



The Swedish Public's Views of India: An Ambivalent Picture



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Executive summary

- This brief is the first of its kind. Building on data collected by the University of Gothenburg national SOM-survey in the autumn of 2021, in which statements on India were included, the brief provides insights into how a representative sample of the Swedish population sees India.
- Swedes from all social, economic, demographic and political segments view India as an emerging power that will become increasingly important in world affairs.
- Despite less positive views on India's respect for democratic rights and its behaviour internationally, increased cooperation with India is seen favourably by most Swedes. The results indicate that Swedes take an interest-oriented rather than values-based approach to India.
- While older age groups view India's economy as developed, younger age groups do not. Younger Swedes, however, are more inclined to wish to travel to India than older respondents. Middle-aged segments are more positive than the youngest age group when it comes to learning from India and are supportive of increased Indian investment in Sweden.
- India is consistently being given increased attention in Swedish political debates, according to additional data compiled for this study. Coverage of India in the printed media increased in the period 2000–2015, but declined thereafter.



Introduction

India is becoming increasingly important to Sweden and the rest of the European Union (EU) as a result of dual trends of a long-term power shift eastwards and Europe's recent promotion of diversification in Asia away from an over-reliance on China. India's growing centrality to European Asia policy stems not only from attempts to hedge risks and reduce dependencies, but also from a realization of India's growing capabilities and its important role in the handling of global challenges. The Indo-Pacific region, to which India is central, is becoming as consequential to global politics, trade and security in our time as the Transatlantic region was to the emergence of the modern period. India is set to become the world's most populous country. It is the fifth largest economy in the world and one of the fastest growing. India is a nuclear power and a top-three arms importer, and has ambitions to become a leading power in a multipolar world. India's rise in the global system is being increasingly accommodated by the established powers. Although Sweden and India are aligned on many issues, positions diverge in important areas, not least Russia's war in Ukraine. That said, cooperation and connections between Sweden and India are strong and widening.

This brief provides a detailed examination of the Swedish public's views about India, drawing on data from the 2021 National SOM Survey. One important finding from this survey is that, despite the growing centrality of India to current affairs and to Swedish economic interests, Swedes themselves suggest that they know little about the country.¹ The knowledge gap with regard to India is significant, and it is apparent in connection with every topic

analysed in this brief. The mean value of "don't know" responses to the statements presented to the public in the survey was over 30%; and on some questions it was over 40%. Nonetheless, even though they report only limited knowledge, many members of the Swedish public still have views on India. This brief examines these views and provides valuable insights into how Swedes from different segments of society perceive India.

This study of Swedish public opinion on India is a first of its kind in Europe. As such it could serve as a benchmark for documenting trends in such perceptions over time and across locations. Details about the National SOM Survey are presented on page 11.

Does public opinion matter in foreign policy?

There are very few current affairs issues or bilateral partnerships that have a real impact on the Swedish public discourse. What Swedes think about other countries and Sweden's relations with them, in turn, only occasionally influences how Sweden crafts its foreign policy. That said, public opinion on a certain topic can drive political interest and put pressure on Sweden's positions on international issues. This can then make it more difficult for a government to make policy, as it can limit political room for manoeuvre. For Swedish industry, public perceptions of specific countries can matter even more. Perceptions on certain issues related to a specific country, such as respect for democratic rights or environmental standards, can inform consumer choices. Positive or negative public perceptions can also mobilize local or national support for or

¹ Olczak, N. 2022. "Swedish Asian Barometer 2022: Measuring the Swedish public's views of China, India and Japan", UI Report no. 2.



opposition to – investment in Sweden by specific countries.

Growing attention to India in Sweden

The size and growth of India's economy are closely associated with views on India's importance. While India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi suggested in his Independence Day speech on 15 August this year that India will be a developed country within 25 years, the Swedish public is more optimistic as 40% of the respondents perceive India to be a developed country already.

Responses on India's economy differ across segments. Interestingly, in the youngest cohort surveyed (16–29 years), a larger proportion of respondents disagree than agree with the statement that India has a developed economy. The demographic group with the highest proportion of people who agreed with this statement was the oldest cohort (65–85 years). In terms of political leanings, those respondents who said they supported the Liberals stand out as the group with the highest proportion who agreed with this statement. Meanwhile, the group of respondents who said they supported the Sweden Democrats was almost evenly split.

Across all segments surveyed, more respondents agreed or partly agreed than disagreed with the statement that India will become an important actor in the future. There was no significant variation between respondents in different age groups regarding India's future importance, but respondents with a higher level of education and in higher income brackets seem to have a firmer belief in India's importance than less well-educated respondents in lower income brackets. The affirmation of India's future importance also exists across political party

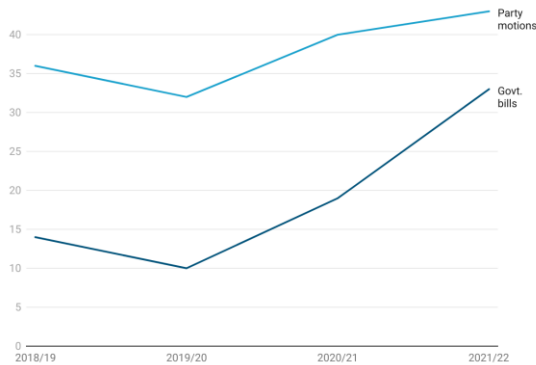
preferences but is highest among Liberals and lowest among Sweden Democrats.

The positive public perception that India will become an important actor in the future is matched by a growing prevalence of India-related topics in the Swedish political debate. Over the past four years, Swedish politicians have been gradually but consistently paying more attention to India. There is also an upward trend in the number of motions tabled in parliament, and of government bills placed before parliament, that mention India (Figure 1a). Mentions are presented here as a measure of attention. The measurement is value neutral; that is, a mention could be positive, neutral or negative in tone. In the parliamentary session 2021–22 there were 43 motions mentioning India. In comparison China was mentioned in 110 motions in the same year.

The political parties that mentioned India most frequently in parliament between 2018 and 2022, comparing all parliamentary activities such as written questions, motions and interpellations, were the Sweden Democrats, followed by the Moderate party, the Christian Democrats and the Left party. The lower level of parliamentary activity regarding India from the Social Democrats and the Green Party in the period under review might be because the two parties were in government for the entire period or for part of the time.



Figure 1. TOTAL MOTIONS AND GOVERNMENT BILLS MENTIONING INDIA (2018-2022)²



There is a similar but more truncated upward trend in mentions of India in the Swedish print media, albeit starting from low levels (Figure 2a). Again, the measurement of mentions in this study is value-neutral. The number of mentions, however, does indicate a certain level of attention given to a topic by the media. A high level of media attention communicates to readers a sense of the importance of specific topics.

There was an almost five-fold increase in mentions of India in the Swedish print media between 2000 and 2021. Attention fell, however, in the period 2015–2022. This is notable but could be explained by other topics crowding the news cycle for extended periods in those years. Travel restrictions linked to the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the level of access to India for foreign journalists more generally, could have affected the frequency of India-related reporting in the Swedish media. National elections that bring a new party to power in India and increased attention surrounding

² Any kind of motion in which India was mentioned at least once. Data retrieved from www.riksdagen.se, accessed on 16 October 2022.

³ The number of articles where the word "Indien" was mentioned in the full text published in 13 main Swedish media outlets between 2000-2021. The sources included were:

high-level visits in 2014–15 could have increased attention.

Figure 2a. MENTIONS OF INDIA IN SWEDISH MEDIA OUTLETS (2000 – 2021)³

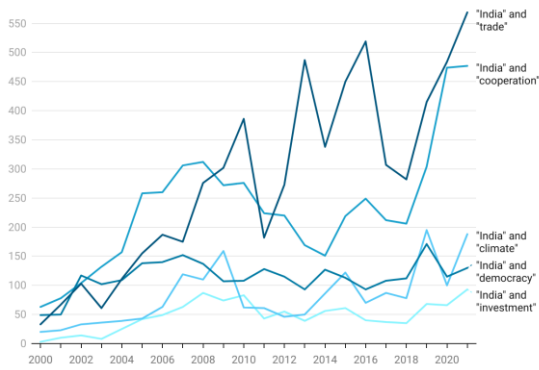


Figure 2b shows the most frequently discussed topics in the reporting on India in the Swedish print media. The figures show that economics and trade, and cooperation more generally, are mentioned more frequently in connection with the term "India" than "democracy" or "climate". While mentions of democracy remained fairly stable from the mid-2000s, mentions of "trade" increased significantly during the period under review. The number of articles mentioning both "investment" and "India" peaked at 93 in 2021 (Figure 2). In comparison, the terms "China" and "investment" were mentioned in 285 Swedish media articles in the same year, which was perhaps related to an increased focus on security concerns in connection with foreign investments.

Aftonbladet (Web), Aftonbladet (Print), Dagens Nyheter (Web), Dagens Nyheter (Print), Dagens Nyheter - Login, Expressen (Web), di.se, Svenska Dagbladet (Web), Svenska Dagbladet (Print), Svenska Dagbladet Premium, Expressen, Expressen Premium, and Dagens industri.



Figure 2b. PRINT MEDIA MENTIONS OF "INDIA" AND KEYWORDS (2000 – 2021)⁴



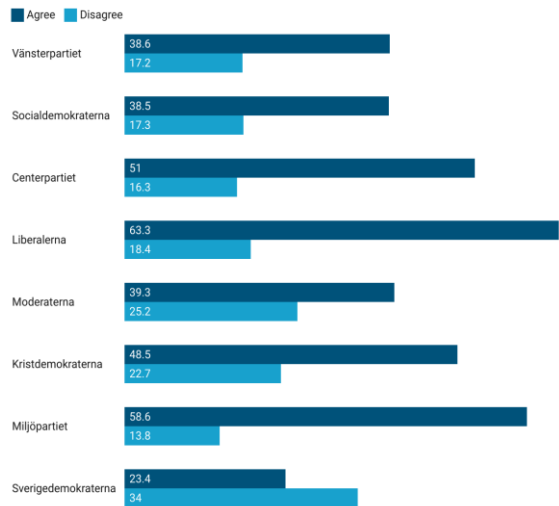
Views of interests and values when cooperating with India

More Swedes agree than disagree, across almost all the survey segments, that Sweden should cooperate more with India. The picture among the respondents, however, is ambiguous.

When examined alongside respondents' party political preferences, those respondents most positive about Swedish cooperation with India were supporters of the Green and Liberal parties (Figure 3). Interestingly, these two parties are among the least active in the Swedish parliament when it comes to mentioning India. This might suggest that these parties view India as uncomplicated for their constituencies. However, it could also indicate that the parties have been slow to acknowledge their voters' views on India. The group with the highest proportion of respondents with negative views about cooperation with India is the supporters of the Sweden Democrats. The Sweden Democrats is one of the most active political parties in mentioning India in the Swedish Parliament.

⁴ The number of times the word "Indien" and selected keywords were mentioned in the full text of articles published in 13 main Swedish media outlets between 2000-2021

Figure 3. SWEDEN SHOULD COOPERATE WITH INDIA.⁵

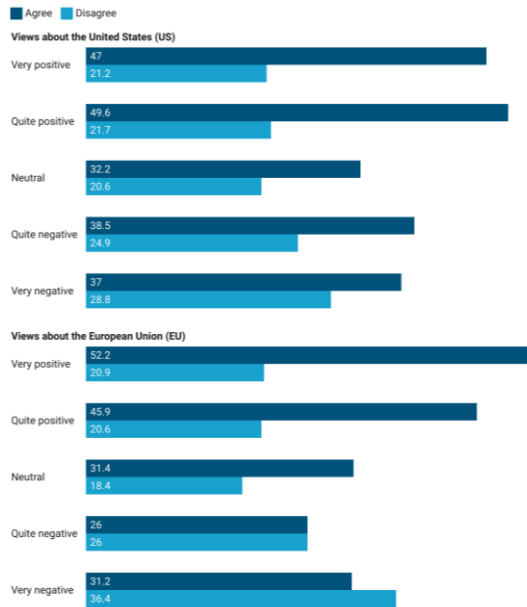


In general, respondents who expressed positive or somewhat positive views about the EU and the US were significantly more positive about expanding Sweden-India cooperation than those with somewhat negative or highly negative views of the EU and the US (Figure 4). This result might suggest two things. First, Swedes who are positively inclined towards international cooperation in general would also support cooperation with India. Second, that India is seen as a partner with which "Western" powers share certain priorities. The latter explanation looks more plausible given that, in comparison, respondents with either positive or negative views of the EU and the US were generally equally negative about extending cooperation with China.

⁵ Data from the annual National SOM Survey (De Nationella SOM-undersökningarna).



Figure 4. SWEDEN SHOULD COOPERATE MORE WITH INDIA. VIEWS ON THE EU AND THE US.⁶

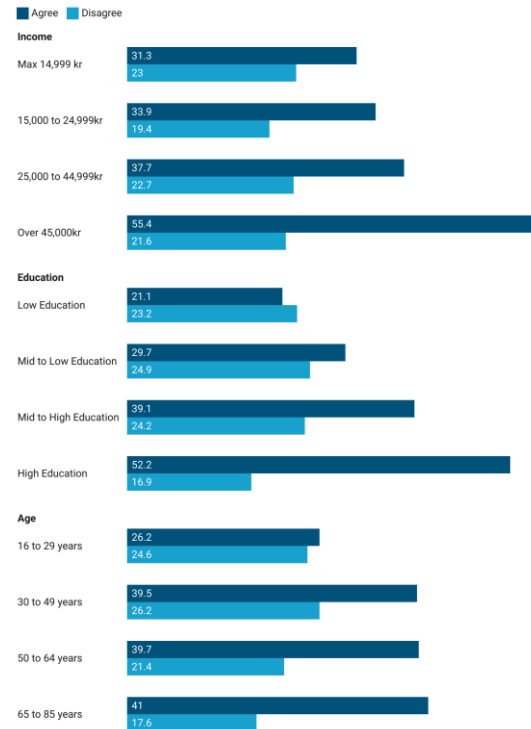


When analysed from a socio-economic perspective, Swedes with a higher education and higher incomes tend to be more supportive of cooperation with India than respondents with less education and lower incomes (Figure 4). Interestingly, the oldest group views cooperation as more desirable than the youngest cohort surveyed, which is almost evenly split between those who agree or disagree with the statement that Sweden should cooperate more with India.

Public perceptions of Indian investment in Sweden complicate the picture. As noted above, Swedes encounter very little reporting on the topic of India-connected investments. In addition, few signature industry investments by Indian companies have become closely associated with job creation in Swedish localities, where such investments might have helped to shape attitudes and increase knowledge about India. It therefore comes as no surprise that as much as 43.2 % of the people surveyed

⁶ Data from the annual National SOM Survey (De Nationella SOM-undersökningarna).

Figure 5. SWEDEN SHOULD COOPERATE MORE WITH INDIA.⁷



said that they did not know whether they agreed or disagreed with increased Indian investment in Sweden.

The responses of those who did express an opinion, however, indicate that increased investment by Indian entities would not be viewed favourably by Swedes. In fact, more survey respondents across all the age groups disagreed than agreed with the statement about increased investment from India. The data provides no reasons for the existence of these views among the population but the issue of national security in relation to foreign investment has received a degree of scrutiny in the Swedish media. The sentiment that foreign investment from countries about which the public know little could be driving attitudes. The least negative views of increased investment from India were to be found among those aged 30–49

⁷ Data from the annual National SOM Survey (De Nationella SOM-undersökningarna).



years and 50–69 years, and within higher income brackets. Respondents with managerial positions in companies or the civil service were more positive about Indian investment than other occupational groups. Less inclined to support Indian investment in Sweden were the youngest and oldest cohorts, as well as those who said they would vote for the Sweden Democrats.

In general, however, as noted above, respondents look favourably on increased Swedish cooperation with India. Nonetheless, it is intriguing that this strong support for increased cooperation comes despite the overall unfavourable views expressed by Swedes from across all segments on India's respect for democratic rights and its behaviour internationally. The data therefore suggests that Swedes view cooperation favourably because of India's merits as an emerging power, rather than its assumed like-mindedness. In other words, shared values seem less important than common interests to the surveyed cohorts when it comes to cooperation with India. The oldest group of respondents had a slightly less negative view than younger respondents about whether India respects democratic rights and acts responsibly internationally. When it comes to attitudes to India's international behaviour, respondents who sympathize with the Left party and the Sweden Democrats tend to be most negative, while Liberals – who are the most positive among the surveyed population – are almost evenly split between positive and negative views. Men tend to be less negative than women on India's respect for democratic rights and its international role.

There is speculation that media reporting might be driving negative opinions with regard to India. The data shows that those with a higher consumption of printed media, or those that read a newspaper either every day or 5–6 times a week, have less negative

views about India's respect for democratic rights and its behaviour in international affairs compared to those who rarely follow the news in the printed media.

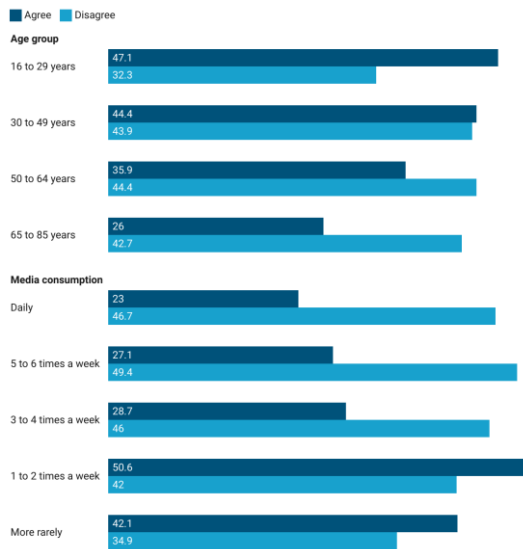
Views of connecting with India through travel and learning

Although Swedes viewed increased cooperation with India favourably, there seemed to be less enthusiasm about connecting with India through travel or learning. It is worth recalling that the SOM data was collected during the Covid-19 pandemic, however, which almost certainly affected views on travel in general.

The wish to travel to India was highest among the youngest group of people surveyed and declined with age (Figure 6). While 47% of the younger population cohort would like to visit India, the corresponding figure among the oldest group of respondents was 26%. Those with higher incomes and a higher education were less negative about visiting India than respondents with low incomes and less formal education. Interestingly, those who rarely read daily newspapers were more positive about visiting India than those who frequently do so. There were only slight differences between men and women, but men were a little more inclined to want to visit India.



Figure 6. I WANT TO VISIT INDIA.⁸



Respondents across all the surveyed age groups disagree with the statement that Sweden could learn from India. The narrowest gap between those who agreed and disagreed with the statement is found in the group of respondents aged between 30 and 49 years, while the widest gap is to be found among the youngest and oldest cohorts. The highest income group was almost evenly split between agreeing and disagreeing with the statement, while respondents in the lowest income bracket clearly disagreed. Again, the more highly educated respondents are, the more likely they were to agree with the statement. Most positive about learning from India were respondents who support the Green and Liberal parties, while the most negative were respondents who associated themselves with the Sweden Democrats. Employees in managerial positions and those owning medium-sized private enterprises were more inclined to agree with the statement than those in other occupations.

Conclusion

The growing centrality of Asia in world affairs is beginning to inform European policymaking. While China's rise has been increasingly discussed in public and political debate across Europe, less attention has been paid to the importance of the Indo-Pacific region and India's growing impact on world affairs. Swedish and other European government officials often repeat how important the partnership with India is. Whether the European publics are as well informed about this important partner, and its role in the Indo-Pacific century that is emerging, is highly doubtful. India will have a real impact on the international political and economic environment, on which Sweden and other EU member states rely. The nature of important foreign partnerships, and the policy choices to be made in this regard, should be part of the debate in a robust democracy such as Sweden's. An informed discussion about an important partner could contribute or provide more legitimacy to policymaking. To Swedes, however, India is largely unknown. When public opinion is uninformed, media reporting is limited and political attention is scant, preconceived notions and emotions rather than knowledge will influence public attitudes and the debates to which these contribute.

The Swedish public currently appears to be very much undecided on India. It is also notable, however that it is divided in its views on India along socio-economic and ideological lines. Urban Swedes with higher incomes and positions, a higher education and a liberal outlook are much more inclined to have positive attitudes to India. Rural Swedes, with low incomes, shorter educations and "blue collar" occupations, especially those who vote for the Sweden

⁸ Data from the annual National SOM Survey (De Nationella SOM-undersökningarna).



Democrats, are more inclined to negative attitudes towards India. There is much for both the Swedish and the Indian side to gain from cultivating perceptions, initiatives on increasing awareness about developments in India, and publicizing India's engagement with Europe – and especially various aspects of the Sweden-India partnership.

About the study

This brief draws on data collected as part of the annual National SOM Survey (De Nationella SOM-undersökningarna), which was carried out in the autumn of 2021.⁹ Each year, this nationwide study asks members of the Swedish public over 100 questions. The survey comprises seven waves sent to systematic probability samples of 3500 people aged between 16 and 85 years from across the country. The data used for this brief was from a question inserted into the seventh wave of the survey. This question presented respondents with eight statements about India and asked them to say, for each statement, whether they “completely agree”, “partly agree”, “agree a little” or “do not agree at all”. There was also an option to choose “don't know”. Alongside the question about India, identical questions consisting of eight statements were also asked about China and Japan. The survey was sent out on 20 September 2021 and the collection of results was concluded at the end of 2021. In total, 1654 people completed the survey.

⁹ To access survey data:
<https://snd.gu.se/sv/catalogue/collection/national-som>



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