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From Soft Power to Narrative Power: India's Diplomatic Shift

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Abstract

The contemporary international order reflects increased multipolarity, greater legitimacy crisis and greater competition among states regarding the nature of ideas, it has become increasingly evident that the practice of diplomacy is being driven less by the material capabilities of the states and their common interest than by their capacity to create and disseminate compelling stories about themselves. Till date, India has primarily employed cultural elements (e.g., civilization, yoga, Buddhism, diaspora communities) to enhance its position globally. However, there are emerging indications of an increasing emphasis by India towards utilizing a more purposeful and effective narrative-based diplomacy to shape the views of other states toward India's role in the world. This paper employs the theoretical lenses of constructive international relations approach and the discourse power approach to examine India's evolving diplomatic practices as they pertain to its transition from using soft power as a means of diplomacy to using a form of narrative power as a means of statecraft. Additionally, this paper will provide qualitative analysis of several recent major events such as India's G20 Presidency, Vaccine Maitri, and its advocacy of Global South interests, which demonstrate how India utilizes narrative-based diplomacy to legitimate its foreign policy objectives. This paper also explores the role of non-governmental organizations (NGO) in reinforcing the narratives associated with India's narrative-based diplomacy beyond the confines of formal diplomacy and concludes that this evolution in India's diplomatic strategies is essential in this increasingly complex global environment.

Keywords: Narrative Power, Soft Power, Foreign Policy, Diplomacy, International Relations.

INTRODUCTION

Power in international politics has always been an evolving phenomenon. From military dominance and economic capability to institutional influence and cultural connect, the expression of power has adapted itself with changing structures in the global order. In present-day context, the diffused world powers, declining Western legitimacy and inflated public influence in state decisions, power of the state depends mainly on its ability to frame perceptions, shape global debates and communicate and spread them throughout the world. As a result, in order to engage effectively in the diplomatic process a country must be as adept at creating the narrative of an issue as about the negotiation of the interests.

To date, India has been widely regarded as a soft power country due to its vast civilization and the diversity of its social and political systems that has been developed over thousands of years. The cultural diplomacy of India, such as promotion of yoga, expansion of Bollywood, Buddhism, diaspora,

celebration of Indian festivals around the globe played a key role in generating international goodwill of India. Also India's believe in soft power diplomacy, democratic values, and rule based international order to take stand and raise its voice in the world affairs placed India in good books of many countries but it remained inadequately located as a diplomatic strategy. Recently from the last few years the development of India's ability to effectively engage with the world has been supported by India giving due importance in creating the narratives associated with the global issues such as health, multilateral reform, climate change. This shift reflects an understanding on how narratives can construct a global image and how the current global order is determined by one's ability to convey meaning and use social power more than military power.

This paper analysis India's evolving diplomatic strategy by examining the transition from an attraction-based soft power strategy to a narrative power strategy as a tool of its foreign policy, while also illustrating the manner in which India is currently applying its narrative power throughout the world and the implications of these actions for India's role in this contested international system.

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Soft Power: Conceptual Foundations and the use of soft power in India's diplomacy

Joseph Nye defines soft power as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion" of other states. Unlike hard power which relies on military or economic capabilities, soft power acts on persuasion, political values and normative appeal. In this complex interdependent world (a theory of Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye) soft power diplomacy has become an important tool in foreign policy especially for the states that lack economic capabilities.

India has always been identified as a key figure in soft power diplomacy on account of its rich civilization, diversified society and democratic values. The history of fighting a non-violent struggle against colonialism and deep spiritual beliefs had created a safe and non-harmful image of India in the world order. Indian arts, culture, yoga, festivals, ayurveda, cuisine, cinema and dance forms also played an important role in enhancing India's attractiveness in the world. As a founder member state of Non-Aligned Movement during cold war time India emerged as an independent actor in global politics. Further, India's firm belief in democratic values and multilateralism has also strengthened its normative appeal, especially among developing countries. Indian diaspora acted as cultural ambassadors in various countries particularly in North America, Middle East and Europe.

However, despite these developments, India's soft power remained diffused and lacked depth and momentum. Its normative appeals didn't align with its foreign policy goals, limiting the political pressure and influence it could exert. Furthermore, in this changing global order based on information and technology the strategic diplomacy depends mainly on strategic communication, storytelling, building narratives and counter-narratives rather than only attraction. These attributes of soft power provide a conceptual foundation for understanding the impact of India's foreign policy as well as the limitations of soft power as a tool of statecraft in achieving India's foreign policy goals. These shortcomings in India's foreign policy have led to a more systematic and deliberate utilization of discourses resulting in a shift from the use of soft power as a tool of statecraft to the use of narrative power as a tool of statecraft.

Soft Power to Narrative Power: A Conceptual Shift

The increasing importance of narratives in global order displays the prominent conceptual evolution in definition of power. The basic difference in soft power and narrative power is that, while former give

importance to attraction based on culture, values, norms and policies latter is more concerned with constructing and controlling its meaning. Narrative power is less focused on how others it is being liked or admired, but with shaping how states interpret it and evaluate its meaning. Unlike soft power which is often unintended or organic, narrative power is much more deliberative, planned, conceptualized, framed and then executed by the states. Thus, narrative power functions at much deeper cognitive level than traditional soft power.

According to the Constructivist Approach of international relations, "global politics is shaped by ideational factors- i.e. the mental process of forming ideas". This approach argues that state interests are determined and shaped through social interactions and narratives play an important role in shaping political behavior of international actors. Thus narrative power offers the ability to the states to define the terms of the discourse around a global issue, frame ideas and views related to global events in a positive manner to develop political legitimacy without coercion.

In the present geopolitical scenario, India holds a position of an emerging country with limited material capabilities as compared to major powers. By positioning itself as a voice of global south and a prominent advocate of ethical global governance, the effective use of the narrative power as a tool of diplomacy can enhance its international status by shaping global dynamics rather than just adapting it. Thus, narrative power represents a shift from passive attraction policy to actively shaping and defining the ways in which India exercises its influence over other nations through the use of ideas, norms and discourses.

India's Narrative Power in Practice

In the past few years, India in its diplomatic practice is increasingly utilising narratives very efficiently and in a very systematic way to project its identity, legitimacy and leadership in global arena. India's narratives are completely intentional, consciously crafted and perfectly aligned with its foreign policy objectives.

One of the most apparent demonstrations of India showcasing its narrative power was its G20 presidency in 2023 under the theme Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam-"The World is One Family". This particular narrative portrayed India as not just a G20 host but also as a bridge between developed and developing countries. Further highlighting the issues of inclusive growth, climate change and sustainable development it redefined governance as socially inclusive one. The successful inclusion of African Union as a permanent member of G20 added legitimacy to India's narrative of being a voice of global south and converting discourse into an institutional change.

Another example of India's use of narrative instrument was during the Covid-19 pandemic when it launched Vaccine Maitri initiative by supplying vaccines to the developing countries at a time of severe global inequity. By taking this step India projected itself as a responsible nation committed to the global welfare and the impact of India's this narrative in framing global perception of it as a reliable partner in global health governance was immense.

India has also articulated its global south leadership position and positioning itself as a spokesperson for developing countries through advocating the interests of developing countries regarding multilateral reforms including reforms in United Nations Security Council, elevating issues like debt distress, capacity building, climate financing, technology transfer, digital innovation and infrastructure development.

The narrative of civilization is an additional important aspect of India's narrative power. Buddhism diplomacy, promotion of yoga and ayurveda not only connect India with other nations but also act as a framework addressing contemporary challenges such as peace building, mental well-being and environment protection. The linking of ancient cultural traditions and modern global issues, India builds a narrative of connecting or continuing tradition with modernity and set itself apart from western universalism.

Digital diplomacy has further accelerated India's narrative power. The proactive use of social media platforms, think tanks, civil society, summits and conferences has significantly helped leaders in framing global issues and agendas. This digital engagement also allows India to actively respond to any misinformation, false narratives of other states and communicates with international audience in real time. Non- state actors also play a crucial role in legitimizing India's narratives. They not only enhance its credibility but also reduce the perception of organized propaganda by state.

Altogether, this indicates that India's narrative power is well constructed, examined and executed with the coordination of various actors and platforms. Now India is not relying solely on soft power diplomacy based on attraction but has shifted its stance to narrative power seeking ways to shape the definition of global issues such that it provides moral and political legitimacy of India's foreign policy in global world.

Critical Assessment: Limits of Narrative Diplomacy

Although narrative diplomacy has raised India's global profile and moral positioning, its effectiveness in long term depends upon its structural, material and contextual limitations. The most important limitation of narrative diplomacy is narrative-capability mismatch. This disconnect occurs when the shaped narratives are not backed by material capabilities, leading to disconnect between what was framed and what is actually achieved. For example, the Vaccine Maitri initiative was initially successful in its agenda and generated international goodwill but in later phases domestic constraints and limited supply showed disconnect between the narrative and capabilities.

The second limitation of narrative diplomacy is lies in its relational and competitive nature i.e. the problem of counter- narratives. In this complex interdependent world, many states actively project counter-narratives with a more structured and targeted narrative against other. For example, China's Belt and Road initiative is backed by more powerful development narrative which directly counters India's ethical connectivity. Hence sometimes the effectiveness of narrative is not judged by moral appeal but rather on the basis of its overall effectiveness.

The third limitation of narrative diplomacy is the audience reception factor. The narrative is not interpreted uniformly across regions, cultures and political contexts. For example, India's global south-oriented narratives may be strongly accepted as framed by developing countries but may not have resonance in regions where audience is more focused on the material achievements and not on the symbolic achievements of the narrative. Thus narrative diplomacy needs to be carefully calibrated such that it is not perceived as rhetoric rather than engagement.

The fourth limitation is of domestic coherence. Contrasting internal political developments and external messaging can undermine India's narrative claims. In this digital era internal issues get internationalized very quickly and responses across the world go viral within minutes. For example, recently when India condemned the treatment of Hindus in Bangladesh it was highly criticized by many states on systematic marginalisation and discrimination against Indian Muslims. These discrepancies between internal

governance and external narrative projection can erode India's credibility and legitimacy both regionally and globally.

The fifth limitation is of over-symbolism. While symbolism remains a vital component of narratives, there overuse can lead to narrative fatigue or skepticism in international arena. Thus effective narrative diplomacy needs a balance between symbolism and measurable outcomes.

Finally, the practice of narrative diplomacy to succeed efficiently requires a deliberative institutional coordination and a systematic communication among them. The fragmentation of the Indian government, unstructured planning, delayed execution and ineffective feedback loops can dilute narrative diplomacy objective.

Conclusion

India's gradual shifting from soft power diplomacy to narrative diplomacy not only shows the change in its foreign policy tools, but a much deeper adaptation to the evolving international politics. The Indian apparatus is thus coming in line with the strategic reality where the strength of shaping meanings is becoming a central source of global influence. In this multipolar world where all main actors are creating narratives, a counter-narrative approach is becoming essential and vital in articulating legitimate vision of leadership. The growing emphasis by Indian actors on narrative diplomacy is a recognition that authority in international politics lies in connecting values to interests.

However this paper also underscores that narrative power is not a substitute for policy performance and institutional strength building but a complementary element to it. Narrative diplomacy gain credibility only when narratives are aligned with actions. For India, this means that its global commitments are supported by adequate resources, effective coordination and long term consistency with aligned internal governance because an effective narrative becomes credible not from symbolic demonstrations but through sustained engagement and positive outcomes.

Non- state actors will remain central to this future trajectory. Track-II diplomacy by think tanks, academic institutions, civil society, media platforms and diaspora networks can serve as bridges between narrative power and articulating favorable public opinion. Such decentralized engagement will enhance credibility by allowing narratives to evolve originally and avoid the global perception of any state driven motive or from appearing scripted and translating narrative intent into acceptability.

Finally the way forward for India's narrative power lies in greater inter-ministerial coordination, strategic communication, effective implementation and analyzing how narratives are perceived across different regions. India should not represent itself as an alternative hegemon but as a pragmatic problem solver. Focusing on enhancing legitimacy and influence in global affairs by learning from both successes and setbacks India can anchor its narratives in practical solutions and make it an effective instrument that resonate across the globe.

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