



India's soft power in the Indo-Pacific post-Covid

**BY
CHRISTINA AHEIBAM**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS
(ASIA PACIFIC STUDIES)**

THAMMASAT INSTITUTE OF AREA STUDIES

**THAMMASAT UNIVERSITY
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COLLEGE OF INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

THESIS

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ENTITLED

INDIA'S SOFT POWER IN THE INDO-PACIFIC POST-COVID

was approved as partial fulfilment of the requirements for
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ABSTRACT

This thesis assesses the soft power of India in the Indo-Pacific regional order after the COVID-19 pandemic by analyzing significant contemporaneous events and policy changes. India is an intriguing prospect in the Indo-Pacific soft power rivalry as it enjoys its abundance in all three types of soft power sources, its cultural values, its political ideals and its foreign policy. When the pandemic struck the world, India's role as a pivotal player in the region increased along with the region's geopolitical complexities. Qualitative data was collected by interview and from secondary sources about Vaccine Diplomacy and foreign assistance under the Neighbourhood First policy, and rise in Hindu Nationalism during Covid-19 and the implications of such in framing the Indian soft power in the Indo-Pacific region. The results imply that Indian soft power has expanded in the Indo-Pacific region due to its vaccine diplomacy and foreign policy initiatives. However, internal challenges, particularly in economics and infrastructure have impeded its full potential. To truly enhance its global influence, India must first solve these domestic obstacles. India should incorporate the element of diversity as a tool to promote its uniqueness. Only by resolving these internal issues can India effectively align its international standing with its aspirations as a regional soft power leader.

KEYWORDS: Soft power, India, COVID-19, Indo-Pacific, Vaccine Diplomacy, Neighbourhood First Policy.

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Christina Aheibam

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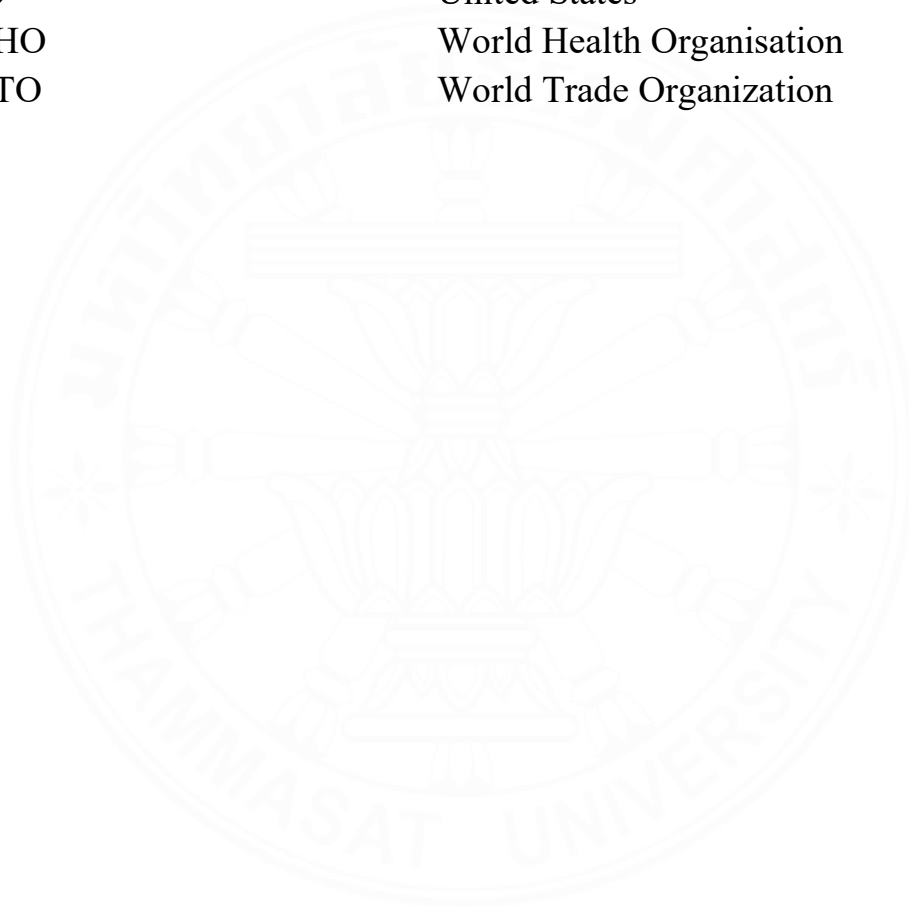
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Symbols/Abbreviations	Terms
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
BC	Before Christ
BECA	Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa
CAA	Citizenship Amendment Act
CEPI	Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations
COVAX	COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access
COVID-19	Coronavirus Cisease of 2019
DPI	Digital Public Infrastructure
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
ICC	Indian Cultural Centre
ICCR	Indian Council for Cultural Relations
IORA	Indian Ocean Rims Association
IP	Intellectual Property
IT	Information Technology
MEA	Ministry of External Affairs
NAM	Non-Alignment Movement
NRC	National Register of Citizens
NRI	Non-Resident Indians
OCI	Overseas Citizens of India
ORF	Observer Research Foundation
OTT	Over-the-top
PBD	Pravasi Bharatiya Divas
PIO	Persons of Indian Origins
PM	Prime Minister
PPE	Personal Protection Equipment
QUAD	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
RIC	Russia India China

SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
TRIPS	Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights
TV	Television
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
US	United States
WHO	World Health Organisation
WTO	World Trade Organization



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The Indo-Pacific concept

The Indo-Pacific has been a key region in shaping the global order. Geographically, “the Indo-Pacific is broadly to be understood as an interconnected space between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean” (Das, 2019). “Its boundaries are disputed, with some arguing that it stretches from the eastern coasts of Africa to the western coast of the United States; however, definitions vary based on the individual actors and where they are located within the enormous region” (Das, 2019). It is a broad mental construct formed by the powerful players associated with the region. From a strategic perspective, the Indo-Pacific region is viewed as a continuous stretch spanning two seas, with the Straits of Malacca serving as its primary commercial channel.

The growing importance of the region is characterized by two factors: the growing Chinese footprint and economic expansion in the region and the declining US presence in the region and its relative efforts to counter the rise of China. The Indo-Pacific area is therefore distinguished by an abundance of geopolitically complicated equations, which have led to a network of interactions between countries in the region and those outside of it (PANT & BASU, 2021). The Indo-Pacific is home to some of the fastest-growing developing economies in the world, the world’s busiest seaports, and 60% of all marine traffic worldwide. The US, China, India, Australia, and Japan are the key players in this region navigating with the middle economies to construct their defined versions of the Indo-Pacific idea.

India's approach to the Indo-Pacific region has been to fortify alliances based on shared interests and build partnerships with like-minded nations in order to confront a changing strategic and security environment (SAHA, 2023). India’s engagement with the region is mainly in the form of multilateral platforms like the QUAD and bilateral relations with countries like the US, Japan, and Australia. India’s presence in the Indo-Pacific is often perceived as an attempt to contain China, its land and maritime neighbour. Enforcing its vision of the Indo-Pacific, India established the Act East Policy which was Look East in the past in an attempt to increase connectivity and trade with the Southeast Asian countries. India also enjoys strong bilateral relations with the majority of ASEAN members, which are vital to shaping the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific. Given its strategic location, long history of shared culture and civilization, and growing global profile, India enjoys its importance in the region.

Overview of COVID-19’s impact on global politics

The COVID-19 pandemic broke out in China in December 2019, which spread rapidly and took grasp of the whole globe. On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a “Public Health Emergency of International Concern” (PHEIC), then on March 11,

2020, it declared a “pandemic”. As of May 2023, after three years, more than 700 million affected people and 6.92 million deaths have been reported (WHO, 2023b). India had its first officially confirmed coronavirus case in late January 2020, and the infection rate began rising rapidly at the end of March 2020 in 2020, it reached a peak with nearly 100 thousand new daily cases in September (Jaskólska, 2023). To contain the pandemic, Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared a nationwide lockdown in late March 2020, bringing the world’s fifth-largest economy to a standstill (Trieu, 2022). The government faced various challenges as the epidemic spread and introduced several initiatives to boost the economy and help individuals impacted by the lockdown.

The pandemic worsened US-China relations over the blame game of the origin of the virus and trade issues on top of existing geopolitical tensions. The pandemic also demanded the importance of strong global cooperation which led to increased emphasis on multilateral platforms like the World Health Organisation (WHO) and other regional platforms. On the other hand, it prompted many countries to choose protectionist policies and prioritize the domestic demands of healthcare supplies. Health became a core element of national security with many countries ramping up their healthcare facilities and pandemic preparedness.

In the context of global politics, the pandemic led to the utilization of soft power credentials by the superpowers mainly through vaccine diplomacy that not only facilitates global inoculation but also contributes to their respective geopolitical objectives. “The countries that produce vaccines and distribute them to those less fortunate see a return on their investment in the form of soft power: prestige, goodwill, a degree of indebtedness, and even awe” (Fetahu, 2021). India, too has been generous in providing aid and support to the neighbouring countries to help them get through the crisis. Such generic acts were frequently interpreted as India's use of soft power diplomacy to improve relations with its neighbours.

Vaccine diplomacy is the use and/or delivery of vaccinations to strengthen a country's diplomatic ties with other governments. It is a form of medical diplomacy. When analyzing the motives of vaccine diplomacy, Seow Ting Lee claimed that “this kind of foreign policy tool improved one’s image worldwide, even in places where it seemed to be irreversibly damaged, as well as achieved economic profit and capitalize on new opportunities” (Lee, 2021). In other words, it has evolved as a tool to promote countries’ soft power arsenal.

1.2 India’s Soft power resources

Soft power is the ability to influence others without the use of force or coercion. According to Joseph Nye: “the soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policy (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)” (Nye Jr, 2008). In all the three resources of soft power, India seems to enjoy its abundance. The country’s rich cultural heritage hosting several of the world’s oldest civilizations carries a multiplicity of ethnic, religious, caste, and other strands within its society. Ancient Hindu temples in Bali and Angkor Wat, Gandhi's nonviolent activism influencing the US civil rights movement, the popularity of Bollywood movies, Yoga, and the economic and

social influence of Indian migrant workers in the Gulf nations on Singapore are all indications of India's worldwide soft power. Indian diaspora around the globe also plays a very influential role in promoting the state's soft power diplomacy. Tamil, a language of southern India, is also known to be the official language of Singapore and Sri Lanka (Mullen, 2021).

Known as one of the largest democracies, India's political ideologies such as secularism and free press are widely acknowledged. India's ability to maintain a democratic political system in the face of extreme poverty, widespread illiteracy, and a multi-ethnic country has undoubtedly boosted its reputation as a champion of democracy. When one considers India's accomplishments in light of other developing nations' democratic records both inside and beyond the region, which unquestionably look to India as a role model in this respect, it becomes even more noteworthy (Mullen, 2015).

In terms of foreign policy, India has a great reputation and credibility thanks to her support for multilateralism and causes including decolonization, disarmament, peaceful conflict resolution, and multilateralism. The Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) policy of the country allowed India to achieve great international prestige and influence by providing an independent course of foreign policy action to the large majority of developing countries (PATGIRI et al., 2022). India's rapid advancement in the areas of science and technology such as space research, information technology, and the pharmaceutical industry is also considered a great source of attraction for other developing nations (Misra, 1987). The acceptance and credibility of numerous financial aid programs to developing countries have significantly contributed to India's soft power image, as noted by Mullen and Ganguly (Mullen, 2012). Additionally, India has sought to incorporate culture into its foreign policy as a part of its soft power diplomacy aiming to project itself as a diverse, multicultural society to achieve political diplomacy objectives.

When the pandemic hit, India employed medical and humanitarian assistance to major neighboring countries as well as to states in the Indo-Pacific. Being called the 'pharmacy of the world' India had to live up to its expectations. Moreover, this would contribute immensely to the image of India as a major pharmaceutical power hence contributing to its soft power. The Indian Prime Minister announced the 'Neighbourhood First Policy', under which India took the lead in providing essential medical supplies to countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives (PATGIRI et al., 2022). In 2021, the Indian government rolled out the 'Vaccine Maitri' (Vaccine Friendship) Campaign where vaccines were supplied to its neighbouring countries, starting with Bhutan first. This helped India to receive immense recognition and appreciation around the region, thus highlighting its influence.

However, there were major setbacks during the second wave of the pandemic. India was hit hard by the second wave due to a lack of vaccines and medical equipments. Unable to meet the domestic demands, the Government halted all vaccine exports and foreign aid to other nations abruptly. This decision did not go well for the country's international reputation. It tainted the gains made in the first wave as a global supplier of medicines and medical equipment (PATGIRI et al., 2022). These setbacks are a result of a weak internal economy and infrastructure.

In the existing global system with huge economic interdependence among the players, soft power becomes increasingly important for a nation to secure its position as a major global power. The prospect of hard power is limited and should be compensated by soft power. In the aftermath of the pandemic, the struggle for soft power increases as the superpowers increasingly involve themselves in the run for attaining regional hegemon. So it is crucial to study the status of soft power of one's country and the challenges and inadequacy in its related elements to fully utilize the nation's potential and smart power.

“The spill-over impact of India's internal problems and China's rising profile has massively challenged India's influence in South Asia” (Aryal & Nair, 2021). Therefore, discussing the internal domestic scenario becomes important to assess the fluctuations in India's soft power image projections as it directly affects the foreign policy of any country. In this paper, the author shall try to address the issue of the rise in Hindu Nationalism during COVID-19 and the role it asserted in determining an important political landscape. The paper shall then try to analyze the implications of such assertions on the foreign policy to the soft power of India.

1.3 Research Objectives

The study aims to assess the soft power index of India by comparing two periods: pre-Covid and post-Covid. The main objective of the research is to analyze significant events and policy changes during the COVID-19 pandemic and the implications of such in framing the Indian soft power in the Indo-Pacific region.

1.4 Research Questions

The following research questions have been framed to be answered through this research:

- To what extent has India's soft power been enhanced or diminished in the Indo-Pacific region following the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How has India's assistance to its Indo-Pacific neighbours during the COVID-19 epidemic affected its soft power?
- What are the internal challenges primarily linked to India's soft power during and after the COVID-19 pandemic?

The hypothesis follows along the lines that India's soft power in the Indo-Pacific has been impacted greatly by the COVID-19 pandemic. India's vaccine diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic had a positive share of impacts on its soft power and the humanitarian assistance provided has boosted India's position as a reliable and cooperative regional partner. However,

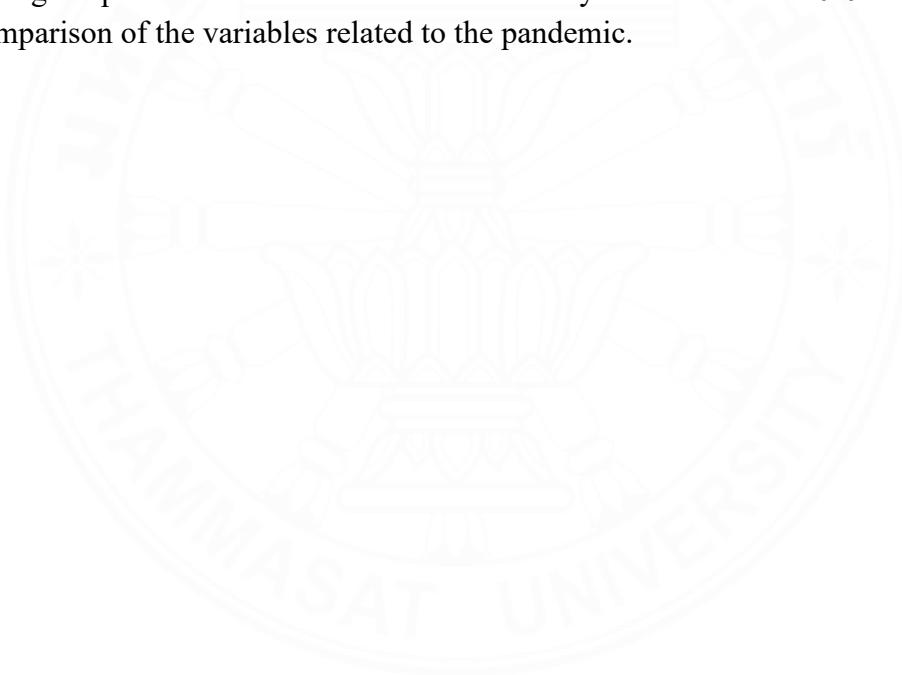
India's incapability to create a unified and inclusive national identity and its domestic governance are the main hurdles to its soft power during and after the COVID-19 epidemic.

1.5 Significance of the research

The findings of this study will help to understand the internal gaps and challenges that could have potentially hindered the projection of soft power of India during the COVID-19 pandemic. Conclusively, assessing those restraints could help prevent and overcome similar drawbacks in India's foreign policy related to soft power in the future.

1.6 Scope of the research and limitations

The research will focus on the major turn of events in India's foreign and public diplomacy during the pandemic that significantly formulated India's soft power image in the Indo-Pacific. Two prime events will be addressed here: Vaccine Diplomacy and foreign assistance under the "Neighbourhood First" policy, and the rise in Hindu Nationalism during Covid-19. These issues are chosen because of their significant relevance in composing the soft power imagery of India during the pandemic. The time frame of the study is limited from 2019 to 2023 for the specific comparison of the variables related to the pandemic.



CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The selection of literature for the basis of the thesis is divided into four parts:

2.1 Soft Power as a foreign policy choice for India

The most notable effort made by the Indian Government to make better use of its soft power assets was the incorporation of a cultural element into its foreign policy. The forming of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) is to present an image of India as a plural multicultural society (Chauhan, 2014). The Modi-led government has improved strategic and security ties with the ASEAN through cultural diplomacy over its term of governance and refreshing and updating its predecessor's foreign policy by bringing out 'the first neighbourhood' policy and the 'Act East' policy in a dynamic way emphasizing on soft power ties (Shekhar, 2019).

(Kugiel, 2017) identifies public diplomacy as a soft power tool to gain support for India's foreign policy and highlights foreign aid as another rising soft power capability of India. India's soft power attributes are being redefined by Modi's foreign policy. The main elements promoted as soft power tools in India's foreign policy are selective, mainly Yoga, Buddhism, and diaspora. The Modi government places special emphasis on these selected resources to transform them into a national policy. India is actively promoting its culture and values across the Indo-Pacific area through cultural diplomacy activities such as cultural exchanges, educational programs, and festivals.

2.2 Health diplomacy as a tool for promoting soft power

India's Vaccine Maitri Initiative is an example of "smart power" that combines soft and hard power to reinforce its geopolitical position and promote a positive national image worldwide. By sending its Covaxin vaccine to many countries, India is portraying itself as a constructive actor in international relations and reaffirming its role in the post-COVID world order. Additionally, India is using its COVID-19 diplomacy as a tool for soft power competition, particularly against China (Trieu, 2022). This literature also mentions the shortcomings of India's COVID diplomacy in the second wave but concludes that the utilization of soft power by the Modi administration through the country's pharmaceutical capabilities has shown mostly beneficial results. The gaps in the literature are the lack of analysis of the setbacks and questioning of India's soft power due to the failure of its vaccine diplomacy in the second wave.

(Mullen, 2021) highlights that the Indian soft power has been on the decline even before the impact of Covid particularly in the context of the Modi government's policies. A drop in GDP, a declining economy, and eroding civil liberties resulted in the deterioration of India's soft power at the start of 2020 as referenced in Brand Finance's Global Soft Power Index report. She emphasizes the failure of vaccine diplomacy and declining foreign aid in the second wave

of the pandemic. These two setbacks visibly undermine India's soft power appeals. The article asserts that India's reputation as an example for others to follow and collaborate with will suffer a more challenging recovery. The analysis is solidly supported by reports and comparisons with other countries such as Russia and China's soft power diplomacy at the same time.

(PATGIRI et al., 2022) call attention to certain internal and societal weakness that severely constrains India's ability to leverage the soft power resources - widespread poverty, inequality, corruption, poor human development index, growing incidents of religious intolerance and societal tensions along the caste, ethnic, and religious lines. COVID-19 exposed these vulnerabilities and hence undermined India's ability to leverage its soft power through successful health diplomacy.

2.3 Hindu Nationalism and India's Foreign Policy

Since the massive political victories of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a Hindu Nationalist Party in 2014 and 2019, "a phenomenon of extreme polarisation" has been increasingly concerning (Saroj Kumar Aryal, 2022). The agenda of Hindutva or Hinduness has been well incorporated in the policies of the BJP government such as the NRC (National Register of Citizens), and the revocation of Kashmir's autonomy. Elements of Hindu Nationalism are found to be increasingly deployed in India's foreign policy. The trajectory of foreign policies has been found to follow Hindu Nationalist doctrine such as to instill necessary hatred against Pakistan. A surge in discriminatory policies against Muslims during COVID-19 affected the democracy index of India and downgraded the country's ranking in the Freedom House evaluation. Such observations seriously undermine the soft democratic secular image that the government has been putting efforts in order to appeal to its soft power in the region.

There is a huge gap in this section of the literature as there is limited relevant literature. There is a need to thoroughly analyze the impact of the rise in Hindu Nationalism on India's soft power mainly in the Indo-Pacific and its immediate neighbours which are majorly non-Hindu countries.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Theoretical framework

THE CONCEPT OF SOFT POWER

The term 'soft power' was first introduced by the American scholar Joseph S Nye in 1990. He defines power as the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants and the nature of it can be hard or soft. He argues that we can affect others' behavior in three main ways: threats of coercion ('sticks'); inducements or payments ('carrots'); and attraction and persuasion that makes others want what we want. The fundamental elements of hard power include tangible assets, like military power, economic strength, science and technology, natural resources, or geography. In contrast to hard power, the elements and tools of soft power encompass several specific fields, such as media, culture, art, science, sports, and education (Nye, 2004). According to him, "soft power is the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment" (Nye, 2019). "Hard power is push and soft power is pull.....hard power is like brandishing carrots or sticks; soft power is more like a magnet" (Nye, 2021).

Nye identifies the three main sources of a country's soft power as "its culture, its political values, and its foreign policy" (Nye Jr, 2008). Mullen considers ideals like democracy, respect for human rights, the provision of a free press, and an approach to foreign policy that is recognized as just as significant resources that attract other nations (Mullen, 2015). Nye also mentions that soft power does not belong to only one nation or only to nations (Nye, 2019). Other scholars also elaborate and define the concept of soft power: Kurlantzick - soft power encompasses everything outside the security and the army realm: shared culture, public diplomacy, economic and political aspects, and involvement in multilateral organizations considered 'soft power (Kurlantzick, 2007) ; Wilson - the capacity to persuade others to do what one wants (Wilson III, 2008) ; Geun Lee - soft power best describes using ideational or symbolic resources to shape others' wishes and desires, ultimately resulting in behavioral changes (Lee, 2010). Shashi Tharoor, former diplomat and ex-minister wrote that "The associations and attitudes conjured up in the global imagination by the mere mention of a country's name is often a more accurate gauge of its soft power than a dispassionate analysis of its foreign policies" (Tharoor, 2013).

Smart power is formed by the combination of mutually reinforcing hard and soft power. Nye links the history of public diplomacy as a means to promote a country's soft power. He adds that "effective public diplomacy necessitates a knowledge of the roles played by civil society, credibility, and self-criticism in creating soft power".

On the other hand, economic aid and assistance can be considered an important source of soft power (PATGIRI et al., 2022). In this context, providing aid to any country during a crisis, such as a natural disaster, by providing relief operations, medical equipment, essential goods, and financial assistance to recover from economic and infrastructure damage, can be viewed as a tool of soft power. Such actions often influence the target country's preferences by

creating positive impressions of the donor country. Soft power is an indirect form of power that typically takes a long time to yield tangible outcomes (PATGIRI et al., 2022). The adoption of health diplomacy by the major powers such as the US, China, and Russia during COVID-19 can be understood along the lines of this concept.

SOFT POWER OF INDIA

Concerning India's operationalization of the concept of soft power, the country is aware of its abundance in Joseph Nye's three sources of soft power. Its rich cultural heritage, democratic ideals, extensive diaspora, and foreign policy lift the nation as one of the strong players in the field of soft power competition. The rising importance of soft power in India's foreign policy can be seen in its efforts to project its image of pluralist diversity and tolerant secularism (Mullen, 2015).

Since entering office in 2014, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has stressed the crucial importance of soft power as one of the five pillars of the "Panchamrit" principles of his foreign policy, which is "Sanskriti evam Sabhyata" (culture and civilizational links) (Basrur, 2017). This pillar relates to "Cultural diplomacy," a powerful strategy India has employed since 1947. However, in Indian perception, soft power is still an ambiguous concept primarily associated with cultural diplomacy. The Modi government thinks soft power may not successfully persuade international players to directly support India's different causes. On the other hand, India will find it simpler in the long run to advance its economic and security objectives to reach its foreign policy goals. In the context of the COVID pandemic, soft power is a highly appropriate concept for Indian foreign policy to take advantage of its resources and past experiences (Trieu, 2022).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, India managed to emerge as a key supplier of vaccines to developing nations, fostering goodwill and strengthening ties with its partners worldwide. The foundation of India's efforts in vaccine diplomacy was the 'Vaccine Maitri' project, which was started by the Ministry of External Affairs. Through this program, vaccines made in India were made available to over 90 nations, showcasing India's responsibility as a global player and its commitment to global health (Gupta, 2022). The initiative also extended beyond vaccine supply and covered humanitarian assistance such as sending medical teams and supplies to support vaccination initiatives and fortify healthcare infrastructure, offering medical assistance and expertise to its neighbors.

3.2 Methodology

In doing the research, a qualitative method based on a historical and descriptive-analytic approach is employed. A historical perspective is needed to be integrated in order to understand India's foundation on soft power and nationalistic politics. The paper will examine the operationalizing resources available in conduit with the abovementioned theoretical framework. The data collected will be critically analyzed to produce an inclusive output.

3.3 Sources of Data

The base of the thesis covers both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources of data include those that the researcher has personally gathered through experiments, questionnaires, and other methods. For the primary source, in addition to interviews with scholars, researchers, officials relevant to the proposed field of study, the researcher also refer to official statements, speeches and documents released by the Indian government and other agencies. Three interviews were conducted and the three interviewees are listed as below:

1. Patryk Kugiel - Ph.D Senior Analyst, Asia-Pacific Program, Polish Institute of International Affairs.
2. Hong Quang Trieu – Ph.D Fellow, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences.
3. Dr. Preethi Amaresh – Scholar, Geneva School of Diplomacy and Social Scientist, CyperPeace Foundation.

Secondary sources include but are not limited to books, government reports, news, relevant dissertations, and scholarly works from available online databases which provide resources related to the soft power of India.

CHAPTER 4

INDIAN SOFT POWER BEFORE COVID

4.1 Historical Evolution of India's Soft Power

Soft power has been a major element of India's foreign policy. Since coming to office, Modi has placed special emphasis on leveraging its foreign policy goals and soft power initiatives. India's long history of cultural relations mainly with the countries of East and Southeast Asia has been significantly beneficial in establishing its soft power potential in these regions. "From around 200 BC to the 15th century, when Hindu Buddhist influence was assimilated by regional politics, South East Asia was influenced by India. Kingdoms on the Indian subcontinent's southeast coast had developed political, commercial, and cultural ties with Southeast Asian nations in Burma, Thailand, Indonesia, the Malay Peninsula, Cambodia, and Vietnam" (Wadhwa, 2019). From then on, Indian influences stemmed from its cultural influences around the world.

During India's struggle for independence, Mahatma Gandhi's 'ahimsa' (non-violence) and civil disobedience philosophies resonated globally and impacted leaders and movements around the world, establishing the foundation for India's contemporary soft power. India set itself up as the biggest democracy in the world after achieving independence in 1947 by highlighting its adherence to secularism, pluralism, and democratic ideals. Many developing countries found India's diversified society and effective democratic government approach to be appealing.

Even before the term soft power came into prominence, India's soft power had an impact on the world stage. Samman (dignity), Samvaad (dialogue), Samriddhi (shared prosperity), Suruksha (regional and global security), and Sanskriti evam Sabhayata (Cultural and civilizational linkages) are the five strategic pillars of this soft power. These are connected to India's broader political and economic objectives (Mukherjee, 2019). In his quest to situate India's political principles within a broader geopolitical framework, PM Modi, who is currently serving his second term, has placed particular emphasis on the notion that India can serve as the world's "viswaguru," or teacher. India thus was portrayed as a Vishwa Guru (world leader), — "a civilization that could usher in moral values and ethical standards into international relations" (Kugiel, 2017).

4.2 India's soft power strategy in the Indo-Pacific

According to the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), a study done in 2019 showed that the main resources endowing the Indian soft power capabilities are mainly in the form of diaspora, Bollywood, Yoga, religion/culture, economic support, and the IT industry. The elements will be discussed further below:

4.2.1 *The Indian diaspora*

"The biggest instrument of our soft power is the Indian Diaspora" As Mr. Sinha pointed out and quoted, "People of Indian origin are extremely important sources of support for the

Indian Government in the execution of its policies through the influence and respect they command in the countries in which they live" (Mohan, 2003).

In the Indo-Pacific, most of the Indian diasporic community dates back its origin to Indian merchant settlement in the early medieval period. Despite being citizens of their host countries, these people have passed down their Indian faith, language, script, cuisine, community institutions, and culture to succeeding generations. Through international trade and community networks, they have enhanced not only their new countries of residence but also the relationship between India and their new countries (Lentin, 2022).

The concentration of the Indian diaspora in Singapore appears to be very financially influential with reports featuring five Indians in the list of Forbes' 50 Richest Singaporeans. In addition to India's foreign policy the diasporic community to the thriving trade and foreign direct investment between India and Singapore. Likewise in the islands of the Republic of Indonesia, the Sultanate of Oman, and the Republic of Kenya, the Indian diaspora holds political and financial influences and has played a significant role in deepening the country's engagement with the Indo-Pacific nation (Lentin, 2022).

The Indian government places significant importance on utilizing its diaspora as a tool of soft power diplomacy and this is evident in the Ministry of External Affairs' initiatives such as the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR). Pravasi Bharatiya Divas conventions have been held since 2003 and are celebrated every year on January 09 to mark the contribution of the Overseas Indian community to the development of India. The objective of PBD is to "strengthen the engagement of the overseas Indian community with the Government of India and reconnect them with their roots" (MEA, 2023). By acknowledging their achievements, the Indian government tries to show appreciation for being an accomplished Indian origin in another country far from its roots and reignites the emotion of being Indian.

The Indian Council For Cultural Relations (ICCR) was established with the "aim to project Indian culture and heritage on the international cultural map and to present India through Indian eyes, and to forge people-to-people contacts with other countries" (ICCR, 2023). It serves as India's cultural ambassador maintaining a network of Indian Cultural Centers (ICCs) in more than 38 countries and offering the diaspora a way to stay connected to their roots. These centers give classes in Indian languages traditional dance styles, yoga, and other aspects of culture helping younger generations develop a strong sense of who they are. These events help to reconnect the diaspora with their cultural roots and promote engagement and enrichment of the Indian culture abroad. In essence, it inspires individuals to strive to improve ties between India and their host nations as well as portray a favorable image of their home country thus promoting India's soft power.

4.2.2 Bollywood

Although not actively promoted by the government as a tool of Indian soft power, Bollywood is one of India's biggest soft power assets with a \$3.5 billion industry and audiences in over 70 countries. It is one of the few non-Western countries that is able to make its presence in the global mainstream cinema market. The Indian government officially recognized the film industry in 2000, granting the Industrial Development Bank of India the authority to lend

money to filmmakers. This guarantee allowed the industry to grow into a significant source of income and a tool for advancing India's soft power. There are many festivals and functions centered on Bollywood, and prestigious universities offer courses and research into this form of popular culture (Gehlawat, 2015).

As stated by Shashi Tharoor in his book, *Pax Indica: India and the World of the Twenty-first Century*, “from a soft power perspective, Bollywood is perhaps more effective among other countries of the global South” (Tharoor, 2013). Bollywood has definitely taken the world by storm, but it hasn't quite captured the same level of excitement in the Indo-Pacific region outside of South Asia. Compared to its huge popularity in places like the Middle East and Africa, Bollywood still has a way to go in winning over audiences there. Contrary to Hollywood's portrayal of the American way of life as the global standard, the Indian entertainment industry is often perceived as merely a source of amusement, rather than a medium to promote its rich cultural heritage. This intriguing contrast highlights the nuanced perspectives surrounding the role of media in shaping societal perceptions and desires.

Bollywood is now the world's largest film factory in terms of production and viewership, with more people buying tickets for Indian movies than for Hollywood films (Xpress, 2023). Interestingly, Bollywood films have gained a devoted following in Muslim nations, as their emphasis on family and community values resonates more strongly than the Western focus on individualism.

In Indonesia, Bollywood movies and music have influenced Indonesian local music greatly due to its long shared history with Indian culture and religious influence. In 2015, “Aamir Khan's delightful comedy, *PK*, earned nearly \$17 million at the Chinese box office, making it the most successful Indian film ever in China and among other overseas markets and resulting in the release of more prints of this film in China than in India” (Thussu, 2019). The 2015 film, *Bajranggi Bhaijaan* also improved people-to-people relations with Pakistan by sparking heartwarming emotions and messages among the viewers. Most recently, the 2022 film - ‘*Gangubai Kathiawadi*’ became a surprise hit in Laos and Thailand with the movie staying in Netflix Thailand's top 10 chart for weeks (DAS, 2022).

Being one of the most significant partners of Australia in the Indo-Pacific, India has developed rich ties economically, bilaterally, and culturally with Australia leading to a unique friendship between the two countries. There has been a strong and growing influence of Bollywood in Australia with the Victorian government even providing funds to promote high-budget Indian films and television shows to be produced in Australia (ANI, 2023). Recognizing the audience of Bollywood in the country, the Australian government also took the initiative to hold the Indian Film Festival every year in Melbourne since 2014.

All the same, Bollywood is hardly ever used by the Indian government as an official soft power instrument in its foreign policy. In light of Nye's observation that the most effective propaganda in the modern world originates from non-propaganda sources, which lends legitimacy to the message, this may potentially be advantageous (Lahiri, 2017).

4.2.3 Buddhism and Yoga

Cultural diplomacy is a powerful element of a country's soft power. Indian cultural elements promoted as soft power resources include Indian arts, cuisine, language, Yoga, Buddhism, and Indian cinema. India heavily utilizes Buddhism and Yoga to establish itself as the global spiritual leader. Several conferences with Buddhism as the theme were organized in Thailand and South Korea in the past. Buddhism has been the slogan linked with most, if not all, of Modi's trips to East Asian nations and his Act East strategy and a compulsory Buddhist temple visit in each one of his visits abroad (Lahiri, 2017). Modi's frequent visits to Buddhist temples and gift gifting to the countries that he visited that had specific Buddhist linkages or meanings harnessed many positive outcomes for India. For instance, during his visit to South Korea where he replanted a Bodhi sapling that India had gifted in advance to South Korea. In response to this, there was a surge in foreign direct investment (FDI) from South Korea and the two nations' economic ties became closer (Lahiri, 2017).

India claims to be the birthplace of Yoga and Prime Minister Modi has actively advocated for Yoga in the international arena. First observed on June 21, 2015, the International Day of Yoga was formally established by Modi following his successful lobbying efforts at the UN General Assembly. Widespread support was shown for World Yoga Day, particularly as Modi profited from the worldwide yoga surge and popularity while excluding religion from his yoga discourse (Lahiri, 2017).

4.2.4 Foreign Policy

Another thing that draws other nations to India is its foreign policy. India's foreign policy stance, which supports multilateralism by endorsing the UN, decolonization, disarmament, and peaceful ways of resolving conflicts, has greatly enhanced her credibility and repute (PATGIRI et al., 2022). NAM's founding was undoubtedly India's pinnacle of global achievement. Several developing nations are finding India's expanding economic wealth and the effectiveness of its peaceful democratic development model to be highly appealing. India was able to gain worldwide prominence and influence well beyond what its real military might and economic might would have brought about due to the foundation of NAM, which provided India, an autonomous course of foreign policy action to the vast majority of developing nations (Misra, 1987).

As part of its foreign policy goals, India founded the Look East Policy in the 1990s which later on changed to Act East Policy. "India's Act East Policy is at the heart of its eastward orientation and ties in with the broader approach to the Indo-Pacific". Under this policy, the government sought to strengthen connections with India's wider neighbors and transform the nation's northeast into the gateway to the Indo-Pacific region. In addition to providing chances for development for the North East States of India, the Act East Policy aims to strengthen economic and trade links with South East Asia and other Indo-Pacific nations. Therefore, the three Cs—commerce, culture, and connectivity—serve as the cornerstones of India's present Act East Policy (Wadhwa, 2019).

CHAPTER 5

INDIAN SOFT POWER WITH THE SPREAD OF COVID-19 AND ITS AFTERMATHS

5.1 Covid-19 Diplomacy in India

In 2021, India surpassed all other countries in the globe in population and for such a vast and developing nation, healthcare facilities and services lag well below the level of plenty. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the seventh-largest country in the world, the government was projected to incur heavy losses if it did not take the necessary preventive measures in a very short period of time. The first confirmed case of the virus in India was reported on 30 January 2020 in Kerala and by March 2020 more than 500 cases were reported (INDIATODAY, 2020).

To halt the disease's rapid spread, the Indian government implemented an eight-week nationwide lockdown from March 23, 2020, and was later extended until July 2020. In the initial months of the pandemic, India, by virtue of the fact that it is the 'pharmacy of the world', increased the production of essential medicines like hydroxychloroquine, paracetamol, etc. as well as Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) kits, ventilators, and masks (Sajjanhar, 2021). Acting on its diplomatic goodwill, India sent medical expertise, equipments, and supplies to over 100 nations in need.

After the ban of all incoming international flights in March 2020, a vast number of Indian workers and students were stranded abroad. India then started to evacuate its stranded citizens phase by phase. 64 flights and 3 navy warships were deployed by India to evacuate 14000 Indians from 13 countries in phase 1 of evacuation (TOI, 2020). "As of 10 March 2021, around 50 lakh people have returned to India under the Vande Bharat Mission", the biggest civilian evacuation exercise launched by India "to repatriate Indian nationals and to facilitate the travel of passengers between India and other parts of the world" (MEA, 2021).

Following the rapid efforts to produce a vaccine for the virus, the government of India approved the distribution of its indigenous vaccine COVAXIN by Bharat Biotech developed in collaboration with the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) in July 2020. It then rolled out the first phase of its vaccination program on January 16, 2021, with an aim to vaccinate around 30 million Indian citizens. India's National COVID-19 vaccination programme was considered the world's largest vaccination programme. It was around this time, that India popularised the Vaccine Maitri program and the Neighborhood First Policy as parts of its vaccine and foreign diplomacy arguably intending to bolster its global standing as a responsible and reliable actor.

5.1.1 Vaccine diplomacy

India is a major vaccine manufacturing hub and produces 60% of the global vaccine supply. India's potential to deepen its connections with the Indo-Pacific area and beyond has been enhanced by its status as not only the region's but also one of the world's leading producers and suppliers of vaccines (Pant & Saha, 2020). Within four days of starting its own immunization campaign, India began sharing its vaccinations with the rest of the globe in accordance with PM Modi's "One Earth, One Health" concept (Sajjanhar, 2022). Vaccine Maitri meaning

“Vaccine Friendship” is a humanitarian initiative launched by the government of India to provide vaccines around the globe. Under this initiative, India has supplied over 300 million total supplies of COVID-19 vaccines to 150 countries of the world as shown in the vaccine supply report of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) as of June 2023. 77% of these doses were exported commercially, but 17.3 percent were sent to low-income developing countries through COVAX and the remaining amount was given as grants (PANKAJ, 2023). COVAX was the multilateral effort coordinated by “Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), the World Health Organization (WHO), and UNICEF from 2020 through 2023 to to accelerate the development and manufacture of COVID-19 vaccines and to guarantee fair and equitable access for every country in the world” (WHO, 2023a).

The Vaccine Maitri program initially started as an effort to help the SAARC nations in accordance with the Neighbourhood First Policy of India. The Neighbourhood First Policy was first enunciated by Prime Minister Modi in 2014. The policy prioritizes improving physical, digital, and people-to-people connectivity while also boosting trade and commerce with its immediate and extended neighbours (NDTV, 2024). Providing vaccines was considered one of the essential elements of the policy.

The first countries to receive the made-in-India vaccines were Bhutan and the Maldives. Bhutan received 150,000 doses and the Maldives received 100,000 doses of the Covishield vaccine. Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Seychelles, and Mauritius followed the list of countries to receive vaccine aid from India. Bangladesh received 2 million doses and Nepal received 1 million doses on January 21. Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Seychelles, and Mauritius received 1.5 million doses, 500,000 doses, 50,000 doses, and 100,000 doses respectively (Sajjanhar, 2021). In addition to its immediate neighbors, India also delivered its vaccines to South Africa, Brazil, Morocco, the United Kingdom, UAE, Mexico, and many other far-off countries. 200,000 doses of AstraZeneca vaccines were also donated to UN peacekeepers serving in various missions.

India and South Africa submitted a proposal at the WTO for a temporary waiver of certain provisions of the “Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights” (TRIPS) agreement in response to COVID-19 to ensure equitable access to vaccines. The proposal, if approved, would give WTO members a choice to decide whether to issue or enforce patents and other intellectual property (IP) pertaining to COVID-19 medications, vaccines, diagnostic tools, and other technology, such as masks and ventilation, during the pandemic (Chattu et al., 2021). Although 100 nations expressed support for the idea, nine WTO members – “the United States, the European Union, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Japan, Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom - did not” (Campaign, 2021).

5.1.2 Digital Diplomacy

Digital Diplomacy is the use of digital technologies and platforms by countries to communicate with each other and the general public to achieve their diplomatic goals. At the time of a pandemic where physical diplomatic engagement between countries became very limited, digital diplomacy emerged as a new tool for furthering foreign policy objectives. World leaders took to Twitter and other social media platforms to engage with each other even encouraging initiatives to fight the pandemic together.

Since COVID came, digital diplomacy has become an essential part of India's foreign policy approach speeding up the use of digital tools in diplomacy. "Foreign Minister Jaishankar has had 65 virtual diplomatic engagements with his counterparts in other countries since the pandemic spread" (Vinod, 2020). He also attended the meetings of BRICS, SEO, and RIC groupings online. In the context of the pandemic era, India's digital diplomacy has primarily focused on three key aspects: "providing consular assistance to Indian nationals stranded abroad, fostering collaborative efforts among scientists working on vaccine development to counter the virus, and engaging with other countries to secure medical equipment, ventilators, and personal protective gear for healthcare workers" (Vinod, 2020).

In March 2020, the Prime Minister of India convened a virtual meeting of the South Asian Regional Organization, SAARC, to address the COVID-19 pandemic and coordinate regional efforts to combat the situation. For the first time, a virtual bilateral summit was held between the prime ministers of India and Australia, representing a significant shift in diplomatic engagement during the pandemic era. India also initiated the SAARC COVID-19 fund to provide financial assistance and expertise to the SAARC countries.

Under its presidency in the G20, India has advocated for digital technology governance by developing a Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI). The G20 India Presidency in partnership with UNDP launched two knowledge products on DPI to help countries advance their digital transformation journey, with speed, at scale, and inclusion (UNDP, 2023). This digital diplomatic campaign with the goal of promoting India's digital infrastructure template as a model for global development model has garnered interest among countries.

The global adoption of India's technological innovations, such as the Aadhaar digital identity system and the CoWin vaccination platform increased. The Philippines and Morocco became the first countries to implement similar unique identifier systems, while Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Jamaica have deployed the CoWin technology to support their vaccination programs (ET, 2023; Lele, 2023). Furthermore, Singapore has integrated its digital payments platform, PayNow, with India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI), enabling faster and more cost-effective cross-border fund transfers (Cheng, 2023). The recent unanimous decision by the member nations of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which includes China and Pakistan, to accept India's proposal for establishing DPI, provides a further opportunity for India to assert its digital soft power (Hussain, 2023). These developments demonstrate the growing international interest in and adoption of India's technological advancements.

Virtual cultural diplomacy during COVID-19

The pandemic also greatly disrupted India's cultural influences in the Indo-Pacific. With travel restrictions and social distancing measures in place, many cultural exchanges and events have been canceled or postponed, limiting opportunities for India to showcase its rich heritage and traditions. Additionally, the economic downturn resulting from the pandemic has led to reduced funding for cultural initiatives and collaborations, further hindering India's ability to maintain its cultural influence in the region (Amaresh, 2024).

Still, the government managed to maintain its cultural diplomacy by organizing various cultural events online. The 6th International Day of Yoga-2020 was themed "Yoga at Home and Yoga with Family," emphasizing the significance of practicing yoga within the home

environment while maintaining social distancing. This digital format facilitated the participation of millions of individuals across India and globally. Art galleries and museums in India started online shows putting Indian art historical objects, and cultural treasures on display. These web-based exhibits allowed people worldwide to learn about Indian culture and history without needing to travel. Indian embassies and cultural institutions turned to social media to keep cultural diplomacy going during lockdowns.

5.2 Comparative analysis with pre-COVID initiatives

Observing the initiatives of India in its efforts to utilize the country's soft power abilities in the Indo-Pacific before the pandemic and after the pandemic hit and comparing them reveals significant adaptations in India's strategy and focus toward their foreign policy goals. Before the pandemic, India seems to focus well on cultural and economic soft power resources, utilizing its rich cultural heritage and economic relations with other nations. In the post-pandemic landscape, India placed major emphasis on health and digital diplomacy, and regional cooperation. India changed its policies in an inventive way as a result, realizing its potential in the fields of health and technology and using them to address domestic and international issues.

While the challenges in the pre-pandemic era were those of transcending through culture, connectivity, and geopolitical tensions, the post-pandemic era brought light to India's domestic loopholes, poor economic conditions, poor management, and religious challenges.

5.3 Religious Polarisation during COVID

India flaunts its democracy in the world and religious pluralism is a core value of its democracy. It is a secular state meaning the government is separated from religion. It signifies that the state should commit to equalizing all religions, meaning that the state does not expressly favor one religion over another or show bias against it through law. This is particularly a struggle for the vastly diverse country with over 8 major religions and several other small religions especially since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in 2014. The BJP-led government is known for its enforcement of elements of Hindutva – an ideology seeking to establish Hinduism and Hindu culture as dominant in India.

The World Religion Database estimates the larger religious group breakdown in 2020 as Hindus, 72.4 percent; Muslims, 14 percent; Christians, 4.8 percent; and Sikhs, 1.8 percent (*2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: India, 2022*). During 2020-2021 India's democracy quality downgraded from being 'free' to 'partly free' as ranked by "Freedom House", a non-governmental US-based organization that ranks countries based on their political rights and civil liberties. The deterioration is largely due to "discriminatory policies against the Muslim population and the squelching of dissenting civil society groups by the government" (Mullen, 2021).

Since Modi's second term in 2019, the government has pushed controversial policies that critics say explicitly ignore Muslims' rights, restrict religious freedoms, and are intended to disenfranchise millions of Muslims (Maizland, 2020). In December 2019, the government of India passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) which allowed non-Muslim religious minorities from Muslim-majority countries Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan who fled to India before December 2014 to seek Indian citizenship. This is the first time in India which makes religion a basis for granting citizenship. The Act particularly excluded Muslims as a

minority religion and did not provide citizenship opportunities to the Muslims which led to several uproar and violence between the Hindus and the Muslims. “Around fifty people were killed, most of them Muslim, in the capital city’s worst communal violence in decades” (Maizland, 2020) when the Hindu nationalists attacked the protestors. It has been alleged that police did not step in to stop Hindu mobs from assaulting Muslims and that several BJP politicians participated in the violence.

Anti-Muslim or Islamophobia has been a serious issue in India for decades but it reached peak height during COVID-19. It all started after “the Indian authorities announced that they found a large number of COVID-positive cases among Muslims who had attended a mass religious congregation in Delhi, organized by the international Islamic missionary movement Tablighi Jamaat” (Bajoria, 2020). Leaders from the BJP started labeling it a “Talibani crime” or “CoronaTerrorism” and “pro-government television channels and social media accused those who attended the gathering and Indian Muslims in general of not just being responsible for the outbreak but deliberately spreading it” (PERRIGO, 2020). Several mob attacks and abuse began against Muslims and social media was flooded with the hashtag ‘CoronaJihad’ spreading anti-muslim sentiments further online for several weeks.

In the context of the Tablighi situation, WHO cautioned that “countries should not profile COVID-19 cases in terms of religion or any other criteria” (DTE, 2020). What came off as a double standard on this incident is that a year later, during the severe second wave of COVID-19 in India, nearly 3 million people gathered at the banks of the Ganga river in celebration of Kumbh Mela, one of the largest Hindu religious gathering in the world (Trivedi, 2021). It came off as a stark contrast to the hypersensitivity and response of the government to the Tablighi event. This marginalization of Muslims is reflected in India’s relationship with the Muslim-majority countries in the Indo-Pacific.

In the Maldives, the mistreatment of Muslims in India has created a lot of bad will for India. And that was one of the reasons why anti-India candidate won the presidential elections in 2023. So, India has been demonized by some sections of the society in the Maldives and it might have been similar in other Muslim countries in Asia (Kugiel, 2024). Even though at the beginning of the pandemic, India gained a lot of goodwill from Maldives owing to its vaccine diplomacy, the aftermath of the pandemic speaks otherwise.

CHAPTER 6

INDIA'S ROLE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC POST COVID-19

6.1 Key interactions with the Indo-Pacific players

No doubt, we have seen that the pandemic has presented a lot of opportunities for India to boost its standing in the Indo-Pacific and at the same time highlighted many drawbacks of the country's capabilities. India's post-pandemic significance in the Indo-Pacific region has multiplied due to the challenges posed by increasing Chinese aggression in the Indian Ocean region. India is aware of the many opportunities available in the region but has to be cautious against "its moves being projected as a Western-led coalition against China" (Kakoti). India's vision of a 'free, inclusive and open' Indo-Pacific can be achieved by regional and sub-regional engagement of India in the region.

India's engagement in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) during the pandemic was a crucial element in shaping the country's influence in the Indo-Pacific. The alliance had its first high-level political summit in March 2021 and discussed "responses in handling the pandemic, security and maritime challenges, along with climate and energy cooperation, were the priority areas of discussion with the decision to create three working groups in the areas of vaccine, climate crisis and critical and emerging technologies" (TheEconomicTimes, 2021). The QUAD provides a non-aggressive forum for democracies that have reached a consensus over their shared goals for the area.

In addition to the Quad, on April 27, 2021, India, Australia, and Japan formed the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) (PANT & BASU, 2021). The SCRI seeks to establish a positive feedback loop that will increase supply chain resilience in order to finally attain strong, sustainable, balanced, and inclusive growth in the region (PIB, 2021). It can help diversify the supply chain and reduce dependency on China.

An unprecedented meeting during the pandemic that took place on September 9, 2020, was the first Indo-Pacific Trilateral Dialogue which brought together India, Australia, and France to discuss various economic and geostrategic challenges, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic (Kakoti). They discussed how to effectively collaborate at the trilateral and regional levels, mainly through institutions like the Indian Ocean Rims Association (IORA) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The United States of America and India held a 2+2 Ministerial dialogue on October 27, 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. This dialogue was crucial because it resulted in the "signing of the defense agreement BECA (Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement), which will enable the India-US Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership to reach its full potential" (Roy, 2020). India took a diplomatic step to redirect its leadership in the region by convening a virtual SAARC Summit during the COVID-19 epidemic.

India's relationship with China worsened after 2020 due to the border conflict in Galwan Valley and growing anti-China sentiments around the world, with its reportedly being the epicenter in Wuhan. This rivalry with China set the world stage for India's role, boosting its emphasis on democratic and rule-based governance juxtaposed with China's authoritarian demeanor (Kugiel, 2024). India and Vietnam are willing to extend more cooperation in the oil

digging exploration in the South China Sea region. This will enhance security measures between the two countries and act as a precaution against the extreme measures of China in the South China Sea region (Trieu, 2024). However, India lacks funding in regards to soft power promotion such as lack of funding in scholarship or cultural exchange in the region so fewer people are exposed to good things about India. Compared to China, which funds extensively in Southeast Asian countries, prompting people to be more welcoming of Chinese investors than Indian investors. This could be one of the drawbacks of Indian foreign policy in the region (Trieu, 2024).

6.2 Evaluation of Post-COVID Soft Power Initiatives in the Indo-Pacific

India was delivering its vaccine, medical supplies, and humanitarian aids to the world and at the same time vaccinating its vast population in phases. India could not have provided vaccine help to other nations due to high local demand if curfews and mobility restrictions had not been implemented. The use of the Indian Air Forces, police, paramilitary forces, and even the navy to deploy medical and humanitarian aid can be seen by foreign nationals as an action of sheer determination from India to fight the disease. An important part of soft power is people-to-people connection and the image that people form of a nation frames the perception of the nation's soft power to a large extent (Bhojraj, 2023).

The deployment of hundreds of aircraft to conduct one of the world's largest evacuation operations during the pandemic was an important step in enhancing such connectivity. In the evacuation, foreign citizens were also included and helped to return to their home countries. This created a lot of goodwill for India and India's soft power increased as a result. India is one of the few countries capable of coming up with its own domestically produced vaccine which was a very important achievement that boosted its image as a biotech power and advanced country in this sector (Kugiel, 2024)).

Under the Vaccine Maitri initiative, India was able to push its diplomatic efforts and receive positive outreach from low-income and developing countries globally. The program garnered praises at the UN Global Summit with even the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Maldives quoting "... We also attribute a significant portion of our fast-paced recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic to India. It would not have been possible without our close partner and friend". Tandi Dorji, the foreign minister of Bhutan, referred to the project as one of the "biggest humanitarian" initiatives. India, according to Mauritius' Minister of Agro-Industry and Food Security, is bringing the Global South together at the decision-making table (ABPNewsBureau, 2023). "The two million doses gifted by India to Bangladesh were the single largest consignment of vaccines provided by India to any country thus far, prompting the Bangladesh Health minister to comment that India had stood by his country during the Liberation War of 1971 as well as during the pandemic" (Sajjanhar, 2021).

India's pharmaceutical industry has undoubtedly gained prominence as a result of the Vaccine Maitri campaign. The efficacy rate of Indian (AstraZeneca) vaccines was high. Covishield showed an effective rate of 93% as per global reports and Covaxin showed an efficacy of 81% as per interim 3rd phase trial result (Ahmed et al., 2022). Distributing the vaccines at a much relatively cheaper price than other vaccines also owed India's image as a goodwill partner at times of hardship. India's assistance was particularly important for the smaller developing nations because, while larger developed nations could afford to receive

large quantities of vaccines over diplomatic engagements and strategic engagements, smaller nations found it challenging to maintain a strong presence in bilateral or multilateral relations.

India's consideration of developing countries at the WTO by proposing a waiver of Intellectual Property Rights under the TRIPS agreement helped form a positive regard towards India during COVID-19. It sent the signal that India is a responsible country that works with the spirit of solidarity with other developing countries. India was doing this in the interest of itself but also in the interest of other developing countries in Africa and in Asia (Kugiel, 2024). The success of the Co-WIN app had a profound effect on India's digital diplomacy which helped the nation to further leverage its digital soft power influence on other countries.

India was able to amplify a positive public image through its various timely assistance, supplies, and reliefs without discrimination. It was able to communicate to the world as a first responder to deliver medical assistance. "The vaccine aid was not connected with any other political issues, neither was it used as a bargaining tool to sort out any other international problems" (Bhojraj, 2023). This enhanced its soft power projection in the pandemic-hit global powerplay. However, massive challenges hit India in the second wave of the pandemic. The lack of vaccines to vaccinate its own citizens and underdeveloped healthcare facilities triggered the loss of lives of hundreds of thousands, affecting its economy and social scenario severely.

Oxygen supplies were vital in a number of states and cities, hospitals turned away patients, and crematoriums were overflowing with dead bodies. "As of May 18, 2021, India had reported more than 26.4 million confirmed cases and over 274 000 deaths from COVID-19" (Samarasekera, 2021). The lack of prevention measures among the people lulled by a sense of false security of a low number of COVID cases in the early parts of the year fueled the rapid spread of the disease. Large public rallies, functions, marriages, and religious festival celebrations were on the rise with attendees ignoring government-laid measures such as wearing masks, social distancing, and use of sanitizing booths. Election meetings and rallies were also under procession with thousands of people gathering at once. These events led to a wildfire-like spread of the virus in most of the states. Moreover, the evolution of new COVID variants also led to difficulties in identifying symptoms of the disease and more severity and higher fatality rate of the disease. With the difficulties piling up, India had to stop supplying humanitarian aid and vaccine supplies to other countries, thus prompting a failed vaccine diplomacy thereafter.

India which once supplied millions of doses of vaccines and medical supplies to over 100 countries was now facing the lack of the same for its own citizens. "As of May 3, just over 9% of India's 1.4 billion population had one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, and only 2% were fully vaccinated" (Samarasekera, 2021). The world had its eyes on India once again but this time for the other end of the reason. Medical assistance in the form of supplies – oxygen cylinders, masks, medicines poured in from different countries to help India. The epidemic brought to light the internal hurdles which was something India definitely did not want the world's eyes to focus on.

People's perceptions of India were stirred by social media posts and videos depicting the appalling medical conditions and the sufferings of the affected population. This posed a serious setback to the positive Indian image formed freshly at the beginning of the pandemic. Thus, India required a more resilient system of responding to its citizens' needs before it could persuade the world that it is a viable player in the soft power competition arena, even if people

acknowledged its efforts to aid the globe and emerge as a responsible partner in the Indo-Pacific region.

The rise of Indian OTT platforms

Over-the-top (OTT) platforms are services that provide content media through the Internet directly to the viewers. It bypasses the traditional method of delivering media to the users by letting the user direct access through devices. During the COVID pandemic, there was a substantial rise in the usage of OTT platforms due to the suspension of theatres and the lack of new content on TV channels. Indian OTT platforms particularly experienced exponential growth and have emerged as a potent soft power tool of India. Easy access to the internet, more time spent at home, and reasonably priced membership proved to be a boon to the over-the-top (OTT) industry as binge-watching emerged as the new trend (ETBrandEquity, 2021). The popular platforms in India that emerged during the pandemic include Netflix India, Amazon Prime Video, Disney+ Hotstar, Zee5, and SonyLIV. By the end of 2020, there were 62 million subscribers overall, up from 32 million at the end of 2019.

OTTs along with social media have become effective instruments for advancing soft power and influencing the political and cultural contexts of consuming communities and nations in the post-pandemic digitalized era. The OTT platforms in India provide a broad selection of content, including films, web series, documentaries, and local movies available in multiple languages. This diverse lineup highlights India's deep-rooted cultural legacy, traditions, and contemporary stories helping people around the globe who consume it to understand and appreciate the diverse Indian culture.

This digital industry has expanded its services beyond international borders making it easier for Indian content to travel across the world. Major streaming platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime Video have invested in Indian shows and movies, making them available to viewers worldwide. This global reach can boost India's cultural impact and soft power. "Curiosity of people about India too has risen, people want to know more about India" (PIB, 2023). Indian streaming services have produced compelling localized stories that resonate with international audiences. Prominent television shows including "Sacred Games," "Paatal Lok" and "Delhi Crime" have garnered appreciation from global audiences, displaying India's aptitude for narrative and imaginative workforce (Ramadurai, 2021).

OTT platforms act as a tool for cultural diplomacy by showing diverse aspects of Indian culture, history, and society. They help people from different cultures connect, build understanding, and break down stereotypes. Additionally, it draws in viewers who are eager to delve into a variety of cultural narratives, which enhances the global perception of India. Thus, OTT serves as a potent soft power source in the domain of cultural appeal in the post-pandemic global scenario.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

India holds a strong card in the global soft power competition ring. With abundant attractive resources and their incorporation in its foreign policy, India could be projecting its soft power influence in most parts of the globe. In the Indo-Pacific, it takes major advantage of its shared historical ties and a rich cultural influence in the region thanks to centuries-old trade and business relations. Indian soft power element before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic came from a strong set of cultural diplomacy and rich heritage. The rich Indian diaspora spanning from millions concentration to thousands is the most important tool for Indian soft power diplomacy. They hold political and financial influences and partake a major consideration in Indian foreign policy makings. The government places major emphasis on acknowledging and appreciating its diasporas' role in fostering relations with the respective host countries with initiatives such as. the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR). Bollywood, Buddhism, Yoga, and its foreign policy are other strong sources of the country's soft power reservoir. After the COVID hit, health and vaccine diplomacy emerged as the new tools. Taking advantage of advancement in its pharmaceutical sector, it produced and distributed vaccines and medical supplies as grants and commercial delivery to over 100 countries. The Vaccine Maitri programme corresponding to its Neighborhood First Policy helped reconstruct India as the 'Pharmacy of the world' and a 'First Responder to Pandemic'. Several countries, particularly the developing ones, worked to improve ties with India. India began to showcase its successful digital narrative through the use of digital diplomacy which helped to further promote its attractiveness in the digital realm. The world recognized India's efforts to fight the pandemic and acknowledged its role as a responsible and reliable regional partner. However, this status of India faced major blows when the second wave hit India severely compelling India to halt exporting vaccines and aid. India suffered seriously from the lack of developed and adequate health infrastructure and vaccine scarcity which in the process stained its status as a "pharma giant" of the world. Further, the deterioration of democratic qualities largely due to numerous religious conflicts and issues during the pandemic shaded India's image of being the largest democracy. The forward-backward trajectory of India's soft power projection has caused other countries to create confusion in their perception of India as a major soft power player in the region. The pandemic provided India with an opportunity to deepen its role in the Indo-Pacific as a capable and reliable actor. Even though the pandemic's later stages proved challenging and India failed its vaccine diplomacy in the later parts of the pandemic, it helped form an image of India as a nation that cares about its fellow nations and made efforts to help them, thus creating a good image for India on the grounds of morality.

Findings

- Following the COVID pandemic, India's soft power in the Indo-Pacific has experienced both a consecutive rise and fall. Analyzing the trends in the Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index, India rose to 27th position in 2020 owing to its health diplomacy initiatives but in 2021 it dropped to the 36th rank reflecting the effects of the second wave. Therefore, India's attempt to leverage its soft power influences during the epidemic fell short of its own expected margins.

- Needless to say, India's assistance has greatly enhanced its regional engagement and cooperation in the region which are positive points as India can set the trajectory to recover and rise to its standing again. In the Indo-Pacific, it has gained a large support and confidence from the smaller developing nations in addition to growing relations with the major players such as the US, Japan, and Australia.
- The main internal challenge primarily linked to India's soft power during and after the COVID-19 pandemic was the inability of India to create a strong economic hard power. That is largely due to being a huge country with poor infrastructure and a relatively poor population. Religious diversity and lack of harmony among its diverse population also count as the major domestic hurdles for India to be seen as a multipolar secular democracy.

Recommendations

India possesses immense potential to emerge as a major soft power player in the global competition. The steps to ensure that position should start by building a robust economy and a strong hard power. As often said, a country without prosperity and assets cannot be a soft power. Hard economic power should be the foundation of building a strong soft power. India should try to be more coherent and unique in its standing with its Indo-Pacific partners. The government must focus on improving its infrastructure development and public governance to help reduce poverty and economic inequalities in the country. India can improve its funding to attract more people to help build up its image by welcoming more students from abroad and offering them scholarships and funds. More cultural centers and institutions can be set up to have more cross-cultural exchanges. India can leverage its uniqueness in diversity. There is a need to build up more direct flights from India to SE Asia as the number of existing direct flights is low compared to other countries. This will strengthen their connectivity. There is a lack of representation of a large section of the diverse Indian culture, people, cuisines, and film industry in the mainstream media. The government should embrace and incorporate policies to promote its diversity instead of sidelining the non-mainstream population. For instance, in cuisines, there is a diverse array of Indian cuisines that is unknown to the world due to a lack of representation by policies and publicity. Most of the popular dishes that relate to India and are popular to the outside world are mainly the North Indian cuisines. People are unaware of the multitude of food and unique traditions of the South, the North-East India which are very much different than those of the North. When we speak of Indian cinema, Bollywood is the brand name that sparks in people's minds. Many of the Bollywood films and pieces are adapted from Tollywood, the South Indian film industry, one of the biggest film industries in India but the brand name of Tollywood is overshadowed and remains unknown to most countries. Thus for India, its soft power resources lie in its diversity. National policymakers need to weave diversity into their national policies. This approach will allow people worldwide to appreciate the rich tapestry of our differences. This could prove to be more attractive for India in projecting its soft power to the world. When a country stands on a solid foundation of an equal and harmonized society, its soft power can naturally be extended to the outside world. As quoted in an interview, "A poor country cannot be admired" (Kugiel, 2024), India should build on its economic power to successfully launch its soft power credibilities.

APPENDIX

“Today, ‘diaspora’ is commonly understood to include Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), who are citizens of India and Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs), including Overseas Citizens of India (OCI), who are foreign nationals. PIO and OCI cardholders have been merged under one category OCI in 2015.”

Questions to the interviewees

1. How has India’s role as a responsible and capable actor been shaped by the pandemic?
2. Has the pandemic had any impact on India’s cultural influence in the Indo-Pacific region?
3. How has India’s economic recovery from the pandemic influenced its soft power?
4. What role did India play in shaping the post-pandemic regional order in the Indo-Pacific ?
5. Do you see any changes in the soft power elements promoted by the country before and after the pandemic hit?
6. Can India’s initiative in promoting regional stability and security proved to have boosted its soft power?
7. What impact did India’s assistance to its Indo-Pacific neighbors during the COVID-19 epidemic have on how these countries perceived India as a nation?
8. Do you think the internal domestic challenges (such as poverty, poor infrastructure) despite its rich heritage and cultural similarity has held back India’s soft power projection in the Indo-Pacific?
9. Do you have any recommendations that could foster India’s soft power capabilities and tackle the limitations to it?

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