

India's Soft Power Diplomacy

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Abstract: Power in International Relations (IR) is defined in relational terms, as the ability of actor A to influence the behavior of actor B to get the outcome he wants. (Nicolas Blarel 2012). That is to say, there is no absolute power. Traditionally, military and economic powers were considered the major factors. However, some other intangible aspects have also been given importance by many strategic thinkers even in the past. The term Soft Power was first used by the eminent IR scholar Joseph Nye in his book "Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power." In the book, he identified three dimensions of power; coercion by military force, influence by offering economic incentives and finally the ability to co-opt other states by the nation's appeal based on its culture and values. The argument is that other states modify their preferences because of their favorable perception of you. They like your story and your narrative.

Personally, I have never been a great fan of this concept of Soft Power even though I consider Joseph Nye as a leading IR expert. The problem lies in the definition of the concept. It is very imprecise, to say the least. Is Soft Power a product or a process? I would say it is more the latter than the former. Let me give an example. Normally military power is considered hard and hence looked down upon in the context of Soft Power. However, when it is used for Peacekeeping or disaster relief, it is a humanitarian and welcome activity. Similarly, projection of one's culture is considered good; however, aggressive projection of a big and historical nation's culture in smaller countries, particularly in the neighborhood, can be interpreted as cultural imperialism. Hence, the important thing is how one uses the instruments. Soft Power ultimately becomes a process and not a product.

Three factors mainly determine the Foreign Policy of a country: its geography, history and capabilities. (David M Malone, Perspectives). Geography is a given. As they say, a country cannot choose its neighbors. Hence, neighborhood policy becomes vital for any nation. Normally, engagements and conflicts are more pronounced with neighbors. History determines the mind sets, outlooks and visions of countries. They also determine some of the linkages with others. Capabilities are what a nation acquires over a period of time. These could be in the military, economic or technological areas. With new capabilities, the Foreign Policy approaches of a country evolves. New interests outside of neighborhood develop. Terms like "extended neighborhood" and "strategic interests" have become common usages in International Relations.

Keywords: soft, power, diplomacy, India, politics, military.

INTRODUCTION

In the context of ‘Soft Power’, capabilities become relevant. How do you protect your interests? What are the instruments you use? Strategic thinkers over the ages have asked these questions. Our own Kautilya in his Arthashastra, talks of the Six Stratagems or Shadgunyas and the four Upayas or instruments to be used. These are Saam, Dhaan, Bhed and Dhand. Of these, the first two preferences are for peaceful means and incentives.[1,2]

At the most fundamental level Soft Power is about winning the hearts and minds of people. Hence, there has to be a people centric approach. Governments cannot do beyond facilitating the process. Let me give you two examples. In the last century, there were only two instances of the idea of India becoming very popular among a large section of the global population. The first was during our freedom struggle with Mahatma Gandhi’s concept of non-violent non-cooperation. The second was during the 1960’s and the Hippie movement when many in the West got attracted to Yoga, Meditation, Indian Classical Music and Indian spirituality. In both these instances, the Government had very little to do with their propagation. In fact, in the first case, the Government of the time was British who did their best to discredit the concept. Even in the second case, the Government of India was not particularly encouraging.

Nonetheless, governments all over are nowadays facilitating the spread of positive ideas from their countries. This would also include arts, culture, music, philosophy, sports and cuisine. India is no exception to this rule. In fact, Government of India realizes that it has an abundance of these resources. So, why not use them to further our interests in a subtle manner.

The operative term here is “subtle”. Using Soft Power to achieve specific goals is a contradiction in terms and can be counter-productive. Ideally, Soft Power dissemination should be neutral without any reference to our interests.

Can Soft Power by itself achieve Foreign Policy Goals?

It is obvious that Soft Power may be a necessary condition for achieving goals, but is not a sufficient condition. This is because Foreign Policy outcomes are not unilateral decisions. Their success depends on other nations. Their interests play a crucial role on how successful we are. If our goals are opposed to their national interests, they would not tow our line even if they like our culture and civilization. That is where use of some aspects of “hard power” would come into play. That does not automatically imply use of force. There are other instruments of persuasion. Nonetheless, the fact cannot be denied that Soft power “lubricates” other instruments in Diplomacy. If a country is appreciative of our values and culture, it may be pre-disposed towards avoiding an adversarial position. Hence, during decision-making occasions, it could tend towards a favorable one provided it is not against its national interests.

What are India’s strengths and weaknesses in Soft Power?

While making this assessment, one should not lose sight of the product and process aspects we talked about earlier. Both are critical.

The most important element is India’s long history, culture and civilization. These have attracted both intellectuals and common folk from across the globe to India. If they were not attractive, so many brilliant minds would not be working as Indologists. In the 1980s, the famous theatre personality Peter Brook produced the Mahabharata with a universal cast. The impact was spectacular. The great Indian epic became popular in the far corners of the world over night.[3,5]

India is fortunate to have all the major religions of the world. Four are homegrown: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Four came from outside: Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This adds to the incentives for the religiously minded foreigners to visit India. The international media coverage of the Khumbmela is testimony to the admiration of other countries for India and how it has kept up its beliefs and traditions over millennia.

Religious tourism into India is a major factor in our external relations. Apart from Hindu religious sites like Varanasi, Badrinath, Kedarnath, Vaishno Devi, Amarnath, Tirupathy, Sabarimala, Tanjavoor, Madurai etc., a large number also come for places of interest to other religions. India is the most favored destination for Buddhist pilgrims. This is not surprising because most of the places associated with Lord Buddha's life are in India. Throughout the year, there is a steady stream of visitors from the ASEAN countries, Japan, Sir Lanka and Myanmar to Bodh Gaya and Nalanda. Christianity and Judaism in India are also very old and there are historic Churches and Synagogues in South India. Speaking of Islam, the Dargas of Sufi saints like Moinuddin Chishti and Nizamuddin Aulia attract thousands of devotees.

Connected to religious aspects of India are Yoga and Meditation, which have become household terms in most countries. The health aspects of these are being researched and propagated by well known physicians and doctors. Government of India did well by making the United Nations declare June 21 as the Global Yoga Day a few years ago.

Equally important are the music, dance, art and architecture of India. Even though the Taj Mahal is the most famous monument of India, foreign tourists are discovering thousands of other historical and archeological sites all over India. These visits will certainly have a positive effect on their attitude towards our country. Propagation of our culture is nothing new. In earlier times, we called it "Cultural Diplomacy". The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) under the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) does pioneering work in not only disseminating our culture abroad but also encouraging exposure of other cultures in India to encourage a cultural dialogue.

Bollywood has been projected as a great Soft Power tool for India. Sometimes there is exaggeration of this aspect. It is true that Bollywood movies are popular among the people of many countries. However, it is equally true that Bollywood does not figure high among its peer competitors. For decades now, Indian cinema has not figured prominently in any of the famous Film Festivals like Cannes, Berlin, Venice or Karlovy Vary. Let us look at the size of it. Hollywood's worldwide box office receipts and international diffusion are far greater than those of Bollywood. The latter's success is in a limited "echo chamber" of Non-resident Indians (NRIs), People of Indian Origin (PIOs) and some India lovers. One has also to mention here the adverse effects of Bollywood on the Indian regional cinema, which tends to be marginalized. Having said all that, the attractiveness of Bollywood, particularly its music and dance deserves a lot of credit.[7,8]

Indian Cuisine is a major attraction for foreigners. There is universal appeal for its variety and sophistication. There may not be a single big city in the world without at least two or three Indian Restaurants. They all do great business. It is joked that the national dish of UK today is CTM or Chicken Tikka Masala.

Indian Diaspora namely NRIs and PIOs play a vital role in projecting its Soft Power. Both put together add up to twenty million. They are spread across all continents and have become prosperous, famous and influential over the last two decades. They not only help in disseminating our culture but also have, on occasions, contributed to promoting our Foreign Policy goals. The best example of this was during the negotiations of the Indo-US Nuclear Deal in the early years of the first decade of this century. Many influential Indians in USA did remarkable work in lobbying Congressmen and Senators and bringing them to our point of view. The Indian Diaspora is becoming a real asset as more and more of them achieve success in their respective fields in different countries.

One important aspect of Soft Power that is not often discussed is the power to lead by example. Mahatma Gandhi could do it. Others will respect and admire us only if we do what we preach. They would judge us by our commitments to our promises. This is particularly relevant in the case of Development Partnership Projects in Developing Countries. In International Relations, nothing is more important than credibility of one's statements.

India, at present, faces the challenges of an important emerging power. Hence, it has to play multiple roles. Our interests are both with the developing world and with major powers. Sometimes, others could feel that we are running with the hares and hunting with the hounds. It is a delicate balancing act that India has to perform constantly. It is easy to convince the Foreign Governments, since they are in the same business and can understand the compulsions of other Governments. The problem is to convince the common citizens of those countries. That is where the articulation of our narrative becomes important. Is our story credible? Is it interesting? Does it evoke respect?

Public Diplomacy is the new tool to deal with these issues. The idea is to communicate directly to the citizenry in simple terms. These have to be devoid of jargons and overt propaganda. Earlier, these used to be done through the conventional media and lectures/seminars. The advent of Social Media has changed the face of Public Diplomacy drastically. Today, even national leaders are resorting to Tweeting to make their ideas known. Here, PM Narendra Modi is leading by example and encouraging all officers in the Government to leverage Social Media for communication with the public.

Soft Power is not "image polishing". It is much more than that. Mere image polishing without corresponding improvement in reality can be counterproductive.[9,10]

Others judge us also by our ability to understand and appreciate them. Openness, humility and empathy go a long way in Diplomacy. Let me quote the French born American historian Jacques Barzun who said " To see ourselves as others see us is a very rare and remarkable quality; however, in International Relations it is even rarer and more useful if you can see others as they see themselves." Real communication can be there only if you see them in their perspective.

One way of winning hearts and minds is not to be obsessed with projecting our successes and achievements all the time, but also try to celebrate those of others. Famous Film Festivals where movies from all over the world compete on an equal footing like Cannes, Berlin or Venice generate a great deal of goodwill for the hosts. Why do countries fight for hosting international sporting events like Olympics? It is a way of showing appreciation of universal talents. India has increased its activities in this respect. ICCR's objective is to not only promote Indian culture abroad but also make Indians aware of other cultures. Care has to be taken that this is done without even a hint of condescension or patronizing.[11,12]

To conclude, I would say that even if the concept of Soft Power is not precise, Joseph Nye did well to flag this important aspect in Foreign Policies of countries. There is no country in the world today, which does not attach importance to this factor. India is in a good position in this respect due to its enormous resources that come in handy in increasing the country's attractiveness to others. Academics and intellectuals can play a critical role in this endeavor.

DISCUSSION

As the world's largest democracy, with a rich heritage, culture and ambitious aspirations, India has always relied on soft power diplomacy, and never more than under current Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. Shreeya Patil explores the different facets of this important democratic instrument.

India's soft power tools

The term 'soft power' was first coined by the American political scientist Joseph Nye. Nye defined it as 'the ability to alter the behaviour of others to get what you want, preferably through attraction rather than coercion or payment'. Soft power has emerged in the post-Cold War era as a crucial component of foreign policy.

As Shashi Tharoor observes in his 2012 book *Pax Indica*, India is an enthusiastic proponent. India draws on its rich cultural traditions, including Bollywood movies, yoga, Ayurvedic medicine, heritage tourism, and distinctive, spice-rich cuisine, to wield soft power diplomacy.

The country, which boasts a global diaspora, is also admired for its focus on education, political pluralism, and religious diversity. While in the past India may have been assumed to be a recipient of foreign aid, in recent years it has even become a donor of economic aid to less developed countries.[13,15]

Soft power, in the post-Cold War era, is a crucial component of foreign policy, and India draws on its rich tradition and heritage to exercise it

The roots of India's soft power run deep. Its civil society has, over millennia, offered religious freedom to Jews, Parsees, Christians and Muslims. One central notion is the importance of family: the influential Sanskrit phrase Vasudhavai Kutumbakam, referenced by Modi himself, translates as the world is one family.

Image-building

Film

The Indian film industry, with Bollywood at its heart, has charmed viewers across the globe. Bollywood cultivates strong ties with the Indian Foreign Ministry. It helps formulate foreign policy, and endeavours to improve India's image abroad by exporting Indian cultural products. Even people who know nothing about India will likely have heard of the Three Khans!

Moreover, after the 1999 Kargil War, India and Pakistan produced several films together, with the aim of restoring peace and harmony between the two countries.

Sport

Cricket has also proved a strong source of soft power for India. So-called cricket diplomacy has had notable positive effects in reducing Indo-Pakistani tensions. It has also been used as a signal of readiness to negotiate. In 1987, for example, relations between the two countries had reached a critical point. To help lower tensions, Pakistan's President General Zia-ul-Haq visited India to watch an India-Pakistan cricket match.

In 2008, an Islamist terrorist group based in Pakistan carried out coordinated attacks in the Indian city of Mumbai, severely damaging bilateral relations. Three years later, Prime Ministers of both nations met in Mohali, India, to watch the Cricket World Cup semi-finals. High-level diplomatic dialogue followed the meeting, helping diffuse the lingering tension between the two countries.[17,18]

Religion, culture, and spiritualism

Yoga – 'India's gift to the world' – is another major soft power tool in India's armoury which enjoys millions of enthusiastic practitioners worldwide. In 2014, Modi succeeded in getting 21 June recognised by the UN as World Yoga Day. A potent medium for promoting the Indian way of life, yoga helps project an image of India as a peaceful country that refrains from aggression. In a foreign policy context, harnessing the holistic power of yoga helps cultivate other countries' goodwill.

Buddhism originated in ancient India, from which it spread to China, Southeast Asia and beyond. Modi uses Buddhist diplomacy to achieve his strategic and economic foreign policy goals. Chief among these goals are offsetting Chinese soft power, and boosting religious tourism in India.

The Indian diaspora

The Indian diaspora, too, is a major asset of India's soft power diplomacy. In the US, it plays an important role in improving Indo-US relations by lobbying American politicians. It also offers a positive image of India to the American public.

Information Technology has made its own contribution to India's soft power. When Americans in Silicon Valley speak of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) with the same reverence they

used to accord to MIT, and when the 'Indianness' of engineers and software developers becomes synonymous with mathematical and scientific excellence, it is India that gains respect.

To revitalise international relations, Modi has visited numerous countries during his tenure. Initiatives such as Howdy Modi during Modi's US visit help shore up his popularity among Americans of Indian origin, and bolster support for the Modi government.

The clash with reality in India

Yet, for all this, India still lags behind other countries in soft power diplomacy. According to Portland's 'soft power 30', India doesn't even make the top 30 countries that excel in this sphere. In the context of India's social and economic realities, the country is probably guilty of exaggerating its soft power capability.

India is the world's biggest democracy. Yet it contains more impoverished people than any country on earth. Corruption is rife, pollution widespread, rape often goes unpunished, there is ethnic and religious strife, and widening economic disparity.

India's soft power capabilities are exaggerated when set against the reality of corruption, endemic poverty, and other social and economic issues[19,20]

In this context, India's cultural outreach initiatives pale in comparison to those of the British Council, Germany's Goethe-Institut, the Japan Institute of International Affairs and China's global network of Confucius Institutes. China in particular has been flexing its superiority not only in its economic, military and political positioning, but also in terms of soft power. Notably, it scores higher than India on the Global Soft Power Index.

Modi: a soft power enthusiast

Modi's government has instigated a number of soft power initiatives to improve India's image abroad. Make in India, for example, encourages home-grown manufacturing and development. The Swachh Bharat Mission, meanwhile, aims to end open defecation and improve sanitation. Atmanirbhar Bharat translates as 'self-reliant India'. It is an umbrella concept for the Modi government's plans for India to become more efficient, competitive and resilient in the world economy.

Since 2014, the Modi government has made substantial investments in resources and projects to enhance India's soft power

Since 2014, the Modi government has made substantial investments in resources and projects to enhance India's capabilities in the realm of soft power diplomacy. These include increasing the number of embassies abroad, reviving ties with regional groupings like ASEAN, BIMSTEC and SAARC, and intensifying strategic, cultural, diplomatic and economic relations with Eastern and South Asian countries through the Look East Policy, Act East Policy and Neighbourhood First Policy. The impact from these efforts may take time to materialise. However, they are all aimed at fostering stronger international ties which would translate into commercial and strategic benefits for India.

Modi is the only Indian leader who has shown significant enthusiasm for this goal. And maybe he is right that we should not underestimate the importance of soft power. Even Mahatma Gandhi used it, in the form of non-violence and satyagraha, to win India's Independence.[18,19]

RESULTS

➤ Soft Power:

- In contrast to the coercive nature of Hard power, Joseph Nye suggested the concept of soft power in post-cold war world
- Soft power is the ability to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction.

➤ The three pillars of soft power are:

➤ Political values, culture, and foreign policy.

➤ **Hard Power:**

- Power in international relations has traditionally been understood in the context of military and economic might.

➤ It is known as Hard power (which is quantifiable).

➤ Hard power is deployed in the form of coercion:

➤ Using force, the threat of force, economic sanctions etc.

➤ **Requirement:**

- Nye argues that successful states need both hard and soft power, the ability to coerce others as well as the ability to shape their long-term attitudes and preferences.

Soft Power: Why it's Important for India?

In addition to economic and military power, the idea of Soft Power has gained traction during the past few decades. Indian arts, culture, yoga and spiritualism, culinary varieties, festivals, music and dance forms etc, have attracted people from all around the world for centuries.

- For creating Goodwill: Indian ethos and practices has helped it build a benevolent image and tremendous goodwill globally, but it has to be backed with quality project delivery.
- As a Strategic Investment: To become a leading strategic investor in commercially viable and financially attractive public-private partnership infrastructure projects, India needs to deliver on its promises.
- Post-Pandemic Changes: With increased scope of cooperation and the realisation that global problems require global efforts, India's role has gained prominence as the pharmacy of the World.
- Trade and Investment Flow: To build an image of a trusted and reliable partner, India needs to make other countries believe in its commitment to deliver. This will lead to rising trade and investment flows to growing Indian markets.
- Agreements and Communication: The projection of Soft power can help India establish agreement and communication between states through peaceful methods. It also helps build a brand for itself by promoting its Non-aligned commitments, Democratic values, morals, ethos, etc.
- In order to Reach Globally: There is no denying the fact that India can use these instruments of soft power to reach out to the global audience—in turn, making an all-embracing impact on the worldwide market.
- India's ancient wisdom and spirituality needed to be utilised to capitalise on India's leadership role in the world.

What are the Challenges?

➤ **Lack of Funds:**

- With limited capacity to fund infrastructure projects, India needs to rationally allot its funds, keeping in mind its strategic objectives.
- Moreover, improving the Indian economy and opening up the market can help India to accumulate funds for international projects.

➤ **Lack of Institutional Framework:**

- India needs an independent development partnership agency that develops long-term and short-term strategies, identifies priorities, builds knowledge and facilitates learning.[20]
- It needs to remove Internal institutional hurdles, such as policy and bureaucratic delays, to meet its infrastructure targets.

What are the Recommendations of the Committee?

- Overseas Centres: Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) should facilitate the opening of more AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga, Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, Sowa-Rigpa and Homeopathy) centres overseas in a “strategic and planned manner”.
- Yoga Certification Board: In the context of the government’s push to popularise yoga through initiatives such as the International Day of Yoga and setting up of other related facilities, the panel recommended that the ministries of AYUSH and external affairs should set up a ‘Yoga Certification Board for certifying Indian yogic practices and therapies’.
- Diaspora Collaboration: The Indian diaspora, too, is a major asset of India’s soft power diplomacy. Collaboration with the Indian diaspora should also be encouraged to disseminate India’s soft power in regions where it is not yet widely known.
- In the Field of Medicine: Conceted efforts to get recognition of Ayurveda as a system of medicine and adopt the pharmacopeia of India so that the products can be exported as medicine.
- Ayurveda does not have a recognised pharmacopeia, which is why such products are being exported as dietary supplements and nutraceuticals. The products are still not recognised in most of the foreign countries.
- Pricing System: On the issue of the differential pricing of tickets to monuments for foreigners and Indians, the panel suggested that the pricing system “may be revisited” since such a policy is unnecessary in a globalised world.
- Such differential pricing leads to a loss of a large segment of foreign travellers.
- Budgetary Allocation: The panel sought an enhanced annual budgetary allocation of ₹500 crore for the Indian Council For Cultural Relations (ICCR) for “conducting India’s soft power and cultural diplomacy in a robust and extensive manner”.
- Coordination Committee: Establishment of a coordination committee consisting of representatives from the MEA and other ministries to overcome the lack of coordination among multiple institutions in projecting India’s soft power and cultural diplomacy.
- A Policy Document: The MEA should also prepare a policy document on “India’s soft power projections, delineating India’s soft power toolbox and manner in which it is being projected abroad along a vision statement for the future”.[17,18]

CONCLUSION

In its capacity as the biggest democracy in the world, India's soft power should extend beyond simply sharing election best practices, to also countering executive overreach through a sophisticated framework of democratic institutions. The other way to overcome a shortage of money and minds on the job is to examine how the private sector can be included to fill some of the gaps left by official agencies.[20]

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