JCP JOURNAL OF CREATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Gandhi in Cultural Diplomacy: A Study of Visual and Heritage Representation in Indian Foreign Policy

Parvesh Kumar[1], and Daksh[2]*

[1]*Department of Political Science, Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra, Haryana, India*

[2]*Department of Political Science, Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra, Haryana, India*

**Corresponding author: Daksh, Department of Political Science, Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra, Haryana, India. Email: dakshdahiya360@gmail.com. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9223-8486*

Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi images keep circulating outside India as a tool for diplomacy, statues gifted by the Indian state, and memorials that subsequently become storm centres of a controversy, yet scholarship hasn't really asked why some versions of Gandhian symbolism travel well while others get contested. This gap in scholarship matters because it obscures the truth that heritage means different things to different people depending on who is constructing it. How does the contemporary usage of Gandhi's image in Indian cultural diplomacy relate to and diverge from the visual logic that Gandhi constructed himself, specifically in relation to the Khadi and dress writing (1919-31)? This paper attempts to analyze the posed problem by carrying out qualitative case studies involving the Gandhi's Khadi and dress writings (1919-31) and statue diplomacy in Ghana, Malawi and other countries (2003-22). It analyses this through Winter's heritage diplomacy and Nye's soft-power theory. These results demonstrate that Gandhi continued to give Khadi meaning to himself by continuously explaining it to Indian, British, and international audiences. Statues placed by the state lack this process. Their meaning is claimed through unveiling ceremonies and the support that comes with them, making them vulnerable to challenge. Since the historical evidence is mostly drawn from Gandhi's own literature, this paper does not argue that Khadi was uncontested in its time. This is the more limited point: someone was authoring the meaning of Khadi, and nobody is doing the same for the statues. The paper's contribution is the distinction between authored heritage and asserted heritage. This has implications for our thinking about heritage diplomacy, Indian foreign policy, and visual studies.

Keywords: heritage diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, visual representation, soft power, Khadi, contested memory

1. Introduction

The Indian statecraft uses Gandhi for foreign engagement on the world stage. In 2016, President Pranab Mukherjee went to Accra to unveil a statue of Gandhi at the University of Ghana. Mukherjee also announced Indian investment in the parliament infrastructure of Ghana. This was widely read as a counter to China and its Confucius Institute (Rao, 2023). As Malawian courts blocked a similar statue two years later over planning irregularities and colonial-era racism by Gandhi himself, Indian officials quietly put up the bust instead, on the sovereign grounds of the Indian High Commission in Lilongwe (Rao, 2023). These cases show Gandhi's image isn't just historical memory anymore — it's an active tool of Indian foreign policy, and sometimes a contested one, moving through the same channels as ordinary statecraft: presidential visits, development grants, diplomatic missions. The constant referencing of Gandhi in foreign countries mirrors a claim made by the editors of his own writings. They state that even though the political map of the world has changed dramatically since he passed away, "the moral and ethical issues raised by him… continue to occupy the central stage for the future of individuals and nations" (Dastur and Thakkar 2002, p. 2).

The existing scholarship often divides Gandhi's visual and material inheritance into two separate conversations. Historians as well as design scholars have looked at Khadi along with the clothing choices of Gandhi as artefacts of anti-colonial nationalism. They have traced how cloth became, in his own words, 'the concrete and central fact of swadeshi' (Gandhi 1926) and documented how a textile became a vehicle of national identity (Gonsalves 2015; Shah 2018; Okada 2022). At the same time, the scholars of international relations have examined the present-day soft power and cultural diplomacy of India, temple restorations, yoga diplomacy, cultural centres abroad largely as tools of post-colonial and, more recently, post-2014 Indian statecraft (Isar, 2017; Mahapatra, 2016; Mahaseth, Sarmah and Qureshi, 2023). The literature on Gandhi and contemporary statecraft barely talk to each other, and no one asks about the relationship between the visual symbol Gandhi built himself and the one now exported by the Indian state in his name.

This gap raises a question: How and in what ways does the Indian state's appropriation of Gandhi's image for cultural diplomacy connect and disconnect with the visual and heritage logic Gandhi deployed in his self-representation? The central argument of the paper is that Gandhi's original visual symbolism constructed through his own sustained explanation of dress and material practice was a form of heritage in diplomacy in the sense suggested in Winter (2015). That is, its meaning depended on an ongoing personal exposition, not just the object. Redeployment of the state today takes on a different meaning: heritage and diplomacy as a detachment and state-endowed act of signifying which faces the peril of being an "empty signifier" (Rao, 2023) in a way that makes it more vulnerable to contestation because there is no one around to explain its significance to those receiving it. The article expands on this assertion through a review of existing literature, a discussion of the research methodology, findings, and implications for heritage diplomacy theory.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Gandhi's iconography and the visual construction of Khadi

There's been much research on Gandhi's visual legacy, but mainly regarding how Khadi was created as the national cloth. According to Gonsalves, who studied Gandhi's clothing choices, these looks were a deliberate strategy that evolved over time. The choices, Gonsalves argues, "radically transformed" (Gonsalves, 2015, p. 8) from a wish to resemble an English gentleman to a final, calculated choice to present himself as "an honest representative" of India's poorest. Gandhi himself wrote that he called his loincloth "an organic evolution" specifically so as not to "deceive" his English audience through affectation (Gandhi, 1972). Through a branding lens, Shah (2018) looks at the same material. He argues that Khadi's "colourless, coarse" texture was purposely promoted to strip out caste, class and region markers. It turns "a communal or a regional identity into a pan-Indian identity" (Shah, 2018, p. 211). Okada (2022) carries this forward, showing how Khadi splits into two on the one hand, a national cloth laden with political significance, and on the other, a commodity in global sustainable fashion marked by designers like Issey Miyake. As a whole, the text treats Khadi as a symbol whose meaning Gandhi actively built, explained, and embodied himself, not something that sat there as an artefact.

2.2 Heritage diplomacy, soft power, and India's cultural statecraft

Political scientists and heritage scholars have written a whole body of work on how symbols like this function diplomatically. Nye (2004) introduced the concept of soft power to frame a nation's culture, values and policy as resources of attraction that work through "co-optive" rather than coercive means (Nye, 2004, p. 7). Winter (2015; 2023) takes this further for heritage specifically, differentiating heritage in diplomacy conservation aid and technical assistance exchanged between states from heritage as diplomacy, where states invoke a language of 'shared heritage' to build diplomatic legitimacy (Winter, 2015, pp. 1008-1009). Isar (2017) contends that India's cultural statecraft is guided by an outdated understanding of 'international cultural relations' rather than the more contemporary perspective of 'soft power' . Mahapatra (2016) and Mahaseth, Sarmah and Qureshi (2023) identify India's use of yoga diplomacy, restoration of temples in India's neighbourhood and establishment of cultural centres abroad as means by which India leverages Gandhian nonviolence and civilisational values as diplomatic resources. Rao (2023) made things complex. While the statues of Gandhi that India gifts overseas are tangible tools of foreign policy with concrete consequences — investment in infrastructure in Ghana, and development aid in Malawi — they have become sites of sustained international backlash.

2.3 The gap

A large gap is becoming clearer between the two literatures. Research on Khadi sees Gandhi's visual self-representation mostly as a concluded historical episode of nationalist construction, with little analysis of the present. Research on India's contemporary soft power tells us that Gandhi's image is just one of many soft-power resources. Despite this observation, they do not ask how the logic of that image's original construction relates to its present diplomatic circulation. Moreover, the same individual who was able to successfully author his own visual meaning now sees contestation when

the state asserts that meaning on his behalf. Rao (2023) provides the closest approach to addressing this gap, albeit through the lens of memory politics rather than heritage diplomacy theory specifically. This study seeks to fill this gap by taking Gandhi's own historical self-representation and contrasting it with the Indian state's contemporary statue diplomacy. Based on Winter's heritage-diplomacy model, the research provides an account of how the two kinds of Gandhian symbols create meaning differently and why that might make the state's monuments more vulnerable to challenge.

3. Method and Methodology

The research utilises a qualitative interpretive design approach. In addition, it involves both historical discourse analysis and comparative case study. These two approaches may be effectively combined in cases where scholars find both visual and textual data attractive. By closely examining two sets of linked cases that were chosen to demonstrate the connection between Gandhi's self-designed visual heritage and its contemporary state-sponsored redeployment, it does not evaluate a hypothesis against a representative sample.

The first cluster is selected speeches, interviews and writing of Gandhi on Khadi and dress (1919-1931), chosen from the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (Vol. 17-21, 24, 35, 53 and 54), and the compiled anthology Gandhiji on Khadi. This period was selected because it spans the whole arc of Gandhi building Khadi as a domestic political symbol through to its international performance at the 1931 Round Table Conference in London, a coherent record of how he reasoned about presenting himself visually to both Indian and foreign audiences.

The second cluster deals with Indian states' use of Gandhi statues abroad. These involve a series of installations and controversies in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Accra, Blantyre and Manchester (2003 – 2022). These cases are the most clearly available record of Gandhi's image circulating as an instrument of formal diplomacy – bundled with development grants, ministerial visits, and trade negotiations – while provoking international pushback in documented form.

Both clusters were analysed using Winter's heritage-diplomacy typology, particularly the division of heritage in diplomacy and heritage as diplomacy, as well as Nye's soft-power concepts. The paper examines the primary material to reveal how meaning is constructed and by whom. Is the meaning constructed through Gandhi's own persistent explanation or through a state assertion detached from any personal authorship?

In order to link the evidence to the theory, the analysis asks the same two questions from both groups: Who gives the interpretation of the symbol? And is it an interpretation customised for the audience that perceives it? In addition, it notes the reception evidence of the sources. Heritage is defined as authored when there is continual interpretation of it customised for its audience, and as 'asserted' when its interpretation comes mainly through its installation, ceremony and transaction. The reception evidence should be interpreted carefully because of reasons that will be explained below.

This design is limited because it only incorporates the early example of the Khadi and the trip to London in 1931; it leaves out Gandhi's iconography from currency, memorials, and domestic architecture. The modern case relies heavily on one secondary source for its record of statue disputes and includes neither fieldwork nor diplomatic archives. Consequently, the analysis is interpretive, not exhaustive.

Furthermore, there is a imbalance within the evidence used by the project. In the case of the Khadi cluster, there is a reliance exclusively upon the documents written by Gandhi himself that reveal how he articulated his clothing, but not the reaction to his clothing. For the case of the statues, there is documentation through evidence of receptions such as petitions, judicial decisions, and acts of vandalism. As such, a comparison between the two time periods based on reception cannot be made on equal grounds.

4. Results

4.1 Gandhi's deliberate authorship of Khadi as visual communication

The main evidence reveals Gandhi consistently articulating the rationale for his visual selections out loud and not allowing them to circulate as self-evident signifiers. Gandhi connected Khadi to swaraj itself. In 1922, he wrote, "We cannot claim to have understood the meaning of swaraj till khadi becomes as universal as currency" (Gandhi, 1922, cited in Joshi, 2002). In addition to this, Gandhi referred to the symbolism of the charkha to advocate for the unity of all religions and regions. He said that it was 'the only device which makes us all feel we are children of the same land' (Gandhi, 1925, cited in Joshi, 2002). Further, he asserted that the rough, undyed fabric was a rejection of "outward show" and not an aesthetic accident (Gandhi, 1921). Gandhi explained in London in 1931 what he wore before British audiences could misread it and actually took the lead. The loincloth, he said, was "an organic evolution in my life", and he said that he chose it as "I should be guilty of discourtesy to the English if I deceived them by appearing not as I am" (Gandhi, 1972). He directly framed the choice in the terms of representation on behalf of "the teeming and naked millions" of India rather than being a personal statement (Gandhi, 1972). All taken together, these passages indicate that the meaning of Khadi in foreign countries was constructed by Gandhi's own constant interpretation of it. These passages are proof of his interpretation of the symbol rather than the reception of it by others. Gandhi did not wear a symbol merely as a badge. He kept telling the people who encountered it its meaning, adjusting it for Indian, British and international audiences. In the terms of Section 3, Gandhi explained the symbol himself and tailored that explanation to each audience, which is what the paper calls authored heritage.

4.2 The Indian state's statue diplomacy as detached symbolic assertion

In contrast, the modern material demonstrates that Gandhi's image is being used abroad mainly through official unveilings and bundled diplomatic deals and a comparative lack of explanation. President of India, Pranab Mukherjee, launched the 2016 Ghana statue along with Indian investment in national infrastructure – a gesture interpreted regionally as countering Chinese influence (Rao, 2023, p. 2). The 2018 Malawi controversy was

triggered by a £7.8 million grant for a convention centre to be named after Gandhi. When local courts forbade erecting the statue for public display, Indian officials decided to unveil it at the Indian High Commission instead of abandoning the gesture entirely (Rao, 2023, p. 3). In each case, it is the material and financial context of the statue (a diplomatic gift attached to capital investment) which asserts its meaning, rather than any sustained engagement with local audiences about what Gandhi's image is supposed to mean. With regard to Section 3, the Indian state interprets the meaning of the statues through ceremonial and financial means and does not seem to adapt this interpretation to the needs of the population receiving the statues. This is what the paper refers to as asserted heritage. The analysis is based primarily on one secondary source (Rao, 2023).

4.3 Divergent patterns of reception

The two clusters also differ in terms of the reception that the sources provide, although again the information is inconsistent. For Khadi, the major sources include Gandhi's writings, which will not be able to document the reaction of those who saw it. Certainly, Khadi would have faced its own kind of resistance in Britain as well as India, but the sources used in the study would not be able to gauge the extent of that resistance. Therefore, this study does not suggest that Khadi was uncontested. What the sources can indicate is limited: when Gandhi's dress was subject to criticism, he was there to respond, as he did in London in 1931. The current documentation is more extensive: statues in Ghana were removed following faculty petitions; those in Malawi were suspended by a court order; they were vandalised as part of the worldwide protests in 2020 (Rao, 2023, pp. 2-3). This pushback focuses more on Gandhi's own history rather than on the political agreements that surrounded the erection of the statue. Thus, what the evidence suggests is a contrast between a symbol whose significance was defended in person as problems arose with another symbol that had no means by which to respond to the same questions. It is not whether either symbol was questioned.

5. Discussion

The ideas presented in Section 4 are similar to Winter's (2015) distinction between "heritage in diplomacy, and "heritage as diplomacy". However, they also indicate a gap in that framework as originally built. Winter's categorisation distinguishes these modes primarily based on their institutional mechanisms of conservation aid and technical exchange on one side and the invoked "shared heritage" on the other but ignores authorship: who actually does the work of explaining what the heritage object means, and to whom. The Khadi case indicates that it is only Gandhi's symbol because of Gandhi's continuous interpretive work, adapting his explanation for Indian, British and international audiences in turn. The statue instance shows the opposite: the Indian state deploys Gandhi through transaction and unveiling but rarely through anything like the same engagement with the audiences receiving it. Thus, the shift from heritage in diplomacy to heritage as diplomacy here is also the shift from heritage authored to heritage asserted. This literature has not made the second distinction. Winter later reflects on this point, saying that heritage diplomacy acts as "a conceptual frame for understanding the ways in which heritage has become a site where specialists, policymakers, bureaucrats, scholars, public servants, entrepreneurs, and corporations all engage with state apparatus" (Winter 2023, p. 131). On

this view, there may be multiple authors of heritage meaning. It does not, however, ask which of them holds interpretive control.

This distinction helps to account for something that Rao (2023) documents but does not explain: Why have Gandhi's statues drawn organised contestation since the state took over narrating his image? Rao attributes the change in the global discourse, which includes decolonial movements in the African academy, Afropessimism, and the rise of new Dalit politics, to the statues, which are only a trigger for a historical process that was already unfolding.

The analysis suggests a complementary point – the statue form is not just an incidental occasion for contestation; it is structurally different from Gandhi's own symbolic practice in ways that make contestation more likely. A statue conveys significance simply through its installation. It cannot modify its justification when questioned, cannot directly address an antagonistic crowd, and is unable to pre-empt misinterpretation via direct address the way Gandhi did in 1931. Using Khadi let Gandhi answer questions as they came up; the state's statues can only be defended or taken down.

One reasonable counterargument might be that this seemingly apparent difference is not due to a real structural difference but rather an artefact of historical distance. Gandhi's Khadi may have been just as imposed and contested in its own moment. The absence of comparable primary-source evidence of contemporaneous backlash may reflect gaps in the record rather than an actual absence of contestation. That's a fair word of caution, and as this study does draw on Gandhi's writings rather than independent contemporaneous British or Indian accounts of reception, it cannot rule that out completely. Opposition to the statues focuses on Gandhi's historical record on race and caste, not on the diplomatic deals surrounding their installation (Rao, 2023). This certainly doesn't mean Khadi was unopposed. The implication here is that the debate over the sculptures is really about the historical individual and not about the diplomatic agreement. This supports the idea that an assertion of meaning opens up the history for debate, though not entirely proving it.

There is more to these findings than Gandhi. According to heritage diplomacy theory, Winter's typology needs to have an explicit authorship dimension, not just where heritage gets mobilised institutionally, but who keeps interpretive control over its meaning as it travels. For Indian foreign policy, however, statuary diplomacy – while perhaps effective in the short term – risks being structurally more precarious than the visual heritage practices it seeks to invokes, as it replicates the sign but not the process by which the original produced enduring interpretive power. In design and visual studies, the case suggests that a symbol's diplomatic portability may depend less on its visual content than on whether a practice of explanation travels with the symbol itself. These cases raise the question of whether other states use historical figures in the same way, but they are not enough to answer it.

6. Conclusion

The paper has traced the life of the same symbol in two different ways. Gandhi's Khadi was never static; Gandhi was constantly explaining, defending and adapting its meaning to whoever encountered it. The Indian state's statues of Gandhi, by contrast,

undergo a transaction and unveiling yet arrive without quite the same interpretive labour as brought to the original. This leaves them unable to answer scrutiny the way Gandhi himself could.

The main contribution here is to sharpen a distinction that the dimensions of heritage diplomacy theorisation have not yet fully elaborated. That between heritage that is authored – through sustained personal or institutional explanation – and heritage that is asserted merely through its installation and transaction. In the instances considered here, this can help account for why the visual legacy of one historical person can serve as a form of soft power or even generate ongoing diplomatic disputes. Which one it becomes will depend upon how it is passed along.

Future research may expand this comparison to a broader set of postcolonial leader-images whose circulation takes place as tools of states' diplomacy. Alternatively, it may ask whether interpretive strategies short of full personal narration curatorial framing, accompanying public programming can actually lessen the vulnerability of asserted heritage to contestation.

AI Declaration

The authors confirm that they did not utilise any artificial intelligence tools or artificial intelligence assisted technologies in the creation, writing, editing, analysis, or production of this manuscript. Furthermore, the authors confirm that they are solely responsible for their manuscript's content, accuracy, interpretation, and findings.

References

Dastur, A. and Thakkar, U. (2002) 'Preface', in Joshi, D. (ed.) *Gandhiji on Khadi*. Mumbai: Mani Bhavan Gandhi Sangrahalaya, p. 2.

Gandhi, M.K. (1919) *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 17. New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India.

Gandhi, M.K. (1919) *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 18. New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India.

Gandhi, M.K. (1920) *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 19. New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India.

Gandhi, M.K. (1920) *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 20. New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India.

Gandhi, M.K. (1920) *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 21. New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India.

Gandhi, M.K. (1921) *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 24. New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India.

Gandhi, M.K. (1926) *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 35. New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India.

Gandhi, M.K. (1972) *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 53. New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India.

Gandhi, M.K. (1973) *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 54. New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India.

Gonsalves, P. (2015) 'Clothing choices in Gandhi's Swadeshi Movement', *Gandhi Marg*, 37(1), pp. 7–28.

Isar, Y.R. (2017) 'Cultural diplomacy: India does it differently', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 23(6), pp. 705–716.

Joshi, D. (ed.) (2002) *Gandhiji on Khadi*. Mumbai: Mani Bhavan Gandhi Sangrahalaya.

Mahapatra, D.A. (2016) 'From a latent to a "strong" soft power? The evolution of India's cultural diplomacy', *Palgrave Communications*, 2, 16091, pp. 1–15.

Mahaseth, H., Sarmah, U.K. and Qureshi, S. (2023) 'Temple diplomacy and India's soft power: a cultural approach to diplomacy in Southeast Asian states', *India Review*, 22(1), pp. 28–42.

Nye, J.S. (2004) *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: PublicAffairs.

Okada, Y. (2022) 'Transformation of Gandhi's khadi: from a national symbol to an icon of sustainable product', *The Journal of the Asian Conference of Design History and Theory*, 4, pp. 80–88.

Rao, R. (2023) 'Gandhi falling ... and rising', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 82, pp. 1–10.

Shah, N. (2018) 'The political economy of branding: khadi, colonialism and Indian nationhood', *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing*, 10(3), pp. 197–223.

Winter, T. (2015) 'Heritage diplomacy', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 21(10), pp. 997–1015.

Winter, T. (2023) 'Heritage diplomacy: an afterword', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 29(1), pp. 130–134.