

Resurgence of India's Soft Power Under Modi Reign: A Comparative Analysis

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Though the origin of the term 'Soft power' is associated with the contemporary American thinker Joseph Nye, a more intense notion of soft power can be traced back to ancient India. Starting from the age of Kautilya, India has had a long tradition of soft power policy. With an initial subdued performance till the 1990s India larked high with its soft power policy. But the breakthrough came in 2014 when all the SAARC leaders attended the swearing-in ceremony of the Indian Prime Minister. India recouped its charismatic leadership under the reign of Modi who went astray after Nehru. India's soft power diplomacy under Modi has extended its outreach not only to the immediate but also to extended neighborhoods through spiritualism, yoga, Indian culture, sculptures; diaspora policy, and very recently vaccine diplomacy. Strained out from multiculturalism, the Indian notion of unity in diversity has outshined than before. However, religious dogmatism and communal discordance have severely hampered India's cultural pluralism at the global level. The two terms of Modi are significantly important as the party under Modi has been committed to reorienting its foreign policy through integrated soft power diplomacy. The paper aims to analyze the growth of India's soft power in terms of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Keywords: Soft power, vaccine diplomacy, Diaspora, Modi's foreign policy, India's neighborhood policy.

"When India's cricket team triumphs or its tennis players claim Grand Slams when a bhangra beat is infused into a Western pop record or an Indian choreographer invents a fusion of kathak and ballet when Indian women sweep the Miss World and Miss Universe contests, or when "Monsoon Wedding" wows the critics and "Lagaan" claims an Oscar nomination, when Indian writers win the Man, Booker or Pulitzer Prizes, when each of these things happens, our country's soft power is enhanced"

(Shashi Tharoor 2007)

The global imbalance due to the Russia-Ukraine war necessitates a serious call for a soft power policy. The uncertainties due to the war have seriously catechized the acceptability of soft power in war-prone global politics. India being the world's ancient civilization and the largest multicultural hub has manifested soft power diplomacy across the world. During the Russian attrition against Ukraine when the whole world expected India to be with Ukraine, New Delhi followed its traditional path of unbiased neutrality; by not supporting either Ukraine or the interminable ally Russia. It shows India's competence as a global leader, influencing its grip on world politics. The

notion of soft power is deeply ingrained in Indian political culture. India is the land of all the major religions; still, it bears the symbol of unity in diversity. The coexistence of different cultures, religions, sects, classes, and creeds made the country a multicultural hub. Despite its heterogeneous socio-political mosaic, the country represents itself as the world's largest democracy, echoing a common political culture. On the external front, India's unyielding attitude towards terrorism, imperialism, racism; commitment toward international peace, and its resolute struggle for non-alignment undoubtedly added further wings to its soft power policy. India has always preferred peaceful negotiation over war. In its foreign policy-making, India has prioritized its neighborhood first policy. The BJP government in the Legislative elections of 2014 has highlighted India's soft power diplomacy as a major agenda of their political manifesto (Election Manifesto, 2019). The ruling government has honed India's soft power diplomacy to a greater extent. The swearing-in ceremony of Narendra Modi in 2014 after his landslide victory marked India's larger presence in the South Asian region when all the SAARC leaders witnessed the historical oath-taking of the Indian Prime Minister. The 'Make in India' project, the foreign visits of the Prime Minister since 2014, and the strategic ploys to invite foreign investments have increased India's engagement in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond by increasing its soft power position. When asked about the rationale behind the Uranium deal with India, Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott replied, "India threatens no one" and "is the friend to many" (Pethiyagoda 2014). The remark undoubtedly shows India's international image, not as a foe but as a harmless strategic partner in world politics. The journey of the Modi government marked a successful endeavor in terms of its foreign policy. The paper attempts to analyze the status of India's soft power diplomacy from 2014-19. It argues for the growth of India's soft power under the Modi reign.

Conceptualizing Soft Power

The notion of 'power' in IR widely bears two connotations— hard power or military power and soft power. The concept of soft power is very trendy in the present global arena. Soft power is the enticement used by one country (A) towards another (B) to incite their attention by the projection of its stature for the attainment desired outcome without coercion. Put simply, a country can accrue the best possible interest without waging war. Soft power is a relative concept, used by nations as per their convenience. The American theorist Joseph Nye originated the term 'soft power' in his book *"Bound to Lead: the Changing Nature of American Power."* To quote Nye, "Power is the ability to alter the behavior of others to get what you want, and there are three ways to do that: coercion (sticks), payments (carrots), and attraction (soft power). If you can attract others, you can economize on the sticks and carrots". He mentioned three dimensions of power - hard power or military force, economic incentives, and lastly the ability to convince other states by appealing to culture and values (soft power). The book was an effort to strongly ground American hegemony in the post-Soviet world order. The USA has excelled in the field of soft power through its education, technology, entertainment, culture, civil society, fashion, food, medication, etc to fill the power vacuum. It has been the soft power of America that let it win over the world's strongest military power – the Soviet Union. But subsequently, America's aggression towards Middle Eastern countries like – Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan marked the decline of its soft power competency. On the

domestic front, the turmoil related to the presidential election and the reshuffling of the internal policy of the US government relating to the visa restriction and selective ban on immigration has severely hampered its soft power image. Meanwhile, countries like Germany, the UK, China, France, and India embarked upon cultural diplomacy. Especially China ranks top ten under the 'Soft Power 30 Ranking 2019' (The Soft Power 30, 2019).

India: A Soft Power Nation

India has had a great tradition of soft power (Thussu, 2013). Though the origin of the term is associated with the contemporary American thinker, a similar notion of soft power was identified by the ancient realist Kautilya between 350-275 BC (Modelske, 1964). In his infamous 'Rajmandala' theory, Chanakya prioritized a soft approach over the war through the capture of 'sandhi'. Even in Arthashastra, the sovereign is advised to confine to 'sam' (alliance) and 'daam' (donation)' before waging war. It means that the concept of soft power had been encapsulated in ancient India. Moreover, in Mahabharata, the trace of soft power is noted. In the 'Udyog Parva of Mahabharata, the Pandavas initially refused warfare and intended peaceful negotiation of the conflict (J. A. B. van Buitenen, 1978). Yudhishtira was offered attractive settlements by Dhritarashtra before the Kurukshetra war. In this Parva, Krishna negotiated with both parties to find a peaceful solution to the conflict, failing to which Yudhishtira waged war. It reflects the omnipresence of the notion of soft power in ancient India.

After the Kalinga war (261 BC) emperor Ashoka (304-232 BCE) denounced violence and became the promoter of 'Dhamma'. He preferred cultural conquest over military conquest and had become an adherent of Buddhism. With Dhamma, as propaganda, the king preached non-violence in South and South East Asia. He sent envoys to spread Buddhism in China, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Cambodia. The spread of Buddhism in every corner of Asia epitomizes Indian cultural enrichment in the region. Moreover, India is known for its most ancient heritage. India's present exposition to be one of the oldest civilizations has worn away the Western claim of their glorious cultural inheritance. Being known as the 'golden bird' the country attracted many emperors from different parts of the world with its plethora of natural and material resources. For that several alien rulers invaded India and looted its wealth. It symbolizes the country's cultural reach at the global level.

Starting from the Indian thinker Aryabhatta who contributed to the field of mathematics and astronomy, the great Indian figures - Swami Vivekananda's *Sanatan Dharma*, Mahatma Gandhi's idea of *Ahimsa*, *Jana Gana Mana* composed by Tagore, Aurobindo's spiritual nationalism mesmerized the world with their eminence. The leadership persona of Nehru Made India follows the distinct track of 'Golden Mean' in the form of the Non-aligned movement as an adverse to Cold War bifurcation.

Indian culture, heritage, foreign policy, and political values have immensely contributed to the growth of India's soft power. The popularity of Indian Bollywood actors, singers, business and sports personalities: intellectuals, Indian engineers, and the stalwarts in Indian politics- from Nehru to Modi and from Mahatma Gandhi to Shashi Tharoor even in the remotest part of the globe is another significant sign of its soft power. Furthermore, the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi has been selected as the most popular world leader by American firm *Morning Consult* and

the most powerful leader by Forbes; Twitter marked him as the most followed world leader. Google CEO Sundar Pichai and the Prime Minister of Britain Rishi Sunak have become the most sought-after figures across the globe. Hindi movies and serials are popular across the world. The Kapil Sharma show has a huge overseas reach. Indian yoga has worldwide acceptance and it is being celebrated on the 21st of June as International Yoga Day. Indian songs, dance, aesthetics, fusions, folks - *kirtan*¹ attracts many tourists every year and has a far-reaching influence on the world. Indian foods have great demand across the globe as it stands as the fourth most popular cuisine². Gradually, India has also become a leading educational destination for foreign students. The country is also the favourite hub of study for SAARC countries. The South Asian University (SAU) situated in Delhi invites foreign students mostly from South Asian countries. Even more, Delhi University and Jawaharlal Nehru University became the sought-after educational institutions, welcoming students from different nations. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) in the academic year of 2013-14, as many as 39517 students had chosen India for study. In 2016-17 total number of foreign students enrolled in higher education was 47,575. In 2019-20 the number of foreign students increased; more than 49000 foreign students enrolled in Indian universities coming from 168 countries (AISHE 2020). All these have sparked India's soft power tradition in the contemporary arena.

The political history of India certainly propagandizes its soft power policy. From the formation of the United Nations to its presidency in the United Nations Security Council, India followed a distinct leadership consistency. The country has provided full support to the UN in its peacekeeping programmes and has conversely championed the cause of UN reforms, thereupon. Even before the independence, the Indian leaders contributed to world politics. The members of the Indian Congress, in its colonial womb, had joined the United Nations Conference on International Organization (1945) in San Francisco, California with a sole vision of the attainment of international peace. Envisioned to be the harbinger of cultural integration in Asia, the Indian Council of World Affairs organized the Asian Relation Conference (McCallum 1947). It was only the soft and respectful approach of India to the bilateral as well as the multilateral world that made it a soft power nation. In the bargain, India's valiant decision to be on the side of humanity and support the liberation war of Bangladesh amidst superpower rivalry in 1971 has eulogized it as a global leader.

The pluralistic nature of Indian society made the country different from the rest of the world, in terms of culture. India is a country with the second largest population. With this large territory and heavy population, the subcontinent has sheltered people from different religions, castes, creeds, races, and languages. Through this cultural pluralism, India globally recognized the principle of 'unity in diversity'. Indian culture has a great bearing on Asia. Especially the entire South Asia is under the cultural spell of India. To back up this, Brunei is a Southeast Asian country that celebrated World Hindi Day on 28th February 2019. India is highlighting the ancient culture and heritage of this subcontinent. Indian religions are spread all over the region from South Asia to South East Asia including - Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, China,

¹ Kirtan is a rhythmic and devotional tone, narrating the life of lord Krishna, mostly practised in Indian societies.

² Available at <https://theprint.in/world/indian-food-fourth-most-popular-in-the-world-a-study-of-cuisine-trade-finds/283119/>

Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Cambodia. India found a strong base to spread a common cultural identity in the region. People-to-people contact has become a thrust of Indian foreign policy. Ensuring people's connectivity and socio-cultural identity is likely to play a vital role in Indian foreign policy. India has prioritized moral values as a foreign policy agenda. It reflects the predominance of soft power in Indian foreign policymaking.

In a nutshell, the initial term of 2014 extended warmth in its relationship with the states in the close and extended neighborhood whereas the second term (2019) has made steady and pragmatic foreign policies; for example – India's 'folded in two' decision on occupation of military rule in Myanmar and Ukraine Russian war struck a balance in its single faceted idealistic image. It means, that to deal with the Chinese ascendancy in Asia, New Delhi maintained discreet silence towards the dethronement of Aung San Suu Kyi's democratic regime.

India's Soft Power under Modi Reign

The success of the Modi government lies in the skillful application of India's foreign policy and connecting India more vigorously with its neighbors than before. Within a year of its inception the NDA Government under Modi, the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council sent their emissaries for a greater and sustainable engagement with India. The first phase of Modi's governance is known for engaging India's economy with not only the major powers but also the small countries like Mongolia, Vietnam, Israel, etc. whereas the second phase has deftly handled the major power contention. For example, During the Ukraine crisis, India dexterously ignored the big power rivalry and showed its position without dismaying Russia. His exploration of other countries has had some significant multidimensional aspects. Modi's historical visit to Bangladesh in 2015 solved the prolonged land boundary issue and also helped India to extend its rail and maritime connectivity through Bangladesh. Modi is the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Mongolia, thus tying up a strategic partnership with the countries from different regions, going beyond its limited ambit.

The major feature of Modi's foreign policy has been to integrate India with the world without any regional disparity. The visit of five Central Asian Leaders to India during Republic Day, 2022 has affirmed India's reach in the Central Asian region, especially after the occupation of the Taliban in Afghanistan. To strengthen the defense partnership with Israel, Modi tied up the cultural knot. As the first ever Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid a visit to Israel in his first tenure. India's engagement in the Middle East has been further inflated by its I2U2³ Summit. According to the defense experts, the summit is expected to grip India's foot in the Middle East. India's diplomacy under Modi's reign mostly focuses on its greater geo-strategic engagement, sheathed and swaddled in a common cultural term which is a sign of leadership acumen.

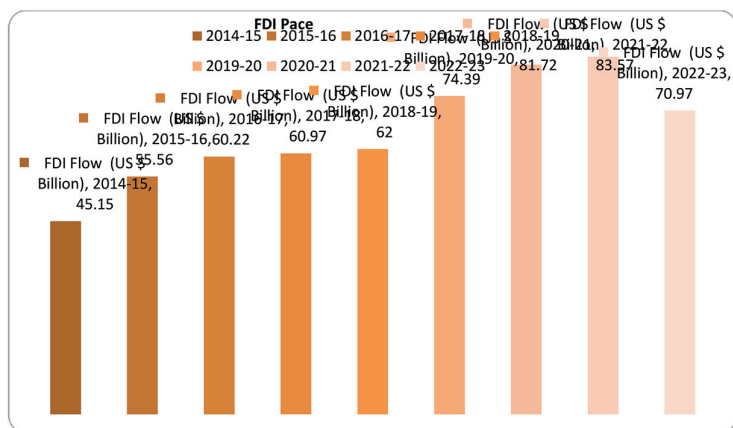
In 2014 New Delhi revived its age-old Look East policy and launched the vigorous Act East policy under which India actively connected with ASEAN and East Asian nations including Japan and Australia. India – ASEAN relations have always been

³ Popularly known as the West Asian Quad, the groupings of India, Israel, USA, and UAE (I2U2) emerged as an outcome of its geo-economic quest, based on some mutual interests. On 14 July 2022, the meeting has been virtually integrated among the four leaders.

part of the reciprocal disagreement. In the 1960s when the regional institution commenced, India was called upon by ASEAN to join. But India's refusal made a lamentable imprint in the ASEAN zone. To rectify that dismal step Modi government introduced the Act East policy that connects India with its ASEAN neighbors both individually and collectively. This new and vibrant policy did not restrict India's venture only in the field of the economy rather it has made the ground open for ascertaining military, political, and cultural interests. The Act East policy has intensified India's partial hegemony in the region. Act East policy is an intensive policy that contributed to raising FDI. In the span of only one year (2015-2016) India's economic tie-up with Singapore increased by many folds (US\$ 13.7 billion).

In the 2021-22 financial year, India received the highest Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). The increasing interests of foreign investors have made India the ideal destination for FDI. Understanding the nature of global competition and the dearth of foreign investment in the country, the government 2014 initiated FDI with an immediate effect. Under this reform policy, Indian sectors that were initially kept under government purview were made open for FDI. To make the Indian economy more liberal and competent, the government had withdrawn the investment limits. For example – defense sectors were made open from 26 percent to 49 percent subject to government approval (DPIIT 2021). Subsequently, the investment cap has been extended to 74 percent. Additionally, pharmaceuticals, medical technology, construction, coal, railways, civil aviation, and broadcasting have been opened for foreign investments. The FDI reforms brought a remarkable increase in the FDI flow that the country ever received.

FIGURE 1: The FDI inflow in India since 2014.



Source: Ministry of Commerce & Industry

In the 2020-21 financial year, the country received capricious investments despite the hit of the pandemic. The present global economic crisis due to the Ukraine–Russia war couldn't stop the pace of foreign investment in India. The Globe-trotting of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi since May 2014, to sixty-six countries, paid off (PMO 2022).

Diaspora has been central to Modi's foreign policy administration. Indian diaspora

being the largest in the world is capable of influencing the foreign policy of the host countries. Replacing the tag of *persona non grata* the Obama administration embraced Modi after his remarkable victory in 2014. Understanding the importance of overseas communities in the development of India, Modi recognized them as the representatives of India in foreign countries (Mohan and Chauhan 2015). Indian communities in the USA along with the Americans tipped their hats to Modi. The 'Howdy Mody' event in 2019 in Texas flabbergasted the international community with Modi's Charisma.

India helped its neighbors with generous aid, material and diplomatic support, and donations. India's space research programme will assist the developing countries in the neighborhood in developing their space technology. Thus India's space exploration has purveyed multiple avenues for strategic partnership with its neighbours. In its second term, Modi made a different appearance as a smart power. The Ministry of External Affairs has provided a dashboard, named 'Performance Smart Board' to allure smart services to the international communities. In addition to this, the decision to make the Indian rupee, a global currency has added further wings to the Modi regime (MOORTHY, 2023). Though the proposal could not hype well and was accepted only by the Neighbours the attempt to replace the Dollar and internationalize the Rupee by the Global South leader is praiseworthy, especially during the unabating Ukraine-Russia fury.

Opportunity out of Tragedy

With all its adversaries, India accrued the position of global power mostly out of some obtruding situations. For instance, during the Cold War led to the bifurcation between the USSR and the USA, India developed its independent and unswayed foreign policy, under the scaffolding of the Non-aligned Movement. The idea of non-alignment was a brainchild of Nehru and it significantly contributed to the end of the cold war. India's decision to be non-aligned eventually made India a global power. Moreover, India's assistance to the formation of Bangladesh in 1971 and its glorious victory, despite America's earnest support to Pakistan had strengthened India's position in global politics. It was the historical contribution of India to the formation of Bangladesh that bore fruit in 2015 allowing New Delhi to access the Chittagong sea port and Ashuganj river port later by breaking China's string of pearls. Moreover, since independence, India has single-handedly expostulated terrorism from its neighboring country. Despite its continuous urge to the UNO and the major powers, India didn't get any tangible support for its war against terrorism allegedly sponsored by Pakistan but it was only recently that the global powers condemned Pakistan and compelled it to return to Indian Air Force Pilot Avinandan Varthamn who got stuck in Pakistan during Indian surgical strike in 2019 against the latter. This incident marked India's position as a regional power in international politics as despite its surgical strikes against Pakistan, it got full support from its neighbors including China. Moreover, at the advent of the Ukraine-Russia war, India's non-aligned position has been grievously criticized by European countries. But India's stand reinforced its independent foreign policy. Even as an astute leader Modi came out of big-power rivalry, during the Ukraine crisis, without hampering India's self-interest. Russia being India's fidus Achates supported India through thick and thin. On the other hand, India's moral responsibility as a good international citizen compels it to be with Ukraine. As an earnest follower of international peace, India tried to negotiate

the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Modi's government repeatedly tried to reach an agreement between the two parties as a good office but New Delhi's preference to continue the business practices with Russia has become cause célèbre.

Vaccine Diplomacy

Vaccine diplomacy is a new buzzword in the discourse of Indian soft power. It was the global pandemic that made India a generous donor of the vaccine in its immediate as well as extended neighborhood. The spread of Covid 19 has brought structural changes in South Asia like in any other region. India's dedicated assistance during the pandemic to the neighboring countries has championed its 'neighborhood first policy'. Being the 'pharmacy of the world' its prompt response to the countries in its neighborhood and beyond has escalated its claim of a regional superpower. In the post-Covid world order, Indian vaccine diplomacy has added a new wing to its foreign policy. India gifted vaccines to 71 countries. Under its Vaccine Maitri programme (Vaccine Friendship) India donated 10.7 crore doses as a grant. Its benevolent vaccine assistance to the world showed not only the resurgence of India's soft power policy but also built a strong footing in the neighborhood.

India's prompt response to global demands for the vaccine has made it a reliable partner and the vaccine policy of India has not only opened doors for its pharmaceuticals but also promises to potentially attract foreign direct investments strengthening its 'Make In India' drive. India's vaccine policy, therefore, is all set to accelerate the economic revival as well. Considering the cost affectivity and efficacy of Covishield and Covaxin, Indian vaccine industries have emerged high in global acceptability compared to their Chinese Sinopharm vaccines (Chakraborty 2021). While most of them are being sent as gifts yet even on commercial terms, the cheap Indian vaccines are equally favored for their easy maintenance, storage transport, and other logistics needs. For this reason, these have become especially preferred amongst developing and least developed countries. India's 'Vaccine Maitri' agenda has provided vaccines to Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Cambodia etc. making them see India in an entirely new light. India's critical assistance to its South Asian neighbors is cementing New Delhi's stronger connections with its immediate periphery where the ascendancy of China had come to be a challenge to India's 'neighborhood first' policy. India has been sending its Covaxin and Covishield vaccines to Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives, Myanmar, Srilanka, Mauritius, and Seychelles as also to its extended neighborhood as also to far-away nations from Canada to Brazil to Morocco. These are being supplied both as grants and gifts as also on commercial terms expanding India's reach to not just its immediate neighbours but also to several Latin American and African countries. India's generous vaccine donation to the world has made it the pharmaceutical hub. Together these can provide India not just novel leverages of vaccine diplomacy but also financial muscle to further sharpen India's soft power diplomacy provided India achieves sustainability in its approach to make its position stronger.

Soft Power in Neighbourhood

Indian neighborhood is the only place where its soft power policy did not work. The biggest challenge to India, being the regional power has been committed to the peace and prosperity of the region. Despite its earnest 'neighborhood first' policy, India was unable to get a cordial neighborhood circle and eventually faced

confrontation from most of the neighboring countries. India has a territorial dispute with China, Nepal, Pakistan, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Countries like Bhutan and Nepal are vexatious with their regional ascendancy. The India-Pakistan conflict has not only destabilized the peace in the region but also dismantled India's soft position. India's enmity with Pakistan has been reflected in its Afghanistan policy. Mistrust, border disputes, dominance, territorial expansions, and terrorism are the major takeaways that signify India's relations with its neighbors. Consequently, the strategic and economic growth of India has been thwarted. The rise of belligerent China, especially at the advent of BRI, has severely impeded India's soft power diplomacy in the neighborhood. Through lofty offers for infrastructural development, China had widened its soft power web in the neighborhood. Xiping's proposed BRI has brought many countries within its close ambit including Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Nepal, Afghanistan, Maldives, and many more. China is giving debt to the countries for the construction of their infrastructure and getting connected by roads and maritime routes in return. Often accused of a debt trap, the Chinese BRI helped build its soft power image; as a result, China outstripped Japan and came in the fourth position on the list of soft power. Border disputes with almost all the neighboring countries severely hit India's soft power image. The neighboring countries expressed grief over India's hegemonic approach in the neighborhood. In his first term, Modi made cultural diplomacy a vital part of his foreign policy. Engaging in building cultural rapport, the Modi administration tied the historical bondings with the countries. The Modi-Xinping meeting at Mamallapuram in 2019 demonstrated historical ties between India and China. The meeting culminated in the 'Chennai Connect' that symbolizes its great soft power tradition.

Despite India's generous assistance, it didn't get a reciprocal response from its neighborhood. India's neighbors find India a 'big brother' if not the elder brother. The bureaucratic approach of the Indian External Ministry has exaggerated the claim. Maldives, Nepal, and Bangladesh are the countries in line that opposed India at times. The takeover of the Taliban in Afghanistan has impaired India-Afghanistan friendship.

Need for a Realist Perspective

A country with the second-highest population, the fifth-largest economy, and the third-largest military spender lark high with its soft power. However, the Indian soft power policy has been put under question. Since its independence, India fought two wars with Pakistan and one with China that showed a sharp decline in its soft power policy. Moreover, Nehru's strong stand on non-alignment during the Cold War halted its soft persuasive policy. In the subsequent periods also, India could not prove its diplomatic proficiency. Due to the territorial discordance with neighboring countries, drowning economy, poverty, unplanned policies, unstable government, and lack of leadership at the internal level, India couldn't focus on the development of its soft power. Despite Modi's dedicated image-building initiatives India failed to rank among the top ten soft power nations (Global Soft Power Index, 2022). China's fourth rank has lagged India behind. China's pursuit to become a global power through BRI has thrown multiple challenges to India. It becomes difficult for India to grip its feet in the region. As a result, India is keeping no stone unturned to stop Chinese geo-strategic expansion. India's collaboration with countries from outside South Asia proves its ineptitude to exercise its influence in the region. To strengthen its soft power, India has to focus on its diplomatic hones.

India has a heterogeneous social mosaic that invites unity in diversity. But the religious dogmatism and the communal discordance especially the Gujarat riot have severely hampered India's cultural pluralism at the global level. Recently, the Indian government's decision on the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), National Register of Citizens (NRC), and Farmer Bill has dismantled its global image as a multi-cultural hub. The revocation of Article 370 has further engendered global controversy. Different countries criticized India for such an arbitrary decision that overlooked the interest of the people of Kashmir. Many countries raised concern over the interest of minorities in Kashmir. Commenting on the Kashmir issue, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad has hyped it by saying – "invaded and occupied". But India has disallowed the involvement of a third party regarding Kashmir. Revocation of the special status of Kashmir is a communiqué for the integration of the same with India. The V-Dem democracy report listed India as one of the top six autocratizers in the world censuring the BJP rule as anti-pluralist (V-Dem, 2022). In its democratic index, India ranks amongst the bottom fifty percent of the countries that show a significant deterioration in its democratic process over ten years (2011-21) whereas countries like South Korea, Malaysia, Seychelles, and Georgia show remarkable development in the restoration of democracy. The major reasons being stated behind such derogation in the Indian democratic profile are the rapid polarization and electoral autocracy.

When established as a soft power nation, one can always criticize India for its surfeit of munitions including nuclear arsenals. While presenting the data on the military stockpile, Hans Kristensen and Norris (2022) articulated India's position with 160 nuclear weapons. After initial reluctance in the Nehruvian era, New Delhi agreed to go ahead with its nuclear energy for the advancement of science and technology. In 1974 India first detonated its nuclear weapon not to strike but to resist. India's 'no first use' policy reinforces its solemn commitment to international peace which further legitimizes its soft power to the international community.

India's astute leadership is a sign of its soft power. The recent remarks of S. Jayshankar on Ukraine have visibly transformed India's stand from idealist to realist in world affairs. While commenting on India's position on the Ukraine crisis Jayshankar highlighted India's due regard to its national interest without compromising its humanitarian values. Despite the strong condemnation of America and its European allies, India strictly continues its trade with Moscow. It symbolizes its independent but pragmatic futuristic vision.

The election of 2014 led to the massive victory of the BJP, the first non-Congress government that came into power with an overwhelming majority on its own. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) won 38.4 percent of the total votes polled with 31 percent voting for the BJP. However, the 2019 General Election increased the BJP's share of the vote by 37.4 percent; the NDA accrued 45 percent of the total votes polled. The government after coming into power decorated the structure of India's external policy. But the infusion of Hindu nationalism has darkened India's secular structure. The increasing incidents of minority lynching have disputed Indian democratic values and raised the notion of Islamophobia. The controversy over the tweet of BJP spokesperson Nupur Sharma on the Prophet Muhammad has burst into flames. Two Hindu persons were beheaded in public for allegedly supporting Nupur Sharma. This tweet has been demurred by many countries in the extended neighborhood. The countries of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and

the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) condemned the provoking statement of Nupur Sharma and demanded her eviction. The Gulf region has been the major source of Indian remittance. Out of 16 surveyed countries India ranks 44 in the list of Press Freedom Index (World Bank, 2022). The Freedom House (2021) expressed concern about India's growing intolerance against minorities, journalists, and protesters. The conceited approach of the Modi Administration over its cultural heritage mainly from 2019 onwards has damaged India's soft position.

Indeed, India is still unable to understand the geo-psychology of its neighbors. It is the greatest hurdle in the process of establishing India as a soft power. Moreover, India's domestic policies have a great bearing on its external policies. The religious dogmatism and growing intolerance in India led to communal riots, gender disparity, and poor HDI rank; minority lynching especially after the enthronement of the Modi government and the derogatory comments of the public figures have flattened India's position as soft power. The second wave of the pandemic starting from the beginning of 2021 has severely halted India's image. The paradoxes in Modi's domestic policies are also severely criticized by the international community. His commitment to *Sabka Sath Sabka Vikash*¹ (with all, development for all) and the aim of making 'Congress Free India' are contradictory to each other. His containment of Congress policy, targeting the opposition-free India has been a major hurdle to Indian democratic polity.

India indeed fails to champion people-to-people contact which has been its major foreign policy concern. Most Nepalese and Chinese folks openly share their open detestation for India. The Nepali resentment has arisen due to multiple Indian blockades to Nepal. India's bureaucratic as well as big brother syndrome has inflamed the abhorrence. Moreover, the misconstrued comments of Indian actors and politicians mocking Nepal have further brewed anti-Indian sentiments amongst Nepalese. As per the survey conducted by Pew Research Centre sixty percent of the Chinese population has a negative mindset toward India². It's mostly due to its border dispute with China that mutual aversion grew between India and China. Since 1975 India's closest neighbour, Bangladesh preferred maintaining distance from India to counter its influence in the society and politics of Bangladesh.

Conclusion

The most flabbergasting incident happened when the Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, James Marape touched Modi's feet to welcome him to the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC) (Sharma & Prasad, 2023). The incident marked history when one statesman lowered down to his counterpart to show respect. Moreover, the winning of Oscar Awards and other international accolades the movies like - *The Elephant Whisperers*, *RRR*, and *Joram* has soared India's soft power stature but at the same time, the prolonged ethnic violence and unwonted gang rape incident in the Indian state Manipur raised international obloquy over the Modi administration. The silence of the government for two long months after the incident has raised serious questions about the accountability of the government. The current

¹ See <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/pm-modi-at-constitution-day-programme-sabka-saath-sabka-vikas-sabka-vishwas-sabka-prayas-is-the-spirit-of-our-constitution/videoshow/88203099.cms>

² See <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2012/10/16/chapter-2-china-and-the-world/>

horrific occurrence of killing Muslim men in running trains and hailing Modi by a railway constable and the communal tension in Haryana have further challenged the secular structure of India under Modi's reign. The growing intolerance towards opposition, minority lynching, secessionist demands, ethnic conflicts, and over and above the hush government shows the incompetence of the government that affects India's soft power depiction in the international milieu.

Despite all opprobrium, India's stronghold in global politics cannot be relinquished. The calculated action and on-the-dot reply of S. Jaishankar on India's stand on the Ukraine crisis further added a feather to India's glaring global power wing and equally showed its balanced diplomacy. To obliterate its hegemonic image it has to work harder on getting global acceptance as a soft power. At the same time, the Modi government has to contrive a fair and sustainable domestic policy that depicts its soft power persona.

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