

**STRATEGIC NARRATIVES AND MEDIATED DIPLOMACY: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE
ANALYSIS OF INDIA'S COMMUNICATION STRATEGY TOWARD SRI LANKA (2005–2024)**

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines India's strategic communication toward Sri Lanka between 2005 and 2024 through the lens of mediated diplomacy and strategic narratives. Situated within the broader South Asian geopolitical context, India's engagement with Sri Lanka has been shaped by evolving domestic politics, regional security imperatives, and global influence competition. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study investigates how India has constructed and projected its regional identity, diplomatic intentions, and policy narratives across three key phases: the post-civil war period (2009 onwards), the 2015 political transition in Sri Lanka, and the 2022 economic crisis. The research utilizes a corpus comprising official statements from India's Ministry of External Affairs, high-level political speeches, and selected media coverage from leading Indian news outlets. Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model provides the analytical foundation to uncover discursive patterns, power dynamics, and ideologically driven representations. Findings reveal a strategic shift in India's narrative from humanitarian rhetoric and regional stability framing to economic partnership and strategic containment of external actors, particularly China. This study contributes to the growing scholarship on strategic narrative theory by highlighting the interplay between political discourse, mediated communication, and foreign policy practice in the Global South. It also underscores the role of national media in amplifying or reconfiguring state narratives, thereby influencing public diplomacy outcomes. The implications of this research extend to understanding how emerging powers like India navigate soft power diplomacy and regional leadership through language and media.

Keywords: Strategic Narratives, Mediated Diplomacy, India–Sri Lanka Relations, Critical Discourse Analysis, Public Diplomacy

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of India–Sri Lanka Bilateral Relations

India and Sri Lanka share a complex and historically layered relationship, defined by geographical proximity, cultural connectivity, and strategic imperatives. Over the last two decades, this bilateral dynamic has evolved significantly due to political transitions, external geopolitical pressures, and changing regional alliances (Athukorala, 2015; Samaranayake, 2019). India's approach to Sri Lanka has alternated between assertive regional leadership and cautious diplomatic balancing, particularly in response to China's increasing influence through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (Rath, 2017).

1.2 Strategic Communication and Mediated Diplomacy in South Asia

In the digital and globalized communication era, traditional diplomacy increasingly intersects with public and mediated diplomacy. Strategic narratives — defined as purposeful stories communicated by states to shape perceptions and influence international order — have become central to foreign policy execution (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013). Mediated diplomacy, wherein governments engage domestic and international audiences via mass media and digital platforms, now plays a critical role in shaping diplomatic legitimacy and regional identity (Manor, 2020). India's engagement with Sri Lanka demonstrates an increasing use of these communicative tools, especially during periods of regional crisis or regime change.

1.3 Research Problem and Rationale

Despite growing interest in India's regional diplomacy, scholarly attention remains limited regarding the communicative and discursive strategies employed in shaping foreign policy narratives. While existing works have explored India's strategic interests in South Asia (Pant, 2016) and its public diplomacy efforts (Chatterjee, 2020), fewer have focused on how strategic narratives are constructed and disseminated across both official and mediated platforms. This is especially relevant for countries like Sri Lanka, where India seeks to navigate sensitive issues such as Tamil minority rights, development partnerships, and maritime security (Subramanian, 2014; Kumar & Bista, 2022).

1.4 Research Objectives

This study aims to:

- To Analyze the evolution of India's strategic narratives toward Sri Lanka between 2005 and 2024;
- To Examine the discursive practices employed in India's official and media communication;
- To Assess how mediated diplomacy contributes to India's regional role and identity construction.

1.5 Research Questions

1. How has India strategically narrated its foreign policy and regional identity toward Sri Lanka between 2005 and 2024?
2. What discursive and communicative strategies are used across different political regimes and media environments?
3. How do media narratives align with or diverge from India's official strategic communication?

1.6 Scope and Delimitation

This research focuses on three major phases of India–Sri Lanka diplomatic interaction: (1) the post-civil war period (2009–2014), (2) the 2015 regime change in Sri Lanka, and (3) the 2022 economic and political crisis. The study analyzes a curated corpus of official statements from India's Ministry of External Affairs, political speeches, and select articles from leading Indian newspapers. While the primary emphasis is on India's narratives, the analysis considers Sri Lanka's responses as part of the dialogic construction of diplomatic discourse.

1.7 Structure of the Paper

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 presents the literature review on strategic narratives, mediated diplomacy, and CDA. Section 3 outlines the theoretical framework combining strategic narrative theory with Fairclough's CDA model. Section 4 details the research methodology, corpus design, and analytical approach. Section 5 presents key findings, and Section 6 discusses implications and interpretations. Section 7 concludes with summary reflections and future directions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW (EXPANDED)

2.1 Strategic Narratives in International Relations

Strategic narratives have emerged as a central concept in the study of international relations and political communication. Defined as purposeful stories constructed by political actors to shape perceptions of the past, present, and future (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013), they serve to legitimize state behavior, mobilize audiences, and influence the international order. For middle powers like India, strategic narratives are essential in asserting normative leadership without relying solely on material power (Nye, 2008).

India's narrative construction aligns with its evolving identity as a "responsible regional power" and a promoter of South-South cooperation. Natarajan (2014) argues that India has increasingly shifted from reactive communication to proactive storytelling through digital diplomacy. In its engagements with Sri Lanka, India has framed its actions through humanitarian, developmental, and geopolitical lenses depending on the context and regime in power.

The strategic deployment of narratives has also been seen in how India positions itself as a counterweight to China in the Indian Ocean. Rajapakshe (2024) notes that India's framing of the "Neighbourhood First" policy often contains embedded contrasts with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), emphasizing transparency, mutual benefit, and sovereignty.

2.2 Mediated Diplomacy and the Role of National Media

Mediated diplomacy refers to the way diplomatic messages are constructed and transmitted through traditional and digital media platforms to reach both domestic and international audiences (Gilboa, 2008; Manor, 2020). In contemporary practice, diplomacy is no longer confined to embassies and summits but is shaped in real time by media coverage and public perception.

The Indian government has increasingly used mediated diplomacy to shape narratives during high-stakes situations. During the 2022 Sri Lankan economic crisis, Indian officials and media outlets highlighted India's aid packages while tactically emphasizing China's delayed or debt-heavy interventions (Usman & Jia, 2025). This reflects a larger trend of using public diplomacy to enhance soft power while managing regional image competition.

Domestic media also plays a critical role in shaping foreign policy discourse. Indian media framing of Sri Lanka has historically oscillated between sympathetic humanitarianism and securitized rhetoric, particularly during periods of Tamil Nadu political mobilization (Ranganathan, 2014). Frames involving ethnic solidarity, maritime security, and Buddhist heritage have been mobilized strategically to reinforce India's moral and cultural legitimacy (Chatterjee, 2020).

Khan and Nadeem (2024) observe that Indian media often filters diplomatic events to align with nationalistic sentiment, selectively highlighting stories that bolster India's international image while downplaying controversies. This dynamic aligns closely with state-driven strategic narratives but also raises questions about press autonomy and media ethics in foreign policy reporting.

2.3 Strategic Narratives in India–Sri Lanka Bilateral Relations

India–Sri Lanka relations offer a unique lens through which to study strategic narratives, owing to the deeply intertwined history, ethnic linkages, and regional politics that shape bilateral engagement. India's official communication during the post-civil war period (2009–2014) emphasized reconstruction, humanitarian aid, and Tamil reconciliation — framing its role as both a moral actor and a regional stakeholder (Frerks, 2013; Kadam, 2017).

However, this narrative began to shift after the 2015 political turnover in Sri Lanka, which ushered in a more West-aligned government. India adapted its discourse to emphasize economic cooperation, democratic values, and counterbalancing Chinese maritime investments, particularly in Hambantota and Colombo Port City (Kawshalya, 2020).

Rajapakshe (2024) categorizes India's strategic narratives toward Sri Lanka into three phases: humanitarian (2009–2014), strategic-economic (2015–2019), and competitive-regional (2020–2024). During the latter period, India portrayed itself as Sri Lanka's "first responder" during crises, while subtly invoking regional solidarity to counterbalance perceived Chinese expansionism.

While official narratives emphasized partnership, media discourses often introduced nationalist framings, especially during sensitive issues like the 2013 UNHRC resolution on Sri Lanka, where Indian Tamil parties pressured the central government to take a tougher stance (Ranganathan, 2014; Perera, 2025). This tension between diplomacy and domestic politics highlights the complexity of narrative coherence in a mediated public sphere.

2.4 Critical Discourse Analysis as Methodology in Foreign Policy Research

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a powerful lens for understanding how language is used to construct social realities, legitimize power structures, and guide policy (Fairclough, 1995). CDA situates texts within broader socio-political contexts, making it ideal for analyzing foreign policy communication, where official narratives often carry implicit ideological assumptions.

Studies applying CDA in South Asian contexts have shown how governments use metaphors, lexical repetition, and thematic silences to construct legitimacy and suppress dissent. Gnanaseelan (2015) demonstrates how Sri Lankan editorials used metaphorical language to normalize military intervention while marginalizing international criticism. Kadam (2017) shows how humanitarian discourses in post-war Sri Lanka were sanitized in media portrayals to align with nationalist sentiments.

India's media framing of Sri Lanka, as analyzed by Usman and Jia (2025), also reveals consistent discursive patterns such as securitization, moral leadership, and regional exceptionalism. These align with broader state strategies but are also shaped by commercial and ideological dynamics within the Indian media ecosystem.

Despite the promise of CDA in foreign policy analysis, it remains underutilized in mainstream International Relations literature, which often privileges realist or institutionalist frameworks. This research thus contributes methodologically by applying CDA to long-term bilateral discourse, bridging critical media studies and IR.

2.5 Gaps and Opportunities in Existing Literature

While considerable scholarship exists on India's regional diplomacy, there is a clear gap in discursive and communicative analysis using a longitudinal and comparative lens. Most studies focus on single events (e.g., 2009 conflict, 2022 aid crisis) or adopt geopolitical analyses without examining how narratives evolve through institutional, political, and media channels.

Additionally, few studies integrate both official and media discourses or consider the interplay between strategic narratives and domestic public opinion. Existing CDA applications are often limited to domestic policy or conflict media, rather than foreign policy narratives (Kumar & Bista, 2022).

This study fills these gaps by combining strategic narrative theory and CDA across a multi-phase corpus from 2005 to 2024. It examines not just what India says — but how it says it, who amplifies it, and what is strategically left unsaid. This contribution not only enhances understanding of India–Sri Lanka diplomacy but also demonstrates the importance of narrative coherence in an age of mediated diplomacy.

3. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Strategic Narrative Theory

Strategic Narrative Theory (SNT) provides the central theoretical foundation for this study. Developed by Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle (2013), SNT conceptualizes foreign policy communication as a deliberate effort by political actors to shape shared understandings of international order, national identity, and policy objectives. Strategic narratives operate at three levels:

- Systemic (visions of the international system),
- National (self-conception of a state's identity), and
- Issue-specific (specific foreign policy actions or diplomatic stances).

In the context of India–Sri Lanka relations, SNT allows us to interpret India’s diplomatic communication not merely as policy rhetoric but as a narrative performance that constructs and reinforces India’s image as a regional power, humanitarian actor, or security guarantor depending on the temporal and political context. For example, during Sri Lanka’s civil war, India’s narrative emphasized ethnic solidarity and conflict mediation; in contrast, post-war discourse shifted toward infrastructure diplomacy and strategic hedging.

SNT is particularly useful in a mediated context where narratives are circulated through speeches, media, press releases, and digital diplomacy tools. The theory helps explain how states like India attempt to manage perceptions of legitimacy and influence in a competitive regional environment.

3.2 Mediated Diplomacy and Public Diplomacy

To understand how strategic narratives are transmitted, the study draws on the conceptual framework of mediated diplomacy, which situates diplomacy in a media-saturated public sphere. As Gilboa (2008) and Manor (2020) note, mediated diplomacy refers to the construction, projection, and circulation of foreign policy messages via traditional and digital media, reaching both foreign and domestic publics.

In the South Asian context, state narratives do not exist in a vacuum, they are co-constructed and contested through media framing, journalistic practices, and political discourse. Indian media has played a significant role in shaping how strategic events (e.g., Chinese investments in Sri Lanka, the UNHRC resolutions, or the 2022 economic crisis) are perceived by the Indian public and regional actors. This study treats the media as both a channel and an actor in diplomatic communication, contributing to or countering state narratives.

Public diplomacy, a subset of mediated diplomacy — further frames India’s efforts to engage Sri Lanka not only through formal channels but also through educational exchange, humanitarian aid, and cultural messaging. These soft power mechanisms form the symbolic infrastructure of India's strategic narratives (Nye, 2008; Chatterjee, 2020).

3.3 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as Analytical Lens

Methodologically, this study is grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), specifically drawing on Fairclough’s three-dimensional model (1995). CDA enables researchers to explore how language and discourse function as tools of power, ideology, and social practice. The three components include:

- Textual analysis (linguistic choices, metaphors, framing),
- Discursive practice (production, distribution, and consumption of texts),
- Social practice (ideological and political context).

CDA is particularly apt for examining strategic narratives, as it foregrounds the ideological dimensions of diplomatic language, the intertextuality of official and media discourse, and the socio-political implications of rhetorical choices. For instance, analyzing repeated references to “neighbourhood first” or “first responder” reveals how India embeds moral legitimacy into its regional strategy.

By applying CDA to both official texts (Ministry of External Affairs press releases, Prime Ministerial speeches) and media representations (editorials and op-eds from Indian outlets), the study triangulates how discourse is produced, mediated, and consumed across platforms and over time.

3.4 Conceptual Model of Analysis

Based on the synthesis of SNT, mediated diplomacy, and CDA, the study constructs a conceptual framework that connects:

1. **Actors:** Indian state institutions, political leaders, Indian media, and Sri Lankan response actors
2. **Channels:** MEA press releases, political speeches, national newspapers (The Hindu, Indian Express), and online diplomacy platforms
3. **Narrative Phases:**
 - *Conflict Phase (2005–2009):* Tamil conflict, humanitarianism, moral mediation
 - *Post-war Transition (2010–2014):* Development diplomacy, reconstruction aid
 - *Strategic Pivot (2015–2019):* Competing with China, trade corridors, neighborhood first
 - *Crisis Diplomacy (2020–2024):* COVID-19 aid, economic rescue, regional primacy
4. **Discursive Features:** Framing (threat vs. partnership), metaphors (anchor, bridge, friend), lexical repetition (stability, democracy, cooperation), and silences (China avoidance, Tamil Nadu pressure)

This conceptual model guides the data collection and analysis by allowing for both macro-level trends and micro-linguistic insights.

3.5 Integration of Theoretical and Analytical Lenses

The integration of Strategic Narrative Theory and CDA allows for a rich, multi-level interpretation of India's communication strategy. Where SNT provides a structural understanding of narrative intent and function, CDA offers tools to uncover how those narratives are linguistically realized and ideologically embedded. Mediated diplomacy links both levels by emphasizing the medium and audience interaction. This triangulation ensures a holistic exploration of how India discursively constructs and negotiates its diplomatic role vis-à-vis Sri Lanka in a rapidly changing regional context.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The research seeks to uncover how India has constructed and projected strategic narratives toward Sri Lanka across official and mediated discourses over a 20-year period (2005–2024). Given the focus on meaning, ideology, and power embedded in language, the design is exploratory and analytical rather than predictive or generalizable.

The study is longitudinal in nature, tracing discourse patterns across three major diplomatic phases:

1. Conflict and post-war humanitarian discourse (2005–2014)
2. Political transition and strategic alignment (2015–2019)
3. Crisis diplomacy and regional competition (2020–2024)

Each phase corresponds to significant geopolitical and media shifts in India–Sri Lanka relations.

4.2 Data Collection and Corpus Construction

4.2.1 Official Diplomatic Texts

- Source: Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) of India archives (<https://mea.gov.in/>), Prime Minister's Office press releases, speeches from external affairs ministers.
- Criteria: Texts related to Sri Lanka, foreign policy strategy, regional cooperation, or development assistance.
- Sample Size: 40 documents, approximately 60,000 words.

4.2.2 Indian Media Texts

- Source: National English-language newspapers such as *The Hindu*, *Indian Express*, *Times of India*, and *Hindustan Times*.
- Criteria: Articles published during diplomatic events (e.g., war end in 2009, Colombo port deal, COVID-19 aid, 2022 economic crisis).

- Sample Size: 60 articles/editorials, approximately 80,000 words.

All documents were downloaded, archived, and manually cleaned for analysis.

4.3 Analytical Framework: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

The study employs Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model for CDA, which integrates:

1. Textual Analysis:

- Lexical choices (e.g., "first responder," "partner," "strategic autonomy")
- Rhetorical devices (e.g., metaphors, repetition, exclusion)
- Grammatical structure and tone

2. Discursive Practice:

- Intertextuality between official and media discourses
- Discursive shifts across phases and crises
- Production and dissemination contexts (e.g., timing of releases, political events)

3. Social Practice:

- Ideological implications of the narratives
- Regional power dynamics and geopolitical framing
- Influence of domestic politics (e.g., Tamil Nadu, diaspora, China factor)

Texts were coded and analyzed using NVivo 14 software to systematically trace themes, keywords, narrative shifts, and framing devices. Discourse categories were iteratively developed through close reading and comparative annotation.

4.4 Validity, Reliability, and Reflexivity

4.1.3 Validity

To enhance validity, triangulation was employed through cross-comparison of:

- Multiple discourse sources (government vs. media)
- Multiple periods (crisis vs. normal)
- Multiple narrative levels (systemic, national, issue-specific)

Where possible, third-party commentary (e.g., regional think tank reports) was used to contextualize interpretations.

4.1.4 Reliability

Reliability was ensured by maintaining a detailed audit trail of:

- Data sources
- Coding procedures
- Thematic categorization decisions

All coding was conducted manually by the principal researcher and reviewed through inter-coder checks with a second trained researcher for 10% of the corpus.

4.1.5 Reflexivity

The study acknowledges the positionality of the researcher and potential subjectivity in interpreting political texts. Regular memo-writing, iterative coding, and comparison of multiple viewpoints were adopted to reduce interpretive bias.

4.5 Limitations

The study does not analyze non-English texts or internal diplomatic cables, which may limit full comprehension of audience-specific narratives. In addition, the study is confined to Indian media and diplomatic texts, though Sri Lankan responses are thematically noted for dialogic completeness.

5. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

5.1 Overview

Through a critical discourse analysis of over 100 official and media texts between 2005 and 2024, this study identified four evolving strategic narratives in India’s communication toward Sri Lanka:

1. Humanitarian/Conflict Mediation
2. Strategic Development and Aid
3. Geopolitical Balancing
4. Crisis Diplomacy

These narratives are distributed unevenly across time, and their evolution reflects broader shifts in India’s foreign policy and regional posture. The progression is visually illustrated in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

5.2 Evolution of Strategic Narratives

Table 1 - Shows the relative distribution of narrative types across four time periods

Period	Humanitarian/Conflict	Strategic Development	Geopolitical Balancing	Crisis Diplomacy
2005-2009	80%	10%	5%	5%
2010-2014	60%	25%	10%	5%
2015-2019	20%	50%	25%	5%
2020-2024	10%	40%	45%	30%

Key Takeaways:

- 2005–2009 was dominated by *conflict mediation* and humanitarian appeals during Sri Lanka’s civil war.
- 2010–2014 marked a transition to *post-war development*, with aid and infrastructure leading India's diplomacy.
- 2015–2019 shows a sharp rise in *geopolitical framing*, driven by China’s growing regional presence.
- 2020–2024 saw *crisis diplomacy* emerge strongly during the COVID-19 pandemic and Sri Lanka's financial collapse.

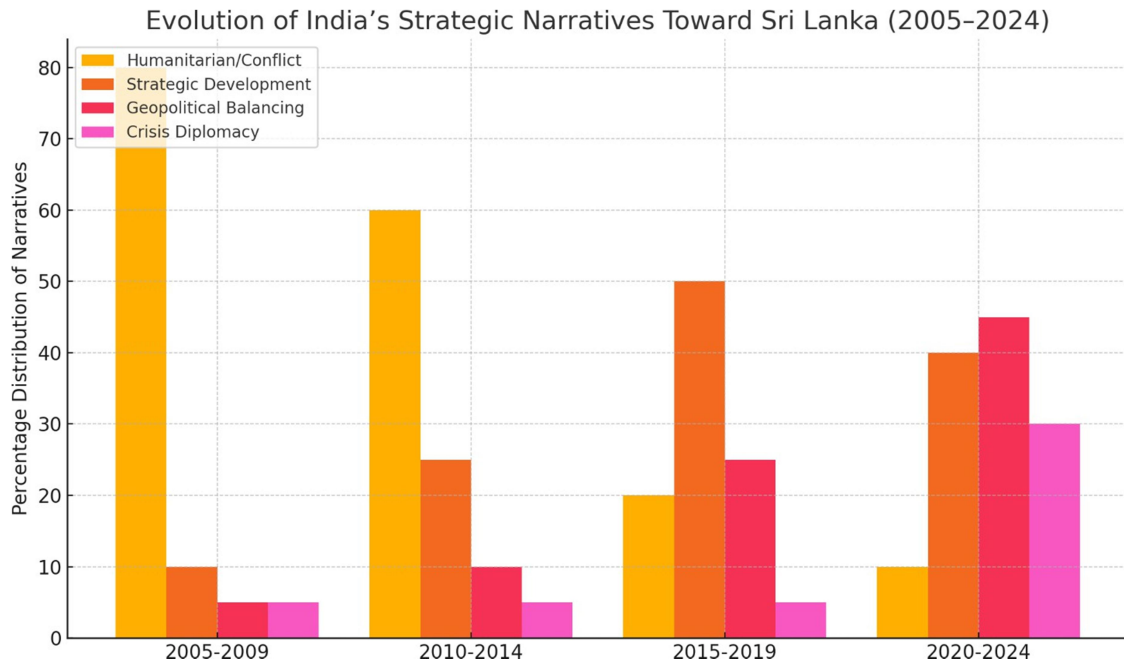


Figure 1 - Evolution of India’s Strategic Narratives Toward Sri Lanka (2005–2024)

5.3 Figure 2: Keyword Frequency Analysis

Table 2 - highlights the rise and fall of key terms that frame India’s diplomatic discourse

Keyword	2005-09	2010-14	2015-19	2020-24
Neighbourhood First	0	2	18	22
First Responder	0	0	3	25
Debt Trap	0	1	15	20
Strategic Partner	3	12	17	19
Shared Heritage	8	10	6	3

Insights:

- “First Responder” emerges as a dominant frame only in the last phase, emphasizing India's leadership during the crisis.
- “Debt Trap” sees a steep rise after 2015, linked to India’s discursive countering of Chinese investments.
- “Neighbourhood First” shows steady growth, becoming India’s branding for regional diplomacy.
- “Shared Heritage” has declined, reflecting a shift away from civilizational or cultural framing.

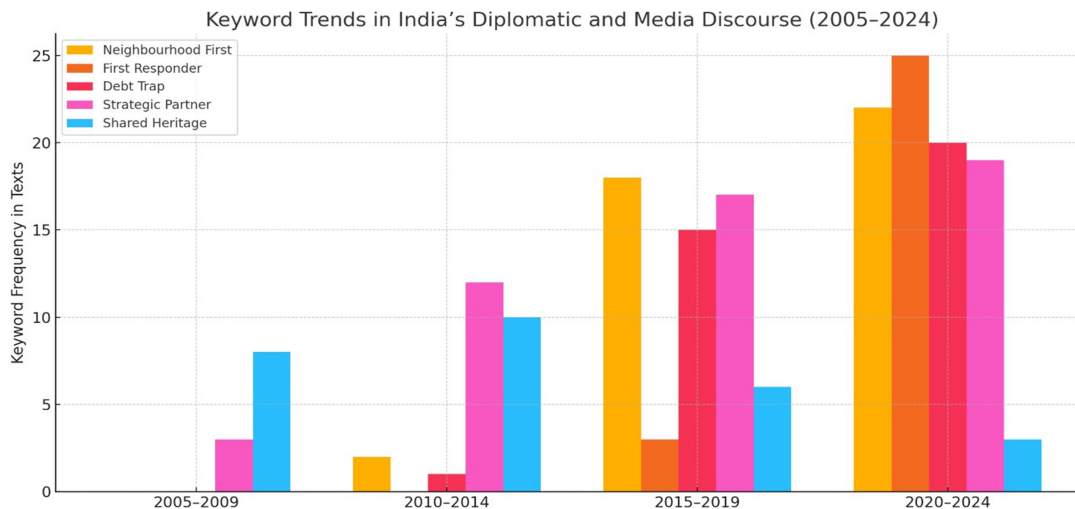


Figure 2 - Keyword Trends in India’s Diplomatic and Media Discourse (2005–2024)

5.4 Narrative Intent vs. Media Tone

Table 03 - Narrative Intent vs. Media Tone

Period	Narrative Intent (MEA)	Strategic Development	Geopolitical Balancing
2005–2009	Reconciliation, political solution	Tamil solidarity, humanitarian concern	Peace-building narrative
2010–2014	Development aid, people-centric diplomacy	Regional goodwill, balanced reporting	Reconstruction and aid
2015–2019	Strategic hedging, regional leadership	Alarmist, China-focused	Strategic competition
2020–2024	Emergency leadership, soft power projection	Triumphalist, comparative advantage	Strategic competition

5.5 Discursive Patterns

Lexical Framing

- *Repeated expressions*: “trusted neighbor,” “natural partner,” “shared prosperity,” “regional balance.”
- *Media metaphors*: India as an *anchor*, *bridge*, *first responder*, often contrasted with China as a *creditor overlord*.

Silences and Omissions

- Almost no reference to Tamil Nadu political pressure on India’s diplomacy post-2010.
- Sri Lankan internal critique of Indian actions was systematically downplayed or ignored.

5.6 Intertextual Alignment

From 2015 onward, India's MEA press releases and Indian national media showed growing alignment in tone and lexical framing — particularly during crisis periods.

Example (MEA & The Hindu, 2022):

“India stands by Sri Lanka as a first responder and trusted friend in times of need.”

This convergence suggests strategic coordination between the state and elite media in projecting a unified diplomatic identity.

5.7 Summary of Findings

1. Narratives evolved from moral legitimacy (2005) → developmental authority (2010) → regional primacy (2024).
2. Crisis events acted as narrative accelerators, especially during COVID-19 and Sri Lanka's debt crisis.
3. China's rise directly influenced narrative structure and urgency — India's discourse became more securitized and symbolic post-2015.
4. Media-state alignment increased, signaling strategic media-diplomacy interplay.
5. Symbolic framing and silences play a critical role in legitimizing India's role while managing domestic and geopolitical tensions.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Strategic Narratives as Instruments of Power Projection

The analysis reveals that India's strategic narratives toward Sri Lanka from 2005 to 2024 were not merely descriptive or responsive but instrumental in constructing a particular regional identity and justifying diplomatic choices. In alignment with Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle's (2013) conceptualization of strategic narratives, India employed discursive tools to:

- Reinforce its normative legitimacy (during the conflict period),
- Highlight developmental leadership (post-war),
- Signal geopolitical maturity (in response to China),
- And assert regional primacy (during crises).

These shifts were not isolated events but discursive recalibrations that reflected India's evolving self-perception in South Asian geopolitics.

6.2 Evolution from Moral Legitimacy to Strategic Primacy

India's communication shifted from a moral-humanitarian tone (e.g., solidarity with Sri Lankan Tamils and non-intervention) to a strategic-power narrative, especially after 2015. This transformation parallels India's broader foreign policy shift from the Nehruvian doctrine of non-alignment to a more assertive, interest-based diplomacy under “Act East” and “Neighbourhood First” policies.

What begins as a conflict-sensitive discourse ends in a crisis-responsive, power-centered discourse, consistent with the practices of emerging regional hegemons.

6.3 Mediated Diplomacy and the Role of Media Echoes

A key finding is the growing convergence between state narratives and media discourse post-2015. This supports the theoretical notion of *mediated diplomacy*, where media not only reflects but amplifies state positions, especially in competitive or crisis contexts (Gilboa, 2008).

The synchronized use of terms like “first responder,” “regional anchor,” and “trusted partner” in both MEA press releases and Indian newspaper editorials suggests:

- Intentional strategic communication coordination, or
- Ideological convergence in elite discourse communities

In both cases, India's media acts not only as a platform but also as a co-constructor of diplomatic legitimacy.

6.4 Crisis as a Discursive Accelerator

The 2020–2024 period illustrates that crises serve as accelerators for narrative consolidation and elevation. India leveraged the COVID-19 pandemic and Sri Lanka's debt crisis to amplify its image as a benevolent regional leader. The emergence of "first responder" as a dominant lexical choice in both government and media underscores how real-time emergencies provide discursive opportunities for long-term identity formation.

Crisis diplomacy thus becomes not only a function of aid but also a branding exercise, reinforcing India's strategic superiority vis-à-vis China, whose assistance was framed as delayed or self-serving.

6.5 Strategic Silences and Discursive Exclusions

An equally important discursive strategy is what is left unsaid. Across all periods:

- Domestic pressures (e.g., Tamil Nadu political sentiment) were systematically downplayed.
- Sri Lankan critiques of Indian involvement (e.g., fishermen disputes, port controversies) were omitted.
- Regional actors like Pakistan and Bangladesh were rarely mentioned, reinforcing bilateral centrality.

Such exclusions are deliberate acts of discursive boundary setting, reinforcing India's portrayal as the only legitimate external actor in Sri Lanka's internal affairs.

7. CONCLUSION

This study critically examined India's communication strategy toward Sri Lanka from 2005 to 2024 through the lens of strategic narratives and mediated diplomacy, using a longitudinal Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. By analyzing over 100 official statements and media texts, it mapped how India's diplomatic framing evolved in response to conflict, reconstruction, geopolitical competition, and crisis.

The research demonstrates that India did not merely react to events but strategically constructed evolving narratives to assert its regional identity, justify its policies, and maintain its soft power positioning.

From humanitarian appeals and development diplomacy to geopolitical signaling and crisis leadership, India's discourse reflects a progressive intensification of regional ambition and narrative sophistication.

The findings show that:

- Narrative shifts were phase-specific but also cumulative, with earlier moral legitimacy evolving into assertive regional primacy.
- The media-state narrative alignment post-2015 suggests either strategic coordination or ideological consonance, especially regarding China.
- Crisis diplomacy, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic and Sri Lanka's debt meltdown, functioned as a discursive accelerator allowing India to consolidate its image as the "first responder" and trusted regional actor.

Figures and keyword trend analyses substantiate these observations, revealing patterns of discursive emphasis and omission that underscore India's diplomatic recalibration. The rise of terms like "*Neighbourhood First*," "*First Responder*," and "*Debt Trap*" reflect a broader strategic shift from reactive to proactive identity-building in South Asia.

While the study offers important contributions to strategic communication, diplomacy, and media framing literature, it is not without limitations. The exclusion of vernacular media, Sri Lankan perspectives, and non-English narratives opens opportunities for further comparative work. Future research may also examine how such strategic narratives are received by target populations, thus addressing the audience side of mediated diplomacy.

In sum, this paper argues that strategic narratives are not supplementary to foreign policy—they are constitutive of it. India's evolving discourse toward Sri Lanka illustrates how regional powers use language, framing, and media channels to construct authority, identity, and influence. This research adds to growing evidence that in contemporary diplomacy, who tells the story and how can be as impactful as the policy itself.

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