



CHANGING INDIAN FOREIGN POLICY: EMERGING TRENDS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN CULTURAL DIPLOMACY: YOGA, LANGUAGE AND TRADITION

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Abstract:

As our Indian constitution rightly mentions 'India that is Bharat' and India's foreign policy is deeply rooted in the philosophy of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' ("the world is one family"). This philosophy emphasizes mutual respect, peace, and coexistence. While other traditional diplomacy focused on hard power and strategic interests, the changing global landscape of the 21st century has put more emphasis on "soft power," which refers to influencing others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. India's rich cultural heritage provides a wide range of soft power tools, including yoga, various languages, and ancient traditions. These are now being strategically used as crucial tools in today's Indian foreign policy. This research paper investigates the changing trends, ongoing challenges, and significant opportunities that arise from India's cultural diplomacy. It specifically focuses on yoga, language, and tradition as ways to improve its global influence and achieve our foreign policy goals.

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy, Soft Power, India, Foreign Policy, Yoga, Tradition, Language, International Relations, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, International Day of Yoga (IDY), ICCR, Public Diplomacy, Challenges

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Introduction :

As our Indian constitution rightly mentions 'India that is Bharat' and India's foreign policy is deeply rooted in the philosophy of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' ("the world is one family"). This philosophy emphasizes mutual respect, peace, and coexistence. While other traditional diplomacy focused on hard power and strategic interests, the changing global landscape of the 21st century has put more emphasis on "soft power," which refers to influencing others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. India's rich cultural heritage provides a wide range of soft power tools, including yoga, various languages, and ancient traditions. These are now being strategically used as crucial tools in today's Indian foreign policy. This research paper investigates the changing trends, ongoing challenges, and significant opportunities that arise from India's cultural diplomacy. It specifically focuses on yoga, language, and tradition as ways to improve its global influence and achieve our foreign policy goals.

Historical Context of India's Cultural Diplomacy:

From Ancient Influence to Modern Strategy India's use of culture as a diplomatic tool has deep historical roots. In ancient times, the spread and acceptance of Hinduism and Buddhism across Asia, especially in Southeast Asia, significantly shaped the region's art, architecture, language, and societal norms. This also fostered strong civilizational connections across the borders. Routes like the Silk Road facilitated not just trade but also the



exchange of ideas, knowledge, philosophies, and artistic traditions. The important thing is that this historical influence arose from a non-coercive and organic sharing of culture and values and not by hard force. During the colonial era and the early years of independence, the state largely underused the potential of cultural diplomacy. However, figures like Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore became global symbols of India's cultural richness and resilience. After independence, cultural diplomacy began to take shape formally with the establishment of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) in 1950. Its goal was to revive and strengthen India's cultural relations with the world, marking a significant move to integrate culture into the country's international engagement. In recent years, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration, this approach has become more assertive and structured. The current foreign policy framework, sometimes referred to as "Panchamrit" (five themes), includes Sanskriti Evam Sabhayata (cultural and civilizational linkages) as a key element. This shows a shift from a quiet approach to a more proactive and strategic use of soft power on the global stage.

Emerging Trends in Cultural Diplomacy:

The most notable trend in India's modern cultural diplomacy is the intentional acceptance and integration of traditional practices into its official foreign policy narrative. This stems from the understanding that narratives and values shape influence; appealing culture can serve as a powerful diplomatic asset.

1) Yoga: The Most Peaceful takeover of Yoga is arguably the most successful and recognized cultural export from India, serving as a strong tool for modern cultural diplomacy. Its global appeal, fueled by a growing the global urge in wellness and mindfulness, has been strategically embraced by the Indian government. In 2014 The United Nations declared June 21 as the International Day of Yoga (IDY), following a proposal from PM Modi. This proposal gained support from 177 member states, highlighting yoga's wide-reaching appeal. The annual celebration of IDY features large, synchronized yoga sessions in major cities around the world, often led by Indian diplomatic missions and joined by foreign dignitaries and local residents from there. The first IDY event at the UN in New York attracted participation from officials, diplomats, and over 35,000 individuals from 84 countries. These events foster visible, positive engagement with India, projecting an image of a peaceful, health-conscious nation and promoting people-to-people connections.

India established the Ministry of AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, and Homeopathy) to promote traditional health practices both domestically and internationally, further strengthening their role in government policy.

2) Language and Literature: Bridges to Ancient Wisdom Language, especially Sanskrit and Hindi, plays an important role in India's cultural outreach. Sanskrit, often linked to yoga, ancient texts, and philosophical depth, enhances India's image as a civilizational power. The rising global interest in Sanskrit, especially for accurate mantra chanting during yoga practice, presents a unique chance for academic and linguistic exchanges. India has been giving classical language status to languages which holds tremendous ancient knowledge which can solve humanitarian issues like environmental and human coexistence. The ICCR and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) work to promote Hindi abroad through language classes, literary



events, and cultural centers. Their goal includes establishing Hindi as a working language in international organizations like the UN, collaborating with UNESCO, and balancing multilingualism with national promotion. Additionally, Indian languages influence areas with a significant Indian diaspora, such as Mauritius and the Caribbean, where languages like Bhojpuri, Tamil and Hindi have integrated into the local multicultural fabric.

3) Tradition: Weaving Heritage into Global Perceptions Beyond yoga and language, a broader range of Indian traditions and cultural expressions are actively used in diplomacy.

Buddhism: India recognizes Buddhism as a vital civilizational link and has engaged in "Buddhist diplomacy." Initiatives include reviving the ancient Nalanda University and developing a Buddhist tourism circuit to connect with countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Southeast Asian nations.

Festivals and Cuisine: Indian festivals such as Diwali and Holi are celebrated by diaspora communities and increasingly acknowledged worldwide. Cuisine serves as an accessible cultural exchange with dishes like biryani and masala dosa becoming symbols of India's rich culture. Cultural festivals organized globally highlight Indian art, music, and dance, drawing diverse international audiences.

Water and Sanitation: India trying to reinvent its ancient water and sanitation knowledge through Swachh Bharat Mission and successfully achieving open defecation free (ODF) status. This is also helping to strengthen its ties with Asian and African countries by sharing knowledge in the area of water and sanitation.

Diaspora Engagement: The large and influential Indian diaspora, the world's second largest, acts as a living bridge. They promote Indian culture and values, advocate for national interests, and enhance the multicultural landscape of their host countries.

Challenges and Opportunities:

While India's cultural diplomacy holds great potential, it also encounters several challenges.

Challenges :

- 1) Cultural Appropriation and Commodification: The global appeal of yoga raises concerns about its commodification and potential cultural appropriation. This can result in the loss of its deeper philosophical roots in commercialized versions. It is a delicate task to maintain the authenticity of these traditions while promoting them globally.
- 2) Standardization Issues: Standardizing yoga and Ayurveda practices on a global scale presents challenges that may impact their credibility and effectiveness as unified diplomatic tools.
- 3) Resource Constraints and Coordination: Critics argue that the government has historically underinvested in cultural diplomacy compared to other nations. Effective coordination among various ministries (MEA, AYUSH, Culture) and Indian missions abroad is vital for a cohesive strategy.
- 4) Geopolitical Sensitivities: In some regions, especially within South Asia, cultural initiatives might face suspicion or regional rivalries, requiring careful and sensitive execution.

Opportunities:

- 1) Global Desire for Wellness and Spirituality: The growing emphasis on mental and physical well-being offers



India a vast opportunity to present its ancient wisdom traditions, like yoga and Ayurveda, as solutions to modern issues.

- 2) Strengthening Bilateral Ties: Cultural exchanges can soften borders and build goodwill, aiding formal diplomatic negotiations. Shared cultural experiences, such as the appreciation for Indian cinema in Afghanistan or Russia, have built connections where formal politics encountered obstacles.
- 3) Economic Diplomacy: Cultural diplomacy leads to tangible economic benefits, such as increased tourism, demand for traditional goods (textiles, handicrafts), and expansion of the wellness industry.
- 4) Countering Dominant Narratives: India can use its inclusive and diverse culture, grounded in values of pluralism and democracy, to provide an alternative model of global engagement, as opposed to more assertive or linear ideological methods. Conclusion India's foreign policy is undergoing active change, incorporating a strong and strategic use of cultural diplomacy to pursue national interests. The focused promotion of yoga, language, and tradition represents a significant investment in soft power. While challenges like cultural appropriation and coordination persist, the opportunities for India to enhance its global standing as a "Vishwa Bandhu" (global friend), a "Vishwa guru" (world teacher) and a valuable partner are immense. By leveraging its ancient heritage in an organized way through initiatives like the International Day of Yoga and the efforts of the ICCR, India is effectively translating its rich cultural assets into real diplomatic influence. This demonstrates that soft power is a crucial part of 21st-century Indian statecraft.

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