

## Diplomacy and Image-Building: India Rides on its Soft Power

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**ABSTRACT** India has projected its soft power for centuries, long before the concept was even defined by political analysts. In the past decade, the country wielded its soft power in a more systematic way in the practice of diplomacy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in power since 2014, is becoming known for his passionate use of India's soft-power assets through both an effective media management strategy and an intelligent use of social media. This Brief finds that while these efforts have helped improve India's image before the international community, the effect in terms of stronger relations with other countries has remained rather limited.

### INTRODUCTION

India's soft power is strong—and it has been so, long before such a concept was made famous by American political scientist Joseph Nye in 1990. For centuries, India's soft power was already being recognised in many parts of the world, where people learned about, and accessed the arts and culture of one of the world's oldest civilisations. It is in the past decade that India has increased its use of soft power in a more systematic way (Ramachandran, 2015). Several initiatives have been launched to push India to the forefront of the international community, including the creation in 2006 of a public

diplomacy division within the Ministry of External Affairs, the worldwide expansion of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), the Ministry of Tourism's 'Incredible India' campaign, and the work of the Ministry for Overseas Indians. These efforts have not only helped emphasise the social and cultural assets of India abroad, but they also support the country's major foreign-policy initiatives such as its strategic aid and trade partnerships in Africa (Ramachandran, 2015). After all, the promotion of business and trade, together with the creation of employment opportunities, are

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key components of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's diplomacy efforts.

To be sure, soft-power diplomacy is not the only tool in the government's arsenal for improving the country's image. Other serious campaigns—for instance, to combat corruption and crime—are also enhancing the outsider's view of what India is, and what it can be as a leader in global politics (Ashwini, 2016). Effective media management and an intelligent use of social media are among the elements of PM Modi's strategy.

### **SOFT POWER: AN INSTRUMENT OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY**

'Soft power' refers to the ability to persuade others to do something using neither force nor coercion (Nye, 1990). While conventional, hard power relies on the State's military and economic resources, soft power works on persuasion, aiming at furthering a country's 'attractiveness'. It is based on three main categories of a country's resources —culture, political values, and foreign policies (Nye, 2004). Soft power is “mostly based on intangibles such as the power of example. It is therefore the ability to modify other states' preferences because of their perception of you” (Blarel, 2012: 28). Today, most countries use a combination of soft power and hard power, together called 'smart power'. Since Modi became prime minister in May 2014, India has employed such a blend, but with a strong focus on soft power.

Indeed, soft power has become a main instrument in public diplomacy. “It is just as important to set the agenda and structure the situations in world politics as to get others to change in particular cases” (Nye, 1990: 166). Soft-power initiatives complement official diplomacy efforts, ultimately aimed at increasing knowledge and appreciation of the

country in foreign shores. Such is true for India as well. As far as diplomacy efforts are concerned, Prime Minister Modi has met several foreign leaders in the past two years (Fontaine, 2016). These meetings have helped increase India's visibility abroad. According to Naman Jain, “Prime Minister Modi's charismatic interaction with world leaders, in comparison to India's neighbours, is far more reported on by international media. This represents a strategic advantage in the soft power for India in the region.” He also believes that the “personal relationships that Mr. Modi has made and maintained with world leaders have not only strengthened ties between India and other countries, but have also raised India's image and profile in the media, elevating Indian soft power.”

A September 2015 conference on “The Main Forms of Soft Power: India and the World”, organised by the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, in collaboration with ICCR, discussed Nye's perception of soft power and the case of India. Regarding soft power, some of the assumptions at stake are as follows—soft power is cultural power; economic strength is soft power; soft power is more human than hard power; hard power can be measured while soft power cannot; and soft power is difficult to use. Analysts say soft power has the potential “to multiply the efforts of Indian diplomacy, and in this regard should be pursued as an important objective” (Mukherjee, 2014: 56). Prime Minister Modi's plans are to revive national pride in the country's ancient values while enhancing the country's hard power by using its soft-power assets (Pant, 2015). However, “public diplomacy cannot achieve its aim if it is inconsistent with a country's foreign policy” (Melissen, 2015: 14).

The promotion of the country's soft power is a means to meet foreign policy objectives. “The outcome of the 2014 general election

marked a significant shift in the conduct of Indian foreign policy. The rise of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a charismatic and populist leader, has redefined Indian foreign policy through the use of soft power in a regional and global context” (Jain, 2016). The promotion of India's soft power (in the form, for example, of Bollywood films and yoga) is aimed at meeting the country's foreign policy objectives and showing its willingness to play a bigger role in global politics. It will help propel India to a position of “an emerging country with the potential of becoming a huge economic success story” (Pant, 2015). India's soft power is important; it is nothing less than a geopolitical tool.

While previous Indian governments understood and recognised the value of soft power to further India's foreign policy goals, attempts have been largely ad hoc (Pant, 2015). Pant notes that for the first time, a more coherent effort is underway to raise India's image and brand value in foreign countries. “Under Prime Minister Modi, India is taking a strategic approach towards using its soft-power resources to enhance the nation's image abroad.” Yet the question remains: How efficient is soft power? Scholars remain divided about the nature of power. J. Nye's soft power concept is one of the most popular concepts in that respect, building it as a behaviour outcome (Trunkos, 2013).

## **MODI'S COMMUNICATIONS AND BRANDING SKILLS**

Prime Minister Modi is seen as an excellent communicator (Venkatesh, 2015), not only in the use of technology but also in his personal style (Farcis, 2016). A key element in this communication strategy is his speeches (Mukhopadhyay, 2016). This is also the case when he addresses the Indian diaspora: “Prime Minister Modi has focused specifically on

tapping into the Indian diaspora community in order to project soft power around the world” (Jain, 2016). Since Indians from this community usually have strong stakes in societies abroad, PM Modi organises events for the diaspora in various cities in the world (for example, in Brussels or Dubai) to deliver strong messages. Embracing over 25 million Indians, the diaspora could become “a core component of foreign policy initiatives” and “a vehicle of India's soft power” (Singh, 2015).

However, current outreach efforts to the Indian diaspora are insufficient and the country should make greater use of diaspora bonds than it has ever done so before. For instance, “well-structured diaspora bonds would directly finance key development priorities. And that would give everyone in the diaspora, not just its entrepreneurs and its financiers, the opportunity to translate their long-distance patriotism into tangible economic gain and share in India's growth story, as Modi often encourages them to do” (Subramanya, 2015).

Various analysts have observed that the success of Prime Minister Modi's strategy relies especially on his charisma, a powerful use of the media (social media in particular), an effective media management strategy, and the capacity to avoid the mistakes made by past governments. Managing the media allows for better management of public perception. The Prime Minister relies on relationships, and the Indian business community—which supports Mr Modi—has heavily invested in the Indian media.

At the same time, Prime Minister Modi's communications strategy has met with criticisms, too. According to the 2015 Freedom House's press freedom report on India,<sup>1</sup> for example, there are journalists who complained in 2014 that the government relies heavily on a “one-way format—such as social media posts

and the prime minister's monthly radio—to communicate with the public, instead of granting access to the press.” The government is thus often perceived as lacking in transparency. Prime Minister Modi sees the media as an “adversary and this establishes that he does not appreciate scrutiny of his actions” (Mukhopadhyay, 2016).

In the past 15 years—including those in which he was Gujarat Chief Minister—Modi's relationship with the Indian press has not been the best, and using social media offers other channels through which to communicate. Analysts say that such a strategy has led to the “gradual disintermediation” of the mainstream traditional media (Bhattacharya, 2014). PM Modi does not want the media to act as a gatekeeper. More than the workings of the foreign media, he cares about the way Indian media cover what the government does. He acknowledges the power and advantages of social media and, therefore, addresses audiences directly—both citizens living in India and the Indian community abroad.

As Gujarat's chief minister, Narendra Modi started building his image in 2011 as a development leader and the state's image as one of the most developed in the country, using social media to reinforce (or else, negate) information coming from the national media. From 2005, he worked on changing the image of Gujarat. He frequently invited journalists to Gujarat and managed to position it as an economic champion; in the process, the westernmost state attracted foreign investments. Modi invited foreign heads of States to Gujarat, further strengthening his popular image.

Modi's rise is viewed as coincidental with the fall of the past government, especially during 2013–2014, when India's growth rate was the lowest in years and there was widespread dissatisfaction with the then government. His

communication strategy, strongly based on the use of social media, would soon prove to be successful. He got elected in 2014, as those voters saw in him a strong leader who can turn around the image of India.

Prime Minister Modi is also one of the first political leaders to have recognised the immense power of the fairly recent trend of 'selfies', which he uses for promotion: “selfies and other social media tactics can help shape the image of the BJP leader” (Taylor, 2015). Selfies are featured prominently on Modi's widely followed Twitter account, and such clever use of social media contributes to his popularity among the youth. His way of perceiving communication brings to mind the *dakshan*: while looking at a god, one feels blessed (Bouissou, 2016). People sometimes see Modi as a god. One particular example elucidates this as well as his use of image: during his campaign in 2014, he used holograms so that people could see him at various places. That tactic may well have helped create the image of a god-like figure.


These examples illustrate Modi's willingness and capacity to foster direct contact with citizens; he would like to eliminate traditional media as a filter (Malik, 2016). Social media have also become one of Modi's instruments of choice for conveying his messages to the countries he visits. He would even communicate to people in other countries in their own language. “Social media is one way (not the only way) of telling the better story about India and the policies of its government. As such, it remains a valuable arrow in the Indian diplomatic quiver” (Tharoor, 2016). Prior to his visit to China around mid-May 2015, for example, Modi joined the Chinese social media platform Weibo to connect with Chinese citizens: “Public diplomacy through social media is an emerging modern day foreign policy tool, largely influenced and guided as means of projecting soft power” (Mallapur, 2015).



## CONCLUSION: ALL ABOUT SOFT POWER?

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has a strategy to promote India's soft power—a strategy which has certainly brought new energy to the conduct of the country's foreign policy (Hall, 2015). However, according to Mukherjee, India “does not at this stage possess a coherent message or image” (2005: 56). There is also “little proof as yet of Indian 'soft power' shaping foreign policy of other countries towards India, or India's policy towards others” (Baru, 2009: 283).

Currently, India does not figure in the list of top 30 countries<sup>2</sup> in terms of soft power. “India

remains a minor soft power in the contemporary world” (Hymans, 2009: 234). PM Modi is promoting the country as a strong economic partner by highlighting India's soft power, especially its values and culture. He has made diplomatic visits to several countries in the last two years. Yet, his use of soft power has had a limited effect in terms of nurturing stronger relations with other countries. For instance, “India is still having difficulties in changing its neighbors' behaviors by using soft power. Neighboring countries with weak democracies and frequent political transitions continue to be threatened by India's strong and stable democracy” (Mishra, 2016). 

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