

India's Strategic Deployment of Soft Power in South Asia: Cultivating Regional Identity and Promoting Cooperation

Urvashi Singh

PhD Research Scholar

Department of Political Science

University of Delhi

singh.urvashi413@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper aims to evaluate India's use of soft power as a strategic asset in South Asia by drawing on cultural, educational, and diplomatic resources to shape regional identity and to ensure greater cooperation. Based on the scholarship, policy documents, and reports by various think tanks, the paper attempts to study Cold War and post-Cold War shifts in India's foreign policy and traces various instruments of India's soft power, such as culture, diaspora, and development assistance, and evaluate their effectiveness in cultivating a sense of shared identity in its immediate neighbourhood. Given historical antagonisms, regional power asymmetries, and competitive external influences, reliance upon soft power will become imperative for India to ensure stability, security, and regional leadership. The paper draws upon various sources, including academic literature, policy briefs, and case studies, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the evolving nature of India's soft power strategy. Filling gaps and providing new insights, the study shows the relevance of Indian soft power as a facilitator for regional cohesion in South Asia. It calls on the need to devise strategies by which India can hold credibility and stay competitive in leading a regional role that is slowly growing in competition.

Keywords: India, soft power, South Asia, cultural diplomacy, regional cooperation.

1. Introduction

In the modern international system, it is no longer sufficient to evaluate states' power merely by their military capabilities or economic assets. Increasingly, influence is also derived from the cultural, ideological, and diplomatic measures that states employ to shape global or regional perceptions. These dimensions, collectively termed "soft power," reflect

the ability to attract or co-opt rather than coerce (Nye, 2004; 2017). India, with its rich cultural heritage, diverse societal tapestry, and rapidly growing economy, has emerged as a major soft power actor—particularly in its immediate neighbourhood, South Asia. India's strategic focus on soft power has evolved through various historical phases. After its independence in 1947, India championed the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), a stance derived from its civilisational ethos and a desire to preserve its strategic autonomy during the Cold War (Rana, 1969; Harshe, 1990). Post-Cold War realignments and globalisation deepened India's engagement with the world, and more recently, New Delhi has identified soft power as a complementary instrument to its hard-power capabilities (Chaban & Holland, 2016; Kumar & Singh, 2012). Over the last few decades, India has systematically capitalised on its cultural influence—ranging from Bollywood movies to yoga diplomacy—to bolster regional ties and cultivate a common South Asian identity.

The central research question of this paper is: How has India strategically used soft power in South Asia to shape regional identity and foster cooperation? This study hypothesises that India's deployment of soft power, using cultural, educational, and diplomatic resources, has been significant in complementing the strength of regional identity in South Asia despite issues like geopolitical tension and external influences competing with the region. This paper addresses three research objectives. First, it charts the historical trajectory of India's soft power deployment, with a particular focus on the Cold War and post-Cold War periods when the country's foreign policy framework and regional strategies were in the process of crystallisation. Second, it interrogates the various instruments that India has resorted to in the practice of soft power—cultural diplomacy, diaspora engagement, education, development assistance, and digital outreach—and their impact on fostering regional identity within South Asia. Third, it makes some policy suggestions aimed at helping India to further improve its soft power strategies in view of increasing geopolitical competition and emerging regional ambitions.

The structure of this paper is as follows. After this introduction, Section 2 provides a review of relevant scholarly and policy literature, engaging with think-tank analyses and notable works on India's soft power, particularly Patryk Kugiel's *India's Soft Power: A New Foreign Policy*

Strategy (2017). Section 3 offers a concise historical overview while focusing predominantly on the Cold War and post–Cold War periods. Section 4 scrutinises South Asia’s importance in India’s strategic calculus, clarifying why India’s ability to shape a regional identity through soft power is critical. Section 5 dissects the instruments of India’s soft power outreach, drawing on specific case studies and policy initiatives. Section 6 evaluates the effectiveness of India’s soft power in the region, considering both achievements and challenges. Section 7 offers a series of recommendations to refine India’s soft power deployment, ensuring sustained regional influence and cooperation. Finally, the paper concludes with a synthesis of the findings and a call for a more agile and nuanced Indian soft power strategy in South Asia.

2. Conceptualising Soft Power

Joseph Nye’s seminal works of the 1990s and the early 2000s are now undeniably seen as magistral for the invention of soft power as an idea, namely by arguing that states can use intangibles—like culture, political values, and foreign policies—to convince (rather than coerce) others, or at least not decisively alienate them (Nye, 2017). Nye says that soft power is a “co-optive” force, allowing countries to woo others to do what they do by making their ideas, norms, and policies attractive (Nye, 1990). In an increasingly globalised world, the roles of public diplomacy, cultural exports, and educational exchanges play a pivotal role in the relationship between states. Nye’s concept has been sutured to various regional contexts, supplying important insights into how soft power strategies can either reinforce or counter a state’s geopolitical goals. Furthermore, the rise of digital media and social platforms has created additional channels for exercising soft power, allowing states to connect with international audiences more directly than ever before (Domingo, 2005; Shaikh, 2024). In today’s challenging international environment, states are implementing the use of soft power in foreign policy primarily, seeking to establish alliances and counter conflicts through common values and understandings.

India’s strategy for soft power, in particular, is significant in the South Asian context. A new body of scholarship over the past decade has emerged analysing India’s soft power strategies, emphasising the nexus between its historical legacies, domestic cultural assets, and its increasingly global ambitions. *India’s Soft Power: A New Foreign Policy*

Strategy (2017) by Patryk Kugiel is a notable example, which offers a comprehensive account of how India has strategically pursued cultural diplomacy, including the promotion of Bollywood, yoga, and the Indian diaspora. Kugiel identifies three key pillars of India's soft power approach: its cultural assets, the sale of democratic values, and the institutions, such as the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), that promote them (Kugiel, 2017). Although Kugiel's analysis offers a systematic account, a deeper dive into India's domestic challenges—whether stemming from religious polarisation or otherwise—would enhance our understanding of the complexity inherent in the country's soft power strategy.

Others, including Ian Hall (2012) and Daya Kishan Thussu (2013), point to Bollywood's impact on global perceptions of India, especially in countries with large South Asian diasporas. Codifying these strategies, India's philanthropic and developmental initiatives, of which the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme is a significant part of its soft power strategy, yet has been poorly reported within the press (United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation, 2021). There has been considerable analysis published by policy research institutes and think tanks such as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Brookings Institution, Observer Research Foundation (ORF), and the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) on India's practice of soft power, especially in South Asia (Mohan, 2014; Jaishankar, 2018; Chikermane, 2024). Such think tanks testify to India's "neighbourhood first" doctrine as well as emphasise the growing necessity of balancing contemporary national security anxieties with an integrated soft power approach (Mohan, 2007; Do Thanh Ha, 2023). Many of these reports recommend increasing people-to-people exchanges, scholarship programmes, and media collaborations to deepen India's regional relationship and to blunt the influence of outside powers, particularly China. With China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) expanding its footprint through infrastructure, media, and cultural initiatives in the region, India now has to recalibrate its soft power outreach to continue influencing the neighbourhood. Figure 1 looks at India's wide-ranging multilateral soft power strategy, highlighting its cultural exports, commitment to democratic values, and robust institutional frameworks that help shape its regional influence.

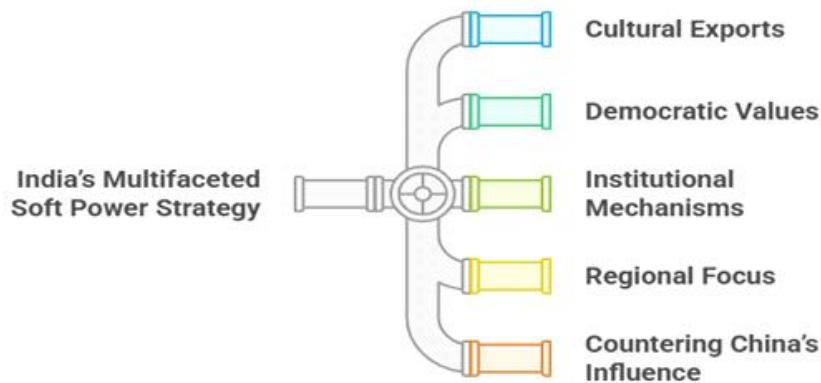


Figure 1: India's Comprehensive Multilateral Soft Power Strategy

The paper encompasses both scholarly insights and policy perspectives to bridge the gap between theory and practice in India's soft power strategy. Through examination of not just India's advantages but also its limitations in this regard, this study aims to provide insights into how India may adapt its strategic approach to maintaining relevance in South Asia in the face of intensifying geopolitical rivalry. It also underlines that the emerging multipolar world requires India to recalibrate its soft power strategy for it to remain relevant in the dynamic regional architecture. The paper also explores the potential for emerging technologies and digital diplomacy to bolster India's soft power outreach in the region.

3. From Ancient Roots to the Modi Government Era: Historical Overview

Ancient and Mediaeval Narratives: India boasts a civilisational deep lineage over thousands of years recognisable by profound philosophical traditions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism), thriving trade routes, and pollination with Persia, the Arab World, and Southeast Asia. Elements of soft power have been visible throughout antiquity and the mediaeval period in the form of religious interactions, for example, Buddhist missions to Sri Lanka and vigorous maritime commerce (Khara, 2018). The relevance of these legacies for contemporary Indian foreign policy is in their informing India's cultural self-image and causing the external images of Indian civilisation to be spiritually profound and culturally rich.

The Cold War Period: After gaining independence in 1947, India adopted policies of non-alignment and anti-colonial solidarity, which

were partly strategic responses to bipolar power blocs and partly symptomatic of India's cultural and philosophical inclinations. At the Bandung Conference (1955), in which Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru played a key role, Afro-Asian solidarity around a shared history of colonised nations was the main theme (Acharya, 2016). India engaged in cultural diplomacy through institutions like the ICCR, which was set up in 1950, with neighbouring states by way of performances, exhibitions, and academic exchange (Singh, Mol, Bika, Kanwat, & Singh, 2023). However, India's soft power initiatives during the Cold War were not always systematic. Cultural diplomacy was often eclipsed by domestic economic challenges and regional crises. India's wars with Pakistan (1965, 1971) and strained relations with neighbours suppressed the capabilities for regional unity (Ganguly, 2001). But India's experiment in democracy, the leadership of the NAM, and intellectual prowess—represented best, perhaps, by Rabindranath Tagore—added to India's 'soft power' profile.

The Post–Cold War Period: This era witnessed a paradigm shift in Indian foreign policy. From 1991 onwards, economic liberalisation, globalisation, and India's speedy integration into the global marketplace turned India into an emerging power (Muni, 1991). It was here that the idea of soft power began to take root in Indian policymaking circles. Bollywood cinema, yoga, Ayurveda, and cuisine, popular cultural exports of India, were very well received, the government realised. Indian art, dance, and educational exchanges started to be demonstrated at its diplomatic missions, embedded in a wider strategy of international engagement (Shairgojri, 2021). In South Asia, India tried to shift from a security-heavy policy to one that utilised soft power tools too. The ITEC programme, for example, provided training and educational opportunities to India's neighbours, while bilateral cultural festivals—often held in partnership with local governments—showcased India's diversity and hospitality. The post–1998 nuclear tests deterioration and the Kargil War (1999) created turbulence in the region (Ajaykumar, 2024). But by the early 2000s, India had stepped into a paradigm of a more robust soft power outreach, strengthening bilateral relations through cultural and developmental outreach with Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. Figure 2 maps India's evolving soft power strategy, tracing its historical foundations, policy shifts, and contemporary adaptations to maintain cultural and diplomatic leadership in a dynamic regional landscape.

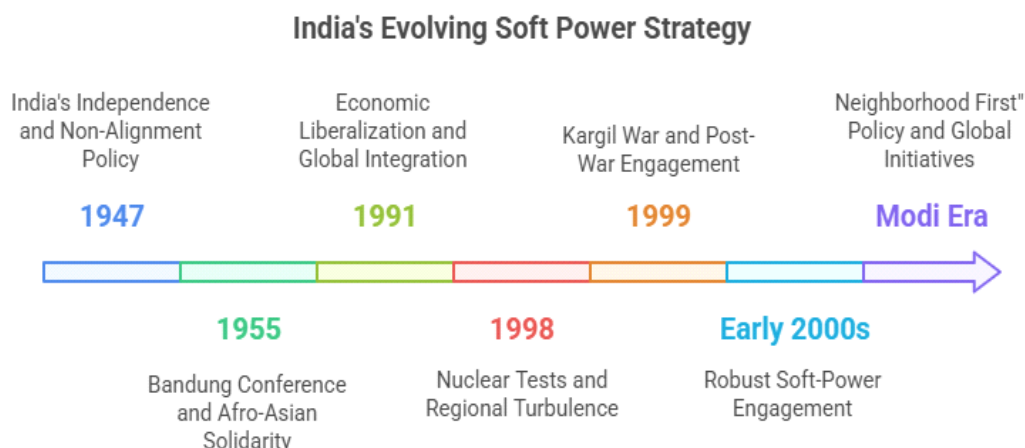


Figure 2: Trends and Transformations in India's Evolving Soft Power Approach

The Modi Government: With Prime Minister Narendra Modi having redefined India's soft power strategy, there is great emphasis on South Asia and strengthening regional ties. The neighbourhood-first policy is focused on stepping up cultural and developmental outreach and developing closer ties through people-to-people contacts and regional cooperation. Modi's government has also been keen to play up India's leadership role in international organisations, putting India forward as a champion of democratic values and development (Mazumdar, 2018). These initiatives, along with well-planned efforts such as the International Day of Yoga, digital diplomacy, and outreach into the Indian diaspora, have greatly enhanced India's global soft power (Kumari, 2023). Furthermore, India has worked to leverage its cultural and humanitarian influence to offset the increasing presence of China in South Asia, balancing both soft and hard power strategies to maintain its leadership in the region.

4. Importance of South Asia to India's Strategic Calculus

Why does South Asia remain central to India's strategic imagination? The answer is geographic contiguity, common cultural and historical experience, and interdependent security concerns. More than 1.8 billion people, most of whom have linguistic, religious, and cultural ties to Indian communities on the other side of the border, live in India's immediate neighbourhood—Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka (Chakma, 2020). This is integral to India's national security, trade potential, and ambitions for great-power status—ensuring a peaceful, cooperative neighbourhood. Figure 3

highlights India's strategic interests in South Asia, emphasising its geopolitical priorities, economic outreach, and security concerns while underlining the role of soft power in shaping regional stability and cooperation.

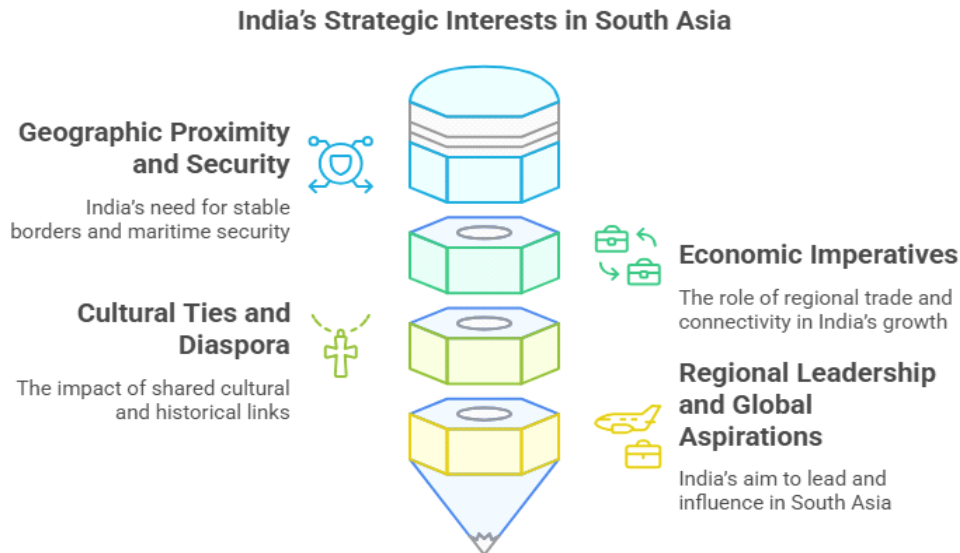


Figure 3: Strategic Objectives and Interests of India in South Asia

- a. Geographic Contiguity and Security**—India shares long land fronts with quite a few of the closest neighbours and maritime frontiers in its Indian Ocean littoral (Tripathi & Chaturvedi, 2019). Background historical grudges with Pakistan, security dilemmas in the Himalayas (with Nepal and China), and meanderings in the Indian Ocean (coastal states like Sri Lanka and Maldives) all highlight the need for stable regional relations.
- b. Economic Imperatives:** There is significant potential for trade, investment, tourism, and energy flows in South Asia. But India's journey of economic growth is intertwined with cross-border connectivity—roads, rail, and energy grids that hinge on neighbourhood cooperation (De & Kumarasamy, 2024). Conflict or political instability in neighbouring states often disrupts trade routes, deters investment, and strains bilateral relationships.
- c. Cultural Connect and Diaspora:** The cultural and demographic intertwining between the South Asian states is deep. Ethnic Indians live in millions throughout the region, and cross-border ethnic communities have shared religious, linguistic, and historical

ties (Isar, 2017). This interconnectedness is both an opportunity—enabling cultural diplomacy—and a challenge, as the domestic politics of neighbouring states can be influenced by India’s cultural presence, increasing suspicions of interference at times.

- d. *Regional Leadership and Global Aspirations:*** India’s aspiration to be a great power in its own right requires its capacity to engage and lead from its doorstep. Responsible and conflict-resolving leadership and development policies in South Asia enhance India’s international credentials. A stable South Asian environment also allows India to deploy resources in the global space outside mere crisis management in the neighbourhood.

Therefore, developing a common regional identity that promotes mutual respect, cultural ties, and economic integration is desirable both as a soft power instrument and as a significant national security agenda. If implemented successfully, India’s ability to establish these ties will lead to increased diplomatic support, less antagonism, and a better climate for cooperation that will benefit the region.

5. Instruments of India’s Soft Power in South Asia

India’s soft power tools in South Asia are numerous, mirroring the country’s cultural pluralism as well as policy creativity. Though cultural heritage is still the principal asset, India also reaches out in the form of media, education, development assistance, and diaspora outreach. This section deconstructs these instruments, exploring how they reverberate throughout India’s immediate neighbourhood.

Cultural Diplomacy: The Bollywood Effect, Yoga, and Ayurveda—Bollywood cinema is India’s biggest cultural export. Top Bollywood stars like Shah Rukh Khan, Aamir Khan, and Salman Khan have a large following in countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Cross-border film viewership has frequently attenuated attitudes towards India and helped create a common sense of cultural values and aspirations (Mehta, 2011). Yet, this soft power has been diminished amidst bans or restrictions on the Indian media due to diplomatic tensions. Outside of film, yoga and traditional Indian medicine, or Ayurveda, have enjoyed international success (Pandey, Rastogi, & Rawat, 2013; Press Trust of India, 2022). International Day of Yoga—the annual celebration, established in 2014 at the behest of India—is an

example of the outsized effect of these cultural exports. In South Asian capitals like Kathmandu, Colombo, and Dhaka, local authorities and community organisations hold yoga sessions in public places, often backed by Indian embassies. These add to the ancient cultural traditions of India, which have significance in an increasingly global era driven by interest in wellness and holistic, healthy living. Cultural workshops, arranged by the ICCR, are held regularly, presenting various forms of dance, including those of Bharatnatyam and Kathak, classical music, and other forms of art (Sahay, 2019). These events, which are often aligned with national celebrations, showcase India's cultural diversity. They also promote cooperation between artists from different countries and enhance people-to-people dialogue.

Educational Exchanges and Scholarships: Education has been a cornerstone in India's outreach for soft power. Scholarship schemes under ITEC, established in 1964, and those administered by the Ministry of External Affairs present opportunities for students and professionals in neighbouring countries to train at Indian institutions (Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation, n.d.; MEA, n.d.). Every year, thousands of South Asian students' study at Indian universities to promote academic collaboration and people-to-people ties. Many of the alumni go on to assume key positions in government, business, or academia in their home countries, further solidifying India's soft power footprint. Some of the more specialised institutions, such as South Asian University (SAU) in New Delhi, reflect the Indian vision for a shared regional knowledge ecosystem. The SAU hosts students from all the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries, encouraging cross-cultural dialogue and scholarly collaboration (Jiali, 2012). These educational initiatives have helped project India as a knowledge hub, offering intellectual resources to its neighbours.

Development Assistance and Humanitarian Aid: The gamut of India's development assistance runs from infrastructure projects to capacity-building workshops and humanitarian aid during natural disasters. In Nepal, for instance, Indian-funded projects include road construction in the Terai region, hydropower initiatives, and healthcare facilities. In Sri Lanka, India has supported housing projects for war-affected populations in the Northern Province. Meanwhile, projects like the Afghan Parliament building and the Salma Dam in Afghanistan stand as testaments to India's commitment to the reconstruction of war-torn

societies. Similarly, India has supported Bhutan through hydropower development and capacity-building programmes while aiding the Maldives with housing initiatives and water supply projects, reflecting its broader commitment to regional welfare (Saha, 2017; Bhole & Mehta, 2024). Humanitarian interventions, such as post-disaster assistance in the 2015 Nepal earthquake or pandemic relief, amplify the compassionate image of India further (Chakradeo, 2020; Parry & Bhat, 2023). Although some critics argue that the development assistance provided by India often appears politicised or paternalistic, it generally contributes to strengthening bilateral goodwill. Due to the resource constraints of many South Asian states, the funding from India often covers very vital developmental needs, thus reinforcing Indian influence and moral authority.

The Role of Diaspora: While India's biggest diaspora populations live in the Middle East, Europe, and North America, sizable diaspora populations are found in South Asia too—especially in Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. Diaspora-linked remittances and cultural exchanges feed into India's soft power storehouse. While diaspora festivals, language schools, and religious institutions reinforce the historical links that have existed between India and its neighbours. Indian missions routinely host events and programmes for the diaspora—cultural exhibitions, film festivals, and national day celebrations—celebrating Indian heritage (Kriti, 2023). Involving diaspora leaders helps New Delhi cultivate grassroots constituencies and local leaders who support closer relations with India. But diaspora politics can also lead to controversies when local people view India's engagement with its diaspora as an intervention in domestic affairs. Striking a balance between diaspora outreach and deference to the sensibilities of their host countries remains key to India's soft power quest.

Digital Outreach and Media: The post-2014 era for India has seen a methodical embrace of social media, digital broadcasting, and online portals as tools of soft power in the age of digitalisation and globalisation. All the Indian embassies in South Asia also professedly use multiple platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, Threads, and YouTube. They post cultural materials, scholarship announcements, and crisis-related news. When it comes to these platforms, India's diplomacy gets personal and interactive with conversations being built and knowledge disseminated in real time (Rani, Acharya, & Trehan, 2025).

State-run media organisations like Prasar Bharati have also been expanded, as indicated by cross-border initiatives. Doordarshan, among others, has agreements with neighbouring countries for joint programming and content sharing (Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, 2024). This view reflects shared cultural and social life stories. These digital platforms transcend geographical boundaries to put out Indian cultural output directly into homes across the subcontinent.

Table 1: Instruments of India's Soft Power in South Asia: Key Strategies and Impacts

Instrument	Examples	Impact
Cultural Diplomacy	Bollywood cinema, yoga, Indian festivals, dance (Bharatanatyam, Kathak), music, traditional Indian medicine	Fosters shared cultural norms, strengthens people-to-people ties
Educational Exchanges	ITEC scholarships, SAU, student exchange programmes, professional training schemes	Builds academic collaboration, creates goodwill through returning alumni in key positions
Development Assistance	Infrastructure projects, humanitarian aid (e.g., Nepal earthquake relief, Sri Lankan housing projects)	Enhances goodwill, meets critical developmental needs, reinforces India's moral authority
Diaspora Engagement	Diaspora festivals, language schools, cultural exhibitions, remittances, religious institutions	Supports cultural continuity, bolsters grassroots support, fosters cross-border connections
Digital Outreach and Media	Social media campaigns, YouTube channels, joint programming with neighbouring countries	Promotes immediate, interactive diplomatic engagement, expands cultural influence digitally

Source: Author

Table 1 details how India's soft power tools—from cultural diplomacy and educational exchanges to development aid, diaspora engagement, and digital outreach—foster regional goodwill, collaboration, and influence in South Asia. Moreover, India's soft power in South Asia balances tradition and modernity, cultural diversity, and growing regional influence. Bollywood, yoga, academic exchanges of students, and food were the means for India to seek more linkages within the region and influenced perceptions. Despite some ongoing territorial disputes with regional actors and rivalry with Pakistan, India tries to strike balanced responses. Yet more than a contest from the outside, it's cultural diplomacy and people-to-people contact that is the sustainable architecture of the event, which will help India restate its leadership of the region.

6. Assessing India's Soft Power in South Asia: Gains and Setbacks

Although the strategic deployment of Indian soft power has resulted in a number of successes, simultaneously it faces myriad challenges that may dent its effectiveness. The successes that India's soft power has been able to gain can be put into four broad categories: cultural resonance, educational leadership, humanitarian diplomacy, and institutional frameworks. First, Indian cultural exports have blanketed South Asia in the forms of cinema, music, and spiritual traditions that help bridge linguistic and national divides. The global popularity of Bollywood, the rise of yoga, and India's religious and spiritual influence have fostered a pro-India sentiment, particularly among the youth (Kugiel, 2012). This cultural familiarity not only enhances India's regional image but also nurtures shared cultural values, creating a foundation for closer regional ties.

Second, India has been an educational and research leader in a way that reinforces its soft power position: extensive scholarship schemes, professional training programmes, and academic links have made it a regional education hub. Thousands of students study every year in India from South Asia, returning to influential positions back home in government, business, and academia. In this process, it forms a network of informal ambassadors supporting and advocating India's policies and culture, hence increasing its regional influence. Third, humanitarian diplomacy has also been quite effectively used by India, particularly during the crisis phase. Be it providing relief during natural disasters of such magnitude as the 2015 earthquake in Nepal or helping with the aftermath of floods in Bangladesh, the swiftness of its response enhanced its image as a dependable neighbour (Banerji, 2023). Such goodwill gestures and similar initiatives indeed go a long way in assuaging historical tensions and rivalries, which in turn are bound to decrease the impact that political disputes within the region have. Moreover, the institutions of ICCR, ITEC programmes, and robust SAU for constant avenues have been a booster for soft power engagement. These indeed reflect the long-term approach of India for regional collaboration at structured and institutional levels in a sustainable way.

However, India's soft power approach has several limitations: the perception of hegemony can be one huge critique. Such dominance in culture and economy can perpetuate neo-imperialism fear among smaller

states. In this trend, some of the neighbours may view India's soft power as a form of influence rather than an attempt to develop partnership and cooperation. This perceived hegemonic ambition could result in a backlash in the country's outreach efforts. Geopolitical rivalries also get in the way of the soft power ambitions of India, the unending dispute with Pakistan, coupled with China's growing influence in the region, makes it extremely hard (Bhasin, 2008). The BRI-alternative framework of regional engagement for China—with large infrastructure investments in South Asia—undermines the impact of India's cultural and economic influence.

Furthermore, India deploys its soft power incredibly unevenly throughout the region: countries like Bhutan and Nepal receive robust cultural engagement, while others, like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, often find themselves being passed over or farther down on the agenda of India's soft power policies. This perceived pecking order of recipients—where some countries benefit from India's outreach more than others—can foster feelings of inequality and regional fragmentation. In addition, India's domestic challenges play a role in the effectiveness of its soft power. Social unrest, along with religious polarisation and a general scepticism of democratic backsliding, has thus tarnished, to a certain degree, India's image on the international platform (Bartels, Daxecker, Hyde, Lindberg, & Nooruddin, 2023). Regional audiences who read about communal tensions, economic disparities, or human rights abuses at home may begin to wonder whether India is serious about pluralism and inclusion, which undermines its credentials as a democratic leader in South Asia. Finally, in India, communication gaps created in their digital diplomacy become one of the key challenges to broader audience outreach. Although India has increased its presence on social media and online cultural exchange programmes, a lot more content needs to be created in various vernaculars to engage with the local populace. Thus, this basically undermines the very motive of India's goal to carve a niche with diversified populations in South Asia. Table 2 outlines how India's soft power initiatives—from cultural diplomacy and educational exchanges to development aid, diaspora engagement, and digital outreach—build regional goodwill in South Asia, while also confronting setbacks like neo-imperialism perceptions, uneven impact, geopolitical tensions, domestic issues, and language barriers.

Table 2: Gains and Setbacks of India's Soft Power in South Asia

Category	Gains	Setbacks
Cultural Resonance	Bollywood, music, yoga, and spiritual traditions build pro-India sentiment.	Perceived hegemony and neo-imperialism fears from smaller states.
Educational Leadership	Scholarship schemes, professional training, and academic links create a network of ambassadors.	Uneven deployment of soft power (more robust in Bhutan and Nepal, less in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka).
Humanitarian Diplomacy	Swift response to disasters like the Nepal earthquake and Bangladesh floods enhances India's image as a neighbour.	Geopolitical rivalries with Pakistan and China affect India's outreach efforts.
Institutional Frameworks	ICCR, ITEC, and SAU programmes foster long-term regional collaboration.	Domestic issues like social unrest and religious polarisation tarnish India's image.
Digital Diplomacy	Increased presence on social media and online cultural exchanges.	Lack of content in vernacular languages reduces engagement with local populations.

Source: Author

In short, all these soft power initiatives by India have been gaining remarkable momentum in South Asia on deeper cultural exchange, educational understanding, humanitarian approaches, and regional institutional frameworks. Yet, serious deterrents persist in the neighbourhood, Indian cultural resonance and educational leadership—its potential to attract—indeed are very valuable assets, but perceptions of hegemony, rivalries, and differential policies of implementation blunt their true value. Further, the domestic issues of social unrest and the requirement for more inclusive outreach strategies dent India's soft power credibility. Therefore, it becomes of paramount importance that India's influence gets strengthened to overcome such limitations by refining its soft power strategy. Developing deeper and more inclusive relationships with all South Asian nations, improving its communication, and taking care of the domestic concerns that may reduce its moral authority in the region.

7. Recommendations for Enhancing India's Soft Power in South Asia

From the above analysis of the existing soft power strategies that India follows in its near neighbours, several recommendations can be made to enhance its influence in the region. These recommendations are designed to not only manage some of the challenges but also take advantage of opportunities for more effective engagement with South Asian nations. Improving upon these approaches will endow India

with the regional leadership role it needs to complement its ends of soft power. Figure 4 explores key pathways for strengthening India's soft power in South Asia, suggesting innovative approaches in digital diplomacy, cultural exchanges, educational partnerships, and humanitarian initiatives to reinforce India's positive influence in the region.



Figure 4: Strategies for Enhancing India's Soft Power Influence in South Asia

- a. Adopt a Nuanced, Country-Specific Approach:* India's soft power engagement as a tool ought to be tailored to the specific cultural, political, and economic contours of every South Asian state. This calls for a more comprehensive mapping of cultural linkages—shared historical commonalities, linguistic affinities, or educational needs. The one-size-fits-all approach to cultural policy is rarely effective, and by avoiding it, India can cultivate deeper emotional bonds with local populations. Cross-border film production with Bangladesh, for instance, could be focused on the use of linguistic and literary heritage, while the festival aspects in Nepal that communicate mythological beliefs and traditions would resonate more.
- b. Use Collaborative Platforms in Media and Entertainment:* In place of a mere export of Bollywood films, India could collaborate on regional production of content that showcases shared stories that nurture a pan-South Asian identity. Content co-created by artists across SAARC could be offered through regional broadcasting networks or Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms.

That would undercut charges of Indian cultural hegemony and simultaneously strengthen shared storytelling traditions.

- c. ***Enhance Educational and Research Partnerships:*** India already has scholarships and training programmes, which can be scaled up. Indian universities can forge partnerships with institutions in neighbouring countries, which can encompass joint degree programmes, virtual classrooms, or collaborative research projects. Joint faculty and student exchanges and academic programmes, cultural immersion programmes, and regular academic conferences across the region can enhance intellectual linkages. This will develop critical institutional infrastructure and a scholarly base that would further institutionalise the SAU's knowledge ecosystem.
- d. ***Improve Public-Private Partnerships for Development Projects:*** Several alternative partnerships could potentially co-finance Indian development needs in South Asia such as rural electrification, skill-building centres, and digital literacy projects with the involvement of local partners or private sector actors. This would reduce perceptions of unilateral Indian action and enhance genuine mission ownership by recipient communities. Joint management committees with Indian representation can help across project design, monitoring, and transparency.
- e. ***Deepen Diaspora Engagement without Overreach:*** Surely, India can persist in supporting cultural events and educational programmes, but it must navigate local politics in South Asian countries. Regular consultation with host governments and local leaders can help to identify diaspora initiatives that foster cultural attachments—without the charge of intervention. Soft power approaches can only succeed when coupled with respect for local sovereignty and sensitivities.
- f. ***Fortify Digital Diplomacy and Multilingual Outreach:*** Indian missions, state broadcasters, and cultural institutions should create feverishly more digital content in local South Asian languages. Short documentaries, podcast series, and interactive social media campaigns can showcase success stories of India's development assistance, cultural festivals, or alumni success

stories. Partnering with a local figure, like a musician, journalist, or community activist and influencer, can help make India's message even more locally relevant and help overcome language barriers.

- g. *Restore Democratic Values and Good Governance:*** India's soft power leadership in South Asia depends on its democratic character and inclusive governance model. Making institutions at home stronger—a free press, civil liberties, and social cohesion—will make India's words abroad more credible. This means that Indian policymakers cannot afford to ignore, on the grounds of state sovereignty, internal issues of religious differences or issues like torture and extrajudicial killings if New Delhi is to protect India's moral authority in the region.
- h. *Institutionalise Soft Power Assessments:*** Periodically assessing India's soft power effectiveness will allow for the recalibration of strategies when required. Public opinion surveys, opinion polls, and focus groups in neighbouring states could measure public perceptions of Indian cultural diplomacy and development assistance. Banks of think tanks and academic institutions should work on trend analysis with big data coming through social media, gauging the sentiment changing hands in real time, and advising on policy when appropriate.

Such moves could enable India to develop a more credible, all-encompassing, and sustainable soft power narrative that appeals to a cross-section of South Asian communities. A much more sophisticated approach could mitigate regional concerns, combat external competition, and provide an atmosphere of collaboration that leads to shared prosperity in the South Asian Region.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, therefore, India's soft power strategy in South Asia can be located within the broad canvas of a multivariate influence imparted by shared cultural heritage, changing policy opportunities, and external forces. The paper outlined the historical roots of India's cultural diplomacy and gave a brief overview of the ancient and mediaeval legacies but concentrated largely on the transformative Cold War and post-Cold War periods. These were times when India moved from

being overwhelmingly security-minded about its regional strategy to one that increasingly deployed cultural, educational, and developmental tools. South Asia lies at the heart of India's strategic priorities because of geopolitical proximity, cultural affinities, economic linkages, and aspirations of regional leadership. The instruments of Indian soft power are varied and widespread—from Bollywood's cinematic influence to education scholarships, the diaspora, digital diplomacy, and humanitarian relief. However, these measures have had unequal effects. Many of India's neighbours appreciate the cultural links and economic benefits that come with Indian soft power, while others fear hegemonistic intentions, competition with China, India's internal issues, and barriers in communication that restrain the effectiveness of such efforts.

Results have been underlining that, though relevant, soft power for India is not a panacea in working through regional tensions. India should focus on the implementation of measures related to relationship-building and context-specific policies that will foster a stronger sense of South Asian identity while promoting sustainable regional cooperation. The policy recommendations include making soft power interventions bespoke for each neighbour, creating media content collaboratively that will provide shared narratives for the region, scaling up educational cooperation, and institutionalising methods of measuring and improving India's cultural reach. Soft power is an underutilised yet important part of India's foreign policy in South Asia. In refining its plans further, focusing on the hilltop, and elaborating on what it has been measuring on the horizons of inclusivity, local partnership, good communication, and consistently being democratic at home, India does have a very significant role in change for a stable and integrated neighbourhood. This is an environment necessary for the security and development of India itself and also for the larger idea of a cooperative and globally capable South Asia.

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