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SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS OF SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY: A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF AFGHANS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT INDIA

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Abstract: Before the Taliban came back to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, India and Afghanistan had cordial bilateral relations and were often described as great friends. Since 2002, India had helped build several infrastructure projects as part of its promised development assistance program of over \$2 billion (later increased to \$3 billion). Considering India's investments in Afghanistan, the goodwill it enjoyed among common Afghans was understandable. However, it would be wrong to imply that these unique, multifaceted bilateral relations between the two countries were simply due to India's helping hand. This research paper is one of its kind attempt to explain the perceptions Afghans had about India based on the field survey done in Afghanistan in 2019. Using responses of over 321 Afghan participants, the paper attempts to quantitatively analyze the goodwill and positive vibes that India enticed among Afghans. However, many Afghans felt that India did not do enough during the crisis in August 2021. Based on the survey and the general perceptions of Afghans in the aftermath of the return of the Taliban, this paper argues that the soft power investments in Afghanistan helped India in its nation-branding, making it attractive and creating goodwill. However, New Delhi lacked the will to act smartly and hence did not get the desired strategic influences due to 'soft power behavior'.

Keywords: Afghanistan; Indo-Afghan relations; Soft Power; Diplomacy; Public Diplomacy

INTRODUCTION

Till August 1947, when British India was partitioned into two countries, India and Pakistan, the Durand line served as the porous border between Afghanistan and India. Geographically and even historically, these contiguous landmasses of Khurasan and South Asia have shared histories and empires. Hence, it is often pointed out that "imagining India without Afghanistan, and Afghanistan without India, is impossible" (Paliwal 2017, 29). Even after independence, the two countries had largely had cordial bilateral relations except for the "diplomatic blackhole" during the 1990s when the Taliban came to power for the first time (Paliwal 2017, 263). Commenting on the 'tangling lines of national interests', Louis Dupree had noted in 1962: "Muslim Afghanistan and Hindu India aligned against Muslim Pakistan; atheistic Communist China and Muslim Pakistan aligned against Hindu India and China and the Chinese

claims to parts of Nepal (including Mount Everest) may draw India and Nepal closer together (...)" (Dupree 1962).

Owing to the civil war, even as the largest number of Afghan refugees lived in Pakistan, it was seen as a hostile brother that kept fuelling the insurgency in contrast to India. Former President Hamid Karzai had once remarked that while Pakistan is a 'twin brother', India is a 'great friend' - *jigri dost* (Reyaz 2015).

No doubt, India was an important partner in the peace-building process in the war-torn country from 2002 onwards till August 2021, when the Taliban came back to power. New Delhi had provided aid as a development assistance program of over \$2 billion (later increased to 3 billion) as part of its peace-building measures. This included nearly 200 small, medium and mega projects, including Salma Dam in Herat, the parliament building in Kabul, a stadium and agriculture university in Kandahar, roads, and highways like Zaranj-Delaram, power transmission plants, a children hospital in Kabul, and scholarships to thousands of students under different schemes (Reyaz 2015). Two countries had even signed a strategic partnership agreement way back in 2011, strengthening bilateral relations. However, there remained a wide gap in understanding the role of soft power in influencing New Delhi's foreign policies in Afghanistan. Journalistic articles suggest that Afghanistan is a manifestation of 'soft-power victory' (Reyaz 2015), but there is a little available empirical study to substantiate those claims.

This paper is one of its kind attempt to explain the perceptions of Afghans about India based on the field survey in Afghanistan conducted in 2019. Using responses of over 321 Afghan participants from 25 provinces, the paper attempts to quantitatively analyze the goodwill and positive vibes that India entices among Afghans. As the return of the Taliban created a diplomatic crisis, many Afghans looked at India with hopes of a possible escape route but felt utterly disappointed at New Delhi's knee-jerk reactions. Taking Afghanistan as a case study, this paper thus deliberates on the limitations and challenges in over-reliance on soft power without actual strategic power influences on the ground or clear objectives.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: UNDERSTANDING SOFT POWER

Power is usually defined as forcing someone to do something that he would otherwise not do (Dahl 1957). This ability or power to force someone to do certain things has often been understood in the sense of coercion, or what we call 'hard power', like military strength, economic resources, etc. Consequently, the debate over international relations is often dominated by so-called high politics and hard power issues, including security, sovereignty, and trade. Arguing that "power over opinion is the third form of power", Carr (2016) noted that it is "not less essential for political purposes than military and economic power, and has always been closely associated with them" (p. 120). In other words, the "ability to force someone to do something" does not always have to be coercive and can be an attractive power that influences someone to do something. Consequently, the "proof of power lies not in resources but in the ability to change the behavior of states" (Nye 1990, 155).

The state's soft power is defined by its "ability to get preferred outcomes through the co-optive means of agenda-setting, persuasion, and attraction", distinct from hard power, which emanates from coercion and economic inducements (Nye 2011, 43). Nye's soft power is

connected to the 'three-dimensional power' of Lukes (1974) and the idea of 'structural power' of Jeffery Isaac (Gallarotti 2011, 29), as well as the 'policy of prestige' of Morgenthau (1997).

The three primary resources of soft power, according to Nye, are culture, political values, and foreign policies. Unlike coercive forces, soft power relies on an "attraction to shared values, and the justness and duty of contributing to the achievement of these values", and hence its resources are "associated with the co-optive end" (Nye 2004, 7). According to Nye (2011), there are three co-optive methods of public diplomacy, including "agenda-setting, persuasion, and attraction" (p. 16). "Attractiveness helps", according to Chitty (2017a), as it is "more in the vein of soft power to be captivated by compelling messages than to be captured and compelled" (p. 20). An important point of distinction is that "soft power does not belong to the government to the same degree that hard power does" (Nye 2004, 14).

Soft power needs to be understood not so much as the neo-realist approach but within the paradigm of neoliberalism and constructivism. Chitty (2017b) tries to locate the soft power debates in "the positivist and post-positivist moments of international relations" (p. 3). Brown (2017), meanwhile, elaborates on how the theory of soft power has offered "a way of talking about non-coercive modes of influence in international politics" (p. 37), thus giving an alternative explanation of policy discourse and consequently helping in "conceptualizing and practicing influence" (p. 37).

It needs to be pointed out here that cultural forms as a tool of soft power, or what is referred to as cultural diplomacy to influence public opinions and build goodwill among foreign nations, is not a new phenomenon. What Nye thus did was to try and explain the age-old practice in new terms. International politics often creates a "hazy power space" (Beck 2005, 339), requiring new innovative approaches. A "more rigorous and systematic analysis of the process of soft power" can help better understand this hazy power space (Gallarotti 2011, 25).

One, however, needs to be careful in overusing the term soft power lest it is reduced to redundancy by stretching it to an "empty catch-all term that means everything and therefore nothing" and to "almost unquestioned credibility and prominence" (Rawnsley 2016, 19). Moreover, excessive reliance on soft power can reduce a country to paper-tiger. Critics of soft power brush it aside rhetorically, stressing that "the trouble with soft power is that it is soft" (Ferguson 2003). Kugiel (2016) reminds us that "soft power is sometimes seen as a moral or idealistic policy, whereas, in reality, soft power does not necessitate morality" (p. 6). On the other hand, even if a country enjoys considerable goodwill but is not a strong economic or military power, does not extend the expected aid, or follows a policy of non-intervention, the goodwill generated is of little use in a pure realist sense of foreign policies. Kugiel (2016) further adds that more important than "soft power resources" is the "soft power behavior" (p. 11). Hence, soft power advocates often talk of the 'golden mean' by creating the right balance between hard and soft power in exerting its influence through what Nye later called "smart power" (Nye 2009).

DATA COLLECTION

This paper is based on the fieldwork conducted in Afghanistan in August-September 2019 as part of an ICSSR-IMPRESS sponsored project. This paper is largely quantitative and with a brief qualitative discussion in the Conclusion section. An exhaustive survey was done across 25

provinces with a questionnaire set comprising 65 questions besides collecting basic details. First, a pilot study was done with seven respondents in Kabul and based on their responses, some of the options for the multiple-choice questions were modified, besides adding a few sub-questions for clarity. The original questionnaire set was prepared in English and was translated into two languages most spoken in Afghanistan - Pashto, and Dari - a dialect of Persian. With the help of local field workers, data from over three hundred respondents (321) were collected using the open-source data collection platform Kobo. Respondents could choose the language with a click of a button. Some responses were also collected by sending the URL via email or other online platforms, particularly from those Afghans now living abroad.

Table 1: Province-wide Distribution of Respondents (Source: Authors' depiction)

S.N	Province/Place	Number of Respondents
1	Balkh	60
2	Badakhshan	4
3	Baghlan	1
4	Samangan	21
5	Bamiyan	7
6	Daykundi	1
7	Faryab	12
8	Ghazni	13
9	Herat	10
10	Takhar	3
11	Jowzjan	10
12	Nangarhar	40
13	Kabul	40
14	Kandahar	1
15	Khost	2
16	Kunar	12
17	Kunduz	2
18	Laghman	51
19	Logar	5
20	Wardak	6
21	Nuristan	1
22	Paktia	1
23	Paktika	1
24	Qarabagh	1
25	Sar-i-pul	6
26	Washington	1
27	London	2
28		7
	Total	321

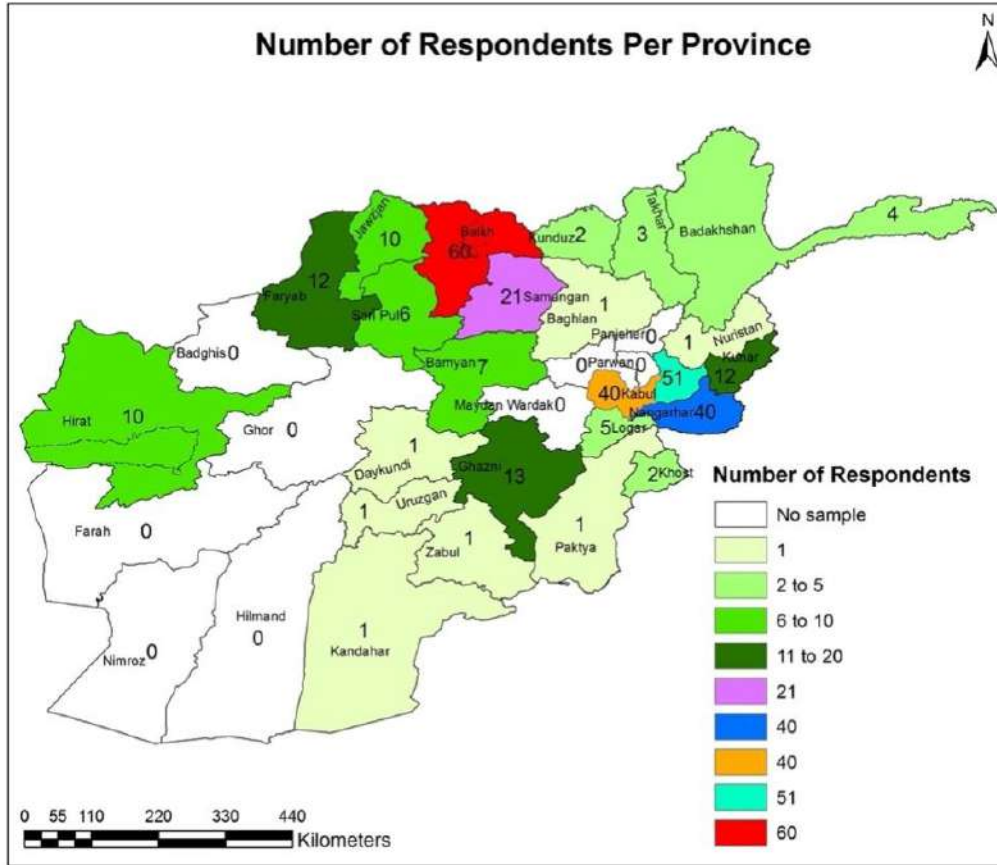


Figure 1: Province-wide Distribution of Respondents (Source: Afghanistan's province-level shapefile has been used from the Texas GeoData portal by The University of Texas at Austin (2020). Dr. Mehebus Sahana in ArcGIS software has prepared the map)

At the analysis stage, responses in Pashto and Dari were first translated and then cleaned to avoid any discrepancy. It was found that different spellings were used even when responses were in English, names of cities, provinces, ethnicities, and several other answers. Consequently, the number of rows was too many, and hence those with different spellings (for example, Kabol, Cabul, Kabul, kabul, etc. were all clubbed as 'Kabul'). Similarly, Pashtun, Pushtun, Pashtoon, Pashto (in the ethnic column), etc., were clubbed as 'Pashtun'. After cleaning the data, those were analyzed using the software 'R'.

Acknowledging Afghanistan's geographical and ethnic diversity, data from at least a few respondents from 25 provinces (out of 34) have been collected (Table 1 and Figure 1). Out of 321 respondents, 212 samples have been collected from 5 provinces - Balkh (60), Laghman (51), Kabul (40), Nangahar (40), and Samangan (21). Seven respondents preferred not to mention their locations.

Table 2: Ethnic Distribution of Respondents (Source: Authors' depiction)

Characteristic	N = 321 ¹
new_ethnicity	
Afghan	18 (5.8%)
Hazara	49 (16%)
Other	5 (1.6%)
Pasthun	135 (43%)
Tajik	64 (20%)
Uzbek	42 (13%)

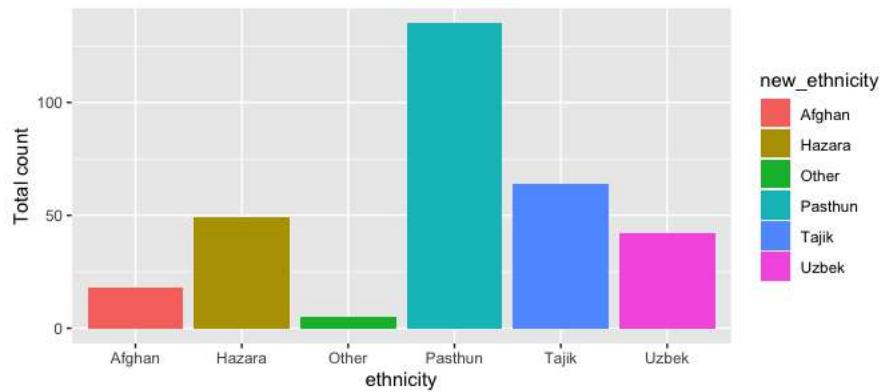


Figure 2: Ethnic Distribution of Respondents (Source: Authors' depiction)

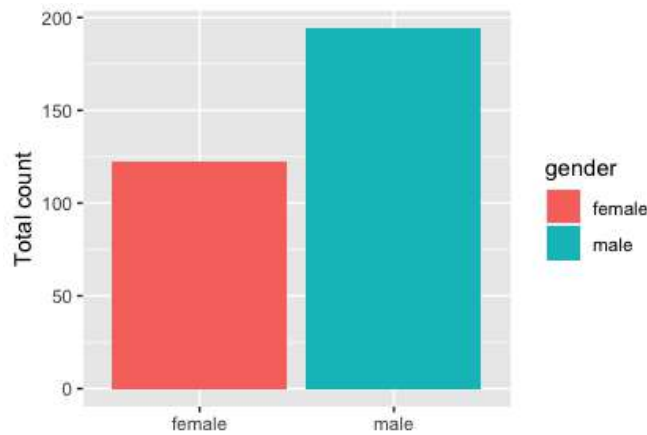


Figure 3: Gender-wide Distribution of Respondents (Source: Authors' depiction)

In terms of ethnic breakout (Table 2 and Figure 2), out of 321, 135 respondents (43%) were Pashtuns, 64 (20%) were Tajiks, 49 (16%) were Hazaras, and 42 (13%) were Uzbeks. Eighteen respondents (5.8%) preferred to write 'Afghan' as their ethnicity instead of identifying as Pashtuns. It should be noted here that although historically Afghans and Pashtuns have

meant the same thing, we cannot say with surety if these Afghans are Pashtuns only or belong to any other community but prefer to call themselves Afghans, referring to their nationality. 194 (60%) respondents were males, while 122 (38%) were female, while five respondents chose not to reveal their gender (Figure 3). As only 316 respondents declared their gender, in the analysis below, effectively 316 is taken as the sample size instead of 321 to see how males and females responded.

Table 3: Age Distribution of Respondents (Source: Authors' depiction)

	Freq	%	% Cum.
above50	8	2.56	2.56
Below20	23	7.37	9.94
between21&35	226	72.44	82.37
Between36&50	55	17.63	100.00

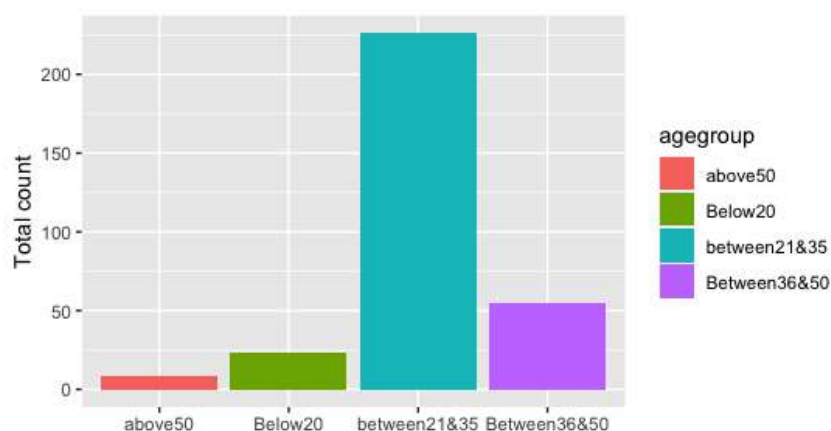


Figure 4: Age Distribution of Respondents (Source: Authors' depiction)

Table 4: Educational Qualifications of Respondents (Source: Authors' depiction)

Characteristic	Overall, N = 316 [†]	female, N = 122 [†]	male, N = 194 [†]
Level of Education			
graduate	193 (61%)	65 (53%)	128 (66%)
illiterate	34 (11%)	29 (24%)	5 (2.6%)
postgraduateabove	36 (11%)	9 (7.4%)	27 (14%)
seniorsecondary	46 (15%)	17 (14%)	29 (15%)
Student	1 (0.3%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.5%)
tillsceondary	5 (1.6%)	2 (1.6%)	3 (1.6%)

[†] Statistics presented: n (%)

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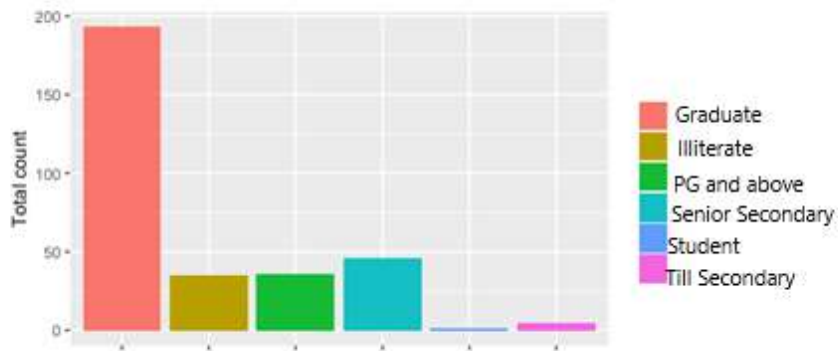


Figure 5: Educational Qualifications of Respondents (Source: Authors' depiction)

The population of Afghanistan is one of the youngest, with 63% of the population below 25. Maximum respondents (226 out of 321) chosen for the survey were between 21 and 35 years of age (72.4%), while those between 36 and 50 comprised 17.63% of the respondents (55). Respondents above 50 or below 20 were only 8 and 23, respectively (Table 3 & Figure 4). Finally, in terms of the educational qualifications of the respondents (Table 4 & Figure 5), overall, 61% of respondents were graduates, while 11% more were post-graduates. 15% of respondents were high school pass-outs, while 11% (34) were illiterates, and the field workers read questions to them and recorded their responses.

The main objective of the survey was to understand the following aspects broadly:

- What is the perception of Afghans about India? Do they see India as a good friend, merely as a strategic partner or an enemy?
- What kind of experiences has shaped the perceptions of Afghans regarding India?
- What is his/her contact/experience with India? Have they traveled to India and other countries?
- What are their opinions on Indian film, serials, and music?
- How relevant is the Indian entertainment industry in this context?
- What role do scholarships to Afghan students and education in India play in shaping their opinion and perceptions?
- How significant are the development projects?
- What role did medical tourism to India play?
- How has cooperation in the field of sports contributed to building goodwill?
- How does India perform when the perception of Afghans about India is compared with Pakistan, Turkey, etc.?
- Did the India-Afghanistan bilateral ties improve under PM Modi, or their opinions about India has changed over the years?

Findings

38% of the respondents had visited India at least once (Table 5 and Figure 6), while 41% of respondents have traveled to other countries (Table 6). Afghans generally have a very positive image of Afghanistan, and hence many of them look forward to traveling to India. However, there seems to be a mismatch between their imagination of India and their expectations of the realities. 44% of the respondents feel that when they or their family members visit India, their experience is never according to their expectations, while 32% said it is sometimes so (Table 7). Only 24% of the respondents seemed satisfied with their experience in India. However, when they compare their experience in India with other foreign countries, almost half of them (49%) have a positive rating for India, while another half (47%) have a neutral view (Table 8).

Table 5: Whether ever visited India? (Source: Authors’ depiction)

Characteristic	no	yes	Total
gender			
female	82 (26%)	40 (13%)	122 (39%)
male	115 (36%)	79 (25%)	194 (61%)
Total	197 (62%)	119 (38%)	316 (100%)

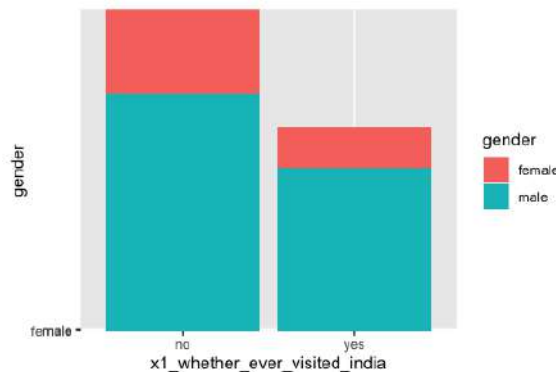


Figure 6: Whether ever visited India? (Source: Authors’ depiction)

Table 6: Whether ever visited countries other than India? (Source: Authors’ depiction)

Characteristic	visitedbeyondindia		Total
	no	yes	
gender			
female	67 (22%)	41 (14%)	108 (36%)
male	112 (37%)	82 (27%)	194 (64%)
Total	179 (59%)	123 (41%)	302 (100%)

Table 7: When you visit India, is your experience according to your expectations?

(Source: Authors' depiction)

Characteristic	Overall, N = 316 [†]	female, N = 122 [†]	male, N = 194 [†]
never	101 (44%)	34 (45%)	67 (44%)
sometimes	72 (32%)	27 (36%)	45 (30%)
yes	55 (24%)	15 (20%)	40 (26%)

[†] Statistics presented: n (%)

Table 8: How would you compare your experience about India with other countries?

(Source: Authors' depiction)

How would you compare your experience about India with other countries?

Characteristic	Overall, N = 316 [†]	female, N = 122 [†]	male, N = 194 [†]
negative	7 (3.2%)	2 (2.8%)	5 (3.4%)
neutral	103 (47%)	36 (50%)	67 (46%)
positive	73 (34%)	26 (36%)	47 (32%)
very_negative	1 (0.5%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.7%)
very_positive	33 (15%)	8 (11%)	25 (17%)

[†] Statistics presented: n (%)

New Delhi seemed to be the most popular place in India for most Afghans, which is understandable (Figure 7). Being the capital, and with 3-4 daily direct flights from Kabul alone, it is often the first entry point (Mumbai's only second option). With some of the country's top public universities and several private universities in the National Capital Region, top-notch private hospitals, and some of the most famous historical monuments. When asked to name the favorite place in India, 13.7% of respondents (44 persons) said either Delhi or New Delhi, with Goa being the second most favorite place, with 10.59% of Afghans calling it their favorite place. It should be noted here that Goa is particularly popular among Afghan male travelers who come for holidays. Mumbai, Agra, Mangalore, and Hyderabad are other favorite destinations for Afghans in India (Figure 7).

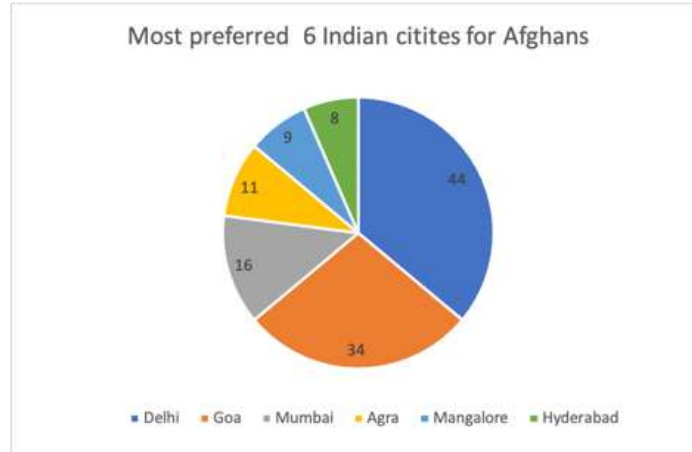


Figure 7: Most Preferred Indian Cities for Afghans (Source: Authors’ depiction)

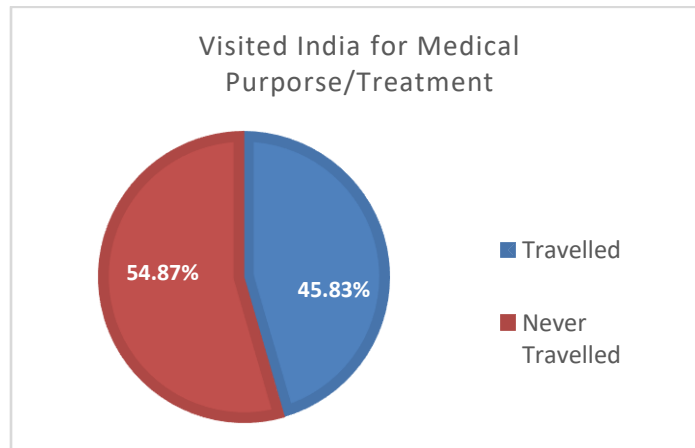


Figure 8: Have you or anyone in your family visited India for medical treatment? (Source: Authors’ depiction)

Table 9: How was your experience of medical services in India? (Source: Authors’ depiction)

How was your Medical Services experience in India			
Characteristic	Overall, N = 316 ¹	female, N = 122 ¹	male, N = 194 ¹
neutral	76 (36%)	21 (30%)	55 (38%)
satisfied	58 (27%)	25 (36%)	33 (23%)
unsatisfied	6 (2.8%)	1 (1.4%)	5 (3.5%)
very_satisfied	72 (34%)	23 (33%)	49 (34%)
very_unsatisfi	1 (0.5%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.7%)

¹ Statistics presented: n (%)

Table 10: How was your experience with a taxi, hotel, and the allied hospitality industry?

(Source: Authors' depiction)

How was your experience with taxi, hotel and the allied hospitality industry?			
Characteristic	Overall, N = 316 [†]	female, N = 122 [†]	male, N = 194 [†]
neutral	22 (17%)	9 (18%)	13 (16%)
satisfied	55 (42%)	18 (37%)	37 (45%)
unsatisfied	12 (9.1%)	3 (6.1%)	9 (11%)
very_satisfied	39 (30%)	17 (35%)	22 (27%)
very_unsatisfi	4 (3.0%)	2 (4.1%)	2 (2.4%)

[†] Statistics presented: n (%)

Table 11: How likely are you to recommend fellow Afghans to India for health treatment?

(Source: Authors' depiction)

How likely are you to recommend fellow Afghans to go to India for health treatment?			
Characteristic	Overall, N = 316 [†]	female, N = 122 [†]	male, N = 194 [†]
likely	122 (44%)	45 (50%)	77 (41%)
not_sure	56 (20%)	14 (16%)	42 (23%)
unlikely	8 (2.9%)	2 (2.2%)	6 (3.2%)
very_likely	88 (32%)	28 (31%)	60 (32%)
very_unlikely	2 (0.7%)	1 (1.1%)	1 (0.5%)

[†] Statistics presented: n (%)

Private hospitals in Delhi are also the first choice of many Afghans looking for treatment. Medical tourism was an important part of bilateral relations. Between 2017 and 2020 alone, about 100 thousand Afghans traveled to India on medical visas for health check-ups and treatment (Bhushan 2020). 45.8% of the respondents said that they or someone in their families had traveled to India for medical reasons (Figure 8). The medical services in India got a 61% approval rating (34% very satisfied and 27% satisfied), while only 3.3% of them seemed to be unsatisfied (Table 9).

Similarly, 72% of the respondents said they or their family members had an overall positive experience with the allied hospitality services like guest houses, transportation, etc., during their stay in India (Table 10). About 12 percent of them had an unsatisfactory experience, and another 17 percent were neutral. Consequently, 76% of respondents said they would recommend fellow Afghans for medical treatment in India (32% very likely, and 44% likely) (Table 11).

Entertainment

Indian films, primarily Bollywood’s Hindi films, are quite popular among Afghans. Overall, 59% of the respondents said that Indian/Hindi films are their first choice for entertainment, while 20% said they would like to watch more Afghan films (Table 12). It should be added that Indian films remain the second preferred option. Alternatively, when probed further, they agree that although they would like to see more Afghan films due to a lack of options, it is Indian films they fall back to. Hollywood and English films are the next options, with 12% of people considering them the first choice. Most of this third category of respondents are educated and city-based. When probed further, it was revealed that Hindi/Indian films are the next best option even for them. What was surprising was that despite linguistic and cultural affinities, Iranian films do not seem to have many takers in Afghanistan. The small caveat to this observation should be that the responses from provinces bordering Iran are too limited to make a conclusive argument favoring the last point.

Like films, Indian serials remain most popular among Afghans, with common Afghans preferring them even over indigenously made series. Overall, 31% of respondents said that Indian drama series are their first choice, with country-made series occupying the second spot at 22% (Table 13). Turkish serials or Dizis have emerged quite popular in the last few years, with 20% of respondents calling it their first choice, while English drama occupies the fourth spot, with 19% of respondents terming them as the first choice. Interestingly, despite linguistic and cultural similarities, Iranian serials are way behind. Only 6 % of Afghans consider them their first choice, and Pakistani TV drama is preferred by less than three percent of the respondents (2.5%). Significantly, while TV drama in India mostly caters to the women population, the male-female ratio for TV series (including Indian serials) is not very different in Afghanistan. While 33% of women regarded Indian serials as their first choice, the data for men was 30%.

Table 12: Films from which of the following countries do you prefer to watch more?
(Source: Authors’ depiction)

Which Countries film do you prefer to watch more?				
Characteristic	Overall, N = 321 [†]	****, N = 5 [†]	female, N = 122 [†]	male, N = 194 [†]
First Preference				
AFGANISTHAN	63 (20%)	1 (20%)	21 (17%)	41 (21%)
ENGLISH	39 (12%)	1 (20%)	13 (11%)	25 (13%)
INDIA	189 (59%)	3 (60%)	73 (60%)	113 (58%)
IRAN	8 (2.5%)	0 (0%)	6 (4.9%)	2 (1.0%)
PAKISTAN	6 (1.9%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.8%)	5 (2.6%)
TURKEY	16 (5.0%)	0 (0%)	8 (6.6%)	8 (4.1%)

[†] Statistics presented: n (%)

Table 13: Serials from which of the following countries/region do you prefer to watch more?
(Source: Authors' depiction)

Serials from among which of the following countries/region do you prefer to watch more?			
Characteristic	Overall, N = 316 ¹	female, N = 122 ¹	male, N = 194 ¹
First Choice			
afghanistan	69 (22%)	22 (18%)	47 (24%)
english	60 (19%)	23 (19%)	37 (19%)
india	98 (31%)	40 (33%)	58 (30%)
iran	19 (6.0%)	13 (11%)	6 (3.1%)
pakistan	8 (2.5%)	2 (1.6%)	6 (3.1%)
turkey	62 (20%)	22 (18%)	40 (21%)

¹ Statistics presented: n (%)
Source: Primary Survey on Stake of Indian's Soft Power: Case Study of Afghanistan 2019

Table 14: Do you think your perception of India has anything to do with Hindi films and serials?
(Source: Authors' depiction)

Do you think your perception about India has anything to do with Hindi films and serials?			
Characteristic	Overall, N = 316 ¹	female, N = 122 ¹	male, N = 194 ¹
agree	114 (39%)	40 (40%)	74 (39%)
disagree	32 (11%)	13 (13%)	19 (9.9%)
neutral	78 (27%)	28 (28%)	50 (26%)
strongly_agree	61 (21%)	18 (18%)	43 (22%)
strongly_disag	6 (2.1%)	0 (0%)	6 (3.1%)

¹ Statistics presented: n (%)

Table 15: Do you know Urdu/Hindi/Hindustani language?
(Source: Authors' depiction)

Characteristic	Overall, N = 316 ¹	female, N = 122 ¹	male, N = 194 ¹
Do you Know Urdu/ Hindi language			
fluently	41 (15%)	9 (9.7%)	32 (18%)
hardly	164 (61%)	66 (71%)	98 (55%)
understand_and_can_speak_a_lit	65 (24%)	18 (19%)	47 (27%)

¹ Statistics presented: n (%)

Table 16: How did you learn Urdu/Hindi/Hindustani language?

(Source: Authors' depiction)

Characteristic	Overall, N = 316 [†]	female, N = 122 [†]	male, N = 194 [†]
Grew up in Pakistan	9 (8.5%)	1 (3.7%)	8 (10%)
Studied in India	27 (25%)	7 (26%)	20 (25%)
From Watching Films & Serials	72 (68%)	20 (74%)	52 (66%)

[†] Statistics presented: n (%)

60% of Afghans also agree that the Indian entertainment industry has largely shaped their positive perceptions of India, while only about 13% disagree (Table 14). 27% of them have no opinion on it. About 15 percent of respondents acknowledged that they are fluent in Hindustani/Hindi/Urdu language, while another 24 percent said they understand and can speak a little too (Table 15).

Interestingly, 39% of Afghans said they at least understand (or can even speak fluently) Hindi/Urdu; twice as many are males - 45% male against 28.7% female. Of them, 68% of Afghans said they picked up the language from watching Indian films and serials (Table 16). 25% of them picked up the language during their stay in India for educational purposes, while only 8.5% said they learned the Urdu language as they grew up in Pakistan. The data for both males and females on how they picked up the Urdu/Hindi language is almost the same.

Some recent films like 'Kesari', 'Panipat', 'Padmavat', etc., have negative characters of Afghans. 32% of the Afghans surveyed agreed that 'these are films, enjoy, why to take them so seriously', while 16% acknowledged that 'negative stereotypes of Muslims are used in films everywhere' (Table 17). However, 28% said that such vilification of Afghan historical figures 'does not bode well with goodwill India-Afghanistan share'. Another 24% expressed concerns that these can be 'detrimental to Indo-Afghan relations'.

Table 17: Some recent films like 'Kesari', 'Panipat', 'Padmavat', etc. have negative characters of Afghans. How do you react when you watch those films? (Source: Authors' depiction)

Characteristic	Overall, N = 316 [†]	female, N = 122 [†]	male, N = 194 [†]
Some films like Kesari, Panipat, Padmavat, etc. have negative characters of Afghans, how do you react when you watch those films?			
detrimental_to	62 (24%)	25 (28%)	37 (21%)
does_not_bode_	73 (28%)	24 (27%)	49 (28%)
negative_stere	43 (16%)	9 (10%)	34 (20%)
these_are_film	84 (32%)	30 (34%)	54 (31%)

[†] Statistics presented: n (%)

Table 18: Do you like wearing Indian ethnic clothes? (Source: Authors' depiction)

Characteristic	Overall, N = 316 [†]	female, N = 122 [†]	male, N = 194 [†]
Do you like Indian/Ethnic Cloths?			
frequently	28 (10%)	8 (8.7%)	20 (11%)
never	141 (51%)	36 (39%)	105 (56%)
sometimes	110 (39%)	48 (52%)	62 (33%)

[†] Statistics presented: n (%)

Table 19: Do you like to eat Indian cuisine/food? (Source: Authors' depiction)

Characteristic	Overall, N = 316 [†]	female, N = 122 [†]	male, N = 194 [†]
Do you like Indian cuisine/food?			
frequently	71 (25%)	29 (31%)	42 (22%)
never	100 (35%)	29 (31%)	71 (37%)
sometime	112 (40%)	35 (38%)	77 (41%)

[†] Statistics presented: n (%)

Table 20: India has a lot of goodwill and is seen as Afghanistan's friend. Do you agree? (Source: Authors' depiction)

Characteristic	Overall, N = 316 [†]	female, N = 122 [†]	male, N = 194 [†]
India has lot of Friends?			
agree	148 (53%)	54 (60%)	94 (49%)
disagree	12 (4.3%)	3 (3.3%)	9 (4.7%)
neutral	51 (18%)	12 (13%)	39 (21%)
strongly_agree	66 (24%)	21 (23%)	45 (24%)
strongly_disag	3 (1.1%)	0 (0%)	3 (1.6%)

[†] Statistics presented: n (%)

The influence of Indian films and serials on Afghan dressing style and the cultural similarities can be seen in that 39% of Afghans said they like to wear ethnic Indian clothes sometimes. 10% of them said they frequently wear them (Table 18). More Afghan females (52+8.7=60.7%) are likely to try ethnic Indian dresses than males, which is understandable as most urban men anyway wear western dresses themselves in India. Similarly, 40 percent of respondents said they like to eat Indian food sometimes, while 25 percent said they often eat them (Table 19). Many Afghan restaurants serve some popular 'Indian dishes', which are spicier than common Afghan food. It is catering to this demand that an Afghan entrepreneur had opened a take-away service in Kabul and has hired an Indian cook.

Almost a quarter of respondents (24%) strongly agree that India enjoys much goodwill in Afghanistan; another 53% also affirm it (Table 20). Thus about 77 percent of respondents view India-Afghanistan relations positively, while only 5.4% disagree, with 18% of Afghans having neutral views on Indo-Afghan relations. Interestingly, many more women have positive views about India than men, with 83% of women agreeing that India enjoys goodwill in Afghanistan against 73% of men. 36% of respondents strongly agreed, and another 41% agreed (a total of 77%) that India’s investment in development projects has some role in this positive image (Table 21). The USA and other Western countries also have many development projects in Afghanistan, but why has India gotten so much goodwill while the USA is disliked? While 40% of Afghans surveyed noted that India does not have a military presence, another 38% reminded us that India does not interfere in their politics (Table 22). 30% said that India has been Afghanistan’s good friend and has no hidden agenda, while 21% agreed that shared history and cultural similarities also play important roles.

Table 21: Do you think India’s investment in development projects has some role in this positive image? (Source: Authors’ depiction)

Characteristic	Overall, N = 316 [†]	female, N = 122 [†]	male, N = 194 [†]
Do you think its a Positive image?			
agree	116 (41%)	45 (50%)	71 (37%)
disagree	12 (4.3%)	4 (4.4%)	8 (4.2%)
neutral	52 (19%)	12 (13%)	40 (21%)
strongly_agree	100 (36%)	29 (32%)	71 (37%)
strongly_disag	1 (0.4%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.5%)

[†] Statistics presented: n (%)

Table 22: USA and Western countries also have many development projects here, but why has India got so much goodwill while the USA is disliked? (Source: Authors’ depiction)

USA and Western countries also have lot of development projects here, but why has India got so much goodwill while USA is disliked?			
Characteristic	Overall, N = 316 [†]	female, N = 122 [†]	male, N = 194 [†]
India does not interfere in our politics	103 (38%)	38 (43%)	65 (36%)
India has Military Presence	106 (40%)	24 (27%)	82 (46%)
Share History & Culture	55 (21%)	20 (23%)	35 (19%)
They are good friends and no hidden agenda	81 (30%)	26 (30%)	55 (31%)

[†] Statistics presented: n (%)

Education

78% of the respondents have heard and known about the scholarships that the Indian government offers to Afghan students (Table 23). 36% of the respondents said that either they or someone in their family has benefited from scholarships or some short-term training programs offered by India (Table 24). Further, 56% of the respondents said that, given an opportunity, they would like to avail the facility and come to India for higher education. In comparison, only 12% were not interested (the rest 32% were not sure) (Table 25).

Table 23: Do you know if India gives any scholarships to Afghan students?

(Source: Authors' depiction)

Characteristic	Overall, N = 316 [†]	female, N = 122 [†]	male, N = 194 [†]
Do you know if India gives any scholarships to Afghan students?	218 (78%)	75 (83%)	143 (76%)

[†] Statistics presented: n (%)

Table 24: Are you or anyone in your family beneficiary of the scholarship scheme from the Indian government? (Source: Authors' depiction)

Are you or anyone in your family beneficiary of scholarship scheme from Indian Government?			
Characteristic	Overall, N = 316 [†]	female, N = 122 [†]	male, N = 194 [†]
	101 (36%)	32 (36%)	69 (36%)

[†] Statistics presented: n (%)

Table 25: If you are given an opportunity to study in India, would you like to go?

(Source: Authors' depiction)

If you are given an opportunity to study in India would you like to go?			
Characteristic	Overall, N = 316 [†]	female, N = 122 [†]	male, N = 194 [†]
maybe	90 (32%)	34 (38%)	56 (30%)
no	34 (12%)	10 (11%)	24 (13%)
yes	155 (56%)	46 (51%)	109 (58%)

[†] Statistics presented: n (%)

Cultural Linkages

At least 51% of respondents believed - 38% agreed while 13% strongly agreed - that cricket has become the new uniting factor, especially with Afghan players now participating in the Indian Premier League (IPL). 35% of them had a neutral view of this (Table 26). Besides films, serials, cricket, scholarships, and aid, other things unite Afghans and India. 59% of the Afghans

surveyed agreed that the two countries shared history and culture are an important uniting factor (Table 27). 21% of respondents attribute the special bonds the two countries share to the Sufis and Khanqahs, while another 16% remind that they both share the same Deobandi School of Jurisprudence. The rest, 14%, attributed it to other factors. Consequently, 55% of Afghans see India as a friend, while 22% see it as a strategic partner (Table 28). 21% were neutral, and only 2.5% of them saw India either as a spoiler or an enemy.

Table 26: Do you agree that cricket has become the new uniting factor, especially with Afghan players participating in the Indian Premier League (IPL)? (Source: Authors' depiction)

Characteristic	Overall, N = 316 [†]	female, N = 122 [†]	male, N = 194 [†]
Do you agree that Cricket has become the new uniting factor, especially with Afghan players now participating in Indian Premiere League (IPL)?			
agree	105 (38%)	36 (38%)	69 (38%)
disagree	26 (9.5%)	9 (9.6%)	17 (9.4%)
neutral	97 (35%)	35 (37%)	62 (34%)
strongly_agree	36 (13%)	8 (8.5%)	28 (15%)
strongly_disag	11 (4.0%)	6 (6.4%)	5 (2.8%)

[†] Statistics presented: n (%)

Table 27: Besides films, serials, cricket, scholarships, and aid, what other things unite Afghans and India? (Source: Authors' depiction)

Characteristic	Overall, N = 316 [†]	female, N = 122 [†]	male, N = 194 [†]
Shared History & Culture	161 (59%)	53 (58%)	108 (59%)
Deobandi School of Jurisprudence	45 (16%)	16 (17%)	29 (16%)
Sufism & Khanqah	57 (21%)	19 (21%)	38 (21%)
Others	39 (14%)	14 (15%)	25 (14%)

[†] Statistics presented: n (%)

Table 28: How do you characterize India vis-à-vis Afghanistan? (Source: Authors' depiction)

How do you charecterised India & Afganistan			
Characteristic	Overall, N = 316 [†]	female, N = 122 [†]	male, N = 194 [†]
enemy	2 (0.7%)	0 (0%)	2 (1.0%)
friend	156 (55%)	50 (54%)	106 (55%)
neutral	59 (21%)	20 (22%)	39 (20%)
spoiler	5 (1.8%)	2 (2.2%)	3 (1.6%)
strategic_part	62 (22%)	20 (22%)	42 (22%)

[†] Statistics presented: n (%)

India is the largest democracy globally, with a huge Muslim population. For multi-ethnic Afghanistan, 72 percent of respondents (29% very strongly and 43% strongly) agree that India

can be a good model to emulate. In comparison, less than 3% disagree, with 25% having a neutral view on the subject (Table 29). About 47% of Afghans think India can teach Pakistan, their common enemy, lessons, while over 24% (including those who strongly disagree) disagree with it (Table 30). However, 42% of respondents disagree with the repeated accusation by Pakistan that India uses Afghanistan as a base for creating troubles across Durand Line, although 37% of them also agree (31) (Table 31). 22% have no opinion on the subject.

About 67% of respondents agreed - including a quarter who strongly agreed - that under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has come closer to Afghanistan, while less than 10 percent disagreed (Table 32). PM Modi was awarded the Amir Amanullah Khan Award, Afghanistan's highest civilian honor, on 4 June 2016 when he visited the country for the second time (the first trip was in 2015 to inaugurate the new parliament building) to inaugurate the Salma Dam. PM Modi and his party, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), are often projected as anti-Muslims in India. However, almost half of the respondents (49%) consider it 'India's internal matter', while another 29% suggest Afghanistan has its internal problems to bother first (Table 33).

Table 29: India is considered the largest democracy in the world. With its huge Muslim population, do you think India can be a model for multi-ethnic Afghanistan? (Source: Authors' depiction)

India is considered as the largest democracy in the world, do you think India with huge Muslim population can be a model for multi-ethnic Afghanistan?			
Characteristic	Overall, N = 316 ¹	female, N = 122 ¹	male, N = 194 ¹
agree	123 (43%)	43 (47%)	80 (42%)
disagree	7 (2.5%)	3 (3.3%)	4 (2.1%)
neutral	71 (25%)	19 (21%)	52 (27%)
strongly_agree	81 (29%)	27 (29%)	54 (28%)
strongly_disag	1 (0.4%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.5%)

¹Statistics presented: n (%)

Table 30: Like Afghanistan, India sees Pakistan as an enemy state. Would you agree that you like India because you think it can teach Pakistan lessons? (Source: Authors' depiction)

Like Afghanistan, India also sees Pakistan as enemy state. Would you agree that you like India because you think, it can teach Pakistan lessons? (Enemy's enemy is a friend?)			
Characteristic	Overall, N = 316 ¹	female, N = 122 ¹	male, N = 194 ¹
agree	82 (29%)	25 (27%)	57 (30%)
disagree	49 (17%)	18 (20%)	31 (16%)
neutral	81 (29%)	27 (29%)	54 (28%)
strongly_agree	51 (18%)	12 (13%)	39 (20%)
strongly_disag	20 (7.1%)	10 (11%)	10 (5.2%)

¹Statistics presented: n (%)

Table 31: Pakistan often accuses India of using Afghanistan as a base for creating troubles across the Durand Line. Do you agree? (Source: Authors' depiction)

Pakistan often accuses India of using Afghanistan as base for creating troubles across Durand Line. Do you agree?			
Characteristic	Overall, N = 316 [†]	female, N = 122 [†]	male, N = 194 [†]
agree	61 (22%)	26 (29%)	35 (18%)
disagree	70 (25%)	27 (30%)	43 (22%)
neutral	61 (22%)	15 (17%)	46 (24%)
strongly_agree	43 (15%)	13 (14%)	30 (16%)
strongly_disag	47 (17%)	9 (10%)	38 (20%)

[†] Statistics presented: n (%)

Table 32: Do you think India has come closer to Afghanistan under PM Narendra Modi? (Source: Authors' depiction)

Do you think, under PM Narendra Modi, India has come closer to Afghanistan?			
Characteristic	Overall, N = 316 [†]	female, N = 122 [†]	male, N = 194 [†]
agree	112 (40%)	38 (43%)	74 (39%)
disagree	17 (6.1%)	2 (2.2%)	15 (7.9%)
neutral	67 (24%)	19 (21%)	48 (25%)
strongly_agree	75 (27%)	25 (28%)	50 (26%)
strongly_disag	9 (3.2%)	5 (5.6%)	4 (2.1%)

[†] Statistics presented: n (%)

Table 33: In India, PM Narendra Modi and his party are often anti-Muslims. Does that impact your perception about India? (Source: Authors' depiction)

In India PM Narendra Modi and his party is often projected as anti-Muslims, does that impact your perception about India?			
Characteristic	Overall, N = 316 [†]	female, N = 122 [†]	male, N = 194 [†]
India's internal matter	131 (49%)	44 (49%)	87 (48%)
Afghanistan has own internal problems	79 (29%)	26 (29%)	53 (29%)
India has always stood by Afghanistan	47 (17%)	16 (18%)	31 (17%)
Yes, it gives a negative perception	52 (19%)	19 (21%)	33 (18%)

[†] Statistics presented: n (%)

Table 34: Do you think a peace deal with the Taliban will negatively affect India-Afghan relations?

(Source: Authors' depiction)

Do you think peace deal with Taliban will have any adverse effect on India-Afghan relations (Taliban is seen as pro-Pakistan)?			
Characteristic	Overall, N = 316 [†]	female, N = 122 [†]	male, N = 194 [†]
agree	76 (27%)	21 (23%)	55 (28%)
disagree	55 (19%)	22 (24%)	33 (17%)
neutral	100 (35%)	32 (35%)	68 (35%)
strongly_agree	28 (9.9%)	9 (9.9%)	19 (9.8%)
strongly_disag	25 (8.8%)	7 (7.7%)	18 (9.3%)

[†] Statistics presented: n (%)

Only 19% of the Afghan respondents agreed that such actions give India a negative image. In comparison, 17% more Afghans reminded that India has been an all-weather friend of Afghanistan and has always stood by them, suggesting that they will not speak on India's internal matter lest it affects the bilateral relations. Finally, about 37 percent of respondents agreed that the peace deal with the Taliban would harm India-Afghan relations. In comparison, about 28% of them think that the two countries are too close and that the deal would not have any adverse impact (Table 34).

CONCLUSION

Our analysis is a testimony that Afghanistan presented a soft power victory for India regarding nation-branding and enjoying goodwill among political elites and the masses. Owing to the staple consumption of Indian films and serials, common Afghans have a very positive and nostalgic image of India. Those Afghans who visit India for education and medical tourism purposes are enamored by the rapid development, besides India's relative peace and stability. Interestingly, about two-thirds of Afghans (72%) considered India's pluralistic and federal Indian structure a good model to emulate (see Table 29). What is even more interesting is that even when some negative reports concerning the Indian government, like their alleged human rights violations or mistreatment of minorities, were pointed out, almost half of the respondents (49%) considered it 'India's internal matter' (Table 33). About 77% of respondents viewed India-Afghanistan relations positively (see Table 20). It is interesting to note that India's investments were minuscule compared to the USA and some other western countries. Still, India got a much higher approval rating (see Table 22).

Education, scholarships, police and military training, and other exchange programs helped India make allies and friends in Afghanistan. The number of scholarships that the Indian government offers to UG, PG, and PhD students has helped India cultivate allies in Afghanistan. During the fieldwork, the project director - lead author - met ministers in the government, senior government officials, civil society activists, media professionals, etc., in the government who studied or received training in India. In 2019, when the lead-author visited Afghanistan

before the election, not just the then Education Minister, Dr. Mirwais Balkhi, and the Deputy Minister of Education Marjan Matin were both alumni of Indian universities. Dr. Balkhi studied bachelor's at the University of Delhi and later shifted to Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), where he completed his PhD. Ms. Matin had studied bachelor at Punjab University and completed her master's from JNU. Many alumni of Indian universities and institutions were working in important and influential positions, and they could be important soft power assets in the future. Thus, Afghanistan represented a victory of India's soft power, so it appeared till 2021 when the Taliban inched closer to Kabul each day.

Limitations of Soft Power Policy

While both Indian and Afghan diplomats did not get tired of stressing the bonhomie that the two countries shared, India appeared hesitant to extend military support despite signing the strategic partnership agreement way back in 2011. In 2015, then Afghanistan's envoy to Delhi, Dr. Shaida Abdali said, "Afghanistan is going through a very critical time; therefore, the Afghan government needs to conduct strategic consultations with its strategic partners" (Reyaz 2018). Even as the security situation deteriorated, New Delhi confined itself to infrastructure development and generally refrained from any aggressive military adventure that may raise suspicion in Pakistan. Under PM Modi, New Delhi also expressed its willingness to shrug off Pakistan's apprehensions and finally decided to deliver on promises of combat helicopters for combat (Reyaz 2018). In 2015, India had gifted four Mi-24 attack helicopters to Kabul from the Indian Air Force's inventory and three more indigenous Cheetal utility helicopters developed by Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL). In 2019, India handed over two more Mi-24 helicopters purchased from Belarus. "Under a tripartite agreement, India has agreed to purchase the attack helicopters from Belarus and supply them to Afghanistan" (The Hindu 2019). These were still not up to the expectations of Kabul, who had expected New Delhi to play a more proactive role in security build-up.

The return of the Taliban in August 2021 and the events unfolding in the preceding and successive weeks further exposed the shortcomings in India's policy in Afghanistan. It was tested most when desperate Afghans who wanted to escape from the country applied for short and long-term visas expecting the 'great friend' to stand by them in those hours of crisis. While it is still unclear what made India take such hasty decisions, the Indian diplomats were one of the first to leave Kabul no sooner than the Taliban forces had reached Kabul. There were also reports that India had misplaced or lost the passports of many desperate Afghans in the ensuing chaos. Although India evacuated a small number of high-profile Afghans and Hindu and Sikh minorities, most Afghans who had applied for visas were disappointed, although it was well known that for most of them, India would have merely been a transit before they had got their papers in order to reach their destinations in some Western countries. As an art activist, Omaid Sharifi noted in a tweet appreciating the efforts of countries like Albania (besides Qatar, UAE, and Poland, among others) in helping evacuate Afghans: "This one is for history! In the times of darkness, where almost all neighbors of #Afghanistan - the ones claiming to be our strategic friend like #India abandoned us and even stopped issuing visas, #Albania and its Prime Minister @ediramaal makes me hopeful for humanity" (Sharifi 2021).

India's knee-jerk reaction was a manifestation of the shortcomings in soft-power behaviors with little effort in working on alternative strategies even as it became imminent that the Taliban would come back to power sooner than later, leaving them with little maneuvers. This was exposed acutely during the negotiations in Doha when India largely remained on the margins, watching the show from the fences. As the US withdrawal was imminent, New Delhi seemed to have limited options in the "Afghan muddle" (Pant 2014). This was largely due to New Delhi's reluctance to have a formal communication channel with the Taliban. India had almost made the folly of putting all its eggs in two connected baskets - the administration in Kabul and the USA. It made sense for India as the Taliban was largely seen as Pakistan's proxy, but by not engaging more actively in the peace process, confining themselves to development projects. Nevertheless, by dragging their feet even when countries like China, Iran, Uzbekistan, Turkey, Russia, etc., who had supported anti-Taliban forces in the 1990s, quietly opened communications channels with the Taliban, India made a strategic mistake in the hindsight (Reyaz 2019).

The former Ambassador to Afghanistan, Vivek Katju, had tried to caution India just days before the fall of Kabul when he expressed his concern that India had "boxed itself into a corner in Afghanistan" and "become a bystander" (Thapar 2021). In the survey conducted in 2019, about 37 percent of Afghan respondents too had agreed that the deal with the Taliban would adversely impact bilateral relations (see Table 34).

India's soft power investments in Afghanistan undoubtedly helped in the nation-branding, making it attractive and creating a positive image and goodwill. However, it also presents a good example of how soft power alone has drawbacks. Soft power behavior "without effective use of hard power can often damage the otherwise positive image created - or fail to yield the desired positive outcome" (Kugiel 2016, 11), as the tweet of Sharifi, quoted above, echoed. No doubt India used its soft power well, but due to a lack of strategic planning and optimum use of what Nye termed as 'smart power', New Delhi wasted the goodwill it had generated in the last two decades.

COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

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Statement on the welfare of animals:

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