

India's Soft Power: The Attraction and the Trap

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Introduction

Soft power was defined by Joseph Nye as the power of attraction¹ or the third component of the overall meaning of the word power, the other two being coercion and remuneration (payments). He notes that the power to attract is subjective. It does not apply equally to all people. India's ancient spirituality and refined royal pageantry, for instance, attract many but leave others indifferent while the poverty that affects a large part of the population and present-day environmental conditions in the country put off many people. However, the active promotion of soft power entails a strategy of seduction through the offer of opportunities and incentives that generally appeal to all.

Although the concept was isolated by Nye according to a typical American academic method to create a personal brand and label, soft power has been an intrinsic part of political discourse since the earliest theoretical works on the subject were written, from the days of Thucydides (Athens exercised soft power through its artistic and cultural efflorescence and economic prosperity while Sparta had historical prestige due to its venerable constitution, military prowess and the austerity of its mores); the Mahabharata (the splendour of the

Pandava capital at Indraprastha dazzled visitors and guests whereas Yudhishthira's probity and fair play were widely admired) and Chanakya.

Soft power is essentially inseparable from what is strictly defined as hard power (economic, military and juridical-institutional) but the borders are inevitably porous and hard and soft power combine to exert what is broadly called influence, whether projected by a state, a corporation or any institution or individual. It has often been demonstrated that soft power is ineffective or even immaterial, in the sense of not being power *stricto sensu* if it is not backed by a hefty ability to enforce rules or preferences and desires.

However, if hard power is applied harshly it can defeat the attempt to project soft power to win friends and allies. Thus, as Nye admits, the arbitrariness and brutality of American military and economic interventions in several countries (including the frequent imposition of unilateral sanctions on other countries and foreign companies and individuals in pursuit of the US national interests) have largely cancelled out in recent decades the positive outcome of the US's humanitarian aid operations to remedy natural or man-made disasters abroad². Loud and aggressive assertions of nationalism are also counter-

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productive and tend to turn the people of other countries against those who toot their horns too much.

The Link between Hard and Soft Power

A case can be made that the renown and prestige of a culture and its productions are almost directly proportional to the sheer power wielded by the state that hosts said culture. World-famous names of literature, the arts, scholarship and even the sciences, however undisputed their merit, owe much of their global fame to the influence of the nations or empires they belonged to. Homer, Plato, Virgil, Thomas Aquinas, Michelangelo, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Victor Hugo, Hemingway and countless other illustrious figures were lucky to be born in countries that were then or became later very prominent in the European region and eventually on a planetary scale. One can wonder whether Virgil or Shakespeare, to choose only two, would be as well known and admired if they had lived and written in some obscure land or a language known to a few. For the same reason, even the brightest stars of Asian civilisations outside their linguistic spheres are only familiar to specialists and the same is true of smaller nations of the West. Every community and nation tends to promote its own with the means that it has. We may call this, to illustrate the point, the conundrum of the Finns (i.e. is much harder for a Finnish writer to become known outside of Finland than for an American writer of equivalent talent, *pari passu* to achieve international celebrity) and conversely recognition and acclaim promote talent and spur creativity so that the most powerful have a decisive advantage also to achieve fame, as is shown throughout

history by privileged minority communities in all areas of activity.

Coming to India, which has an unsurpassed soft power appeal due to her ancient geographically spread out and romantic history, continental and overseas cultural expansion, artistic wealth and seminal contributions to the languages, religions, sciences and philosophies of the world³, we find that, like many other ancient civilisations she has not reaped the full benefit of that aura in the modern age and is in some ways the victim of the image and perceptions that have been generated around both Indian history and the contemporary reality. We might, as a parallel, point to other obvious cases of nations inheriting a hoary prestige as soft power but since deprived of the accompanying hard power, such as Egypt and Greece. Despite the attraction they hold for most people because of their glorious past and stunning ancient achievements, their present weakness and problems are unfavourably compared with their erstwhile prominence. One may indeed question whether Egypt, for instance, can boast of any real soft power outside the Arab world except concerning her enduring appeal for tourism. Greece's soft power is also quite limited by her size and current economic situation. On the other hand, Iran, after a long eclipse has been able both under the Pahlavi dynasty and as the Islamic Republic to combine rather effectively, soft with hard power, at least in part of the world, despite intense foreign opposition and the generally negative global perception of the 'Shah's dictatorship' followed by the 'Ayatollahs regime'. Iraq is a case study of a country whose ancient prestige, comparable to Egypt's and Greece's, has been almost totally erased in the last decades of

wars, turmoil, foreign invasions, occupation and internal conflicts.

Turkey offers an interesting example of an empire which became a nation-state by seeking to free herself from much of the Ottoman-Islamic cultural and political legacy (enshrining major religious and civilisational soft power) in the early part of the twentieth century only to hark back to her days of *Khalifal* hegemony in the last two decades. While bolstering its hard power, the Turkish Republic under President Erdogan, who enjoys being known as ‘The Sultan,’ does not hesitate to claim the legacy of the Sublime Porte and assert its cultural centrality in the Turkic and Muslim spheres⁴. Historical heritage is indeed usually at the core of soft power. In China’s and Russia’s case, for instance, respective imperial memories play a major part in their self-image.

India's Hurdles

A legitimate question is why India, with her immense cultural and physical assets, has not been able to use her soft power further to her advantage by projecting a more positive image, especially when compared with Pakistan which, outside the Islamosphere has very little to offer as a positive and attractive feature, being a former part of India which tries not to be Indian or Indic and therefore projects a rather confused and derivative sense of identity.

The answer to the above question is multiple and can be broken into the following segments:

1. The traditional popular view of India as a timeless, picturesque civilisation of ascetics and mystics living in wild nature attracts spiritual seekers but does not fit easily in a global

technological and industrial civilisation focused on wealth acquisition and physical growth. India is often seen as a giant time capsule in which one can cultivate the nostalgia for antiquity and the Middle Ages. This is the perspective of Indologists but also of much of the general cultivated public who tend to ignore the current realities or even rue the often culturally damaging but the inevitable modernisation and globalisation of society. India lovers often prefer to see India as a mirror of the human past and tend to deplore changes even when they are healthy and necessary ones.

2. As a land of ‘polytheists, castes and maharajas’ India was regarded by Christians and Muslims as an arena for missionaries and conquering ‘civilisers’ - and later as a motherlode for anthropologists and sociologists. The ‘charm’ of India was and is still tied to the perception of extreme inequality. An ocean of poverty surrounds small islands of immense wealth harbouring the ruling potentates of yore and the free-spending business tycoons of today. Poverty and inequality are commonly associated with Hinduism which is still seen by some as a fascinatingly mysterious but ‘primitive’ cult that holds the Indian masses back in the evolutionary race for constant modernisation. The widespread prestige of Buddhism does not help India as much as it could because it is usually (unfairly and inaccurately) contrasted with Hinduism as being a rationalist egalitarian and Godless philosophy which sought to break the hold of superstitious, oppressive and caste-based ‘Brahmanism’⁵.

3. Perhaps the most important factor is what I call ‘The Ahimsa Trap’ unwittingly set by Mahatma Gandhi when he anchored his *Swarajya*

campaign to Ahimsa. Hitherto an attribute of yogis and spiritual seekers, usually translated as non-violence, which he sought to apply to an entire nation for political action. His method to expose, discredit and gradually weaken the British Raj by peaceful means was partly successful, although India's freedom was ultimately a by-product of the two world wars, the decline of Britain and the rise of the US and USSR, both opposed to European colonial hegemony for their own reasons. However, the Mahatma set India in the minds of many in the world and at home on such a high moral pedestal that it has not always been possible for the country to live up to somewhat unrealistic expectations that Jawaharlal Nehru tried to nurture through his adoption of non-alignment, *Panchsheel*, the Bandung Declaration and the advocacy of altruistic, supra-national causes, even when India did not have the power to effectively support them.

Nehru and his successors often had to break with the line of conduct that they espoused in-principle when critical national interests were at stake. As was expected, moves such as the 'police operation' in Hyderabad, the merger of Goa and Sikkim, the policies about Jammu and Kashmir and even the liberation of East Pakistan met with virulent and self-servicing criticism in many foreign quarters, happy to bring the country down a few pegs in global esteem.

4. The fact remains that India set the bar very high for herself when she achieved independence and is now paying a price when accommodations have to be made for *realpolitik* and national security in the lawless international system in which all states compete and conflict. Every time a decision is made or disposition is adopted, howbeit

democratically and constitutionally, that is depicted as a breach with 'Gandhian Nehruvian' principles, whether in foreign or domestic policy, massive internal and international opposition is generated. The immemorial Chanakyan pragmatic and realist tradition of Indian polity⁶ is almost unknown to the outside world and generally despised by liberal left-wing thinkers in the country and yet it should not be ignored in the nation's geographic and cultural context.

5. It may be pointed out in this regard that India's soft power assets are also two-edged swords in the current global contest for power. Her philosophical introspective schools of thought are invoked to deny India's ability to be pragmatically progressive and 'hard-nosed' due to an overdose of religion and speculative hair-splitting; the pomp and refinement of her ancient royal courts are major attractors but are also depicted as symbols of oligarchic autocracy and economic inequity; the intellectual brilliance of her Vedic scholarly classes is accounted for as a vestige of brahminical casteist ivory-tower elitism; the acumen of her business class is often ascribed to a usurious ability to accumulate pelf at the expense of the vast majority of the population (even though that faculty is the cornerstone of any capitalist system) while the many non-monetary *Seva* and *Daan* rooted-aspects of Indian polity are traced to an endemic socialistic tropism that Nehru's Fabian socialism only reinforced. Even the democratic parliamentary system, widely hailed both as a positive legacy of British colonisation and as a showcase of political maturity is also reputed for its complexity and noisiness which account for frequent inefficiency and even self-

defeating exercises in controversy, vastly and often needlessly amplified by the press.

6. While the resolute and far-sighted foreign policies of governments such as Russia's and China's are reluctantly respected by impartial observers, even when politically unpalatable to other powers, India's pluralistic and regionally influenced decision-making processes are perceived as cumbersome and arcane by both statesmen and businessmen. Hence the current system of government does not bring unmitigated encomium to the country especially when it is held to hinder vital efforts for economic development, the elimination of absolute poverty and environmental protection.

The conclusion, therefore, is that having started playing her score in the concert of sovereign nations on a very high note, India has suffered in many of her actions from harsh and often unfair scrutiny from both domestic and foreign censors. The criticism has been on a crescendo since the election of the BJP-led Government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi who is routinely accused by reputedly 'authoritative' voices in the major media at home and abroad of tampering if not discarding the hallowed Gandhian-Nehruvian heritage. In this process, the Indian political opposition enjoys a major advantage in the global echo chamber which tends to repeat its contentions *verbatim* insofar as the aforesaid opposition is seen as the repository of the allegedly Centre-Left heritage of *Satyagraha*, non-violence, non-alignment and socialism, even though those were more often theoretical goals than objective practices in the previous decades of Congress rule, usually supported by Marxist parties from inside or outside the government.

A comparison (once again) can be drawn with China which began her modern journey towards unity and real independence amid anarchy, brutal Japanese occupation and civil war. The harshness of Mao's dictatorship which cost the lives of millions and brought about enormous hardship and poverty was tempered by his successor Deng Xiaoping, who started a marathon towards full-fledged technological and economic prosperity. Today, China's financial and industrial might and global influence, silence many critics of her political and social system which cannot but be favourably compared with the Maoist dispensation in the dark days of the Great Leap Forward and of the Cultural Revolution. Since Communist China set the bar very low concerning respect for individual freedom, humanitarian values and cultural standards, she now enjoys grudging but inevitable recognition and even acclaim as a potential hegemon whose regime has brought hundreds of millions out of poverty while pioneering various scientific and technological developments.

India's economic clout, though on the rise, is not on par with China's and can therefore not have the effect of winning friends and influencing people all over the world. Neither is her economic system allowing her the latitude to massively invest in or loan capital on attractive terms to poorer nations. Many other developing, formerly colonised countries such as Indonesia, Brazil, South Africa and other Latin American and African nations also have a comparative advantage on India because of their chequered histories, marked by violence and instability which presumably make it easier for the governments to improve the images of their

respective states. The ‘legend of India’ is perhaps too high a standard for modern India to meet.

We have pointed out earlier the considerable ability of the USA to exercise soft power through its cinematic blockbusters, technological innovations, world-renowned centres of scientific research and learning and the opportunities it offers to many people all over the world to improve their incomes and sometimes achieve great wealth faster than almost anywhere else. However, many of the tools projecting this soft power are also highlighting the ills that afflict the country and greatly spoil its image. For instance, much of American cinema portrays, at times unwittingly, the climate of brutality, coarseness, injustice, rootless individualism, racism, widespread criminality and extreme inequality that cast a dark shadow on the superpower. Furthermore, American popular culture is so commercial that it is hard to see much of it as soft power because it is, in fact, hardcore business pushed on other countries through the country’s massive capacity to force its will on much of the rest of the world. The hypertrophied ‘defence’ budgets and aggressive military policies of the US shape the country’s image and arguably defeat its purpose to be seen in its own definition as ‘a force for good’⁷.

China has a similar problem; its otherwise effective and well funded global ‘charm offensive’ generates public scepticism and misgivings because of well-known characteristics of the Chinese regime, such as conquering mercantilism, pervasive state surveillance, intolerance of domestic and foreign dissent and a harsh penal system, all packaged in a fast-rising projection of hard power—financial and military—abroad.

Suggested Measures

I will conclude by outlining some possible measures and policies intended to improve India’s image, hone the exercise of its soft power and avoid some of the pitfalls that have bedevilled the country since independence, with the caveat that some problems cannot be solved quickly, partly because Left-wing ‘liberal’ critics will not disarm as long as India does not conform to their beliefs and visions of ‘postcard’ Gandhism coupled with strict (howbeit artificial and at times intolerant or arid) secularism. In addition, economic neoliberals will continue to insist that India should disband much of her government, privatise her public services, open her markets to the world and industrialise her agriculture while secularising and westernising at the cost of her own traditions and way of life. Also, great economic and military powers have an enduring interest in hobbling India’s growth and keeping her down as they fear a new rival for global influence.

What then can be done? The key to success is a far-sighted successful economic policy spreading prosperity equitably, protecting and stimulating domestic industrial productivity and raising the country’s profile, which would silence many of the critics and provide more capacities for outreach. India must carry on with the effective promotion of her ancestral heritage and assets: ancient literature, fine arts, handicrafts, quality films, yoga, Ayurveda, philosophy, distinctive princely and royal regional cultures and traditions, religious festivals (such as *the Kumbha melas, yagnas, sammelans* and *yatras*), a varied and thriving ecosystem and wildlife, by improving facilities, preservation and access.

Buddhism is a major vehicle to spread knowledge about Indian civilisation and spirituality. As means allow, India should develop in major cities of the world *Sanskriti* (Culture) Institutes, as China has built a network of Confucius Institutes. Secularism should not be an obstacle to the promotion and propagation of the most positive aspects of the spiritual and philosophical legacy of India, whether in Vedic rituals and liturgy, Vedanta, Buddhism, Jainism, Sufism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism and the symbolic significance and contents of visual and musical arts.

India should also strengthen and deepen regional and multi-national institutions it has built or in which it has a role to play such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Commonwealth, BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation

Organisation (SCO) and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and work to gradually set up an 'Indic Commonwealth,' assembling all the states where Indian cultural, trading and demographic influence spread over the centuries, from Japan and Korea to East Africa and the Gulf States.

A strong, clear and easily understandable narrative should be provided and propagated by well-informed spokespersons for the reforms that the government deems fit to implement. Key governments and think tanks abroad should be provided with those explanations before or while these measures are taken, or laws passed, intending to limit the number and intensity of negative reactions. The debate should be sought and engaged in to make such institutions feel that they can provide inputs into the process and are consulted, even if their viewpoints are not shared and their advice not always followed.

Notes:

- 1 *India Foundation Journal, Vol. VII, no. 2, pp.8-9*
<https://indiafoundation.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Mar-Apr-2019-IF-Journal-Pdf-copy.pdf>
- 2 *Among many books and articles on the subject: Uncouth nation: why Europe dislikes America, Andrei Markovitz, The Public Square, Princeton University Press,(2007) and The Anti-American Century, Alan McPherson and Ivan Krasnev, CEU (2007)*
- 3 *India's Intellectual Traditions and Contributions to the World, Balram Singh, Surendra Dvivedi et al. DK Print World, (2010)*
India's Contribution to World Thought and Culture, Lokesh Chandra (Editor), (1976). See also documentary Ancient India's Contribution to the World (youtube.com/watch?v=QxgkOdX872k)
- 4 *Erdogan's Empire, Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East, Soner Cagaptay, B. Taurus (2019)*
- 5 *among many works articulating that thesis which is very popular among Indologists Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste, Gail Omvedt, Sage Publications New Delhi (2013)*
- 6 *Kautilya's Arthashastra, India's Strategic Culture and Grand Strategic Preferences, Kajari Kamal, Journal of Defence Studies, Vol. 2, no. 3, July-September 2018, pp. 27-54.*
- 7 *Many books and papers deal, pro and con, with the American official contention that the country is a force for good. See Is the US a force for good in the world? Eric Zuesse, Global Research, April 25, 2015.*

