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INDIA@75: ASSESSING INDIA'S USE OF SOFT POWER AS A FOREIGN POLICY INSTRUMENT

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Abstract: *The term soft power has become a catch-all-phrase for public and cultural diplomacy since Joseph Nye introduced it in 1990. India has had several historical and cultural advantages regarding its influence in foreign countries. While India and Indians enjoyed goodwill in most countries, the sudden interests in India among the policymakers, businesses, and politicians were mainly after the 1992 economic liberalization that had opened the Indian markets to foreign investments. Besides the nation-branding exercises globally, New Delhi employed soft power instruments in countries it deemed to have more significant interests, from traditional allies like Bhutan and Afghanistan to the countries in the West in the last three decades. Nevertheless, how successful has India been in exploiting its cultural linkages and using its soft power in its branding? This question becomes pertinent as, in recent years, India has often received negative press coverage in international media, and on several freedom/democratic indices, its rankings have gone down. As India celebrates 75 years of independence as Azadi Ka Mahotsav (a grand celebration of independence), this paper assesses the scope of its soft power as a foreign policy instrument, points out its shortcomings, and recommends the possibilities.*

Keywords: *Soft Power; Cultural Diplomacy; Public Diplomacy; India; Bollywood; Azadi Ka Mahotsav; Foreign Policy*

INTRODUCTION

“Our 75th year as a free nation is also the starting point to envision where we will be on our centenary”, India’s External Affairs Minister EM Jaishankar noted at a ceremony organized by the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) to mark the grand celebration of 75 years of independence - *Azadi Ka Mahotsav* - in August 2021 (MEA Media Center 2021). He further stressed: “The bold transformations at home will give us an increasingly salient role in the international system. As a democratic polity, a pluralistic society, an innovative economy, and a culture of unmatched diversity, our contributions have real weight and value. Our ability to harmonize tradition and modernity stands out in particular” (MEA Media Center 2021).

No doubt, India’s stature has grown manifold in the international arena in the last few decades as the largest democracy and one of the fastest-growing economies. However, there are often occasions when India makes negative headlines in the international press, besides the strong reactions on social media for alleged violations and abuses of the very features that the EAM took pride in. As India celebrates the completion of 75 years of independence as *Azadi Ka Mahotsav* and assumes the presidency of G-20 in December 2022, this paper evaluates its soft power as an instrument of foreign policy. The article critically examines the scope of India’s soft power instruments and achievements, explores the challenges, and points to opportunities to strengthen those initiatives further.