

# On Indian Public Diplomacy

Written by Ritambhara

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RITAMBHARA, APR 30 2013

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century realignment of power is becoming more of a reality day-by-day, with the influence of Western powers waning to some extent and an increasingly assertive role being played by the rising powers like China and India in the global context. This trend has most recently been hastened by the global economic downturn that comparatively had less effect on the Chinese and Indian economy compared to those of the United States and Europe. India's exponential economic growth and recognition of its de-facto nuclear status by the U.S. and other powers (after the Indo-U.S. nuclear deal) have altered external perceptions of India, with the country being viewed as an emerging power with expanding global clout. In this scenario, India's attempt to amplify its soft power through public diplomacy becomes crucial.

India as a new claimant of a place at the high table in the world has huge stakes in the arena of global politics, and thus maintaining and enhancing its influence remains a top priority for the country. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century there has been more of a need for states to use soft power so as to enhance one's attractiveness in international arena and to show one's better side in order to stimulate cooperation and dampen resistance, particularly concerning security policies. In this context, public diplomacy has become a very important instrument of soft power, as well as being a vital tool of Indian foreign policy. The undercurrent of Indian public diplomacy is to avow India as a rising power of undeniable international significance and influence, which is consistent with India's demand to win a place at the high table by being granted the permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.

India has already proved itself as a capable military and economic power in the world, yet somehow it finds struggles to project this power to the world. There are limits on what hard power can accomplish and thus a judicious mix of hard and soft power, or what is termed as 'smart power'[1], is needed. Thus, the principal modus operandi for augmenting India's influence in the world can be achieved by expanding its soft power. Soft power, the term coined by Joseph Nye, has become a portent measure of a country's power and influence in the world today. Soft power is the ability to get what one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payments.[2] Soft power largely emanates from a country's culture, its political values and institutions and its foreign policy.[3] India finds itself well-placed in possessing soft power resources because of its rich culture and history, its democratic credentials, its technological advancement, its large and influential diaspora and the leadership India wields among the developing nations through multilateral institutions like Non-Alignment movement. Thus, what distinguishes India's claim to global leadership is its unique, unobtrusive, persuasive "soft power" or what South Asia expert Steven Cohen calls "India's Reputational Power".[4]

One of the most important tools for exercising a country's soft power is public diplomacy. Public diplomacy can be defined as, "a Government's process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about an understanding for its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and current policies." [5] It can be seen as an instrument that a country's government uses to mobilize its resources to communicate with and attract the public of other countries (rather than merely their governments) to promote its national interests through a number of means, such as broadcasting, direct outreach programmes, cultural diplomacy, educational and professional exchanges, and so forth. Public diplomacy is not only limited to influencing foreign publics but also for gaining feedback on the foreign perception of the host country. However, the most significant role of public diplomacy is to inform, explain and interpret the nation's goals and strategies to foreign publics, in order to garner their support and create goodwill among other nations in order to achieve its national

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interests.

## Evolution of Public Diplomacy

Although public diplomacy is a relatively new concept in the sphere of international affairs, it has promptly become an important foreign policy tool for many governments. While the terminology is new, the practice of public diplomacy is quite old. Public diplomacy was first used by the American government during World War I when President Wilson created the committee on public information (also called the Creel Committee) whose task was to make the US war aims known all over the world. It was later successfully used during World War II to fight the Nazi propaganda. Things took a more concrete shape with the creation of the United States Information Agency (USIA) in 1953 to inform foreign audiences and explain US objectives to influence and gain support of foreign public opinions, which served US interests immensely during the Cold War. However, the U.S. lost interest in public diplomacy initiatives after the Cold War[6], only to be rudely awakened and have to reinvigorate public diplomacy after the events of 9/11 owing to increasing anti-Americanism in some parts of the world.

It is not only the U.S., but every other power like China, U.K., Russia and France are all investing in public diplomacy initiatives today, largely because of an ever increasing global integration, no country can stand in isolation and thus co-optive and soft power have become the core realities of the day. Countries like France and the United Kingdom have been running successful public diplomacy campaigns all over the world, establishing cultural centers for example, but now newly emerged powers like China are leaving no stone unturned to engage the world through its public diplomacy activities. India, with its high stakes as an emerging power in the world cannot lag behind in this "Battle of Ideas".

A new understanding of public diplomacy is emerging in the highly globalized and integrated world of today. Public diplomacy can no longer be about straight-line propaganda or one-way communication in this information age because conditions for the production and enactment of public diplomacy have changed significantly because of the ways that global "interdependence" has radically altered the space of diplomacy. [7] Public diplomacy today has become more inclusive where it includes multilevel relations conducted by MNC's, NGO's, private groups and social movements using new technologies of communication to interact with and petition foreign publics.[8] Emphasis has to be laid on adopting a more erudite grassroots people-to-people communication, for two-way engagement as public diplomacy is not only about communicating foreign policy but also about developing a long term understanding of people, culture and values of the host country. Cultural diplomacy has to be a part and parcel of public diplomacy for it to succeed in the globalized world. Public Diplomacy today can no longer be a one-size-fits-all approach. Rather, it has to be tailored individually in consideration of the political and cultural environment of a country. Thus public diplomacy needs to be dynamic, flexible, and capable of adapting to changing circumstances.

## Background of India's Soft Power

India is one country that could always count itself among the few nations with strong cards in the arena of soft power, even when it was deficient in hard power.[9] India began its journey as a self-determining state in 1947 with a soft power bang that faded away after its greatest exponent, the country's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, died in 1964.[10] During Nehru's time, India lacked hard power resources, being a poor economy coupled with weak military capabilities. Despite this, India possessed unparalleled soft power among the developing nations, as Indian foreign policy was more idealistic in nature and vehemently campaigned for peaceful co-existence and economic equality in world economy. The number of diplomatic forays Nehru made into distant conflicts around the world was dizzying and brought instant recognition to India as a responsible Asian country that was trying to solve global problems.[11] However, India had to soon face the harsh realities of international politics, where its hard power capabilities were soon tested by China in the 1962 war, a war where India had to face stark humiliation. The 1962 war with China, which was followed by the 1965 war with Pakistan, forced India to reassess its priorities, with the country choosing to focus on building its hard power capabilities and strengthening its hold in South Asia while minimizing its global role.

India began flexing its muscles in South Asia and played the role of a regional hegemon as illustrated by the clandestine role India played in the 1971 Pakistan-Bangladesh war and later humanitarian military intervention in Sri

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Lanka in 1987. Ironically, even as India practically disappeared as an actor[12] with influence in far-flung regions of the Global South like Africa and Latin America by the turn of the century, it began to improve its hard power attributes by logging higher economic growth and military prowess.[13] During that period India's regional power rested on her hard power capabilities ranging from diplomatic coercion to economic sanctions to military interventions.[14] Soft power strategies like economic cooperation and the promotion of common political values only played a secondary role.[15] However, India could not play a very successful role as the regional hegemon, as India had to soon withdraw its IPKF forces from Sri Lanka in the face of opposition from both the public and the Government in Sri Lanka. India soon lost out on the goodwill that it had created for itself in Bangladesh among both the Bangladeshi Government and public, when it had helped them in attaining their freedom from Pakistan. Adding to India's woes was the Pakistan-sponsored cross-border terrorism in Kashmir. India, once again faced with a changing international environment (the collapse of the Soviet Union) and the regional dynamics, re-evaluated its approach towards South Asia and the world in the form of the Gujral doctrine.[16] The Gujral doctrine emphasized that India should play a bigger role in helping its neighbors while not requiring reciprocation and at the same time avowing a policy of non-interference in internal affairs and promotion of common economic interests and strengthening regional cooperation through SAARC.

Thus India once again began to lay emphasis on the use of soft power in its foreign policy conduct, as it had already proved its mettle as a rising power with proficient hard power capabilities. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, India found itself in a very good position to play a bigger role in global politics owing to its military and economic power coupled with a huge soft power potential. India at the same time realized that hard power is not a one-stop solution to all of a country's problems and neither is soft power. Soft power is one arrow in a nation's security quiver; it is not an all-purpose panacea.[17] Thus an over-reliance on either one in the present context of geopolitics will only prove to be detrimental to India's future.

## India's Soft Power Potential

India has often been regarded as a "cultural superpower"[18] with an expansive hoard of soft power resources. Very few countries can match the rich history, culture and civilization of India that creates an unparalleled interest and appeal for India abroad. In addition to this, India's vibrant and thriving democracy, its independent and free media, its democratic institutions and its increasingly aware and pulsating civil society all contribute to India's soft power. Along with this, India's values of non-violence (ahimsa) and peace and the use of these methods in its struggle against colonialism have inspired and continue to inspire generations of leaders all over the world. Additionally, India's exponential economic growth and innovation and leadership in information technology, have earned India, admiration the world over.

India's entertainment industry and Bollywood have given India an edge over many other countries in the world, and have enhanced India's image. Indian movies find a large number of takers in not only Asian countries (with some similarity of culture), but are climbing the popularity charts rapidly, in Africa, the Americas and Europe as well. Indian music, dance, fashion and art add to India's growing soft power base. Along with this, the contribution of new-age Indian authors to English literature has to be credited in increasing awareness and interest about Indian society, polity and culture. The popularity of Indian cuisine and Yoga all over the world has only amplified the world's fascination with the Indian nation. The large and influential Indian diaspora is another one of India's assets in the realm of soft power. Indian diaspora has many a times played a pivotal role in shaping up positive policies towards India in many countries, especially the United States. India's commitment to humanitarian rights in the world and its role in the UN peacekeeping mission has earned India a lot of respect.

In the information age, Nye has argued, the side with the better story to tell often wins. India must remain the "land of the better story." [19] As a society with a free press and a thriving mass media, whose people whose are daily encouraged to unleash their creative energies, India has an extraordinary ability to tell stories that are more persuasive and attractive than those of its rivals.[20] India has to compete with soft power of other countries, especially China in the time to come, as China expands its influence gradually all over the world. India, in some ways has an advantage in this 'competition of influence' over China because of its soft power resources. As the world's largest democracy, with a vibrant press and thriving entertainment industry, India has huge soft power advantage

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over authoritarian China and its state-controlled media. The implication is India can take advantage of that goodwill as Asia's two giants' battle for influence in the region and around the world.[21] Another point is that India's rise, unlike the rise of China, is not being viewed with trepidation and alarm in many countries.[22] India derives real political mileage from the prestige attached to its title of "world's largest democracy".[23] Being a democracy, India can assert a political influence in the world, especially now, when more and more countries are clamoring for democracy, as witnessed in the Arab Spring.

## Indian Public Diplomacy Initiatives Undertaken Since 2006

The Public Diplomacy Division of the Ministry of External Affairs was established in May 2006 with an aim to "educate and influence global and domestic opinion on key policy issues and project a better image of the country commensurate with its rising international standing." Closely modelled after the U.S. State Department's approach to public diplomacy, the Division will attempt to "sensitize and influence think tanks, universities, media and experts to create a more nuanced understanding of the government's stance on tricky issues". [24]

It's not only the public diplomacy division of the MEA that's engaged in promoting India's image abroad, but is also aided by Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), which remains the pre-eminent instrument of cultural diplomacy. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting also lends support to the public diplomacy initiative with the ministry's strategic use of the media, which is "responsible for international cooperation in the field of mass media, films and broadcasting, and interacts with its foreign counterparts on behalf of the Government of India." [25] Apart from these, many other Government agencies carry out programmes that promote the Indian image abroad and engage in public diplomacy, both independently and collectively.

Brand India was one such campaign that was organized by Indian Brand Equity Foundation and the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India, and the Confederation of Indian Industry. The Foundation's "primary objective was to build positive economic perceptions of India globally. It aimed to effectively present the India business perspective and leverage business partnerships in a globalizing market-place." [26] To this end the Foundation developed a number of promotional campaigns, including brochures, films, print ads, and panels which emphasized India's strong economy and encouraged national and international investment. [27]

Many notable initiatives have been undertaken by the Indian government to engage in an effective public diplomacy campaign in order to promote India's interests. Some of these programmes have been campaigns like 'Pravasi Bharatiya Divas' and 'Know India' programme specifically targeted at the huge and influential Indian diaspora that cannot not only, aid India's development but as well as, promote its interests all over the world. Programmes like 'Pravasi Bharatiya Divas' and 'Know India' campaign have met resounding success as the number of delegates taking part have increased rapidly year after year.

Other initiatives include publications, documentary films and cultural events that showcase different facets of the Indian nation. One such popular publication is the "India perspective" magazine that is published in 17 languages and distributed over 150 countries in the world. The magazine seeks to project India's rich cultural heritage, its composite pluralistic society as well as its vibrant economy. The Indian Public Diplomacy Division also partners with major domestic and international universities, think tanks and research organizations to organize seminars and conferences on subjects that are relevant to India's concerns, and hosts delegations from various countries and organizations to provide them with a broad-based exposure to India; along with organizing lectures and other events within India with the objective of fostering a more informed discourse on India's foreign policy. [28] These include lecture series on Indian foreign policy that have been organized by the Ministry of External Affairs in universities in India and abroad in UK, Indonesia and South Korea. One such conference and workshop was organized in December 2010, by the Ministry of External Affairs and the Centre for Media Studies, titled "Public Diplomacy in the Information Age". Attended by scholars, journalists, business leaders and diplomats, the conference was aimed at exploring India's public diplomacy potential. The conference helped reach some key conclusions as well as the reasons for embarking upon active Public Diplomacy. [29]

Other than these, Indian diplomatic missions regularly organize Indian film and music festivals locally, where both

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commercial and classical music and films are screened. India to increase its outreach to foreign public, has invested in public diplomacy 2.0 to promote a two-way communication, which stresses more on 'listening' to the foreign public rather than 'telling'. The Indian Public Diplomacy Division has also taken to the social media in a big way by creating and regularly updating its accounts on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube.

As a part of its outreach programmes the Public Diplomacy Division has also tied up with the 'INDIA-future of change' (IFC) initiative, which seeks to emphasize India's position as a catalyst of change. IFC is a five-year initiative that promises to take India to the world, and get students and professionals across geographies to compete, collaborate and strengthen ties between India and the world.[30] The initiative signifies an innovative effort at communicating the emerging realities to a global audience, and managing a collaborative dialogue of what 'Brand India' begets as it readies to become a global power.

## **Success Stories of Indian Public Diplomacy**

India has played a significant role in providing aid and development assistance to many countries in Africa and Asia. In Africa, for example, India has reached out to countries including Senegal and Ghana to help with projects ranging from rice production to information technology development. India has played a major role in infrastructural development in Afghanistan by building roads, highways, hospitals, schools, etc. which have won India not only admiration in Afghanistan but elsewhere as well. The role India plays in UN peacekeeping forces further augments India's goodwill in the world; the Indian help in disaster management and assistance during the 2004 tsunami in South and South-East Asia and the Pakistan earthquake of 2005 have been successful exercises in Indian public diplomacy.

There are instances when India has used public diplomacy effectively as a foreign policy tool, as demonstrated in 2009, when the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh used the meeting with Pakistani President Zardari, first one after 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks, on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit in Yekaterinburg to drive home his concerns. On another occasion, he spoke of the sustainability of the Indian way of development as being inclusive, tolerant and plural in a clear reference to China.[31] Thus, the Indian government is slowly and steadily using public diplomacy to further its foreign policy interests in the world.

## **Limitations of Public Diplomacy**

Public Diplomacy, despite its instrumental role as a foreign policy tool, cannot be used to solve all Indian foreign policy problems. There are limits on the role public diplomacy can play especially in the age of 'communication and information revolution.' Information in the 21<sup>st</sup> century cannot be controlled and the notion that a government can control its own image through some sort of managed propaganda is only an illusion.[32] Thus public diplomacy can achieve only certain targets, as internal contradictions of a country, more so of a democratic country like India, cannot be hidden.

India's perception in the world is changing with India's economic growth, its technological advancement, its de-facto nuclear status, its growing military capabilities and rising soft power and influence in the world. However, this is only one side of the story, as India's glaring poverty (having the largest population of malnourished children in the world[33] is a dear and troubling reminder of India's struggles as the country develops) farmer suicides, Maoist insurgency, humanitarian and separatist problems in Kashmir and North-East, repeated terrorist attacks are all impediments to a successful Indian public diplomacy, which become an obstacle in India's journey to be a great power.

## **Strengthening Indian Public Diplomacy**

Public diplomacy, despite its shortcomings remains an essential tool in the foreign policy arsenal of the Indian government to enhance its power and influence in the world. Public diplomacy is not merely a generic activity for disseminating data about India. It is not expected to be limited to detailing the economic growth and industrial potential of the country, and its democratic credentials. Public diplomacy is a target-oriented activity; both in terms of

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objectives and audience.[34] Indian public diplomacy has to focus on dialogues with the foreign audience; it has to lay stress on the need for 'strategic communication'. Public diplomacy today needs to have a better understanding of cooperation, collective interests and engagement with other nations. A very important instrument of soft power is public diplomacy, which cannot just restrict itself to propaganda anymore and has to look beyond and involve inter-cultural dialogues.

Indian public diplomacy can be augmented by increasing funding for cultural activities in Indian consulates and embassies. India should also try and develop cultural centers all over the world on the lines of British Council, American Information Resource Centers, Alliance Francoise and the Confucius Institutes started by China. These institutes increase their respective countries' soft power by projecting a favorable image of their countries to the outside world through public relations exercises.[35] India should also expand its educational and professional exchange programs with foreign universities and organizations, and at the same time invite prominent members of civil society of other countries to facilitate a better understanding of Indian culture, interests and values, so that they can picture India in a favorable light. Innovativeness, foresight, marketing blitz, strategic planning and psychological management are imperative for any successful public diplomacy effort and thus India needs to invest handsomely in public diplomacy as it forms a connecting link between nations and provides a strategic leverage in foreign policy.[36]

## **The 2014 Elections: Impact on Public Diplomacy**

The 2014 General elections in India are highly awaited and anticipated the world over. There is significant speculation as to whether the Congress-led UPA (United Progressive Alliance) will come back to power, or will the BJP (Bharatiya Janta Party)-led NDA (National Democratic Alliance) succeed in replacing the ruling party of the last ten years. Both the parties have been running vigorous campaigns around their projected Prime-Ministerial leaders (yet not confirmed officially), namely Rahul Gandhi for the Congress and Narendra Modi (present Chief Minister of the Indian state of Gujarat) for the BJP. Both Rahul Gandhi and Narendra Modi have been running dynamic campaigns, focusing on engaging with the Indian public at large.

Modi has managed to conduct many successful and impactful talks and engagement sessions with various interest groups in India, ranging from young university and college students, to women entrepreneurs, to the lower-caste groups, etc. not only this, he is already on the path to reincarnate a new image of himself (trying to rid himself of the Communal image) and has had very successful engagements with dignitaries and diplomats from the US (a country that had refused visa to Modi on his earlier accounts of a tainted communal image) and the UK. Narendra Modi has been projecting an image of himself as a modern, tech-savvy, development-oriented, people's leader. If Narendra Modi were to be elected the Prime Minister of India in the 2014 Elections, the face of Indian Public Diplomacy will certainly undergo some change from the present. He has already suggested a road map for restructuring the Ministry of External Affairs in India, where he wants to bring in new department that focuses on the new strategy of diplomacy that focuses on trade and economics. He's also talked about restructuring the Indian image abroad more vehemently and he wants to do this by building India as a developmental model for the developing nations and making the Government function more transparent and accountable.

On the one hand, Narendra Modi with his greater emphasis on engagement with both interest groups in India and abroad, a more open and transparent policy, promises to offer Indian public diplomacy a fresh vigor. Yet, on the other, he may be more detrimental to the Indian image abroad, as he is viewed as an authoritarian, communal leader by many in the world, which may hurt the two very strong virtues of Indian soft power- democracy and secularism. However, for now, one can only wait and watch the outcomes of the 2014 elections and how it will shape up Indian Public Diplomacy efforts in the future.

## **Conclusion**

Indian public diplomacy is a relatively new strategy adopted by the Indian government, but its importance is highly valued today as its become a vital instrument of India's soft power. Not only this, but public diplomacy is also an important tool in India's foreign policy arsenal which can be used to leverage India's international imprint in the world, keeping in mind India's ascendance in international affairs. Public diplomacy has to be integrated into Indian foreign

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policymaking process in form of a comprehensive and cohesive strategy. Therefore, Public Diplomacy cannot be just an afterthought, but has to become imperative at all levels of foreign-policy making. Thus, for India to become a great power in the world, the Indian government has to exploit all resources of soft power, of which public diplomacy is a crucial one.

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