

# DIASPORA: A SOFT POWER STAKEHOLDER IN INDIA'S SOUTHEAST ASIAN FOREIGN POLICY

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## ABSTRACT:

*In today's complex-interdependence world, India is grappling with the multi-dimensional aspects of the international arena, striving to overcome obstacles for sustainable growth. As an ambitious player, India is working to mitigate the economic and strategic challenges in the present world order and the emergence of Southeast Asia. Strategically connecting with the rest of Asia and Southeast Asia is imperative for India, given that this region is not just one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, but also a new destination for multinational companies. The Indian influence in Southeast Asia has deep historical roots and is often described as "Indianising." This influence extends to various aspects of the Southeast Asian world, including social, cultural, and religious elements. Indian diaspora play an integral role in the economic and political life of the receiving societies, leading to the emergence of diasporic consciousness while continuing a strong connection with their native country. In this regard, article is a modest attempt to explore how far trust and capacity building in Southeast Asia could be enhanced by leveraging soft power diplomacy through the strong foothold of the Indian diaspora community.*

**Key Words: Diaspora, Diplomacy, Soft Power, Bridge, Policy.**

## INTRODUCTION

Since the inception of International Relations as a discipline, most scholars have studied strategic and military preponderance through the self-

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interest dictum of an anarchic environment. This narrative is supported by a series of incidents, such as World Wars and Cold War, which serve as concrete examples of the study of power in action. Power is still one of the most critical topics in this field, often confined to a one-dimensional aspect that is hard power. Joseph Nye defined the hard power concept as “the ability to use the carrots and sticks of economic and military might to make others follow your will” (Nye, 2003a). This power is related to the idea of an anarchic world system. Historically, it has been measured in terms of military forces, economic strength, etc. According to Hans Morgenthau, “like all politics, international politics is a struggle for power, and whatever the ultimate aims of international politics, power is always the immediate aim” (Morgenthau, 1996). In this obsession with the hard power game, scholars always ignored other aspects of the International Relations.

However, many theories developed in the late 1980s due to the changing nature of complex global politics, and they started criticizing the one-dimensional aspect of the field. With the end of the Cold War, International Relations gradually transformed into complex interdependence and a world of globalisation. This poses a big question of whether the myopic version of International Relations is enough to understand the ever-changing global world order or how far overemphasis on military and hard power are relevant to upcoming security threats. Joseph Nye brought up a new aspect, soft power, to complement the dynamics of international relations. He introduced the idea of “soft power” in his 1990 work “Bound to Lead.” The capacity of a country to influence other countries via persuasion and attraction rather than coercion or force is known as soft power. The advocate of soft power, Nye, outlined:

“A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries—admiring its value, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness—want to follow it. In this sense, it is also important to set the agenda and attract others in world politics, and not only to force them to set the agenda and attract others in world politics, and not only to force them to change by threatening military force or economic sanctions. This soft power gets others to want the outcomes that you want - co-opts rather than coerces them” (Nye, 2004b).

He also develops the three pillars of soft power - culture, political ideals, and foreign policy-which the traditional realists overlooked. Public diplomacy, as well as bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, mostly influence these ideas. A nation's three most significant assets are its culture (when it is appealing to others), its political ideals (when it upholds them both at home and abroad), and its foreign policy (when they are seen as morally and legally sound). A society's culture is made up of a variety of practices that give the society its meaning. It is customary to make a distinction between high culture, which caters to elites and includes things like literature, art, and education, and popular culture, which emphasises public enjoyment (Nye, 2008c).

Drawing intangible resources like political unity and universalist popular culture also impacts how others perceive things. The paradox of globalisation, according to Niall Ferguson, is that as the world gets more linked, power diffuses (Ferguson, 2004). According to Joseph Nye, today's major powers are less equipped than in the past to utilise their conventional power resources to further their objectives. Small nations have seen an increase in the influence of private players on several issues. He noted that at least five tendencies have influenced this power-diffusion. They include evolving political concerns, transnational players, nationalism in weak governments, economic interdependence, and the expansion of technology (Nye, 1990). It has been amplified even louder in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Giulio M. Gallarotti emphasised how soft power has historically been a significant part of national strength and how it reflects the shifting nature of international relations (Gallarotti, 2010). Nye redefined the soft power as "the ability to impact people to accomplish desirable results via the co-optive means of setting the agenda, persuasion, and positive appeal," (Nye, 2011d) which is a far more extensive definition from the earlier idea. Yet, it needs a more advanced level of knowledge and abilities because soft power is more complicated than hard power (Pallaver, 2011).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, most countries, including superpowers, have started using the soft power strategy to maintain their power status quo. China and the US both found success in their ways. One of the significant issues raised by the writers in this article is how far India may go under the guise of soft power.

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In the growing complex-interdependence world, India's efforts to utilize soft power for sustainable development and international influence are a part of the global context, connecting us all.

When people from all over the world observe sizeable rallies staged for the Indian Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi, at various places, the involvement of the Indian diaspora has been one of its significant triumphs for the image makeover of India. The present government, led by Shri Narendra Modi, is putting a lot of effort into enticing foreign investors to invest in India. The 17<sup>th</sup> Pravasi Bharat Divas theme, which has been celebrated since 2003, is "Diaspora: Reliable partners for India's progress in Amrit Kaal" and was held from 8-9 January 2023 in Indore, Madhya Pradesh (PMO, 2023). This theme reiterates the government's goal of making the Indian diaspora an essential stakeholder in the developmental works of India. This convention provides a space for them to discuss their attitudes toward India and build goodwill bridges with their fellow people in the globalised world. Being an ambitious participant, India has been attempting to ameliorate the economic and geopolitical crisis in the contemporary international system and the development of East and Southeast Asia in the world order. Linking strategically with the rest of Asia and Southeast Asia is a necessary and calculated move for India because this area is one of the emerging economies in the world and a new destination for global firms.

The Government of India has been taking many initiatives to boost the participation of its diaspora in different host countries. Its efforts to reach out to the diaspora could be analyzed broadly in twofold. The government caters to the requirements of Non-Resident Indians (NRI) and Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI) by providing them protection, consular services, and outreach initiatives. At the same time, they adopt and create policies to encourage them to support other development initiatives and philanthropy, invest in innovation, share expertise, and contribute to India's prosperity (Challagalla, 2018). In order to protect and promote the welfare and interests of Indian diasporas, several measures were announced. For instance, the 2014 Minimum Referral Wages (MRW), which are applicable to countries with Emigration Check Required (ECR) such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, raised

the minimum salary for Indian workers hired as laborers, domestic helpers, cleaners, and industrial employees. The Modi administration has repackaged the “Know India Program” (KIP) and other programs. The initiative primarily targets Girmitya youth and allows them to deepen their connections to their ancestral homeland, better comprehend and appreciate modern India, and broaden their involvement with India. The ultimate goal is to shape them into unofficial Indian ambassadors (Challagalla, 2018). In 2014, the Look East Policy was upgraded/rebranded to the Act East Policy, which added new participants to the diaspora in Southeast Asian countries. This policy is a trump card for India to flourish with its Southeast Asian counterparts. However, the policy could not achieve its optimum goals due to many reasons, one of which might be trust deficit. This paper is a modest attempt to explore how far trust and capacity building in Southeast Asia could be fulfilled by employing soft power diplomacy through utilising the strong foothold of the Indian diaspora community.

## **PROSPECTS OF INDIA’S SOFT POWER**

India has been making every effort to interact with South and Southeast Asian nations ever since the Look East policy began. The diaspora’s soft power in these nations has become a valuable asset. Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s trips to the area are crucial to improving relations with numerous ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) nations. The Act East initiative is successful in large part thanks to ASEAN. In 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi travelled to Malaysia to participate in the 10<sup>th</sup> East Asia Summit and the 13<sup>th</sup> ASEAN-India Summit. Afterward, he officially visited Singapore to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the two countries’ diplomatic ties, transforming it into a strategic alliance (Ranjan, 2016). Again, he visited Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia in 2018 to strengthen ties between India and these crucial Southeast Asian allies (Roche, 2018).

In response to the visits, many ASEAN leaders reciprocated by visiting India on various occasions and events. Singapore is one of the Asian countries with a rich diplomatic background and a strong bond in terms of economy and strategic domain with India. It is the first ASEAN nation to start the

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Comprehensive Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with India and one of the most significant foreign direct investments (FDI) sources in India. Furthermore, there have been several efforts over the past two decades to improve ties with ASEAN through forging deeper ties with the Asia-Pacific area. It is gradually becoming a crucial component of Indian foreign strategy.

During these visits, the Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi, has used soft power diplomacy significantly to enhance the role of the diaspora in maintaining smooth ties with the region. He tries to engage with the Indian diaspora on his tours, Southeast and East Asia are no exceptions. One of the most involved Indian Prime Ministers in international forums is Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He has gone above and beyond using India's cultural soft power to reach as many people as possible (Kugiel, 2017).

Since its independence, India has been trying to balance its power structure with soft power. India's pluralistic society successfully integrated unity in diversity into a prosperous democratic country which became a symbol of stability in Asia and continues to be so. India is the largest democratic nation on earth and one of the most prosperous and stable democracies among post-colonial countries. Western counterparts have many expectations from India to promote democracy in the region. The global audience noticed India's economic growth in the late 1990s. India's multilateral engagement has also been increasing. To live up to international standards, the Indian government has started to tie the advancement of democracy to its development aids. The plural nature of the Indian political system has also inspired societies abroad. Democratic polity in India, unparalleled in most post-colonial countries, may be viewed as a strong soft power resource.

The soft power of India is anchored in our philosophical traditions, consistent messages of peace, harmony, and co-existence, attractive customs and traditions, and so on. Our diasporas preserve and promote these values of who we are. Many foreign policy experts like Shashi Tharoor and C. Raja Mohan believe that India has the soft power that would make it an influential global leader. Foreign policy expert, C. Raja Mohan put India as "India could always count itself among the few nations with strong cards in the arena of

soft power” (Mohan, 2003). Shashi Tharoor also said that “this country with all these qualities inherited from millennia of living as example of this sort of culture has the soft power that would truly make it the influential leader in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (The Economic Times, 2017). India is, nevertheless, in a laid-back posture to benefit from her capabilities at the regional and global levels. India appears to be content with its soft power assets, such as its democratic traditions and prospects for economic progress. India possesses extraordinary storytelling skills that set it apart from its competitors in terms of force, appeal, and persuasiveness. It helps to remain India as the “land of the better story” (Tharoor, 2011). In the words of Christian Wagner, India is a “soft power by default” (Wagner, 2010). But rather than using its soft power to attract foreign investors, he saw it as a “defensive soft power” that limits its political model as a means of influencing others. He also makes a distinction between vast capacity that is already accessible and limited capabilities that are required to boost a nation’s standing abroad (Wagner, 2010). Some aspects of India’s soft strength may also represent its soft vulnerability, according to Jacques E.C. Hymans. He recognises that India’s soft power has grown over the past twenty years. Nonetheless, India is still only a modest soft power in the present word (Hymans, 2009).

Several academics have noted that India’s ethnic conflicts, governmental structure, poverty, and corruption all have flaws and limitations that prevent India from becoming a more influential soft power. However, India’s foreign policy has been trying to come up with many soft power tactics like non-reciprocity, connectivity, and asymmetrical responsibilities. India has established several people-to-people contacts to improve animosities between neighbouring states. The diversified characteristics of the soft power of India are Bollywood movies, Yoga, Ayurveda, political pluralism, multicultural and religious diversities, a large diaspora across the globe and so on. India extensively tries to re-route long historical, civilisational, and cultural ties with Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East on this account. Re-visiting Buddhism from India across Asia is also one of the main agendas for cultural sustainability. An example of these initiatives to revitalize long-standing cultural links is India’s proposal for cooperation with South Korea, Japan, China, and Singapore to rebuild Nalanda University in Bihar state. India is looking forward to historical, cultural, and

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religious interconnectedness to build cooperation and coordination along the line of sustainability with deep-rooted culture.

In recent years, the Indian government has launched several attempts to integrate “culture” into foreign policy. India is embracing alternative culture through cinema, particularly Bollywood, and it is quickly overtaking Hollywood in terms of output, making it one of the fastest-reaching platforms for Indian culture. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) is widely regarded as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ soft power division. It started promoting Indian culture via festivals, tournaments, and exchange programs. The then President of ICCR, Dr. Karan Singh, stated that “earlier cultural diplomacy was considered peripheral, now the message is clear: soft power is important, and the idea behind the festival is to project India as a plural multicultural society and to achieve the goals of political diplomacy” (Shukla, 2006).

The diaspora’s capacity to impact a nation’s foreign policy without using force or other forms of hard power automatically transforms into a soft power instrument. With approximately 18 million diasporas living abroad, India has the highest emigrant population in the world, followed by Mexico with 11 million (IOM, 2022). Diasporas could be a powerful leveraging tool to attract and lobby foreign investors to invest in their origin countries. The current government sees the Indian diaspora as a soft power tool. It could be witnessed in the mammoth rallies of Indians living abroad that Modi addresses whenever he visits. This strategy has been employed by the current BJP-led NDA government, led by visionary leader Narendra Modi, to promote India’s soft power through Ayurveda, Yoga, and Buddhism and proactive engagement with the Indian diaspora. One of the significant accomplishments is the United Nations General Assembly’s (UNGA) recognition of June 21<sup>st</sup> as the International Yoga Day since 2014. This decision drew a lot of support from the Indian diaspora. The demonstrations conducted in support of the Indian Prime Minister across the US, UK, Canada, and Singapore also demonstrated the pride of the diaspora in India’s accomplishments. It represents one of the most significant changes in India’s diplomacy history.

Unquestionably, succeeding governments have tried to utilise different



facets of soft power. In the post-liberalisation age, soft power has been effective mainly due to India's growing economic strength. In this context, foreign policy analyst C. Raja Mohan has opined that "amidst India's globalisation and the intensification of its global footprint since the 1990s, there has been growing popular interest in India's culture — from yoga to cuisine and from Bollywood to contemporary art and culture. The economic success of the Indian Diaspora, especially in the developed Western world, has tended to boost India's soft power" (Mohan, 2015a). The spiritualism of India has drawn adherents from all over the world, and its Gurus have travelled the globe promoting yoga and mysticism, according to Foreign policy analyst C. Raja Mohan. Bollywood has contributed more to India's impact overseas than the bureaucracy. India today has various soft power levers at its disposal, from its classical and popular music to its cuisine and from the expanding influence of its authors and intellectuals (Mukherjee, 2013).

However, India's image has been somewhat flawed both regionally and internationally as a result of its inconsistent foreign policy, inadequate internal security and law enforcement system, ongoing territorial conflicts with neighbours, and, most significantly, its domineering attitude towards smaller neighbours (Baniya, 2021). India did not even place in the top 30 nations in the poll "Soft Power 30," which rates nations globally based on their soft power (Shetty & Sahgal, 2019). It begs the issue of whether India, a nation with a wealth of soft power assets, is unable to turn those assets into concrete results and whether the nation's positive soft characteristics are eclipsed by its negative hard ones (Shetty & Sahgal, 2019).

## **INDIA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The historical influence of India on Southeast Asia, dating back to prehistoric times, is a lasting and significant aspect of world history. This influence is evident in Southeast Asia's customs, religious life, language, literature, and monuments. Many aspects of Southeast Asian culture and civilization still witness this profound influence. The temples of Bali, Borobudur, Angkor Wat, Luang Prabang, and the Champa civilization in Vietnam are internationally recognized for their Indian art and architectural

styles. Hinduism was the first religion to spread in Southeast Asia, followed by Buddhism and Islam (Muni & Mishra, 2019). The mythical bird, Garuda from Buddhist and Hindu mythology, serving as the national symbol of Indonesia, the country with the highest Muslim population in the world, is a testament to this enduring influence (Bhattacharya, 2020).

The Chola rulers, especially Rajaraja I and Rajendra Chola I, not only established a military power in Southeast Asia but also left an indelible mark on its culture, a unique contribution to India's history. Around AD 1025, the Chola King Rajendra I overthrew the renowned Southeast Asian kingdom of Srivijaya in Sumatra and on the Malay Peninsula, capturing more than a dozen harbour cities (Kamalakaran, 2021). This conquest led to a significant increase in trade activity in the last years of the first millennium BC. The peaceful expansion of Indian culture over the Gulf of Bengal during the first century AD, as seen in the profound and enduring influence of Buddhism and Hinduism on Southeast Asia's developing mainland and marine civilizations, is a testament to the Chola rulers' cultural influence. The oldest inscriptions of the Pallava Grantha from what is now Indonesia, dating back to the fifth century AD, are often cited as the first distinctly South Indian influences. This is followed by a significant impact of Pallava and Chola art and architecture in Southeast Asia (Kamalakaran, 2021).

A well-known Southeast Asian folktale about the union of an Indian Brahmana named Kaundinya and a local Naga princess named Soma explains the influence of India on Southeast Asia and the beginning of Southeast Asian royalty. The region's Hindu kingdoms were established in this manner. The most significant Hindu kingdom in Sumatra, Srivijaya, was established around 670 CE. With the development of its maritime policy, it became a substantial hub of trade and culture. It's fascinating to note that although there is evidence of vernacular epigraphs as early as the seventh century CE, most of the Southeast Asian inscriptions are written in Sanskrit, indicating a deep level of cultural integration. Instead of forcing Hinduism upon them from without, local rulers chose to embrace Indic gods and languages for their own benefit (Saran, 2018).

Although most of the Indian value systems that made their way to

Southeast Asia have their roots in religious heritage (Hindu-Buddhist). For instance, the Dhamma philosophy of the Indian Emperor Ashoka, whose conversion to Buddhism acted as a positive catalyst for disseminating Buddhism outside of India, particularly in Southeast Asia, included explicit prohibitions against the ill-treatment and cruelty to both people and animals. These are some illustrations of core values and beliefs. The Arthasashtra of Kautilya, which inspired Southeast Asian statecraft, strategy, and diplomacy, would also be an excellent example of causal beliefs (Acharya, 2013). Many literary works based on the Ramayana were also produced in Southeast Asia, but each had a unique quality that could be recognised (Sengupta, 2017).

In fact, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose is a legend among the Indian diasporas and local people of East and Southeast Asian countries. Indian diasporas, mainly in Malaysia, Singapore, and Burma (Myanmar), proactively participated in the Indian National Army (INA). INA drew its members primarily from Indian Prisoners of War (PoW) and other Indian migrants sent as farm labourers in this region by the Britishers. They found a ray of hope to free their homeland, India, from the British Empire and brought new awakenings within them (Mani & Ramasamy, 2006). They donated large sums of money and other materials to Netaji, and thereby, the Indian Freedom Movement became a rallying point. It left a significant mark on the Indian population and, with the aid of reimagined homeland links, transformed community-based identities into an all-encompassing “Indianness.” Several aspects of Indian culture and civilization have survived throughout Southeast Asia. One of the key contributing reasons for preserving a solid relationship in the era of globalisation is the long-standing contact between India and Southeast Asian nations.

## **INDIAN DIASPORA IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

Southeast Asian nations host a large and diverse population of the Indian diaspora. They make up around 8 percent to 9 percent of Singapore’s and Malaysia’s overall populations. Moreover, they make up around 4 percent of Indonesia’s overall population. However, the social, political, and economic standing of Indian diasporas in various nations is not uniform. For instance,

the Sikh, Sindhi, and Tamil populations moved to Indonesia in small groups, which led to the establishment of the Indian diaspora there (Oak, 2017).

However, at times, India overlooks a crucial geopolitical connection between Southeast and East Asia. It is primarily due to the lack of understanding of India's foreign policy with regard to the political, cultural, and social facets of diplomacy in the area, such as Myanmar and Malaysia, where Indian diasporas are even denied many fundamental human rights. However, diaspora is recognised as an essential factor in forging international ties. However, given the numerous tragic incidents affecting the Indian-origin population in Malaysia, it appears to have gone the opposite way in the case of India-Malaysia relations. Malaysian society faces a constant risk of ethnic violence since it is somehow divided along racial lines and reinforced by religion, culture, language, and occupation. After the racial disturbances in May 1969, around 60,000 Indians moved back to India (Singh, 2007). Moreover, more than 2.9 million, around 4 percent of the total population of Myanmar, peacefully residing Indians reside in Myanmar (Chaturvedi, 2015). After gaining its independence, the Myanmar government, under Prime Minister U Nu, adopted various actions designed to advance the economic interests of the local population against those of foreign origins. Indian diasporas were disproportionately affected by these restrictions since they made up the largest group of foreign residents in independent Myanmar. The Land Alienation Act was one of several laws that the Myanmarese government established in 1948 that outlawed selling land to anyone who wasn't a citizen of Myanmar (Chaturvedi, 2015). In these unfortunate incidents, India could not do its best. Furthermore, India could not take many proactive roles in the Indian diaspora crisis in Southeast Asia compared to China in the 1960s. During the Malaysian ethnic crisis, the Chinese government fully supported its immigrants without any hesitation. India had played a very safe game of "hands off" in these two incidents, which gave the Indian diaspora a sense of uneasiness and called into question the legitimacy of India's diaspora policy.

Indian expatriates were strongly urged by the then Prime Minister Pandit Nehru to assimilate with their host country. This approach, in Marie Lall's opinion, had a number of shortcomings. When a section of the Indian

diaspora faced extreme crises or political, economic, and social injustice, India was not to intervene. Even so, India did not bring up the subject of human rights abuse. There was little encouragement for diasporas to get involved in India's economic developmental activities. As a result, until the late 1980s, there was somewhat distrust between the Indian government and its diaspora. It was believed that the Indian state had ignored expatriates and that its inability to create a suitable economic climate was one of the main reasons for the gap between India and her diaspora (Gangopadhyay, 2005). In the 1990s, New Delhi shifted its attitude towards its diaspora policy trend, which some analysts sometimes call a "missed opportunity" (Pande, 2013). India launched the Look East Policy and implemented a multi-faceted strategy to repair its long-damaged relationships with its diaspora. This shift in policy has led to a mutually beneficial and symbiotic connection, offering optimism for the future as the Indian diaspora gradually realises the immense economic potential of India and its rise to prominence as a global force (Pande, 2013).

Despite the regime changes, India still seems to have adopted a very narrow and tapered strategy for engaging with its diaspora, focusing on a select few groups, particularly those who have achieved outstanding success in their host nations. One obvious issue is that the Government of India has neglected the somewhat weaker segment of the Indian diaspora in favour of the wealthy and prosperous sectors of abroad Indians (Chenrui, 2018). Although the Indian diasporas in Southeast Asia are not financially robust, this does not preclude the Indian state from using them as a resource. It would help if the Indian diaspora and government had a closer working relationship in such a situation so that they could look out for each other's interests. The Indian diaspora in this region has hardly been as active in furthering India's interests, nor has India paid as much attention to them. Nevertheless, India needs them to engage with Southeast Asia. The diaspora can help India's foreign policy by strengthening India's soft power through increasing economic and political networks. Even though they are not as strong as the ones in Western countries, Indian diasporas worldwide are known for their peace-loving, adaptable nature that usually makes them family-oriented and socially stable. Indian diasporas in Southeast Asia are increasingly becoming more educated and economically stable. People of Indian origin in Singapore are one of the success stories of Southeast

Asia. There are approximately 650,000 people of Indian origin in Singapore, comprising nearly 10 per cent of the country's six million population and thus making them the third-largest ancestry and ethnic group in Singapore (Bajeli-Datt, 2023). Singapore has three people of Indian origin as its President. They are Chengara Veetil Devan Nair (third President: 1981-1985) and Sellapan Ramanathan (sixth President: 1999-2011). The current and ninth President of Singapore (since 2023), Tharman Shanmugaratnam is also India-origin (PTI, 2023).

Indian diasporas are not well represented politically in these countries, except Singapore. Few Indian diasporas are even represented in the administrative apparatus. As a result, they are of little use in advocating their benefits from the host countries. The region also has a wide range of politico-economic systems. It is important to note that genuine democracies are not just rare, but extremely rare, which again makes lobbying difficult. Furthermore, there aren't many powerful Indian origins who may shape public opinion broadly through various means, such as media ownership and Multi-National Corporations (MNCs).

India should continue to support ASEAN's standards for peace and security and its central role while nurturing unique relationships with some of its most crucial member nations, particularly given the changing dynamics of power relations in East and Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, these resources will not enhance India's soft power unless its cultural practices are closely linked to its economic prosperity. A recent Carnegie report concludes, "South Korea provides a new model of what a 21<sup>st</sup> century Asian country can look like: an advanced economy mixed with an ancient civilisation that is at once irrevocably democratic, technologically innovative, and culturally vibrant" (Rao, 2021).

## CONCLUSION

India is an emerging superpower country with a robust soft power heritage. India's capacity to tell a better tale hasn't yet produced the intended results. If put into practice, India's potential for soft power would raise its

status around the globe, making it prosperous and well-liked. India has the capacity and enormous prospects to strengthen its position as a “rising global soft power,” which may further open the door for the nation to become a soft power powerhouse of the twenty-first century (Amaresh, 2020). To effectively utilise the Indian diaspora as a soft power and make them a main stakeholder of India’s narrative in Southeast Asia, the Government of India needs more energy and effort.

India needs to leverage its diaspora as a tool for its foreign policy to establish itself as a viable alternative to China in the region. This requires a well-planned, mature approach to building the capacity of the diaspora. China has invested heavily in soft power strategies, establishing Confucius Centres in various universities and locations. In contrast, India’s ICCR cultural centers are somewhat lacklustre. Efforts to promote Indian cinema, TV shows, and networks also lack a coordinated approach. With the diaspora’s involvement, these promotional activities could be integrated into India’s public diplomacy efforts. Some Indian universities and schools have successfully used these tactics to attract and engage the Indian diaspora, establishing campuses abroad. However, this approach is notably evident in Malaysia and, to a lesser extent, Singapore in Southeast Asia.

Encouraging the Indian diaspora to serve as India’s brand ambassadors is a key strategy to involve them in India’s growth. As significant shareholders in a nation’s brand image, they are required to encourage to be active both as tourists and business people, supporting the economic and industrial growth of their motherland. For instance, the Government of India’s Ministry of External Affairs should actively listen to their grievances and provide assistance, without getting involved in domestic politics. This support empowers the diaspora to represent India in their local institutions or organisations. They should be stakeholders in India’s growing relations with their host countries. This underscores the need for the public diplomacy of Indian Embassies and High Commissions in these countries to be specifically geared towards the people of Indian origin, ensuring they feel prioritized and catered to.

Maintaining constant engagement with the Indian diaspora through

cultural, academic, and social activities in their host countries will promote awareness of India's interests. Organizations such as the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI) could be played a significant role by encouraging Indian companies to invest in these nations with the support of the diaspora. India needs to implement various strategies in the medium to long term to enhance the current situation while leveraging both its hard and soft power to uphold its position in the international community. However, the responsibility does not solely lie with the Indian government; it is also the moral obligation of the Indian diaspora to utilize their expertise, economic influence, political power, exposure to diverse cultures, and social progress to contribute to India's prosperity (Srinivas, 2019).

It may be difficult for India to counter any strategic or influential giant players in Southeast Asia regarding mercantile diplomacy or military. Nonetheless, it would be reasonable to say that even if several governments have been attempting to use different aspects of soft power, soft power as a strategy would only be effective with India's growing economic weight on the post-liberalization stage of the globe. If India wants to increase its influence through the medium of the Act East Policy, it might be from the soft power influence in East and Southeast Asia. For this, the Indian government must make the diaspora as a critical player in these efforts. The engagement of the diasporas requires better planning and execution as the Chinese influence is already sweeping them up. India is not considered a threat to Southeast Asian nations, making it easier for the Indian government to project its soft power tools of cultural and historical ties to build relations. India's connections with the area would be more established and developed than they are today if it had recognised decades earlier the Indian diaspora's significance, potential, and prospects.

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