Soft Power in Indian Foreign Policy

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This essay addresses first how the concept of soft power emerged, how it has evolved and then examines one significant effort by India to project soft power to the east. It thereafter looks at some major features of Indian foreign policy, discusses how soft power might or might not relate to them, and zeroes in on how Indians, including the Indian government, may distinguish between “public diplomacy” and soft power in their conceptions of Indian foreign policy.

The year 2011 has been declared “the year of India in Canada”, offered by New Delhi as an opportunity for Canadians to experience the civilisational pull of that great nation through shows by top Indian classical and contemporary artists, even rock bands. Trade shows, literary festivals and cultural performances (often overlapping) have been rolling out from coast to coast – across four and a half time zones! One high point in June: the Indian International Film Awards extravaganza that touched down on Toronto in June this year and created a minor frenzy in the city. All of this came on the heels of the announcement late last year of the start of negotiations for a Canada-India economic cooperation agreement.

The million or so Canadians of Indian extraction – a number that is five times greater proportionately than that in the United States (US) – are undoubtedly pleased by all the attention. But for others, the question arises as to why India is courting Canada culturally, when Canada pursues its (mostly commercial) aims in India without much attempt to woo wider Indian public opinion through the arts or otherwise.

This essay addresses, first, how the concept of soft power emerged, how it has evolved, then examines one significant effort by India to project soft power to the east. It thereafter looks at some major features of Indian foreign policy, discusses how soft power might or might not relate to them, and zeroes in on how Indians, including the Indian government, may distinguish between “public diplomacy” and soft power in their conceptions of Indian foreign policy.

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What Is ‘Soft Power’?
The concept was first formulated by American scholar and frequent policy-maker, Joseph S Nye Jr, who defined it in 1990 as “when one country gets other countries to do what it wants” and as “co-optive power” (Nye 1990: 166). He noted:

Today...the definition of power is losing its emphasis on military force...The factors of technology, education and economic growth are becoming more significant in international power (ibid: 154).

Later, he described the determinants of soft power as growing out of “a country’s culture; …out of our values – democracy and human rights, when we live up to them” (Nye 2004). In 2006, he elaborated further:

Power is the ability to alter the behaviour of others to get what you want, and there are basically three ways to do that: coercion (sticks), payment (carrots) and attraction (soft power) (Nye 2006).

He also mentioned the key role of civil society in generating us soft power “from Hollywood to Harvard”.

Discussion of the “soft power” ingredients in India’s international relations took off parallel to Nye’s evolving views. C Raja Mohan argued as early as 2003 that “India could always count itself among the few nations with strong cards in the arena of soft power”, asserting that India’s biggest “instrument” of soft power was its diaspora. India’s diaspora is certainly an asset, but far from the only one. Beyond its cultural and civilisational riches, its vibrant (if at times chaotic) democracy, its free media, its mostly independent judiciary, its dynamic civil society, and the impressive struggle for human rights since independence all make it attractive to publics in much of the world where these characteristics of its national experience are known.

In addition, India’s largely non-violent defeat of colonialism served as an important beacon for freedom movements and newly independent countries elsewhere in the 1950s and 1960s.

Shashi Tharoor, briefly minister of state for external affairs, 2009-10, spoke and...
wrote about soft power often, noting, “Hard power without soft power stirs up resentments and enmities; soft power without hard power is a confession of weakness” (Tharoor 2009). This description might apply as readily to the US as to India, both countries seeking to attain and to project internationally pluralist diversity and tolerant secularism. And in a world awash in conflict stemming from failure to generate comity within nations, India’s success in weaving together so many ethnic, religious, caste and other strands within its society is a singularly strong advertisement for its exciting national experiment, however frustrating the fight against poverty in India has often proved.

The abject failure of Indira Gandhi’s period of emergency rule, 1975-77, decisively repudiated by the electorate, generated a growing sense internationally of the enduring nature of India’s democracy. Thus, an interpretation of India as the permanent anchor of its subcontinent and wider region, albeit still one afflicted with much poverty, social challenge and internal violence, is now widely credited globally, reinforcing the internationally compelling narrative of its accelerating economic growth as of the early 1990s. Democracy has thus become a key, positive element of India’s international identity.

S D Muni, in a useful recent survey of the democracy dimension in Indian foreign policy, examines why the promotion of democracy has not evolved as a central theme of India’s international relations, possibly because of its earlier orientations: “Some analysts have attributed this to India’s policy of non-alignment which drew its rationale from anti-colonialism and anti- imperialism”, in connection with which “democracy promotion might have breached the solidarity of the anti-colonial and anti-racial movement led by India under the umbrella of non-alignment” (Muni 2009: 8). More recently, however, India has joined in a number of multilateral democracy promotion forums, including the Community of Democracies of which it became a founding member in 2000. Muni quotes Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee in 2001 as stating: “The shape of our new world order will be determined by the success of pluralistic democratic societies in destroying the ideology of bigotry and hatred which drives terrorism” (ibid: 10). Nevertheless, in contrast to the US at times, India’s official view has not wavered that democracy cannot be “imposed from outside” (ibid: 13).

In sum, there is a growing consensus that the power of attraction exerted by cultural affinities and shared values can greatly contribute to international credibility. India’s soft power potential lies, among other things, in its democratic credentials, secular values, pluralistic society, considerable pool of skilled English-speaking professionals, varied culture (particularly Bollywood movies), and its food and handicrafts. India, over millennia, has offered refuge and, more importantly, religious and cultural freedom, to Jews, Parsis, several varieties of Christians, and Muslims, a factor that should be better known internationally than it has been to date (Tharoor 2009).

As argued by Sunil Khilnani, India’s greatest asset remains its “accumulated political legitimacy” rather than any hypothetical or real accumulation of power.2 And political legitimacy lies at the core of “soft power” for any state.

South-east and Wider Asia

In 2010, Uma Purushothamam noted the saliency of Indian “soft power” in south-east Asian countries, describing them as “civilisational neighbours” (while also noting that, helpfully, unlike several contiguous neighbours, none of the south-east Asian countries entertain border disputes with India).

In the post-Independence period, India failed to make the most of its cultural ties to the Asian region. Indeed, its cultural diplomacy then was perceived as somewhat gauche in Asia, insofar as it seemed to suggest that some south-east Asian countries were India’s “cultural colonies”. Moreover, Indian foreign policy initiatives arguing for Asian solidarity failed to gain traction because east and south-east Asian nations had no desire to subordinate their national identities to high-minded notions of Asian regional unity; nor did they agree with the claim that India was the “mother of all civilisations” in Asia (ibid). And India was then seen primarily as economically lagging (in contrast to the early success of the “Asian Tigers”), and not yet much of a geostrategic player.

Recognising the need to shed earlier notions of cultural superiority, India has since the early 1990s engaged more pragmatically with Asians on cultural and other issues, relying as much on contemporary art forms as those relating to its heritage: India’s film stars like Amitabh Bachchan, Aishwarya Rai or Shah Rukh Khan have become icons of India’s cultural image. If, today their ‘presence’ in millions of homes across south-east Asia is a source of joy and fellow feeling, then their contribution to enhancing the comfort level between India and south-east Asia cannot be insignificant (Deware 2006: 171).

Cricket has also fostered strong relations between India and some other Asian nations beyond its immediate neighbourhood. The new Indian 20/20 League, in which New Zealand and Australian players participate, has attracted wide interest in those countries and in some other Asian nations. The October 2010 Commonwealth Games in Delhi – in spite of gross organisational shortcomings – proved a meaningful selling point with the many Asian and Pacific Commonwealth countries.3

All of these factors generate “pull” for India, in ways that have little to do with economic growth or military might.

India’s youth is a crucial asset in Asia. “It is the power and energy of our human capital, young and old, that has been central to the Indian transformation” (Nilekani 2009: 26-27). Thus, unsurprisingly, in Singapore, the finance and information technology (IT) sectors welcome young Indians with open arms and many companies, banks and financial institutions have started visiting top Indian campuses for recruitment purposes (Duttagupta 2008). Indeed, India has emerged as an important source of skilled workers in much of Asia (Kaur 2009: 84).

In south-east Asia, efforts are afoot to promote

networking of universities [by] the linking of Indian higher education institutions with the ASEAN University Network, cooperating on accreditation, joint research, exchange of professors and students in information technology, biotechnology, biomedics, and the social sciences, including economics (Deware 2006: 172).

Moreover, India provides numerous scholarships for Asian students in India, particularly through the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR). The Indian
government also helps in the establishment of chairs related to India and its languages in universities of south-east Asia.4

The Indian diaspora is a crucial actor in India’s influence in Asia. South-east Asia alone accounts for an estimated 6.7 million people of Indian origin (Sridharan 1996). The significant economic resource represented by diaspora and migrant labour remittances back to India has guided much of Delhi’s efforts to engage this large community. Between 2007 and 2008, these remittances increased nearly 45%, and they proved robust even during the 2008-09 global economic crisis (Government of India 2009: 5-6). But while such remittances are much welcomed by India, the treatment of Indian citizens (and, in the case of Malaysia, citizens of Indian origin) by host countries can give rise to criticism within India, often with considerable justification.

But diasporas can also generate international tensions. The power struggle between ethnic Indians and indigenous islanders in Fiji over past decades has soured diplomatic relations between the two countries, not least when the ethnic Indian community was adversely affected by the coups of 1987 and 1999 in Suva.

In response, the Indian government exerted what diplomatic pressure it could through bilateral and multilateral channels but with limited effect, culminating in the closure of the Indian High Commission in Suva (Sridharan 2008: 83). In fact, India has scant capacity to guarantee basic labour rights and promote the interests of its diaspora communities: “given its myriad domestic challenges...it is unrealistic to expect that it [India] can influence events in other countries on behalf of its people” (Government of India 2009).

The flow of tourists between Asia and India has increased both in absolute numbers and in relative terms in recent years, although not yet dramatically (Acharya 2008: 15). Tourism, particularly religious tourism, is a potentially greater asset in India’s relations with Asian nations. Buddhist tourism, already a major draw, has significant potential to generate further arrivals from Asian markets (Koldowski and Martin 2008: 128). The launch of a new Buddhist circuit special luxury train in 2007, and Japanese-supported development of tourist infrastructure along the circuit mark its growing significance (ibid: 128-29).

India could attract many more tourists from Asia, but this will require a better understanding of the value-for-money available in other Asian tourist destinations, and the minimum requirements of comfort and facilities that Asian tourists, including from China, have come to expect during their travels abroad. India’s often over-priced, subpar hotels, combined with at times chaotic local conditions for tourists, and unsympathetic state bureaucracies in charge of many tourist sites, are hardly the Asian ideal for family holidays, even when the archaeological and other attractions themselves are stupendous. If these concerns remain unaddressed, the “Incredible India!” conveyed in the excellent Indian tourism promotional campaign is destined to remain in reality the “incredibly inconvenient and expensive” India for many Asians.

Thus, after a weak start in implementing its “Look East Policy” in the 1990s, India’s relationships in the area have intensified greatly during the past decade, in spheres ranging from trade and investment to defence and anti-terrorism cooperation. India’s determined efforts to promote its historical, cultural and educational assets have been an important part of the mix, but a strategy relying exclusively or principally on civilizational and cultural links would have fared poorly (as the early Look East Policy did) (Mohan 2007).

Foreign Policy and Soft Power

As a gross generalisation, three factors shape the foreign policy of most countries: history, geography and capability. And each of these has decisively influenced Indian foreign policy, in different ways at different times. India’s power of attraction, the foundation of any country’s “soft power”, derives from each.

It is India’s newly recognised global economic significance and potential that lends weight to the country’s international profile. Its foreign policy, regional concerns and geostategic views have remained largely unknown to the rest of the world, particularly to a heedless west, which had become comfortable with its interpretation of India as a none-too-straightforward international performer frequently disrupting cosy multilateral gatherings with its high-minded and literate (if sometimes disingenuous) interventions. But today, its international actions and positions matter more and are perceived differently.

Any country’s preoccupations nearly inevitably involve immediate neighbours. It is by them that we are influenced, and them, above all others, we might influence. And views on the neighbourhood within India vary considerably. In 2006, while making the rounds of official Delhi, a senior member of the security and foreign policy establishment introduced me (confidentially) to two different views of India’s neighbourhood: “I think our neighbours are mostly thugs and crooks. However, the prime minister believes that if our neighbours mostly are so, we Indians must have something to do with that.”

In recent years, in seeking to improve often very frayed ties with contiguous neighbours, India has been experimenting more often with asymmetric diplomacy, offering more than it would have in the past in an effort to lay to rest its reputation as a regional bully.5 (This reputation was often undeserved, of course. India was often indifferent to most of its neighbours for long stretches of time.) From Nehru onwards, civilizational and other historic links were much emphasised in India’s declaratory neighbourhood diplomacy, but it is perhaps only recently that India’s “pull” has become a strong one, with its economic progress, unmatched to date in most of the neighbouring countries, eliciting mixed emotions. I was told repeatedly in Pakistan in early 2010 that what Pakistanis find hard to endure with respect to India nowadays is a sense of drawing away from them and the fractious family quarrels that constantly beset bilateral ties between New Delhi and Islamabad. Pakistanis lucidly observe New Delhi increasingly reaching beyond neighbours to secure its place at the global table of influence (from which Pakistan is often absent, for example in the G-20 forum).

China is not a neighbour like the others. Including Tibet, its territory is three times greater than that of India and its national economic output also three times that of India. Finally, and most tellingly, its per capita gross domestic product (GDP) is three times larger. Thus, China, to which Buddhism and many other Indian influences flowed in past
millennia, experiences India quite differently than do its smaller neighbours.

**Only Rival for Beijing**

In the overall scheme of things for Beijing, New Delhi is its only serious rival for influence in Asia in decades to come, Japan’s advanced if stagnant economy notwithstanding. The 1962 border war between the two countries was much easier to overcome in China, which won, than in India, which lost. And, while the quest of both countries for natural resources and food security beyond their borders might cause them to rub up against each other, neither is seeking to destabilise the other, China’s growing presence in south Asia being motivated above all by the search for markets and access to the sea for economic purposes.

The slogan *Hindi Chini, Bhai Bhai!* was always more aspirational than convincing, not least because the values espoused by the two governments, as reflected through their political systems, could not have been much more different. And thus, while cultural and other forms of outreach by India to China (and vice versa) can help inflect a frequently tense relationship, soft power instruments are not likely to prove particularly effective as compared to fairly narrow calculations of economic and geostrategic self-interest and mutual accommodation. Growing economic interdependency is more likely to stabilise the relationship than might factors relating to soft power. Seen through a wider lens, Pocha (2003) points out that both China and India have been projecting soft power globally, but in very different ways – China’s principal calling card has been its economic success, while India has relied on a mix of constitutional, political, economic, and cultural assets.

India’s emergence as a major actor on the global stage, offering a development model that for some years now has been strikingly successful in terms of growth (while falling depressing in terms of distribution) has allowed it to establish a meaningful partnership with two other leading democracies in the developing world, each a dominant actor on its own continent. Under the banner of the new rasa group, India, Brazil and South Africa are working hard to build content into the concept, at last giving practical expression to the idea of South-South cooperation, too long an empty vessel. The emphasis on democratic kinship within this formation, which might be taken as a dig at China, should perhaps also be seen as an effort by India, a more explicit one than usual, to develop a “soft power” component to its diplomacy.

In temperment, notably through their individualism, optimism and innate entrepreneurship, Indians resemble Americans more than any other nationality I know. Their governments ultimately overcame their mutual allergy, rooted in cold war dynamics and India’s quest for strategic autonomy at its time of greatest fragility after Independence, through the success of Indian migration to the US and through the logic of mutually beneficial commercial ties. This was also achieved because the us, newly sobered by the costs and failures of several post-9/11 ventures, recognised that its values were strongly reflected in those of Indians and of their government. (The proxy for their rapprochement was the US-India nuclear agreement of 2008.) The result has been positive for both countries, particularly at a time when the us recognises the reality of a multipolar geo-strategic dispensation. In this relationship, shared values of, above all, democracy have played an important role, at least rhetorically. It is clear that beyond diplomatic pronouncements, and with the us accepting to a much greater degree the equality of the two states than in the past, the values and interests that the two parties bring to a negotiating table today are more consonant than at any time since India’s Independence.

In all of these critical relationships, attributes of “soft power” can play varying roles but, as Nye himself has stressed in espousing, as of 2004, the concept of “smart power” (involving elements of both soft and hard power), soft power alone cannot achieve much in an often-contentious world. And no amount of cultural promotion can undo the damage internationally caused by spectacular corruption scandals such as the alleged 2g spectrum scam currently under investigation (Malone 2011).

**Conflicting Impulses**

In deciding how to project its values internationally, India has, to date, exhibited a rather clear path. On democracy, it advertises its own credentials when relating to other democratic countries, and joins in multilateral activity centred on democracy, for example, as an early contributor of $10 million to the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF). In addition, India has supported a role for the Commonwealth (under the “Harare Declaration” of 1991) in restoring or improving democracy in countries experiencing internal challenges – for example, Cameroon and Fiji. But, unlike western democracies, it avoids promoting democracy publicly vis-à-vis patently undemocratic regimes, for example, Myanmar. Under attack from much of Indian civil society and some of the media on its acquiescence in Myanmar’s dictatorship, it did recently re-establish personal contact with Myanmar opposition leader and Nobel Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, whose family had strong connections with India and who won the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding in 1995. Overall, criticism of the political systems of partner countries does not come readily to Indian diplomacy, in stark contrast to the more strident (and at times selective) approach of western countries.

Likewise, India has subscribed to major international human rights treaties (although not to those optional protocols that would allow its citizens to appeal at the international level when domestic avenues for redress prove fruitless). And India, much to its credit, volunteered to be amongst the first to undergo a peer review at the UN’s new Human Rights Council in Geneva in April 2008, under a process known as Universal Periodic Review. As with any country, India’s performance under the terms of various UN treaties and covenants raises questions, but, by and large, both official expert bodies consulted and national delegations have praised India’s struggle to enshrine and respect a number of key human rights, while raising questions about a number of specific issues, including caste discrimination and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). In addition, restrictions on foreign funding to Indian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were mentioned as inhibiting research into and activism on certain politically sensitive problems within India, including application of the
AFSPA. A close reading of the proceedings of this periodic review suggests that Indian delegates were only too happy to lap up praise for the many positive features of India's struggle for human rights but less inclined to answer, with any degree of specificity, some of the sharper questions that arose, as pointed out by some Indian civil society groups (Forum-Asia 2008).

In sum, India has integrated both democracy promotion and human rights performance into its foreign policy, but carefully chooses form, forum and messages on these topics, seeking to insulate bilateral relationships from them as much as possible.

Conclusions: Public Diplomacy or Soft Power?
The discussion here suggests that Indian approaches to developing and projecting its soft power have focused mostly on the power of attraction exercised by its cultural riches and heritage, as well as carefully considered promotion of human rights and democratic development at the multilateral level, while eschewing the introduction of the promotion of Indian values into bilateral relationships with countries possessing different political systems. And while civil society and the media at times criticise this latter characteristic of Indian foreign policy, notably with respect to Myanmar, in the political circles of New Delhi it seems widely accepted.

India could make more of its soft power attributes, as argued by Shashi Tharoor and others, but it would do so at a cost in some sensitive and important bilateral relationships (for example, Iran and Myanmar). It is not clear that a country only recently successful in hoisting itself to the high table of global influence has had much of an interest in doing so. But India can and should open itself more readily to outside scrutiny by researchers and others. Indeed, it has every interest in doing so.

Were India’s achievements and remaining problems better understood internationally, including, for example, the real if incomplete progress made in combating caste discrimination, the country’s image would be even more positive than it already is. Further, as India’s civil society and media already lay bare all of the deficits of Indian governance and society, what possible benefit is there to be derived from excessive defensiveness abroad? It is the inclusiveness of India’s politics and the dynamism, pluralism and frankness of its public that largely make India so attractive at the international level.

As India grows more self-confident internationally, this defensiveness of the government (particularly the government bureaucracy) may fade with the realisation that, whether official India likes it or not, information on India, warts and all, is fully accessible today by the rest of the world. And the world, accessing India in full, tends to admire what it sees more than it depletes the country’s shortcomings. In this sense, a more inclusive and wide-ranging public diplomacy would doubtless serve India even better than does its current approach.

NOTES
1. See www2.ihi.aau.dk/political-economy/NYE.doc. Nye eventually coined the term “smart power”, combining elements of attraction, incentives and the possibility of coercive measures, in the run-up to the 2008 US presidential election, which received a degree of media play in US media and Democratic Party circles, but which has, so far, failed to take root.
2. Correspondence with the author, 6 April 2010.
3. For an excellent analysis see Rahman (2010).
4. See “Chairs” and “Scholarships” on the ICCR website (www.iccrindia.org/chairs.htm). Outside south-east Asia, growing cooperation on education is taking place through exchanges and recruitment of Indian students in South Korea, New Zealand, Singapore, and, particularly, Australia.
5. India has achieved lasting positive links with only two of its neighbours: Bhutan and the Maldives, hardly the most significant of the lot.
7. The Commonwealth’s current secretary-general is Kamlesh Sharma of India, who earlier served as special representative of the UN Secretary-General in east Timor during crucial years of that young country’s state-building efforts. For information on the Commonwealth Secretariat, see: http://www.thecommonwealth.org/.
9. See UN Document A/HRC/8/26 of 23 May 2008. Discussion of caste discrimination in India is often raised under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, which suggests a profound mischaracterisation of the phenomenon, and makes it easy for the Indian government to bat away related questions and criticism. The appreciation of 37 human rights-related NGOs and independent research bodies was less complimentary than that of governments and UN bodies. See UN document A/HRC/45/WG.6/1/IND/3 of 6 March 2008.

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