

The soft power of India

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Abstract

India's soft power is on the rise, in parallel with its economic power as one of the fastest growing major economies in the world. This chapter discusses India's soft power within four domains: firstly, the democratic strengths of India, a particular distinction among the BRICS countries. As the world's largest democracy, India has retained and arguably strengthened democracy in a multi-lingual, multi-racial and multi-religious society. The second domain examines the diasporic dimension of India's international presence, increasingly viewed by Indian government and corporates as a vital resource for its soft power. As the world's largest English-language speaking diaspora, the Indian presence is visible across the globe. The third domain focuses on the emergence of an Indian internet – part of the Indian government's 'Digital India' initiative, launched in 2015 – and its potential for becoming the world's largest 'open' internet. The chapter argues that, with the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi the push for digital commerce and communication is likely to increase. Already home to the world's second largest internet population, its creative and cultural industries, notably Bollywood, have the potential to circulate across various digital domains, resulting in globalized production, distribution and consumption practices. However, the chapter argues that these three domains of soft power will remain ineffective until India is able to eliminate its pervasive and persistent poverty, afflicting large number of its citizens.

Keywords

Soft Power; India; Diaspora; Democracy; Digital India; BRICS.

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O poder brando da Índia

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Resumo

O poder brando (soft power) da Índia está em ascensão paralelamente ao seu poder econômico, sendo uma das principais economias em crescimento no mundo. Este trabalho discute o poder brando da Índia em quatro domínios: primeiro, os pontos fortes democráticos da Índia, uma distinção particular entre os países do BRICS. O segundo aspecto examina a dimensão diaspórica da presença internacional do país, cada vez mais vista pelo governo e pelas empresas indianas como um recurso vital para o seu poder brando. Como a maior diáspora de língua inglesa do mundo, a presença indiana é visível em todo o mundo. O terceiro domínio se concentra no surgimento de uma internet indiana – parte da iniciativa Índia Digital do governo, lançada em 2015 – e seu potencial para se tornar a maior internet aberta do mundo. Por fim, o artigo argumenta que, com o governo do primeiro-ministro Narendra Modi, o impulso para o comércio e a comunicação digital provavelmente aumentará. Afinal, além da sua cultura e criatividade, o país abriga a segunda maior população da internet do mundo.

Palavras-chave

O poder Brando da Índia; Diáspora; Democracia; Índia Digital, BRICS

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While India's global influence has a long and complex history, this chapter suggests that, as India emerges as a major economic power (on purchasing power parity terms, it is the world's third largest economy), the country's cultural power will also grow. This process is also underpinned by its 25-million strong diaspora, seen by Modi government as a key strategic resource for promoting the country's soft power. From mobile telephony to online communication, India has witnessed a revolution in the production and distribution of its cultural products, as well as a steady growth of Indic ideas – ranging from sustainable living and alternative lifestyles to celebratory religiosity and multilingualism – and now reaching all corners of an increasingly digitized globe. The chapter argues, however, that the populist streak in policy restricts the potential of a global India, especially since the pluralism for which India is known, is increasingly under strain in the majoritarian discourse of current domestic and foreign policy.

Even before Narendra Modi was elected Prime Minister in 2014, the populist politician from India's western province of Gujarat could claim international recognition, especially among large sections of India's 25-million strong diaspora. As Chief Minister of Gujarat, Modi had travelled to various countries, addressing dozens of meetings where members of the diaspora were present in large numbers. He had visited China, too, to seek investment for his state – printing red business cards in Mandarin to please his potential Chinese investors. This pragmatic and media-savvy attitude can be seen in the approach of the Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party government in India's public diplomacy, wooing the diaspora through mega events in the world's major cities, promoting the cultural and religious aspects of India and emphasizing India's democratic, demographic and digital strengths as one of the world's fastest growing large economies.

Since 2013, India has been the world's third largest economy, behind China and the United States, on the basis of purchasing-power parity, while in overall GDP terms, its \$2.6 trillion economy became the fifth largest, surpassing Britain in 2019 (IMF, 2019). Nevertheless, the country is still home to the world's largest number of people living in extreme poverty. This change in India's global status has coincided with the relative economic decline of the West, creating the opportunity for an emerging power, such as India to participate in global governance structures hitherto dominated by the US-led Western alliance (ACHARYA, 2018; CULL, 2019). Given its history as the only major democracy that did not blindly follow the West during the Cold War years, pursuing

a nonaligned foreign policy, India has the potential now to take up a more significant leadership role. Despite growing economic and strategic relations with Washington, it maintains close ties with other major and emerging powers. India's presence at the Group of 77 developing nations and at the G-20 leading economies of the world has been effective in articulating a Southern perspective on global affairs. India is also a key member of the BRICS grouping of countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as well as the Commonwealth.

Parallel to its rising economic power, is the growing global awareness and appreciation of India's soft power—its mass media, celebratory religiosity (yoga and Ayurveda) and popular culture (THAROOR, 2008; BLAREL, 2012; THAROOR, 2012; THUSSU, 2013; KUGIEL, 2017). Joseph Nye in his 2004 book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* suggests that soft power is an integral part of foreign policy, especially for states seeking to 'incorporate the soft dimensions into their strategies for wielding power' (NYE, 2004, p. 1). Its role in foreign policy is important precisely because 'in behavioural terms, simply put, soft power is attractive power' (IBID, p. 6), pursued in order to influence the behaviour of other states.

How much such 'attractive power' does India possess? India's soft power has a civilizational dimension to it: the Indic civilization, dating back more than 5,000 years, being one of the major cultural formations in the world, with wide-ranging influences from religion and philosophy, arts and architecture to language, literature, trade and travel. As the point of origin of four of the world's religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism – and as the place where every major faith, with the exception of Shintoism and Confucianism, has coexisted for millennia, India offers a unique and syncretized religious discourse.

The dissemination of Hindu and Buddhist ideas across Asia is well documented: it is no coincidence that the official airline of Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, is named *Garuda*, the Sanskrit name for the mount of Hindu God Vishnu. The Indian contribution to Islamic thought (and via that to European intellectual culture) on mathematics, astronomy, and other physical and metaphysical sciences is widely recognized. India's soft power in historical terms was directed not towards the West but to Asia. India's cultural influence across East and Southeast Asia during the early centuries of the Christian era was spread through the dispersion of Hinduism and Buddhism and thus the millennia-old relationship between India and the rest of Asia has a strong cultural and communication dimension. Buddhism was at the heart of this interaction, with the widest dissemination of ideas emanating from what constitutes India today, and remains a powerful link between the Indic and the

Chinese civilizations. Narratives on Buddha's life and teachings are still a cultural referent in much of Asia, while traces of Indic languages, cuisine, dance, and other art forms survive in parts of Southeast Asia, notably in Indonesia. Two of the world's other great religions – Christianity and Islam – also have long associations with India. Some of the earliest Christian communities were established in India: St. Thomas is supposed to be buried in Chennai and one of the world's oldest mosques is also located in India – in Kerala, where Jewish communities have lived for millennia. Adding to this legacy is India's long and continuing encounter with European modernity and its contribution to a distinctive worldview epitomized by leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, the apostle of non-violence and tolerance – whose thoughts influenced such leaders as Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela, prompting scholars to speak of a 'pax-Gandhiana' (PAREL, 2016). This rare combination of a civilization which has strong Hindu-Buddhist foundations, centuries of Islamic influence, and integration with Western institutions and ideas, gives India cultural resources to deal with the diverse, globalized and complex realities of the twenty-first century.

The Diasporic Dimension

Another key dimension of India's growing global soft-power profile is its extended and increasingly visible diaspora, especially in the United States, where an estimated 4.6 million people of Indian origin live (KAPUR, 2010; CHAKRAVORTY; KAPUR; SINGH, 2017). The most articulate and effective manifestation of this soft power attribute is the growing presence of members of the Indian diaspora in influential positions at Ivy League universities, international media and multilateral organizations, as well as among transnational corporations. Member of the Indian diaspora, scattered around the globe, have excelled in many spheres of life and enriched the cultural, economic and intellectual experience of countries such as the US and Britain (KAPUR, 2010; THUSSU, 2013; CHAKRAVORTY; KAPUR; SINGH, 2017). The more prosperous sections of this diaspora – mostly based in the West – have become an important component in foreign policy priorities for Modi. He has underlined the need to further strengthen the linkages between India and its diaspora, as indicated in his various stage-managed 'town-hall' events, full of razzmatazz, notably the 2014 mega show in New York's Madison Square Garden as well as the 2015 rally at London's Wembley Stadium, and most recently, the Houston rally with US President Donald Trump in September 2019. These shows were exceptionally well attended and received wide media coverage. Indian corporations, too, are keen to engage with the diasporic elites to further their

own interests.

In a globalized and interconnected world, diasporas can be a vital strategic instrument and channel of communication to further foreign policy goals, depending on their economic and political influence within the centres of global power (RANA, 2009; KAPUR 2010). It is no coincidence that two of the world's top digital corporations in 2019 were led by men who studied for their first university degrees in India: Satya Nadella, the CEO of Microsoft and Sundar Pichai, chief executive of Google. Such 'soft power resources' are being deployed by India's government, in collaboration with increasingly globalizing Indian industries, to project India as an investment-friendly, pro-market democracy.

As India's international profile has grown in recent decades, many members of its diaspora are reconnecting with the homeland. Although Modi has prioritized engagement with the diaspora, he is benefitting from steps taken by his predecessors, especially Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, who headed the pro-business BJP-led coalition government in 1998. Vajpayee created the annual celebration *Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas* (Day of the Non-Resident Indian) on 9 January, symbolically chosen to mark the return of Mahatma Gandhi to India from South Africa in 1914 to lead the Indian nationalist movement. The phrase '*Vishwa Bharati*' (Global Indian) was also coined during his time. Vajpayee set up the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs in 2004, another milestone in this diasporic diplomacy.

The Public Diplomacy Division within the Ministry of External Affairs MEA is also involved in organizing soft-power related events abroad in collaboration with the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), the nodal government agency responsible for India's soft power projection that regularly organizes 'Festivals of India' around the world.

The Popular Dimension

Official 'Festivals of India' that focus on India's traditional cultures have had limited success as they are perceived, quite accurately, as government-sponsored initiatives catering to a discerning global elite. Much more effective in soft power terms is India's privately-owned and -run popular film industry - Bollywood - the world's largest film industry in terms of the number of films produced. Indian movies are watched and enjoyed in large parts of the world, from the Middle East and North Africa to Central and Southeast Asia (GERA ROY, 2012; SCHAEFER; KARAN, 2013;

SWAMINATHAN, 2017; ATHIQUE, 2019, AMONG OTHERS). Since formally receiving the status of an industry by the Indian government in 2000, authorizing banks to provide loans to filmmakers and insurers to insure film financiers, the Indian film industry has become a source of export revenue, as well as an instrument for promoting India's soft power. This has also helped encourage foreign investors to engage with the Indian entertainment industry, resulting in growing investment from the telecom, software and media sectors. The ensuing corporatization and the synergies this created made it possible for Bollywood content to be available on multiple platforms - satellite, cable, online and mobile - and help formulate a complex, globalized production, distribution and consumption system (PUNATHAMBEKAR, 2013; SWAMINATHAN, 2017).

Indian film exports have witnessed a steady increase in the past two decades and industry estimates suggest that the entertainment and media sector in India was worth \$19 billion in 2018 and was expected to grow as its markets widen and further globalize (FICCI-KPMG, 2017; FICCI/EY REPORT, 2018). The globalization of Indian films can also be witnessed in the trend of non-Indian actors appearing in Indian films, most recently Chinese actress Zhu Zhu as the leading lady in the 2017 film *Tubelight*, set against the backdrop of the 1962 India-China border war. Increasingly Hollywood giants have expanded their involvement in India and entered into joint ventures with Indian companies to enter the Indian market and indeed the global market for Indian cinema. One notable example was Disney's 2016 Bollywood production *Dangal*, which made \$217 million in the international market, with China accounting for \$178.3 million of this figure, making it the most successful Indian film internationally. The film was released in China in May 2017 dubbed into Mandarin as *Shuajiao Baba (Let's Wrestle, Dad!)*, and generated about five times its India earnings (YAU, 2018). Bollywood is also increasingly being watched not in theatres but on laptops and other mobile digital devices, with both Amazon Prime and Netflix having special rates for Indian films for the global audience. Yet the industry's growth continues to be limited by various factors, including a poor communication infrastructure as well as piracy, which accounts for an annual loss of substantial revenues. (FICCI-KPMG, 2017; FICCI/EY REPORT 2018).

Communicating Soft Power

Unlike the entertainment industry, Indian news and current affairs continue to be largely domestically oriented and therefore absent in the global news arena. As a

result, the capacity to communicate India's cultural attributes to a globalized audience is largely underdeveloped. Of the countries with ambitions for a global role, India is the only one whose national broadcaster (*Doordarshan*) is not available in the major capitals of the world. Unlike non-English speaking countries such as China (CGTN), Russia (RT), Qatar (Al Jazeera English), Iran (Press TV) and Turkey (TRT-News), whose English-language 24/7 news networks are widely distributed around the world, the Indian viewpoint is notably missing in the global news sphere, at a time when news media are a key instrument of public diplomacy.

While India's English-language private news networks, such as NDTV 24x7, CNN-News 18, India Today Television, Times Now and WION (World is One News) are available globally, they have rarely ventured out of their diasporic constituencies. These networks do not appear to be interested in catering for an international news market. Instead, the international dimension of the commercial news channels functions primarily to reach to the global diasporic audience, who are perhaps more interested in coverage of India itself rather than broader international affairs. For a nation with a developed model of journalism and one of the world's largest English-language news markets, it is an irony that Indian journalism is losing interest in the wider world at a time when Indian industry is increasingly globalizing and international engagement with India is growing across the globe. Despite its penchant for managing media messages and Modi's personal reputation as a formidable communicator, his government has done little to address this shortcoming in India's external communication strategy.

Digital Diplomacy

Where television has failed, will the internet succeed in communicating India's soft power? India's Ministry of External Affairs was one of the early adopters of social media platforms to connect with diasporic communities. Though MEA's twitter account @IndianDiplomacy was set up in 2010, since Modi took over in 2014, the Ministry has been using social media more effectively, promoting a positive cultural narrative for 'Brand India'. The MEA India Facebook page, created in 2012, is also widely followed in diplomatic and diasporic circles. It also maintains two You Tube channels and has accounts on various platforms including Instagram, Soundcloud, Flickr, LinkedIn as well as a Google+ channel. India's Foreign Missions have twitter accounts and Facebook pages. Such digital diplomacy has been spurred on by Modi's own considerable social media presence. Modi has used such digital connectivity to promote yoga as part of soft-power projection, in which his government has been very

active, as evidenced by the adoption of International Yoga Day by the United Nations on June 21. This required intense lobbying by the Modi government, gaining the support of 175 member states at the General Assembly for the resolution proposing an international day of yoga. Drawing on an ancient Hindu spiritual tradition to promote an Indian ‘alternative’ lifestyle fits in very well with a Hindu nationalist leader who is himself a devoted yoga enthusiast (MAZUMDAR, 2018; GAUTAM; DROOGAN, 2018).

Encouraged by the \$18 billion ‘Digital India’ initiative, launched by the Modi government in 2015, India is currently undergoing a digital transformation, making it home to the world’s largest ‘open’ internet (since the Chinese one is not open). In the last 15 years, India has seen an exceptional expansion in internet use, with an increase of nearly 7,000 per cent: at the turn of the century only 5.5 million Indians (with a penetration rate of 0.5 per cent of the population) were online; by 2019 that figure had grown exponentially to 600 million internet users (with a penetration rate of over 45 per cent).

This digital revolution is particularly significant in a country that boasts the largest population of young people in the world – more than 70 per cent of India’s population of 1.3 billion is below the age of 35. It will ensure that Indic ideas will travel across global digital superhighways in large volume, strengthening the already well-established connection between India and its diaspora, as well as wider international publics. As noted by a commentator, ‘India benefits from its traditional practices (from Ayurveda to yoga, both accelerating in popularity across the globe) and the transformed image of the country created by its thriving diaspora. Information technology has made its own contribution to India’s soft power’ (THAROOR, 2012, p. 284). Given Modi’s energy, his astute use of social media and his formidable communication skills, the Indian Prime Minister has endeared himself to large sections of this constituency (TANDON, 2016).

However, the deployment of diasporic and digital diplomatic resources do not alone make a country attractive on the world stage; these assets need to be translated into influencing the behaviour of other states and stakeholders, requiring a concerted effort by policy makers (MUKHERJEE, 2014). Modi’s ‘faith-based’ diplomacy, promoting, and some would say, appropriating Buddhism is particularly pronounced. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, Buddhism was founded in India and remains the most enduring and powerful idea to be identified with the region called India today and connects Indian culture with countries across Asia. It is not without symbolic significance that the first foreign visit Modi made after being elected Prime Minister in 2014 was to Buddhist Bhutan. Since then, in his official visits to Asian nations such

as Nepal, Japan, China, Mongolia and South Korea, he has repeatedly invoked Buddhism (MAZUMDAR, 2018). Although according to the 2011 census, merely 0.7 per cent of the Indian population were Buddhists, Modi's government declared 'Buddha Purnima' (Buddha's birthday) an official holiday to be celebrated each year. With its focus on peace and non-violence, Buddhism is seen as a useful soft power tool for India, which has traditionally projected itself as a peace-loving nation (despite being a nuclear power, the world's largest importer of arms and having the third largest armed forces in the world). Emphasizing the millennium-old cultural and communication links with other Asian nations, the Modi government has propounded the idea of '*sanskriti evam sabhyata*' (culture and civilization) as a core principle for promoting India's image globally.

One area which deserves greater emphasis is India's successful tryst with democracy - 'the world's largest democracy.' India has an electorate of 700 million (larger than the combined number of voters in the US and Western Europe) and more than 100 registered political parties. This largely successful experience is unprecedented outside the 'democratic West.' India's democratic record - electing Modi, who is never shy of publicly admitting his very humble background, being the son of a 'Chaiwala' (tea seller) to the highest office in the land - coupled with a secular and federal political infrastructure, in place for nearly seven decades, is a unique experience in encompassing and accommodating different ethnic, religious, and linguistic stakeholders.

Despite the dire predictions of many commentators at the time of independence from Britain in 1947, that a country mired in poverty, ignorance, and illiteracy could not sustain a democratic system and would descend into autocratic dictatorship, India has proved that this can be achieved (SEN, 2005). The scale and scope of the Indian electoral process should offer great opportunities for other developing countries to learn from the Indian experience, ranging from understanding voter behaviour among a largely poor electorate as well as the importance of an autonomous and effective Election Commission. Beyond the electoral aspects of democracy, India also demonstrates that a unified nation state can function without a single language or one religion but as a socially diverse, culturally plural, multilingual, and multi-faith country. Such heterogeneity may be India's major strength in a globalized world, where the capacity to deal with diversity is likely to grow in importance (THUSSU, 2013). Unlike China, India's soft power initiatives are not centrally managed by the government. Indeed, the government takes a backseat while India's creative and cultural industry, its religions and spirituality, as well as its active diaspora and corporations help promote Indian

interests abroad, a phenomenon likely to accelerate in an increasingly globalized and networked world.

How Effective is India's Soft Power?

The intangible nature of soft power makes it hard, if not impossible, to measure. To make India a more attractive country, especially among other developing nations, would require India's policymakers to seriously address the daily deprivation that millions of its citizens suffer. Despite its admirable economic performance in the past two decades, India is still home to more poor people than the whole of Sub-Saharan Africa. On virtually every internationally recognized index, India remains very low in the ranking of nations: from child malnutrition to infant mortality, access to basic health and education; to status and security for women (KOHLLI, 2012; DRÈZE; SEN, 2013). The contrast is especially stark with its BRICS partner China, a one-party, authoritarian state, which has been able to raise 700 million people out of poverty in the past two decades—an exceptional record by any historical or contemporary standard. The exponents of India's soft power must consider why India's example of a multicultural democracy has not been generally appreciated by other developing countries, many of which view, with admiration if not awe, the Chinese model of development as worth emulating. India continues to be seen outside India as a nation of extreme poverty, social inequalities and communal strife.

The Modi government's reluctance to engage more fully with India's 180 million Muslims – the world's largest minority – is a sign of policy limitation. The emphasis in promoting India's Buddhist and Hindu legacy is in striking contrast with not highlighting positive aspects of India's Islamic legacy: had British imperialism not divided India in 1947, it would have been the world's largest Muslim country, in terms of population. The fact that an exceptionally small number of Indian Muslims (estimated at a few dozen) have volunteered to take part in Al Qaeda or ISIS extremism (as against thousands of Western-based Muslims who fought with these groups against the Western forces in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria) should have given Modi's public diplomacy enough ammunition to project India as home to a tolerant version of Islam contributing to a 'dialogue' rather than 'clash' of civilizations.

Apart from ideological reasons, prompted by a majoritarian mindset, efforts to promote India's soft power are also hampered by the rather limited resource base of its diplomatic infrastructure: the country has only 940 diplomats serving in 169 missions and consulates across the globe: in comparison the figure for China is 7,500.

On the recommendation of a 2016 report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs, the MEA has developed a 'soft power matrix' to measure the effectiveness of India's soft power outreach. This matrix, inspired by the London-based international public relations firm Portland Communications, which, in conjunction with the University of Southern California School of Public Diplomacy, publishes an annual 'soft power index', indicates the growing corporatization of public communication across the globe associated with the dominant neoliberal ideology. The Indian policy elite, like their counterparts in many other developing countries, seem to have adapted the market mantra of 'branding' nations and cultures.

A relatively new concept, which emerged in the 1990s in the West, nation branding is rooted within the discipline of marketing and situated within the subfield of 'place marketing,' applying techniques traditionally used by transnational corporations to promote countries as products for favourable foreign investment or to challenge or redress media and cultural stereotypes associated with many developing countries. A country of India's size, scale and substance should not have to be so instrumentalist in its approach. Beyond populist and majoritarian considerations, Modi and his mandarins should recognize that India's soft power will only be effective internationally when the country is able to substantially reduce, if not eliminate, the pervasive and persistent poverty in which a majority of its citizens live. If this could be achieved within a multi-cultural and multi-lingual democracy, then India would indeed offer a new developmental model and, together with a more effective public diplomacy, its status as a major civilizational and economic power would receive its due appreciation around the world.

As one commentator notes: 'India remains in a transitory phase where its hard power is yet to become preponderant even regionally to the point where it can meaningfully project its soft power in order to create a political environment conducive to its international goals' (MUKHERJEE, 2014, p. 55).

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