



ATMANIRBHAR BHARAT: PROJECTING ITS SOFT POWER TO BECOME VISHWAGURU IN SOUTH ASIA

SUMMIYAH PARVEEN

Undergraduate Student of Fourth year

Department of Political Science

Vivekananda College, University of Delhi

ABSTRACT

India is one of the richest and diverse countries in the South Asian region. Basically India is assumed as a living museum because of its repository of ancient values and traditions in terms of civilization, progress, education, knowledge and technology. It has always given priority to the vision of Atmanirbhar (self-reliant) since its independence from colonial rule. It has one of the dominant geopolitical locations as it is landlocked in nature with its adjacent neighbours. Since its liberation India tried to develop friendly relations with south Asian nations, who had faced similar colonial dominance in their historical context. India followed the ancient policy of Saptang theory of Kautilya i.e. to maintain cordial relations with neighbours as it does not believe in existence but in coexistence. It follows the path to become self-sufficient in order to achieve the landmark pattern of Atmanirbharata in all the sectors like agriculture, health, technology etc. This paper further examines how India's soft power approach in South Asian neighbours which gives her the status of vishwaguru with self-sufficiency. The purpose of this paper is to assess that how the concept of Atmanirbhar Bharat is often misunderstood by nations as the policy of isolationism. The focus is to highlight the parameter that vishwaguru cannot lead if it is dependent on others for basic pre-requisites. A true leadership comes from a position of strength and self-sufficiency. This paper will be the attempt to scrutinize that Atmanirbhar Bharat is not just an economic policy of import substitution but it evolves India's national image from a passive recipient to an active provider of solutions to global problems. The paper further focuses on India's self-reliance in various forms like Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), education, Pharmaceuticals (Vaccine Maitri), space technology. It also provides a soft power influence of self-reliance in south Asia that portrays India's image as a vishwaguru.

KEYWORDS

India, Soft Power, Atmanirbhar Bharat, Vishwaguru, South Asia

1. INTRODUCTION

India is one of the richest and diverse countries in the entire South Asian region. It has been argued by Max Muller that it had naturally gifted with its geography with full of its civilizational development, flora, fauna, progress, education, knowledge, mythology, languages, philosophy and primitive art which are most valuable materials in the history of human beings that are treasured up in India. The dominance of colonial rule had exploited the rich resources of India. Since independence the idea of self-reliance (Atmanirbhar Bharat) was emphasized by the leaders of the freedom struggle movement like Mahatma Gandhi, he supported the idea that India should boycott the foreign goods and should focus on the manufacturing of the indigenous goods of Khadi with the help of charkha which was a nationalist symbol of Atmanirbhar Bharat (Chahal,2024). It is a country surrounded by its adjacent south Asian neighbors and it has always given priority to its neighbors in the policy formulation. Its neighbors had somehow faced the same historical context of colonial domination and dependency. The Gujral Doctrine and the Neighbourhood First 2014 policy (MEA, 2024) are the policies that can be connected with the idea of ancient political philosopher Kautilya's Saptanga theory seventh principle mitra that is to protect the interest of neighbors first as India believes in the idea of coexistence (Kaur and Tomar 2023). The concept of soft power was coined by Joseph Nye and the idea has shown that India has the potentiality to portray its soft power assets in the region through its culture, democracy, diaspora, infrastructure, space technology, yoga, vaccines, education and humanitarian aids in the neighbouring countries. It tries to act has an active provider rather than passive recipients of resources. Post-independent India see scarcity and poverty in various areas and it experienced heavy dependence on foreign aid for a long period of time specially during the refugees burden of Bangladesh. But during contemporary times India shifted its outlook from dependence to self-reliance in the form of various elements- DPI, education, pharmaceuticals, space technology (PIB,2025) etc. and these soft power elements shapes south Asian relations and India's resemblance as a vishwaguru. Under the umbrella of Atmanirbhar Bharat the nation is redefining its foreign policy, moving beyond the traditional Big brother role in south Asia towards becoming a vishwaguru (world teacher). It fosters the idea of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (one earth, one family and one future) and it headed the presidency of G-20 summit (MEA,2023).

1.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

Joseph S. Nye in his book, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in world Politics (2005)*, argues that a nation has the ability to influence others through attraction (culture, values, policies) is very important than military (hard power). He outlined that in an interdependent world, soft power enhanced cooperation on global issues and countering the limitations of unilateral forces. The core idea is blending hard and soft power into "smart power" for effective bilateral cooperation among nations. The focus to move beyond from coercion to soft diplomacy.

Harsh V. Pant in his book, *Politics and Geopolitics: Decoding India's Neighbourhood challenge (2021)*, outlines the India's foreign policy and regional relations in south Asia focuses on the restraints and opportunities amongst neighbours, within "Neighbourhood First Policy". This book gives the detailed analysis of policy initiative launched under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. It showed the

projection of soft power mechanism of India with its south Asian neighbours inspite the fact of many longstanding issues with Pakistan, Bangladesh and others.

Rumel Dahiya, Ashok Dahiya and Ashok K Behuria in his book: India's neighbourhood challenges in the Next Two Decades (2012), it highlights the strategic geopolitical location of India in South Asian region. Basically it successfully outlines the geographical connection of India and its neighbours apart from border and security concerns. The potentiality of India to deal the hard power(coercive) actions in simple soft power(diplomacy) manner. It elaborated the challenges posed because of illegal migration, terrorism, security threats and also the economic benefits for coexistence in the south Asian region.

The Author Sharanpreet Kaur in her book : India's soft Power diplomacy(2023) examines India as a regional and global player in field of soft approach. And how India is playing a significant role to foster democracy , cooperation, stability and multiple players to hold power and compete at the global level to meet global challenges.

The Author JN DIXIT in his book India's foreign policy and its neighbourhood (2003), focused on the idea that how continuity of India's role evolves from Nehruvian ideals to modern ideals. This book explores Nehru's foreign policy based on principles of national interest, security and pragmatic approach towards every problems or circumstances. The author created the cumulative understanding of Nehru, Lal bahadur Shastri and Indira Gandhi in foreign policies and shift came in the era of these charismatic leaders.

Abhishek Srivastava (2025) writes in the report: "A Decadal Snapshot of India's Soft Power strategies (2014-2024): It showed the notion of "soft Power" first proposed by Joseph Nye in the latter half of 20th century that gives new dimension of foreign power dynamics. The diversity of India's culture , yoga and historical values which were inspired by deep civilization. Even the effectiveness of India's soft power took a boost in the leadership of Prime minister Narendra Modi as its use was minimal or less effective in previous leaderships.

Rishabh Sachdeva writes in the article: "From Big Brother to a leader : Modi's Soft power surge in South Asia" (2022) elucidates India's public diplomacy under the leadership of exceptionally pragmatic leader PM Modi and EAM Jaishankar. India's initiatives like Vaccine maitri, diplomatic and cultural initiatives to promote cooperation, coexistence and coherence.India's dynamic personality or measures in the contemporary era of digital interconnectedness and communication .The Interplay role of India as a Vishwaguru among its neighbours.

Dhruva Jaishankar writes in the article: "India rising: Soft Power and the world's largest democracy" (2018) elaborated that how India being a world's largest democracy with diverse sets of population diversity exhibits its soft power model in the world. Indian leaders were very positive about their soft power potentiality. And the popularity of Indian food, Bollywood and International Yoga Day recognized by United Nations.

Christian Wagner argues in the article: " India's Soft Power: Prospects and limitations"(2010) highlighted the India's soft power with her democratic tradition. And Mahatma Gandhi's ideas of non-violence and peaceful resolution of problems without violence. India's defensive soft power as it put more focus on capacities rather than the capabilities. India's approach to balance its national interest and political values simultaneously.

Anjan Saha writes in the article: *“A Hard Look at Soft Power strategy in South Asia”* (2017) focused on the mainstream introduction of the concept of Soft Power by Nye. According to Nye country's soft power comprises from three sources-the culture, political values and foreign policies. The author constitutes India's rich culture, cuisine, yoga, Ayurveda and ICT. The Hard power policies proved to be unsuccessful to influence the neighbouring countries behavior.

Rohan Mukherjee argues in the article: *“False Promise of India's Soft Power”* (2014) elaborated three factors of India's soft power shortcomings that is soft power resources have been over estimated, Secondly more emphasis on soft power dimension accompanied with hard power. Final Factor is credibility of India's soft power lies in context of national identity. And how India is still unsuccessful to clear contradictions with the utilization of its soft power.

Manoj Kumar Mishra argues in the article: *Soft and Hard power in Foreign Policy* (2016) examines India's adoption of soft power as a tool in its foreign policy. Nye introduced it to explain the changing dynamics of American foreign policy. The Non-Aligned movement which was basically providing alternative during cold war era. Indian leaders were fostering its soft power through culture, economic and political interactions with its neighbours.

J. Jegannathan argues in the article: *“Regional Strategy for India: Exploring Soft Power options* (2012) examines the South Asia in terms of its economic prosperity and political stability and how India plays a pivotal role among its neighbours. The idea of foreign policy focusing upon the neighbours for territorial integrity and national sovereignty. The soft power resources of culture and values to maintain stability and peace. The age of globalization and revolution of information that has changed the politico-security environment in south Asia.

Vijay Chauhan argues in the article: *“Soft Power: A Foreign Choice for India”* (2014) elaborates evolution of the concept of soft Power and Foreign policy of India. The Author makes distinction between Soft and Hard power. On the Other hand the understanding to focus on the factors that forces as well as the constrains that hinder natural evolution of soft power.

Vatsal Choudhary and Utkarsh Agarwal writes in the *IJNRD Journal*: *“Analysing India's Soft Power Concerning South Asia”*(2022) examines the uniqueness of south Asian region with major challenges and disputes of land and boundry. The Positive image of India in south Asia in terms of its brotherhood approach for its neighbours. According to the understanding of Wagner the requirement for India to transform its soft power capacity like yoga, Bollywood, etc for desired outcomes.

Subhra Pratim Roy and Tuhin Chitrakar in the *International Journal on Arts, Management and humanities* (2023) *“India's Quest for Soft Power: Challenges in South Asia”* focuses on the rise of prominence on Indians in 21st century. The development of India in terms of economic and military infrastructure since 1991. India's development in terms of Digital and public diplomacy and the challenges come along with soft power basically its shortcomings. The attempt of India to portray a positive image of its soft power in its neighbourhood.

Patryk Kugiel writes in the article "India's soft power in South Asia" (2012) highlighted the Asymmetrical power relations and India's leadership in South Asia to ensure peace and stability. The unsuccessful approach of hard power to soft power shift India turns. The India's initiatives to build a positive foundation in the region of south Asia to rebuild trust with its neighbors.

1.2 RESEARCH PROBLEM

India since its independence has series of cooperation and conflicts with its south Asian neighbours. The Core problem statement in the study of the strategic impact of India's soft power on regional cooperation with its south Asian neighbours is basically the dominance and Historical Issues in south Asia that is broadly India oriented in terms of geography, economy and demography. But strong dominance and deep historical problems like religious, ethnic, language and boundry disputes that creates misunderstanding and misapprehensions among its neighbours. These issues negatively affect India's growth, prosperity and its potential role in global politics. Soft Power as a solution to these problems that aims to understand how India can effectively use its soft power to foster regional cooperation among its South Asian neighbours.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) How effectively and consistently has India Used its soft power in south Asia?
- 2) How the soft power changed since PM Modi Came to power since 2014?
- 3) What are the key internal and external factors that constrains India's Softpower?

1.4 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- 1) To examine the concept of soft power and India's potentiality in soft power?
- 2) To understand India's neighbourhood First policy and its soft power push in south Asia?
- 3) To examine the policy of Atmanirbhar Bharat and its influence in neighbours as a vishwaguru?
- 4) To understand the primary challenges and limitations that hinder India's soft power in south Asia?

1.5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The Methodology of research is Qualitative, descriptive and comparative. The Research concentrates on the "Agent Centered Approach", that how India use its soft power as an element to stabilize its relations with its neighbours. The resources which are used in the study are secondary data that comprises books, journals, websites, articles, newspaper articles and magazines to analyze the academic discourse on soft power in India and South Asian region. The data has been properly studied and analyzed to make the research potentially authentic.

1.6 HYPOTHESIS

I. India's effective use of its soft power amongst its South Asian neighbors and how India's soft power has been strengthen due to its Neighbourhood First Policy 2014 and Atmanirbhar Bharat vision to became vishwaguru.

1.7 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of power is basically multidimensional in nature which can be viewed through many lenses. The conceptual understanding of power is defined by realist thinkers like Hans Morganthau and EH Carr which shows that there has been a struggle for power in the form of war, balance of power and national interests. But the concept of power has been shifted from hard to soft push after the introduction of the term Soft power in 1990 which was first used by Joseph Nye. He shows that how nations can be attracted through its culture

rather than coercion or force. Nye elaborates that how culture, literature and cultural diplomacy can be used to shape the interest of other nations and also their foreign policies..

2. INDIA'S SOFT POWER IN SOUTH ASIA

The concept of soft power had came into mainstream by Joseph Nye and as per “Nye power lies in the intangible elements of resources such as culture, values, institutions and foreign policy. These resources are highly non-fungible and immeasurable in character” (Nye,2005). Soft power had played an important role in shaping the future of south Asian relations through persuasion rather than coercion. The beginning of 21st century India has been glorified and renewed with the soft power tools like culture, Bollywood, IT technology, Bilateral Investments, humanitarian assistance and series of leadership meetings among the Prime Ministers of South Asian neighbours (Kugiel,2012). It had channelize its soft power potentiality in south Asia to solve the complex matters in a soft manner rather than hard manner. Its foreign policy has based on the principles of cooperation, peace, non-interference and mutual respect. Its soft power roots had founded in the Buddha's ideas of individuality and universality among mankind and now in the contemporary times the whole world is celebrating humanity in the form of Vasudhaiva kutumbakam (one earth, one family and one future) at the global level (Saha,2017). It adopted the policy of non- reciprocal altruism towards its neighbours in the form of Gujral Doctrine under the leadership of PM IK Gujral. The shift came into practice to enhance the influence of its soft power on neighbours through Neighbourhood First Policy as this initiative introduced by India in 2014 under the leadership of PM Modi.

3. COMPONENTS OF INDIA'S SOFT POWER IN SOUTH ASIA

India's soft power is deeply rooted in its culture, civilization, political values and foreign policies. The following components are very crucial in fostering its regional image as a big brother.

3.1 CULTURE AND CIVILIZATION

India is one of the oldest and diverse civilizations in the history of the world. Its rich culture is the important source of its soft power push. The oldest civilizational links and shared religious heritage which is prevalent in its culture. It provides the connectivity through the spiritual linkages of cultural heritage sites like Buddhist temples and relics of Buddha which are still valuable as a soft power assets. India's art, cuisine, Ayurveda and principles of non-violence are relevant across south Asia. It's culture has been transmitted to various nations through the diaspora of India via festivals, cuisines and rich traditional values. The epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata provides a shared collective narratives across the region that fosters regional cooperation and collectivity. It promotes the ancient practices of yoga as a cornerstone of India's soft power with the recognition of International Yoga Day celebrated on 21 June across globe showcases its culture. This is a diplomatic tool which is a source of peace, harmony and health. Indian cinema mainly Bollywood, television serials has immense popularity in neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri lanka (Chaudhary and Agarwal ,2022).

3.2 DEMOCRATIC VALUES

India is one of the largest democracies in the world with its secular, federal state principles which are the sufficient tools of its soft power. India is basically an example of 'unity in diversity'. It shows the model to other nations which are highly chaotic and internally divided. It provides the framework of accountability, diverse interest catered, multi-party system in the democratic government. It helps in the independence of Bangladesh by taking heavy burden of refugees during war. The promotion of democracy as the best form of government which was a tool of soft power (Chaudhary and Agarwal, 2022).

3.3 INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

Since the independence of India, it is based on its non-violent struggles. It supports the idea of decolonization, disarmament and peaceful co-existence among nations. It believes in the idea that nations should benefit each other to maintain peace in the world. (Chaudhary and Agarwal, 2022) The initiative of India to play an active role in the formation of NAM which was basically a positive platform for the negotiation and dialogue for developing nations of the world. India had a more pragmatic outlook towards its foreign policy. Basically Look east policy has strengthened India's relations with its south Asian neighbours. (Kugiel, 2012)

4. ATMANIRBHAR BHARAT AND ITS ELEMENTS IN SOUTH ASIA

The vision of Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-Reliant India) was launched in the year 2020 by Hon'ble Prime Minister Narendra Modi which was not about the policy of isolationism but it was basically about strengthening India's domestic capabilities to act as an active provider of policies. India has achieved its self-reliance in various sectors and portray its image of vishwaguru in south Asia through its neighbourhood diplomacy. It has shifted its image from a dependent nation to an active provider of stability and growth for its neighbours aligned with its "Neighbourhood First 2014" policy. India has faced heavy dependence since its independence specially during Bangladesh refugee burden.

India's self-reliance (Aatmanirbhar Bharat) initiatives has focused on five elements : Economy, Energy and defense Infrastructure, Pharmaceuticals and healthcare , Digital infrastructure and Disaster relief :

4.1 ECONOMY

India has always focused to address the problem of dependency through its move of self-reliance in agriculture (green revolution) so that it can address the issue of economic crisis in south Asian neighbouring nations. India helped Sri Lanka which it faced the worst economic crisis by acting as an active responder through the aid of \$ 4 billion in credit lines for fuel, food and medicines. India has taken an initiative to submit a letter to IMF for support of finances and restructuring to its economy. This shows a strong economic foundation of India (Sharan, 2017).

4.2 ENERGY AND DEFENSE INFRASTRUCTURE

India has significantly reduced its reliance on various arms imports with the indigenous defense production by reaching its record of around 1.54 lakh crore rupees in the year 2024-25. There are certain projects like the HAL Tejas fighter jet, warship construction and indigenous ammunition pieces production signifies the growth and self-reliance. India's Atmanirbhar character in power generation has shifted into regional energy cooperation. It permitted Nepal to export an additional supply of 251 MW of electricity to boost its economy and energy infrastructure. Nepal exported its power for the first time to India (Das, 2015).

India continues to support Bhutan in its hydropower development crucial for its economic stability. The India-Bhutan hydropower partnership is a glorifying model. It installed over 2000 MW Arun- III project and upper Karnali project to help Nepal transition from a power- deficit to a power surplus nation. It continues to show its soft push to Bangladesh in the form of initiative such as the BBIN (Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal) motor vehicle agreement to enhance its trade (Mukherjee 2015). It has extended dollar 8 credit to Bangladesh for its infrastructure. India has developed its robust solar manufacturing ecosystem with 100MW of solar PV modules to reduce dependency on fossil fuels. Through the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme which shows its self- reliance in mobile production and chasing to become largest manufacturer (Mukherjee 2015). All these above mentioned projects and initiatives shows India's Atmanirbharata in the field of defense and energy.

4.3 PHARMACEUTICALS AND HEALTHCARE

India is known as the Pharmacy of the world. It has achieved self- reliance in manufacturing personal protective equipments (PPE) kits during pandemic moving from zero production to surplus production to 450,000 pieces around three months. It is now a global leader in generic medicines and vaccines to produce sophisticated medical devices and reduce reliance on imports (Singh & Raj,2022). The whole world has witnessed COVID-19 pandemic, India's self- reliance has allowed it to provide vaccines and medical supplies to neighbours like Bhutan, Maldives, Bangladesh and Nepal to strengthen the health of its whole south Asian region before exporting it to globally. As India believes in the idea of "Vasudhaiva kutumbakam" that means the world is one family and its solidarity is a global responsibility. (Singh& Raj,2022)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, India's "VACCINE MAITRI" initiative shared its self- reliance with the world and its nature to portray the image of VISHWAGURU. South Asian neighbors were approximately the 30% recipients of India's vaccines. It provides the vaccines at the low costs to its neighbors to make it affordable.

(chattu, et al., 2024)

4.4 DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE

India is fostering its infrastructure in digital technologies. It is exporting its digital success such as the India stack (UPI, Aadhaar) to neighbours (MEA,2024). The successful integration of these technologies in the countries like Maldives and Sri Lanka helps them to improve the financial inclusivity. Basically it helps tourist to use Indian digital payment systems to foster the relations between the neighbours. The digital infrastructure in the form of UPI (Unified payments Interface) has been developed to enhance the digital financial inclusion with around 650 million transactions approximately on the daily basis (MEA,2024). India is establishing itself as a leader in digital technology like IT sector services , indigenous start- ups and Artificial intelligence technologies to reach at the regional level and developing good relations with its neighbors and portray the image as a VISHWAGURU.

4.5 DISASTER RELIEF

India is trying to grow its capacity to manage its own natural disasters that has enabled it to provide humanitarian aid to nations which are in need. In case of Afghanistan India sends its aid in the form of wheat supply and vaccines to support the neighbour logistically. India utilizes its indigenous satellite capabilities (SAARC Satellite) to provide forecasting of weather related information and disaster indications to cater the needs of neighbours for free (Malone,2011). Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) refers to the rapid, coordinated and efficient response by governments and various organizations to save lives and alleviate sufferings during natural and man-made disasters. It basically integrates disaster management diplomacy to provide medical care, evacuation and infrastructure restoration (Tharoor,2008). The several cases in which India portrayed its soft power diplomacy in a self-reliant manner to signify its Image of a vishwaguru : Operation Castor in 2004 (Maldives), Operation Rainbow (Sri Lanka) during 2004 Tsunami, Operation Maitri to tackle the situation of earthquakes (Nepal, 2015), Operation Devi Shakti (Afghanistan , 2021) , Mission Sagar (2020-22) , Operation Brahma was launched to rescue against the disastrous earthquake(Myanmar,2025) and Sagar Bandhu (Sri Lanka,2025).(Chakradeo,2020)

5. CHALLENGES TO ATMANIRBHAR BHARAT AND ITS SOFT POWER

The India's Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative has certain good assets that had strengthen its soft power potentialities in the south Asian region. But on the otherhand there are few challenges that hinders its true image at the regional and at the global level: Inspite the efforts of India to promote regional cooperation there are interferences of china in the region and its manipulative efforts to instigate the south Asian neighbours to hamper India's regional cooperation and its image of a vishwaguru . For example- China's Belt and Road initiatives that offers faster large scale infrastructural projects to slower the Indian projects(Haran,2017). On the contrary China has been conducting multidimensional cooperation with most of all the south Asian countries by expanding its reach in the field of economy, communication, culture, energy and security(Muni,2015). Border disputes among neighbours sometimes creates misunderstandings regarding India's Big Brother Image. The another most important challenge is that sometimes south Asian neighbours perceives India's self- reliance as its domination in the region.

6. CONCLUSION

India's self- reliance that is projecting its soft power potentialities in south Asia to fosters the image as a vishwaguru. The Atmanirbhar bharat abhiyaan campaign that has been introduced under the leadership of PM Modi and the initiative of Neighbourhood First policy 2014 goes hand in hand based on the agenda to proritise India's neighbours and to ensure self reliance of India in various forms to help the region which resembles the image as a vishwaguru. The soft power tools of India like yoga, education, Bollywood ,diaspora etc ; to persuade the nations rather than coercive attitudes. India's strong self- reliance in the field of vaccines , defense, energy, digital technologies and humanitarian aids to nations of south Asia. There is basically a structure that one can made is that India's projection of self- reliance via soft push in south Asia for portrayal of vishwaguru symbol.

India has always tried to maintain peace, cooperation, unity and integrity among whole south Asian neighbours. As India strongly follows the idea of vasudhaiva kutumbakam considering that the world is one family with the feeling of brotherhood,

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