

Exploring Potential of India's Soft Power in Post-2021 Afghanistan

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Indian Foreign Policy and Idea of Soft Power

Protection of the national interest is the core aspect of any country and the multifaceted framework which guides the country's interactions with other Nations regional groups and international organisations is called as foreign policy. There has been various dimensions in the Indian Foreign Policy with regard to diverse principles such as non-alignment, strategic autonomy, multi alignment and relations with the neighbouring countries. One of the aspects of the foreign policy is the exertion of soft power through which India is trying to influence others through non coercive means. The idea of soft power is gaining momentum and significant importance in the Indian Foreign Policy over the decades. Soft power is as important as hard power in foreign policy of India. "India has progressively understood that these two dimensions of power should not be placed in opposition to one another, especially for an aspiring global power."ⁱ While analysing the Indian Foreign Policy the concept of soft power plays a significant role in nurturing and obtaining India's national interest with multiple international organisations. It has reshaped India's image at the international level.

India's soft power can be reflected in a broader sense through its cultural diplomacy. It includes India's enriched cultural heritage which refers to the classical dance, music, literature, Bollywood and cuisine. "The Ministry of Culture aims at disseminating Indian art and culture in new territories to promote India's soft power and developing cultural relations between India and other countries of the world."ⁱⁱ

The role of Indian media is equally important in spreading India's soft power. Educational and academic exchanges are another component through which India is spreading its soft power. The academic and intellectual exchanges facilitate the overall growth of the person. The promotion of yoga has been another aspect of exercising soft power at the international level. Intermingling people and people to people's ties, crossing the borders of the countries and diaspora engagement programs further enhances India's soft power.

Historical Legacy of India – Afghanistan Relations

The relationship of India and Afghanistan can find their roots in historical and cultural linkages. This relationship is not only limited to the head of the states of both the government but also it has extended its linkages and exchanges among the people. "The Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) between the two sides, inter alia, provides for assistance to help rebuild Afghanistan's infrastructure and institutions, education and technical assistance to re-build indigenous Afghan capacity in different areas."ⁱⁱⁱ The historical connectivity can be traced between the Republic of India and The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in the civilization or ties. The ancient Indus valley civilization where the roots of connection of people belonging to both the countries can be found which has set the foundation of the beginning of relationship. Religion has been one of the aspects where both the countries have attached relations. Both the countries also shared the history of resistance to Britishers.

India's Soft Power in Afghanistan: Post 2021

The concept of "Soft Power" was enumerated by US diplomat Joseph Nye in his book 'The Changing Nature of American Power' that enumerated that co-opting power is 'the ability of a nation to structure a situation so that other nations develop preferences or define their interests in ways consistent with one's nation.' "It would thus emerge that India through its "soft power" approach tried to define its interests aligned with Afghan interests; encompassing strategic, political as well as economic aspects that both countries could benefit from."^{iv} This year completes the one year of Taliban rule in Afghanistan since its takeover in 2021, ending the two decades of military presence of the US military and NATO in Afghanistan since 1991. Since this new regime, the fate of Afghanistan has become uncertain, giving rise to the insecurity and instability in the region. Taliban's return to power is not only the concern for pro-democracy Afghan people but it has also worried India as it will shrink its access to Afghanistan.

There have been various factors which have affected the soft power of India in Afghanistan after the takeover of the Taliban government. There have been multiple connecting areas through which India has always tried to influence Afghanistan. Despite the changing Geo political landscape after Taliban's takeover in August 2021 India has continued to exert its soft power through its historical ties, cultural connectivity, and humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan equally important with diplomatic efforts.

As mentioned earlier, it is one of the ultimate motives of the Indian Foreign Policy to emerge as a global power for which it cannot be dinner its focus on this of power methods. It has benefited India to influence Afghanistan and to develop the trust between the two countries through the influence of art, culture, music and films etc. Here are some of the factors which impacts Indo-Afghan relations from the window of soft power.

1. **Cricket Diplomacy:** One of the most popular and primary means of soft power that India has used in strengthening friendship with Afghanistan is Cricket. Though cricket came to Afghanistan from Pakistan's refugee camps in 1980s, it was India who

extended its hand in its further development in Afghanistan. “In 2018, India hosted the historic Indo-Afghanistan Friendship series of test cricket in Bengaluru which proved to be a milestone in bilateral relations”.^v “India also offered Greater Noida and Dehradun to the Afghanistan cricket team as their home ground in 2016 and 2018 respectively. India also provided coaching and technical facilities along with funding to a stadium in Kandahar built in 2016.”^{vi}

2. **Connecting through Bollywood:** The relationship between Bollywood and Afghanistan is joined at the hip for a long time. The nature of this relationship is such that it creates a people-to-people bond that is greater than any governmental efforts. “Bollywood movies were dubbed in Farsi or Pashtu and a few Bollywood songs on TV here and there along with Turkish, Tajiki and Peshawari songs.”^{vii} In an orthodox society where there is strict adherence to rules and regulations, the Afghans love and cherish to watch Bollywood films. Indian cinema has always been a large market not only in Afghanistan but also in Asia. Moreover, Bollywood has always portrayed Afghans as a devoted and loyal individuals in their characters. Many Bollywood films such as Dharmatma, Kabul Express, Khuda Gawah, Agent Vinod, Torbaaz have been shot in Afghanistan further increasing the popularity of Indian cinema in the nation. The depth of soft power can be well understood through the influence of Bollywood in Afghanistan. It has certainly won the hearts and minds of the people.
3. **Educational Exchanges:** There have been growing influence of Indian education on the global platform. The Indian education is driven by multiple objectives such as academic excellence, cultural richness, and commitment to promoting education as a means of fostering global understanding and cooperation. India has been heavily involved in the educational development in Afghanistan. “Five Memorandums of Understanding were established in 2020 between India and Afghanistan to improve the struggling Education system. These pacts included the construction of new classrooms, construction of another Higher education building (apart from Habibia High School) as well as road construction within the existing Alberoni University.”^{viii} India has availed multiple scholarships to Afghan students with thousands of Afghan nationals studying in India. The number of students are again increasing with the facility of distance learning and digital learning. Organisation of various vocational training and skill development programs have brought people together. Education is one such sector through which people to people connections have improved a lot. Education as a soft power has worked in favour of India with regards to building trust and influence.
4. **Health Care and Humanitarian Aid:** Another important Indian contribution has been in health and medical care in Afghanistan. India has bestowed an amount of 5 million USD for the Afghan Red Society Programme to treat congenital heart disease in children. Medical tourism has become a large market between India and Afghanistan. India has been actively involved in building healthcare infrastructure in Afghanistan. It includes a wide range of constructions including hospital, clinics and providing medical

facilities. By offering scholarships for the Afghan students studying the medical stream in the university India is aiming to expand its soft power.

This relationship was expanded with a more liberal visa policy in 2014 when it became easier for the patients in Afghanistan to travel to India for the better medical healthcare. Due to lack of proper medical facilities in their own land there is a huge flow of foreign travellers coming to India and taking advantage of the medical facilities in both private and government hospitals.

Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health in Kabul - Considered the largest paediatric hospital in Afghanistan, Indira Gandhi Institute for Child Health was restored by India. "In view of the urgent appeals made by the United Nations to assist the Afghan people, India has, so far, supplied 20 tons of medical assistance in seven batches, which includes essential lifesaving medicines, anti-TB medicines, 500,000 doses of COVID vaccine, etc. These medical consignments have been handed over to the World Health Organization (WHO) and Indira Gandhi Children Hospital, Kabul."^{ix} It's considered as one of the best public health care facilities for children.

5. **Aid to Construct the Parliament:** The Afghan Parliament in Kabul was built with the aid provided by the Indian government of USD 90 million. In 2015, it was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to strengthen the political relations. The large complex is spread across 100 acres of land. India's Central Public Works Department (CPWD) is the consultant for the project and the contract was awarded to an Indian infrastructure company in 2008. In fact, a block in the building is named after former Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

Future Prospects

The relations of India and Afghanistan are very important not only in the sense of development of the South Asian region but also in terms of countering Pakistan within the region. There have been diverse relations such as historical, cultural, religious, ethnic, linguistic and trading links which naturally ties the state of Pakistan and Afghanistan. In spite of diverse relations Pakistan has failed to develop the strong bond and enhance its relationship with Afghanistan. Pakistan through its foreign policy objective tries to use and rely on more hard power rather than soft power. It has been an advantage to India for strengthening its relations with such a strategic partner like Afghanistan through its soft power methods such as art, culture, education etc.

Clearly, India's use of soft power over hard power in Afghanistan has greatly benefited the nation and its relationship with Afghanistan. Soft power plays an important role in developing friendly and diplomatic relations with nations and cannot be neglected. This is not to say that hard power should be completely neglected. A balance and combination of hard and soft power is required to achieve the required goal. India can continue its support for the development of the infrastructure projects in Afghanistan which will mutually benefit both the countries. Trade and commerce is one of such areas where more corporations are required. Strengthening

financial ties will further foster the greater regional integration. For maintaining the peace, stability and prosperity in the Asian region, both India and Afghanistan need to cooperate with each other.

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