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Can Soft Power Facilitate India's Foreign Policy Goals?

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India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi arrives in Nairobi, Kenya, on July 10, 2016, on a two day visit to Kenya, after visiting Mozambique, South Africa, and Tanzania. File photo: AP

*Despite the huge potential of India's soft power, it has not been optimally used thus far. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, through his high visibility and extensive foreign travels, has made soft power and outreach to the Diaspora key components of his foreign policy initiative. However, as **Tridivesh Singh Maini** argues in this article, the Prime Minister's efforts have been hamstrung by factors such as lack of financial support for the outreach and his inability to control domestic majoritarian forces.*

In recent years, soft power has become an important component of foreign policy globally. There is no one definition that can truly encapsulate such a broad concept as Soft Power. The most commonly accepted definition of Soft Power was given by Joseph Nye (2004:10) ¹: "The ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment." India, too, has been giving greater importance to Soft Power in the past two decades, ever since its economic status has risen. The Narendra Modi Government has made it an

important tool in its foreign policy, yet a number of issues such as domestic politics and insufficient financial resources are proving to be major obstacles. This article aims to provide an overview of Indian Soft Power, the efforts being made by the current government for promotion of the same, and highlight some of the key drawbacks in the current strategy.

India's Soft Power

India's Soft Power can be classified into a number of categories. The first is India's cultural and spiritual heritage that has played a key role in building links with other regions including East Asia and South East Asia. For instance, Buddhist and Hindu influences have helped in building strong links with South East Asia.

The second is by way of political and ethical inheritances, among them the philosophies of Mahatma Gandhi and India's first Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru. Gandhian concepts like non-violence and non-cooperation have a world-wide following today with two key names in this respect being Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela. Both followed Gandhian principles during their respective struggles. The Non-Aligned Movement of which Nehru was a leading light showed the way forward to the entire developing world ² In the third category falls India's film industry, especially Bollywood, and, more recently, its television soaps, which have acquired popularity across regions, not just in the neighbourhood. In the words of ShashiTharoor: ³ "India produces various kinds of culture, notably including the films of Bollywood, now reaching ever-wider international audiences. The triumph of 'Slumdog Millionaire' at the 2009 Oscars both reflects and reinforces this trend. Bollywood is bringing its brand of glitzy entertainment not just to the Indian diaspora in the US, UK or Canada, but around the globe, to the screens of Syrians and Senegalese alike."

TV serials too are popular not just in neighbouring South Asia, including Pakistan and Afghanistan but also in South East Asia ⁴ .

Blarel (2012:31) also echoes Tharoor: "...goodwill for India abroad has largely been generated in an unplanned manner, New Delhi does have the capacity to accentuate soft power through 'public diplomacy' or by developing a framework of activities by which a government seeks to influence public attitudes in a manner that they become supportive of its foreign policy and national interests" ⁵ .

Successive Indian governments have in different ways deployed India's Soft Power. This includes leveraging institutions like Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) that have been increasing awareness about India, and also providing scholarships to students from a number of countries. In 2006, the Ministry of External Affairs set up a Public Diplomacy Division to promote India overseas. India has also been providing financial assistance for capacity building and strengthening of democratic institutions. A strong reiteration of this point is Afghanistan where India provided financial assistance for the construction of a New Parliament building which was inaugurated in December 2015.

During Prime Minister Modi's visit to Afghanistan in June 2016, the Salma Dam project was inaugurated. India's Aid outreach has gone beyond the immediate neighbourhood to far-off countries in Africa where India has been providing not just Aid for infrastructural projects but training through programmes such as India's Technical & Economic Cooperation which started in 1964. In the 2011 India-Africa Summit, 25,000 scholarships were sanctioned for African students; in 2016, this number was raised to 50,000. India is also assisting Africa in the

sphere of Information Technology, and the development of an E network ⁶. In recent years, the presence of Indian businesses in different parts of the world, has also emerged as one of India's sources of Soft Power.

It would be fair to argue that while successive governments have sought to utilise different facets of soft power, it is only with India's increasing economic clout on the world stage post-liberalisation that soft power as a strategy has really worked. In this context, C. Rajamohan has argued: "amidst India's globalisation and the intensification of its global footprint since the 1990s, there has been growing popular interest in India's culture — from yoga to cuisine and from Bollywood to contemporary art. The economic success of the Indian Diaspora, especially in the developed Western world, has tended to boost India's soft power ⁷."

The current government

If one were to examine efforts by the current government to promote soft power, its focus has been on Ayurveda, Yoga, and Buddhism, besides reaching out pro-actively to the Indian Diaspora. A major success in this regard is the international recognition accorded to Yoga. In 2015, on the Indian Prime Minister's appeal, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) declared June 21 as International Yoga Day. Since then the day has been celebrated with mass yoga practice, not just by overseas Indians and staff of Indian embassies but by people of other nationalities.

India has been reaching out to East Asian and South East Asian countries through Buddhism in the past, one of the major steps taken in this direction was the revival of the Nalanda University in Bihar. The Nalanda University Bill was passed by Parliament in 2010. The Prime Minister has also sought to utilise Buddhism for building closer ties with neighbours in South Asia besides, of course, East Asia and South East Asia. During his visits to Sri Lanka, Japan, Mongolia and China, Prime Minister Modi sought to draw upon India's Buddhist links with these countries and visited important shrines like the Sri Mahabodhi Temple in Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka, Toji and Kinkakuji Buddhist Temples in Japan and the Wild Goose Pagoda in Xian, China, dedicated to the famous Buddhist pilgrim, Hieun Tsang. ⁸ Interestingly, Xian also happens to be the Chinese President Xi Jinping's home town and was Modi's first stop during his China visit. Modi also inaugurated the Buddha Purnima Diwas in New Delhi in 2015 stating, "Without Buddha this century cannot be Asia's century ⁹."

Modi has also used Sufism to build links with Central Asia. The 2016 Sufi conference held in New Delhi from March 17-20, 2016, and attended by a number of Sufi leaders from different parts of the world, including Pakistan, must be viewed in this context.

The Prime Minister has addressed the Diaspora in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and Singapore. However, a less noticed interaction has been with Indian workers in the Middle Eastern countries the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. During his visit to Africa, too, he reached out to communities settled there. The outreach towards the Diaspora, in fact, began during the Atal Behari Vajpayee government with the setting up of a committee under L.M. Singhvi to look into the demands of overseas Indians. The Committee's key recommendations included the need for greater outreach by the government towards the Diaspora, dual citizenship to Indians settled in seven countries, including the U.S., the U.K., and Canada, and holding an annual 'Pravasi Bharatiya Divas' ¹⁰. The first such event was held in January 2003.

A Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs was also set up to address issues pertaining to the Diaspora which has recently been merged with the MEA.

While India has sought to utilise its soft power pro-actively, there are inevitable comparisons with China

The China comparison

China has pro-actively wielded its soft power, setting up Chinese language centres and Confucius institutes in other countries, and providing scholarships to foreign students to study in China

China's success in the use of soft power can be seen especially in two areas: tourism and international student arrivals. While China managed to get well over 100 million foreign tourists in 2015 [11](#) , the total number of foreign tourists visiting India in the same year was 80 lakh [12](#) . The number of international students in China (3,97,635) for the year 2015 [13](#) , was far more than international students in India, a little over 65,000 (66,885) in 2015 [14](#) .

Shashi Tharoor makes an interesting point [15](#) "...such strategic advantages as have accrued from India's soft power - goodwill for the country amongst African, Arab and Afghan publics, for instance - has been a largely unplanned byproduct of the normal emanations of Indian culture. Such goodwill has not been systematically harnessed as a strategic asset by New Delhi. It is ironic that, in and around the 2008 Olympics, authoritarian China showed a greater determination to use its hard-power strengths to cultivate a soft-power strategy for itself on the world stage." Daya Thussu in a book on India's soft power makes the point that there are at least half-a-dozen English books on China's soft power, and many more in Mandarin while the number of books on India's Soft Power is far fewer [16](#) . What are the problems in India's current approach towards utilisation of Soft Power?

The first problem with regard to Soft Power is that it is a very broad concept and means different things to different people. It is important to not be obsessed with one aspect of soft power and ignore the others. In a country with diverse opinions, different individuals are likely to have different notions of 'Soft Power' [17](#) . Should the focus be on cultural dimension of soft power, or promotion of Democracy?

Second, diversity is India's main strength and there have been efforts by fringe elements in India to promote majoritarianism and an exclusivist identity. If such elements are not kept in check it will be detrimental to India's efforts at utilising Soft Power.

C. Rajamohan rightly argues [18](#) : "Modi's efforts at projecting soft power, however, are likely to come to nought if the government continues to allow a free run to groups that seek to anchor India's rich cultural inheritance on a narrow and religious basis and infect India's democratic culture with the virus of majoritarianism."

Third, for the effective promotion of Soft Power, financial resources are needed and so is it important to play to one's strengths. Unfortunately, the Indian approach falls short on both counts. Indeed, recently, the Ministry of External Affairs complained about the Ministry of Finance reducing the funds allocated for promotion of Indian soft power [19](#) .

Lack of a clear strategy is also visible in the government's failure to use its own communication tools. For instance, China Central Television (CCTV) is spread across all regions and Indian private channels like Sony and Zee are available in Africa, South East Asia, Middle East and Central Asia. As against this, India's government channel, Doordarshan has been unable to internationalise itself [20](#) .

Fourth, while successive leaders, including Prime Minister Modi, have referred to India's democratic credentials and sought to build commonalities with democratic countries, a counter point has been made that India has not sufficiently highlighted the successes it has achieved in the sphere of democracy. Rohan Mukherjee (2014:55) argues: "On the one hand, India is the second largest contributor to the US-led UN Democracy Fund for the promotion of democracy around the world; on the other, it continually reiterates its unwillingness to become an exporter of democracy, i.e. to externalize its domestic political values ²¹."

Finally, while India is trying to attract more foreign students, many of them are reluctant to take the offer due to apprehensions with regard to law and order, and safety of women. The recent murder of an African national and subsequent attacks on African students sent a wrong message internationally.

In conclusion, soft power can undoubtedly play an important role in generating goodwill. However, India's use of soft power has been hampered by key limitations such as paucity of resources, especially in comparison to countries like China, and the lack of a clear strategy due to internal contradictions. Besides, soft power by itself will not suffice in the absence of palpable economic and hard power. For instance, South East Asia and Africa may have strong strategic convergences with India, and yet it is China's economic prowess that gives it the decisive edge.

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