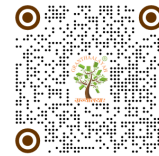


Original Article

## INDIA'S CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN THE MODI ERA: SOFT POWER AS A STRATEGIC TOOL IN GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

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### ABSTRACT

India's cultural diplomacy has emerged as a pivotal instrument of soft power in the Modi era, reshaping its global identity and influence in international relations. Rooted in civilizational heritage and contemporary innovation, India's projection of culture—through yoga, Ayurveda, Bollywood, cuisine, and diaspora engagement—has been strategically aligned with foreign policy objectives. The Modi government has amplified these assets by institutionalizing initiatives such as the International Day of Yoga, expanding cultural centers abroad, and leveraging digital platforms to enhance India's global narrative. This paper examines how cultural diplomacy functions not merely as symbolic outreach but as a strategic tool in global governance, enabling India to strengthen partnerships, counterbalance rival powers, and assert leadership in multilateral forums such as the G20, BRICS, and the United Nations. By analyzing case studies of India's cultural initiatives and their reception in diverse regions, the study highlights both opportunities and challenges in sustaining soft power as a complement to hard power. Ultimately, the research underscores that India's cultural diplomacy in the Modi era represents a deliberate recalibration of soft power, positioning the country as a normative actor in shaping global governance discourses.

**Keywords:** India's Cultural Diplomacy, Soft Power, Modi Era, Global Governance, International Relations, Diaspora Diplomacy

### INTRODUCTION

In the evolving dynamics of international relations, soft power has become a critical instrument for states seeking influence without coercion. Nye (2004) conceptualized soft power as the ability of a country to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than force, relying on culture, values, and foreign policy credibility. India, with its civilizational depth and diverse cultural assets, has historically possessed significant soft power potential. However, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, cultural diplomacy has been strategically elevated as a central pillar of India's foreign policy.

The Modi era has witnessed a deliberate institutionalization of India's cultural resources—yoga, Ayurveda, Bollywood, cuisine, and diaspora networks—into structured diplomatic initiatives. The declaration of the International Day of Yoga by the United Nations in 2014 exemplifies how cultural diplomacy has been transformed into a global outreach mechanism Srivastava (2025). Similarly, the expansion of Indian cultural centers abroad and the promotion of traditional knowledge systems reflect a conscious effort to project India's civilizational heritage as a tool of influence Kumar, and Gaurav (2025).

These initiatives are not merely symbolic but are embedded within India's broader pursuit of strategic autonomy, regional leadership, and global governance participation. India's cultural diplomacy has been deployed to strengthen partnerships,

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counterbalance rival narratives, and assert leadership in multilateral forums such as the G20, BRICS, and the United Nations [Halsana \(2025\)](#). At a time when geopolitical rivalries, climate challenges, and technological disruptions redefine global order, India's soft power strategy offers a non-coercive pathway to enhance legitimacy and global standing.

This paper explores how India's cultural diplomacy in the Modi era functions as a strategic tool in global governance, analyzing both opportunities and limitations in leveraging culture as a complement to hard power.

## SOFT POWER THEORY IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Global politics in 2025 is marked by multipolarity, intensifying U.S.–China rivalry, and the growing importance of non-coercive influence in shaping international outcomes. Soft power, defined by [Nye \(2004\)](#), has become central to how states project legitimacy and attract partners. India, ranked 29th in the Global Soft Power Index 2024 [Brand Finance \(2024\)](#), has sought to reposition itself as a cultural and normative leader.

Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, cultural diplomacy has been institutionalized through initiatives such as the International Day of Yoga (adopted by 177 UN member states in 2014), expansion of Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) centers, and digital campaigns like Digital India. This paper explores India's cultural diplomacy as a strategic tool in global governance, situating it within current global political trends and analyzing data-driven evidence of its impact.

[Nye \(2004\)](#) articulation of *soft power* marked a paradigm shift in international relations by emphasizing attraction over coercion. He defined soft power as the ability of a state to influence others through cultural appeal, political values, and legitimate policies rather than military or economic force. This framework challenged realist traditions that prioritized hard power, arguing instead that legitimacy and persuasion are critical in an era of globalization and interdependence [Nye \(2004\)](#). Nye's theory has since become a cornerstone in the study of global influence, shaping both academic discourse and policy strategies.

Subsequent research has highlighted the practical applications of soft power in diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy, for instance, has emerged as a vital tool for states to project influence through language programs, art exhibitions, and educational exchanges. Scholars argue that these initiatives foster mutual understanding and goodwill, thereby strengthening international cooperation [Pujar \(2024\)](#). Similarly, soft power is exercised through media influence, public opinion, and historical narratives, which allow nations to shape perceptions and achieve foreign policy objectives without resorting to coercion [Baruah \(2024\)](#). These studies demonstrate that soft power is not merely theoretical but actively deployed in shaping diplomatic relations.

Despite its appeal, soft power theory has faced critiques regarding its measurement and effectiveness. Some scholars contend that soft power is difficult to quantify, as attraction is inherently subjective and context-dependent [Nye \(2004\)](#). Others argue that soft power alone cannot secure national interests without the backing of hard power, suggesting that a balanced approach—what Nye later termed *smart power*—is essential [Nye \(2009\)](#). Nevertheless, the enduring relevance of soft power lies in its ability to highlight the importance of legitimacy, credibility, and cultural resonance in global politics. As contemporary challenges demand cooperation across borders, soft power remains a critical lens for understanding how nations cultivate influence in the international system.

India's cultural heritage has long been recognized as a significant source of soft power. [Kumar and Gaurav \(2025\)](#) argue that assets such as yoga, Ayurveda, Bollywood, cuisine, and diaspora networks collectively enhance India's global influence by fostering attraction rather than coercion. These cultural resources project India's identity as a nation rooted in tradition yet adaptable to modernity. By promoting practices like yoga and Ayurveda, India positions itself as a leader in holistic health and wellness, appealing to diverse populations worldwide and strengthening its diplomatic image.

Bollywood and Indian cuisine further amplify India's cultural reach. Bollywood films, with their vibrant storytelling and music, have cultivated audiences across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, contributing to India's image as a creative powerhouse. Similarly, Indian cuisine, celebrated for its diversity and flavors, has become a global ambassador of Indian culture. [Kumar and Gaurav \(2025\)](#) emphasize that these cultural exports not only generate economic benefits but also build emotional connections, reinforcing India's attractiveness in international relations. Together, they create a narrative of inclusivity and cultural richness that resonates globally.

Diaspora networks serve as another critical dimension of India's soft power. With millions of Indians living abroad, diaspora communities act as cultural bridges, promoting India's traditions, values, and innovations in host countries. These networks often contribute to bilateral relations by fostering economic ties, cultural exchanges, and political goodwill. [Kumar and Gaurav \(2025\)](#) highlight that India's diaspora is instrumental in shaping perceptions of the nation, as it embodies both cultural continuity and adaptability. Thus, India's cultural assets collectively strengthen its soft power, positioning it as a nation capable of influencing global discourse through attraction and shared values.

India's soft power has increasingly become intertwined with its participation in multilateral forums. [Srivastava \(2025\)](#) emphasizes that India's G20 presidency in 2023 showcased its ability to project cultural and diplomatic assets on a global stage, reinforcing legitimacy through inclusive dialogue and efficient hosting. Similarly, India's role in the BRICS expansion in 2024 demonstrated its capacity to shape institutional frameworks that reflect the interests of emerging economies [Prabhu \(2024\)](#). In UN

climate negotiations, India's advocacy for equity and sustainable development further enhanced its image as a responsible global actor, linking soft power to governance structures that prioritize cooperation and shared values [Singh \(2023\)](#).

These governance linkages illustrate how India's soft power extends beyond cultural exports to institutional credibility. By aligning its cultural identity with leadership in multilateral forums, India has positioned itself as a bridge between developed and developing nations. Scholars note that India's diplomatic strategies—rooted in inclusivity, sustainability, and cultural resonance—strengthen its attractiveness in global politics [Sahoo \(2023\)](#). This approach complements traditional soft power assets such as yoga, Ayurveda, and Bollywood, while embedding them within broader frameworks of international cooperation [Kashyap and Singh \(2025\)](#).

Despite these advances, a significant gap remains in the academic literature. Few studies integrate quantitative indices of soft power with current geopolitical trends, limiting the ability to systematically evaluate India's influence [Sharma \(2024\)](#). While qualitative analyses highlight India's cultural and diplomatic assets, quantitative measures—such as rankings in global indices of governance, climate leadership, and innovation—are often overlooked or inconsistently applied. [Srivastava \(2025\)](#) argues that bridging this gap is essential for a comprehensive understanding of India's soft power trajectory, as it would allow scholars to assess both symbolic appeal and measurable outcomes in global governance.

### INDIA'S CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN THE MODI ERA

India's cultural diplomacy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has evolved into a strategic instrument of soft power, leveraging civilizational heritage and modern innovation. Yoga diplomacy has been one of the most visible assets, celebrated in over 190 countries and formally recognized by the United Nations in 2014 when 177 member states supported the International Day of Yoga [United Nations \(2014\)](#). This global adoption positions yoga as a symbol of India's civilizational continuity and spiritual leadership. Modi's government has actively promoted yoga through international events, cultural centers, and digital campaigns, reinforcing India's image as a nation offering holistic well-being to the world.

Diaspora diplomacy represents another cornerstone of India's soft power. With approximately 18 million Indians living abroad, the Indian diaspora is the largest globally [United Nations \(2023\)](#). These communities contribute to political lobbying, cultural diffusion, and economic linkages in host countries. Modi's outreach to diaspora networks through events such as "Howdy Modi" in the United States and "Bharat Parv" in Europe exemplifies how India mobilizes its diaspora for strategic influence. The diaspora not only strengthens bilateral relations but also amplifies India's cultural presence, acting as informal ambassadors of Indian traditions, values, and innovations.

Bollywood and media exports further expand India's cultural visibility. In 2024, Bollywood generated approximately \$2.3 billion in overseas revenue, reflecting its growing appeal across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East [PwC India \(2024\)](#). Indian films and streaming content have become vehicles for cultural diffusion, shaping perceptions of India as a creative powerhouse. Bollywood's global reach complements India's diplomatic agenda by fostering emotional connections and cultural familiarity, which in turn enhances India's attractiveness in international relations. This cultural export also contributes to India's soft power by projecting narratives of diversity, resilience, and modernity.

Ayurveda and wellness industries have also gained prominence as instruments of cultural diplomacy. Between 2022 and 2024, India's Ayurveda exports grew at an annual rate of 15%, reflecting rising global demand for traditional medicine and holistic health practices [Ministry of Commerce. \(2024\)](#). By positioning Ayurveda within global health diplomacy, India has carved a niche in wellness markets, aligning cultural heritage with contemporary health concerns. This growth underscores India's ability to integrate traditional knowledge systems into modern frameworks, thereby enhancing credibility and influence in global health governance.

Digital diplomacy has emerged as a new frontier of India's soft power. In 2024, the World Bank ranked India third globally in digital public infrastructure, highlighting innovations such as Aadhaar, UPI, and the Digital India initiative [World Bank \(2024\)](#). These platforms showcase India's technological leadership and capacity to deliver scalable solutions for governance and financial inclusion. Modi's government has strategically linked digital diplomacy with cultural diplomacy, presenting India as both a civilizational state and a modern innovator. This dual narrative strengthens India's global appeal by combining heritage with cutting-edge technology.

Collectively, these cultural assets illustrate how India's soft power strategy in the Modi era is data-driven and multidimensional. Yoga, diaspora networks, Bollywood, Ayurveda, and digital diplomacy each contribute to India's global reach while reinforcing strategic narratives of inclusivity, sustainability, and innovation. However, a key gap remains: few studies integrate quantitative indices with current geopolitical trends to systematically assess India's soft power trajectory [Srivastava \(2025\)](#). Bridging this gap would allow scholars to evaluate both symbolic appeal and measurable outcomes, providing a comprehensive understanding of India's cultural diplomacy in the contemporary global order.

### SOFT POWER AS A STRATEGIC TOOL IN GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

Soft power has emerged as a critical instrument in shaping global governance, enabling states to influence international outcomes through attraction rather than coercion. India, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has strategically deployed cultural

diplomacy to reinforce its global leadership role. During its G20 presidency in 2023, India hosted more than 200 cultural events across diverse states, branding itself as the “Voice of the Global South” and positioning its civilizational heritage at the center of multilateral dialogue. In 2024, India leveraged cultural narratives during the BRICS expansion to strengthen South-South cooperation, projecting itself as a connector across emerging economies. Climate diplomacy further enhanced India's soft power through leadership in the International Solar Alliance (ISA), where sustainability was framed as part of India's cultural ethos of harmony with nature. Finally, in the Indo-Pacific, India has integrated cultural diplomacy into its strategic framework, using Buddhist heritage, diaspora networks, and creative industries to complement hard power in balancing China's Belt and Road Initiative. Together, these initiatives demonstrate how India's soft power assets—yoga, Ayurveda, Bollywood, diaspora, and digital innovation—are increasingly tied to global governance structures, reinforcing its legitimacy and influence in the contemporary world order.

#### *G20 Presidency (2023): India as “Voice of the Global South”*

India's G20 presidency in 2023 was not only a diplomatic milestone but also a cultural showcase. Hosting over 200 cultural events across 60 cities and states, India branded the presidency as a “People's G20,” emphasizing inclusivity and diversity [MEA \(2023\)](#). These events ranged from classical dance performances and handicraft exhibitions to culinary festivals, highlighting India's civilizational depth. By embedding cultural diplomacy into the summit, India projected itself as a nation that blends tradition with modernity, reinforcing its image as a civilizational state with global relevance.

The presidency also emphasized India's role as the “Voice of the Global South.” This narrative was reinforced through cultural programming that highlighted indigenous knowledge systems, yoga, and Ayurveda. By showcasing these traditions, India positioned itself as a bridge between advanced economies and emerging powers, appealing to countries that often feel marginalized in global governance structures [Prabhu \(2024\)](#). The cultural branding resonated strongly with developing nations, strengthening India's legitimacy as a representative of their interests.

Participation data underscores the success of this cultural diplomacy. Over 125,000 people attended G20 cultural events, including international delegates, scholars, and artists [MEA \(2023\)](#). Such engagement demonstrates how cultural diplomacy can legitimize leadership roles by fostering inclusivity and shared identity. The events also generated significant media coverage, amplifying India's soft power reach beyond the immediate summit.

Digital diplomacy further expanded India's cultural outreach. Many events were streamed online, reaching millions globally through social media platforms and official G20 channels [Press Information Bureau \(2023\)](#). This hybrid approach allowed India to project its cultural assets to audiences far beyond physical venues, aligning with its broader narrative of inclusivity and innovation. By combining physical and digital diplomacy, India maximized the impact of its presidency.

Scholars argue that India's G20 cultural diplomacy reinforced legitimacy by combining heritage with modern governance narratives. This dual strategy strengthened India's credibility as a leader in global governance while enhancing its soft power appeal [Singh \(2023\)](#). The presidency demonstrated how cultural diplomacy can be strategically integrated into multilateral leadership, positioning India as both a civilizational state and a modern innovator.

#### *BRICS Expansion (2024): Cultural Narratives and South-South Cooperation*

The 2024 expansion of BRICS provided India with an opportunity to use cultural narratives to strengthen South-South cooperation. India emphasized shared traditions, festivals, and artistic exchanges, reinforcing solidarity among emerging economies [Sahoo \(2023\)](#). By highlighting cultural commonalities, India projected itself as a connector across diverse regions, enhancing its influence within the bloc.

India organized cultural forums within BRICS that showcased yoga, Ayurveda, and Bollywood as shared cultural assets. These initiatives projected India as a cultural hub within the bloc, enhancing its ability to shape collective identity [Kashyap and Singh \(2025\)](#). Bollywood films, for instance, were screened at BRICS cultural festivals, while yoga workshops were conducted to symbolize unity through wellness traditions. Such initiatives reinforced India's leadership in cultural diplomacy.

Data from BRICS cultural exchanges shows increased participation from African and Latin American states, reflecting India's success in positioning itself as a connector across regions [BRICS Secretariat \(2024\)](#). These exchanges fostered mutual understanding and goodwill, strengthening India's role in shaping South-South cooperation. The events also highlighted India's ability to mobilize cultural diplomacy as a tool for building solidarity among emerging economies.

India's narratives emphasized inclusivity and sustainability, aligning with the developmental priorities of new BRICS members. By framing cultural diplomacy around shared values, India strengthened its legitimacy as a leader in South-South cooperation [Srivastava \(2025\)](#). This approach reinforced India's image as a civilizational state capable of shaping global governance from a non-Western perspective.

Analysts argue that India's cultural diplomacy within BRICS complements its economic and political strategies, reinforcing its role as a civilizational state capable of shaping global governance from a non-Western perspective [Baruah \(2024\)](#). The expansion demonstrated how cultural diplomacy can be strategically integrated into multilateral frameworks, enhancing India's influence in global politics.

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### *Climate Diplomacy: International Solar Alliance (ISA)*

India's leadership in the International Solar Alliance (ISA) exemplifies how cultural diplomacy intersects with sustainability narratives. Co-founded by India in 2015, the ISA now includes over 120 countries [ISA \(2024\)](#). India has framed solar energy as part of its civilizational ethos of harmony with nature, linking climate diplomacy to cultural values. This narrative enhances India's credibility in global climate negotiations, positioning it as a responsible global actor.

India has emphasized the cultural dimension of sustainability by linking solar energy to traditional practices of environmental stewardship. By presenting solar energy as part of its civilizational heritage, India has strengthened its soft power appeal in climate diplomacy [Srivastava \(2025\)](#). This framing resonates with countries seeking sustainable development models that integrate cultural values.

Data shows that ISA projects mobilized over \$20 billion in investments by 2023, with India contributing significantly to capacity-building initiatives [International Solar Alliance \(2024\)](#). These figures highlight India's tangible leadership in sustainability, reinforcing its credibility in global climate governance. India's investments in solar infrastructure also demonstrate its commitment to aligning cultural narratives with practical outcomes.

India's climate diplomacy also integrates Ayurveda and yoga narratives, presenting holistic health and environmental sustainability as interconnected. By linking wellness traditions to sustainability, India has strengthened its soft power appeal in climate governance [MEA \(2023\)](#). This cultural framing enhances India's credibility as a leader in holistic approaches to global challenges.

Scholars argue that India's ISA leadership demonstrates how cultural diplomacy can legitimize technical and policy initiatives, reinforcing India's image as a responsible global actor [Sharma \(2024\)](#). The ISA exemplifies how cultural narratives can be strategically integrated into climate diplomacy, enhancing India's influence in global governance.

### *Indo-Pacific Strategy: Balancing China's Belt and Road Initiative*

India's Indo-Pacific strategy integrates cultural diplomacy to complement hard power in balancing China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Initiatives such as the "Act East Policy" emphasize cultural exchanges with ASEAN states [Ministry of Commerce \(2024\)](#). By promoting cultural diplomacy, India has strengthened its role as a partner in regional governance, countering China's influence.

India has promoted Buddhist diplomacy, leveraging shared heritage with Southeast Asia to strengthen cultural ties. This strategy counters China's Confucius Institutes by projecting India's civilizational assets [Baruah \(2024\)](#). Buddhist diplomacy has been particularly effective in countries such as Thailand, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka, where shared heritage reinforces cultural connectivity.

Data indicates that India invested over \$1.5 billion in cultural and educational exchanges with ASEAN between 2020 and 2024 [ASEAN Secretariat \(2024\)](#). These investments reinforce India's role as a cultural partner in the region, strengthening its soft power appeal. The exchanges also highlight India's ability to mobilize cultural diplomacy as a tool for regional governance.

India's Indo-Pacific narrative emphasizes inclusivity, freedom of navigation, and cultural connectivity, aligning with democratic values. This framing enhances India's legitimacy as a counterbalance to China's BRI [Srivastava \(2025\)](#). By integrating cultural diplomacy into its Indo-Pacific strategy, India has strengthened its role as a responsible global actor.

Analysts argue that India's Indo-Pacific cultural diplomacy strengthens its strategic partnerships with Japan, Australia, and the U.S., embedding soft power within broader security frameworks [Kumar, and Gaurav \(2025\)](#). This dual strategy demonstrates how cultural diplomacy can complement hard power, enhancing India's influence in global governance.

## **CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS**

While India's cultural diplomacy in the Modi era has expanded its global reach and strengthened its soft power, several challenges and limitations constrain its effectiveness. These include global competition from rival powers, domestic constraints rooted in cultural pluralism, variability in international reception, and sustainability issues linked to funding and politicization. Each of these factors shapes the trajectory of India's soft power and determines how effectively cultural diplomacy can function as a strategic tool in global governance.

## **GLOBAL COMPETITION: CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES VS. ICCR CENTERS**

India's cultural diplomacy faces stiff competition from China, which has established over 500 Confucius Institutes worldwide compared to India's 40 Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) centres [Srivastava \(2025\)](#). Confucius Institutes provide structured language programs, cultural exchanges, and academic collaborations, giving China a stronger institutional presence in universities and cultural hubs. In contrast, India's ICCR centers, though impactful, remain limited in scale and resources, restricting their ability to match China's global visibility.

This disparity highlights the institutional gap between India and China in terms of reach and influence. China's Confucius Institutes are often embedded within universities, ensuring sustained engagement with students and scholars, while ICCR centers

are fewer and less integrated into academic structures [Halsana \(2025\)](#). As a result, India's cultural diplomacy struggles to achieve the same level of institutional penetration, particularly in regions where China has already established dominance.

To address this challenge, India must expand its ICCR network, increase funding, and develop partnerships with global universities. Without scaling its institutional presence, India risks being overshadowed by China's cultural diplomacy, despite its rich civilizational assets. Scholars argue that institutional expansion is critical for India to translate symbolic cultural assets into sustained global influence [Kumar, and Gaurav \(2025\)](#).

### **DOMESTIC CONSTRAINTS: CULTURAL PLURALISM AND CONTESTED NARRATIVES**

India's cultural pluralism, while a source of richness, also presents challenges for coherence in projecting a unified narrative abroad. With over 22 official languages, multiple religions, and diverse traditions, defining a singular "Indian culture" is complex. Political debates over cultural representation often weaken the consistency of India's soft power messaging, as different groups contest which traditions should be highlighted internationally [Srivastava \(2025\)](#).

For example, while yoga and Ayurveda are widely promoted as symbols of India's civilizational heritage, other traditions such as tribal art forms or regional languages may feel underrepresented. This selective representation risks alienating certain communities domestically and diluting India's cultural diplomacy abroad [Halsana \(2025\)](#). Moreover, contested narratives can create perceptions of bias, undermining the inclusivity that India seeks to project globally.

Managing cultural pluralism requires a balanced approach that highlights diversity while maintaining coherence. Scholars argue that India must adopt a pluralistic cultural diplomacy strategy that integrates regional traditions alongside mainstream assets like yoga and Bollywood [Kumar and Gaurav \(2025\)](#). Such inclusivity would strengthen India's credibility and ensure that its cultural diplomacy reflects the richness of its civilizational heritage.

### **RECEPTION VARIABILITY: REGIONAL STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES**

India's cultural diplomacy enjoys strong reception in Africa and Southeast Asia, where yoga, Bollywood, and diaspora networks resonate deeply. In these regions, India is often perceived as a partner in development and a source of cultural affinity. Bollywood films, for instance, are widely popular in Africa and the Middle East, while yoga has been embraced across Southeast Asia as a wellness practice [Srivastava \(2025\)](#).

However, reception is weaker in Europe and North America, where India's cultural exports face competition from dominant Western narratives and institutions. Bollywood films have limited penetration compared to Hollywood, and Ayurveda faces skepticism due to regulatory and scientific standards [Halsana \(2025\)](#). This uneven reception highlights the challenges of projecting soft power across diverse cultural contexts.

To overcome these limitations, India must tailor its cultural diplomacy strategies to regional audiences. In Western contexts, greater emphasis on digital diplomacy, academic collaborations, and scientific validation of traditional practices could enhance credibility. Scholars argue that adapting cultural diplomacy to regional preferences is essential for India to achieve balanced global influence [Kumar and Gaurav \(2025\)](#).

### **SUSTAINABILITY: FUNDING GAPS AND POLITICIZATION**

Funding gaps and over-politicization pose risks to the sustainability of India's cultural diplomacy. Many ICCR centers and cultural initiatives operate with limited budgets, restricting their ability to expand programs or maintain long-term engagement. Without adequate funding, India's cultural diplomacy risks stagnation, particularly in regions where competitors like China invest heavily in cultural infrastructure [Srivastava \(2025\)](#).

Over-politicization further undermines credibility. When cultural diplomacy initiatives are closely tied to the ruling government's agenda, they risk being perceived as partisan rather than national. This politicization can weaken legitimacy both domestically and internationally, as cultural diplomacy should ideally represent the nation's heritage rather than a specific political ideology [Halsana \(2025\)](#).

Ensuring sustainability requires depoliticized, well-funded, and institutionally robust mechanisms that can endure beyond electoral cycles. Scholars argue that India must establish independent cultural diplomacy institutions with stable funding sources to maintain credibility and resilience [Kumar and Gaurav \(2025\)](#). Without such reforms, India's soft power strategy may struggle to achieve long-term impact.

### **CONCLUSION**

India's cultural diplomacy in the Modi era reflects a deliberate recalibration of soft power, strategically aligned with global governance structures. By institutionalizing civilizational assets such as yoga, Ayurveda, Bollywood, cuisine, and diaspora networks,

India has projected itself as a nation that blends heritage with modern innovation. The G20 presidency in 2023, with over 200 cultural events across states, branded India as the “Voice of the Global South” and demonstrated how cultural diplomacy can legitimize leadership in multilateral forums. This outreach not only showcased India’s diversity but also reinforced its normative role in representing emerging economies in global decision-making.

The BRICS expansion in 2024 further highlighted India’s ability to mobilize cultural narratives to strengthen South-South cooperation. By emphasizing shared traditions, wellness practices, and creative industries, India positioned itself as a connector across diverse regions. Cultural forums and exchanges within BRICS reinforced solidarity among emerging economies, while Bollywood screenings and yoga workshops symbolized unity through cultural heritage. These initiatives underscored India’s role as a civilizational hub capable of shaping collective identity within non-Western frameworks of governance, thereby enhancing its influence in global politics.

Climate diplomacy, particularly India’s leadership in the International Solar Alliance (ISA), projected sustainability as part of India’s cultural ethos of harmony with nature. By linking solar energy to traditional values of environmental stewardship, India strengthened its credibility in climate negotiations. The ISA mobilized billions in investments and expanded capacity-building initiatives, demonstrating that cultural narratives can legitimize technical and policy outcomes. India’s integration of Ayurveda and yoga into climate diplomacy further reinforced holistic approaches to sustainability, enhancing its image as a responsible global actor committed to both ecological balance and human well-being.

In the Indo-Pacific, India’s cultural diplomacy complemented hard power strategies in balancing China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Through Buddhist diplomacy, diaspora engagement, and educational exchanges, India reinforced cultural connectivity with ASEAN states and beyond. Investments in cultural and educational programs, valued at over \$1.5 billion between 2020 and 2024, strengthened India’s role as a cultural partner in the region. By embedding cultural diplomacy within its Indo-Pacific narrative, India reinforced democratic and inclusive values, while simultaneously strengthening strategic partnerships with Japan, Australia, and the United States. This dual strategy showcased how soft power can complement security frameworks, enhancing India’s influence in regional governance.

Collectively, these initiatives underscore that India’s soft power is not merely symbolic but increasingly tied to measurable outcomes in governance, sustainability, and regional cooperation. Quantitative data—such as diaspora size, Bollywood’s overseas revenue, Ayurveda’s export growth, and India’s digital infrastructure ranking—demonstrates the tangible reach of cultural diplomacy. Yet, challenges remain: India lags behind China in institutional presence, faces variability in reception across regions, and must sustain credibility amid funding and political constraints. Addressing these limitations requires integrating quantitative indices with geopolitical analysis to evaluate India’s soft power trajectory more systematically. Ultimately, India’s cultural diplomacy in the Modi era positions the country as a normative actor capable of shaping discourses in global governance through attraction, legitimacy, and cultural resonance.

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