

India's Civilisational Ties with the World

An Underexplored Theme in India's Soft Power Discourse

*Arpita Mitra**

'Soft Power' has never before been explicitly stated as part of India's foreign policy, like it has been done in the last few years. However, much remains to be done to transform India's capacities into capabilities for an effective soft power exercise, and to be able to employ such soft power as a veritable instrument of influence. This article discusses the civilisational asset that India possesses and its potential for enhancing soft power, that is, India's historical and civilisational ties with, and the cultural footprints thereof, in different parts of the world, especially Asia. It is argued in this article that there is an intrinsic value in underscoring this aspect of India's contribution to the world for reasons that go beyond the narrow interests of a single nation. The current 'Neighbourhood First' policy of the Indian government makes room for an effective utilisation of this asset, if the discourse around it is framed carefully. The purpose of this article is threefold: to highlight the importance of this particular soft power asset of India; to address the critique of this approach in a constructive way; and to suggest a way forward in terms of concrete policy recommendations.

Keywords: *Soft Power, Foreign Policy, Cultural Diplomacy, Civilisational Ties, India's Cultural Footprints, Neighbourhood First, Asia*

'Soft Power' has never before been explicitly stated as part of India's foreign policy, like it has been done in the last few years. The expression itself was coined and defined in 1990 by Joseph S. Nye, Jr., who proffered it as an analytical tool that can help measure a country's ability to influence other

* Dr Arpita Mitra is Assistant Professor at Department of History, Kazi Nazrul University, West Bengal, India.



countries apart from the use of coercion or compensation.¹ However, the formulation of the concept was only an acknowledgment of the existence of soft power even prior to its public articulation. Nye himself writes that the concept can be traced back to ancient thinkers. One may even argue with some degree of plausibility that Emperor Asoka's *dharmasravana* (proclamations on morality) as found in his edicts and the peace missions he is believed to have sent abroad were also an exercise in soft power among other things. Asoka did not become a hermit, but remained an Emperor with a powerful standing army. Thus, it was not just a matter of personal faith but something more than that. On the other hand, Asoka was appropriated by posterity, especially by the Indian state after independence, as a symbol of India's soft power. While the term was yet unknown, Jawaharlal Nehru and his team definitely had a soft power exercise in mind when the principles that shaped Indian foreign policy were framed and the symbols of the new state (Asoka Chakra, Asokan Lion Capital, *Satyameva Jayate*, *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* inscribed at the entry of the Indian Parliament, and so on) were chosen. Soft power, in fact, ties a country's domestic and foreign policies together—what one wants to project abroad has to be first achieved at home.

The 'soft power' discourse started to be articulated in India, albeit by a handful of commentators, in the first decade of the 21st century.² In the recent years, the Indian government has articulated it much more robustly. In the midst of a discourse that India is a 'defensive soft power'³, the adoption of the International Day of Yoga (IDY) by the United Nations in 2014 took many quarters by surprise. This key event appeared sudden but it was neither an abrupt interest of the world in Yoga nor the result of any long-term effort of a government that had just come to power a couple of months before. Yoga had trickled into the world community much before (as discussed later); it was a culmination of historical processes and the year 2014 provided the opportunity for convergence of the right factors. The governments prior to the BJP-led government of 2014 had shied away from overtly promoting things that seemed to have anything to do with religion, especially Hinduism. But the world in 2014, on the brink of climate change, was quick to look towards a philosophy that could bring in physical and mental well-being, in a way that is in tune with deep ecology, but without a necessary belief in God or organised religion. In 2014, India had a government that was willing to make the most of its ancient resources for achieving greater visibility on the global stage. The adoption of IDY was, therefore, neither

a chance nor a one-off event. It was an indication of the fact that India had arrived.

However, much remains to be done to transform India's capacities into capabilities for an effective soft power exercise, and especially for the use of soft power as a veritable instrument of influence.⁴ India's influence remains low and is not commensurate with the vast number of soft power resources at its disposal.⁵ While there exists a discourse and also a policy, no matter how muted, regarding India's soft power, there is much room for expanding the scope of soft power exercises as practiced so far by India. Think tanks and policy researchers have recently engaged with the question of India's soft power, but there is a need for more concrete policy recommendations. The present article is an attempt at discussing one particular civilisational asset of India and its potential and implications for enhancing soft power, that is, India's historical and civilisational ties with, and cultural footprints in different parts of the world, especially Asia. It has perhaps become a platitude that the world borrowed so much from India civilisationally, and this statement is even looked upon with some degree of unease and reservation by certain quarters. However, as the present article would like to put forward, there is an intrinsic value in underscoring this aspect of India's contribution to the world for reasons that go beyond the narrow interests of a single nation. The current 'Neighbourhood First' policy of the Indian government makes room for an effective utilisation of this asset, if the discourse around it is framed properly, and the government goes about the matter more systematically by bringing about the necessary changes in both its domestic (curriculum of history) and foreign (cultural diplomacy) policies. The article will also address the critique of this approach. Thus, the purpose of this article is threefold: (1) to highlight the importance of this particular soft power asset of India; (2) to address the critique of this approach in a constructive way; and (3) to suggest a way forward in terms of concrete policy recommendations.

SOFT, HARD, SMART AND SHARP POWER

This section will deal with the concept of 'soft power' and the different conceptual variants such as 'hard', 'smart' and 'sharp' power that have been formulated in order to make sense of a reality that is more complex than schematic.

Nye had proposed the concept of 'soft power' essentially to chart the course of the development of America in the post-Cold War period,⁶

which freed it from the compulsion to use coercion as a means for vying for the place of a world power. The concept was also meant to be a tool for analysing the way we think about power. Gradually, it transcended its initial scope and came to be embraced by other countries as well, as a potent discourse in international relations and also became a conceptual tool in other domains like leadership studies.⁷ The idea caught on in such a way that now we have global soft power indices and rankings.

Nye developed the concept in due course, but the central definition remained the same: the ability to affect others and obtain preferred outcomes by attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment. While sceptics continued to doubt the efficacy of soft power in bringing about real gains especially in comparison to hard power (essentially military power), Nye arrived at his concept of 'smart power', that is, the successful combination of hard and soft power resources into an effective strategy.⁸ In fact, American cultural dominance was directly related to its military and economic powers. In other words, soft power is ineffective in the absence of hard power, and, one may add, an efficacious strategy calls for not just a combination but the right *balance* of hard and soft power.

The concept of 'sharp power' has been formulated recently in the context of China's aggressive posturing, which, along with Russian initiatives, has been perceived as 'authoritarian' especially by the Western world. In a recent report published by the International Forum for Democratic Studies, the authors argue that

Over the past decade, China and Russia have spent billions of dollars to shape public opinion and perceptions around the world, employing a diverse toolkit that includes thousands of people-to-people exchanges, wide-ranging cultural activities, educational programs, and the development of media enterprises and information initiatives with global reach... some of the most visible authoritarian influence techniques used by countries such as *China and Russia, while not 'hard' in the openly coercive sense, are not really 'soft' either... This authoritarian influence is not principally about attraction or even persuasion; instead, it centers on distraction and manipulation...* We are in need of a new vocabulary for this phenomenon. *What we have to date understood as authoritarian 'soft power' is better categorized as 'sharp power' that pierces, penetrates, or perforates the political and information environments in the targeted countries.*⁹

The concept of 'sharp power' is thus contrasted to that of 'soft power', as some kind of a sinister manipulation is implied in the former. To what extent this conceptual distinction is real or to what extent it betrays an in-built value-judgement can, however, be open to question.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOFT POWER

Veena Sikri points out that the first among the six measures (*sadgunya*) of foreign policy and the first of the four techniques (*chaturupaya*) in the conduct of foreign relations in Kautilya's *Arthashastra* are *sambhi* (the policy of peace) and *sama* (the use of friendliness, persuasion, polite argument or reason) respectively. Sikri holds these to be equivalent to soft power and highlights that the exercise of soft power, thus, constitutes the pathways of primary choice in foreign policy. She argues that 'without, in any way, impeding or limiting the development of a nation's hard power, it is a *sine qua non* that strategizing soft power projection should be prioritized as the pathway of primary choice'.¹⁰ As recently as 11 January 2022, given recent dramatic examples of coercion or payoff by governments, Joseph Nye commented that governments today ignore the potential of soft power only at their peril. He remarked: 'Soft power is not the only or even the most important source of power, because its effects tend to be slow and indirect. But to ignore or neglect it is a serious strategic and analytic mistake'.¹¹

Some commentators in India continue to think that soft-power exchanges of the cultural kinds are for coffee-room discussions. Across the working table, real power and consequent external support, financial and/or political, alone matter to the leadership in office.¹² While it is true that soft power can never replace hard power or more tangible gains, to relegate cultural soft power to coffee-room discussion is a reflection of myopic thinking. In the present age of Information Revolution, soft power is acquiring an increasing role in public diplomacy,¹³ and it would be foolhardy to undermine its importance. Today any country which has global ambitions—as India certainly has—cannot afford to ignore soft power as a complementary support to its hard power and economic prowess.

THE PARADOXES OF SOFT POWER

Soft power, however, comes with its inherent paradoxes. Firstly, an exercise in soft power is essentially a silent exercise; it serves its purpose only when it is muted. Any visible *effort* at projecting soft power is likely to be at

best ineffective and at worst counterproductive. How to circumvent this problem is something that individual states need to work upon, and this issue may be especially relevant in the context of India's relations in the neighbourhood.

Secondly, drawing from the above, non-state actors become more important in the exercise of soft power as compared to the state. Furthermore, as Nye observes: 'The problem for all states in the 21st century is that there are more and more things outside the control of even the most powerful states, because of the diffusion of power from states to non-state actors.'¹⁴ Thus, in today's day and age, people-to-people contact is an indispensable instrument of soft power. An example of this is China's involvement in Latin America that is heavily based on people-to-people contact. However, one needs to keep in mind that 'the Chinese actors that undertake such initiatives to connect with elites abroad are not independent from the state, even when they appear to be part of civil society'.¹⁵ Furthermore, such people-to-people engagement is largely dependent on money, that is, money used for free training programmes, exchange programmes and scholarships in China.

CULTURE AND CULTURAL ATTRACTION

As Nye puts it succinctly:

A country's soft power comes primarily from three sources: its culture; its political values, such as democracy and human rights (when it upholds them); and its policies (when they are seen as legitimate because they are framed with an awareness of others' interests). A government can influence others through the example of how it behaves at home (such as by protecting a free press and the right to protest), in international institutions (consulting others and fostering multilateralism), and through its foreign policy (such as by promoting development and human rights).¹⁶

While Nye distinguishes between culture and political values, cultural theorists today would subsume political values within culture. It was reported as early as the 1950s that the term 'culture' in the English language alone had more than 200 definitions.¹⁷ Subsequently the 'cultural turn' in the social sciences, as embodied by the New Cultural History and the Cultural Studies, began taking place from the 1950s onwards, and more prominently, from the late 1970s. The scope and meaning of 'culture' expanded to transcend its narrow definition as high culture (art,

literature, ideas) to include popular culture, political culture, scientific culture, material culture, and much more. Furthermore, when Nye used the word 'culture', he too did not confine himself to high culture, but included popular culture, the entertainment industry and the like.

For the sake of theoretical acuity, in the present article, we shall follow Nye and distinguish between political values and culture, while including popular culture, entertainment, high arts, folk arts, customs, practices, ceremonies, rituals, language, literature, morals, philosophy, religion, ideas, history, tangible and intangible heritage, within the ambit of culture. If we consider the three instruments of soft power—culture, political values, and policies—we find that while a government's behaviour at home is shaped by particular contexts and exigencies, and a government's efforts at promoting developmental programmes at home can be a slow process, any country's culture is always a mainstay on which the government can easily bank upon for bolstering its soft power.

Jennifer Hubbert has highlighted the centrality of culture, and especially that of language, the most important part of the symbolic system that constitutes culture, in the context of China's soft power projection through the Confucius Institutes (hereafter referred to as CIs).¹⁸ Hubbert calls the 'official' CI culture 'patriotic state culture' that is 'more simply often referred to in CI materials and conversations as "traditional" culture—that complex and sometimes paradoxical fusion of Confucian thought, elite material culture, and popular folk art that the language programs and the CCP have advocated as representative of China's contemporary significance.'¹⁹ While China is one of the most ancient and eminent civilisations of the world, its history and present behaviour do not give it global acceptability; yet, China follows its soft power agenda rather aggressively. If the country in question has a particularly rich culture with global acceptability and worldwide reception for long periods of history and the quality of being in favour of promoting universal welfare, such a culture is indispensable for the projection and promotion of that country's soft power. India is one such country, where culture should be serving as one of the strongest pillars of the government's soft power exercise. This assertion is backed by the data from the Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index Report 2021, where despite having taken a beating in the overall rank, India fared well in metrics pertaining to Culture & Heritage, Influence, Reputation, and Familiarity.²⁰ The Report also acknowledged India's future growth potential as a soft power.

INDIA'S SOFT POWER ASSETS

Cultural attraction is thus a significant component of soft power; it can range from something as fleeting as a nice vacation spent in picturesque locales amidst native culture (tourism) to something more enduring—something that adds value to life like good health, mental wellness, and inner engineering (Yoga, Ayurveda, or Spirituality). It is a welcome development that the discourse of India's soft power has finally moved beyond Bollywood and Bharatanatyam to include more. But, as this article argues, there is room for greater expansion of the scope of cultural soft power in the case of India. Before turning to culture, let us take a cursory look at the other factors that contribute to a robust soft power. These would be democracy and a political culture that protects civic liberties; good governance; gender equality and absence of gender violence; good development indices such as on poverty alleviation, food security, access to education, and public healthcare; sustainable development; economic growth and vibrancy; participation in multilateral organisations; foreign assistance; and a role in international humanitarian and relief operations. The last three were not initially part of soft power as conceived by Nye, however, in the wake of China's ascendancy and aggressive assertion as a super power, Joshua Kurlantzick has suggested an extended definition of soft power to include 'more coercive and diplomatic levers, like aid and investment and participation in multilateral organizations'.²¹ In the post-COVID-19 world, how a country handled the pandemic, and how it helped the world get over it, are also counted as one of the indices of soft power. Thus, in contemporary times, diplomacy has acquired several new faces, ranging from debt diplomacy to vaccine diplomacy. In the Brand Finance ranking, India fared poorly in governance-related metrics; governance, public healthcare, alleviation of poverty and access to education are certainly key areas in which India needs to work not only for enhancing its soft power but also for domestic peace and growth.

Salil Shetty and Tara Sahgal argue that the major non-state driven sources of India's soft power are Yoga, Diaspora, Medicine, Education, and 'Bollywood, TV and Culture', and the major state-driven sources are Space Diplomacy, Tourism, Diplomatic Outreach, Panchsheel and Non-Alignment, and Democracy.²² Although they draw their conclusions by interviewing a minuscule sample of about 20 'experts', many would more or less agree with their broad classification. However, in their classification, 'Culture' continues to be clubbed with Entertainment, and there is a lack of in-depth engagement with India's rich cultural

indices. India's political ethos and economic potential is highlighted in every study or commentary, and culture is relegated to a broad nebulous category, which includes everything from Yoga to Bollywood. This conceptual haziness does not allow us to explore the potential of culture to a fuller degree.

Just as Nye had used the expression 'from Harvard to Hollywood' to encapsulate America's dominant cultural presence in the world, the catch-all expression 'Buddha to Bollywood'²³ has been used to cover the wide range of existing cultural resources for India's soft power. Once the reigning soft power items of India on the cultural front were Bharatanatyam and Bollywood.²⁴ Now, the dominant ones in this category are Yoga and Ayurveda. This is not to deny the importance of these in India's soft power projection. However, this article argues that now it is time to move beyond Bollywood and even Yoga and reflect deeply on the historical role India has played in the world and how truly it has impacted the course of world civilisation at all times—even when India was a subject country for nearly 200 years.

The ideational resources that India has contributed and can still contribute to the world are immense and absolutely under-represented in the discourse on India's soft power. To give a small example: how many are aware of the nuances of the Indian concept of *dana* (giving)? It is distinctly different from the Western concept of 'gifting' in that it is completely non-reciprocal, whereas the Eurocentric concept of 'gift' is necessarily reciprocal as it is meant to create social ties.²⁵ 'Dana' and 'gift' conceptually belong to two different epistemes and worldviews—they cannot be equivalent and it is important to emphasise on the non-equivalence of Indian concepts and those belonging to other cultures. 'Giving', however, no longer remains non-reciprocal when it is used as one of the components of statecraft, for example, in the *Arthashastra*. But the general philosophy of 'giving' in India is based on higher values such as non-reciprocity, generosity, giving to the one who is in need, and so on. We need to distinguish between the philanthropy practiced by the state as part of statecraft and purely out of benevolence. The Indian concept of *dana* thus has a significance in world culture that goes beyond the politics of states, debt diplomacy, humanitarian diplomacy, and so on.

Another example of India's ideational resource is its strategic culture. The recent revival of studies on Kautilya's *Arthashastra* from the point of view of strategic culture²⁶ is a welcome development, and some scholars

have been able to point out continuities with change in India's strategic culture and strategic choices from ancient till modern times.²⁷ A third example of India's ideational resource pertains to the domain of deep ecology, which is particularly relevant in the current context of climate change and the onset of the Anthropocene. Deep ecological wisdom embedded in ancient Indian spiritual traditions²⁸ is an invaluable resource for humankind today, and religions of Indian origin have continued to impact modern-day environmental movements in India and abroad.²⁹ These are already existing ideational resources which have not yet been fully tapped either for framing different policies or for leveraging India's soft power. These are not abstract ideas, but ideas directly relevant to international relations, public diplomacy and the crisis of the current world order, including climate change.

INDIA'S CULTURAL FOOTPRINTS IN THE WORLD

While the above-mentioned elements have the potential for being used in policy-making, mapping India's cultural footprints in the world through the ages helps us map the contribution that has already taken place since antiquity. What is being presented next is not an exhaustive list of cultural influence, but only a representative one. It is interesting to note that India's cultural influence reached every conceivable land in almost every age.

India's ties with the world outside dates back to its oldest civilisation. The external trade links of the Harappan civilisation extended as far as Tell Brak in Syria to Namazga-Tepe and Altyn-Tepe in Turkmenistan to Rasal-Junayz in Oman. On the basis of the archaeological finds, these linkages are dated to c. 2600–1300 BC.³⁰ Culture travels with trade, as ideas travel with objects. It may not be possible for us to delineate the exact nature of the *civilisational* impact of these linkages, however, we can only surmise that such linkages must have created some degree of cultural exchange, as it also created significant material exchange. Moreover, it is certain that India interacted with the outside world since early antiquity and objects and ideas travelled with ease across borders through both inland and maritime routes at different points of time in Indian history. Thus, intangible heritage such as philosophy, scientific thought, religious ideas, and even music travelled across ancient borders to Greece, the horn of Africa, Roman Empire, the Islamic world, Central Asia, China, Japan, South and South-East Asia, and Europe. Traders, monks and pilgrims, and seafarers were the carriers of this knowledge. There were also those

who visited India, especially the Greeks, the Chinese, the Arabs and other Muslims, Europeans and so on. Significant Indian texts have been in circulation outside India since early times.

This section provides a few well-known and less-known examples of the knowledge transfer that took place from India in the form of religion, arts, science, philosophy, language and script. There is now significant public awareness regarding the way Buddhism travelled from India to different parts of Asia, like Afghanistan, Central Asia, China, Japan, South-East Asia, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and the Himalayan states of Bhutan, Tibet and Nepal. One can only gauge the kind of haloed status India enjoyed in the eastern part of the world from the case of Japanese adulation of Indian civilisation since pre-modern times. Though there was very little actual contact between the two lands, Japan nearly identified itself with India.³¹ As Fabio Rambelli notes: 'Until the nineteenth century, the Japanese Buddhists envisioned a world system in which India was the centre, China was located at the periphery... At least until the seventeenth century, many Japanese intellectuals envisioned their country and its culture in relation not only to China, but also and especially to India or *Tenjiku*... as it was commonly known...'³² Hindu deities like Saraswati, Kuber, Lakshmi and others are equally revered in Japan.³³ There is also no need to highlight separately the 1500 years of historical Hindu presence in South-East Asia and other parts of South Asia. Guru Nanak is believed to have left his native place four times for undertaking long journeys known as *Udasis*. He travelled extensively, mostly on foot and visited many places in and outside India. Among places that are now outside India, he is said to have visited Ceylon, Nepal, Bhutan, Kailash Mansarovar, Tibet, and places in Central Asia and the Middle East.

Along with religion, travelled all forms of art, ranging from sculpture and painting to music and musical instruments. The Buddhist *stupas* around Kabul, Bamiyan and Mazar-i-Sharif and the painted grottos of Kizil and Dunhuang are reminiscent of the influence of Indian art on the art and sculpture of Central Asia. The art of Mongolia, Korea and Japan bears testimony to the influence of Buddhist and Hindu iconographic themes. Indian influence can be found on the Tibetan art tradition, on the temple styles of Pagan and sculpture of Arakan in Mynamar, besides the well-known impact of Indian sculpture and architecture on the temples of Angkor-Vat, Borobodur and other places in South-East Asia. In each of these places, iconographic themes from India predominate and

Indian styles were adapted to local traditions and contexts to produce unique world heritage in art. Musical instruments like the ancient Indian *veena* have travelled to South-East Asia and have been preserved in their original form with playing techniques in Myanmar and Cambodia, while the same instrument has evolved and transformed in India in course of time.³⁴

India's achievements in science are recorded by early Islamic writers. Sa'id ibn Ahmad Andalusi, an astronomer and historian of science, in his 11th-century-work, *Kitab Tabakat al-Umam (The Categories of Nations)*, accords the highest place to India among the contemporary nations to have developed the study of sciences. Andalusi writes that the Indians were the first nation to have cultivated the sciences, and that although they were black descendants of Ham, Allah ranked them above many white and brown peoples.³⁵ Indian texts have had a remarkable history of circulation outside the country. Brahmagupta's two astronomical treatises, *Brahma-Sphuta-siddhanta* and *Khanda-khadyaka* were translated into Arabic as early as the 8th century. The medical treatises of Charaka, Susruta and Vagbhata were also translated into Arabic.

The earliest documented translator of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* happens to be Al Beruni. When Sufism came in contact with Hatha Yoga in India, the result was not only a process of translation, but what Carl Ernst calls 'a process of Islamisation, involving scriptural Islamic themes, philosophical vocabulary, and the terminology and concepts of Sufism'.³⁶ The Sanskrit/Hindi Hatha Yoga text *Amritakunda* (Pool of Nectar), which is believed to be no longer extant, survives in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu translations in multiple recensions. It was translated into Arabic in the 9th/15th century as *Mirat al-maani*, and into Persian as *Hawzal-hayat*, which was in circulation in the Indian Sufi circles by 1500, and later again into Persian by Muhammad Gaww Gwalyari as *Bahr al-hayat* in Gujarat in the 10th/16th century. Thus, there was already a cosmopolitan audience for Yoga of all kinds way before a special day was earmarked for it by the UN. Similar was the case with Vedanta as expressed in the Upanisads. It was Dara Shikoh's 17th-century Persian translation of the Upanisads available in the Islamic world that the European scholars laid their hands on, and subsequently it was Anquetil-Duperron's Latin translation of this Persian text that found its way into the shelves of European savants like Arthur Schopenhauer.

A Sanskrit text that was very widely circulated in the pre-modern world is the *Panchatantra*. By 1600, it existed in Persian, Syriac, Arabic,

Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Spanish, Italian, German, English, Old Slavonic, Czech and many other languages and enjoyed a wide circulation from Java to Iceland.³⁷ Sanskrit Niti literature and other texts like the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Puranas*, Tantric and Shaiva texts, and works of Sanskrit grammar have been in circulation in different parts of South-East Asia. The circulation of Mahayana Buddhist texts in China and elsewhere, and Theravada Buddhist texts in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and other places are well-known. With texts, scripts travelled as well. Many Asian languages have derived their scripts from Indian scripts. For example, the script of Sri Lanka is derived from Grantha Tamil, the 5th-century Burmese script closely resembles the Salankayana script used in the Krishna valley, the Javanese inscriptions of Purnavarman bear the influence of Pallava script of 5th and 6th centuries AD, not only Indian script but also Indian grammar have helped to shape Tibetan language and literary works, and Nepal perhaps preserves more Sanskrit inscriptions in Gupta-Brahmi characters than India. C Sivaramamurti and Krishna Deva thus summarise: 'If the Gupta script found its way to Central Asia and Tibet, Vakataka, Pallava and Chalukyan and still earlier versions from the Krishna valley and the extreme end of the peninsula enriched the palaeography of Burma, Ceylon, Campa, Annam, Cambodia, Malaya, Java, Bali and Borneo.'³⁸

About India's contribution to world civilisation in modern times, it may be briefly stated here that it is not limited to Mahatma Gandhi's call for non-violence inspiring Martin Luther King; it is equally manifest in the colonised country's contribution to the advancement of scientific knowledge despite every effort by British officials to foil or suppress such achievements. Cases in point are those of Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose and Acharya Prafulla Chandra Ray. India equally participated in different forms of internationalisms, ranging from Rabindranath Tagore's promotion of pan-Asianism to Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan's idea of international intellectual cooperation as embodied in the Indian Committee of Intellectual Cooperation he was instrumental in establishing in 1935–36. India was also a founder member of the League of Nations' International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation (ICIC) that met for the first time in 1922. Indians such as Prof. D.N. Banerjee of Calcutta University, Acharya J.C. Bose and Dr Radhakrishnan were members of ICIC. Asoke K. Mukerji points out that India's efforts at international intellectual cooperation planted the seeds of the idea of future organisations like the UNESCO.³⁹

On the other hand, the Chicago Parliament of World Religions of 1893 opened the doors for Swami Vivekananda to represent the best of Indian spirituality and culture of religious tolerance to the world. With 54 branch centres abroad (known mostly as Vedanta Societies) presently, the Ramakrishna Math and Mission has contributed substantially in consolidating India's cultural ties. While the real impact of Vedanta in the West is yet to be assessed, it is America's debt to Vivekananda that Eleanor Stark acknowledges in her book *The Gift Unopened: A New American Revolution*.⁴⁰ Vedanta has impressed not only European philosophers and scientists, but also impacted spiritual movements like Transcendentalism on American soil. Indian philosophy, religion and literature continued to receive the attention of the world in the modern age. Countries such as Germany, France, and Russia have invested much in nurturing Indological knowledge.

This theme of India's cultural footprints in the world was greatly worked upon at one point of time. The 'Greater India Society' established in 1927 with the leading historians of the time like R.C. Majumdar, U.N. Ghoshal and others was driven by the spirit of nationalism and the need to respond to the challenge of British imperialism. While this scholarship used expressions such as 'Greater India' and Indian 'colony' for countries which openly received Indian influence or were ruled by Indian kings, these expressions may be avoided today for their political incorrectness in the context of current world affairs. However, all these works are rich in well-researched error-free factual details that only need to be updated in the light of newer research. Subsequent generations of scholars have also worked on the theme, but much of that work too has lapsed into oblivion. Finally, there is very little new research happening on this theme.

INDIA'S CULTURAL FOOTPRINTS AS A SOFT POWER RESOURCE: WHERE DOES IT FIGURE IN OUR SOFT POWER DISCOURSE?

In the Thirteenth Report (November 2016) of the Standing Committee on External Affairs (2016–17), presented in the Sixteenth Lok Sabha, the Foreign Secretary listed the following among India's soft power resources: culture (arts, crafts, other intangible heritage), history and heritage (yoga, meditation, holistic medicine), political values such as democracy, Information Technology (IT) power, pluralism and diversity, Indian cinema, and diaspora.⁴¹ As part of 'history and heritage', yoga, meditation and holistic medicine have been highlighted whereas these

three constitute a separate category of soft power resource which may be called 'spirituality and well-being' (or it may be divided into 'spirituality' and 'science and medicine'). What should be highlighted under the umbrella category of 'history' is the country's history itself, and its historical and civilisational ties with other lands. There is no separate mention of this last point in the Report. Curiously, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) in a written reply even mentioned the popularity of 'Bhulpuri' abroad in the context of soft power,⁴² but it failed to mention the significant fact about India's historical and civilisational ties with other countries!

In a recent book jointly published by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), the centrality of culture in India's soft power projection has been rightly highlighted, as is evident from the title of the book, *Connecting through Culture*.⁴³ Adequate space has been given to different aspects of Indian high and popular culture. India's influence on world culture has also been discussed; however, there is room for more discussion of, and emphasis on, this important soft power asset of India. Daya Thussu has written elaborately on India's rich cultural heritage as a soft power resource. While he has included a somewhat detailed discussion of India's cultural footprints in the world, if we segregate this as a separate item altogether, it will help highlight the importance of this asset. A recent release, *India's Contribution to World Thought and Culture*,⁴⁴ is a revised and abridged edition of the original volume published by the Vivekananda Kendra to commemorate the centenary of the Vivekananda Rock Memorial. This volume contains a wealth of research on India's intellectual and cultural influence on the world done by one-time stalwarts in the subject. This can be an important resource book for advancing our knowledge and understanding of the subject, while updating of this research will undoubtedly enrich our understanding even more.

While the Indian government has for long recognised the primacy of culture, it is now time for the detailing. They have taken culture seriously, but have not as yet carved out a special place for this discourse of civilisational ties. As mentioned in the preceding section, the failure to factor in this rich history of civilisational ties in India's soft power policy will be strategic myopia of the highest order. Highlighting this particular soft power resource is in consonance with India's present 'Neighbourhood First' policy, which aims at strengthening India's ties in the region. This is not to argue that this alone will suffice, but somewhat

more systematic work on this front is likely to support other initiatives in enhancing India's soft power. As D. Malone notes, 'in the post-Independence period, India failed to make the most of its cultural ties to the Asian region'.⁴⁵ The purpose of the Neighbourhood First policy is to rectify and revise the stand of regional isolation of the post-independent Indian state,⁴⁶ and, if properly framed, the theme of civilisational ties can be a major component of this policy.

INDIA'S CULTURAL FOOTPRINTS AS A SOFT POWER RESOURCE: CHALLENGES AND IMPORTANCE

Some apprehensions need to be addressed before formulation of such a policy. Some experts are wary of overbearing gestures from India that might insinuate some kind of regional hegemony or cultural superiority. In his analysis of the Neighbourhood First policy, Constantino Xavier points out that 'an Indian connectivity strategy should refrain from excessive emphasis on cultural unity'⁴⁷, and rightly so. But the solution is not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. In the discourse of India's civilisational ties, equal emphasis should be given on mutual exchange and reciprocity and respect for cultural diversity and autonomy. This discourse needs to recognise that the Buddhist art of Bamiyan, for instance, had Indian influence in its origin, but was not Indian in final identity but Central Asian. Countries that have assimilated Indian culture have also appropriated it, that is, made it their own and indigenised it. People invested great energy and resources in doing so, for instance, the sheer diligence of Chinese monks for acquiring knowledge from India, and also in preserving it with an instinct as if it were its own, like Sri Lanka being the authority of Theravada Buddhism, while this branch of Buddhism disappeared from the face of the Indian subcontinent, or Myanmar's efforts at preserving the purity of Indian musical instruments. This also helps India recover from others what the country itself lost—leaves from pages of its own history.

Secondly, it is not that it has always been a one-way traffic. On the other hand, a certain degree of re-importing has also taken place. For example, different versions of Buddhism are now coming back to India—Nichiren Buddhism from Japan, Zen Buddhism, and Vipassana from Myanmar. Thirdly, this discourse should not get reduced to one of cultural homogeneity, least of all appear as an effort at re-creating past cultural unity. One way of avoiding this is highlighting reciprocity and diversity. The sheer diversity that Buddhism, for instance, acquired in

the different countries it went to is worth remembering. This diversity is even reflected in its iconographic representation—sculptures of the same Buddha or Bodhisattva with faces with varying racial features found across Asia—the Buddha in Cambodia looking significantly different from the Buddha in China at once underscores unity and diversity. More importantly, unity and homogeneity are not one and the same thing. There can be unity, yet heterogeneity; in fact, heterogeneity is a precondition for unity.

Thus, India's role in shaping the civilisation of Asia should be highlighted, while paying attention to the above caveats. But one may still ask: What is the use in digging into this past? Can it bring any real gain? Is anyone even interested in this? How we are faring now is what is more important than what we did centuries ago, and so on. These are all valid objections to the approach proposed in this article. In response, it may be pointed out that the value of history is always heuristic, but it is a grave mistake to overlook it. Representation of the past shapes present perceptions, and the public utility of history, especially for the construction of identity, is well appreciated by both Western and other Asian powers. The revival of this historical knowledge in India is important for home as well as international fronts. There is a value in it for both India and the world.

ASYMMETRY OF POWER

The dominance of a Western paradigm is deeply embedded in our episteme, as the last century was shaped in a defining manner by the 'West'. An example of such a hegemonic discourse is that no book on the history of early modern Europe would ever acknowledge its debt to Asia for several intellectual and scientific influences. Similarly, academic compendiums continue to be written with generic universal expressions and no specific geographical markers (e.g., 'the Ancient World'), even though the contents are mainly on the Western/Northern part of the world. Despite being the oldest civilisation of the world that continues to thrive and grow, to what extent has South Asian history and archaeology been integrated into world history and archaeology? It is always put in a box as a separate category. Same is the case in other disciplines such as philosophy; and feminist studies/gender studies at best rope in the Global South.

These are larger questions pertaining to the exercise of power that everybody needs to ponder upon, quite apart from the narrow question

of one country's soft power. China is making ample use of its historical and cultural linkages, and has largely set itself to the task of erasing parts of history in the process of re-writing it. But the result is that it has grabbed the attention of the world and has of late managed to occupy a significant position in the field of world archaeology, while India is yet to put the record straight on the world arena. If one surveys the call for applications for fellowships and faculty positions in universities worldwide, one would see a preponderance of Chinese Studies and the next most popular subject-candidate is Islam. A power asymmetry exists in the global discourse, and it needs to be challenged by projecting a factually rich history of India's contribution to world civilisation with due mutual respect and a nuanced understanding of 'influence'.

THE INDIA WAY

Scholars have recently highlighted that soft power is going global or getting de-Americanised.⁴⁸ One is tempted to add that there is a need to deliberately de-Americanise soft power—a process which can be viewed as part of the soft power exercise itself of any country other than America (a point that has perhaps been grasped well by China). The first step is to recognise that the concept is not American in its origin. It was merely articulated in a systematic way with a nomenclature by an American scholar keeping in mind the American context. Secondly, the situation of every country is unique—this is of course a platitude; however, it is not always adequately reflected in policies of governments. Soft power need not always be the American way. Perhaps a few years down the line, we need to be reminded that soft power need not always be the Chinese way either. In fact, soft power projection the Chinese way is always suspected and therefore not acceptable to other powerful countries.

It is also about the historical role and destiny of a country in the world. Each country has an identity—if we may say, a 'personality'. Soft power projection in India needs to highlight India's historical role and place in the world. Robert Kaplan contrasts India's value system with that of America which says 'adopt our belief system as your own and you shall be as happy as we are', and that of China which harbours no doubt about their own centrality. Kaplan writes that 'India, too [like China], encompasses a great world civilization. By pushing out its own sphere of influence it can serve as a balancer, helping to manage China's rise. There is intrinsic value in this for the peace of Eurasia and the world. The degree to which Indians can engage in an internal discussion about

what their civilizational values are—and how they can help improve the world—will actually advance India's power and influence.³⁴⁹

THE WAY FORWARD: SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

Two kinds of recommendations are being put forward in this section. Some address the discursive issues, while others are practical. The very first step is to recognise that India's cultural footprints in the world need to be a significant component of the soft power policy of the Indian government. It is present, but still in a muted form. It needs to be segregated and highlighted, and made more research-based and specific on a case-to-case basis. Soft power policies in general need to be framed taking into consideration the historical and current standing of the country in question. This is one end of the spectrum. Specificities of the other end—the end that will receive—is also to be taken into account. For instance, what would attract the US to Indian culture may not and will not be the same as what would attract France or Germany or Iran or Russia or Sri Lanka or Cambodia to India. Not only that, India's relations are different with these countries, India's historical ties with each of them have been different, and the nature of the society prevalent in each country and the history of each country are also different. Hence, soft power policies need to be as specific as possible. Furthermore, soft power projection that makes use of India's historical ties and cultural footprints as a resource also needs to be as precise and target-oriented as possible and backed up by in-depth research on India's historical linkages with the concerned country. Detailed engagement on a case-to-case basis needs to be worked out, where three things need to be taken into account in conjunction: (1) the unique history and culture (in the broadest sense—including social and political dimensions) of the country in question; (2) India's historical ties with that country; and (3) India's current geopolitical and diplomatic equation with that country.

The second intellectual hurdle in the way of India is the burden of colonialism. This burden has not only thrust upon us a particular narrative about ourselves and a particular framework for understanding our past, it has also robbed us of our ability to access our own past and verify things for ourselves. The latter is reflected in the lack of widespread knowledge of the language and script of the primary sources of our past, especially Sanskrit. Volumes of manuscripts exist in various Indian and foreign libraries which have not been translated or studied due to lack of

interest and funding. To arrive at its own discourse, its own narrative, India needs to invest in knowledge about itself.

From here, we can draw up the first practical recommendation, the steps to be taken for consolidation of knowledge on the subject: (1) The government and concerned private institutions need to fund and encourage research on India's historical ties with other countries. Project Mausam⁵⁰ was one such commendable collaborative research project of recent times, but there needs to be more such adequately funded and publicised research projects, collaborative or individual. For instance, much archaeological research remains to be done in West and Central Asia that can unearth important finds. Support to research initiatives also involves (2) facilitating access of researchers to areas where access is restricted, just as it involves (3) promotion of languages in which our primary historical sources exist. Neither is translation available for many of these texts, nor is it always a case of translation that is sensitive to cultural nuances. (4) Translation of such sources should also be funded in order to widen the horizon of knowledge. (5) Whatever knowledge already exists about the subject needs to be collated at one place, and updated further in the light of new research findings.

The next step concerns dissemination of knowledge. (1) The present school, college and university curricula and courses do not reflect this knowledge of India's rich historical engagement with the world. Existing and new knowledge in the field need to be integrated within mainstream curriculum of history at all levels. Institutions like the present-day Nalanda University (NU) are exceptions that offer specialised courses on India's cultural linkages in Asia (NU does it on a priority basis on account of its unique identity, and some other universities or institutes do it because of their chosen area of research focus); but we need to make this practice more commonplace rather than exceptional. (2) Since soft power exercises concern people-to-people contact in a significant way, the subject needs to be brought out of academic niche areas and popularised in the form of exhibitions. The exhibition *India and the World* organised by the National Museum in 2018, on the occasion of 70 years of Indian independence was a memorable example, but such initiatives are few and far between. (3) Both America and China have successfully leveraged their soft power by using their information and broadcasting agencies. Indian information and broadcasting outfits abroad should produce and broadcast serious and well-researched historical documentaries on India.

Third, we come to institutions created specifically for the projection of soft power. We have the ICCR which is entrusted with the responsibility

of running Indian cultural centres abroad, appointing chairs of Indian studies in foreign universities, appointing teachers of yoga, Indian languages and so on abroad, conducting cultural exchange programmes, and organising cultural festivals in foreign countries. It is being argued here that a single-point institution is not adequate for the drafting and implementation of a policy on soft power.

Instead the government should appoint a high-level committee exclusively dealing with India's soft power policy. While there is already a Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs that oversees India's soft power policy and the workings of the ICCR, it may not be a bad idea to create a sub-committee under it, dealing exclusively with India's soft power. That committee could draft the soft power policy of the country and also help in the implementation of its recommendations. Creation of such a Soft Power Council or Committee may help in giving the issue of soft power, which is now quite unwieldy, its due attention.

Next, if we think about educational institutes established abroad as part of soft power project, the Chinese CIs have caught the attention of the world, but for all the wrong reasons. They are looked upon with suspicion and the governments of some countries have come down heavily upon them; hence, that cannot be a model for India to follow. The German Goethe-Instituts and the French Alliance Françaises have for long served the purpose of creating awareness about respective national cultures through instruction in respective languages, and of also creating a market for these languages. Iran's decision to open branches of the Islamic Azad University in Syria and Iraq has been hailed as part of their soft power projection strategy. India too has to think on similar lines—either establish new institutions (universities or language institutes) or expand the scope of existing ICCR cultural centres whose activities are at present limited to organisation of various events.

Furthermore, ICCR empanels and appoints academics and experts for Indian Studies Chairs in foreign universities, and also appoints teachers of Indian languages, arts, yoga, and so on. The criteria used for the empanelment and selection of ICCR Chairs abroad cannot be only academic merit, as these chairs were instituted not for a purely academic purpose, but with the aim of promoting greater awareness about Indian culture abroad. Therefore, chair-holders should ideally be selected keeping in mind that their subject expertise matches with India's soft power directives. The list of academics sent abroad, their research specialisations, and the courses they offer in foreign universities, are not available in the public domain. The ICCR Annual Reports only

mention the discipline-wise Chairs that are operational. Due to non-availability of this data, it is difficult to assess the selection criteria used for appointment of these Chairs, and whether the purpose for which they are being sent is served. Thus, quite apart from this existing provision, can the Government of India not send to each country one expert, who specialises in India's ties with that particular country, for giving public lectures, offering courses and also orienting diplomats in the Indian missions in these countries?

There is a disconnect between the world of academic scholarship and that of policy-makers. Policy-makers need to work more closely with credible historians who can provide at least a factual history of India's civilisational linkages. This knowledge is to be incorporated in a more prominent and comprehensive way in the training of Indian Foreign Service (IFS) officers, so that they can attain a certain degree of familiarity with the historical literature on the subject, while also being aware of the blind-spots of older scholarship. The purpose is not to repeat *ad nauseum* this history before the people of the concerned country, but to be able to reflect deeply on the issue of India's historical engagement with that country and adopt an informed attitude based on that.

CONCLUSION

A few remarks may be made in conclusion. Firstly, there are various levels of pitching the soft power discourse—one for the common man, another for the intellectual/academic person, and yet another for government officials. India's cultural footprints abroad may appear too specialised a subject, but it can be simplified to address particular target audience. Courses, lectures and any other content should be tailor-made (for academics, diplomats and ordinary people respectively) and attractive. Secondly, integrating this historical knowledge in India's policy of cultural diplomacy requires a multi-sectoral approach, highlighting convergence and synergy of different government departments, and bearing upon both domestic and foreign policies. For instance, in 2016, the ICCR's complaint of not receiving Annual Action Plans from all the Indian Missions abroad was taken seriously.⁵¹ This exercise should also ideally involve both state and non-state actors, and the Indian state has rightly recognised the potential of the Indian diaspora in this respect.

In India, History happens to be a niche subject; instead, it needs to occupy more of the public sphere, and the approach should be one that weds uncompromising scholarship with attractive and accessible presentation of facts, especially through visual culture. Gaps need to be filled up—

in both specialised research and public knowledge. Finally, India must put forward the narrative of its forgotten and even suppressed history in order to counter a worldview that is still predominantly Eurocentric, to challenge aggressive regional hegemony (without presenting itself as one) with global ambitions, and to overcome the politics of self-negation at home. On the one hand, knowledge is power, and on the other, there is a value in truth that is beyond mere utility. Diplomacy is the art of saying it subtly. In order to be effective, soft power projection as part of public diplomacy should have a well-outlined robust internal policy and an equally subtle outer expression. Every country likes to create a discursive space as a location for its identity to itself and to the world, and this discourse underpins its importance to the world, its *raison d'être*. America and China have never shied away from articulating their discourse—Nye's concept of 'soft power' itself has its origin in an unabashed discourse of the US as the leading world power. However, America and China do it in their own distinctive voices. India too needs to arrive at that register where it can pitch the case for its contribution to world civilisation through history, gracefully yet confidently.

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