

Need to Rejuvenate India's Ancient Geo-Spatial Cultural Heritage

Neera Misra*

Introduction

A former Ambassador of China to the USA, Mr Hu Shih, had once stated- “*India Conquered and dominated China culturally for 20 centuries without ever having to send a single soldier across her border*”, acknowledging the influence of Bhartiya culture and civilization across Asia. In those times of yore, India’s cultural landscape, never in contradiction to its intangible achievements, commanded a venerable position in the eyes of evolved kingdoms, learned scholars, traders, artists, and philosophers. Much water has flown down the *Ganges* since then. Though our strength as the largest and youngest democracy is attracting the world now, yet how effective has been the role of our culture and civilization in strengthening our strategic position in the world is a pertinent question worth analyzing.

As per Dhruva Jaishankar, currently Director, US Initiative at the Observer Research Foundation, “*Though many speak positively about the country’s soft power potential, but its absence from The Soft Power 30 Index, shows India does not yet benefit as much from international awareness, positive associations or investments in cultural diplomacy as many other countries*”. He further added a critical point that “*India has more UNESCO World Heritage sites than all but five other countries and more public policy think tanks than any country outside the USA,*

China and the UK, but still fares poorly on tourism and education on a per capita basis. India rates badly on any measure of state-driven cultural diffusion ...better projecting its culture and values to international audiences”.

As it can be understood, this is primarily because currently, there is a glaring mismatch between what we show, what we are perceived as, and what we speak about who we actually are. We constantly speak of a civilisation of great antiquity, going back to 5,000 years, yet a visitor to Bharat, at its ‘Deheri’ or threshold Delhi, sees a city-state of a mere 500 odd years. The story is the same in most of our major state capital cities, where colonial and medieval structures hide whatever may exist of greater antiquity. Incidentally, how many of these UNESCO sites of Delhi and India are entirely of Indian origin? It is here that the gaps between perceptions versus reality need to be effectively bridged. This mismatch has arisen because the scope of showcasing our indigenous culture and civilization (Sanskriti evam Sabhyata) has been mainly limited to intangibles like music, classical dance, folk performances, arts, literature, philosophy and Yoga.

We must admit that these intangibles derive their meaning from the earthy geographical landscapes that were cradles of their evolution and weave the narratives of our journey of thousands of years.

*Neera Misra is an Independent Research Student, focused on Vedic and Mahabharata period history and culture, and its socio-cultural impacts. She is the Founder Trustee and Chairperson of Draupadi Dream Trust.



(The dates for Hindu rule are based on astronomical dating of Kurukshetra War as 3067 BCE, by Prof Narhari Achar of Memphis University, USA.)

Foreign Policy of Bhartiya Government

The stated Foreign Policy of the Indian government is ‘*promoting India’s cultural diplomacy and transforming India’s global image through the five pillars of foreign policy namely – **Samman** (dignity), **Samvaad** (dialogue), **Samridhhi** (shared prosperity), **Suraksha** (regional and global security), and **Sanskriti evam Sabhyata** (Cultural and civilisational links)*. Thus cultural and civilisational links are integral to our diplomacy, but we are yet to realise its full potential to revitalise our soft power internationally (and nationally). A paradigm shift from the current emphasis on showcasing the intangible is the need of the hour. Development of the tangible cultural landscape associated with the intangible narratives will leverage the output for the desired impact of soft power diplomacy.

In this case, seeing is believing. Bridging the gap between the glorious Bharat that is known to discerning foreigners and the missing landmarks of that landscape of Bharat is important.

Here comes the key role of the Ministry of

Culture and especially the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), along with the Ministry of Tourism. After the partition of India, the major archaeological sites of ancient Bhartiya civilisation were strangely in the Islamic country of Pakistan and much of Ganga cultural legacies were in the current day Bangladesh. Added to this was the control of education and culture with Maulana Abdul Kalam, who made significant contributions to modernize Indian education system but paid no heed to the development of ancient Bhartiya knowledge systems, and places of cultural significance. National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) became channels for promoting medieval rule and painted those rulers in glorious light while downgrading history of ancient Bharat to just a few pages. Likewise, the ASI became a medium to develop, renovate and promote medieval landmarks as the only heritage of India. Maximum budgeting was devoted to refurbishing tombs and mosques, most of which were built over important Hindu places while other Hindu, Buddhist landmarks languished to oblivion.

While the keen interest of nations like Japan

fueled some developments of Buddhist places in India and Jain business community actively funded Jain places, the Vedic and Epic era heritage points suffered grave neglect for lack of patrons. We owe much to ancient rulers of Southern India and South East Asia who kept alive some tangible connects of our enviable past for posterity. These glimpses show us an inkling of our magnificent heritage that needs to be unearthed and restored to its grandeur once again, across the nation.

Then came the colonial rulers, who created their style of buildings. However, the due credit of establishment of the ASI rightfully goes to the colonial rulers, who explored and documented our civilisational heritage. Post partition, however, this institution was actively used to promote Muslim architecture and glorify brutal invaders and their symbols of subjugation of our indigenous heritage. The funding and promotion of cultural heritage became focused on these towering medieval structures and ancient Bharat remained lost or submerged in ruins. Gradually, over the years and decades, the ASI, and government promoted NGO's like Indian National Trust for Art, Culture and Heritage (INTACH), Agha Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) etc., which became active players in shaping India's cultural heritage image, understanding and perceptions nationally and internationally.

Courtesy their agenda-driven work, few in Delhi would know about the original roots of Delhi, which used to be the ancient capital city-state of Indraprastha. The renovations of even the Purana Indraprastha Qila has been given a completely medieval look, and the many temples at the Mehrauli area are downgraded to showcase a

mosque built above them, with little explanation for their past.

This is what gives a confusing message to visitors to India. They read about the great Indian epics, Ayurveda, Yoga and Indic philosophical texts authored by great Rishis and scholars of Bharat. On the ground, however, they are unable to connect with the places of that era that were the nurturing grounds of those epics or intangible knowledge treasures. This confusion has also percolated to a large Indian populace, thanks to the influence of Marxist historians of the 20th century.

This mismatch between our actual cultural strength and the mischievously promoted interface has finally been realised. Real term portrayal of our heritage in concrete and use of virtual reality techniques are being put into effect to create a difference in this regard. The choosing of the famous point of Arjuna's Penance (Mahabalipuram) as the meeting venue for Prime Minister of India and the Chinese Premier was a remarkable initiative of our strategic planners. This gave a strong message of our desire to rejuvenate our ancient cultural geo-spatial landmarks and spread the message of Bhartiya antiquity, 'Itihasa' (history) and 'Dharma' (rule of law) to the world at large.

This point of Arjuna's penance symbolizes the high moral principles of our legacy, derived from the Mahabharata Epic which points to Raj Dharma, the historical narrative that even the king has to bear the consequences of breaking rules. Going millennia before the Magna Carta, it represents the strong foundations of our value systems that made Bharat unique in the entire world. The widespread popularity of Indian epics makes them

an ideal vehicle for showcasing Bhartiya ‘Sanskriti and Sabhyata’.

A nation’s philosophical and cultural journey is revealed through its history and its landscapes. Over centuries, these narratives have travelled across vast lands, assimilated with others and created links of shared culture. India’s philosophy and literature have found echoes in other languages, other habitats because spirituality has always been at its foundations which is universal in nature and common to all humanity. Through these historical cultural connections, India’s soft power became a potent channel for nourishing relations.

The broader definition of culture adopted by United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in 1982 specifies that “culture comprises the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterise a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters but also modes of life; the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs.” (Sahai, Paramjit, Indian Cultural Diplomacy; Celebrating Pluralism in a Globalised World. India, page 31)

Our epics are the epitome of our inherited culture. It is quite surprising that so far, Indian policymakers have not tapped and comprehensively harnessed this USP (unique selling proposition) of our nation. Promoting this vast ‘heritage-scape’ can showcase the wonder that is Bharat, synergising with foreign authors’ writings about ‘*The Wonder that was India*’. We had coined the *Incredible India* slogan for tourism promotion. Now it is time to ‘show’ the incredible

landscapes of ancient India. The Epics are a treasure trove of our cultural strengths. Our archaeologists and astro-archaeologists have already scientifically proved their civilisational antiquity. The cultural wealth and identity of Bharat deserve better and concerted attention. Along with epics, ancient Vedic Bharat is equally mesmerising. The places linked to the development of Yoga, Charak Samnhita, Surut Samnhita etc., are interesting locations with enriching history.

With the recent two-day conference on ‘*Indian Epics & Soft Power: India & South East Asia*’ at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), finally, a dialogue on this has started. The Epics are in themselves compelling narratives, grounded in the geospatial landscape of Bharat and Aryavarta, having deep cultural linkages with even some far off lands. Not only do they take us back into antiquity that we are so proud of, but also give insights into our sustainable cultural values and life systems. Our stated national foreign policy can achieve its objectives by ‘nourishing and harnessing geospatial cultural heritage bonds of epics. It is time to realise that our beliefs and reverences towards our rich cultural wealth must elevate to a higher effective visual level by transforming heritage legacies into tangible forms for substantial benefits.

The Geo-Spatial and Cultural Landscape

Our motto is Satyamev Jayate, and we should unhesitatingly speak and display facts that our common ancestors bore to us. That is our ‘Itihasa,’ containing our philosophy, our sciences, and our cultural and civilisational ethos. Both the Ramayana

and the Mahabharata have much to offer in terms of 'Dharma' (principles) that reveals itself in the events and actions of that history. The epic Mahabharata fits well in the stated policy of '**Understanding India,**' '**Destination India**' and more significantly in unveiling the '**Incredible India**' cultural tourism potential. If a state wants 'tangible power to fulfil a state's goal, then it is time to harness 'tangible cultural landmark' avenues and touch base at the ground level of locations that gave rise to that *itihasa* or roots. Through physically portrayed, reachable visual cultural landscape narratives and cultural travel narratives, Bharat will transport a so far intangible experience into a realistic perception of our past, co-existing with the present. This will enliven a journey spanning thousands of years' upheavals, bearing, assimilating and tolerating all, yet surviving on the power of its universal faith, the 'Sanatan Dharma'. The power of truth is deep and everlasting. The Mahabharata is an ideal channel or vehicle for this as it is a storehouse of geographical knowledge and exhaustive data on our antiquity and identity. The potential of this epic as a captivating and engaging narrative for enhancing India's soft power is unmatched.

It is worthwhile here to first understand and overcome some misperceptions about this epic that has made it the favourite of leaders and academicians world over, is strangely not taught as history and is rather shunned in average Hindu homes. Unfortunately, the name 'Mahabharata' has been loosely used to denote a war, even though hardly 20 per cent of this grand epic is about the Dharma Yudha or the Kurukshetra War. The preface to Akbar's Persian version of the

Mahabharata Epic, Razamnama mentions that this is the most sacred text of Hindus and read in every Hindu home. The name 'Mahabharata' in reality denotes the 'Greater Bharata,' or the history of the vast Bharatvarsha (region). This is a progression from its earlier smaller narratives Jaya (8,800 verses) and Bharata (24,000 verses), which were limited in scope and expanded to include the wider narrative, beyond the story of the Kings of Bharata clan. Thus it is named Maha-bharata comprising 1, 00,000 verses.

Another reason for not mainstreaming this epic is that it has so far been taken only as brilliant literature (Mahakavya) or a book of deep philosophy. However, it is also a storehouse of our sacred geography that connects and narrates our history, has not been explored. This epic provides us information of about around 80 kingdoms, 220 provinces, more than 100 villages, towns & cities, over 80 mountain ranges and peaks, around 30 forests, 150 rivers, approximately 30 lakes, and about 60 geographical regions. Besides, there are several travel narratives, pilgrimage narratives and many such. This exhaustive information makes Ved Vyasa as the real unifier of India, connecting the huge landscape of humanity and their environments into a cultural entity.

Our international image has also suffered due to many disturbing narratives propagated about our society and systems, which have clouded our positive credible endeavours. Soft power is also a medium to counter the many misperceived and mischievous propaganda about Indian society per se. Besides denouncing our epics as mere imaginative tales, highlighting the 'colonial created' caste divisions, caste discrimination, issues of

liberalism, democracy and gender status in Indian society, in the eyes of the world have greatly affected India's perception across the world. Though we know that these are to some extent ideological attacks, controlled and managed, yet we have to accept that we have failed to factually portray our civilisation and culture well. The depths of our knowledge resources can counter the psychological wars of today and reestablish our core strengths.

An encounter with a multimedia created retelling of our history and culture that represents true Bharat will enlighten many a visitor. For example, visually recreated Raj Dharma Gyan to Yudhishtira by Bhishma, Krishna's presentation as Envoy of Peace and Draupadi's reaction in the Sabha and her dialogue with Satyawahana can counter much of these false narratives about our country. The epic *Mahabharata* has the potential to set all this in proper perspective. It can revitalise our cultural impact and soft power while reinstating its position as a *Vishwaguru*.

The internet and social media boom have opened the doors to renewed interest in ancient legacies and achievements of Bharata. The diaspora and the world are curious and hungry for more knowledge of the past, as is evident from the various hyperactive social platforms like YouTube Twitter etc. The fact of touching base with history is an unforgettable powerful experience which we can effectively tap to our diplomatic benefit.

We are a civilisation of thousands of years. Thus, showcasing and popularising tangible existing remnants of that will help in a critical matching of perception and reality of our heritage profile. We

have to respect the intelligence of tourists and let them experience the history we so often speak of and take extreme pride in, thereby also diluting the misperception due to current heritage building landscapes. We should aim in bringing out our strength of tolerance, freedom and social engineering measures. Moving forward to investing in epic diplomacy by creating the cultural landscape of the wonder that India was, can potentially boost India's soft power. We need to move forward with a paradigm shift from the so far promoted 'elements of national attraction'—the intangibles like music, dance, arts, literature, Ayurveda, Yoga, to also showcase the tangible zenith and variety of civilisation and culture, that today has an unparalleled survival and sustained existence. Our initiatives should aim to achieve influence by building networks, communicating compelling narratives, rekindling and nourishing international heritage bonds, by drawing on the resources that make a country naturally attractive to the world—all embedded in our epics.

Harnessing and nourishing the sacred geographical and historical geo-spaces of Mahabharata, via renovation and recreation of the ancient landmarks, will create an intriguing *Cultural Travel Narrative* of the Maha-n-Bharata. Needed is activism to use those assets effectively, those that are attractive, appealing and connect the countries to the India that we speak of as 'world guru,'—that gave to the world 'the science of life - Ayurveda', and the principles of Dharma—'good governance'.

To optimize the potential use of culture as a diplomatic tool to influence other countries and leverage Indian cultural diplomacy, our cultural

landscape needs concentrated revival. As Dr Debidatta Aurobindo Mahapatra wrote in his seminal work on the evolution of India's cultural diplomacy, *'the message of the East, the message of Asia, is not to be learnt through European spectacles, through the Western spectacles'. If we want to give a message again to the World, it must be a message of Bharat, that has the 'ability to attract and co-opt', and 'shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction'.*

The Mahabharata is considered to be the unifier of Bharat as a nation. It has amazing travel narratives on kings and the common people. For example, the Capital Cities Circuit of the 16 Mahajanapadas, travel narratives of Arjuna, Yudhishtira, Pandavas, Balarama, Krishna, Arjuna's travel, to the tale of submerging Dwarka, and also the travels of Rama (in a crisp Ramayana embedded in the Vana Parva of Mahabharata), Balarama's pilgrimage along Sarasvati from Dwaraka to Kurukshetra etc. are more than inspirational stories.

It is said that *'the currency of soft power is culture, political values, and foreign policies'*. Soft power goes beyond the traditional foreign policy tools and we are ready for that paradigm shift. Our Constitution has the beautifully painted imprints of our iconic ancestors, Ram and Krishna. Let us now string together the pearls of geo-spatial histo-cultural points into a necklace of a soft power gift to ourselves, and the regions of our common ancestors.

Winston Churchill aptly said that ***"A nation that forgets its past has no future."*** Once we successfully showcase our cultural history, we will be an unmatched beneficiary of our inherent soft power narratives. It is time to remind ourselves what the American author Mark Twain had once said *"India is the mother of history, the grandmother of legend, and the great grandmother of tradition. Our most valuable and most artistic materials in the history of man are treasured up in India only."*

Notes

1. Jaishankar Dhruva, 2018 *India Rising: Soft Power and the world's largest Democracy*, Published – www.uscpublicdiplomacy.org
2. Sahai, Paramjit, 2019. *Indian Cultural Diplomacy; Celebrating Pluralism in a Globalised World*. India; Vij Books India Pvt Ltd.
3. Misra, Neera and Lal Rajesh, *Mahabharata Manthan 2018*, Ravi, Jijith Nadumuri, 2017 Paper presented on *Geographical Data in the Mahabharata*, New Delhi, India B R Publishing Corporation.
4. Das, Ashok Kumar, 2005, *Razmnana: The Book of War*, Mapin Publications Pvt Ltd , India.

