

# > India's Soft Power: From Potential to Reality?

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**O**ver the last decade, many scholars and analysts have tried to assess India's emergence as a major actor in the global arena by looking at such material indicators as economic growth, military expansion or demographic evolution. As a consequence, these accounts have mainly overlooked New Delhi's increased emphasis on developing its 'soft power' credentials by using the attractiveness of Indian culture, values and policies. Indian diplomats like Sashi Tharoor have recently argued that if India is now perceived as a superpower, it was not just through trade and politics but also through its ability to share its culture with the world through food, music, technology and Bollywood. However, it is difficult to determine India's actual soft power resources, or which of these resources have actually helped strengthen India's global status. With such a difficult concept to define and measure, is it possible to monitor the evolution of India's soft power over the last decade? Most saliently, can we compare India's efforts with those of another emerging Asian power, China?

## CONCEPTUAL DIFFICULTIES IN DETERMINING INDIA'S SOFT POWER

'Power' in International Relations (IR) has traditionally been defined in relational terms: as the ability of actor A to influence the behaviour of actor B to get the outcomes he wants. Traditional (neo-) realist models have emphasised military strength and economic power to determine state capacities. By contrast, in his seminal book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, eminent IR scholar Joseph Nye separated three dimensions of power: coercion by using military threats, influence by offering economic incentives, and finally the ability to co-opt other states or what he also called a 'soft power' approach (in contrast to the two previous 'hard power' approaches). According to Nye, co-optive power is 'the ability of a nation to structure a situation so that other nations develop preferences or define their interests in ways consistent with one's nation.' Nye also argued co-optive power emerges from soft power and immaterial sources such as 'cultural and ideological attraction as well as the rules and institutions of international regimes.' As a result, the difference between hard and soft power relies on their relative materiality as soft power is mostly based on intangibles such as the power of example. Soft power is therefore the ability to modify other states' preferences because of their perception of you.

However, as the Indian case will demonstrate, the conceptual relationship between hard and soft power remains unclear. Does a rising power need to develop both hard power and soft power resources to attain major power status? Do both dimensions of power substitute each other or do they overlap in a complementary way? Does India today fill these two prerequisites? For instance, the high economic growth rates since the liberalisation process in 1991 have certainly increased India's international attractiveness; does economic power here feed India's soft power?

In the last decade, India's soft power has mainly been defined in opposition to hard power considerations. For example, the most eloquent proponent of India's soft power, former Union Minister of State for External Affairs Shashi Tharoor, has argued that past classifications of major power status were

becoming archaic and that India had now become a great power mainly by the 'power of example' or in other words because of its 'soft power'. Tharoor's contention is that today it is not the size of the army or of the economy that matters (two dimensions where India has failed to compete with other great powers like China or the US) but instead it was the country that told the 'better story' which would qualify as a global player. To support this argument, Tharoor has discussed components of India's soft power as diverse as films and Bollywood, yoga, ayurveda, political pluralism, religious diversity and openness to global influences. While the successful export of cultural products such as Bollywood across the world has helped raise awareness of Indian culture and modified existing stereotypes, other soft power elements such as the institutional model of a long-lasting democratic and plural political system have also inspired societies abroad.

But Tharoor also believed India's soft power had emerged until now independently of the government's policies. In other words, a soft power by default, India has now to enhance its co-optive power. What are India's soft power assets? How have these resources improved India's international reputation?

### **THE INDIRECT AND INCONSISTENT NATURE OF INDIA'S SOFT POWER**

Since soft power is an intangible component of a state's power, it is difficult to measure its actual impact. The advantages of hard power such as military and economic resources are that they can be measured and compared, and their direct effects are more or less palpable. It is easy for example to compare Indian and Chinese military expenditures. It is impossible however to quantify the appeal of a country's values, culture, institutions or achievements, an appeal which is inherently subjective and therefore contested and fluctuating. Furthermore, the indirect nature of India's soft power is more difficult to ascertain. It is for example difficult to assess whether a foreign government acceded to India's foreign policy objectives because of its partiality towards Indian culture. Nevertheless, in spite of these caveats, some observers of India's foreign policy have noticed how certain characteristics

of India's history, culture and political development have progressively gained foreign attention. How these soft power qualities have actually been actively used by Indian diplomacy to exert international influence is another matter.

In the last decade, Indian diplomats have started emphasising the appealing and also 'familiar' nature of India's culture. India has a long history of civilisational and cultural links with countries in Central Asia, South-East Asia and the Middle-East. Its riches have attracted traders and travellers for thousands of years. Buddhism spread from India to China and beyond, leading to a sustained exchange of ideas since ancient times. Even today, the proposal by India to rebuild the once internationally famous Nalanda Buddhist University in partnership with China, Japan, South Korea and Singapore serves as testament to those historic cultural ties. Similarly, preachers from India have spread the values of Islam across Asia to Singapore and Malaysia. Such historical, cultural and religious ties built along trading routes were regularly raised by Indian diplomats as they sought to improve relations with South-East Asia through the 'Look East' policy in the early 1990s, emphasising in particular the religious influences of Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as the spread of language (especially Sanskrit), art and architecture throughout Southeast Asia. Today, as India also tries to re-establish economic relations with the Gulf countries, it regularly evokes pre-colonial commercial routes as well as centuries-old cultural-religious linkages.

Today, alongside China, India offers one of the most dynamic alternatives to Western cultural values. India's film industry, popularly dubbed 'Bollywood', is probably the largest and farthest reaching medium for Indian culture. It is today the world's largest film industry, surpassing Hollywood with an annual output of over 1000 movies. Thanks to satellite TV and internet, Bollywood movies and Indian soap operas have reached a growing global audience that has become increasingly familiar with Indian society and culture. Another one of India's most successful and long-lasting exports, yoga, is now practiced around the world as a form of exercise, and Indian cuisine, with its distinctive use of spices, has become popular worldwide. More directly, cricket has proved to be a strong soft power

resource for India, with cricket diplomacy having notably positive effects in reducing Indo-Pakistani tensions. Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani's meeting with Indian Prime minister Manmohan Singh during the 2011 world cup semi-final in India closely followed the resumption of high-level diplomatic dialogue between New Delhi and Islamabad after the 2008 Mumbai attacks. On another level, the creation in 2008 of the rich and internationally-popular Indian Premier League (IPL) has reinforced the narrative of India's rise.

However, while the exportation of these cultural products has certainly made aspects of life in the Indian subcontinent more familiar and accessible to people across the globe, it is not evident how this element of India's soft power has helped India fulfil its foreign policy objectives in the last decade. Whereas Nye could link American popular culture with the US' 'co-optive' power, the effects of the globalisation of India's diverse culture are not so explicitly political. For example, unlike Hollywood's approach during the Cold War, Indian films have never really promoted a certain model for political and cultural development.

India's large diaspora is also considered to be a major asset for Indian diplomacy. There are today millions of Indians spread as far as Fiji, Malaysia, Mauritius, South Africa and Trinidad. While many of these Indians originally migrated as labourers for the British Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a new wave of richer and educated expatriates have found their way to the US, Canada and Australia in the last decades. These immigrants have come to play major roles in the political spheres of these different countries. For example, the educated Indian-American community has played an important role in improving Indo-US relations by lobbying American politicians and by giving a positive image of India to the American public.

Nye argued that 'smart' states can increase their credibility and soft power capacity by their domestic and international performance. India's democratic record, unprecedented for most decolonised countries could be regarded as a strong soft power resource. The new international consensus following the Cold War around democracy, human rights and market-oriented economic reforms has reinforced the appeal of India's

political achievements. The stability of India's democracy over more than 60 years, especially in a neighbourhood rife with ethnic conflicts, has demonstrated that unity in diversity was possible in a democratic format and there could be an institutional alternative to Western political systems. India's democratic, federal and secular political model (although not always perfect) could be considered as an institutional model of reasonable accommodation of minority rights, and of flexible adjustment to different ethnic and linguistic claims.

While economic power is usually considered a hard and material asset, a country's economic development model could also be interpreted as a soft power resource to the extent that its accomplishments prove attractive to others. The recent global successes of Indian information technology firms such as Infosys Technologies and Wipro, the achievements of other multinational companies such as the Tata Group and the Reliance Group; and the now global reputation of the Indian Institute of Management (IIMs) and Indian Institute of Technology (IITs) have contributed to the development of a new image of India as an economic powerhouse. The stereotypical image of underdeveloped, impoverished India has now been removed by the impression of a modern and dynamic economy attracting now foreign investments and workers from different parts of the world.

Soft power is however a difficult resource to leverage, and India's political leadership and its diplomatic instrument have inconsistently capitalised upon these undoubted soft power resources over the last decade. References to Indian culture, to its diaspora, to its political values and to its economic development have mostly been rhetoric for image-polishing. It poses the question of whether India has really tried to exploit its huge soft power potential.

## **DEVELOPING A SOFT POWER COMPONENT TO INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY**

In practice, India's soft power remains weak for two primary reasons. First, Indian diplomacy has neglected soft power as an important tool of statecraft and has only recently understood the relevance of 'cultural diplomacy'. Second, soft power cannot really exist without some initial hard power achievements. A country will only be able to realistically tell a 'better story' if it has material power to build its soft power on. While 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. India has recently demonstrated the intention to exploit its soft power resources in a systematic manner to achieve its objectives, notably by creating a Public Diplomacy Division in India's Ministry of External Affairs in 2006. This new institution's main objective has been to intensify the dialogue on foreign policy issues with all segments of the society at home and abroad. However, it is a fairly new and small department and its ability to formulate and implement policies remains to be seen.

As a result, India has over the last 5 years attempted to begin to make better use of its soft power assets. Most notably, the Indian government has explicitly incorporated a 'cultural' element into its foreign policy. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) has set up 22 cultural centres in 19 countries whose activities ranging from film festivals to book fairs and art exhibitions, aim to present an image of India as a plural multicultural society. The Indian government has also encouraged the use of Hindi abroad by organising an annual and rotating World Hindi Conference and by offering Hindi classes in its different centres.

India has also begun to emphasise its democratic process. Despite India's important democratic achievements, New Delhi had historically shied away from promoting democracy abroad, but since 2000 India has expanded its activities for the development of democracy abroad, notably in coordination with

the international community. In 2005, India joined the UN Democracy Fund and contributed \$25 million to it, making it the second biggest donor after the US (\$38 million). India's activities mainly include electoral assistance and programs to strengthen the rule of law and to fight corruption. At the regional level, India has also decided to link its development assistance with projects of democracy promotion as in Afghanistan. The Afghanistan example is interesting as India has direct national interests at stake in the stabilisation of that country. However, India has deliberately refused to send any military mission and instead pursued a soft power strategy to gain Afghan goodwill by delivering \$1.3 billion in economic and logistical assistance. Since 2001, India has concentrated on the reconstruction of Afghanistan through aid for building infrastructure like dams and roads and providing scholarships for Afghan students. Ordinary Afghans seem to have appreciated India's 'soft' involvement in their country as 74 percent of them have a favourable image of India according to a 2009 ABC/BBC/ARD poll (in contrast to 91 percent of unfavourable opinions of Pakistan). Elsewhere in the region, India has promoted a soft power approach through a series of new initiatives framed around concepts of 'non-reciprocity', 'connectivity' and 'asymmetrical responsibilities', which indicate a willingness to use economic attractiveness to persuade its neighbours rather than coercive military capacities. This has resulted since the 1980s in a greater political investment in different regional institutions such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme, the South Asian Economic Union and BIMSTEC which were created to enhance cultural and commercial ties. Similarly, in order to rebuild its trust deficit with countries like Pakistan and Sri Lanka, India has recently increased economic cooperation notably by negotiating free trade agreements. Following the signing of a bilateral free trade agreement in 2000, Indo-Sri Lankan trade rose 128 percent by 2004 and quadrupled by 2006, reaching \$2.6 billion. In November 2011, Pakistan also took further steps toward normal trade and travel ties with India, agreeing to open up most areas of commerce with its larger neighbour and to ease visa rules by February 2012.



India has also progressively tried to include its diaspora into its foreign policy strategies. Beginning in the 1990s, it became clear that the Overseas Chinese community was contributing to China's economic development. In reaction, India began outreach efforts to wealthier expatriates who were well situated to play a vital role in strengthening ties between India and other countries. The government established in 2000 a High-Level Committee on Indian Diaspora to review the status of People of Indian Origin (PIOs) and Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) in the context of constitutional provisions, laws and rules applicable to them both in India and countries of their residence. By studying the characteristics, strengths and weaknesses of this community, which represents twenty million people worldwide, this committee aimed to study the role that PIOs and NRIs may play in the economic, social and technological development of India. In exchange for their contribution and based on the committee's recommendations, the Indian government reformed citizenship requirements in 2004 and eased the legal regime governing the travel and stay of PIOs in India. A case in point of such cooperation was the decisive role of the Indian-American community in improving India's image in American minds which greatly contributed to the recent Indo-US rapprochement. The lobbying efforts carried by the US India Political Action Committee (USINPAC) proved to be crucial to get the much debated Indo-US nuclear deal passed in the US Congress.

Soft power has now become an active element of India's diplomacy in parallel with the development of its hard power resources. India has progressively understood that these two dimensions of power should not be placed in opposition to one another, especially for an aspiring global power. India's political and economic appeal would not be possible if it had not developed robust political institutions over the last 60 years and sustained high economic growth rates over the last two decades. Similarly, as India's hard power capabilities, notably in the economic and military realms, have increased over the last decade, it became important to develop in conjunction a soft power strategy to give legitimacy and credibility to India's leadership role in the world.

As the world's largest democracy, with a vibrant free press, India has important soft power advantages over the other rising power in the region, China. Because of India's democratic experience, its rise (unlike China) has been perceived as complementing rather than challenging the existing Asian and international orders. Not coincidentally, India's public diplomacy over the last 5 years has sought to promote its soft power credentials in a battle for influence with China in Asia and around the world. A concrete example of this new soft power rivalry is visible in Africa today. Since India cannot match China's massive financial investments in Africa, it has been concentrating on soft power resources such as its information technology capabilities and its affordable university courses to attract African students. At the same time it has promoted its image of the country which inspired the anti-colonial struggles of the last century and took a strong principled stand against apartheid to develop future partnerships in Africa. As a result, by publicising the pluralist nature of its politics and society, India intends to prove it is a cooperating, stabilising and exemplary rising power, in contrast to China's more aggressive, if not neo-colonial model.

## **CONCLUSION: INDIA'S SOFT POWER AS A WORK IN PROGRESS?**

The Indian government's efforts over the last decade have helped promote a new and modern image of India abroad. The increase in foreign direct investments in recent years (investment inflows of financial year 2006-07 touched over \$13 billion, as compared with \$16.5 billion over the whole of the 1990s) may partly be due to these publicity campaigns that promoted India's soft power capacities. Post-liberalisation India is progressively being seen as a manufacturing hub for international firms that are making long-term productive investments in the country. Coincidentally or not, simultaneously many aspects of Indian culture like music, food, style and religions have become fashionable in many parts of the world. However, since India did not have any meaningful public diplomacy program until recently, it is not yet perceived as a political and societal model in other countries.

India has long been content with its indirect soft power capacities. In comparison with Beijing's well-organised and centrally mandated 'charm offensive,' India's public diplomacy is still in formation.

To increase its international clout, notably in its growing competition with China over which power tells the 'better story,' India will have to use its soft power in a more systematic and planned manner. This process will most probably take time as it will require a domestic debate on how to balance national interests and political values and norms. The resolution of this debate will determine how India finds a right mix between soft and hard power in order to achieve real influence, or what Nye, and many in the Obama administration, in particular Hillary Clinton, have termed 'smart power.' For India to continue to be an attractive power, and most importantly for it to present a more compelling development model than China, it will also need to continue to improve its internal economic performance.

In addition, since soft power has a fluctuating value, India will need to resolve its lack of social and economic equality if it wants to retain its soft power edge. One of the major factors in the rise of India's profile has been its impressive economic growth since the early 1990s. Suddenly, India became an appealing economic model, one that presented a different option from the centralized and authoritarian Chinese model. But the maintenance of this positive international image will require India to simultaneously become a more equitable and efficient society, a global economic power, and an economy that commands a major share of the global wealth, especially from global trade and investment. Decreasing FDI over the last two years cannot solely be explained by the global economic crisis. India's lack of proper physical infrastructure, constraining federal regulations, large and inefficient bureaucratic structures and the perception of massive corruption have all deterred major investors. Indeed, the popular mobilisation behind anti-corruption crusader Anna Hazare and the associated civil unrest demonstrates that India still has a way to go to implement the macro-economic and structural reforms that will enable it to become an inclusive and prosperous economic reference, and with that, a soft power superpower. ■