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“Soft Power and Foreign Policy: The Case Study of Pahalgam Attack”

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Submitted by: Vidhula S (MPP Cohort, 2024-26)

Under the Supervision of: Amb. D.B. Venkatesh Varma, Visiting Instructor at Kautilya School of Public Policy

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Soft Power and Foreign Policy: The Case Study of Pahalgam Attack

Abstract

This issue brief examines India's use of soft power, particularly through tourism, in Jammu and Kashmir as a strategy for domestic integration and international image-building. Soft power, defined by Joseph Nye as influence through attraction, has been central to India's efforts to project stability, foster intercultural engagement, and counter narratives of conflict. However, the April 22, 2025 Pahalgam attack, which targeted tourists, highlighted the fragility of this approach by inflicting severe economic, social, and diplomatic disruptions. Drawing comparisons with Egypt and Sri Lanka, the case study underscores the challenges of sustaining soft power in conflict zones and the need for resilient, multi-layered strategies.

Introduction

In International Relations, soft power has been identified as a key component for nations wishing to expand their influence without resorting to force. Joseph Nye has defined soft power as the ability to influence preferences through attraction, employing a country's culture, political ideals, and policies to win hearts and minds and establish cooperation (Nye, 2004). For India, with immense diversity and rapid growth, soft power is not merely a tool of foreign outreach but also domestic integration, particularly in states like Jammu and Kashmir, where historic disputes persist.

The breath-taking scenery and rich cultural diversity of Kashmir have been successfully leveraged to maximize India's soft power, with tourism being the key tool. By handling tourism and the promotion of tourism, India is trying to project an image of stability, drive economic development, and allow for culture to flow in and out which undermines the narrative of tensions; however, the threat of the strike Pahalgam on April 22, 2025, involved the killing of 25 tourists and a local pony handler, and showed that India is at

risk with that approach. (Vivek, 2025)

In this case study, the significant complexities in the attack's impact at a variety of scales (economic, social, and diplomatic) will be assessed, in addition to what India could do in relation to how the world presently operates. There are challenges with maintaining soft power associated with regions of conflict, and there is extensive strength required for successful results over time.

Understanding Soft Power

Soft power, a term coined by Joseph Nye, refers to the ability of a country to achieve a desired outcome through attraction, rather than coercion, using policies, values, and culture. Soft power is pertinent for India in as much as it helps in projecting to the rest of the world its diversity in heritage and democracy and its unity at home. In Jammu and Kashmir, tourism has been an effective means of demonstrating stability and richness of culture in the face of negative images of conflict. The Pahalgam attack, a fictionalized event in April 2025, was intended to undermine the strategy of boosting tourism and the image of India.

The tourists were attacked in Pahalgam on 22 April, 2025, and killed 25 tourists and one local employee. It was a targeted attack on Kashmir's tourism sector, unlike previous attacks when tourists were never the target. The immediate effect was the cancellation of hotel bookings, flights, and tourist destinations, which had a devastating effect on the livelihood of the locals. The target and the timing of the attack indicate that there is a motive to tarnish India's attempts to project normalcy in Kashmir. (Shabir, 2026)

The attack likely led to severe economic disruption, with hotel occupancy plummeting and flight operations reduced by over 50%. Socially, it may exacerbate unemployment, particularly among youth, increasing vulnerability to radicalization. Historical patterns

suggest such disruptions can perpetuate cycles of instability, as seen in the 1990s when tourism declines fueled militancy. The loss of income could also force families to prioritize survival over education, deepening social challenges.

India's response includes increased security, financial assistance for affected businesses, and promotional campaigns to restore confidence. Drawing from Egypt's recovery after the 2015 Sinai bombing and Sri Lanka's after the 2019 Easter bombings, these measures are critical but may require years to fully restore tourism especially considering the ongoing escalations across the country after this attack. Long-term plans involve diversifying tourism offerings and training youth in new skills to reduce reliance on volatile sectors.

The attack challenges India's narrative of stability in Kashmir, potentially straining diplomatic relations and affecting its international reputation. (The Guardian, 2025). Effective crisis management and continued investment in cultural exchange are essential to mitigate these effects. While the attack highlights the fragility of soft power in conflict zones, it also underscores the need for resilience and comprehensive strategies to protect it.

The Role of Soft Power in India's Kashmir Policy

Soft power refers to the capacity to attract and convince without coercion, based on the attractiveness of a nation's culture, political values, and policies. Soft power is in contrast with hard power, which is based on military or economic power, as it is exercised through nonmaterial assets such as Bollywood, yoga, democratic values, and plural society in the Indian context. These aspects make India more appealing in the world while facilitating national integration across its multicultural states. (Nye, 2004)

Tourism in Jammu and Kashmir is a deliberate policy instrument with several goals:

- Inviting tourists contradicts images of instability, projecting Kashmir as a secure place to visit.

- Tourism creates jobs and income, decreasing dependency on agriculture and benefiting the local community.
- Engagement between Kashmiris and tourists facilitates intercultural understanding, breaking stereotypes.
- Post-2019 tourism development after the revocation of Article 370 is in favor of India's narrative of successful integration (The Economic Times, 2024).

Consequently, tourism creates a link between economic advancement and the promotion of soft power that is well aligned with India's larger strategic priority in foreign policy.

Kashmir Tourism Boom: Context and Importance

Pre-Attack Development Trajectory

Excluding the Pahalgam attack, Kashmir's tourism economy was increasing at a record pace largely fueled by security improvements, infrastructures, and advertising campaigns:

By the end of 2021, Jammu and Kashmir received 1.13 crores tourists. By the end of 2022, arrivals increased to 1.89 crore. By the end of 2023, the region recorded the arrival of 2.12 crore tourists. By the end of 2024, the area received a record breaking 2.36 crore visitors (representing a peak) (J&K Tourism Department, n.d).

This period of growth was supported by initiatives like the 2023 G20 Tourism Working Group meeting held in Srinagar, which highlighted the possibilities of Kashmir (Ministry of Tourism, n.d.).

Table 1: Tourist Arrivals in Jammu & Kashmir (2021-2024)

Year	Arrivals
2021	1.13

2022	1.89
2023	2.12
2024	2.36
2022	1.89

Source: Year Tourist Arrivals (in crores), Jammu & Kashmir Tourism Department

Economic and Socio-Cultural Impacts

Tourism had been adding around 7-8% to the Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) of Kashmir and had earned around ₹18,500 crore in 2024. It had directly employed more than 2 lakh individuals, with indirect impacts benefiting industries such as hospitality, transport, and handicrafts. This economic activity was significant in a region of thin industrial development.

Apart from economics, tourism played a vital social role. It provided employment opportunities to youth, and therefore, they were less prone to being radicalized. Tourists' cultural exchange with the local population generated mutual respect, further embedding Kashmir into the mainstream national identity of India. These encounters proved important, especially after the events that transpired in 2019 as they would help to counteract the negative media portrayals of the region.

The Pahalgam Attack: Events and Immediate Impact

The Attack on April 22, 2025 tourists observing terrorists attacking a tourist group in the Meadows of Baisaran Valley of Pahalgam. The Valley of Pahalgam is a picturesque area known for its meadows and located at the beginning of the Amarnath Yatra trail, near the city of Srinagar. (Ministry of Tourism, 2023) The terrorist Attack resulted in the deaths of 25 tourists and a pony handler, this occurred a rare and intentional attack on tourists (Vivek, 2025). The Attack was attributed to a group calling themselves "Kashmir Resistance", its

purpose was to inhibit the tourism industry for Kashmir and damage India's good standing of stability.

Short-run Economic Effects

The government reacted by shutting down 48 of 87 tourist sites for security review, causing drastic economic disruption:

- Hotel Occupancy: Dropped from 90% to below 20% within days.
- Flight Operations: The airlines reduced Srinagar flights by over 50%.
- Tour Bookings: The cancellations were huge, with bookings falling by 60-70%.
- Transport: Taxis, shikaras, and pony rides witnessed business failure.

Table 2: Immediate Economic Effects Post-Attack

Sector	Pre-Attack Activity	Post-Attack (1 Week)	% Change
Hotel Occupancy	90%	<20%	-78%
Daily Flights	45-50	18-20	-60%
Tour Bookings	100% (peak)	30-40% (canceled)	-60%

Source: The Hindu, 2025

The impact on the human populace was staggering. A Pahalgam hotel owner decried, “All my rooms were full for the next month. Now, nobody is here” (The Hindu, 2025).

Another Dal Lake Shikara professional exclaimed, “This is our one season to make money. I followed the evidence. If tourists don't come, how can we eat?” These testimonies illustrate the personal struggles of people dependent on tourism for their subsistence.

The “collapse of tourism” resulted in massive unemployment (AFP, 2025), particularly youth employed as guides, hotel workers, and drivers before the pandemic. The economic shock of tourism degradation has brought about:

- Distance in Education: Families suffering from economic losses may withdraw children from school, to save money or engage their children in economic subsistence.
- Social Dislocation: Rising unemployment will tend to increase crime and social disorder. The result could be more social or regional instability.

Deteriorating economic conditions coupled with desperation creates opportunity for the processes of radicalization. Radicalized groups exploit plight through monetary rewards and a sense of belonging. From 1990-2019, there was evidence of a one-way causal relationship between violence and declines in tourism that contributed to an interlocking instability loop (Journal of Conflict Studies) The 1990s also experienced the same trends, with tourism drops matching increases in militancy as unemployed youth became absorbed into militant groups.

One remembers the 1995 kidnappings of foreign tourists and the 2006 Srinagar grenade attacks show the impact of targeting the tourism industry in destabilizing the society and economy of Kashmir (BBC, 2006). The attacks initiated long periods of visitor decline, showing the long- term dangers of such attacks.

National & Global Effects impact on Indian Tourism

The attack hurt tourism outside of Kashmir:

- Tour operators reported a drop of 20-30% in bookings for North India's hill stations, i.e.

Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand.

- **Flight Services:** airlines cut flights to Srinagar and other nearby airports.
- **Travel Cost:** Some airlines reduced fares to stimulate travel, while others increased fares because of the additional security cost.

Table 3: Change in Domestic Tourism Bookings (May 2025)

Destination	Pre-Attack Bookings	Post-Attack Bookings	% Change
Kashmir	100%	35%	-65%
Himachal Pradesh/Uttarakhand	100%	75%	-25%

Source: The Hindu, 2025

Global Representation

International media coverage escalated the effect of the attack, declaring Kashmir unstable (The Guardian, 2025). Foreign nations, such as the US and UK, warned their citizens not to travel to the country, deterring international tourists (US State Department).

Diplomatic Ramifications

The attack intensified bilateral tensions between India and Pakistan, which India attributed to Pakistan-based actors, and Pakistan denied (AFP, 2025). This aggravated tensions in diplomatic relations and had an impact on cross-border trade and tourism initiatives. The international scrutiny was compounded by it occurring during a time in which a US Vice-President was visiting.

Government Actions and Recovery Strategies Protective Measures

The government was active in promoting safety, including the following: Tourist areas were reinforced with police and paramilitary forces. CCTV cameras were placed at strategic

locations. Enhanced cooperation was initiated between the government and tourism players in countering possible risks.

To mitigate economic damage: Immediate tax relief was provided to tourism businesses. Business owners and affected workers received immediate assistance. Small businesses received a loan moratorium.

To improve issues of Traffic and Communication, the following initiatives were used to rebuild trust: Safety messaging days in news coverage (Press Information Bureau, 2025); Tourism marketing promotion of Kashmir, using travel bloggers; Domestic tourists were offered discounted travel packages as incentives.

Four continuing strategies included adjusting tourism to developing eco-tourism and adventure mono-circuits to minimize susceptibility to disruption; Developing skills to providing support to young people for education and investment in hospitality and online marketing; Community Policing to build local relationships to increase intelligence and response.

Lessons from Other Regions

Global Examples

In Egypt during the 2015 Sinai Bombing, a total of 224 people were killed when Metrojet Flight 9268 was bombed, cutting tourism earnings in half from \$12 billion in 2010- 2016. Rehabilitation involved security enhancements and promotion (AP News, 2018).

In Sri Lanka (2019 Easter Bombings), bombings resulted in more than 250 deaths and a 70% decline in tourist visits and \$1.5 billion in lost business. Rebound involved security upgrades and promotions (Soon, 2019).

Table 4: Comparative Analysis of Tourism Recovery

Region	Incident	Tourism Drop	Recovery Time	Key Strategies
Egypt	2015 Sinai Bombing	~50%	Several Years	Security upgrades, marketing
Sri Lanka	2019 Easter Bombings	70%	1-2 Years	Security, incentives, promotion
Kashmir	2025 Pahalgam Attack	~65%	Ongoing	Security, relief, campaigns

It is vitally important for tourists to see proactive security measures, especially following the incidents such as the Pahalgam attack, to establish travellers' confidence and feelings of safety in the region. The timely, open and clear information provided by the authorities is also important to dispel rumours, and establish confidence that rumours and fears do not guide decisions about whether to travel. (Press Information Bureau, 2025).

Providing instant financial compensation to affected businesses and employees is crucial in averting long-term negative impacts on the tourism-dependent local economy. (Bukhari and Patel, 2025) Finally, coordination with global tourism authorities and stakeholders can help relax travel advisories and spur phased return of international tourists, thus helping the industry recover and improve Kashmir's image as a hospitable destination.

Conclusion

The Pahalgam attack was an overt attack on Kashmir's tourism industry, a significant generator of India's soft power. The violence devastated the economy of the area, probably

reversed integration processes, and increased the risk of radicalization. Not only did the Pahalgam attack have a direct financial impact, but it also damaged India's reputation globally (US State Department, n.d) and underscored the weaknesses of soft power in conflict zones. While the prospect of recovery does exist with India's comprehensive approach to addressing the situation- enhancing security, providing financial support, and promoting tourism-status of all three is in uncertainty.

The experience of Egypt and Sri Lanka allows for examples of resilience, and while it will be up to the people of Kashmir, and for Indian action to provide effective responses, to determine whether or not the area can recover to being known again as a region of beauty and peace, reaffirming the value and enduring capacity of soft power backed by hard policy.

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