

Tradition, Tourism and Influence: India's Soft Power in a Paradoxical Context

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Abstract: This paper attempts to explore a postcolonial analysis of India's soft power through its age old cultural traditions of yoga, Ayurveda, and tourism. India's global recognition depends on a delicate balance between leveraging its rich cultural assets and managing domestic contradictions. Internally, the country faces challenges such as sectarian tensions, narrow conceptions of identity, and social polarization, which coexist with its ambitious cultural projection abroad.

These contradictions the tension between a globally celebrated image and domestic social strife pose critical questions about the credibility and perception of India's soft power. While international audiences admire India's cultural exports, internal conflicts may undermine the projected narrative of harmony and inclusivity, influencing how India is socially constructed on the global stage.

Despite these challenges, India's soft power continues to thrive, suggesting that projecting a nuanced and multifaceted image may itself be a form of strength. The coexistence of internal contradictions alongside celebrated traditions demonstrates the resilience and adaptability of India's cultural diplomacy, offering a model for how nations can navigate complexity while maintaining international appeal.

Keywords: India, soft power, Yoga, Tourism, Ayurveda

Introduction

The length and breadth of international politics is both blessed and threatened by the existence of nuclear weapons threatened because such weapons can potentially decimate human existence, blessed because the apprehension of Mutually Assured Destruction limits the possibilities of future world wars. Joseph Nye coined the term soft power in 1983, prognosticating the features of a neoliberal world braced with nuclear power. Soft power, as defined by Nye, is "the ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce or buy, by shaping the preferences of others through appeal or attraction."

Soft power runs parallel to military and economic capabilities. In a world of anarchy, social constructivism is highly influenced by the projection of soft power. India, as a semi-periphery nation, blends hard power and soft power in harmony; its Ayurveda, Yoga, and tourism are exported all over the world as soft power.

India holds contradictions at heart while promoting soft power. The politics of India is inked with religious tensions, divided and antagonistic identities and political divides. The flashy soft power that India exports and the dull internal contradictions leads puts the credibility of soft power under question. Is it necessary to have internal cohesion to champion soft power or is it feasible to build an image globally despite facing internal challenges?

This paper examines the tension in India's case. It argues that India doesn't have to hide or ignore its contradictions to gain soft power. India's example de-

picts how a country can expand and polish its global presence even when dealing challenges at home.

Literature Review

Joseph Nye's foundational theory of soft power defines it as a nation's ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion. The three core pillars of soft power culture, political values, and foreign policy serve as essential instruments for global influence (Nye, "Soft Power"). This framework has been instrumental in analyzing India's soft power strategies.

In the Indian context, Nicholas Blarel highlights India's vast soft power potential but notes that it suffers from a lack of strategic coherence. Various institutions promote Indian culture abroad, yet these efforts often remain fragmented and underfunded, limiting their overall impact (Mukherjee). Similarly, Rohan Mukherjee provides a critical lens, suggesting that India's soft power may be overestimated due to internal challenges such as religious tensions, socioeconomic inequality, and infrastructural deficits. According to Mukherjee, projecting cultural symbols abroad is ineffective if the nation's internal realities contradict the values India seeks to project internationally (Mukherjee).

Other scholars explore how India manages these contradictions to protect its global image. Nainika Kumari points out that the institutionalization of International Yoga Day under the Modi government demonstrates India's ability to reframe a deeply religious practice as a secular, globally appealing initiative. While Kumari acknowledges the diplomatic success of such campaigns, she questions whether the impact extends beyond symbolic gestures to genuine soft power influence (Kumari).

Vijay Chauhan emphasizes the strengths of India's soft power in education, cultural exchange programs, and diaspora engagement but notes that bureaucratic inefficiency and inadequate funding hinder the effective projection of influence. His analysis highlights the persistent gap between India's soft power ambitions and its administrative capacity (Chauhan).

Dr. S. Kumari examines yoga's transformation from a spiritual and religious practice into a global wellness trend. She argues that this repackaging allows India to maintain cultural ownership while reaching a broad international audience, illustrating how traditional practices can adapt without losing authenticity (Kumari). A.S. Raikwar similarly Explores tourism campaigns such as Atithi Devo Bhava, which portray India as spiritually fulfilling and culturally diverse despite internal contradictions. Such campaigns demonstrate that tourism can serve as a significant vehicle of soft power (World Governance Indicators).

Taken together, these studies highlight both India's soft power strengths and the paradoxes that shape it. While some literature focuses on symbolic success, other studies question the depth and coherence of India's influence abroad. What remains underexplored is how internal contradictions, rather than weakening India's cultural diplomacy, may in fact enhance its authenticity and appeal on the global stage. This research seeks to address this gap by examining the interplay between India's domestic paradoxes and its international soft power projection, particularly through Ayurveda, yoga, and tourism.

Research Questions

1. How do yoga, Ayurveda, and tourism contribute to India's soft power?
2. Do India's internal contradictions affect its international image?
3. Can India maintain global influence despite domestic challenges?

Key Findings

Ayurveda as a Paradoxical but Powerful Soft Power Tool

Ayurveda is often perceived as both traditional and innovative; it is criticized domestically as unscientific, yet embraced abroad as an alternative health system (Mukherjee). This paradox is not a weakness in India's soft power; rather, it demonstrates the country's ability to project diverse ways of thinking about health beyond dominant Western models (Nye). In line with Nye's framework, Ayurveda exemplifies soft power by enhancing India's international appeal through cultural and knowledge-based influence.

Even though Ayurveda is sometimes dismissed by urban elites and sections of the medical community, it remains widely practiced across the country. According to a 2022–23 household survey, over 40% of rural and urban households utilize Ayurvedic practices (Press Information Bureau, "Yoga: International Day of Yoga"). This demonstrates that Ayurveda is a living tradition that coexists with modern medicine in daily life.

The number of institutions offering Ayurvedic education has increased rapidly, from 263 in 2014–15 to over 540 by 2023–24 (Press Information Bureau, "Incredible India Campaign"). The establishment of the Ministry of AYUSH in 2014 underscores the Indian government's commitment to promoting traditional systems such as Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, and Siddha (Press Information Bureau, "E-Visa Enhancements for Tourists").

By contrast, indigenous practices such as Lolong in the Philippines, which uses crocodile fat to treat illnesses, or Kambo in Brazil and Peru, which applies frog secretions to skin wounds, lack formal recognition, carry health risks, and are largely deemed unsafe. In comparison, Ayurveda has attracted not only global curiosity but also formal partnerships with international institutes, including the UN Cancer Institute, highlighting its credibility and evolution within recognized frameworks (World Governance Indicators).

Internationally, Ayurveda is gaining prominence, particularly in wellness tourism and alternative healing (Kumari). While it is often assessed through Western standards that favor rapid outcomes, Ayurveda emphasizes long-term healing and lifestyle interventions. This approach may be perceived as slower but offers deeper and more sustainable benefits (Chauhan).

In postcolonial contexts, local knowledge systems often gain recognition primarily after Western validation. However, Ayurveda's growing acceptance among both Indian policymakers and global audiences illustrates that India can project its cultural assets confidently, without relying on foreign endorsement (Mukherjee).

Despite tensions between domestic skepticism and international admiration, Ayurveda enhances India's soft power. Rather than concealing contradictions, India presents a plural and flexible image. Ayurveda embodies tradition while maintaining global relevance, reinforcing India's unique position in international cultural diplomacy (Nye).

Tourism in India: Growth Amid Paradox

India's tourism sector has experienced remarkable expansion in recent years. In 2023, over 9.2 million foreign tourists visited the country, representing a 43.5% increase from the preceding year (Press Information Bureau, "E-Visa Enhancements for Tourists"). This surge is largely attributable to initiatives such as the Indian E-Visa system and the Incredible India campaign, which have facilitated international travel and streamlined trip planning (Press Information Bureau,

“Incredible India Campaign”).

Notably, this growth has occurred despite the persistence of significant structural challenges. India continues to contend with inadequate infrastructure, safety concerns, and political tensions—factors that would conventionally deter tourism. Yet, visitor numbers continue to ascend, underscoring a unique resilience in the sector.

It is pertinent to recognize that no nation is entirely insulated from internal challenges. Even highly developed countries have faced civil unrest: Copenhagen experienced riots in 2007, and Geneva encountered multiple incidents in the 1990s and 2000s (World Governance Indicators). In this context, India’s ability to attract tourists despite such complexities is particularly noteworthy.

Herein lies the paradox. Tourists are not solely motivated by luxury accommodations or scenic landscapes; they are drawn by India’s rich cultural tapestry, spiritual heritage, and authenticity. Numerous travelers report that the juxtaposition of beauty and chaos, comfort and discomfort, is precisely what renders India memorable (Mukherjee).

Consequently, tourism functions as a potent instrument of India’s soft power. Its significance extends beyond numerical growth; it lies in the enduring emotional resonance the country imprints upon visitors. By embracing its imperfections and offering an immersive, candid experience, India reinforces its global cultural influence (Nye, *Soft Power and Public Diplomacy Revisited*).

Despite persistent challenges, India succeeds in leaving a profound impression on its visitors. This amalgamation of cultural depth, authenticity, and resilience renders its tourism sector and, by extension, its soft power distinctive. Tourists do not merely observe India; they engage with and internalize its multifaceted essence.

Yoga as India’s Soft Power Rooted in Paradox

Yoga has gained widespread international recognition, practiced across continents, making it one of India’s most visible cultural exports (Mukherjee). A significant milestone in this global acknowledgment occurred in 2015, when the United Nations designated 21 June as International Yoga Day, now celebrated annually in numerous countries (Press Information Bureau, “Yoga: International Day of Yoga”). These events, often organized by Indian embassies and cultural centers, demonstrate how India utilizes yoga to foster international goodwill and strengthen its cultural influence (Press Information Bureau, “Incredible India Campaign”).

The Indian government has taken an active role in promoting yoga abroad. The Ministry of AYUSH and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) have partnered with embassies to conduct yoga sessions, training programs, and awareness campaigns (Press Information Bureau, “E-Visa Enhancements for Tourists”). These initiatives reflect India’s aim to present yoga as a gift of its tradition while showcasing its rich cultural heritage. By engaging international audiences through these programs, India demonstrates how cultural practices can function as instruments of soft power (Nye, *Soft Power and Public Diplomacy Revisited*).

Furthermore, yoga’s influence spans diverse cultures and religions. Though rooted in Hindu traditions, it is now recognized globally as a practice open to all (Mukherjee). This universality enables India to project an image of inclusivity and pluralism, amplifying its cultural impact abroad. By presenting yoga in ways that cross religious boundaries, India attracts voluntary admiration and adoption, effectively exercising soft power (Nye, *Soft Power and Public Diplomacy Revisited*).

The absence of strict international guidelines for yoga practice enhances its adaptability and accessibility. Different countries and communities tailor yoga to suit their cultural and social contexts (Kumari). This flexibility demonstrates that India does not impose a single version but allows yoga to evolve organically, reinforcing its appeal as a cultural export. Voluntary participation in yoga exemplifies the essence of soft power: influence through attraction rather than coercion (Nye, Soft Power and Public Diplomacy Revisited).

A notable paradox further strengthens yoga's role in soft power. Within India, yoga is often linked to religious traditions, yet internationally it is primarily embraced as a secular wellness practice. Rather than diminishing its impact, this contrast enriches India's soft power by showing the country's ability to carry complex traditions into the modern world in ways that resonate globally (Mukherjee; Nye, Soft Power and Public Diplomacy Revisited). This duality highlights that internal cultural complexity does not weaken India's soft power; instead, it enhances it, underscoring India's unique influence on the global stage.

Conclusion

Soft power pursues validation and recognition more than purely economic or financial gains. India's soft power assets have not only embedded "Indianness" across the world but have also allowed other countries to engage with it in familiar ways. The success of soft power relies heavily on its pliability, which enables it to permeate diverse cultures across borders and hemispheres. On one hand, soft power may generate remittances; on the other, it fosters cultural familiarity. Ayurveda and Yoga have successfully become integral to global wellness practices. Cultural "othering," as explored in postcolonial studies by Frantz Fanon, can be significantly reshaped through such cultural diffusion for example, the Americanized chai latte has blurred traditional cultural boundaries.

India rarely conceals its internal contradictions. These contradictions, rather than weakening its image, portray an authentic and reliable nation one trusted even as a nuclear power.

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