

INDIAN SOFT POWER: THE ROLE OF CULTURE

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Introduction

Soft power is increasingly becoming a tool of Indian diplomacy. Armed with the global appeal of Bollywood, the country's multimillion-dollar movie industry in Mumbai, and the power of culture, this country has already launched a massive exercise to project its soft power across the world.¹ India's investment in soft power is growing and this is a sign of its effort to ensure its global emergence. A long-term focus of the Indian policymakers now is to carry India's soft power - the power of its popular and traditional culture - to all the Asian countries and beyond including Latin America. A special or particular focus is applied on Asia, in whose current emergence, India is expected to play a major role. Though never fully reliant on it while pursuing its foreign policy goals in the past, Indian policymakers now perceive culture² as an enormous source of power.

"It has the potential to shape, alter and impact the ideas and opinions of public communities. From a wide-ranging perspective, culture has the capability to resolve tensions and prejudices—ethnic, religious, communal, national and international. It can create a climate of tolerance, respect and understanding among nations, religions and entire regions. It is thus, an essential medium for peaceful and tolerant contact and communication."³

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¹ For details see: http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/uncategorized/india-projecting-its-soft-power-globally-iccr-chief-interview_100257057.html#ixzz0hZW5goUL

² Culture is a difficult term to define. Etymologically, it is derived from the Latin *cultura*, which means to tend, cultivate or till. In its universal declaration on cultural diversity, UNESCO effectively defined culture as "the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs".

³ Pavan K. Varma, "Culture as an instrument of diplomacy", in Atash Sinha and Madhup Mohta, (eds.) *Indian Foreign Policy: Challenges and Opportunities*, (New Delhi: Academic Foundation), 2007. pp-1140-1141.

The expansion of cultural presence is one of the new goals of India's foreign policy. To pursue this policy India is opening cultural centers or cells in cities like Bangkok, Tokyo, Kuala Lumpur, Dhaka and Abu Dhabi. India considers these cultural centers as "platforms" to expand outreach to project its soft power.

Indian soft power is shaped by the synergy of Indian government and India's booming private sector. This public-private partnership is one of the basic strengths of Indian soft power. As India emerges as a global power, Indian soft power will have a greater cultural, economic and to some extent political impact across the globe.

The Idea of Soft Power

The notion of soft power is relatively new in international relations discourse. Soft power is the ability to obtain preferred outcomes through attraction rather than coercion and payments. According to Joseph Nye, the resources that produce soft power for a country include its culture (where it is attractive to others); its values, (where they are attractive and not undercut by inconsistent practices); and policies (where they are seen as inclusive and legitimate in the eyes of others).⁴

Traditionally, power in world politics was seen in terms of military power: the side with the larger army was likely to win. Soft power works both as an alternative to hard power, and as a complement to it.

According to Shashi Tharoor a country's soft power, emerges from the world's perceptions of what that country is all about. The associations and attitudes conjured up in the global imagination by the mere mention of a country's name is often a more accurate gauge of its soft power than a dispassionate analysis of its foreign policies. In his words, "hard power is exercised; soft power is evoked."⁵

Joseph Nye in his book *The Paradox of American Power*, took the analysis of soft power beyond the US; other nations too, he suggested, could acquire it. In today's information era, he wrote, three types of countries are likely to gain soft power and so succeed:

⁴ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "American Soft Power and Smart Power", *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 12 Nos. 1 & 2, June & December 2008.

⁵ Shashi Tharoor, "Indian Strategic Power: Soft", *The Huffington Post*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/shashi-tharoor/indian-strategic-power-so_b_207785.html, 26 May 2009, accessed: 10 June 2009.

"Those whose dominant cultures and ideals are closer to prevailing global norms (which now emphasize liberalism, pluralism, autonomy); those with the most access to multiple channels of communication and thus more influence over how issues are framed; and those whose credibility is enhanced by their domestic and international performance."

At the first glance, this may seem to be a prescription for reaffirming the contemporary reality of US dominance, since it is clear that no country scores more highly on all three categories than the US. But Nye himself admits this is not so: soft power has been pursued with success by other countries over the years.

Ancient Egypt was an example of a nation that used mainly soft power to become a major power. When France lost the war of 1870 to Prussia, one of its most important steps to rebuild the nation's shattered morale and enhance its prestige was to create the Alliance Française to promote French language and literature throughout the world. French culture has remained a major component of French soft power ever since.

In today's world many countries have chosen culture as a source of soft power. For example, the US has the American Center, the UK has the British Council, the Swiss have Pro Helvetia, and Germany, Spain, Italy and Portugal have, respectively, institutes named for Goethe, Cervantes, Dante Alighieri and Camoes. Today, China has started establishing 'Confucius Institutes'⁶ to promote Chinese culture internationally, and the Beijing Olympics was a sustained exercise in the building up of soft power by an Asian country. The US itself has used officially sponsored initiatives, from the Voice of America to the Fulbright scholarships, to promote its soft power around the world. But soft power does not rely merely on governmental action: arguably, for the US, Hollywood and MTV have done more to promote the idea of America as a desirable and admirable society than any US governmental endeavor.

There exists an argument that increasingly countries are being judged by the soft power elements they project onto the global consciousness – either deliberately (through the export of cultural products, the cultivation of foreign publics or even international propaganda) or unwittingly (through the ways in which they are perceived as a result of news stories about them in the global mass media).

⁶ As of November 2009, there were 282 Confucius Institutes and 272 Confucius Classrooms in 88 countries and regions. For details see: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-12/11/content_12633620.htm