

DIGITAL DIPLOMATIC DISCOURSE OF INDIA: HINGSLISH HASHTAGS



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Abstract

This article examines Hinglish, the pervasive Hindi-English hybrid produced by code-switching (CS), in the context of India's digital cultural diplomacy on Instagram and X. It relies on content analysis of the official activities of India's Ministry of External Affairs (@MEAIndia, @IndianDiplomacy), and three significant hashtag campaigns, i.e. #VaccineMaitri, #G20Bharat, and #DigitalIndia. This study employs sociolinguistic theories (Gumperz, 1982; Myers-Scotton, 1993; Poplack, 1980; Sahni, 2025) to assert that Hinglish hashtags simultaneously serve as identity markers, and soft power and narrative framing tools for domestic and international audiences. As a digital platforms, Instagram is analysed as an integrate aesthetic-visual diplomacy where Hinglish captions humanise policy and project heritage. On the other hand, Hinglish hashtags of X is the real-time diplomacy, provides a means to communicate policy.

Keywords: Hinglish; code-switching; digital diplomacy; hashtag; Instagram; X soft power; cultural diplomacy; multilingualism; South Asia.

1. Introduction

On January 20, 2021, India launched a hashtag campaign, #VaccineMaitri, as a push to send COVID-19 vaccines to 100+ countries. The campaign introduced a unique method of code-switching, combining the Hindi word ‘Maitri’, meaning ‘friendship’, with ‘vaccine’. This would be emotionally effective for Hindi-speaking domestic audiences while remaining globally comprehensible. Once the hashtag began trending, the country's Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar began to address his neighbours to the north using the hashtag in tweets and a combination of English diplomacy formality and Hindi cultural warmth. In January, 2021 the #VaccineMaitri hashtag attracted around 541,000 interactions on Facebook (Bogle & Zhang, 2021) signalling the successful communicative power for code-switched diplomatic messaging.

The purpose of this article is to centre on India's use of Hinglish code-switching in the practice of digital diplomatic discourse, particular focus on the major platforms Instagram and X (formally Twitter). Why these two social networking platforms? Through images, reels and life style content, Instagram operates as a space of visual narrative and aesthetic branding (Yeh & Swinehart,

2024; Faucher & Zhu, 2025; Alyakhri, 2025) of digital cultural diplomacy. While, X functions as a space for public debate and the rapid circulation of diplomatic messaging through texts and images (Payne et.al., 2011; El Damanhoury & Garud-Paktar, 2021). Collectively, the two social platforms constitute a complementary digital diplomatic infrastructure through which a country can project soft power via language in a hybrid model of Hindi and English that linguists call Hinglish.

Code-switching (CS) is the visible alternation between two or more languages during a single instance of communication. It has been described as a socially motivated and rule-governed behavior (Poplack, 1980; Gumperz, 1982; Myers-Scotton, 1993). When considering digital diplomacy, CS takes on political and reputational significance. Choosing a language for the purpose of CS is an act of communication as well as an ideological statement. A study done by IIT Delhi's Laboratory of Computational Social Systems on the socio-economic drivers of Hinglish on X, which included 260,000 posts by 17,000 individuals, found that about 34% of the Indian X population prefer Hinglish since it enables them to more efficiently communicate with their followers, and that the Hinglish-using Indian population on X experienced a growth of 1.2% per year from 2014 to 2022 (Sengupta et. al, 2024). These are not casual bilingual speakers mixing languages by accident. They are sophisticated communicators making deliberate choices.

The paper is organized into following sections: the theoretical framework, an analysis of the platforms as diplomatic arenas (Instagram and X), a case study of the three major Hinglish hashtag campaigns, and lastly the conclusions, where objective recommendations related to diplomatic training and sociolinguistic studies are offered.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Sociolinguistic Foundations of CS

The first foundational typology of CS was proposed by Poplack (1980), who identified three types of code-switching. They are inter-sentential CS (i): switching languages between sentences or clauses, often reflecting shifts in topic or audience. Intra-sentential switching (ii): alternating languages within a single sentence, often to fill lexical gaps or introduce technical terms, and tag -switching (iii) the insertion of a short phrases or tags from one language into a predominantly monolingual utterance.

The Poplack (1980) Equivalence Constraint Model (ECM) argues that switches, in this case, code-switching, happen at the level of language structures that are similar and are surface aligned between both languages. In contrast to Myers-Scotton's (1993b) Matrix Language Frame Model (MLFM), both models serve to provide a balanced account. Myers-Scotton's (1993b) MLFM explanations assert that in any given case of language code-switching, one of the languages used collocates the matrix of the sentence, while the other language populates the sentence with the language unit that is lexically proximate to the collocational language. More recently, Sahni (2025) provides the same analytical framework for Hinglish and argues that the limitations of the MLF model are greater in the South

Asian intra-sentential CS. In this case, Hinglish is identified as CS of Hindi as the language populating the morphosyntactic frame and switching of English as the language collocating the content unit of the sentence. This is especially useful when analyzing diplomatic Hinglish hashtags.

Gumperz (1982) outlined several conversational functions of CS, including addressee specification, message qualification, and personalisation versus objectivisation. Within the framework of digital diplomatic communication, these functions have close correspondence with the dual-audience management problem. For example, a foreign ministry tweet, addressed to a domestic audience of Hindi speakers and an international audience of English speakers, has to juggle both functions at the same time. In this case, Hinglish CS offers a solution: it speaks to both audiences in a single utterance, with each audience decoding the segment most salient to it.

2.2 Hinglish: from Street Talk to Diplomatic Register

Hinglish is one of the dominant forms of digital communication in India. It has its own phonological, lexical, and syntactic conventions (D'Souza, 2001). It has been said that 50% of the language used by entrepreneurs is in Hindi (Kumar 2024), suggesting that Hinglish has become the standard language of India's urban educated class, including the diplomats and politicians.

Shakir and Deuber (2024), in corpus-based research found that across the South Asian countries in group chats and Twitter memes, CS and native/indigenous languages particularly used to 'create a sense of localness in English communication'. Precisely defined, English is for global reach, while indigenous languages is used for creating a relationship of cultural and emotional context.

Thus, what is the purpose of blending languages in digital diplomacy? Monolingual English hashtags, such as ‘#VaccineDiplomacy,’ may appear distant and bureaucratic to Hindi speakers, while monolingual Hindi hashtags, such as ‘#TikaaMaitrata,’ would resonate domestically but appear opaque to internationally. However, blending the English word vaccine and the Hindi-style word *maitri* has resulted in ‘#VaccineMaitri’ for the purpose of diplomatic engagement, to show the unique cultural values and philosophy of diplomacy of friendship.

2.3 Instagram and X as Differentiated Arenas

Digital cultural diplomacy is the intended use of social media to shape ideas about a nation's culture, identity, and values through narratives, while considering the distinctiveness of the algorithm's environment, how the audience interacts, and emotional visualization (Faucher & Zhu, 2025; Alyakhri, 2025). The choice of the platform determines the nature of the interaction.

Instagram does visual diplomacy and imparts aesthetic value to branding (Hovpun et.al., 2025). Given its image, reel, and story-based design, it is a space to artistically structure visual compositions that decode identity, heritage, gastronomy, and tourism. Instagram lends itself to the use of colour codes, composition, architectural details, and local symbols as cues to project the artistic complexity and the civilizational richness of India. Nevertheless, the risk here is that this aesthetic

design social media participation ends up reducing the cultural message to a culture-cum-cosmetic image, an appealing visual that may lose the cultural political message. Compounded with aesthetic content, Hinglish captions and hashtags on Instagram can offer a balance by re-contextualizing visual content with respect to local speech communities (El Damanhoury & Garud-Paktar, 2021).

On the other hand, X functions to facilitate political and social mobilisation, where messaging, hashtags, and images serve to provide real-time diplomatic positioning during a time of potential crisis, conflict, and/or the battle for diplomatic support (Payne et. al., 2011; Liyudzira & Nugroho, 2025). Twiplomacy found that over 97% of the UN member countries maintain a diplomatic accounts on X (El Damanhoury & Garud-Paktar, 2021). Considering the birthplace of X (Twitter) networking service, it is not surprising that it is the social media platform of choice for the US, and of Japan, Indonesia, and India (Statista, 2026). @IndiaDiplomacy and @MEAIndia were the first Twitter accounts of the Ministry of External Affairs. By 2024, the MEA had extended its digital presence to 174 foreign missions and posts on X (Dasgupta & Vora, 2024). Where state and non-state narratives meet, as during the 2021 India-China hashtag war where India established the hashtag #VaccineMaitri, while the Chinese side, due to a state of vaccine diplomacy, was creating counter-narratives, (Bogle A., & Zhang A., 2021).

3. A Comparative Analysis

Instagram. Indian Diplomacy's official account as well as Indian missions operate a special Instagram campaign that uses a distinctive visual-linguistic strategy in which Hinglish captions accompany high-quality photographs, reels, and infographics.

The function of Hinglish on Instagram is primarily what Gumperz (1982) termed ‘personalisation’, the switch into Hindi-inflected language transforms an official diplomatic post into a communication that feels warm, accessible, and culturally embedded rather than bureaucratic.

Consider the annual campaign of the International Day of Yoga. The @IndianDiplomacy account, like other Indian embassies, has posted photos of yoga enthusiasts in some of the world’s most sought after and photographed locations with diplomatic language description and Hindi/Sanskrit cultural labeling in the captions:

#YogaSeHoga (Yoga will make it happen); #YogaLife; #RozYoga (Yoga everyday); #YogaGyan (Yoga knowledge); #YogaDay; #IncredibleIndia.

These Hinglish hashtags, post the diplomatic messages to international and domestic audiences, including the diaspora, fulfilling cultural and emotional aspects.

As key function of Instagram is what Myers-Scotton (1993b) termed ‘marked choice for group identity’, the strategic selection of a code that signals membership in, or respect for, a specific cultural community. As an example, Indian embassies posting about Diwali, Holi, or Navratri celebrations abroad consistently frame their

visual content with Hinglish captions that blend English spatial description with Hindi cultural naming:

#DiwaliKaJashn; #DiwaliVibes; #DiwaliRangoli; #Diwali2025;
#DiwaliMithai; #IndiaInUS.

The Hindi nouns *jashn* (celebration), *rangoli* (colour) and *mithai* (sweets) function as 'embedded language content morphemes' within an English matrix frame (Sahni, 2025). Each untranslated Hindi word signals that the event is authentically Indian, not a generic cultural performance but a specifically Indian cultural experience. This is soft power through lexical choice.

X (Twitter). Here, India's diplomatic code-switching has a more pronounced political focus and operates at a quicker speed. The character limit, the trending hashtags, and the structure of quickfire public debates on the platform collude to create Hinglish diplomatic messages of a given form. Three functional modes are identifiable:

‘Narrative framing with hybrid hashtags’, is the first mode. A hashtag like ‘#VaccineMaitri’ or ‘#G20Bharat’ encodes an entire diplomatic narrative in a single CS label. ‘#VaccineMaitri’ does reference a discourse on Indian vaccine diplomacy, (as *maitri* indicates friendship) translates the sentiment, and *Bharat* is a reference to Indian civilization. These hashtags are simultaneously a label, a claim, and an identity performance.

The second mode is ‘dual-audience addressing’. Hinglish hashtag tweets invariably target Hindi speaking Indian citizens (whose emotional and cultural needs are served by the Hindi elements) and English speakers (whose needs are served by the English elements). This is termed Gumperz (1982) ‘addressee specification’ at the level of the hashtag itself.

The third mode is ‘symbolic confrontation’. Bogle A., & Zhang A. (2021) note that during the pandemic was a fought through competing vaccine diplomacy between China and India. India's ‘#VaccineMaitri’ versus Chinese state digital promotions of its own vaccine narrative.

4. Case Studies: Hinglish Hashtag Campaigns in Action

4.1 #VaccineMaitri (2021–2023): Friendship as Diplomatic Language

The Indian government claims that assistance in providing vaccines, the Vaccine Maitri initiative, which began on 20 January 2021, is inspired by the ancient philosophical doctrine of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, which says that the world is one family (Banerji 2021). Using the doctrine, as well as *Maitri*, a Hindi word that means ‘friendship’, provided ample opportunity to craft a narrative of Indian civilization that is integrated into more sustained, deeper forms of vaccine diplomacy rhetoric.

On X, the campaign is expressed in Hinglish CS, both at the hashtags and post levels. Hashtags often integrate multiple languages. At the post level, MEA and diplomatic officials produced a stream of messages that blended English policy content with Hindi cultural markers: (External Affairs Minister Jaishankar, X, 2021):

‘Caring for a spiritual neighbour. Made in India vaccines reach Mongolia. #VaccineMaitri’.

(MEA @IndianDiplomacy, X, 2021): ‘Dosti ka dose - 100+ countries ko India ka gift. Humanity se humanity tak. #VaccineMaitri" #NeighbourhoodFirst (The dose of friendship - India's gift to 100+ countries. From humanity to humanity).

In analyzing the structure of the tweet, the Hindi phrase *Dosti ka dose* (dose of friendship) is a 'marked choice', where the Hindi phrase draws attention to itself as a deliberate departure from the expected English diplomatic register. This is an act of friendship, which is Indian bureaucratic vaccine distribution. The subsequent switch to English is to make a global claim, specifying the quantitative claim (from humanity to humanity) 100+ countries.

4.2 #G20Bharat (2023): Ancient Civilisation as Global Host

India's 2023 G20 Presidency marks the apex of Hinglish diplomatic hashtag campaigns centered on merging micro-culture and regional identity. By using *Bharat* instead of India, the Sanskrit origin of India's civilizational heritage in contrast to the Western-centric name of the post-colonial nation. Furthermore, India's G20 Presidency also positioned *Bharat* in the global diplomatic space. Through the G20 India President theme, ‘#G20Bharat mein sabka swagat!’ (Everyone's welcome to G20 India!) ‘#VasudhaivaKutumbakam’ (One Earth, One Family, One Future), wove Sanskrit philosophy, English global aspiration, and Hinglish social media messaging into a coherent diplomatic narrative. Through the use the hashtags #DeshKiG20 #BharatKePaas (Country's G20 with India), sought to create a sense of national ownership and pride. This post illustrates Poplack's (1980) intra-sentential switching (*sabka swagat* - everyone's welcome, inserted into an otherwise English-framed post)

Hovpun et al. (2025) categorize the G20 India Presidency visual campaign on Instagram as 'aesthetic branding'. This included high-quality, artfully taken photographs of Indian traditional arts, cuisine, and cultural heritage sites, with captions that utilized Hinglish, the G20 branding in English, and cultural descriptions in Hindi. Images and captions combined to create a visual-linguistic argument that India is a complex and beautiful civilization that is worthy of global leadership.

4.3 #DigitalIndia (2015–ongoing): Technology as National Identity

The ‘#DigitalIndia’ campaign, which began in 2015, shows how Hinglish CS enables a lasting diplomatic narrative over the years. Posts across both X and Instagram blend English technical vocabulary with Hindi cultural-emotional anchoring, PM Modi, X, 2023 G20 digital session: ‘*Digital India ab har haath mein! #DigitalIndia revolutionising governance and transforming lives, ek nayi subah. #TechForAll*’, (Digital India now in every hand! #DigitalIndia revolutionising governance and transforming lives, a new dawn. #TechForAll).

Ab har haath mein (literally now in every hand) serves two functions, it is a democratic claim (notice how digital technology is not elite but becoming universal) coupled with an affective claim (and how it is something that is now in your hand,

personal and immediate). The Hindi metaphor *ek nayi subah* (literally) translates a cultural image of optimism, giving hope and lifting the spirit signifying a renewed culture to a post English policy vocabulary. Hinglish research on X, as noted by Sengupta et.al. (2024), demonstrates that the posts are designed to combine Hindi emotional-political and English policy framework, and as stated show the highest engagement as compared to posts that are purely Hindi or purely English. Table 1 provides a summary of the key conceptual and functional similarities of Hinglish digital diplomacy in India.

Dimension	India (Hinglish)
Languages involved	Hindi + English (+ Sanskrit/regional)
Dominant CS type	Intra-sentential (Hinglish); hashtag compounds
Matrix language on Instagram	English (with Hindi embedded items)
Matrix language on X	Hinglish blend; English for hashtags
Primary diplomatic function	Soft power projection; identity assertion
Key theoretical driver	Postcolonial identity + globalisation

Table 1. Comparative dimensions of digital-diplomatic code-switching in Hinglish

5. Results

The analysis in this article both supports and extends pre-existing findings in various respects. First, it demonstrates that diplomatic Hinglish uses English as either a matrix or embedded language, suggesting code-switching is a flexible rather than structural practice. This finding is consistent with Sahni’s (2025) claim that MLFM accounts for Hinglish code-switching more effectively than the ECM. Second, it expands upon the findings of Shakir and Deuber (2024) in that diplomatic Hinglish code-switching serves the ‘localness-creating’ function of Multilingual South Asian Computer-mediated communication (CMC) code-switching. Hinglish code-switched hashtags in South Asian CMC serve to define a localized ‘Indian’ posting in the global digital community.

For research methodology, the present article illustrates the advantages of a comprehensive approach to research problems by offering a way to combine data obtained through social media content analysis of the campaign’s Primary Social Media Tool and research through the lens of Myers-Scotton’s CS Framework (1993) along with Poplack (1980) and Gumperz (1982). This type of methodology (or

scaffolding) is recommended for other scholars to approach the application of International Relations (IR) theory in the context of social media. The research indicates that any diplomatic training for the 21st Century with a focus on oriental languages, requires ‘Metalinguistic’ Diplomatic Competence: the capacity to deploy code-switching strategically, to recognise its social and political significance in others' communication, and to calibrate language choice to multi-audience digital environments.

6. Conclusion

This article posited that Hinglish is a dominant medium of digital diplomacy in India, instead of being a marginal or informal aspect of India's digital communication. Hinglish caption and hashtag usage in Instagram posts transforms the content of diplomatic visuals, communicating policy content through culture and aesthetics. Hinglish hashtag campaigns on X such as #VaccineMaitri, #G20Bharat, #DigitalIndia are diplomatic narratives that address both domestic and foreign audiences, establish a civilisational presence, and challenge competing narratives from other states in a real-time context.

Hinglish is a product of various sociolinguistic mechanisms like inter-sentential and intra-sentential CS, tag-switching, marked lexical choice, dual-audience addressing strategies. These mechanisms have been discussed in the works of Gumperz (1982), Myers-Scotton (1993a; 1993b), and Poplack (1980) and updated in the South Asian digital context by Sahni (2025) and Shakir and Deuber (2024). The empirical finding that over 34% of Indian users prefer Hinglish for effective digital engagement (Sengupta et.al., 2024) confirms that this hybrid is not marginal but majoritarian, the dominant linguistic practice of India's digital public sphere.

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