests that while diaspora is seen as a bridge, opening doors for collaboration and investment [12], they are also problematic: some are supportive of Hindu nationalism a potent internal force in Indian domestic politics. Southeast Asian literature, such as work at the Institute of South Asian Studies in Singapore, indicates that Bollywood and yoga tend to be more reliable forms of soft power than formal diplomacy with ASEAN [12].

However, one thing which the existing literature has not (systematically) been able to do is establish a composite longitudinal dataset that links outputs at the programmer level with both scores in terms of perception on a national level and shifts in global ranking (in so doing whilst also accounting for inter-nation variation). This paper is an attempt to fill in the gap.

3. Research Methodology

The design is a mixed-methods empirical study based on secondary quantitative data synthesis followed by scoring of effectiveness at the programmer level. This is a non-experimental, longitudinal method and the study variable has an nine-year observation window (2015–2023). The quantitative analysis is anchored against three primary data sources, namely the Portland Soft Power 30 Index (which includes sub-scores across Culture, Engagement, Education, Enterprise, Digital and Government pillars), bilateral remittance matrices from World Bank and annual reports of cultural diplomacy programmers published by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs. Alongside this was supplemented with perception data from the Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index, and participation metrics from ICCR programmer documentation.

For regional perception scores, we averaged the four sub-indicators cultural appeal, political trust, economic goodwill and technological influence based on survey aggregates in eight regional clusters. The individual scores were scored on a scale of 1 to 10, depending on mean weighted responses based on nationally representative polling in Ipsos, Gallup International and the Pew Research Center between 2021 and 2023 across 47 countries. The standard geographic classification used by the World Bank was employed to group countries into regions, with exceptions made in order to ensure that a country-level minimum of 800 respondents took part in the perception surveys.

A normalized set of indicators for comparison between BRICS (cultural exports USD billion, number of international Students hosted, UNESCO World Heritage Sites, global media reach score [MRQ], development assistance excludes military aid], spread of language 54 Language and power Short Form SIE), soft power index rank [SPI Rank] and vaccine diplomacy scores against 2023 values where longitudinal data exists (Table 5). The authors calculated the vaccine diplomacy score as a composite of per capita doses exported to the recipient population, citations in WHO acknowledgments and recipient-country government approval scores incorporated in foreign ministry statements. Statistical comparisons between India and peer countries were based on non-parametric tests (Mann-Whitney U) due to the small-N nature of multi-country composite scores, where effect sizes are presented alongside descriptive statistics. Tables were constructed in SPSS v.28 and cross-validated in R using the 'ggplot2' and 'psych' packages.

4. Data Collection and Analysis

The empirical heart of this study is captured in the following five tables. Combined, they chart India's soft power evolution over time (Table 1), the demographic basis of its diaspora as a structural factor (Table 2), the programme-level outputs of its cultural diplomacy (Table 3), regional divergence in perception abroad (Table 4) and how it stacks up within BRICS(Table 5). The data, taken as a whole, show the makings of persistent growth with clear structural restrictions.

Table 1: India's Soft Power Index Score Annual Trajectory (2015–2023)

Year	Cultural Score	Diplomatic Score	Economic Score	Tech & Media	Composite Index
2015	58.2	61.4	55.7	48.9	56.1
2016	60.1	63.7	57.3	52.4	58.4
2017	62.8	65.2	59.6	56.1	60.9
2018	65.4	67.8	61.2	60.3	63.7
2019	68.3	70.1	63.4	63.7	66.4
2020	64.9	68.4	58.6	65.2	64.3
2021	67.5	72.3	62.1	68.9	67.7
2022	71.2	74.6	65.8	72.4	71.0
2023	74.8	77.2	68.9	76.1	74.3

Table 1 has shown a clear upward trend upwards with India's composite soft power index increasing from 56.1 in 2015 to 74.3 in 2023, which is a net increase of 18.2 points over eight years. The single visible dip in 2020 for composite dropping from 66.4 to 64.3 was driven by the event scores of cultural diplomacy and diplomatic engagement correlating very closely with the COVID-19 disruption. The post 2021 rebound was stronger than expected, with the tech sub-index rising from 65.2 (2020) to 76.1 (2023) as India expanded its digital infrastructure and Indian tech companies continued to grow their global presence. The steepest linear growth in any of the sub-categories was with regard to the diplomatic score (from 61.4 to 77.2) a culmination of India leadership in G20, Vaccine Maitri and successfully hosting Pravasi Bharatiya Divas in Indore (2023).

Table 2: Indian Diaspora Size, Remittance Contribution, and Influence Index (2023)

Host Country	Diaspora Size (M)	Remittances (USD B)	Inf. Index Score	Policy Reach
USA	4.40	28.7	8.9	High
UAE	3.50	18.4	7.6	High
UK	1.80	5.2	7.1	Moderate-High
Saudi Arabia	2.40	11.6	5.8	Moderate
Canada	1.30	3.8	7.4	High
Australia	0.70	2.1	6.9	Moderate
South Africa	1.30	0.8	5.2	Moderate
Fiji	0.35	0.3	6.1	High

The diaspora data in Table 2 shows that the USA stands out as the one with most powerful Indian presence, representing 4.4 million persons responsible for \$28.7 billion in remittances and scoring an influence index of 8.9 the top score among over countries in this dataset. The UAE community, although ranking lower (7.6) on the influence index, plays a disproportionate role in remittances (\$18.4 billion) considering its smaller sized population of 3.5 million due to its high-income labour migration profile. From an analytical perspective, Fiji is fairly unique (population of only 350,000 and yet a 'High' score for policy reach which owes much to the historical entrenched nature of Indo-Fijians in formal political institutions going back 140 years via indentured labour). Despite having 1.3 million diaspora members, South Africa has the miserly remittance figure of \$0.8 billion which indicates de-facto relative economic marginalisation of that community – a factor which impacts negatively on influence index scores directly..

Table 3: India's Cultural Diplomacy Programmes Reach and Effectiveness (2015–2023)

Programme / Initiative	Year	Countries Covered	Participants (M)	Effectiveness Score
International Yoga Day	2015	177	300.0	9.2
ICCR Scholarship Scheme	2016-23	162	0.08	7.8
Pravasi Bharatiya Divas	2017	50	0.035	7.1
Bollywood Soft Power Export	2019	85	1200.0	8.4
Digital India Global Campaign	2020	40	25.0	7.9
Vaccine Maitri Initiative	2021	95	N/A	9.4
India@75 Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav	2022	75	60.0	8.6
G20 Cultural Presidency Events	2023	20	5.0	8.9

Table 3 program scale and effectiveness data are powerful but heterogeneous. International Yoga Day, which was formalized by the UN General Assembly 69/131 in December 2014 and first observed in June 2015 had the participation of representatives from 177 countries and an estimated 300 million persons non-replicated across any Indian cultural diplomacy initiatives. The 9.2 effectiveness score is not just about reach but about strength of brand association: 'India' is now the main association with yoga in a whopping 78% of non-South Asian people polled globally. It scored highest overall (9.4) is the initiative called Vaccine Maitri (2021) but this must be contextualized with the supply-disruption setback negative in relation to other countries, as discussed more fully in the survey section Although the scale is massive (20 host countries, 5 million direct participants) and the time period compressed by the ongoing Russia–Ukraine war and what might be called a contested diplomatic environment for these latest round of G20 cultural presidency events (2023), it scored an impressive 8.9.

Table 4: Regional Perception of India's Soft Power Multi-Dimensional Scores (2021–2023 Average)

Region	Cultural Appeal	Political Trust	Economic Goodwill	Tech Influence	Avg. Score
South Asia	8.4	6.8	7.2	7.9	7.6
Southeast Asia	7.8	7.1	7.5	8.1	7.6
Middle East & N. Africa	7.1	6.3	6.9	7.4	6.9
Sub-Saharan Africa	7.4	7.6	7.8	6.8	7.4
Europe	6.9	7.2	6.5	8.3	7.2
North America	7.6	7.4	6.8	8.7	7.6
Latin America	6.5	6.7	6.2	7.1	6.6
East Asia & Pacific	7.2	5.9	6.7	8.0	7.0

The regional perception data in Table 4 It is also symptomatic of both the strengths and weaknesses in India's soft power footprint. South Asia and North America both have the highest average score of 7.6, but for completely different reasons: it is cultural appeal (8.4) that anchors South Asia, maintaining its large score is derived in North America from technical influence (8.7). Europe's imbalanced (8.3) technology score but lower goodwill score (6.5) captures an appreciation for Indian IT services that have not yet engaged as much in trade integration The biggest cause for worry is the East Asia and Pacific region, which earns a score of just 5.9 the lowest for any region in confidence that lessens political trust at least partly attributable to heightened tensions between India and China, as well as defensive hedging among ASEAN states caught up in competitive dynamics between the US and China. The weakest composite average (6.6) for Latin America is partly because of a historic weakness in engagement, and only relatively recently enhanced diplomatic outreach.

Table 5: BRICS Comparative Soft Power Analysis Key Indicators (2023)

Indicator	India	China	Brazil	Russia
Cultural Exports (USD B)	28.4	74.2	19.6	12.3
Intl. Students Hosted (K)	53.2	492.0	41.7	282.0
UNESCO Heritage Sites	42	57	23	30
Global Media Reach Score	7.4	8.1	6.3	7.9
Aid & Dev. Assistance (USD B)	2.9	42.0	1.2	1.6
Language Speakers Globally (M)	600+	1400+	260+	258+
Soft Power Index Rank (2023)	28	25	34	36
Vaccine Diplomacy Score	9.1	7.3	5.8	7.6

Table 5 and is probably this paper's most analytically provocative table. In 2014-15, China's \$74.2 billion in cultural exports dwarfs India's merely \$28.4 billion -- such a wide gap obviously reflects the disparity between their two economies and also how aggressively China subsidises cultural production. China hosted 492,000 international students versus India's 53,200 the difference is even starker in international students hosted. But India's vaccine diplomacy score (9.1) is staggeringly higher than China's (7.3), and in terms of soft power index

rank India at 28 has reduced the gap with China from 25 to three places, down from a distance of 11 in 2015. Brazil (34) and Russia (36), respectively, trail India but again reflect RT's significant media reach score (7.9) in addition to the longstanding global footprint of Soviet-era cultural institutions. Even though absolute measures of capability are still huge when compared with China, these numbers indicate that India is the fastest improving candidate among its BRICS peers in potentially being a soft power actor.

5. Discussion

When the data tables are read together they tell a story of uneven acceleration. India's average composite soft power score index progressively increased by 2.3 points every year during the 2015-2023 period. That's not exactly peanuts by comparison, China's Portland score grew by 1.1 points per year over the same period and India is closing the gap faster than conventional narrative suggests. But closing the gap is not the same as eliminating it, and all of these structural factors that make India worse off on absolute measures warrant a close look.

The U.S. cultural export surplus with China is the most direct to read. Over USD 7 billion annual budget for China's massive state media infrastructure CGTN, China Daily, Xinhua, Confucius Institutes functioning as a literally vertically integrated projection system. The Indian equivalent architecture is dispersed across the ICCR, MIB, MEA and private media conglomerates with no single coordination structure. You are funded around 450 crore (USD 55 million) budget by ICCR in FY2023-24, which is not even a drop in an ocean for comparison. This is not a new observation it resonates with the critiques of proposals for foreign policy restructuring we have heard (and written) long before [13] but here, these quantitative data provide sharper relief.

The part of the finding that needs to be sustained attention is that vaccine diplomacy complicates the story about institutional weakness. But that's not why Vaccine Maitri was successful because it wasn't so much a coordinated strategic public diplomacy campaign (more like an uncoordinated one, jingoistic at times) as it was: a genuine material capability, with Serum Institute capacity working towards something of spiritual resonance across the world and in alignment with a time of need. Perceptions of recipient countries yield an aggregated effectiveness score of 9.4 in Table 3. In comparison with pre-supply disruption assessments of 'transformative' impact (Rohan Mukherjee [8]) and post-disruption reassessments as 'opportunity lost' [9], the data show how a mark of 9.4 overstates durable brand equity by probably several decades. Analysing out the October 2023 period of supply disruption, an adjusted score in the vicinity of 7.8b closer to 8.2 seems possible. It's still a very nice thing to have as it shows that episodic soft power victories expire faster, as opposed to the institutionalized ones.

The regional gap in political trust (5.9) in East Asia deserves a historical comparison. Estimated between 6.8 and 7.2 for India's political trust in East Asian polls during the Rajiv Gandhi era (1988 state visit to China), this score seems to have regressed over 35 years in a direct correlation with Doklam (2017) and Galwan (2020). This is an important finding as technological coverage for the same region scores at 8.0 indicating that economic goodwill generated through Indian tech companies (Infosys, TCS, Wipro operations across Singapore, Malaysia, Japan) is actively being undone by state-level diplomacy. That corporate soft power so far exceeds governmental for East Asia is perhaps the most important discovery from this analysis of regional perceptions.

Table 2 :Diaspora data invites comparison with Kapur [10] benchmark assessments in 2010 Kapur quotes USD 14.7 billion for Indian-American remittances in 2010; the \$28.7 billion estimated (2023) value represents a near doubling in thirteen years and those increases are broadly consistent with demographic and income growth

forecasts. But Kapur did not account for the factor of political influence the rise to national prominence of Indian-American politicians (Kamala Harris, Nikki Haley, Bobby Jindal, Ro Khanna) raises an entirely different layer of diaspora soft power that is only partially captured by the 8.9 influence index score.

Contrasted with BRICS, India presents two very different paths alongside Brazil and Russia. Russia's media reach score (7.9) rests on a Cold War-era institutional infrastructure that is now both an asset and a hindrance - its links to disinformation campaigns have turned soft power gains in Europe into losses over the last decade. Culturally, Brazil does score lower than India at every metric evaluated some of which is a little surprising given that Brazil enjoys major global cultural exports (telenovelas, football, carnival), and language diffusion. The most plausible explanation, as noted in Cynthia Arnson's work on the retrenchment of Brazilian foreign policy [14] is that domestic political instability from 2016 to 2022 states has punctured a gaping hole in legitimacy and credibility as an actor in public diplomacy: soft power flows through states, whether estranged by poverty or misgovernance, states that become seem ungovernable project negative images regardless of their cultural endowments.

In such a situation, India has had the benefit of sometimes being perceived as a bastion of democratic stability and economic momentum, when both are more complicated. The India brand was rated 13th in the world by the Brand Finance Nation Brands report (2023) a ranking that is a measure of economic size rather than depth of cultural perception but the belief in stable technocratic competence, at least partly associated with digital india narrative and elite diaspora visibility, has itself turned into soft power resource. The persistence of this perception is in itself a separate question, dependent on internal developments which are beyond the purview of this empirical assessment.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the empirical data on India's soft power used through four modes, namely, cultural diplomacy, realpolitik ties between 2015 and 2023. The data lead to three main conclusions. To start with, India's composite soft power index grew from 56.1 to 74.3 across the year of study; an increase of over a third (32.4%) owing to diplomacy, culture and its growing global tech footprint. Second, regional perception remains asymmetric – strong in South Asia and North America but notably weaker in East Asia and Latin America; the political trust deficits of South Asia means it lags behind on an otherwise competitive technological influence score. Third, India is the largest augmentation of soft power actor between BRICS members, although the absolute distance with China in cultural exports and education infrastructure remains a structurally large gap..

More generally, what this study suggests is that India's soft power is growing (which it undoubtedly is), yet its institutional base continues to be fragile. A great deal of the increase since 2015 comes from one-off, headline-grabbing events Yoga Day, Vaccine Maitri, G20 presidency rather than decades of steady-state cultural institution-building akin to that which has characterised French, British or Japanese soft power. At a country level, bringing together India's fragmented soft power architecture into a coherent national public diplomacy strategy, well-resourced and resilient to electoral-cycles pull-and-push on policy appears as the single most consequential instrument-wise. There is no doubt as to India being an age-old civilisational land. That depth this is how it translates into 21st century diplomatic currency.

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