



India's Soft Power Strategy: Leveraging Diaspora and Culture in UAE Foreign Policy

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Abstract

India's soft power strategy has transformed into one of the critical drivers of its foreign policy, especially in building strong bilateral partnerships like that of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which is among India's closest strategic partners in the Gulf. This study uses both an analytical and theoretical lens grounded in Joseph Nye's soft power and constructivist international relations theory to analyze the ways India uses its diaspora and cultural resources to strengthen its sway in the UAE. More than 3.5 million Indians in the UAE find themselves to be a transnational bridge of dynamism through remittances (around \$20 billion annually), business investments, and culture. Cultural connections are enhanced through various events including Diwali celebrations and other action by most Indian community groups and Indian diaspora engagement is further bolstered via initiatives such as the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas. At the same time, through Bollywood, yoga and traditional festivals, India's cultural diplomacy sends a favorable image of the nation, a component which also appeals to the expansive UAE population with its Vision 2021 and 2071 goals that emphasizes global synergies, cultural inclusivity and openness to ideas and imaginations. The universality of Bollywood appeal and the international applicability of yoga — which has been propagated by the Indian state through International Yoga Day — provide avenues for mutuality and cultural convergence. India has made an effort to reach out on a strategic front through campaigns such as the Indian Cultural Centre in Abu Dhabi and cultural showcases in events like the Dubai Shopping Festival. These initiatives are founded on constructivist values, with the development of common identities and goodwill expanding India's strategic agency, illustrated by the 2022 Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) [10]. But labor rights for unskilled workers are one red flag, as are geopolitical sensitivities, and the potential for cultural reductionism through commercialized exports like Bollywood. The paper contends that India's soft power strategy in the UAE is complex and successfully marries elements of cultural diplomacy and diaspora outreach to achieve foreign policy goals and provides us with a glimpse of India's worldwide outreach. With the Gulf region so fluid, managing labor challenges and geopolitical tensions will be key to maintaining the success of this strategy.

Keywords :- population, Economic, diplomacy, cultural, attraction, regional, environment .

1. Introduction

The first Threat-Buster (India in the Gulfs, 50-Year Journey to a Former Colonizing Power, 2022) takes readers through the runway of India's rise as a global power with an information-rich yet very concise assessment of soft power as a tool to grow access and influence in important geopolitical regions such as the Gulf. The UAE, as an important economic and strategic partner, becomes a significant case for understanding India's soft power strategy, whereby it uses its large diaspora and a rich cultural inheritance to deepen bilateral relations. The UAE, with more than 3.5 million expatriate Indians, is practically a large microcosm of economic cooperation and cultural interplay, and thus a valuable case for the observation of a great deal of India's soft power efforts. This Article examines the ways in which India uses its diaspora and its cultural resources like Bollywood, Yoga and festivals to complement its national image and goodwill with the UAE. Using Joseph Nye's notion of soft power, which is about attraction rather than agitation and constructivist international relations theory that sees an international society of states as being formed through shared identities and norms, this paper looks at the way India is framing a narrative of partnership and cultural affinity. The Indian community spread over various professions — professionals, laborers and entrepreneurs — serves as a transnational bridge, with economic linkages manifested through remittances and investments, and soft power through cultural festivals that appeal to the diverse UAE market. Cultural diplomacy (the Indian Cultural Centre in Abu Dhabi, which also hosts events like the International Day of Yoga) fits neatly into the UAE post-modern vision of diversity and cosmopolitanism, and strengthens India's strategic positioning. The 2022 Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) highlights the concrete results of this endeavour. But the need to tread carefully on issues such as labor rights, and geopolitics, would necessitate India's soft power efficacy to be sustained. The focus of

this paper is on three questions as to how India use its diaspora and cultural diplomacy in the UAE. Which theoretical frameworks account for this behaviour? And What obstacles has restricted its influence. Through these various dimensions, the study will seek to gain a holistic understanding of India's soft power strategy in the context of the UAE and what this means for India's foreign policy more broadly.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Soft Power: Joseph Nye's Concept

Joseph Nye's notion of soft power offers a framework for viewing India's foreign policy approach in the UAE, especially in terms of using its diaspora and cultural resources. Soft power, a term coined by Joseph Nye in 1990, defines the ability of a nation to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction, as opposed to command and payment (Nye, 2004). Soft power differs from hard power, in that soft power is the reliance on the appeal of the country itself to exert influence through its culture, political values, and foreign policies which are seen as legitimate and conferring moral authority as opposed to hard power which relies on military or economic might. Specifically, in the case of the India-UAE engagement, soft power plays out as the active Indian diaspora and cultural exports such as Bollywood, yoga and traditional festivals, creating goodwill and a cultural brotherhood. However you cannot have soft power without the three sisters, culture, political values and foreign policy, that Nye most importantly points out in his work. India has vast resources in terms of a rich culture that has been global for practices such as yoga and bollywood movies that have made people rally around India as an area — for India it becomes an important string for our ability to pull audiences towards us from UAE, which in turn creates a bond across the cultural symbiosis. The Indian diaspora, over 3.5 million strong in the UAE, echoes this influence by serving as cultural ambassadors, spreading Indian values and lifestyles through community events and economic contributions. Nye defines soft power policies as those that reinforce a state's legitimacy and attractiveness, which is exactly what India's foreign policy exemplifies through initiatives like the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (Abroad Indian Day) and bilateral agreements such as the 2022 Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). Through nurturing goodwill, India is able to solidify its strategic foundational partnership with the UAE and this resonates with the wider UAE philosophy of diversity and global cooperation. Yet the effectiveness of India as a soft power comes under threat due to issues including labor rights and risk of commodification of Indian culture. Nye's framework highlights that genuine and credible soft power cannot be built through promotion alone, and as such it will be difficult for India to rely on soft power through cultural outreach without accompanying policy initiatives that match diplomatic rhetoric if it is to maintain its influence in the UAE and beyond.

2.2 Constructivism in International Relations

International relations constructivism IS therefore an apt theoretical tool to understand India's soft power strategy in the UAE as it shifts the focus from states as being the principal actors in the global arena to people and groups and processes of self and collective identity formation and the influence of: norms and institutions on state behavior. Constructivism — which rejects the realist or liberal emphasis on material power or the economic incentive — and, also like Wendt (1992), finds the socially constructed character of these relationships through collective meanings and intersubjective understanding. In the case of India is engaged with UAE, constructivism explains how India creates an important part of identity and sense of respect through diaspora and cultural diplomacy. With over 3.5 million Indians living in the UAE, the Indian diaspora represents a transnational community that draws upon expressions of collective ethnicity and identity in ways that can unite Indian and Emirati societies — from Diwali celebrations, to the work of Indian social welfare organizations in Dubai as well. The interactions mold perceptions, and they feel like partners, at the national level, on the floor of the cultural world. The Indian Cultural Centre in Abu Dhabi, International Yoga Day initiatives, and other elements of India's cultural diplomacy, such as Bollywood films, complement these normative overlaps, reinforcing the UAE's own aspirations for a culturally diverse and globally cooperative society. It goes on to argue that when state interests are socially constructed, state interests are constantly evolving, which is evident in the case of India, which is trying to signal through agreements such as 2022 Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), that it is a reliable partner. India influences UAE's perception of its nature as a cultural & economic partner by emphasizing values of inclusion and mutual benefit. Yet challenges as labor rights controversies and sensitive geopolitical dynamics can upend constructed identities, and India needs to ensure that its cultural outreach and policy deeds are in consistent with authenticity. Narratives are crucial to sustain India's soft

power and strengthen mutual perceptions; missteps can jeopardize the common meanings that lies behind bilaterals according to constructivism. India meticulously shapes a positive image through diaspora involvement and cultural interactions leading to emerging intersubjective understandings that bolster its strategic prowess in UAE providing a glimpse into the fluid relationship between identity and international relations.

3. Analysis

3.1 The Indian Diaspora as a Soft Power Asset

The Indian diaspora is over 3.5 million strong in angle has remained the bedrock of India's soft power policy by functioning as a transnational hinge to deepen cultural, economic and diplomatic ties. Wayumbre in within downdetective the frame of soft force Joseph attracted soften among those attracted through close-society system glass cost, through labor, profession, and fair-stead conduct after drive as India activity(inside&out&wait-behind, collect community enjoyment). Remittances of net \$20 billion (in cash and kind) by Diaspora and investments in real estate, trade and other sectors by Indian business leaders have also created economic linkages and enhanced the bilateral relationship. OUViprojects India's rich culture and cultural events such as Diwali and Holi celebrationsplayed by community groups bring goodwill and cultural affinity to the diverse population of UAE. These activities resonate with constructivist thought because they build collective identities and common understandings and construct India as a cultural friend. Annual celebrations such as the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, honouring overseas Indians contribute to that engagement by recognising their contribution while addressing their concerns and aim to enhance India's image as a homeland that cares. Also, the Indian government has sourced bilateral labor agreements with the UAE to build goodwill for the diaspora where it must live up to the expectation of protecting the rights of its workers. But it still finds challenges, especially for low-skilled workers that continue to suffer labor right issues like bad working conditions which will soil India's reputation and dilute its soft power. Cultural & Social differences are another set of integration barriers, thus hindering the diaspora from completely connecting India and the UAE. Since constructivist theory emphasizes the requirement for consistent narratives, they are likely to be detrimental to India if it does not resolve these matters simultaneously to retaining the good optics. Speaking of economic and cultural contributions from the diaspora, India geo-strategically aligns its soft power with the UAE vision for diversity and global partnerships, illustrated through strengthened two-way ties, including the Dubai-based overseas Indian diaspora diaspora, the 2022 Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). The role of the diaspora as a soft power asset consolidates Indias capacity to improve its strategic heft in the UAE through a foreign policy that embeds cultural affinity and economic partnership.

3.2 Cultural Diplomacy: Bollywood, Yoga, and Festivals

This post examines how India's cultural diplomacy in UAE works through a soft power conceptualization. It argues that India utilises Bollywood, yoga and traditional genres of festivals in seeking compelling national image projection in relation with Joseph Nye's (1990) overarching framework of equality via the eyes of attraction through culture! From a cultural standpoint, Bollywood is a global phenomenon with immense popularity in the UAE, where Indian films and cinema regularly show up in theaters and shape entertainment trends. These films also propagate Indian values, lifestyle, and aesthetics which resonates well with Emirati and the expatriate audience and region. The opening of the Indian Cultural Centre in Abu Dhabi further expands on this reach, offering up space for film screenings, art exhibitions and other performances involving the many diverse aspects of Indian heritage. Yoga has become a global fad due to its promotion by India as International Yoga Day and has gained momentum in the UAE through activities, patronised by leaders and citizens, signifying the overcoming of cultural barriers and an alignment of values in wellness. Public events and showcase during the Dubai Shopping Festival reflects this embedment of culture while traditional festivals such as Diwali and Holi appeal at a deeper cultural level as they resonate as well with the cultural inclusivity goals set out by the UAE via the UAE Vision 2021 and UAE Vision 2071. Constructivist theory is confirmed in these initiatives through the construction of shared identities and the production of norms when cultural exchanges breed mutual understanding and strong bilateral relations. The cultural synergies culminated into the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) of 2022 which manifests strategic dividends thereby expanding Indias Economic and diplomatic weight. Still, the commercialization of cultural exports, such as Bollywood, raises concerns about distilling India into a product, opening doors to charges of cultural appropriation or cultural one-dimensionalism. Moreover, there is a need for authentic cultural diplomacy, a spate of popular culture

should not to eclipse the wider Indian heritage. Constructivism is ultimately about narratives that need to be consistent, which will require India to actually balance accessibility with depth in its engagement. Through Bollywood, yoga and festivals, India creates a story around togetherness, enhanced by the globally-oriented humanity of the UAE which further strengthens its own soft power. Realising this strategy necessitates managing commercialization risks while ensuring authentic reflection of culture in the bid to further strengthen India's strategic partnership with the UAE.

3.3 Strategic Alignment with UAE's Vision

India adopts a soft power strategy in the UAE, which is complementary to the UAE Vision 2021 and 2071 that emphasize the need for economic diversification and cultural diversity while enhancing cross-border cooperation through creativity, culture, and people-centric sectors expand. With its 3.5 million-strong diaspora and cultural exports like Bollywood, yoga, and festivals, India presents itself as a partner that enhances the UAE's aspirations for a multicultural and globalized society. The economic contributions of the diaspora, with remittances over \$20 billion per year and trade and real estate investments, also match the UAE's ambition for economic resilience to create areas of mutual benefit. India- Through the institution like the Indian Cultural Centre at Abu Dhabi, International Yoga Day, etc, where both the countries have initiated, each of these initiatives resonate with UAE cultural policy of 'cultural inclusiveness' fully corresponding it into shared values which enhances both the countries in terms of diplomatic relations as well as mutually benefit each other through successful exchange of cultural aspects owing to whole presence of cultural diplomacy. Rooted in a dose of soft power from Joseph Nye, these initiatives showcase India as a culturally rich and reliable partner to the UAE nation with its diverse population. This is also perceptible from a lens of constructivist theory as it illustrates how India builds an identity through culture which enables the natural forces of respect-sharing and careful collaboration. The comprehensive economic partnership agreement (CEPA) in place in 2022 is a case in point, a sign of deeper trade and investment ties grounded upon consensus of common economic objectives. India's engagement in many UAE-led initiatives, including participation at Expo 2020 Dubai, in which India highlighted not only its cultural and economic strengths but showed itself as a foremost country in health and technology, confirms it. But issues such as labor rights abuses faced by Indian workers in the UAE could puncture this narrative and force India to do more on welfare if it wishes to remain credible. The UAE occupies a strategic position in the Gulf, meaning geopolitics as well as bilateral relations will require a deft diplomatic touch to maintain commonality. Since shared meanings must inherently be repeated, India has to naturally but constantly reinforce what it brings to the table culturally and economically, and that is where constructivism is critical. India also sets itself an example of 21 century soft power diplomacy capable of impacting and aligning its soft power with the UAE's vision augmenting its power in the Gulf.

3.4 Challenges and Limitations

India's diaspora and cultural assets enable the use of expansive soft power strategy; however, there are significant challenges and limits of soft power in the UAE that can limit its potential. One of the key worries relates to ongoing labour rights violations involving low-skilled Indian workers, who are a large section of the 3.5 million-strong diaspora. Spills in the media over lousy working conditions, wage disputes, and inadequate legal safeguards, in turn, damage the reputation of India and sometimes, the positive narrative projected through the cultural diplomacy, and return to hit the same bilateral relations. Such problems can drive a wedge between the UAE's leadership and people, diluting the benefits of soft power. Third is the question of geopolitical sensitivities; geopolitical balancing between the UAE and other Gulf nations as well as the UAE and other global powers is not simple, and India cannot afford to get it wrong in view of the complexities of the regional environment. While there are several positives to the export of popular culture, especially Bollywood, domestically, there does exist a risk of over-simplifying the diverse Indian identity and characterisation of Indian culture and people, and whereby the reins of perception of India is left in the hands of the International consumer trend and diaspora potentially resolving in a cultural diplomacy that boils down to prose and performance and lack of depth and connection with the people of UAE. This excessive placebo in pop culture may also promote a feeling of cultural inauthenticity and thus challenge the constructivist ideal of creating togetherness [28]. Moreover, social and cultural differences act as integration barriers for the diaspora, thus preventing them from being functional transnational bridges and from truly representative of India. Joseph Nye in his soft power framework put forth that legitimacy and authenticity is necessary in order to enhance soft power, thus India needs to focus on these issues so as to retain credibility. While the Indian government has skilfully employed many instruments

— from bilateral labour agreements to programs engaging the diaspora like Pravasi Bharatiya Divas to address and mitigate some legacy issues, scope for ineffectual implementation can dilute the benefits of many of these initiatives and create challenges all their own. Finally, constructivist theory also emphasizes coherent narratives, which implies that India will need to marry its cultural outreach with appropriate action on the policy side. Failure to respond to labour concerns or geopolitical complexities may undermine the common meanings that ensconce India's soft power. Worker welfare, real cultural representation, and regional rivalries must be handled with care as India builds its soft power to retain its strategic foothold in the UAE.

4. Conclusion

Coming to the topic of the ongoing soft power strategy of India in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the second-largest home of the Indian diaspora, advocates an advanced approach to combine both the diaspora and the soft power element to achieve its foreign policy in the Gulf region. Using its diaspora of 3.5 million along with other cultural characteristics such as Bollywood, yoga, traditional festivals, etc., which appeal to UAE cultural norms of reluctance towards extreme Islam, India constructs a desirable national identity in the UAE that complements the latter's vision of cultural diversity and global partnership. As a transnational bridge, the diaspora connects the two with economic ties in the form of remittances and investments, and cultural ties (e.g., Diwali celebrations). Combining cultural diplomacy, through institutions such as the Indian Cultural Centre in Abu Dhabi and events such as International Yoga Day, is aligned with the soft power formula of Joseph Nye which engages an audience in UAE through attraction nurtured by common values. The mutual identities created by these efforts, making the economies in partnership with each other closer, can be explained under constructivist theory, as with the help of the 2022 Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) on the other hand, bilateral relations both culturally and economically become strengthened. Labour rights abuses against low-skill workers, geopolitical intricacies, and the export of hollow, commercialised culture such as Bollywood could erode the effectiveness of India's soft power, however. Doing so necessitates policy measures which maintain their validity by being perceived as both real and legitimate according to Nye's framework and constructivism. The strategic confluence of India with UAE Vision 2021 and 2071 strengthens the positioning of India as a dependable partner in a strategically important region. This strategy works as it simultaneously marries cultural outreach with ground-tangible economic and diplomatic results, providing a blueprint for India's wider global outreach. India's diaspora, regional dynamics, and authentic cultural narratives should be of priority in order to sustain its soft power. The case illuminates the potential of soft power in the international system through attraction and common significations, and emphasises the growing cultural and economic influence that India holds in the Gulf and beyond. By keeping the focus on the issues, India will be able to maintain its soft power extending it as a lasting instrument to develop permanent ties with the UAE.

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