

India's Soft Power Diplomacy: Capturing Hearts and Minds

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Any discourse on International Relations (IR) today never fails to talk about the Soft Power of countries. Ever since Joseph Nye coined the term, it has become rather obligatory to use it. It is not as if the aspects of the so-called Soft Power were never recognised before. Earlier, it was known by other terms, one of which was cultural and civilisational diplomacy. Countries projected their cultural and non-transactional sides to get the friendships of others. This indirectly helped them to pursue their national interests

Power in International Relations is defined in relational terms, as the ability of actor A to influence the behaviour of actor B to get the outcome he wants.¹ That is to say, there is no absolute power. Traditionally, military and economic powers were considered the major factors. However, some other intangible aspects have also been given importance by many strategic thinkers even in the past. The term Soft Power was first used by the eminent IR scholar Joseph Nye in his book *Bound to Lead: the Changing Nature of American Power* (1990). In the book, Nye identified three dimensions of power: coercion by military force; influence by offering economic incentives; and, finally the ability to co-opt other states by the nation's appeal based on its culture and values. The argument is that other states modify their preferences because of their favourable perception of you. They like your story and your narrative. These are very valid arguments. However, when one tries to capture these in one term, it leads to difficulties. The problem lies in the definition of the concept. It is very imprecise, to say the least. The ideas we are dealing with

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here are quite intangible. That, of course, does not mean that we cannot have a reasonable notion of what they are. It is, in fact, essential to put all those aspects in a group. Giving this group a title is the difficult part. Therefore, for want of a better term, we go along with Joseph Nye's definition. It must be remembered that Nye himself has, in his later writings, tried to refine the term. Others have tried to give new names, but without much success. For example, Hillary Clinton, as Secretary of State of the USA, used the term "Smart Power" meaning a clever mixture of the traditional military, political and economic powers with cultural and humanitarian aspects. The term, however, did not find much traction. The other term — namely "Sharp Power" — had the same fate.

What is Soft Power?

The most important question that arises is whether Soft Power is a product or a process, or is it both. Merely clubbing together aspects like art and culture as Soft Power, and military, political and economic assets as Hard Power may lead to contradictions. Let us take some examples. Normally, military power is considered hard, and hence looked down upon in the context of Soft Power. However, when it is used for peacekeeping or disaster relief, it is a humanitarian and welcome activity; it is not hard power anymore because the intentions are good. Similarly, the projection of one's culture is considered laudable; however, the aggressive projection of a big and historical nation's culture in less powerful countries, particularly in the neighbourhood, can be interpreted as cultural imperialism. Aren't we familiar with this kind of imperialism during colonial times when the colonisers called it the "White man's burden to civilize the Natives"? Hence, the important thing is how one uses the instruments. One test of this is to see how the other side views it. Soft Power ultimately becomes more a process than a product.

Three main factors determine the foreign policy of a country: its geography, history, and capabilities.² Geography is a given. As they say, a country cannot choose its neighbours. Hence, neighbourhood policy becomes vital for any nation. Normally, engagements and conflicts are more pronounced with neighbours. It is with neighbours that a country normally has strong bonds or strong rivalries. History determines mind sets, outlooks, and visions of countries. They also determine some of the linkages with others. Many of the issues that countries face are a product of their histories. Capabilities are what a nation acquires over a period of time. These could be in the military, economic, or technological areas. With new capabilities, the foreign policy

approaches of a country evolve. New interests outside the country's neighbourhood develop. Phrases like "extended neighbourhood" and "strategic interests" have become common parlance in discussions on international relations. The more powerful the country, the more interests it will have in distant geographies.

It may be relevant here to touch upon the usual debate on "Idealism and Realism" in the foreign policy of a country. The normal error in this binary approach is the over simplification of the issues involved. Hence, instead of following the "either-or" approach, some scholars have suggested a middle path called "Moral Realism". This takes into account the realpolitik of a situation but also suggests that while dealing with it, a more morally acceptable method should be followed. By doing this, the contradiction in the binary approach is minimised. Patricia Stein Wrightson says that, "Conventional wisdom has it that realism excludes moral concerns from questions of Foreign Policy. But the truth is more complex. Conventionally, realism has a problem with the moral question. Does it have to be that way?"³

Ilan Manor in the Centre on Public Diplomacy of the University of Southern California argues that, "one of the things that increases the appeal of a State is its perceived morality. Indeed. Morality breeds legitimacy on the international stage." He goes on to define Soft Power in the 21st century as "the ability to manage the normative associations that a State evokes so that a state is seen as a desirable partner for creating temporary coalitions or permanent alliances."⁴

In the context of 'Soft Power', capabilities become relevant. How do you protect your interests? What are the instruments you use? Strategic thinkers over the ages have asked these questions. Our own Kautilya in his *Arthashastra*, talks of the Six Stratagems or Shadgunyas, and the four Upayas or instruments to be used. More on this will be discussed later in the paper.

At the most fundamental level, Soft Power is about winning the hearts and minds of people. Hence, there has to be a people centric approach. In this, governments cannot do much beyond facilitating the process. Let us take two examples. In the last century, there were only two instances when the idea of India became very popular amongst a large section of the global population. The popularity was not with the foreign governments so much as with the ordinary people. The first was during our freedom struggle, with Mahatma Gandhi's concept of non-violent non-cooperation. This was seen universally as a new paradigm in fighting oppression and injustice. There was a genuine desire that humanity should turn a new leaf and follow this path.

The second was during Hippy movement of the 1960's, when many in the West got attracted to Yoga, Meditation, classical music, and spirituality of India. Those were the days when the anti-Vietnam war protests were at their peak. In both these instances, the Government had very little to do with their propagation. In fact, in the first case, the Government of the time was British who did their best to discredit the concept. Even in the second case, the Government of India was not particularly interested in encouraging promotion of yoga and meditation because of the negative publicity of the Hippy movement.

Nonetheless, governments all over are nowadays facilitating the spread of positive ideas from their countries. This would include arts, culture, music, dance, philosophy, sports, and cuisine. India is no exception to this rule. The Government of India realises that it has an abundance of these resources. So, why not use them to further Indian interests in a subtle manner?

The operative term here is "subtle". Using Soft Power to achieve specific goals is a contradiction in terms, and can be counter-productive. Ideally, Soft Power dissemination should be neutral, without any reference to our interests.

Can Soft Power by Itself Achieve Foreign Policy Goals?

It is obvious that Soft Power may be a necessary condition for achieving goals; but it is not a sufficient condition. This is because Foreign Policy outcomes are not unilateral decisions. Their success depends on other nations. Their interests play a crucial role on how successful we are. If our policies are opposed to their national interests, they would not tow our line even if they like our culture and civilisation. That is where use of some aspects of Hard Power would come into play. This does not automatically imply the use of force. There are other instruments of persuasion. Nonetheless, the fact cannot be denied that Soft power "lubricates" other instruments in diplomacy. If a country is appreciative of our values and culture, it may be pre-disposed towards avoiding an adversarial position. Hence, during decision-making situations, it could tend towards a favourable one, provided it is not against its national interests. Even if Soft Power may not directly help in furthering foreign policy goals, it certainly helps in the conduct of diplomacy. It is necessary here to differentiate clearly between the two. Often, the two terms are used wrongly. We see, for example, newspaper articles analysing Foreign policy achievements in a particular period by listing out the various foreign trips undertaken by leaders. These activities do fall under diplomacy. They may even contribute to foreign policy. But by themselves, they do not amount to policy.

Kautilya understood this very well. That is why he conceptualised the six Stratagems or the Shadgunyas as foreign policy initiatives and the four Upayas as diplomatic tools. The Shadgunyas are Samdhi (policy of peace), Vighraha (policy of hostility), Asana (policy of remaining quiet), Yana (policy of expedition), Sansraya (seeking shelter with another king), and Dvaidhibhava (double policy of samdhi with one king and vighraha with another at the same time). The Upayas are Saam (extending friendship), Daan (offering material incentives), Bhed (dividing the adversary's group), and Dhand (use of force).⁵

What are India's strengths and weaknesses in Soft Power?

While making this assessment, one should not lose sight of the product and process aspects mentioned earlier. Both are critical.

The most important element is India's long history, culture, and civilisation. These have attracted both intellectuals and common folk from across the globe to India. If they were not attractive, so many brilliant minds all over the world would not be working as Indologists. In the 1980s, the famous theatre personality Peter Brook produced the 'Mahabharata' with a universal cast. The impact was spectacular. The great Indian epic became popular in the far corners of the world overnight.

India is fortunate to have all the major religions of the world. Four are indigenous: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. Four came from outside: Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This adds to the incentives for the religiously minded foreigners to visit India. The international media coverage of the Kumbh Mela is testimony to the admiration of other countries for India, and how it has kept up its beliefs and traditions over millennia.

Religious tourism into India is a major factor in our external relations. Apart from Hindu religious sites like Varanasi, Badrinath, Puri, Kedarnath, Vaishnavo Devi, Amarnath, Tirupati, Sabarimala, Tanjavor, Madurai etc., a large number also come for places of interest to other religions. India is the most favoured destination for Buddhist pilgrims. This is not surprising because most of the places associated with Lord Buddha's life are in India. Throughout the year, there is a steady stream of visitors from the ASEAN countries, Japan, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar to Bodhi Gaya and Nalanda. Christianity and Judaism in India are also very old, and there are historic Churches and Synagogues in South India. Speaking of Islam, the *dargahs* of Sufi saints like Moinuddin Chishti and Nizamuddin Aulia attract thousands of devotees.

Connected to the religious aspects of India are yoga and meditation, which have become household terms in most countries. The health aspects of these are being researched and propagated by well known physicians and doctors. The Government of India did well to persuade the United Nations declare June 21 as the Global Yoga Day.

Equally important are the music, dance, art, and architecture of India. Even though the Taj Mahal is the most famous monument of India, foreign tourists are discovering thousands of other historical and archaeological sites all over the country. These visits will certainly have a positive effect on their attitude towards our country. The propagation of our culture is nothing new. In earlier times we called it cultural diplomacy. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) under the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) does pioneering work in not only disseminating our culture abroad but also encouraging the exposure of other cultures in India to encourage a cultural dialogue.

Bollywood has been projected as a great Soft Power tool for India. Sometimes, there is exaggeration of this aspect. It is true that Bollywood movies are popular among the people of many countries. However, it is equally true that Bollywood does not figure high among its peer competitors. For decades now, Indian cinema has not figured prominently in any of the famous International Film Festivals, like Cannes, Berlin, Venice or Karlovy Vary. Let us look at its size. Hollywood's worldwide box office receipts and international diffusion are far greater than those of Bollywood. The latter's success is in a limited "echo chamber" of Non-resident Indians (NRIs), People of Indian Origin (PIOs), and some India lovers. Bollywood was, in fact, able to get much more global appreciation in the 1950s and 1960s. The movies of those decades appealed to foreign audiences more because the themes and presentations seemed natural and realistic regarding the Indian context. One has also to mention here the adverse effects of Bollywood on Indian regional cinema, which tends to be marginalised. Having said all that, the attractiveness of Bollywood, particularly its music and dance, cannot be underestimated.

Indian cuisine is a major attraction for foreigners. There is universal appeal for its variety and sophistication. There may not be a single big city in the world without at least two or three Indian Restaurants. They all do great business.

The Indian Diaspora (the NRIs and the PIOs) plays a vital role in promoting India's Soft Power. Both put together add up to twenty million. They are spread across all continents, and have become prosperous, famous, and influential over the last many decades. They not only help in disseminating

Indian culture but have also, on occasion, contributed to promoting our foreign policy goals. The best example of this was during the negotiations of the Indo-US Nuclear Deal in the early years of the first decade of this century. Many influential Indians in the USA did remarkable work in lobbying Congressmen and Senators, and bringing them around to our point of view. The Indian Diaspora is becoming a real asset as more and more of them achieve success in their respective fields in different countries.

One important aspect of Soft Power less often discussed is the power to lead by example. Mahatma Gandhi could do it. Others will respect and admire us only if we do what we preach. The world will judge us by our commitments to our promises. This is particularly relevant in the case of Development Partnership Projects in Developing Countries. In international relations, nothing is more important than credibility of one's statements.

At present, India faces many challenges as an important emerging power. Hence, it has to play multiple roles. Indian interests are both with the developing world and with major powers. Sometimes others could feel that we are running with the hares and hunting with the hounds. It is a delicate balancing act that India has to perform constantly. It is easy to convince foreign governments, since they are in the same business and can understand the compulsions of other governments. The problem is to convince the common citizens of those countries. This is where the articulation of our narrative becomes important. Is our story credible? Is it interesting? Does it evoke respect?

Public diplomacy is the new tool to deal with these issues. The idea is to communicate directly to the citizenry in simple terms. These have to be devoid of jargon and overt propaganda. Earlier, these used to be done through conventional media and lectures/seminars. The advent of Social Media has changed the face of public diplomacy drastically. Today, even national leaders are resorting to Tweeting to make their ideas known. Here, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is leading by example, and encouraging all officers in the government to leverage Social Media for communication with the public.

Soft Power is not "image polishing". It is much more than that. Mere image polishing without a corresponding improvement in reality can be counterproductive. Soft Power is also different from "Nation Branding". Achievements in arts, literature, music, sports, science and technology are the main factors that lead to admiration of others, and contribute to Soft Power.

Others judge us also by our ability to understand and appreciate them. Openness, humility, and empathy go a long way in Diplomacy. The French

born American historian Jacques Barzun once remarked, “To see ourselves as others see us is a very rare and valuable gift, without a doubt. But in international relations what is still rarer and far more useful is to see others as they see themselves.” This needs true openness of mind. Real communication can be there only if you see others in their perspective.

One way of winning hearts and minds is not to be obsessed with projecting our successes and achievements all the time, but also try to celebrate those of others. Famous Film Festivals where movies from all over the world compete on an equal footing — like in Cannes, Berlin or Venice — generate a great deal of goodwill for the hosts. Why do countries fight to host international sporting events like the Olympics? This is a way of showing appreciation for universal talents. India has increased its activities in this respect. The ICCR’s objective is to not only promote Indian culture abroad but also make Indians aware of other cultures. Care has to be taken that this is done without even a hint of being patronising or condescension.

Even if the concept of Soft Power is not precise, Joseph Nye did well to flag this important aspect in the foreign policies of countries. There is no country in the world today, which does not attach importance to this factor. India is in a good position regarding this aspect due to its enormous resources, which come in handy in increasing the country’s attractiveness to others. Academics and intellectuals can play a critical role in this endeavour.

Notes :

- ¹ Blarel Nicolas, “India: the next super power? India’s Soft Power: from Potential to Reality?” IDEAS Reports, LSE IDEAS, 2012
- ² Malone David M., “Does the Elephant dance? Contemporary Indian Foreign Policy”, Oxford University Press, 2014
- ³ Wrightson, Patricia Stein, “Morality, Realism and Foreign Affairs: A Normative Realist Approach”, *Journal of Security Studies*, Vol. 5, 1995, Issue 2
- ⁴ Manor Ilan, Center on Public Diplomacy, University of Southern California, 21 & 28 October 2019.
- ⁵ Kangle R. P., *The Kautilya Arthashastra*, Motilal Banarasisdass, Part 3: Chapter 11, 2014

