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India's Humanitarian Assistance during the Covid Crisis: In the Context of Soft Power

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted lives, economies, and cultures worldwide, and it was more than just a health emergency. In response to this not experienced challenge, India took the initiative to manage the situation both at home and abroad. This paper explores how India's humanitarian assistance during the pandemic, ranging from disaster assistance to vaccine diplomacy, enhanced its standing internationally. The study takes Joseph Nye's concept of "soft power" to show how India's assistance initiatives became a significant component of its foreign policy, boosting its standing as a trustworthy and caring global actor. The report outlines how the pandemic changed India's position on the international order while also acknowledging the challenges the country faced at home while aiding to their neighbour countries and other nations. Ultimately, the crisis strengthened India's reputation as a responsible and significant player in international affairs while delivering new opportunities for global leadership.

Introduction

In early 2020, COVID-19, which was first reported in late 2019, became a worldwide emergency that required countries to enter emergency mode in order to control infections and preserve lives. The WHO recorded over 118,000 cases in over 100 countries by March 2020, which was a startling number. Global governments were to implement strict regulations, including travel restrictions, lockdowns, and, in the end, a rush to vaccine billions of people. India, which has a huge population of 1.3 billion, faced very big challenges. The struggle to limit the pandemic was difficult due to crowded cities, economic disparities, and a burdened healthcare system. But in response, the nation imposed one of the strictest lockdowns in the world, fighting to maintain vital services and obtaining medical supplies. But India did not only concentrate on its own problems; it also entered the international arena by providing assistance, vaccinations, and support to other nations—a practice known by specialists as "humanitarian diplomacy." These initiatives were not merely acts of kindness; rather, they were calculated actions that enhanced India's reputation as a trustworthy and caring world leader.

This paper looks at how India's pandemic assistance, like as vaccine supplies and disaster relief, increased its "soft power," or global influence. However, it also poses difficult concerns: How did India help others while handling its own crises? What were this strategy's actual expenses and constraints? By looking at both the successes and the challenges, this paper shows how the epidemic changed India's place in the world, making it more than just a country in distress but also a major force in international solidarity.

Literature Review

Shantesh Kumar Singh and Ravi Shankar Raj (2022) In the article "**Internationalism, Soft Power and India 's Vaccine Friendship",** it has been told that India is a country with an internationalist ideology. India has been following the principle of "Vasudhaiva" since ancient times. Kutumbakam" is an ideology which means that the whole world is like a home. India has stood firmly against climate change, terrorism, poverty and other global epidemics since independence. During the recent outbreak of Covid - 19, which has shaken the entire humanity, India gave a new form of soft power at the global level by sending medicines to the needy countries all over the world with the contribution of its health sector. At the same time, programs like "Vaccine Maitri" under the leadership of the recent Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi gave a new identity in the world. India got a new respect at the global level. This program of India was highly appreciated by the World Health Organization and the whole world got to see new dimensions of soft power towards India, which is taking the Indian economy and development to the highest path.

" **Impact Off covid -19 on Humanitarian** In "**Actions in India**", **B Mihir and R Bhatt** have explained that Corona is a global pandemic which has come as a big challenge for the whole world . The author has told that during the Corona period, the government implemented the lockdown policy to keep people together so that the infection does not spread. He has talked about the country's economy going down as the pandemic spreads and has talked about the direct and indirect effects of coronavirus. He has given a dubious description of the deaths caused by Corona.

" **India Case Study Situation Analysis on the Effects Off End Responses The** book " **COVID-19 on the Education Sector in Asia (2021)** " is published by **UNICEF** . Vishwakarma talks about the impact of the sector during the pandemic. She talks about the varied responses by different governments to the education sector, the indirect nature of school reopening's after closures, and the early impact on children of people living with their families. She talks about the need to achieve sustainable education by 2030. Development Goal 4, which is towards acquiring education, talks about its progress and its policy. It also talks about the use of online education medium to maintain mutual cooperation between teachers and students during the Corona epidemic.

" **Operation Samvedna: Humanitarian Relief operation during COVID - 19 Pandemic Management and Response Haryana's Relentless efforts in alleviating the Hardships Off In "Citizen (2022) "** , author **Anil K Rao** told that in this article it has been told that the corona epidemic, which came from a lab in Wuhan , China , spread very fast. It was gradually spreading all over the world and India, taking care of its health facilities, imposed a lockdown in the entire country on 24 March 2020. The Haryana government, following the orders of the Center, came forward to help the displaced people. Under Operation Hum, those displaced people were helped. Sand facilities and food facilities were provided. Shelter facilities were provided to those who were without shelter. Food and water were provided to the hungry. To promote education, the importance of digital education was increased. To increase health facilities, PHCs and sub- health centers were opened so that patients can be looked after and faith education can be promoted.

"**MGNREGA- A Humanitarian Policy Response during** in the article **"Covid- 19 (2021)"**, **Prof. (Dr.) Ashwani Kumar and Mr. Ravindra Chaudhary told** that in this article, he talked about the 100 days employment program under MNREGA, which was run to improve the mental condition of uneducated and unemployed youth by giving them employment. This program was in full swing during the Corona epidemic. When displacement took place on a large scale, shelter facilities were provided to laborers and migrants under this program. During the lockdown, money was also sent to their accounts in the form of financial assistance to overcome unemployment. Arrangements for food and drink were made and from time-to-time health services were also delivered to door- to-door.

" **Indian a Neighborhood Vaccine Diplomacy During The COVID -19 Pandemic : Humanitarian and Geopolitical** In **"Perspectives (2022) "** , **Baba Singh , Sandeep Singh , Balinder Singh , and Vijay Kumar Chattu** have told that whenever there has been an epidemic or any natural crisis in the world , India has always been at the forefront in dealing with and facing those crises. Similarly, India has further strengthened its health sector. In India, we have "Pharmacy" for the world. China has displayed China as a vaccine hub. China wanted to leave India behind with the help of its vaccine diplomacy. In response to this, India has launched "Co- vaccine" and "Covishield". By developing vaccines like these, healthcare facilities have been made available to people across the world. He is also doing vaccine diplomacy in the form of "Neighborhood First Under this policy, the vaccine was first sent to our neighboring countries during the Corona period so that people there could remain healthy. During the second wave of Corona, we sent our health equipment like ventilators vaccines across the world.

" **The Plight Off Migrants During COVID- 19 and the Impact Off Circular Migration in India : A Systematic Joshi** in the article " **Review** " **Jasleen , John , Eslawath Prince , Alan Joshua George** has told that according to the WHO report , COVID- 19 , which first appeared in December 2019 , has put the whole world in a crisis of unprecedented magnitude and has created a crisis of uncertainty with countless deaths , generalized economic weakness , poverty , restrictions , inevitable lockdowns , which were and travel restrictions established globally as a necessary measure to deal with the pandemic. Migrants were found to be some of the most susceptible populations in this lockdown. Every source of income came to a standstill. The aim of this review study is to look at various aspects of adversity that migrants faced while staying in India throughout the lockdown, as well as the socio-psychological impact of this cyclical movement. During COVID -19, PRISMA (Preferred Reporting for Systemic Assessments and Meta-Analysis Studies on migrant labour and circular movement were conducted as per the standards (item refers to) The findings show the diverse circumstances of the migrants, demonstrating a strong need to return home with their families despite severe financial crisis and travel difficulties. The poor conditions of the relief camps, with meagre rations and lack of facilities, particularly concerned women and children, resulting in mental disorders. The present study encourages mental health providers to prepare for the problems of increased mental diseases by adopting necessary preventive measures. It also emphasizes the need to establish a strong foundation for

" **A Critic of the Indian Government 's response** In her article " **Towards the COVID- 19 Pandemic** " , **Jayati Ghosh** explains how the most damaging effects of COVID-19 in India were not due to the disease itself , but to the nature of the official response. The most severe lockdown in the world devastated the economy and pushed millions into despair and famine, yet it could not stop the transmission of the virus. The easing of restrictions as the disease resurgence and the continuation of economic misery point to 10 critical elements of the official response that secured these adverse outcomes. India's experience with COVID-19 has been dire from the time the disease reached its peak, primarily due to the central government's lack of response in key critical sectors. A major shift in socioeconomic strategy is underway. This must be accompanied by a significant increase in public health spending so that the economy as well as livelihoods can gradually recover. However, there is already insufficient evidence that the prevailing regime supports any of these.

Understanding Soft Power and Its Relevance to Humanitarian Diplomacy

Joseph Nye first proposed the concept of "soft power" in the 1980s, describing how nations can influence others by winning hearts and minds rather than using money or force. Soft power uses common principles, cultural appeal, and careful diplomacy to create real, mutually beneficial connections, as opposed to "hard power," which depends on economic pressure or military force. This is a discipline where India has always had a natural advantage. "Vasudhaiva kutumbakam," means "the world is one family," is our ancient belief. Our civilisation, dynamic democracy, cultural diversity, and advantageous geographic position have long attracted attention from around the globe. However, we have only just discovered how to consciously utilise

these resources. Initiatives like as the Public Diplomacy Division (established in 2006) and extended cultural exchange programmes under ICCR have helped promote India's story abroad. Strong linkages with our diaspora and tourism initiatives like "Incredible India" have further increased our visibility around the world.

Our humanitarian initiatives have been one of India's most effective soft power instruments, particularly in times of crisis and any natural disaster and pandemic. Not only are we aiding those in need when we offer medical aid or disaster relief, but we are also showcasing our values, skills, and dedication to global leadership. This combined strategy—saving lives while boosting international ties and reaffirming India's position as a responsible, caring global power—is just reflected in our COVID-19 response.

Impact of covid-19 on India

India acted rapidly to stop the spread of COVID-19, but at a high cost. In accordance with WHO recommendations, the government implemented one of the strictest statewide lockdowns in history in March 2020, suspending normal life, closing businesses, and restricting travel in an effort to control the pandemic.

1.　Economic and environmental effects

After the lockdown was imposed in the entire country due to coronavirus, all the people were displaced. The working class and workers who had left their homes and gone to cities to earn their livelihood started coming back home. Unemployment emerged as the biggest problem for the people and it was very challenging for them to feed themselves. So it also affected the economic condition of the country. The health system of the country collapsed due to not being so strong because it was a disease for which there was no antidote or medicine till now. And knowing about it was a time of great trouble for the doctors. Due to the spread of this infection, all the people were confined to their homes. Due to which the mental condition of the people was greatly affected and a big obstacle was also seen in the field of education.

2.　Impact of Corona virus on Society

Coronavirus had spread all over the world in 2020 and was at its peak. People of all countries and every class were affected due to the Corona epidemic. A lot of impact was seen in the life behaviour and mental health of billions of people around the world, such as there was an increase in stress, anxiety and loneliness among people. The main reason for all this was lack of means of livelihood and unemployment. Due to all this, the situation of domestic violence and abuse increased and there was a change in the ways of communication between people.

3.　Impact on education

The corona pandemic has also affected cultural education in many ways, such as children missing school due to the sudden lockdown and the education system being completely disrupted. The link between students and teachers was seen to have become distant. There was a significant decrease in the learning process of children and their results, their learning gap and their access to quality education reduced. It seemed to be very effective due to lack of resources. Children used to get moral education from schools, but they became devoid of moral values.

4.　Impact on Human Rights

The corona pandemic affected people's human rights in various ways (Ghosh, J., 2020) such as violation of their right to health, discrimination on the basis of their living conditions, organization, expression and age due to the poor condition of hospitals. People with disabilities had to face a lot of physical and health problems at that time.

This pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities and inequalities of all sections of society (Ghosh, J., 2020). And it further increased those inequalities such as people who were poor became poorer, elderly people, disabled people and youth had less contact with each other due to unemployment. The pandemic also affected social institutions and organizations such as health care, education, justice and social security and also challenged the values of cooperation and social norms in the mutual sense of people. This pandemic highlighted the need for more inclusive, resilient and sustainable societies that can prevent and respond to future crises.

India's international humanitarian response during covid-19 by VACCINE MAITRI initiative

Vaccine Maitri ("Vaccine Friendship") is a humanitarian initiative by the Government of India to provide COVID-19 vaccines to countries around the world. The government started making vaccines available from 20 January 2021. As of 21 February 2022, India had delivered about 162.9 million doses of vaccines to 96 countries. The Corona pandemic came as a challenge to the whole world and affected the entire human race. During this crisis, India has provided humanitarian assistance to its neighbouring countries and needy countries through the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) organization.

Under this program, India has established mutual brotherhood and peace in the whole world and attracted the world with the help of its soft power. Under vaccine diplomacy, India launched a program called Vaccine Maitri to provide access to health facilities to the people to reduce and avoid the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic. Whose main objective was to provide health facilities to the countries in need. In which vaccines, ventilators, oxygen kits, and other health-related equipment were sent. India launched the "Aarogya Setu" app to keep information of people infected with corona in the country

and to make that information reach the people, which provided information about the infected people every day and also informed if someone in your neighbourhood is infected. India also shared this app with many countries like Afghanistan, Myanmar, Nepal, Bhutan, etc.

In addition to bilateral assistance, India

• Partnered with the WHO to promote fair vaccine distribution

• Deployed military expertise for international disaster response

• Established itself as a solution provider in global health emergencies.

These humanitarian efforts not only saved lives – they also changed the way the world viewed India. By combining: Capability – demonstrating world-class manufacturing and logistics.

Compassion – prioritising people over profits during crises; Collaboration – strengthening multilateral partnerships. India emerged not just as a regional power, but also as a trusted global partner – proving that true leadership is measured not just by what a nation achieves for itself, but also by what it contributes to the world.

Challenges

Even though India's pandemic response received global praise, there were difficulties along the way. Some international partners viewed the country's difficult but essential choice to temporarily stop vaccine exports in order to safeguard its residents against an evil second Covid wave in 2021 as being misleading. On the ground, good intentions sometimes turned into harsh realities:

• Delivery timelines faced logistical hurdles

• Quality control concerns sometimes cropped up

• Coordinating aid across borders proved complex

• Geopolitical tensions raised unforeseen complications

Back home, the crisis exposed uncomfortable truths – the pressures underfoot showed cracks in our healthcare system, and socio-economic inequalities meant the pandemic hit some communities harder than others. These experiences made it clear that while our human spirit is strong, we need deep reforms in the healthcare system to be truly crisis-ready.

Experts say India's soft power approach – combining cultural influence with humanitarian action – remains effective, but needs to be refined. To maintain this credibility, we will need to:

✓ Strengthen our health infrastructure

✓ Improve the way we communicate our global contributions

✓ Adapt our strategies to a changing world

What is the lesson? True global leadership is not about being perfect – it's about learning from failures while remaining committed to helping others. India's pandemic response, flaws and all, showed we are prepared to do both.

Policy implications and recommendations

To consolidate and advance India's Humanitarian Assistance during the Covid Crisis and soft power in pandemics recommends the following points:

• **Healthcare Strengthening:** Reinforce healthcare infrastructure for which Indian government allocated around Rs 1 lakh crore FY 2025-26 for the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and emergency preparedness nationally, ensuring equitable access to services particularly for vulnerable populations.

• **Vaccine Production and Distribution:** Institutionalize partnerships to enhance vaccine research, development, and global supply chains, making India the epicentre for global health manufacturing.

• **Digital Inclusion:** Expand affordable internet and technological access across urban and rural populations to mitigate future disruptions in education and health.

• **Multilateral Engagement:** Deepen participation in global health governance platforms, including WTO, WHO, and G20, to advocate for fair access and pandemic preparedness.

• **Communication Strategies:** Implement robust public diplomacy campaigns to highlight India's humanitarian contributions, using multimedia and cultural channels to reach global audiences.

• **South-South Cooperation:** Strengthen frameworks for regional collaboration around disaster management, capacity building, and knowledge sharing.

• **Research and Innovation:** Invest in public health research, vaccine technology, and disaster relief innovations to build long-term resilience.

• **Inclusive Diplomacy:** Combine humanitarian assistance with cultural diplomacy and people-to-people contacts to foster sustained relationships.

These recommendations align with India's larger vision of being a responsible global power committed to humanity's welfare, as showcased during the Covid-19 crisis.

Conclusion

This study brings to light a compelling reality: during COVID-19, India not only saved lives but also gained international confidence by sending rescue workers, medical supplies, and vaccines around the world. India's immediate care demonstrated what true global unity looks like during a time when even wealthy nations were having difficulties. We have a strong humanitarian attitude that stems from both contemporary laws that institutionalise compassion and old beliefs about service. Through collaborations with groups like the NDMA and SAARC, disaster response has become ingrained in our national identity. Our ability to combine this humanitarian effort with astute diplomacy—collaborating with both major states and international institutions to optimise our impact—was what set our pandemic response apart. The crisis pushed us to innovate; we speed up advancements in healthcare and developed links to digital education overnight, demonstrating that change can come from necessity. Not only are we putting out fires when we integrate humanitarian action into our foreign policy, but we are also contributing to the creation of a stronger and more stable world. The lesson is clear: in today's interconnected world, real influence comes not from force, but from being a country others rely on in times of crisis. As we move forward, doubling down on this humane approach – combining our cultural values with practical action – will cement India's place as a regional anchor and a trusted global leader. Our pandemic response was not just about meeting a moment; it showed the kind of power India can wield when we lead with both competence and compassion.

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