

A Soft Power-Driven Approach: India's Cultural Ties with Central Asia

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ABSTRACT

India's strong power-driven approach to its cultural ties with Central Asia offers both regions a unique opportunity to enhance cooperation beyond the traditional realm of politics and economics. India is positioning itself as a cultural partner in Central Asia by leveraging its vast cultural heritage, promoting educational exchanges, and fostering shared values of spirituality and well-being. India derives a strategic advantage from this approach as it promotes peace, stability, and empathy in the region. As India continues to engage with Central Asia through its soft power initiatives, there is greater potential for deeper and more fruitful ties between the two countries, setting the stage for a prosperous and cooperative future.

Keywords: Adolescence, Reproductive health, Sexual health, Social security measures

INTRODUCTION

Countries today are realizing the importance of soft power to accomplish strategic and diplomatic goals, especially in today's international relations. Political scientist Joseph Nye termed soft power as the ability to influence global events through anger rather than force. Hard power is based on economic coercion or military force, while soft power is driven by a country's culture, values, diplomacy and policies. Soft power has grown in importance as countries seek to exert influence through media, cultural exchanges and educational programs in a world increasingly connected by digital technology (Nye, 2004). India sees soft power not as a strategic tool but as an extension of its historical and civilizational ties with the world, especially with countries that have strong historical and cultural ties to its heritage. For a long time, Central Asia has been a focus of India's engagement, diplomacy and cultural outreach. Continuous trade, religious ideas and cultural beliefs between the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia dating back to the Silk Road era form the basis of India's cultural ties with Central

Asia. The centuries-old interaction has forged strong cultural, linguistic and spiritual ties between the two places that still exist today. India has forged strong ties with Central Asia politically and economically over the years, but cultural diplomacy has become a powerful tool in strengthening ties with Central Asian countries (Rozanova and Singh, 2022). With the rise of new global powers and geopolitical changes in the post-Soviet era, India's cultural presence has gained new importance in improving bilateral ties and asserting India's position in the regional and international order.

The concept of soft power is important in India's foreign relations with Central Asia. The Indian government has done much to promote Indian culture in Central Asia through its Ministry of External Affairs and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR). This has been done in a number of ways: education, exchanges, scholarships, and the promotion of Indian art, cinema, and music. In addition, India's soft power has reflected its ability to offer alternative models of cultural, social, and economic development to the Central Asian region, which has historically been dominated by Russia and

China. Central Asia is strategically important for its geopolitical interests, with Russia, China, and the Middle East at its core (Thussu, 2013). Central Asia holds strategic importance in international diplomacy. The region is made up of five countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. It is geopolitically important due to its natural resources, strategic location in the middle of Eurasia and growing economic potential. It connects Asia and Europe, providing access to important energy reserves, trade routes and emerging markets. As India seeks to increase its regional influence and balance the growing influence of China and Russia, a soft power-driven approach offers an alternative way to build relations with Central Asian countries. This approach emphasises India's historical and cultural proximity to the region, which allows it to foster mutually beneficial cooperation.

At the core of India's soft power engagement is its cultural heritage, which gives it deep ties with the people of Central Asia. The ancient Silk Road trade routes facilitated the movement of goods and ideas across the Eurasian continent, allowing India to have a profound influence on Central Asia's art, architecture, religion and philosophy. The spread of Buddhism in Central Asia, which originated from India more than two millennia ago, is one of India's historic ties. Cultural and spiritual transfers between India and Central Asia during that period laid the foundation for deep ties, traces of which are visible in the shared Buddhist heritage in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan (Khurana, 2019). These old ties form strong cultural bridges that continue to link India and Central Asia today.

India's cultural diplomacy today reflects the changes taking place in global politics and the growing influence of global media. Yoga, Indian spirituality and India's Bollywood film industry have become powerful tools of cultural diplomacy in Central Asia. Bollywood films with their universal themes of love, family and resilience have found a warm welcome among Central Asian audiences, further strengthening India's cultural appeal. The Indian government has promoted yoga and Ayurveda through Yoga Day, wellness workshops and education programs, reflecting the growing interest in these spiritual and wellness practices in Central Asia. These cultural inroads enhance India's image in Central Asia and also provide opportunities for cooperation in the health, education and tourism sectors.

Components of Soft Power and India's Foreign Policy:

The use of soft power is deeply connected to India's rich cultural heritage, democratic values and its long-standing role in global issues. India's soft power strategy relies on its age-old cultural heritage, as well as its growing economy and today's appeal as a promoter of peace, democracy and development. India's cultural diplomacy is very important in this regard, especially in its relations with Central Asia, with which the country has a deep cultural and historical connection. India has created a soft power-driven approach to expand its influence in Central Asia by leveraging its cultural assets and historical ties, positioning itself as an important partner in the development of the region while promoting mutual respect and understanding.

Joseph Nye (2004) explains that a country's soft power consists of three major components:

- **Cultural Diplomacy:** Culture is the first and perhaps most important part of soft power. The ability to make a country's culture attractive, relatable and exemplary to others increases its soft power. Cultural diplomacy involves the transfer of art, music, literature, food, cinema and other areas of national identity (Chaudhury, 2020). These exchanges allow one country to establish goodwill with another, build goodwill and enhance mutual understanding. India's Bollywood, classical arts, literature and philosophy are prime examples of how cultural diplomacy can increase a country's global influence.
- **Political Values and Ideals:** Soft power is dependent on political values of democracy, human rights, justice and rule of law. International society can gain admiration and influence from countries that support universal values of freedom, equality and non-violence. India is seen by many countries, including Central Asia, as a symbol of democracy, pluralism, secularism and the world's largest democracy. India's strong power is provided by its political and social values, while other global powers often favor authoritarian models (Pant, 2015).
- **Foreign Policy and Diplomacy:** A country's

standing in international forums and its views on global issues such as climate change, conflict resolution and humanitarian assistance also strengthen India's foreign policy, which emphasizes multilateralism, peaceful dispute resolution and cooperation on global challenges, contributes to its global appeal. India's engagement with international organisations such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organisation and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) further strengthens its soft power and positions it as a leader in shaping the international order.

India and Central Asia's Historical Cultural Interactions:

The historical and cultural ties between India and Central Asia go back thousands of years, forming one of the oldest and most enduring examples of inter-regional interaction in human civilization. Though geographically separated, the two regions are linked by a shared history of trade, cultural exchange, religious conflicts, and political settlement, maintaining a civilizational bridge that continues to influence their relations today. Long before the emergence of modern nation-states, the peoples of India and Central Asia were linked by a vast network of commercial, religious, and educational ties, facilitated primarily by the ancient Silk Road- a vast network of caravan routes that crisscrossed the Asian continent. Goods, ideas, and people flowed freely between India and Central Asia along this route, giving rise to centuries of cultural fusion (Sen, 2017). Central Asian countries contributed to India's society, especially in the medieval period, shaping India's political landscape and cultural expressions. From the spread of Buddhism to the transmission of Indian sciences, arts and languages, India's influence is evident in Central Asia. Today, this deep historical background gives India a strong approach to Central Asia, using shared heritage as a tool for strategic cultural diplomacy (Liu, 2010).

India-Central Asia relations developed along the Silk Road. The Silk Road, which ran from the 2nd century BCE, traded not only costly commodities such as silk, spices and gems but also intangible goods such as ideas, religious ideas and art traditions. Buddhist monks travelled from India to Central Asia and China and built monastic centres and stupas, propagating the Buddha's teachings. Central Asian countries such as Bactria (present-day

Afghanistan) and Sogdiana (present-day Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) became important places for spreading Buddhist ideas. The region served as a cultural corridor where Indian philosophy mingled with local customs. Buddhist artefacts created with a blend of Greco-Roman and Indian styles bear testimony to this inter-cultural synthesis. Later Central Asian merchants, scholars and envoys visited Indian cities to engage in trade, diplomacy and scholarly discourse. Respect and admiration of each other's civilizations was the core of these exchanges.

Indo-Central Asian relations grew when powerful empires rose. Emperor Ashoka adopted and promoted Buddhism, and the Maurya Empire forged ties with Central Asian rulers through diplomatic and missionary missions (Khurana, 2019). The Kushan Empire, created by the Yuezhi people in Central Asia from the first to the third centuries CE, later became a power over both regions. Stretching from Central Asia to northern India, the Kushan Empire institutionalized Buddhism, preserved Indian arts, and facilitated trade across the Hindu Kush. Their reign also saw significant changes in Indo-Central Asian culture, including the flourishing of Sanskrit literature, the establishment of cosmopolitan cities, and the standardization of coins, which depicted Hellenistic motifs as well as Indian deities. Kushan rulers acted as cultural mediators, spreading aesthetic and spiritual values across Indian and Central Asian traditions (Foltz, 1999). Babur's memoirs, the Baburnama, vividly describe his nostalgia for the gardens, literature, and urban life of Central Asia and his efforts to reestablish these cultural elements in India. The Mughal court was a blend of Indian and Central Asian traditions, as evidenced by Indo-Persian architecture, the use of Persian as the court language, and the integration of Central Asian court etiquette. In this way, the Mughal period marked a point in the cultural confluence between the two countries, which left a profound influence on India's arts, language, cuisine, and government (Richards, 1993).

The historical ties between India and Central Asia were strengthened by religious and spiritual ties. Buddhism and Sufism united the people of both regions. Sufi saints and scholars in India and Central Asia spread messages of tolerance, love and spiritual unity. Famous Sufi orders such as the Naqshbandiyya and the Chishtiyya maintained strong ties in these regions, leading to a shared spiritual and intellectual heritage. Sufi shrines are places of tourism and cultural memory in both India and Central Asia, symbolizing age-old spiritual ties (Khurana, 2019).

The arrival of poets, scholars and mystics helped create a shared cultural vocabulary transcending linguistic and political boundaries. Both trade and commerce formed the foundation of India-Central Asia relations. Cities such as Kashgar, Samarkand and Bukhara were centres of trade as well as education, where Indian merchants and scholars were welcomed. Indian markets brought horses, furs and dried fruits from Central Asia, while Indian goods, such as textiles, spices, indigo and precious stones, were in great demand. These economic ties increased mutual dependence and led to the emergence of diaspora communities, which contribute to cultural diversity in both regions (Waugh, 2011). Today, there is interest in reviving the International North-South Transport Corridor and the Chabahar port, which seek to revive some of the historic links that once worked well.

Colonialism and the final drawing of modern national boundaries in the 19th and 20th centuries disrupted the previously seamless ties between India and Central Asia. The expansion of the Russian Empire into Central Asia and British colonial rule in India gave rise to new political realities. However, the memory of old interactions survives through language, music, folklore and historical accounts. After independence, the newly formed Central Asian republics revived their historic ties. The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 provided India with a new opportunity to engage with Central Asia culturally, diplomatically and economically (Joshi, 2010). Recognizing its deep historical ties, India has formulated a multi-faceted Connect Central Asia policy that considers education, culture, people-to-people contacts and civilizational ties as the pillars of engagement.

India's Soft Power Initiatives in Central Asia:

India's soft power strategy in Central Asia is based on mutual respect, cultural similarities, spiritual ties and a benign, culturally rich civilization. The promotion of Hindi and Indian cinema, institutional cooperation, education and capacity building programs, promotion of spiritual ties such as Yoga and Buddhism and the establishment of Indian cultural centers all use its soft power.

- **Cultural Diplomacy:** Cultural diplomacy supported by the efforts of the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR), is an important part of India's soft power projection in Central Asia. India has set up cultural centres in the capitals of Central Asian countries such as Tashkent,

Dushanbe and Almaty. These centres promote Indian classical music, dance, art exhibitions and cultural programmes (ICCR, 2023). They also hold events to commemorate major Indian national celebrations such as International Yoga Day, Gandhi Jayanti and Republic Day, which see wide participation of the local people. Through these events India has showcased its vast cultural heritage, as well as propagated values such as non-violence, tolerance, pluralism and humanism, which are the moral pillars of India's global image (Pant, 2015). India has taken great pleasure in celebrating the International Yoga Day declared by the United Nations in Central Asia, especially in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where thousands of people perform yoga publicly every year (Kaur, 2021). This spiritual outreach goes beyond religious boundaries and positions India as a land of holistic living, well-being and awareness.

- **Education Diplomacy:** Education and capacity building programmes are also important in India's soft power toolkit. Central Asian students receive scholarships under several programmes such as the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme and ICCR scholarships (MEA, 2022). These scholarships enable students to enrol in undergraduate, postgraduate and research programmes in medicine, engineering, IT, humanities and international relations. The experience of studying in India fosters a long-standing pro-Indian spirit, promotes understanding of Indian institutions and society and creates a pro-India orientation among professionals, policymakers and think tanks visiting Central Asia. Also, India has extended the Pan-African e-Network model to Central Asia through its e-Vidyabharati and e-ArogyaBharati (e-VBAB) programmes, which provide tele-education and telemedicine (MEA, 2019). This digital outreach helps bridge the infrastructure gap in remote areas and promotes India's educational and healthcare expertise. Several Indian universities have signed MoUs with Central Asian institutions to enhance research collaboration, faculty exchange and curriculum development (Joshi, 2021).

- **Spiritual Diplomacy:** India's spiritual heritage, especially its links with Buddhism, is important in its strong power diplomacy in Central Asia. The historical spread of Buddhism linked India to ancient Central Asian centers such as Bamiyan, Termez and Sogdiana via the Silk Road. Archaeological sites and museum artifacts in the Central Asian republics, especially Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, testify to the once rich Buddhist presence in the region. India has taken advantage of this shared heritage by promoting Buddhist tourism and creating cultural preservation programs. For example, Indian archaeologists and heritage conservationists have worked together to restore Buddhist sites in the region. India has also invited monks and scholars from Central Asia to visit Buddhist sites such as Bodhi Gaya, Nalanda and Sarnath. These exchanges not only strengthen spiritual ties but also establish India as the originator and custodian of Buddhist ideas.
- **Cinema and Popular Culture:** India's cinema and popular culture have contributed significantly to the country's popularity in Central Asia. Since the 1950s, Indian films have been shown in theatres and on television, often dubbed into local languages. Bollywood films have long found a special audience in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Bollywood stars such as Raj Kapoor, Mithun Chakraborty, Shah Rukh Khan and Aishwarya Rai have held a special place in the hearts of Central Asians for several generations. This emotional connection strengthens India's cultural influence and weakens the perception of India as a distant or foreign power. Themed Bollywood festivals, film screenings and celebrity visits enhance this cultural affinity and create a shared cultural space that transcends language and nationality. In addition, Indian food, cultural boutiques and yoga centres are becoming increasingly popular in urban areas of Central Asia.

Role of Bollywood and Indian Media in Central Asia:

India's rich cinematic and media traditions have long been leveraged for cultural diplomacy to foster

international relations. Bollywood is the most important tool in this endeavour, as it is India's vast film industry that has contributed significantly to shaping perceptions and strengthening ties with Central Asian countries. The resonance of India's cinema and media underscores the profound impact of soft power on international relations in countries such as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. The historical roots of Bollywood's influence in Central Asia are linked to the Soviet era. At that time, Indian films became very popular in the USSR when they were allowed to be viewed publicly. Old films *Awaara* (1951) and *Disco Dancer* (1982) attracted audiences that made Raj Kapoor a household name. According to Kumar (2019), this first exposure laid the foundation for a lasting love for Indian cinema in the region.

Bollywood's allure continued even after the Soviet Union. Central Asian audiences have been greatly influenced by Indian films' emotional stories, lively song-dance scenes, and themes of love and family. Spiritual exchanges and ancient trade routes further strengthened this cultural connection. Bollywood's continued popularity in Central Asia is an example of how cultural products can transcend linguistic and geographical boundaries, enhancing mutual understanding and goodwill (Savi, 2018). Apart from cinema, Indian television dramas have also made a big impact in Central Asian homes. For example, Indian serials, such as "Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi", gained huge popularity in the 2000s, attracting viewers in Afghanistan with their hard-hitting plots and emotional depth. According to Kumar (2019), these shows, often dubbed into local languages, became a staple of evening entertainment, making them even more deeply embedded in the social fabric of the region's Indian cultural narratives.

Indian media has also had an impact on the music sector. Havas Guru, an Uzbekistani music group composed of members of the Ermatov family, has received praise for its performances of Indian songs, a notable example. Kumar (2019) states that their performances of Bollywood classics have attracted attention not only in Uzbekistan but also in several Indian cities, symbolizing cultural exchange across borders. Furthermore, Indian government efforts, including the "Connect Central Asia" policy, aim to enhance cultural ties through various means, such as promoting Indian cinema and media. The strategic use of soft power to foster diplomatic ties and personal relationships is

highlighted in these efforts. Such moves make the country look good around the world by showcasing India's cultural diversity (Salvi, 2018).

Challenges to India's Soft Power in Central Asia:

Strategic cooperation with Central Asia, based on India's "Connect Central Asia" policy, aims to leverage historical, cultural and economic ties to promote regional cooperation. However, there are many obstacles to the successful projection of India's soft power.

- **Strategic and geopolitical conflicts:** Major countries like Russia and China dominate the geopolitical landscape of Central Asia. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has spurred infrastructure investment in the region, increasing its economic influence (Singh et.al., 2023). Russia's historical ties and security system have made it very influential. India's attempts to project its soft power are often hampered by these major players, limiting its strategic space.
- **Problems in connectivity:** India's lack of direct land access to Central Asia is a major challenge. The landlocked nature of the region, instability in Afghanistan and Pakistan's denial of transit routes have hindered land connectivity. The development of Chabahar port in Iran and efforts on the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) aim to address these problems, but progress has been slow due to geopolitical complexities and infrastructural challenges (Gupta, 2025).
- **Limited economic ties:** Economic ties between India and Central Asian countries are very old. Trade is low and investment is low. This weakens India's ability to effectively project its strong economy, as the economy is often tied to cultural and diplomatic initiatives.
- **Linguistic and cultural barriers:** India and Central Asia share a shared cultural heritage, but linguistic differences and differing cultural beliefs can impede deeper connectivity. With Russian and local languages dominating the region, Indian cultural products may not always resonate as expected (Singh et.al., 2023).

Furthermore, a lack of ability to speak Hindi or English well may prevent students from accessing educational programs and media in India.

- **Underutilization of multilateral platforms:** India has many opportunities for engagement through its participation in regional institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). However, India's participation has often been limited, focusing on multilateral rather than bilateral goals (Gupta, 2025). This underutilization prevents India from enhancing its soft power through collective regional efforts.
- **Limited awareness and perception problems:** Despite efforts to promote Indian culture, little is known in Central Asia about India's contemporary achievements in innovation, technology, and education. This gap can undermine soft power initiatives as modern India is often viewed from a traditional or historical perspective, rather than as a dynamic, modern country (Centre for Public Policy Research, 2023).

Conclusion:

India engages with Central Asia through soft power, reflecting a conscious effort to build enduring, non-coercive and mutually respectful relations rooted in shared cultural, historical and civilisational ties. The region, once linked to the Indian subcontinent via the Silk Road, was a conduit of ideas, religions and artistic expression. Buddhism, Sufism and ancient trade networks revived and extended their influence in India through cultural diplomacy. India's soft power offers a peaceful, inclusive and human-centred alternative to hard power dynamics in Central Asia, today when geopolitical conflicts and strategic struggles dominate international relations. The proliferation of organisations such as the Indian Council for Cultural Relations and the establishment of cultural centres in Central Asian capitals is an important part of India's cultural diplomacy. Locals can use music, dance, food, language and traditional crafts to connect with Indian heritage. Education and academic exchanges have been another important way of building cultural ties. Central Asian students studying in Indian universities not only gain an education but also a deeper understanding

of Indian society, culture and values. Also, popular culture, especially Indian cinema, television and music, has become a powerful soft power tool. Yoga and Ayurveda, traditional knowledge systems, have strengthened India's reputation as a source of holistic well-being and ancient wisdom. Central Asia has shown growing interest in these subjects at both institutional and individual levels.

India's soft power strategy, despite these improvements, is fraught with challenges in Central Asia. Russia and China, which wield economic power and investment in infrastructure, make the region a geopolitical hotspot. India, despite being culturally deeply rooted, has little involvement due to very low investment and trade levels and limited connectivity. In addition, India's soft power initiatives are sometimes hampered by bureaucratic hurdles, linguistic barriers and little knowledge about contemporary India. Even the best cultural efforts can falter in their long-term impact if there is no strong logistical support and strategic stability. India must adopt a holistic approach to address these issues and sustain its momentum that complements infrastructure, economic cooperation and regional connectivity. Efficient trade corridors, supporting civil society ties and investing in education and technology partnerships can be used to improve the appeal and credibility of India's cultural outreach. Also, digital diplomacy, such as virtual exchanges, online courses and cross-border collaborative platforms, can enhance India's soft power in an increasingly connected world. India must also ensure that its outreach is inclusive and represents the diverse spectrum of its society, so that Central Asian people can gain a multifaceted view of Indian civilization.

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