

# **A Case for the South Asian Diaspora as Soft Power in Statecraft**

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## **Abstract**

*The concept of ‘Soft Power’ is relatively new to the academic discourse of state power. In a wider connotation it also relates to the power embedded in a country’s culture. In an age where public diplomacy and strategic interests are placed in the forefront of foreign policy agendas of the states, it is pertinent to inquire into how the South Asian Diaspora can be considered as an apt vehicle of the soft power. This paper argues for a case for South Asian diaspora to be recognised as a form of soft power and also proposes as to how it can be used trans-nationally.*

## **Introduction**

When Joseph Nye coined the term ‘Soft Power’ in the late 1980s he would not have imagined that the term ‘diaspora’ would soon gain momentum and acquire all the characteristics required to become a new form of Soft Power in the dynamics of global politics. The notion of soft power is relatively new in the academic discourse. Coined by renowned Harvard professor Joseph Nye Jr., soft power defines the influence and attractiveness of a nation and the ability of a nation to draw others to its culture and ideas. Soft Power enables nations to achieve desired outcomes in international affairs through attraction rather than coercion. Nye (2002) distinguishes between ‘hard power’ and ‘soft power’ and thus categorises military power and economic power as hard power while soft power is defined as ‘getting others to want what you want.’

According to Nye (2002), soft power draws largely from the values of a country which are expressed in its culture, internal policies, and its international conduct. The subtleties of a culture, values, and opinions often have deepening effects upon the community at large and they are more powerful and have penetrative effects than the use of coercion.

In an age where public diplomacy and strategic interests are placed in the forefront of foreign policy agendas of states, it is pertinent to inquire as to how the South Asian Diaspora can be considered as an apt vehicle of soft power in the contemporary world. The people of South Asia have shared somewhat similar historic currents and have inherited a distinct identity that is projected in their cultures, sub-cultures, customs, traditions, costumes, and food, etc. There is, however, a need to inquire into how far the diaspora or more specifically the South Asian Diaspora has been incorporated into the notion of Soft Power in the country of origin and destination. Though, there is no finite definition for South Asian Diaspora, it could be defined if not described as “ethnic minority groups of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin —their homelands” (Sheffer 1986: 3). South Asian Diaspora consists of people who originate from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

Indian Diaspora constitutes to the largest number among the South Asian Diaspora and is present in more than 200 countries of the world. As per the estimates of the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA), with over 25 million people spread across over 200 countries covering every major region in the world, India has the second largest diaspora in the world. As of May 2012, there are 21,909,875 Indians living outside India

which include both Non Resident Indians (NRIs) as well as Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) (The Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs: Online). According to the Pakistan Defense website, Pakistan's Diaspora is seventh largest in the world and constitutes over 5 million Pakistani emigrants (Pakistan Defence: Online). Sri Lankan diaspora comes third in the region with an estimated 3 million people.

Given the large number of South Asians living outside their countries of origin, and given the rapid changes induced by the globalisation taking place in every sphere of social and cultural lives, diasporic communities are increasingly becoming heterogeneous and they continuously recreate cultural identities in diverse locations. The South Asian diaspora, in large numbers have also gained leverage power over the past decades and are now making their impact felt on the socio-economic and political policies of the host country. 'Does the country of origin make use of the Soft Power of its diaspora?' is a question worthy of discussion and debate. As diaspora can be the most viable, closest, and effective form of soft power propagation of South Asian nations, this debate assumes greater importance in the modern age. The distinct culture that we boast of in South Asia, functions both as a discordant as well as a concordant factor that is capable of paving way for subscribing oneself to the common, subconscious sense of belonging to the 'Asianness' on the one hand and making themselves distinctive in foreign lands due to religious and ethnic disharmonies that are embedded in their historical legacies on the other. Thus, from the perspective of a soft power, the maneuvering potential that lies in the diasporic communities is splintered and becomes disjunctured. It is not only the countries of origin that tend to overlook the cultural potential of their diasporas as a form of power but also the host country where they have established

their roots. Therefore, Shankar and Srikanth (1998) describe the *Gandhabba* status or the ‘ready to be born’ status of diaspora as ‘a part, yet apart, admitted, but not acknowledged.’

### **South Asians in Diaspora**

Diaspora is a term that has taken diverse undertones over the centuries which, in turn, is shaped by history, colonial legacies, and social currents. The concept of diaspora, therefore, has undergone many changes so as to produce diverse conscious and sub-conscious meanings to the scholars, to the diaspora themselves, and to those who are not part of diaspora. The term ‘diaspora’ was once used to refer to the Jews who were exiled from their homeland and assumed a connotation of people settled away from their homeland, a sense of trauma and banishment. As time passed by, the concept shared a wide range of meanings such as immigrant, refugee, exiled community, expatriate, overseas community, guest workers, expelled, ethnic and racial minorities (Shuval 2011). The list of meanings will continue to expand and subsume diverse other forms of migrations in the future. Hypothetically speaking, there could be a possibility of inclusion of tourists as a category of diaspora who would visit a particular land several times depending on conditions such as their longevity of stay, their forms of connections and forms of adaptability in the host environments. Thus the concept of diaspora will continue to evolve with the perpetually altering socio-political dynamics. Cohen (1997) has proposed a new typology of diaspora, namely victim diasporas, labour and imperial diasporas, trade diasporas, cultural diasporas, global-deterritorialised diasporas. However, Cohen (1997) notes that these typologies can overlap and change their character overtime. Vertovec (1997) defines the term diaspora as ‘any population which is considered deterritorialised and

transnational.’ He, however, notes that the term’s descriptive usefulness is marred by the conflating categories such as immigrants, guest workers, ethnic and ‘racial’ minorities, refugees, expatriates and travellers. He thus observes that the notion of diaspora has been subject to ‘over-use’ and ‘under-theorisation’ among academics. Vertovec (1997: 2) therefore, outlines three general meanings of diaspora, drawing from more recent literature. They include ‘diaspora as social form’, ‘diaspora as type of consciousness’ and ‘diaspora as mode of cultural production.’ The South Asian diaspora can belong to one or more of the above categories of people who are settled away from their homeland.

Within a gamut of definitions that characterise and distinguish diaspora, it is worthwhile to analyse how the South Asian diaspora can be placed in this contemporary discourse. To fulfil the said objective, it is first important to come to terms with a common acceptable definition about who and what constitute the South Asian diaspora. Whether a group called ‘South Asian’ diaspora exists and if so what are its common traits that can be identified or exemplified?

Historically speaking South Asia inherits a common civilisational, historical, and cultural continuum that binds the nations in the region together. The diaspora of South Asia, however, have undergone various currents of migration routes. The purpose of this paper however, is not to analyse the historical routes of the South Asian diaspora but to argue for the case of using the South Asian diaspora as a vehicle of soft power. Nevertheless, a brief look at the usage of the term within the region and how it has been imagined and constructed by the South Asians and their diasporic counterparts would give an insight into various connotations of the term ‘diaspora.’

The Diaspora Services Division of the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs deals with matters related to overseas Indians, comprising Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs), Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) as well as Overseas Citizens of India (OCIs) and overseas Indians who are not PIOs, OCIs or NRIs. The last category includes those overseas Indians whose forefathers migrated from India in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Thus, the Ministry's categorisation is a seemingly explicit rejection of the term diaspora and instead prefers to branch out the generally termed 'diaspora' as PIOs, NRIs and OCIs. In the Sri Lankan context the terms 'diaspora' and 'expatriates' are used interchangeably to refer to Sri Lankans who work and live abroad. The term 'diaspora' however, in Sri Lanka is largely used to refer to Tamil diaspora whose ethnic identity is more pronounced than their transnational status. Thus, the concept of 'diaspora' for the Sri Lankans remains, exclusively, an ethno-political nomenclature rather than a social phenomenon. The above array of meanings brings us to the conclusion that despite the term's importance, the term 'diaspora' within the national level has not been well defined in South Asia.

### **South Asian Diaspora as a form of Soft Power**

In the recent times, owing to growing politicisation of the diaspora, their trend has begun to shift from mere remittance generators to pressure groups. They have not only mobilised themselves politically but also provided economic aid as well as military assistance to their homelands. This has led to internationalisation of the concept. Diasporas no longer mean to refer to enclaves of communities but to groups of individuals whose activities transcend the borders of the host environments. Some of the well-known and influential diasporic organisations

such as Vishwa Hindu Parishad, has been active transnationally in the UK, USA, and Australia. Similarly, certain diasporic organisations of Tamils in Canada, UK, and Switzerland are known to have been supporting the demand for a separate homeland for Tamils in Sri Lanka.

According to Shuval (2001) there are three sets of actors relevant to diaspora theory. They are the diaspora group itself, the host society and the homeland which may be real or virtual. These three actors can be either mutually constructive or destructive and the attitude or policy changes of the homeland state towards the host state or vice versa are determining factors in the acts and actions of diaspora. This dual allegiance of the diaspora to the home and host has made it difficult for the homeland to utilise the diaspora as a vehicle of soft power.

This form of soft power contained in the diaspora can best be described as ‘transnational soft power’ which includes the diaspora as its main actor. There is a need for future research to be carried out to study as to how the soft power generated domestically can be adjusted and moulded on a foreign soil by the natives who reside outside the homeland. The Traditional Realist models of power in international relations have emphasised military strength and economic power to determine the capacity of a state. By contrast, Joseph Nye (2002) presented a new explanation to power which included the ability of a state to co-opt other states or in other words the ‘soft power’ approach. According to Nye (2002), co-optive 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. He also argued co-optive power emerges from soft power and immaterial sources such as ‘cultural and ideological attraction as well as the rules and institutions of

international regimes (Nye 2002). Adding more to the discussion of soft power, Shashi Tharoor (2009: Online) makes a very interesting distinction between soft and hard power by stating that “hard power is exercised; soft power is evoked.” The concept of diaspora, however, has so far remained peripheral in any discussion on soft power, for the soft power has been discussed with reference to how states manipulate their foreign policies and foreign relations.

As the South Asian diaspora case will demonstrate, there are a number of hindrances that lie ahead of the path in manipulating the diaspora as a soft power. The challenge is to bring South Asians as one, single entity of soft power for they represent eight countries and diasporic individuals belonging to diverse religious and ethnic origins. Countries of South Asian region share common soft power resources of culture and values but have failed to harness culture as a form of soft power for prosperity and strong regional cooperation. Ethno-political cleavages that ripped the countries in South Asia apart – geographically and emotionally – have far outweighed the level of attractiveness. It may also be argued that the ‘American-bred’ concept of soft power does not seem to fit the more heterogeneous communities of South Asians who live abroad despite their cultural similarities and civilisational linkages. As the population of South Asian diaspora rapidly increases, the question of its inclusion in the formation of Soft power becomes increasingly complex. The diasporic debate on whether the diaspora cultures were an integrating or segregating factor continues and Sunil S. Amrith (2011: 11) states that Asia’s mass migration is “far from being a process of cultural exchange” and instead it is another “culture of enclaves, segregated from one another.” This phenomenon, he attributes to a conscious process of colonial ‘divide and rule’ (Amrith 2011).



In practice, soft power of the South Asian diaspora remains weak for several primary reasons. First and foremost, unlike hard power, soft power, by contrast, remains intangible and discreet. It is also difficult to quantify the appeal and value of a country or their cultures for these are inherently subjective and fluctuating. When it comes to harnessing the benefits of soft power from a community which lives abroad, the best suggestion is to utilise it to stand united for rights in the areas of common interests concerning the South Asians. Areas of common interests of South Asian diaspora can be race related issues, nuclear testing, issues of intellectual property, bio-piracy, threats caused by multinational corporations or any such issue which poses a threat to the peaceful existence of human beings.

Considering the importance and increasing relevance of the use of soft power as a form of global dominance requires multilateral synergy and cooperation among states and the diaspora to create a sense of common identity. With the growing idea of ‘Chindia’ and ‘Asian century’, it is essential to give serious thought into the positioning of South Asian diaspora as a common cultural entity. Taking a broad view on diaspora as a vehicle of soft power can be empowering, illuminating, and enticing for the diaspora as well as the home country.

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