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India's Soft Power in Latin America: Tapping Emerging Opportunities with Cultural Diplomacy

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Abstract

This paper examines India's soft power strategy in Latin America, analyzing its cultural diplomacy, and strategic partnerships. By exploring historical ties, contemporary engagements, and prospects, the study highlights how India leverages non-coercive influence to enhance its global standing in the region. This research work also takes into

account the challenges faced by India in order to foster stronger ties with the region and how India should address these challenges. The present paper is a link to a bigger research idea of the author to study India's multilateralism supported by its soft power approach.

Keywords: Multilateralism, Soft Power, Latin America, Global South

Introduction

Soft power, a term coined by political scientist Joseph Nye in 1990, refers to the ability of a country to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment. In his seminal work, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, Nye contrasted soft power with "hard power," which encompasses military and economic force. He argued that in the modern world, the most effective way to achieve foreign policy goals is not through coercive means but by shaping the preferences of others through appeal and attraction. Soft power is derived from three primary sources: culture, political values, and foreign policies. When a nation's culture, political ideals, and foreign policies are seen as legitimate and morally authoritative, others are more likely to follow its lead without the need for forceful measures. This form of influence is particularly significant in an era where global connectivity and information flow have increased the visibility of nations' values and actions.

In the context of India, soft power has been a cornerstone of its foreign policy, especially in regions like Latin America. India's rich cultural heritage, democratic values, and commitment to peaceful coexistence resonate with many Latin American countries. Through initiatives such as cultural exchanges, educational programs, and diplomatic engagements, India has sought to build relationships based on mutual respect and shared values.

One of the most notable aspects of India's soft power is its cultural diplomacy. The global popularity of Bollywood films, Indian classical music, and yoga has enhanced India's cultural footprint worldwide. In Latin America, these cultural exports have fostered goodwill and curiosity about Indian traditions and lifestyles. Moreover, India's emphasis on democratic governance and secularism aligns with the values upheld by many Latin American nations, further strengthening bilateral ties. Furthermore, India's foreign policies, which often emphasize non-interference, multilateralism, and support for developing nations, have bolstered its image as a responsible global actor. In Latin America, where countries value sovereignty and regional cooperation, India's approach has been well-received. This alignment of values and policies has paved the way for deeper collaborations in areas such as trade, technology, and sustainable development. Soft power offers a nuanced and effective means for countries like India to engage with its Global South partners, like Latin American countries.

India's General Interest in Multilateralism and Regional Affinities Marked by Mutuality.

India's global aspirations are multifaceted, reflecting its ambition to assert itself as a prominent player on the world stage. These aspirations encompass economic growth, strategic influence, leadership in global governance, and the promotion of cultural diplomacy. India aims to bolster its economic stature through initiatives like "Make in India" and "Atmanirbhar

Bharat." "Make in India," launched in 2014, seeks to transform India into a global manufacturing hub by encouraging both domestic and foreign investments. Keeping in focus its economic interests, India, is actively engaging the Indo-Pacific region through initiatives like the Act East Policy, which emphasizes strengthening ties with Southeast Asian nations. This policy aims to enhance economic and strategic relations, countering China's growing influence in the region. India's participation in multilateral forums such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) further underscores its commitment to regional security and connectivity. These platforms facilitate cooperation among like-minded nations to address common challenges and promote stability in the region.

While India expects to work with regional partners in its economic endeavors, keeping good and respectful relations with multiple platforms in the world is going to help India in its projection as global leader. India seeks a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to play a more significant role in global decision-making. As a member of the G4, along with Brazil, Germany, and Japan, India advocates for UNSC reforms to reflect contemporary geopolitical realities. The G4 proposal includes expanding the council's membership to include new permanent members, thereby enhancing its representativeness and effectiveness. Additionally, India is striving for greater representation in international financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank and has been in fact challenging the processes and political under currents of these institutions. This advocacy aims to ensure that the interests of emerging economies are adequately represented in global economic governance.

Historical Foundations of India-Latin America Relations

As discussed before, India has been focusing on multilateralism and regional partnerships, which bring s us to the question that why and how Latin America holds significant strategic, economic, and geopolitical importance for India, aligning with its broader global aspirations.

India's engagement with Latin America has evolved from early cultural exchanges to strategic partnerships, shaped by shared values, geopolitical considerations, and economic interests.

The initial interactions between India and Latin America were primarily cultural. In the early 20th century, Rabindranath Tagore's poetry influenced Latin American writers like Pablo Neruda and Victoria Ocampo. Tagore's visit to Buenos Aires in 1924-1925 marked a significant cultural exchange, with Ocampo hosting him and publishing his work in her magazine *Sur*. Mexican writer Octavio Paz, who served as a diplomat in New Delhi in the 1950s, developed a deep appreciation for Indian civilization, which influenced his literary and diplomatic endeavors.

India-Latin America Relations: Post-Independence

After India's independence in 1947, diplomatic relations with Latin America were established, albeit gradually. Brazil became the first Latin American nation to establish diplomatic ties with India in 1948. India opened its embassy in Havana in January 1960, symbolizing solidarity with the Cuban revolution. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru visited Mexico in 1961, and his daughter, Indira Gandhi, embarked

on an eight-nation tour of Latin America during her tenure. Bilateral relations of India with Latin American countries started in the post-cold war period. The 1990s marked a significant shift in India's approach to Latin America, driven by economic reforms and a desire to diversify its international partnerships. India established a resident embassy in Panama in 1973, marking the first such mission in Central America. The Indian community in Panama, primarily of Sikh origin, has been instrumental in fostering ties between the two nations. In 2005, India and Chile signed a Framework Agreement to promote economic cooperation, leading to a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) in 2007. This agreement expanded bilateral trade and laid the groundwork for deeper economic ties.

India's Cultural Diplomacy in Latin American Countries:

India's cultural diplomacy in Latin America has evolved into a dynamic and multifaceted engagement, fostering mutual understanding and strengthening bilateral ties. Through a combination of government initiatives, cultural exchanges, and community involvement, India has successfully promoted its rich cultural heritage across the region. Some of the country specific examples of India's presence in particular Latin American countries is discussed below:

Bolivia and India formalized cultural cooperation in 1997, leading to significant cultural exchanges. Bollywood films, music, and dance have gained popularity in Bolivia, with Bollywood dance academies (locally known as *Danca-Indu*) and Indian dance groups present in cities like La Paz, Cochabamba, Potosí, and Oruro. These cultural expressions have fostered a deeper appreciation for Indian culture among Bolivians. In Peru, India's cultural diplomacy has been exemplified through events showcasing classical Indian dances and Bollywood music. These cultural presentations have been integrated into diplomatic visits, enhancing bilateral relations and promoting cultural understanding. Ecuador and India signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on cultural cooperation in 2006, leading to a cultural exchange program from 2009 to 2011. These initiatives have facilitated mutual cultural appreciation and strengthened ties between the two nations. Costa Rica has embraced Indian culture through various initiatives. Notably, the 2017 Costa Rican film *Enredados: La Confusión* (Entangled: The Confusion) featured a Bollywood-style song-and-dance sequence choreographed by Bollywood choreographers. This collaboration marked a significant integration of Indian cultural elements into Costa Rican cinema. Panama hosts a significant Indian diaspora, primarily of Sikh origin, who have contributed to the country's cultural landscape. The establishment of Gurdwaras and participation in local festivals have facilitated cultural exchanges and strengthened the bond between India and Panama. Chilean Folkloric Ballet, *BAFOCHI*, is preparing a special show for India featuring their best repertoire inspired by Chilean heritage and Indian culture. They will also conduct public workshops to share traditional Chilean dance and music, promoting cultural exchange.

Colombian band *Abakorao*, led by Santiago Ramírez, has performed at numerous fairs and festivals, showcasing their distinctive blend of Caribbean influences with pop and rock, incorporating tropical styles like salsa, merengue, bachata, caribe son, reggaeton, and cumbia. Their performances have

contributed to cultural exchanges between India and Colombia.

India's cultural diplomacy in Latin America has not only promoted its rich cultural heritage but has also fostered deeper bilateral relations, mutual respect, and understanding. Through continued cultural exchanges and collaborations, India and Latin American countries can further strengthen their ties and promote global cultural diversity.

Major Cultural Diplomacy Initiatives Between India and Latin America:

1. Cervantino International Festival (Mexico)

In 2018, India was honored as the Guest of Honour at the Cervantino International Festival in Guanajuato, Mexico—the largest cultural festival in Latin America. This marked a significant milestone in India's cultural outreach to the region. The festival featured performances of Kathakali, Bollywood dance, yoga demonstrations, and a special production titled *A Passage to Bollywood* by choreographer Ashley Lobo, showcasing the fusion of Indian and Latin American artistic expressions. The event underscored India's commitment to cultural diplomacy and its growing influence in Latin America.

2. Bloco Bollywood (Brazil)

Initiated in 2016, Bloco Bollywood is a vibrant street carnival in São Paulo that celebrates Indian music, dance, and culture. What began with 700 attendees has now grown into one of the largest Indian cultural events in South America, attracting over 8,000 participants in 2019. The carnival has not only popularized Indian culture in Brazil but also boosted local businesses, including Indian restaurants and textile traders.

3. Indo-Latin America Cultural Festival (India)

The Indo-Latin America Cultural Festival, organized by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) in collaboration with Latin American embassies, serves as a platform to showcase the rich cultural heritage of both regions. The festival features performances by Latin American artists, including the Ballet Folklórico de Chile and the Abakoro Latin Band from Colombia, fostering mutual appreciation and understanding.

4. Media Collaborations

Telenovela Co-productions: India and Mexico have collaborated on the production of telenovelas, such as *Valentina, mi amor especial*, co-produced by Zee TV and Vip 2000 TV. Based on the Indian serial *Aapki Antara*, the show addresses social issues like autism and is filmed in Guadalajara, Mexico. **Broadcasting Indian Content:** Indian television content has found a receptive audience in Latin America. Brazilian soap operas like *Camino das Índias* have been dubbed and broadcast across Latin American countries, while Indian films and series are aired on channels like Zee Mundo, catering to the growing interest in Indian entertainment.

5. Educational and Cultural Exchanges

Scholarships and Training Programs: India offers scholarships to Latin American students under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations. These programs enable students to pursue higher education and cultural studies in India, fostering long-term bilateral relationships.

Cultural Centers and Associations: Institutions like Mundo Latino in New Delhi and the Indo-Peruvian Friendship Association in Peru play pivotal roles in promoting cultural exchanges, language learning, and academic collaborations

between India and Latin American countries. India's cultural diplomacy in Latin America exemplifies the power of cultural engagement in international relations. Through sustained efforts and meaningful collaborations, India continues to build lasting bridges with Latin American nations, paving the way for a future of shared growth and understanding.

Contemporary Engagement and Strategic Partnerships:

India's involvement in BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) and the G20 has provided Latin American countries with alternative avenues for economic development and multilateral engagement. These platforms offer a counterbalance to traditional Western-dominated institutions, aligning with Latin America's interest in diversifying its international partnerships. Brazil, as a founding member of BRICS, has been instrumental in this dynamic, facilitating deeper cooperation between India and other Latin American nations.

In recent years, India has intensified its engagement with Latin America through various initiatives. Latin American countries are increasingly seeking to balance relations between global powers. Brazil's strategic diplomacy, for instance, involves engaging both China and the U.S. to strengthen global partnerships, showcasing the region's ability to maneuver between superpowers to secure national interests. India's consistent support for a rules-based international order and its emphasis on inclusive development resonate with Latin America's aspirations for equitable global governance.

In economic cooperation, over 100 Indian companies have invested approximately \$12 billion in sectors such as IT, pharmaceuticals, and mining across Latin America. India and Latin America share multilateral forums like: India, Brazil, and South Africa established the IBSA Dialogue Forum to promote South-South cooperation, focusing on areas like agriculture, trade, and defense. The strategic implications of the relations between India and Latin American countries must not be overlooked. India's cultural diplomacy in Latin America serves as a cornerstone of its broader foreign policy objectives, enhancing soft power and fostering deeper bilateral ties. By leveraging cultural initiatives, India not only promotes its rich heritage but also creates avenues for economic cooperation, educational partnerships, and mutual respect. This approach aligns with India's vision of a multipolar world, where cultural understanding and collaboration are pivotal in shaping global relations. Bilateral trade between India and Latin America reached approximately \$42.9 billion in FY 2023-24, with India exporting about \$19.15 billion to the region. Key sectors for Indian investments include information technology, pharmaceuticals, and infrastructure. Latin America is rich in minerals essential for India's green energy transition, such as lithium, copper, and iron ore. India has secured agreements with countries like Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile for lithium exploration and copper supplies, supporting its electric vehicle and renewable energy goals. The region's vast agricultural resources provide India with opportunities to secure essential commodities like pulses and oilseeds, contributing to its food security. Latin American countries, including Venezuela, Mexico, and Brazil, supply approximately 20–30% of India's crude oil imports. This diversification is crucial for India's energy security, reducing dependence on traditional suppliers. India's participation in BRICS and the G20 has significantly

influenced Latin American policy by providing alternative development models, fostering economic partnerships, and promoting a multipolar world order. As both regions continue to collaborate, their shared commitment to sustainable development and equitable global governance will likely shape the future of international relations.

Challenges in India-Latin America Relations:

Long territorial distance between the two is a big hurdle in trade and commerce and it also adds up to the travel cost for people to travel. These logistical challenges increase the cost of trade, making it less competitive. For India, this means higher costs for importing critical minerals from Latin America, which could hinder its green energy initiatives. For Latin American countries, the high cost of exporting goods reduces their competitiveness in global markets. This challenge can be addressed by investing more in infrastructure, for example, by improving road, rail, and port infrastructure can reduce transportation costs and improve efficiency. Developing direct shipping routes and air links between India and Latin America could reduce transit times and costs. Also, digital diplomacy can be of great help in this case. To further facilitate smooth relations, simplifying and standardizing customs processes can reduce delays and costs associated with cross-border trade. Addressing these logistical barriers is crucial for enhancing trade between India and Latin America, ensuring the efficient flow of goods, and supporting the strategic objectives of both regions.

Challenges posed by the presence of other big powers in the region: US and China:

The United States has historically been a dominant force in Latin America, though its influence has been challenged in recent years. The U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) remains a cornerstone of economic relations with Mexico, but China's growing presence in Mexico's auto industry has prompted the U.S. to expedite trade reviews. The U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) has been instrumental in facilitating debt-for-nature swaps, where countries reduce debt in exchange for environmental conservation commitments. However, recent shifts in U.S. policy under President Donald Trump have cast uncertainty on the future of such initiatives. The release of U.S. Air Force veteran Joseph St. Clair from Venezuela, facilitated by President Trump's envoy Ric Grenell, highlights efforts to engage diplomatically with Latin American nations, even those with strained relations with the U.S.

Despite these efforts, the U.S. faces challenges in the region. Some Latin American countries perceive a retreat in U.S. commitment to the region, particularly in areas like climate change and development aid, leading them to seek alternative partnerships.

Another challenge to India in the region is China's aggressive investment strategy and non-interference policy present a compelling alternative to U.S. engagement, especially for nations wary of political conditionalities. China's expansive economic footprint and the United States' historical influence present both opportunities and challenges for India in Latin America. By focusing on areas where it can offer unique value and fostering strategic partnerships, India can carve out a significant role in the region's future trajectory. China has become a dominant player in Latin America's infrastructure development. The China-Brazil Cooperation Fund, established in 2017,

exemplifies this commitment, with an initial investment of \$20 billion aimed at enhancing Brazil's infrastructure and industrial capacity. Additionally, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has led to significant projects, such as the construction of the Chancay Port in Peru, which is expected to reduce shipping times between South America and Asia by approximately one week. Chinese technology firms, particularly Huawei, have established a significant presence in Latin America, providing telecommunications infrastructure and 5G technology.

While China has a substantial presence in Latin America, India has made inroads in sectors like pharmaceuticals, information technology, and automobiles. For instance, India exports more pharmaceuticals to Latin America than China, with over 27 Indian companies operating 72 subsidiaries across the region. India's strategy in Latin America must consider the dynamics introduced by China and the United States. India can leverage its expertise in sectors like information technology, pharmaceuticals, and renewable energy to offer alternative partnerships to Latin American countries, distinguishing itself from Chinese and U.S. approaches. Collaborating with like-minded nations within multilateral frameworks such as BRICS and the G20 can enhance India's influence in the region, promoting a multipolar world order.

The historical foundations of India and Latin America relations are rooted in cultural exchanges, diplomatic engagements, and shared values. Over time, these interactions have evolved into robust partnerships encompassing economic cooperation, strategic alliances, and cultural diplomacy, reflecting a mutual commitment to fostering deeper ties between the regions. In conclusion, Latin America is integral to India's global aspirations, offering opportunities for economic growth, energy security, and strategic partnerships. By addressing existing challenges and enhancing diplomatic engagement, India can further strengthen its ties with the region, fostering mutual growth and cooperation.

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