

## India's Soft Power in the US & impact on Kashmir policy

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Coming on the heels of the mega-successful *Howdy Modi!* event last year in Houston, President Trump's recent successful state visit to India has further added to the excitement and expectation of India-US relations. The transformation over the past two decades in this bilateral relationship has been truly extraordinary, with both countries fast abandoning their Cold War-era reservations about each other and pursuing a multi-faceted partnership marked by unprecedented levels of engagement, consultation and cooperation on several global issues.

However, and despite this increasing proximity, India has also faced a steady stream of public protests and even quiet political reproach in the US over its recent action on Article 370 and Kashmir. President Trump's repeated utterances of being willing to play the role of an 'honest broker' on Kashmir has lent further doubt to India's real political capital in the US. It is in this context that it might be time to realistically assess India's soft power in the US, especially when viewed through the prism of major changes currently underway in American politics, media and society.

### India's Growing Soft Power in the US

Over the last 25 years, perhaps no other country in the world has improved its public image

and political goodwill in the US as dramatically as India. This is largely due to three major features of India's global footprint: Diaspora, Development & Democracy.

The centre of gravity of the Indian diaspora shifted from the UK to the US sometime in the early 1970s, and the success of that generation is now on full display. High levels of education, prosperity and political activism among Indian Americans have given the community both social acceptance and political clout in the US, and perhaps even disproportionate representation in positions of power. There were over 40 Indian-Americans appointed to senior posts during the eight years of the Obama administration, more so than any other ethnic group, and the number in just three years of the Trump administration is about the same.

A generation ago, few Americans knew any Indian well, let alone knew any famous Indian; now, most Americans who are 40 years and younger have shared either a college dormitory or office space with an Indian or an Indian-American. Indian authors, professors, editors, artists, venture capitalists, CEOs and even Bollywood celebrities have gained much attention in the US in the past decade, and Indian cultural cornucopia is cheered in American media like never before - sometimes

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to an embarrassing degree. Taken together, the Indian diaspora has created a hugely positive image of India, and equally important, has nurtured an independent space of mutual discovery, quite separate from official negotiations and encounters, which has added a stabilising dimension to the bilateral relationship.

India's economic reforms of the last 25 years have created even further cross-dependencies between the two economies, with the US becoming by far the largest financial investor in India. India's economic opening has also brought to global attention the phenomenal growth of India's professional middle class which gravitates heavily towards American education, ideas and lifestyle. Going to the US for studies has now become such a standard practice in India that every year almost 100,000 new Indian students enrol in US universities, representing the second largest group after China.<sup>1</sup> Indian students represent a multibillion-dollar market for US academia, in fact, a lifeline for many US universities. Conversely, should the US ever shut off this pipeline, there would be career chaos and widespread angst in the Indian middle-class. This is just one example of how intense and beneficial cross-dependencies have become between the two countries.

A third reason behind the re-positioning of Indian image in the US is because of India's social and political structure, and its overall track record of moderation both internally and abroad. India's open society embracing diversity, multiculturalism, secularism and democracy resonates with Americans, and in fact, India stands out as one of the few such truly liberal democracies in all of Asia. And after 25 years of solid economic reforms

in India on the one hand and abandonment of any Cold War prisms by the US on the other, India has upgraded itself gradually in US' eyes. Over the last 50 years, India has gone from being viewed as a "nascent democracy" to a "liberal democracy" and finally to a "rules-based free-market liberal democracy." This is much more than just mere changes in wording, rather it points to the consistent broad-basing of India's image in the US establishment.

Indian and American academics, authors, civil society members, lawyers and journalists interact frequently across a large number of global forums and platforms, something that neither China nor Pakistan can claim. India's image as a flawed but steadfast democracy carries special significance in the context of heightened geopolitical turmoil after 9/11 and a stark comparison between India and many of its neighbours who, at one time or another in the last ten years, have been ranked high in the index of failed states by *Foreign Policy* magazine. US media has noted and applauded the fact that India votes often, votes in large numbers, its poorer people usually vote the most passionately, and that the country has a habit of usually voting out incumbent governments. This is in stark comparison to China, which despite all its economic, military and technological leaps, comes across as a closed society with a single party autocracy, soft support for rogue states and lack of historical empathy for other nations. While there is unspoken but definite discomfort over China's rise as a major global actor, India, on the other hand, commands emotional goodwill and moral respect within the US civil society.

India's emergence as a valuable global player

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has also led to a remarkable turnaround in specific aspects of the India-US relationship, which could perhaps not have been imagined two decades ago. Many opinion polls, including those in the recent past by Gallup and Pew Foundation, have shown how Americans feel nearly as warmly toward India as they do toward steadfast allies like Israel. It is now far easier for Indians to get US visas than it is for most Asians, Africans and Arab nationals, perhaps even easier than it is for US citizens to get an Indian visa. India remains a complex and exotic land in the larger western mind, a home to palaces, noisy bazaars, yoga and spiritual philosophy, but a nuanced recognition is beginning to develop in many western quarters, an appreciation that while parts of India grapple with poverty, there are other parts equally pulsating with modernity, intellect, entrepreneurship, optimism and confidence. The idea of India as an amalgam of parallel universes is finally catching on.

And so, while Pakistan and China may have successful “hard power” lobbies in the US who have for long been working the corridors of the Congress, Pentagon and even White House, what India has, is this unique “soft power” appeal that results from its diaspora’s success, its open society, and its economic potential.

### **And Yet, India Has Had Very Few Wins**

Unfortunately, like in many other issues, Indian has fallen victim to its own hubris, believing that potential equals results. While the environment for India’s soft power in the US is real, a lot of hard work, sensible planning and timely outreach are still required to build friends, constituencies and allies, both in and out of the US government. And

in this, India has failed, or rather, successive governments and foreign policy elites in India have failed. India’s actual scorecard on harnessing soft power in the US so far has been rather disappointing, especially on its foreign policy priorities. India has often been blinded and waylaid by stylistic attention in the US at the cost of substantive attention to its concerns. In fact, over the last ten years, including under both Bush and Obama administrations, India–US relations have often had some prickly moments over Pakistan or Kashmir. And even though civil society organisations are the ones who usually bring up human rights concerns, India has tended to view any criticism as officially inspired and a ploy designed to keep it on the defensive. Consequently, despite its access to soft power, India has often felt cornered and reacted testily to what it sees as moral sermonising by the US.

What are some of the lessons from India’s experience so far? First, India’s over-reliance on its diaspora has been belied, despite the ‘success’ of some recent mega rallies and events. Either Indian officialdom has not done enough outreach, coordination or re-vitalisation of its relationship with the community, or it has egregiously presumed the steadfast commitment of the diaspora on every issue, big and small, which is simply unrealistic. India itself is a complex melting pot of different social backgrounds, world views and political instincts, and there is no reason why the Indian diaspora in the US would be any different. It has long stopped behaving like a monolith and exhibits a full spectrum of opinions and voices on news and events in India. It is one thing to expect the Indian community to come together as one in

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support of a key national priority, quite another to expect the same zeal on every policy issue. Given the compression of space and time in the modern technology-driven globalised world, it would, in fact, be natural to expect both support and opposition within the Indian community in the US over individual policy and political events in India. Conflating key national priorities with every policy decision is a counter-productive strategy, likely to unnecessarily deplete goodwill towards India.

### **New US Media & Intellectual Elites**

The second lesson to be learnt is that India still does not produce the kind of original, insightful and lucid commentary on America that may be expected from an English-speaking and education-obsessed country that has so many layers of engagement with the US society. Even after sharing more than 4 million migrants, hundreds of thousands of students, and multiple points of intellectual interactions, India's collective understanding of American social trends and public impulse is frustratingly narrow. Even the new Indian media, with all its confidence, money, swagger and glamour, hardly covers any other policy action in the US beyond Pakistan, IT outsourcing industry and H-1 visas. As a result, it has missed out almost entirely on critical political trends taking place behind the headlines.

A lot has happened and changed in the US since the 1970s, but of all the major mutations of the last generation, the biggest is the decline of genuine liberalism in the US public life and the unquestioned dominance over public discourse of a narrow elite that is centred around technology tsars, hedge fund billionaires, entertainment

celebrities and lavishly paid media superstars. While America loves to flaunt its love of 'diversity' at every instance - and indeed there has been impressive progress in the US towards all kinds of racial, ethnic and cultural inclusion which would have been simply unimaginable just one generation ago - there is also a kind of sterile conformism of opinion in US media and academic circles in this age. There is a kind of unquestioned acceptance of the 'Davos Man' worldview where national aspirations are considered unhealthy, history is considered a sociopathic fixation, and open borders and free flow of capital considered a self-evident virtue.

Not only are TV studios and editorial rooms in the US becoming echo chambers, but the newly-acquired celebrity power of media elites in a 24/7 world has given them a false sense of their importance and role in policy, politics and even public morality. In the US, entertainment stars like Michael Moore, Oprah Winfrey, Bill Maher or George Clooney do not just routinely endorse political candidates but also get intensely engaged in all aspects of the campaign. Lately, India too has shown a similar trend, where famous movie stars, directors and authors are now increasingly weighing in on social and political issues. There is a dearth of healthy scepticism even among the American Left, which has now more or less lost its old traditions of being a reflective and self-effacing group, habits that were once so essential to public life, or even journalism. American 'liberalism' in particular seems to have been lately infected with a strange mix of swagger, arrogance, celebrity culture and incessant comedic lampooning, none of which is really useful in understanding

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complex issues or exercising wise judgement.

America is a far more populist nation now than it ever was before, only there is both right-wing and left-wing populism in equal measure. Much like Republicans of the old days, Democrats now carry the same old moral hubris and the same self-assured righteousness, an abiding sense of obligation as a “leader of the free world”. This in turn has led recent Democratic administrations to use humanitarian pretexts to justify senseless military interventions around the world which have been not merely destabilising but actually extremely devastating in terms of death, destruction and misery.

It is worth recalling how the vast bulk of US media, including icons of US liberalism like *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*, went along eagerly with – and thus gave so much public legitimacy to – the specious and engineered pretext to invade Iraq in 2003, or to successive wars of regime change in both Libya and Syria.<sup>2</sup> These are the same stables who now produce young journalists who pen articles lamenting the lack of democracy and human rights in faraway corners of the world. For Indian policymakers, the lesson here is not to get disheartened or testy at the US media for getting unfair or biased treatment, because that is largely counterproductive, but to recognise the beast as it is. Intellectual piety is very much part of the new American canvas. On the one hand, the US produces many exceptionally balanced, sober and insightful thinkers, but on the other hand, it also produces in plenty a kind of brash and impatient-with-facts reporter, falling under the category of the young rebel looking for a cause. Which is not altogether different from India, which has its growing numbers of smug

reporters and self-righteous activists. What is important is to recognise that the larger aim of winning and keeping friends in the US requires patience, not petulance. It is also worth recognising that the US is one country where India is very advantageously poised, far more than Canada or Europe, where the instinct of the governing elites to preach is even more pronounced.

### **Lessons for India from the Devyani Khobragade episode**

No other incident in recent times highlights the grave mismatch between promise and reality of India’s soft power in the US than the 2012 controversy involving a young Indian diplomat who was arrested over alleged mistreatment of her domestic staff, and whose incarceration and humiliation became a *cause celebre* at the time. It led to extremely strained relations and stiffening of positions on both sides, with the ultimate result being that both sides lost over an issue which could have, and should have, been handled with discretion and, well, with diplomatic tact. Not only was public & media opinion in the US at that time strongly anti-India, with demonisation of India’s *slave labour* practices a common thread in news and opinion stories, India even found it difficult to find a single person of stature in the US to pen a solid op-ed to explain that this was hardly a case of human trafficking, much less one where an accused would get strip-searched anywhere else in the world.

Of course, after much back and forth, wiser heads on both sides did prevail, and that incident is now only a footnote in public memory. Nevertheless, what it did do is to highlight how,

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when push came to shove, India stood isolated within the chambers of US officialdom and public opinion. Even the diaspora hid itself, with few people or organisations willing to explain the Indian position. Almost all the lovely platitudes and homilies which had till then been written about the US-India relationship suddenly needed to be reassessed, adding to an unbelievable capricious quality to what was assumed to be a rock-solid partnership. If nothing else, that episode showed that despite so much talk of being *natural allies* or *strategic partners*, the India-US relationship can never be on smooth autopilot.

### **Kashmir: India is losing the Public Opinion Battle**

Despite the afterglow of the hugely successful Howdy Modi! event in Houston last September, which for a brief moment re-assured Indians everywhere of their immense soft power in the US, media and public perception in the US of India's Kashmir policy, especially the revocation of Article 370, continues to be very negative. The bitter truth is that India risks losing the public image war to Pakistan despite deeply bellicose statements from Pakistani leadership, or despite strong historical and constitutional support for Indian actions.

Pakistan's hyperbolic characterisation of India and Indians have always been part of a self-conscious national identity that has perpetually promoted a sense of religious embattlement against an unworthy adversary, an identity carefully and purposefully nurtured in the last 70 years via serious distortions of history, blatant use of negative stereotypes, control over public discourse, and of course emotional appeals to other countries for

support in defence of the faith. However, in recent months, this national habit has now become dangerous sociopathy, with regular references to outrageous labels like "genocide against Muslims" even by Pakistan's cabinet ministers, senior media anchors and retired diplomats, many of whom carry impressive credentials and a wide audience.

This incendiary rhetoric from Pakistan combines a surreal mix of extreme communal vilification on the one hand, with an open possibility of nuclear war on the other. Three prominent former diplomats have publicly called for exploring the use of non-conventional violence against India, and there is now new respectability to a vicious communal and jihadi rhetoric in public domain, with terms like *Ghazwa-e-Hind* or the ultimate Islamic conquest of India being freely used in Pakistani media debates.<sup>3</sup>

Overlooking this provocative rhetoric, and ignoring Pakistan's record and history in Kashmir, especially in fomenting 30 years of terrorism, which parts of the US media have themselves documented, the bulk of American coverage has been largely anti-India. It has even largely ignored the strong public support this move has in Jammu, Ladakh and in fact everywhere in the country except in the Kashmir Valley. Instead of noting this overwhelming support, US media has instead chosen to air articles and opinions that play up a one-sided narrative, with the most often-used phrases being *unprecedented crackdown in disputed Kashmir*, *illegal annexation of Kashmir by India*, and *violence and torture by Indian officials against locals*.

One of the reasons that Pakistan's dangerous rhetoric has escaped US media attention is because

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of a simple but amazing fact: unlike India, where public discourse and public debates are held daily over a large number of influential English channels, Pakistan's electronic news media has no such equivalent. And so, hate-speech against India by the Pakistan establishment, which is really delivered in Urdu and directed at its domestic audience, has not caught the attention of most western intellectuals and journalists.

During the last six months, India's soft power strategy to counter this Pakistani bellicosity has been sporadic or weak. There was a short phase when senior mandarins from the foreign ministry, especially foreign minister Jaishankar, did put forth India's point of view strongly and soberly to influential audiences in the West, but since then, India's Kashmir cause has become conflated with and compromised due to subsequent policy debates in India.

The result is that there are now enough worrying signs that the Pakistani narrative has been largely accepted in the US, especially in the news blogosphere and social media, the latter having an inordinate influence on younger demographics. This new accepted wisdom is all the more surprising given the US media's own long investigation and documentation of Pakistan's terror links and dystopian policies in the region.

Unless India forcefully presents its own counter-narrative, marshalling facts, history and sensitivity, the impression of India's "illegal ethno-fascist control over hapless Kashmiris" will be cemented in the minds of a whole generation of western audience, taken as an unvarnished truth without reference to history, context or nuance. And it will for long become an albatross on India's soft power projection in the US.

## **What Should India do in Future?**

So far, India has regrettably been distracted by either minor issues or stylistic attention at the cost of substantive advancement over key national priorities. Yet, the basic building blocks of a strong soft power base still exists in India's favour, given the multiple points of social, business and cultural overlap between India and the US. Going forward, some broad suggestions are as follows:

1. Do not overestimate the power, unity or zeal of the Indian Diaspora on every issue. The diaspora has contradictory pulls and loyalties, and many in the community would often prefer to conform to American opinion and stance, rather than India's. The desire of Indians and Indian-Americans to "belong" amongst their American peers should neither be dismissed nor disdained.

2. India needs to conserve the bulk of its public and political capital in the US for key issues such as Kashmir, which really ought to be India's main public diplomacy priority in the US at this time. Using public capital to defend every Indian policy only serves to deplete the goodwill India enjoys.

3. It is important to understand the complexity and behaviour of US elites, including their sense of entitlement, lack of a sense of history and *noblesse oblige*. It is equally important to recognise some very positive dramatic changes happening in the US intellectual eco-system, led by a fiercely independent alternative media and a large number of video bloggers who now command viewership that runs into millions. Youtube channels covering the US and global events, such as The Young Turks, The Jimmy Dore Show and Secular Talk, are slowly becoming the 21st-century versions of The New York Times and CNN in terms

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of their influence on younger demographics. Main stream media in the US is a rapidly fading agent of influence among those born after 1985. Research shows that during the 2020 US election, the bulk of voters received or affirmed their political ideas from alternate media, video blogs or even late-night chat shows.<sup>4</sup> India needs to reach out to some of these new platforms, offering an excellent opportunity to shake off old biases against it and to build anew.

4. Attention span in the US to almost all things foreign is very limited, and this is true in old and new media alike. Indian officials and community leaders who want to be part of public discourse should be ready and prepared with brevity, charm and even light-hearted jocularly on questions and issues that can be thrown at them. India needs to project its case on sensitive issues in a well-researched, sensible, cool and articulate fashion, not by nervous reactions and self-righteous indignation. Feisty attitudes and doctrinaire obsessions will invite negative publicity and wrong attention in the US press and will take away much-needed goodwill.

5. India's rather successful stable of newly started literature festivals and art summits and should be used to promote the country's intellectual influence in the US. The Jaipur Literature Festival, in particular, has become an international best-seller and a compelling draw for American editors, publishers and academics it has been described by a famous US editor as the "greatest literary event on Earth."<sup>5</sup> This is hyperbolic, but also indicative of how, quite outside of government channels, a purely private venture can create so many possibilities for Indian soft power.

Finally, soft power is neither static nor narrowly confined, and it indeed often gets triumphed by considerations over hard power issues, such as defence purchase, the volume of trade, or levels of investment. However, there exists a very strong foundation for India's voice and perspectives to be heard in the US. Despite less than a stellar record so far, India needs to remain pragmatic, visibly engaged and persistent in its public diplomacy in the US.

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