



Research Paper

## Using Sustainable Development as Soft Power: The Case of India's Sustainable Development Policy

Mr Sourav Kumar<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Rajiv Gandhi National University of Law, Punjab, PIN – 147006

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**Abstract:**

Joseph Nye introduced the idea of soft power in *International Relations*. It is the ability to influence the behaviour of other states by using soft or non-coercive instruments like culture, political values, and foreign policy. For India, the lynchpins of its soft power in the 20<sup>th</sup> century lay in its policy of non-alignment, anti-colonialism, and peaceful co-existence. However, with the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, India has become an emerging soft power through its culture, particularly in the Indo-pacific and also through its vast Diaspora. More importantly, India has adapted to the emerging global issues, like environmental governance, in line with its aspirations to be a global leader. Ever since the institution of the Sustainable Development Goals by the United Nations, India has shown a growing willingness to make commitments in the field. It has played an active role in global climate change forums and has supported many global initiatives through domestic policies. This paper evaluates India's sustainable development initiatives at the domestic and international level and how these initiatives become elements of India's soft power. This paper argues that, on the one hand, India utilises its existing soft power credentials to influence the global sustainable development negotiations. On the other, it utilises the soft power of sustainable development as a foreign policy strategy to expand its global influence.

**Keywords:** soft power, India's foreign policy, sustainable development, climate change

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### I. Introduction

The idea of soft power was introduced by Joseph Nye in his seminal work *Bound to Lead* (Nye,1990). He further refined the concept in his book *Soft Power* (Nye, 2004), where he defined it as the ability to influence the behaviour of other states by using soft or non-coercive instruments. Nye contended that these instruments are three in number viz culture, political values and foreign policy. In the case of India, soft power in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was lynchpinned in its commitment to the principles of non-alignment, anti-colonialism, and peaceful co-existence. However, with the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, India emerged as a mighty soft power through its culture, particularly in the Indo-Pacific and its vast Diaspora. More significantly, India has been keen to adapt to emerging issues, like environmental governance, in line with its global leadership aspirations.

Ever since the institution of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations (UN), India has shown a growing willingness to make commitments in the field. It has played an active role in global climate change forums and has supported many global initiatives through domestic policies. Various authors have hailed India's role as the leader of the developing world in climate change negotiations at the UN, which essentially represents its soft power. This paper evaluates India's sustainable development initiatives at the domestic as well as international level. These would include its domestic initiatives in food security, health, education, and the environment. At the international level, India's role in global negotiations on these sustainable development issues would be analysed in connection with its soft power potential. This paper argues that, on the one hand, India utilises its existing soft power credentials to influence the global sustainable development negotiations. On the other, it utilises the soft power of sustainable development as a foreign policy strategy to expand its global influence.

## **Context of the study**

### *Soft Power*

In International Relations, the Realists had long emphasised that states need to maximise their military and economic resources to ensure their survival and get the desired outcomes in their interactions with other states. However, in the wake of the Cold War, four significant changes in power politics in International relations ensued, changing this understanding (Gallarotti, 2011). First, globalisation and the rise in interdependence; second, the cost of use or even threat of use of force among nuclear powers skyrocketed; third, with the growth of democracy, individual empowerment generated strong impediments to the use of force and coercion; and fourth, the evolution of international organisations and regimes embedded nations more firmly in networks of cooperation.

In such an atmosphere, when the need to look for alternate ways of creating influence was felt, Harvard scholar Joseph Nye came up with the concept of 'soft power' (Nye, 1990). It stands for the ability to attract and co-opt without having to coerce in International relations. It stems from the attraction towards a country's culture, political values and foreign policy (Nye, 2004). In International Relations, the extent of legitimacy and moral authority of a state determines the soft power of a country (Nye & Jisi, 2009, pg. 19). Soft power is, thus, used as a tool to influence other countries to act favourably. In a more interconnected world with the need for collective solutions to global problems, soft power comes in handy over hard power.

### *India's Soft Power*

Though soft power was first discussed in the United States, other countries quickly caught up. In the case of India, soft power had been implicit in the post-independence foreign policy ideals of peaceful co-existence, non-interference, non-alignment, peaceful resolution of disputes, non-reciprocity, anti-colonialism, anti-racism, etc. However, with the 1998 nuclear tests painting a hard power face, it became pragmatic to have explicit soft power policies. This was visible in the Incredible India campaign, establishing the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, joining the league against terrorism, and giving aid for democracy promotion.

Today, after over two decades, soft power has become an indispensable part of India's foreign policy. India has been actively trying to leverage the power of its culture, democratic credentials, and widely spread Diaspora and attract the public of foreign countries through tourism promotion and scholarships and training programmes (Kugiel, 2017). As the cradle of Indus Civilisation, India has been a source of many ideas and ancient religio-cultural traditions. Throughout its long, rich, and glorious history, India has been an assimilator of knowledge and a source of inspiration for its neighbourhood's lands and the people. As it stands today, culture, democratic credentials, Diaspora, aid programme and Bollywood are the notable sources of India's soft power.

### *Sustainable Development*

The industrial revolution that started in the west over two centuries ago has led to a drastic impact on the environment. Increased effects of anthropogenic activity led to the publication of the book 'Silent Spring' in 1962, which served as a catalyst for discussions on climate change, culminating in the UN Conference on Human Environment at Stockholm in 1972. Subsequently, the flagship UN Conference on Environment and Development was held at Rio de Janeiro in 1992, setting various rounds of negotiations in motion. Meanwhile, the Brundtland report published as 'Our Common Future' by the UN in 1987 had come up with the idea that economy, environment and social justice are interrelated goals. Building upon this, in 2000, the UN came up with millennium development goals to be achieved by 2015, which were the first international reflection on sustainable development issues other than climate change.

In September 2015, a united world made history by pledging itself to the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development. It addresses significant issues concerning all countries and proposes collective action to safeguard the planet. As defined by the Brundtland report, sustainable development is the 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. With 17 goals and 169 targets, the 2030 agenda touches all important aspects of human life, from health to education, and from equality to justice, from the environment to economic growth, and from food security to peace. Through these goals, the world has committed itself to organising its society to exist in the long term.

## **II. Methodology**

This paper is based on a qualitative analysis of India's national and international initiatives towards achieving SDGs. Books, journal articles, news articles and editorials, and various national and international reports on issues related to sustainable development formed the database for this study. Global indexes were used to indicate India's position on multiple SDGs and reflect India's soft power.

National reports analysed for this study included the Annual Status of Education Report by Pratham, Annual Sustainable Development Reports by NITI Aayog and the Voluntary National Reports on India's

progress on SDGs submitted by NITI Aayog to UN in 2017 and 2020. International reports included Education For All (EFA) report 2015 of UNESCO, Global Gender Gap reports of the World Economic Forum, Human Development Reports of the United National Development Programme (UNDP), and Sustainable Development Reports of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN). The indexes utilised were Climate Change Performance Index by Germanwatch, Global Food Security Index by The Economist Intelligence Unit, Global Hunger Index by Concern Worldwide and Welthungerlife, Global Health Security Index by John Hopkins University, Global Multidimensional Poverty Index by UNDP, Sustainable Development Index by SDSN and the SDG India Index by NITI Aayog.

### **Sustainable Development as Soft Power**

The opening lines of UNESCO's constitution say, "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed." This idea has an inherent link to soft power. As a tool of diplomacy in international cooperation, soft power depends on the attraction towards shared values and a sense of duty to contribute to achieving those values. If a country is able to set the agenda on what the 'shared values' are in International relations, without using coercion, its soft power is augmented. Soft power and its role in international institutions become magnified when countries face global problems requiring cooperative decision-making.

Joseph Nye (1990) had contended that soft power is a 'more attractive way of exercising power' as it encourages a willingness to agree with or follow a country's foreign policy stance. "A number of states have also built their soft power by improving their international image and contributing to global governance" (Karakir, 2018). "A state can reinforce its power in a better way by acting together with other states rather than acting against them particularly when the global commons are concerned" (Karakir, 2018). As sustainable development issues gain traction in the international agenda, it has become an indispensable element of a country's foreign policy. Thus, a country that complies with, say, international environmental norms, has higher soft power potential. Li (2016) offers the example of Germany's responsible and effective climate diplomacy in this regard.

With the communications revolution and the rise of social media, public awareness towards issues like climate change and hunger, the contemporary times provide the best opportunity for nations to emerge as a soft power in SDGs. "Climate change is also an emotive issue that unites people across the political spectrum—unlike other policy issues that remain divisive, such as migration or digitalisation. Even among populists, it is very hard to argue against reducing pollution and promoting biodiversity" (Zeilina, 2019).

A holistic development towards the SDGs will require innovative cooperation among the national governments, civil society and the private sector. There are investment houses that only invest in sustainable development projects and those that invest only if there are no malpractices related to sustainable development. As a nation's appeal to the world goes green, Sustainable Development becomes a soft power tool. It builds credibility among the stakeholders that a nation is working towards a better planet. Sustainable development, thus, benefits a country not only domestically but also internationally.

### **India's Domestic Sustainable Development Initiatives**

The Indian government has time and again affirmed its commitment to the SDG agenda. The Indian prime minister, in his statement at the Sustainable Development Summit in New York in 2015, pointed out that "much of India's development agenda is mirrored in the Sustainable Development Goals". An emerging consensus among scholars has emphasised India's pivotal role in sustainability. In India, the NITI Aayog has spearheaded SDG progress in cooperation with the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. India's significant strides towards sustainability reflect in its National Development Agenda on food security, health, education, and environment.

#### *Food Security*

To ensure food security for its population, India has taken various steps which deal directly with poverty alleviation and ensuring universal access to food to its people, thus eliminating hunger. Under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), unskilled labourers are provided with a minimum of 100 days of employment in government projects as a legal right. On similar lines, the Prime Minister National Rural & Urban Livelihood Mission aims to provide self-employment and organisation for the poor in rural and urban areas. Such programmes ensure that poverty doesn't hamper access to food.

In 2013, the Indian government enacted the National Food Security Act under which affordable access to food grains are to be provided to 75% of the rural and 50% of the urban population through a revamped Public Distribution System (PDS). As a part of the PDS, Antyodaya Anna Yojana provides even more subsidised food to the most impoverished families. The Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), *Poshan Abhiyaan* (National Nutrition Mission), and the Mid-day meal scheme, have been institutionalised to battle

stunting, wasting, malnutrition and anaemia among children. India even has a National mission on Sustainable Agriculture in line with SDG targets, to provide incubation to sustainable food production systems.

#### *Health*

While India has made sustained efforts to achieve the targets set under Goal 3, the country has made impressive gains on key indicators. The maternal mortality ratio has declined to 113 in 2020-2021 from 254 in 2004-06. The under-five mortality rate in 2020-21 was 36, down from 74 in 2005-06 (NITI Aayog, 2021). Under the recently launched *Ayushman Bharat* scheme, insurance coverage for secondary and tertiary treatment up to five lakh rupees has been provided to 100 million families, i.e. about 500 million beneficiaries. India has also achieved near-universal (91%) immunisation in children aged 9-11 months. For non-communicable disease control, many schemes are in place to reduce premature mortality and morbidity from these diseases, for instance, Tuberculosis, Leprosy, Cancer, Diabetes, Cardiovascular diseases etc.

#### *Education*

The Government of India amended the constitution to include the Right to Education (RTE) as a fundamental right under Article 21A, whereby every child has a right to satisfactory and equitable full-time elementary education. Even before the incorporation of article 21A, India had been vigorously pursuing universal elementary education under the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* since 2001-02. As of 2019, *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* along with *Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan* (RMSA for secondary education) and Teacher Education (TE) have been merged into Samagra Shiksha to provide for a holistic education environment. The government has also started digital initiatives like Swayam, Diksha, e-Pathshala, etc., to provide open education.

#### *Environment*

To promote the use of clean energy, the Indian government has been working rigorously on its Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs under Paris agreement) targets which are as follows:

- (i) emissions reduction by 33-35 per cent over 2005 by 2030
- (ii) have installed renewable energy capacity of 175GW by 2022
- (iii) Increase the share of non-fossil energy capacity in the electricity mix to above 40 per cent by 2030.

In 2020-21, India ranked 4<sup>th</sup> globally in installed renewable energy capacity. Programmes like the National Solar Mission and the Green Energy Corridor have been initiated to facilitate the shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy. In 2020-21, 99.99% of the households had access to electricity (NITI Aayog, 2021).

Under the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC), India has set up eight missions to deal with climate change related issues. These are National Solar Mission, National Mission for Enhanced Energy Efficiency, National Mission on Sustainable Habitat, National Water Mission, National Mission for Sustaining the Himalayan Ecosystem, National Mission for A Green India, National Mission for Sustainable Agriculture, and National Mission on Strategic Knowledge for Climate Change.

### **India's Soft Power in Sustainable Development**

India's Voluntary National Report (VNR) to the UN on implementing SDGs in 2017 said, "India had played an important role in shaping the SDGs. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the country's national development goals are mirrored in the SDGs. As such, India has been effectively committed to achieving the SDGs even before they were formally crystallised." Through its domestic actions, India has gained a competitive advantage in the world, by time and again figuring in world reports as the nation that has done more than even the developed countries. The emerging consensus that India has created in the developing world can lead the formation of a guiding policy framework that can help bridge the gap between local and global action.

As the world discusses an impending climate crisis, India is well-positioned to help create an agenda that would establish it as an indisputable soft power in SDGs, with support in the developing and the developed world. India is already emerging as a world leader in attracting foreign direct investment. By sustainably aligning its domestic policies, India can fill the fiscal gap to achieve SDGs by innovatively attracting FDI. As a destination for investment, India's appeal can build up if its domestic policies are seen as sustainable.

The following discussion analyses India's international outlook on four areas of sustainability mentioned above viz environment, education, health and food security and how these areas have contributed to India's soft power.

#### *India's Role in Environment Protection*

On India's performance, the SDG Index 2018 says, "independent reviews of SDG 13 conducted by experts show that, except for India, INDCs and current climate policies pursued by G20 countries are insufficient and, in some cases, critically insufficient to achieve the 'well below 2°C' objective of the Paris Climate Agreement." India's environment minister Prakash Javadekar said at the COP25 that India is "walking

the talk” on climate change. It is among the few countries on track to meet its Paris target, having already achieved in 2020, 21% of its 2030 emissions reduction target of 33-35%. Also, India is just 2% short of achieving 40% non-fossil fuel capacity by 2030.

“India is a crucial player in international climate negotiations by virtue of four main factors: its large population; its rapid economic growth; its political role as a leader amongst nations of the global South; and its position on the frontline of climate change impacts” (Fisher, 2012)

India broke into the top ten performers list in the Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI) 2020 and also maintained its position in the 2021 index. Within the G20, only the European Union, UK and India rank among high performers. For two consecutive indexes, India has maintained its performance as ‘high’ in the GHG emissions category (2020-21). India’s performance was also rated ‘very high’ in the per capita emissions category, even with one of the largest growth trends. Its performance has also been ranked ‘high’ in the energy use category.

“In seeking to carve its own niche on climate leadership, India has employed three narratives: the power of example; the power of resistance; and the power of institutional leadership” (Ghosh, 2018). By example, India has cut down power costs by upto 80% by pushing a market for LED light bulbs. India is also well on its way to achieving 175,000 MW installed capacity for renewable energy by 2022. India thus upturned the notion that renewables are out of reach of developing economies. India’s experience in transition to a greener economy can provide replicable examples for other developing countries.

By resistance, India’s soft power centres on equity and climate justice in climate change negotiations. ‘Climate justice’ now forms a part of the preamble of the Paris agreement. India was also a key player in incorporating the principle of Common But Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR) in the agreement. India has been vocal about the needs of the developing world and the necessity of their incorporation into climate agreements. By leadership, India’s soft power was at display when it launched the International Solar Alliance (ISA) in cooperation with France in 2015. By June 2021, 77 countries had signed and ratified the ISA framework agreement. It also set up the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure in 2019.

Despite high ratings in climate policy and renewable energy targets, experts have pointed out that the government is yet to develop a vision map to achieve its ambitious targets in both categories. India’s low levels of emissions, coupled with its commitments to the INDCs, have made it less susceptible to moral pressure. However, India can utilise this as an opportunity to transform its energy and transportation milieu.

### *India's Role in Education*

The 1992 Earth Summit came up with many paths to sustainable development under Agenda 21, and education was one of them. Thereafter, 2005-14 was declared as the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. This was intended to collectively mobilise educational resources across the world towards the creation of a sustainable future. This could be done by integrating the principles and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning (UNESCO, 2014).

The ‘Education For All (EFA)’ report 2015 places India among the countries with improved curriculum and pedagogy for Early Childhood Education Curriculum Framework (ECCE). India is also among the countries that have closed gender gaps in primary and lower secondary education. It also praises India’s efforts towards reaching the EFA goals through the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009, *Saakshar Bharat Mission*, *Sarv Shiksha Abhiyan* (now National Education Mission), and the *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* initiative. India has also improved ease of access to schools significantly, more so in underserved areas.

Evidence from researchers like Afridi, Barooah & Somanathan (2011), and Dreze and Kingdon (1999) have suggested that school feeding programmes like mid-day meals in India have had a tangible impact on girls’ enrolment and attendance. Initiatives like the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) and Pratham Open School of Education (POSE) have helped increase access to formal education, and skill development, especially for children from underprivileged sections. That education can serve as a soft power tool can be seen when a country sets an example for other countries to follow. For instance, Pakistan monitored the progress of India’s RTE legislation while preparing its own similar legislation that came into effect in 2012 (Jagmag, 2012).

Over the past three decades, a consensus has emerged that education can help achieve sustainable development for forming conceptions that care for human values and universal problems (Sayamov, 2013). Education can be used as a tool of interaction between different educational systems across national borders. It can also help establish an agenda of thinking in a more global manner for the generations to come. “In the ever more interrelated and interdependent world of our time, global education for development is gaining a special significance not only as a teaching process, but more importantly as the advancement of understanding to mass consciousness of how crucial global processes embracing the planet are for the future of humankind” (Sayamov, 2013).

In line with target 4B of the SDGs, India has expanded its outreach to the developing countries by providing scholarships under the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) scholarship programme and

Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC). In line with target 4C, India has started a tele-education initiative in the African continent under the Pan-Africa e-network programme for its population to access premier Indian education programmes. A concrete programme on achieving the goals of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) can help generate a soft power through attraction and provoking interest in similar programmes throughout the developing world.

#### *India's Role in Global Health*

India has effectively been using its rising economic might and diplomatic acumen to find solutions to global health issues. On the one hand, India engages in medical diplomacy, i.e. using health care as an instrument of foreign policy; for instance, sending medical missions under UNPKF, telemedicine in Africa, and sending medical teams to Afghanistan. On the other, India has been an active player in global health diplomacy, whereby diplomacy is used to find solutions to global health problems. A significant example of this is India's active role in negotiations at WTO regarding compulsory licensing of life-saving drugs.

Health diplomacy is a 'political activity that meets the dual goals of improving health while maintaining and strengthening the international relations abroad' (Chattu & Knight, 2019, p. 151). As health diplomacy helps a nation build its benign image abroad, it can be categorised as an element of soft power. India ranked 57 out of 195 countries in the Global Health Security Index 2019. India ranked above the average world score in four out of six categories, and its worst performance was in indicators related to the prevention of diseases. The worst performing indicator was 'emergency preparedness and response planning', in which India scored a mere 12.5 out of 100. However, India scored a complete 100 in the indicator of 'international commitments', and that is where its soft power lies.

While the whole world was caught unawares during the pandemic, India took the lead and announced US\$1 billion as COVID-19 assistance to 90 countries of the world (Gupta, 2020). This was in line with its earlier philosophical stance of *Vasudeva Kutumbakam* (the world is one family). India had been projecting its cultural soft power by utilising Yoga and Ayurveda as a tool, even before the onset of the pandemic. The declaration of 21<sup>st</sup> June as the International Day of Yoga marked the highest achievement for India in terms of its offering for a healthier world. The Covid-19 pandemic brought to the fore the need for alternate wellness systems. India's very own cultural soft power tools of Yoga and Ayurveda thus gained popularity in the space created by the pandemic.

Towards the fulfilment of its ambitions to be a global leader, India needs to look at new avenues to play a constructive role for the world at large. Healthcare is one such sector. India produced 20% of the world's medicine and 62% of the vaccine over a decade ago. It exported 67% of medicine production to developing countries, and about 50% of the medicine supplies of UNICEF came from India (Medicins Sans Frontiers, 2007). When India, the world's pharmacy, was put to the test by the Covid-19 pandemic, India grabbed it as an opportunity to showcase its pharmaceutical talents. Within two months, the Indian pharmaceutical industry was providing ventilators and supplying essential medicines and medical equipment to its neighbourhood as the first responder. This health diplomacy gave India an edge over other regional powers to project its soft power and portray itself as a 'friend in need'. Even during natural disasters around the Indian Ocean, India has been at the forefront in providing medical assistance.

After sending essential medical equipment, India reached out to the world with its vaccine diplomacy under '*vaccine maitri*'. As soon as India started vaccinating its citizens, it started its export on a humanitarian basis to its neighbourhood and the developing world. With the second wave coming in, some have questioned this approach. However, what needs to be understood here is that it was India's good samartitanship that helped it tackle the second wave in myriad ways. The goodwill that India earned abroad through its vaccine diplomacy had paid back in the form of medicinal and food-kit support (for instance, from Qatar, Kenya, Japan, Singapore, Taiwan etc.). India was, thus, able to mobilise support when needed. "For the first time, perhaps, India's aggregate calling abroad is larger than the piecemeal efforts that have been deployed by it in the past" (Saran & Mathur, 2021). India's gesture to share its supplies rather than hoard like the west has earned it a benign image and goodwill.

#### *India's Role in Global Food Security*

Food security, as defined by the United Nations' Committee on World Food Security, means that all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their food preferences and dietary needs for an active and healthy life. It, therefore, refers to security from threats to food insecurity – including health, climate change, economic shocks and armed conflict. Food security is a global challenge where the authority to create policies belongs to the countries, but solutions usually come from an international level. "The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the weakness of the global food system, with hunger becoming a critical issue in most countries. With slowing agricultural growth, expanding populations

and resource constraints, achieving food and nutrition security will remain a major challenge long beyond the pandemic” (Rampal, 2021).

Economically, India is a nation with stark contrasts. In 2013, 22% of its population lived below the poverty line (Global Hunger Index, 2016). However, India is also home to 140 billionaires, the third-highest globally (Forbes, 2021). It is the world's second-largest food producer and is also home to the second-highest population of undernourished people globally (Global Hunger Index, 2016). In the Global Food Security Index 2020, India ranked 71 out of 113 countries. India performed the best (full 100 points) in the 'Food Security and Access Policy Commitments' indicator. Out of 25 indicators, India was listed in the topmost 'very good' category on six indicators and 'good' on four.

According to the Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (2018), “in India 271 million people moved out of poverty between 2005/6 and 2015/16, but the country still has the largest number of people living in multidimensional poverty in the world (364 million people).” India has performed phenomenally in cutting its poverty rate from 55% to 28% in a decade. Another positive trend in poverty in India is that the poorest across all disadvantaged groups have had the most significant reductions in poverty. This is a reversal in an earlier trend whereby the poorest were progressing the slowest (Multidimensional Poverty Index, 2018). Subsequent MPIs have positioned India favourably towards the reduction of poverty and inequality of income.

The SDGs recognise that hunger is linked to poverty in a complex manner, and there is a need for multi-sectoral collaboration. It also underlines the role that the national governments have to play through capacity building and accountability. The Global Hunger Indexes (GHI) from 2015-2020 reflect India's 'serious' state of poverty and hunger, leading to alarming child stunting and child wasting rates, inadequate access to nutritious food, and clean drinking water. India has scaled up implementing the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) programme and the National Health Mission to improve upon the indicators. Because of this, the annual Global Hunger Indexes have progressively recognised India's efforts in ensuring adequate nutrition to its huge population.

India has also proactively invested in African countries for the development of their respective agriculture sectors. For instance, in 2017, India offered a \$100 million Line of Credit to Kenya for agricultural mechanisation (PTI, 2017). Indian companies like Mahindra have been exporting tractors and other agricultural equipment modified for African needs. India has used 'Dal diplomacy' (IANS, 2016) with Mozambique to ensure nutritional security for its citizens while providing aid and technical know-how to develop the agricultural sector in Mozambique.

India is poised to take a leadership role in ensuring food security in developing countries. Through its stand at the WTO regarding flexibility in food subsidies for food security purposes, India has already come a long way in ensuring food security to its citizens and has opened up avenues for other developing countries to follow the lead. In the pandemic, India rose to the challenge of providing food relief and assistance to several other countries in the Indian Ocean Region; for instance, food aid to Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar, Djibouti, Eritrea, among others under Mission Sagar.

### **Global SDG Negotiations: Reflections on India's Soft Power**

“India is an interesting country to look at when studying the features of global climate governance because Indian climate policy is a salutary case study in the failure to build North/ South trust in multilateral negotiations. A long-time opinion leader in the developing country bloc, India has sought to champion the concerns felt by other developing countries, as well as to occupy the moral high ground as a defender of poor countries' rights” (Vihma, 2011).

India's development strategy under the slogan 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas' is also a corollary of SDGs. This strategy stems from India's ancient philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world is one family) and its civilisational values. In alignment with its philosophy, India has been active in various regional forums like the BRICS, India-Africa Forum Summit, and IBSA and international forums like ISA, Climate Change Conferences like that in Paris, etc. While the leadership skills of the west have been suffering in the areas of climate change negotiations, the developed world and especially the BRICS countries have geared up to fill the gap. However, their abilities are hampered by obsolete technological models in industries and vehicles, generating pollution. If the BRICS countries can lead innovations that inspire changes in the developing world, they will gain traction in terms of credible leadership and hence, soft power.

According to Sehovic (2018), there are three ways to chart diplomacies in food security viz diplomacy of food, i.e. making food an international security issue, diplomacy for food, i.e. diplomacy to find solutions to food problems, and food (science) for diplomacy, i.e. research interventions in food development. While India has shown some initiative in issues related to global food security, in practice, we find that the issue of food security is usually left to the FAO and the World Food Program. “To influence the global health agenda, India not only needs to engage within the WHO proactively but also outside the organisation at the regional and international levels, as part of a coalition of like-minded constituents” (Pandit, 2021). A major food security

issue where India has garnered support in the developing world is subsidy reduction commitments under the WTO regime. India has maintained that subsidies meant for ensuring food security must not be subject to reduction.

In 2020, given the pandemic, India and South Africa presented a joint proposal before the WTO in 2020, which seeks a waiver from the “implementation, application and enforcement of” TRIPS agreement (WTO Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights) concerning vaccines. This would allow faster vaccine manufacturing, hence its timely worldwide availability and affordable prices for the third world. Later in 2021, the proposal was revised to include all medical equipment and not just vaccines. The proposal has since earned express support of over 100 countries, reflecting upon India's leadership role concerning global health issues and hence, its soft power.

Historically, health has occupied the lower levels in national foreign policy priorities. The human security narrative offers a better alternative whereby health is considered a universal right that requires national and international intervention. Recent developments and health issues have, thus, lifted health as a mainstream foreign policy priority. It has now emerged as a potent soft power tool in international relations. In the Indian foreign policy, health found the first promotion in the WHO negotiations leading to the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), in which India was the principal negotiator. India also displayed its outreach to South Asia (also through the SAARC Covid-19 fund), Indo-Pacific, Latin America, and Africa during the Covid-19 pandemic. It unconditionally dispatched medical equipment, personnel, and food supplies to this region, earning goodwill as a rising benevolent power that believes in leaving no one behind.

India has for long staunchly guarded its defensive position on climate justice and warded off efforts to impose emission control burdens on the developing countries (Ghosh, 2012). India has been vocal for concessions for the developing world to allow a fair share of the carbon budget to meet development needs. Its stand has been for the developed countries to support the developing world by meeting their financial commitment of \$100 billion per year from 2020 onwards. India has also pursued the establishment of an international institutional framework for technology transfer so that the developing world can also become an equal part of global efforts towards clean energy.

Climate change negotiations were for long understood as a foreign policy issue. Following India's economic transformation in the 1990s, India's position changed from a defensive ‘porcupine’ to a versatile ‘tiger’ (Mohan, 2003). Over the past decade, India has also aligned its positions in line with its vulnerabilities to the effects of climate change (Hijioka et al., 2014). In 2011, Christiana Figueres, the then Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC, told The Hindustan Times (IANS, 2011), “India represented its own interests and stood firm with other developing countries, and then was incredibly helpful in showing that it's mostly in the interest of developing countries to move forward.”

As a player in international climate change negotiations, India stands at the crossroads of being a victim of historical emissions by the west and an emerging polluter that could substantially contribute to the containment of future global emissions. Covid-19 came as an opportunity in disguise for India to leverage its reputation as a neutral and credible partner with sizable capabilities in sectors like pharmaceuticals, clean energy and humanitarian aid. While on the one hand, India has been pushing to assume more significant roles in existing forums like the G20, BRICS or Quad, it has also spearheaded new initiatives like the International Solar Alliance. Thus, India has used its domestic policy credentials and shared values of equity and justice to manoeuvre in international negotiations. On the other hand, it has capsized the notion that only western countries can lead international institutions. This has led to India's emergence as a soft power in climate change.

### **Challenges and Conclusion**

India's annual ‘SDG India index’ provides enough evidence on its progress towards institutionalisation of robust localisation measures. India's development strategies can be captured in the following slogans: Sashakt Bharat, Sabal Bharat (Empowered India, Resilient India), Swachh Bharat, Swasth Bharat (Clean India, Healthy India), Samagra Bharat, Saksham Bharat (Inclusive India, Entrepreneurial India), Satat Bharat, Sanatan Bharat (Sustainable India), and Sampanna Bharat, Samriddh Bharat (Prosperous India, Vibrant India).

However, India currently faces many domestic and international challenges that hamper its emergence as a global leader in Sustainable Development. If we look at India's position in the Human Development Index, its ranking has fluctuated between 130 and 131 for the past five years. This indicates stagnation of progress on life expectancy at birth, expected years of schooling, mean years of schooling and gross national income per capita, all of which have a bearing on the SDGs. Similarly, the EFA report pointed out that despite the institutionalisation of the RTE act, India has faced challenges in the delivery of adequate grants for its implementation. Hence, the performance has not been optimum.

Even though India's position is in limbo because of over 195 million undernourished persons, India has made significant advances in its farm sector which can be lessons for other developing countries, especially in Africa. Unlike Africa, India does not depend on imported food grains for food security. Our challenges lie



elsewhere. A case study on India under the GHI in 2016 suggested that while the National Food Security Mission ensured access to food as a human right, it also led to the loss of traditional nutritional diversity by making people dependent on rice and wheat. The Indian experience has indicated that hunger and malnutrition can co-exist with surplus food stocks because of problems in the distribution systems. However, India's success with the green revolution can inspire countries trying to meet food shortages.

As India's ranking on various indicators related to the SDGs improves, it becomes poised for a more global leadership role in knowing the way, going the way, and showing the way. Its success story can provide it with the credentials to lead by example. This would especially be relevant in the current scenario when a leadership deficit appears to have emerged in SDG implementation. India has been leading the wagon on favourable decisions for the developing countries at the WTO and the UNFCCC, both of which have a bearing on SDGs. India's soft power would lie in its ability to overcome the domestic bottlenecks and then set the global agenda on SDGs in a way that would be beneficial for the countries with which it has shared values and goals. With its vast Diaspora and cultural influence globally, India is well-positioned to utilise its soft power credentials to ensure sustainable development.

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