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**An Anthology of Essays**

Swaran Singh, Sanjukta Bhattacharya,  
Simi Mehta, Satyam Tripathi

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**Authors:** Swaran Singh, Sanjukta Bhattacharya, Simi Mehta, Satyam Tripathi

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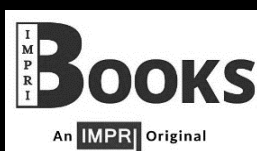
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## Chapter 2

# Recalibrating Influence: India's International Storytelling and the Challenges of Public Diplomacy in the 21st Century

Wakhare Hrishikesh Chandrashekhar

### Abstract

*This essay evaluates India's public diplomacy and international narrative strategies, examining how the country projects its identity and values to global audiences and identifying successes and limitations. It draws on soft-power theory and comparative cases (e.g. Korea's Hallyu, Japan's Cool Japan) to analyze India's strengths – such as its rich cultural heritage, democratic ethos, large diaspora and technological innovations – and constraints, including fragmented messaging and domestic challenges. Empirical examples (the COVID-19 Vaccine Maitri program, global spread of Unified Payments Interface (UPI) & Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) platforms, International Yoga Day) illustrate that India often generates high-impact events but struggles to sustain a coherent narrative. Key findings highlight India's soft-power assets (e.g. Bollywood, yoga, tech leadership) and narrative deficits (institutional silos, resource limits, mixed domestic signals). The study proposes strategic recommendations: instituting a unified national narrative strategy with metrics, creating an inter-agency coordination body, expanding vernacular and digital outreach, formally engaging the diaspora, and aligning foreign messaging with domestic reforms. These steps aim to transform episodic outreach into enduring influence, ensuring India's global story is consistent, credible and compelling.*

### Introduction

Public diplomacy – often defined as a state's strategic communication of its culture, values and policies to foreign publics – has become a cornerstone of modern statecraft. It is no longer limited to government-to-government interaction; instead it emphasizes '*narrative-building, persuasion, and trust creation*' as nations compete in a global marketplace of stories. For India, a rising power with a vast diaspora, deep civilizational heritage, and a booming digital economy, effective public diplomacy is crucial to shaping international perceptions and securing diplomatic, economic and security objectives. International storytelling in this context refers to the coherent narrative that India weaves about itself abroad – through cultural festivals, development projects, digital initiatives and diplomatic campaigns – conveying its identity and priorities to diverse global audiences. Recalibrating influence thus implies refining and aligning these narratives and tools to fit the realities of the 21st century: a polycentric, digitally networked world rife with competing narratives and disinformation.

Contemporary scholarship underscores that a nation's *attractiveness* – its culture, ideals and policies – can yield influence as powerfully as hard power. Joseph Nye's soft-power theory

and Nicholas Cull's work on public diplomacy emphasize attraction and dialogue over coercion. In practice, modern public diplomacy is a many-to-many communication system, not one-way projection. This research examines how India has told its story internationally and where its public diplomacy strategy has succeeded or faltered. It synthesizes academic insights and empirical data, including emblematic cases such as India's COVID-19 *Vaccine Maitri* program, the global adoption of UPI/DPI digital platforms, and International Yoga Day. Comparative examples (e.g. South Korea's *Hallyu*, Japan's *Cool Japan*) are used for context. Key concepts are defined at the outset: *Public Diplomacy* is state-led outreach to foreign publics to influence perceptions; *International Storytelling* is the narrative a country projects abroad; and *Recalibrating Influence* means updating that narrative and strategy to match evolving geopolitical and technological contexts.

## Objectives

- a. **Analyze India's international narrative:** Evaluate how India projects its culture, values and technological prowess on the world stage (e.g. through festivals, aid, and digital exports).
- b. **Assess successes and challenges:** Identify where India's public diplomacy efforts have generated positive global attention (such as Vaccine Maitri, UPI, Yoga Day) and where they have been undermined (e.g. by mixed domestic signals or coordination gaps).
- c. **Compare strategies:** Draw lessons from other nations' branding efforts (e.g. *Hallyu*, *Cool Japan*) to contextualize India's approach.
- d. **Identify strengths and weaknesses:** Examine India's soft-power assets (democracy, diaspora, culture, tech) and narrative constraints (fragmentation, resource limits, domestic politics).
- e. **Formulate recommendations:** Propose pragmatic steps for India to enhance narrative coherence and long-term influence abroad.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, evidence-based analysis grounded in existing scholarship and case study evaluation. First, it reviews theoretical foundations of soft power and public diplomacy (citing scholars like Nye and Cull). Second, it analyzes data and media reports on specific Indian initiatives: for example, statistics on vaccine exports, UPI transactions and Yoga Day participation. Third, it draws on comparative examples of national branding (South Korea, Japan) and policy papers to benchmark India's performance. Finally, insights from the academic literature (e.g. Mazumdar 2020 on India's Public Diplomacy challenges) and practitioner reports were synthesized to identify coherent themes. This triangulation of theory, empirical data and comparative analysis provides a balanced, data-informed appraisal of India's public diplomacy narrative.

## Findings

### *Strong Soft-Power Foundations*

India possesses powerful ‘raw materials’ for influence: its 1.4 billion population, millennia-old civilization, vibrant democracy and booming technology and entertainment industries. These underpin narratives about India’s cultural wealth (Bollywood films, yoga, Ayurveda) and development model. For instance, the Global Soft Power Index (2025) ranks India highly in Arts & Entertainment and Future Growth Potential. India’s narrative emphasizes *Global South leadership*, development-first solutions and digital innovation. When aligned and well-communicated, these assets resonate globally: Yoga has become a symbol of wellness and inclusion, and Indian cuisine and cinema have worldwide followings.

### *Episodic Visibility vs. Sustained Influence*

India often achieves momentary global attention through high-profile initiatives, but struggles to convert these into enduring influence. Events like International Yoga Day (co-sponsored by 177 countries) and Vaccine Maitri created initial media spikes, but analysts describe these as ‘episodic visibility’ without a year-round narrative plan. For example, India exported nearly 300 million vaccine doses by mid-2023 under Vaccine Maitri, earning praise as the ‘pharmacy of the world.’ However, when a domestic COVID surge in 2021 forced export curbs, India faced a credibility gap: foreign audiences noted India hoarding vaccines after earlier generosity. Similarly, India’s G20 summit in 2023 and other flagship events project an image of growing leadership, but absent systematic follow-through, their impact has been largely transitory. In sum, our analysis finds that India’s soft power launches major campaigns, but lacks a sustained, year-round strategy to build a cohesive image.

### *Coordination Gaps and Resource Constraint*

India’s Public Diplomacy strategy is hindered by institutional fragmentation and limited resources. Multiple ministries and agencies (e.g. the Ministry of External Affairs, Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), Commerce Ministry, health agencies) run separate culture, commerce and tech programs with no single nodal authority. This leads to disjointed messaging: a tourism campaign like Incredible India may not connect thematically with India’s tech diplomacy or vaccine outreach. Commentators explicitly note ‘fragmented messaging across actors’ and an absence of a central ‘Chief Public Diplomat’ to unify the story. Moreover, India’s diplomatic footprint is smaller than its ambitions. With only ~149 embassies and a foreign service of under 5,436 officers, India has less local presence than rivals. This limits cultural outreach and local-language engagement. As one report observes, Indian missions bolster soft power through culture, ‘but this role is hampered by the paucity of officers and funding.’ In practice, India’s PD often remains Anglophone and reactive. Without dedicated staff for vernacular media, it struggles to shape narratives in many regions.

### ***Digital Diplomacy: Promise and Paradox***

Technology has emerged as a major theme of India's narrative. India exports its digital public goods (DPI) as development models: the UPI payments system has processed billions of transactions (growing from ~39 billion in 2021 to ~131 billion by FY2024), and Aadhaar identity frameworks are promoted abroad. These successes reinforce an image of India as a tech innovator and development partner. The Ministry of External Affairs itself touts UPI as 'the empirical backbone of India's narrative' for exporting digital infrastructure. However, analysts point out a paradox: India claims digital sovereignty, yet much of its digital ecosystem relies on foreign cloud and semiconductor technologies. In narrative terms, this does not negate India's soft power, but it suggests a potential credibility gap about self-reliance in technology. India's challenge is to frame its tech story persuasively while acknowledging these dependencies.

### ***Diaspora and Cultural Outreach***

India's diaspora—estimated at over 18 million—serves as a powerful 'story-carrier' abroad. Overseas Indians often defend and promote India's image, contributing informal soft power. Yet the diaspora is diverse: some communities voice criticism of Indian policies. Without formal engagement, diaspora influencers remain 'digital vigilantes – not narrative architects'. Systematic outreach (e.g. regular dialogues and spokesperson networks) could harness this asset more effectively.

Cultural diplomacy remains a strong suit. Events like International Yoga Day, now observed in about 177 countries, showcase India's heritage and global appeal. However, India's cultural symbols also highlight the need for inclusive messaging. For instance, some critics noted that linking Yoga Day too closely with Hindu tradition stirred concerns about secularism. Our analysis finds that blending culture and policy narratives is sensible, but India must balance its ancient heritage with its modern diversity. Overemphasizing one side risks stereotyping (as a 'spiritual relic' or technocracy), whereas a balanced story – 'India: blending tradition with innovation' – would maximize appeal.

### ***Strategic Ambiguity and Governance Narrative***

India's principle of 'strategic autonomy' (pursuing ties with all major powers) allows it flexibility on the world stage, but can produce mixed messages. For example, maintaining relations with both Russia and the U.S. appeals to many, yet external audiences may perceive opportunism if India's stance shifts. Similarly, domestic issues impact international credibility. High-visibility foreign campaigns (e.g. vaccines, technology aid) sometimes clash with events at home: communal tensions or policy controversies (such as debates over minority rights) can undercut India's image of pluralism. Analysts note that India rarely highlights internal governance successes abroad (e.g. e-governance or judicial reforms) and recommend that India practice 'narrative hygiene' – ensuring that foreign messaging about values like tolerance is backed by consistent domestic actions. In summary, my findings

indicate that without a unified, data-driven strategy, India's narrative risks being seen as opportunistic rather than coherent.

## **Recommendations**

### ***Establish a National Narrative Strategy***

Create a formal framework (a *National Comprehensive Narrative Strategy*) that defines India's core story themes, target audiences and key performance indicators (KPIs). This strategy would articulate an overarching narrative (e.g. 'India: Diversity with Digital Dynamism') and set metrics such as international sentiment indices, media coverage tone, and adoption rates of platforms like UPI. An annual 'Soft Power Scorecard' could report progress on these measures, highlighting successes and gaps.

### ***Create a Narrative Coordination Cell***

Form an inter-agency unit within the foreign ministry to ensure coherence. The NCC would include liaisons from ministries of Culture, Commerce, Health, Technology, & Tourism etc., and from state governments and diaspora networks. Its role would be to vet external messaging, align campaigns on a rolling calendar, and coordinate rapid rebuttals to misinformation. A dedicated digital monitoring cell could link embassies with domestic media teams for 24/7 response, integrating PD with national security communications.

### ***Invest in Vernacular and Digital Outreach***

Move beyond an English-centric approach by deploying vernacular media officers in every mission. Produce localized content (short videos, podcasts, social campaigns) in major world languages to highlight India's innovations, culture and values. Embrace 'Cultural Diplomacy 2.0': use VR tours of heritage sites, mobile games about Indian science, and partnerships with local influencers to engage youth. Consider establishing a pan-India global media platform (or co-productions with international outlets) to amplify India's voice in key regions.

### ***Strengthen Digital Public Diplomacy***

Train a cadre of 'digital diplomats' skilled in social media strategy and crisis communication. Equip each mission with a 24/7 digital monitoring team to proactively engage on Twitter/X, Instagram, YouTube and other platforms. Use these channels not only for announcements but interactive dialogue (Q&A sessions, explainer videos). In emergencies, missions must push India's perspective rapidly to preempt misinformation (as delayed response in the Pahalgam terrorist attack showed). Closer coordination between defence/intelligence and PD (as during recent border standoffs) can align security events with public messaging.

### ***Leverage the Diaspora Strategically***

Formalize engagement with overseas Indians by creating an *Indian Diaspora Storytelling Network*: vetted spokespersons who receive briefings on India's policies and soft power

goals. Revive and expand platforms like Pravasi Bharatiya Divas into regular dialogues between diaspora media professionals and PD strategists. Encourage public-private partnerships abroad (similar to Confucius Institutes) by collaborating with NGOs, cultural associations and businesses on India-themed programs. Such initiatives would amplify positive success stories (e.g. Indian scientists, entrepreneurs) and preempt negative stereotypes.

### ***Professionalize Thematic Diplomacy***

Develop specialized diplomatic cadres in key sectors. For example, appoint climate attachés fluent in renewable energy issues, tech diplomats knowledgeable in AI and cybersecurity, and health diplomats for global health forums. These experts, posted in partner countries or multilateral institutions, can translate India's cooperation (e.g. in solar power or pandemic response) into compelling narratives. A health attaché in Africa, for instance, could highlight India's polio eradication experience to underscore India's development credentials. This thematic approach ensures that ministries beyond Foreign Affairs have a stake in telling India's story.

### ***Align Messaging with Governance ('Narrative Hygiene')***

Ensure credibility by reconciling foreign-facing campaigns with domestic realities. Before promoting value-based themes abroad (e.g. tolerance, free press), address any contradictory signals at home (e.g. communal violence, press restrictions). Enhance transparency on sensitive issues and pivot diplomats to universally appreciated topics (development aid, innovation) during sensitive periods. Legal and institutional reforms (e.g. improving media accreditation or data transparency) can also bolster India's narrative of openness and democracy.

### ***Monitor and Adapt with Metrics***

Institute rigorous evaluation of PD efforts. Use surveys, media analysis and social-media analytics to gauge impact. The proposed Soft Power Scorecard should draw on quantitative data (brand ranking, content viewership) and qualitative research to identify which narratives resonate. Regular feedback loops would allow India to shift focus – for example, targeting countries where its image lagged – and justify budget allocations for public diplomacy. In short, make India's PD as data-driven as its economic planning.

## **Conclusion**

India today has the ingredients of influence: a storied civilization, a vibrant democracy, a global diaspora, and a dynamic economy. Its international storytelling emphasizes development solutions (vaccine exports, solar energy cooperation, digital infrastructure) and cultural heritage (yoga, festivals, cuisine) as evidence of its global relevance. Achievements like *Vaccine Maitri*, the global reach of UPI, and near-universal Yoga Day celebrations attest to India's soft-power potential. However, as this analysis shows, potential alone is

insufficient. India must recalibrate its influence by addressing structural gaps in its public diplomacy apparatus: improving inter-agency coordination, engaging diverse audiences (especially in local languages), and ensuring domestic policies reinforce its international narrative.

A balanced, whole-of-nation approach is required. As one assessment notes, India's soft-power tools are strong – 'digital public goods, vaccine diplomacy, climate and space initiatives' – but their impact depends on 'domestic resilience, institutional coherence and modern digital storytelling.' Only by aligning policy, narrative and delivery can India convert episodic campaigns into enduring influence. The recommendations above – from a national narrative strategy to a Soft Power Scorecard – aim to make India's storytelling as formidable as its economic aspirations.

Ultimately, India's most effective narrative will be one that is coherent, emotionally engaging and strategically told. By investing in professional skills, maintaining message consistency, and embracing innovation (e.g. multimedia campaigns, digital diplomacy), India can not only tell its story to the world, but shape the context in which it is heard. In the multipolar, digital age, influence is built not just by wealth or arms but by hearts and minds. India's public diplomacy must evolve accordingly if it is to cement its status as a trusted global voice.

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