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# Indian Soft Power in a Globalizing World

T.V. PAUL

Soft power—based on intangible indicators such as culture, civilization, literature, philosophy, involvement in global institutions, diplomacy, political organization, and state capacity—has emerged as an important factor in the globalizing world for nations seeking higher status and influence. But an appraisal of India’s present and putative soft power assets underscores the need for greater hard power resources in order to harness soft power more effectively. Indeed, soft power without hard power is a chimera, and they should not be seen in oppositional terms, especially for an aspiring global power.

## Soft Power Revisited

Seventh in a series

Hard power sources include military, economic, demographic, and technological assets. As defined by Harvard’s Joseph S. Nye Jr. in his 2004 book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, soft power “is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies. When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced.” Yet a country relying solely on soft power without hard power assets can find its weaknesses exposed easily. This happened to India in 1962, when China inflicted a humiliating military defeat on it, tarnishing New Delhi’s hard-won soft power position in the world, especially among other developing countries in the nonaligned movement.

By the early 1960s, India had shown that epochal changes such as freedom from colonialism could

be achieved largely through nonviolent means, that Asian and African states could be organized as a cushioning force in world politics amid intense Cold War rivalry among the great powers, and that democracy could be established in a large, poor, underdeveloped, and multiethnic country. India had also shown under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s leadership that, even with limited hard power resources, diplomacy could be used in global institutional forums to mediate conflict among the major powers to some extent. All these advantages came crashing down in the Himalayas as the military conflict with China exposed the limitations of India’s soft power, making Nehru’s active global engagement a casualty in the process.

That said, soft power can still bring reputation, credibility, and legitimacy to a state’s power position in the global system if it is developed and exercised in conjunction with hard power resources. India has tremendous assets in the soft power area. Its multiethnic culture, peace-generating civilizational values (including religious and philosophical ideals), and unique art forms and literatures constitute perhaps the core of its soft power asset mix.

More importantly, contemporary India’s key values and institutions hold great promise for managing multiethnic societies, especially in the developing world. These arise largely from four institutional structures that Nehru helped to establish in India: democracy, secularism, federalism, and official recognition of multiple languages. Although attractive and potentially quite powerful on the global stage, these assets have yet to be harnessed effectively.

## CULTURAL RESOURCES

A country’s unique culture can be a currency of attraction and influence. National values and norms are important manifestations of culture, and they are often depicted in a country’s art, lit-

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erature, and civilizational assets. The art, dance, architecture, cuisine, literature, and languages of India are all part of its composite cultural and civilizational offerings to the world, and are therefore soft power assets. These can bring global influence if other societies find them valuable and worthy of emulation.

India's traditional and modern art have slowly become internationally accepted as powerful assets. Visitors to major art museums around the world where Asian art is exhibited will see India's contributions. Indian artists today are gradually making headway in the global scene of auctions and exhibitions, though much more can be attained in this area. Meanwhile, the traditional facades of Indian buildings have not been properly marketed internationally. Even in buildings within India, traditional architectural forms are often missing, as concrete jungles arise in urban centers. Yet visitors to Bali, Indonesia, are astounded by the intricate architecture and art forms that originated in ancient India.

Indian cuisine has already made a tremendous impact globally, as is evident in countries like the United Kingdom, where it is now the most preferred international food. The most popular cuisine is North Indian. But cuisines from southern India (for example, from Kerala in the southwest) could be globally branded, as Thai cuisine is today. The cuisine of India's different regions could be made popular through sustained campaigns by Indian government agencies and private corporations.

A key element when it comes to marketing is the vegetarian cuisine that a majority of the Indian population consumes. Globally, more and more people are adopting vegetarian diets in hopes of avoiding ailments like cancer and heart disease. The problem here is a dearth of sustained campaigns for vegetarian cuisine and branding of India's offerings. Traditional Indian medicines, as in the Ayurveda system, similarly require global branding. They have the potential to become valuable alternative therapies for certain ailments. However, a lack of strict regulations has given rise to fake Ayurvedic doctors and medicines, some tainted with arsenic.

The literature of India in the English language has become global, especially books written by Indian expatriate authors. In fact, many leading authors in English literature today are of Indian origin, and their themes often related to India or the Indian diaspora. The list is long: It includes

Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Abraham Verghese, Rohinton Mistry, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Aravind Adiga, Kiran Desai, and V.S. Naipaul. Why not undertake a campaign to brand locally produced vernacular-language Indian literature? Latin American authors have made a major global impact. Commissioning high-quality translations and disseminating literary works into the global marketplace by developing collaborations with major publishing houses and literary agents are essential for this purpose.

## FUSING FORMS

The apparel designs and fashions of India have tremendous soft power potential. Clothing is an area where India could excel, given the colorfulness and variety of brands that the country offers. Fusion is the key to developing Indian apparel producers into global brands. Indian companies need to design clothes in conjunction with global leaders, market them through shows and media presentations, and encourage global chains to purchase them.

The idea of fusion also holds promise for globalizing classical and modern Indian dance forms. Take the case of Bharatanayam, Kathak, Kuchipudi, Kathkali, and Mohiniyattam—the prominent classical dance forms of India. These are unique art forms that many foreigners initially find difficult to appreciate, but with some simplifications they could be made internationally more attractive. Leading Western artists such as the Beatles, Michael Jackson, Madonna, and Shakira have adopted elements of Indian dances or music in their performances.

The music of India has a particularly peaceful character. More upbeat dance and music forms such as the Bhangra are now popular in many wedding parties and other festivities in North America and other English-speaking places. A substantial number of Indian musical traditions such as Hindustani, Karnatik, instrumental music (especially using a flute, tabla, and sarod), and ghazal singing all have potential to be marketed and appreciated on a global scale. Eminent figures like Pandit Ravi Shankar, the sitar player and composer, have done much to popularize Indian instrumental music in the West since the 1960s. Here again adaptations, including more fusion and collaborations, are needed to make the music attractive to the twenty-first-century global audience. But in this regard India's dance and music forms hold much promise, given their variety and rich traditions.

Indian films have already made a major mark in the global arena. Bollywood produces more films than any other country, and is now increasingly viewed as second to Hollywood in terms of global reach. Indian movies are known for being entertaining and are popular in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, and slowly spreading to Western countries. However, quantity versus quality is a major problem. Indian films often lack realism. If entertaining themes were developed with realistic story lines, India could make even deeper inroads into the global film industry. Foreign collaboration would also help, as was proved by the success of the 2008 movie *Slumdog Millionaire*.

Many other Bollywood films could have achieved similar prominence. Consider *My Name is Khan*. Even though this 2010 movie was a commercial success, it could have enjoyed much more global appeal had it given a more realistic portrayal of the main characters. The 2001 film *Lagaan*, despite some incredible elements, artistically depicted the struggles and feelings of the characters and the political drama of colonial India. It made a major mark and won an Oscar nomination. Proper marketing is necessary for Bollywood to make a major impact beyond its existing strongholds in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.

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## THE DRAW OF CIVILIZATION

Civilizations and their inherent cultures have been the core of much soft power in modern and ancient times. The empires that left lasting impressions were those with important civilizations. In today's world, imperial civilizations are hard to establish. Instead, in a globalized era, multicultural and pluralistic civilizations are most valued, since people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds have to live together even if they do not share all of the same values or goals.

India's multidimensional civilizational assets have great actual and potential soft power significance. What are the strengths of Indian civilization? Foremost is the unique peace-generating ethos inherent in Hinduism, Buddhism, and minority religions like Islam, Jainism, Sikhism, and Christianity as practiced in India. In many respects, India has one of the world's most enduring "grand" civilizations. Over three millennia it has contributed immensely to many fields, including religion, philosophy, art, literature, science, and mathematics.

As the Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen has pointed out, India has a strong tradition of intellectual dialogue and skepticism, and of "accepted heterodoxy" among atheists and religionists. Three world religions emanated from India—Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism—in addition to a smaller religion, Jainism. Christianity reached Indian shores in AD 52, even before it was acceptable in Europe, while persecuted religious minorities such as Zoroastrians, Jews, and Baha'is found India received them with open arms. Although Islam arrived in northern India largely through invading Muslim rulers and latter-day conversions, in the south it came via Arab traders, and spread through mainly peaceful means. What is unique about this mix of religions in India is their relatively peaceful coexistence, despite some significant aberrations in the late seventeenth century and since the 1930s, especially before and after the partition of the subcontinent in 1947.

India's minority religions, even those of foreign origin like Islam and Christianity, have developed eclectic ideas in conjunction with Indian ideals, largely emanating from Buddhism and Hinduism. Peace-generating ideals were promoted by India's ancient and modern heroes, four of whom are most prominent: Lord Buddha, the 3rd-century BC Mauryan emperor Ashoka the Great, the 16th-century Mughal emperor Akbar the Great, and Mahatma Gandhi. Each is remembered for instilling peaceful values in India and beyond.

The impressive spread of Buddhism from India to other countries in South Asia, to China and Japan in East Asia, and to Southeast Asia and beyond was accomplished through peaceful means. Buddha's teachings even without reference to God have reached millions over the millennia. This may well be India's greatest soft power diffusion and contribution to world peace. Even within religions, medieval India produced movements like *Bhakti* (Devotion) and helped to spread Sufism; these were known for their peaceful, eclectic ideas and practices. Similar to Buddhism, Jainism also emphasized ideals of peace. India throughout its history has received and naturalized diverse cultural forms and traditions from Central Asia and the Middle East—manifest in architectural monuments like the Taj Mahal and

in North Indian music—thus becoming a uniquely composite civilization.

Since India's independence, violence-generating behavior has come from fringe elements of these religions, yet the faiths contain powerful strains of harmony and peace. Some modern meditation gurus like Deepak Chopra and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi have articulated the elements of this peace, but it has not been fully used as a soft power resource by India. The deeper meanings of yoga and meditation arise from the spiritual level of India's civilizational offerings to the world, and these need to be explained further.

The biggest manifestation of the multicultural and multiethnic sources of soft power is the simple fact that India contains almost the same size of population as Africa and the Middle East combined, and more varieties of religions and cultures than any other nation-state in the world. Although it is a very non-egalitarian society, India has mechanisms for social order that are more peaceful than those of many other civilizations. The democratic and secular values instilled since independence have helped tremendously in developing this tradition.

However, when extremist elements, whether from the left or the right, try to undermine this harmony, India and its soft power suffer. Rapid and peaceful social and economic change and social engineering may be necessary to quell extremist violence. The exclusivist civilizational ideas propounded by extremist religious parties or groups, be they Hindu nationalists or Islamic fundamentalists, can hurt India's soft power, since such ideas have little attraction for outsiders who are not members of a given religion or ethnic group. They simply generate "in-group" and "out-group" mentalities and violence among diverse communities.

Scholars have increasingly talked of India developing (or resuming) a role as a bridge-building civilization. The Singaporean academic Kishore Mahbubani has noted, for example, that Bollywood movies are watched with equal passion by Hindus and Muslims—the latter in many Asian, Middle Eastern, and African countries. Some of Bollywood's leading actors and actresses are Muslims, a feat hard to find in Hollywood. However, whether India can emerge as a bridge-builder has yet to be determined. Can India show the world

that exclusivist agendas are things of the past? Can it show that the future belongs instead to multicultural and multi-civilizational paths amid an intensified globalization of universal values—values that are not confined to either Western or Eastern mindsets?

## PERSUASIVE POLITICS

A country's political system can be a source of soft power. In India's case, the power of attraction arises from four institutional structures: democracy, secularism, federalism, and the nation's three-language formula. These institutional ideas also derive from India's inclusive civilization, despite some deep hierarchical issues arising from the caste system and corruption among the political elite.

Despite all of its messiness, Indian democracy has sustained itself. This is a wonder to many social science theorists, some of whom have branded the phenomenon "Indian exceptionalism" (meaning it is non-replicable). Since India won its independence in 1947, transfers of power have occurred largely without bloodshed (barring some election-related violence).

To be sure, violence continues to afflict areas infested by Naxalite communist rebels, and in recent years there have been a high number of suicides by indebted farmers. New Delhi also has great difficulty dealing with insurgencies in Kashmir and the northeast, and often resorts to high-handed methods that undermine India's image and soft power. Even so, the country has developed an imperfect but important democratic model for the governance of multiethnic and multireligious societies.

Similarly, India's secularism (despite occasional aberrations) has become strong. Tangible evidence includes the growing percentage of minority populations—be they Muslim, Christian, or Sikh—showing firm allegiance to the Indian nation, in contrast with declining percentages of religious minorities in India's South Asian neighbors, especially Pakistan and Bangladesh. Secular values are also evident in the growing integration of Muslims in India, and their low participation in global jihadist organizations like Al Qaeda.

Meanwhile, the increasing pragmatism of the Indian electorate has been evident in both federal and provincial elections: Incumbents are voted out

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unless they perform well. The federal organization stipulated in the Indian constitution has allowed provincial governments to function reasonably autonomously and, in many cases, this has made them more effective. And India's official "two-plus-one" language policy (Hindi, English, plus local languages) has proven a peaceful solution to an issue that still bedevils even advanced countries like Canada, the United States, and Spain.

These political models can be enhanced and adapted to emerging states in Africa and Asia, including India's South Asian neighbors, most of which are plagued by ethnic violence arising from intolerance toward minority groups. In this regard, China has a major weakness in soft power competition because its authoritarian system is not an attractive model for twenty-first-century states in terms of political organization. Beijing's ethnic integration strategies in Tibet and Xinjiang are highly coercive and disregard local customs and values.

However, if politics is an asset for India, it is also the country's bane. India exhibits some strengths, but also many signs of a weak state. The political system has not received the credit it deserves abroad because of its chaotic nature and the state's inefficiency and ineffectiveness at every level—central, state, and municipal/village—in delivering public services. The private sector has largely been more effective, at least in industries where businesses have been allowed to operate, such as aviation and wireless telephone service.

## **ATTRACTIVE GROWTH**

India's economic successes can also be a great soft power asset. It is incredible to many outside observers that the country could sustain 6 to 9 percent annual economic growth rates with all the inefficiencies that plague the Indian system. Recently, growth has slowed substantially, taking some glitter off the Indian success story. But the record clearly shows that India's entrepreneurial genius, if freed, could make the nation a model for twenty-first century economic growth. India demonstrates that a developing country can grow rapidly without a Chinese or East Asian top-down and mercantile economic model.

However, the big weakness lies in the rampant inequalities and distributional injustices, as well as the corruption, that the Indian system generates. The continuing extreme poverty in rural and urban areas, appalling conditions for workers, persistent child labor, poor treatment of women,

widespread caste discrimination, and general lack of public hygiene all affect the way that outsiders perceive India despite its economic successes.

India's rapid economic growth, moreover, has not been accompanied by effective urban planning and infrastructure development. For instance, Indian road builders seem not to understand the need for proper footpaths and crosswalks for pedestrians. Another major weakness is the control of pollution and waste. Indian schools should provide compulsory education on hygiene and waste disposal, and clean lavatories need to be set up in all urban and rural centers.

If India can meaningfully address the need for wealth redistribution and infrastructure improvements, it will be able to offer a powerful economic and developmental model, as East Asian nations did in the 1970s and 1980s. However, India will have to pay more attention to quality-of-life parameters, and not just raw economic numbers, while making an all-out effort to lift up more millions of its citizens from destitution.

## **DIPLOMATIC SOLUTIONS**

Diplomacy has two key dimensions that can be soft power assets. The first encompasses the actual diplomatic practices and policies carried out by governmental representatives through their activism in global institutional forums and foreign capitals. The second dimension is public diplomacy, which relies on the distribution of information and cultural programs overseas aimed at improving a country's image and prestige. Such diplomacy can help counter negative stereotypes or propaganda stemming from opponents, prejudices, and ignorance. In this sense, diplomacy is a tool for enhancing soft power.

A caveat is that public diplomacy, if used overzealously, can become sheer propaganda, which other countries will resent. While America has been the most successful practitioner of public diplomacy in the contemporary era, its actual foreign policies in places like the Middle East have provoked reactions that diminish its soft power assets. The messenger, in other words, matters for diplomacy as much as the message. Barack Obama's 2008 election to the presidency, after two terms of George W. Bush, made a big difference in the presentation and appreciation of America's public diplomacy and soft power.

India pursued diplomacy as a soft power asset quite successfully until the 1960s. By organizing the newly emerging Afro-Asian states and

leading their cause at the United Nations, supporting peacekeeping operations, and offering mediation during major power conflicts (such as in Korea), Nehru's India enjoyed more influence in the global arena than its hard power warranted. This changed dramatically when China, the other emergent power, saw Indian activism as a potential threat to its position in Asia and exposed India's inability to withstand a military challenge in 1962. After the 1960s, India de-emphasized diplomacy as a tool of soft power, though its activism continued in specific venues such as UN forums.

In the post-Cold War globalized world, India once again has begun using diplomacy more effectively, whether in the UN, the Group of 20 industrialized nations, the BRICS grouping (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), the World Trade Organization, global climate talks, or engagement with the European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. India's global diplomacy and engagement have shown increased confidence and pragmatism. This is partly a result of the Indian elite's realization that the country's hard power resources have grown substantially and will likely continue doing so. If present trends persist, India may within a few decades overtake other countries, except for China and the United States, in gross economic terms.

As the regional analyst John Lee has written, India today is viewed in many Asian capitals as "a predictable, stabilizing, cooperative, and attractive rising power." Indeed, the region is marked by a widespread "lack of apprehension about India's rise," unlike China's. This may have much to do with India's soft power assets.

A major weakness of India's public diplomacy is the attitude and behavioral dispositions of the country's political and bureaucratic elite and how they are perceived abroad. To capitalize on public diplomacy efforts, a nation needs articulate and media-savvy spokespeople. India's political class (barring a few exceptions) does not have an effective public presence or the ability to speak well to a global audience. This goes for the Indian bureaucracy and diplomatic corps as well. India needs to pay attention to developing spokespeople with the qualities necessary for selling the country's soft power assets abroad.

India also needs to use its talent within corporations (especially globalized ones), along with journalists, scholars, artists, and writers to bring its soft power assets to the world's attention.

Globally influential opinion leaders, scholars, and artists from other countries can help accomplish this. Some might be regularly brought to India for visits and exchange programs, as the United States does.

## KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

Knowledge, especially scientific knowledge, has both hard and soft power values. To fully harness this asset, India needs to set up research-intensive universities and open up its educational institutions for international students and foreign scholarly collaborations. The biggest ambassadors of American soft power have been the thousands of foreign students who have studied in the United States since the 1940s. They carry American ideals of freedom and entrepreneurship back to their home countries and into the global arena.

India has many teaching institutions, some of high quality, but many seem to lag behind. The nation needs to build educational institutions of higher learning that meet world standards, develop cutting-edge research and publications, and produce innovative ideas in key disciplines. Social sciences such as international relations and economics should receive higher prominence in India, as they do in China. Such universities could attract top talent, especially from the Indian diaspora, which is untapped now.

## A FORCE FOR PEACE

Can India offer a model for global governance and ideas for peace and order different from Western liberal or Chinese authoritarian ideas, based on its eclectic civilizational and cultural ethos and mores? Inclusiveness, interdependence, and unity in diversity are essential for the world. Without these values, the twenty-first century will see many more conflicts, of both internal and external varieties. The rapid rise of new powers like China and India may generate conflict with the declining powers or between the newly emerging powers.

Can India's soft power assets be deployed and emulated to help prevent the massive internal upheavals and aggressive nationalism that such power-transition conflicts can cause, as in the case of the European state system for over 500 years? Can India act as a "bridging power" between West and East? I believe it can, and the first thing to do is to develop a national strategy with this goal in mind. New ideas from India for a peaceful global order are essential. ■