

Associate Paper

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India Must do More to Fully Leverage its Soft Power Potential

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Key Points

- India is richly endowed with a wide range of soft power resources, but it lacks an appropriate institutional “ecosystem” to harness its soft power and further its interests in the international sphere.
- Multicultural India’s soft power resources are mostly autonomous of the government and critically depend on the health of its inclusive democracy.
- The present ruling party’s indiscriminate pursuit of political consolidation is affecting social harmony within the country and, by implication, the foundations of India’s soft power.
- The government can leverage soft power resources to support its foreign policy interests, if it unobtrusively provides infrastructural support for soft projects and refrains from interfering in the cultural and social lives of people.

Summary

India is richly endowed with a wide range of soft power resources that can help it to engage countries as far apart as Iran and Israel. Much of India’s soft power, and the ability to deploy it, is autonomous of the government, which limits the extent to which soft power can be actively harnessed. Moreover, India lacks an appropriate institutional “ecosystem” to harness soft power and further its interests in the international sphere. The present government’s capacity to deploy soft power is further constrained by the ruling party’s indiscriminate pursuit of political consolidation that is affecting domestic social harmony and, by implication, the foundations of the country’s soft power. India’s soft power

resources can be nurtured and better used to advance its foreign policy interests, if the government unobtrusively provides infrastructural support for soft projects and refrains from interfering in the cultural and social lives of its citizens.

Analysis

The Narendra Modi Government, the first majority government since 1984, was expected to recast India's foreign policy. It has, however, mostly followed the previous government's policies. That is not surprising because, in large and stable democracies, major policies are mainly governed by deeper socio-economic factors and are not driven by the whims and fancies of the ruling party, let alone any individual. There does seem to be some change in style, though. Greater mobility of the Prime Minister, the marginalisation of the External Affairs minister,¹ the Prime Minister's personality-centric approach to foreign policy, attacks on opposition parties and previous governments from foreign shores, the growing use of foreign policy "achievements" in domestic politics, the use of Indian languages in international interactions, a willingness to air differences with other countries in public, a greater reliance on social media, and a greater stress on soft power stand out. The last is part of a longer trend in India's foreign policy and bears close scrutiny.

Traditional Sources of Soft Power

Assessments of India's soft power stress historical, spiritual, ethno-linguistic and cultural ties with other countries. The recent spats between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and India and Nepal, reveal the fragility of such bonds in international affairs, though. These pairs of countries share as close traditional ties as possible. On the other hand, the close relationship of [Buddhist](#) Sri Lanka and [Islamic](#) Pakistan with [atheist](#) China shows that material and strategic considerations can outweigh socio-cultural differences.

The huge and persistent [disparity](#) in material power between India and the rest of the countries in the Indian Subcontinent engenders a sense of insecurity in the region despite the shared heritage. Soft initiatives such as the introduction of [Varanasi-Colombo flights](#) to ease the difficulty of Sri Lankan Buddhist pilgrims, Modi's visit to Sri Lanka on the [International Vesak Day](#) commemorating the Buddha's enlightenment, and the participation of Sri Lankan President in [Simhastha](#) celebrations in India, cannot diminish that insecurity, which pushes countries in India's neighbourhood to embrace outside powers irrespective of socio-cultural differences and also makes India-bashing attractive in the domestic politics of most of those countries. Outside powers that can provide "unconditional" defence assistance are particularly welcome in India's neighbourhood. No wonder China is already a key, if not the largest, trading partner, source of FDI, and supplier of arms and ammunition to all but one of India's neighbours.

India's neighbours backed its call to boycott the 2016 Islamabad Summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) that was as good as dead after India pulled

¹ Most other ministers are also marginalised, but do not seem to be cordoned off from their responsibilities to the extent that the External Affairs Minister is.

out. Later, they readily participated in the Belt and Road Forum for International Co-operation. So, as usual, the neighbours sided with India on a trivial issue, but deserted it on a substantive issue even though everyone, including, of course, Sri Lanka, was aware of [Hambantota](#); governments grappling with immediate economic challenges seem to ignore long-term consequences. It is not a mere coincidence that China has put Bhutan, the sole exception, under enormous pressure ahead of elections in that country. India's [neglect](#) of its relationship with Bhutan has only made China's task easier.

India's non-violent anti-colonial struggle, participation in the Non-Aligned Movement and championing the cause of the developing countries, which allowed for a sense of a shared cultural unity with other decolonising countries, have been other traditional sources of soft power. India's understanding of its anti-colonial credentials seems, however, to be outdated. As the memories of colonialism recede, the West's global dominance reduces and India's investments in developing countries grow, India will increasingly be judged by its present conduct (and in comparison to China), more than its past credentials.²

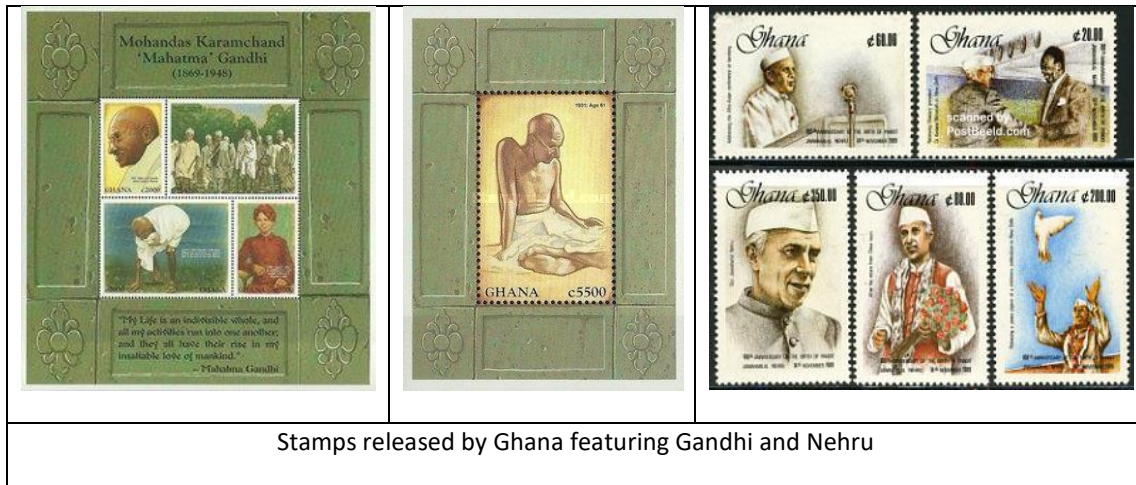
	
<p>PM Modi paying homage to Mahatma Gandhi's statue in Brisbane, 17 November 2014</p>	<p>President Mukherjee paying homage to Mahatma Gandhi's statue in Accra, Ghana, 13 June 2016</p>

A recent example is illustrative. Pranab Mukherjee, the [first](#) Indian president to visit Ghana, unveiled a statue of Mahatma Gandhi at the University of Ghana. Later, a group of academics demanded its [removal](#) on the grounds that Gandhi was [racist](#). They were motivated by historical revisionism (see stamps of Gandhi below),³ a growing "sons-of-the-soil consciousness", and, possibly, a resentment against the [mistreatment](#) of African students in India. Unlike the first two, the last is, in principle, not beyond India's control. Moreover, it is time India promoted newer global icons. The Modi Government has made a small attempt in this direction by supporting the celebration of the [birth anniversary](#) of Dr

² The old stereotypes have not entirely gone out of use, though. Writing on the West's purportedly partial attitude towards India amidst its stand-off with China, a contributor to [Global Times](#) wrote: '[India] gained independence through nonviolent resistance to the British Empire. The West believes India created a peaceful model of an anti-colonial movement. Therefore in the eyes of some Western scholars, India has been well-behaved and will not invade or bully other countries.'

³ There was [criticism](#) of the demand to remove Gandhi's statue from within the African community, though. Also, note that in the quote accompanying the Ghanaian stamp, Gandhi seems to caution against selective engagement: 'My life is an indivisible whole, and all my attitudes run into one another; and they all have their rise in my insatiable love for mankind.'

B.R. Ambedkar, the Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee at the United Nations.⁴



India's diaspora, which boasts of several [heads](#) of states and governments and, more recently, [CEOs of multi-national corporations](#), is yet another traditional source of soft power. The Indian diaspora is among the few of its kind in terms of size, global spread and occupational, ethno-linguistic and religious diversities. While Indian governments have mostly [focussed](#) on the North Atlantic region and a particular class within the diaspora, Modi has tried to reach out to Indian workers during his foreign visits. The diaspora ought not to be engaged through high-decibel [Madison Square Garden](#) and [Allphones Arena](#)-type shows of strength, however, because they not only stretch the understaffed Indian diplomatic corps, but also needlessly highlight the diaspora as an organised body, which may not be a good thing amid growing nativist tendencies across the world.



⁴ The government is also trying to build newer platforms to engage fellow developing countries across the Indo-Pacific region because older organisations, such as the NAM, have long ceased to provide meaningful opportunities to pursue India's interests.

India's Twenty-First Century Soft Power

Just like the historical sources of India's soft power, the sources of India's contemporary global cultural appeal – [Bollywood](#), [cricket](#),⁵ [Indian cuisine](#),⁶ [new age spirituality](#), [yoga](#)⁷ – are autonomous of the government, which, in most cases, cannot influence them except when obstructing them.⁸ Moreover, cultural ties and people-to-people relations have only limited impact on the hard calculus of international relations. China was busy altering the ground reality on the India-Bhutan-China tri-junction even as Narendra Modi and Xi Jinping discussed Aamir Khan's record-breaking inspirational movie [Dangal](#) and [International Yoga Day](#) was celebrated on the Great Wall. The road from Dangal to Doka La was indeed very short. It is not that yoga does not help, but only when relations are already good. [Benjamin Netanyahu](#), for instance, creatively used yoga to underscore the foundations of the bilateral relationship: 'When I do a relaxing Tadasana pose, in the morning I'll turn my head to the right, India is the first democracy that I'll see. And when Prime Minister Modi does a relaxing pose of Vasisthasana and he turns his head to the left, Israel is the first democracy that you can see.'⁹

In the recent past, success in the new economy sectors such as information technology, biotechnology and space technology has also enhanced India's global visibility. The fact that [women](#) form a significant proportion of the workforce in these sectors has also attracted attention from the rest of the world. The government can get some mileage out of private activity in this sector, but cannot push private players to align with foreign policy. So, while Modi could visit Tata Consultancy Services centres in [Japan](#) and [Saudi Arabia](#), he did not get a similar opportunity in [Iran](#). However, the government has used its control over India's [cost-effective](#) space technology to promote the country's interests abroad. The [South Asia satellite](#) is the latest example of India's [space diplomacy](#) that is at least a decade old.

⁵ Of late, cricket has turned into a source of immense acrimony in the Subcontinent. India's cricket ties with [Bangladesh](#) and [Pakistan](#) are cases in point.

⁶ It is not unusual for Pakistani and Bangladeshi restaurants in the West to be named after Indian icons such as the Taj Mahal.

⁷ Sanskrit is sometimes added to this list, but the language is as good as dead within India. Most of the contemporary scholarship on it is located in the West, while the traditional scholarship based within India is not amenable to being used as a source of soft power.

⁸ Pakistani sportspersons and artists have been effectively banned from working in India. It would be unrealistic as well as unfair to expect others to accept Indian cultural goods if it is itself not open to their offerings.

⁹ The diversity of India's cultural resources can be gauged from the fact that it can reach out to Israel's rivals and enemies, Saudi Arabia and Iran, with equal ease. Modi [presented](#) a replica of India's oldest mosque to the King of Saudi Arabia during his visit to that country and [released](#) a rare Persian manuscript of Kalileh-wa-Dimneh that is based on ancient Indian collections of stories during his visit to Iran. India's ability to connect across divides is, in fact, not limited to this triad and would hold for almost any set of estranged countries.

	
<p>Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Tanzanian President Jakaya Mrisho Kikwete visiting the Tele-Medicine Unit at the India-Tanzanian Centre in Dar es Salaam on 27 May 2011.</p>	<p>Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's address on the occasion of launch of South Asia satellite (<i>Daily Star</i>, 6 May 2017).</p>

Some of the other, newer sources of soft power, such as the smooth conduct of parliamentary elections and decennial censuses, the largest peacetime exercises of their kind, are directly under the government's control, but require it to maintain a studied distance except for providing necessary administrative support. Likewise, India's independent judiciary and free media require the government to respect the autonomy of other institutions in society.

	
<p>Modi at the All Women TCS IT Centre in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 3 April 2016</p>	<p>Modi at the inauguration of TCS Centre in Tokyo, Japan, 2 September 2014</p>

The peaceful resolution of [land](#) and [maritime](#) border disputes with neighbours such as Bangladesh, contributions to [disaster relief](#), [evacuation](#) of people from conflict zones and [humanitarian assistance](#) across the Indian Ocean and Himalayan regions, contributions to [UN peacekeeping missions](#), and small need-based development assistance, as in [Afghanistan](#), have also contributed to India's soft power.

Nurturing Soft Power



Much of India’s soft power, and the ability to deploy it, is autonomous of the government and demands that the government nurture cultural diversity, openness and creativity, or at the very least, not curb them. By thrusting a monolithic identity upon India, the Prime Minister’s party is further shrinking the room available to the government to harness soft power.

Unlike Wahhabi Saudi Arabia or Han China, multi-cultural India’s soft power critically depends on the health of its inclusive democracy. India cannot afford to promote one language, ideology or religion abroad – à la Saudi Arabia and China – because each of its provinces has its own language, script and religious and cultural icons, and there are serious ideological differences among the leading political parties. Hindu nationalism promoted by some of the sister organisations of the ruling party is not only straining social harmony within the country, but will also make India [less attractive](#) to scholars, artists, students, and tourists from abroad and even the non-Hindu communities, as well as non-orthodox Hindus, within the Indian diaspora.

The Modi Government would do well to recognise the character of India’s soft power and check the forces that are undermining its very foundations by trying to impose a singular identity. Otherwise, the emerging mismatch between the values and icons advertised abroad and those promoted within the country will stall the country’s soft power push – the government cannot celebrate the [Taj Mahal](#) and actor [Aamir Khan](#) abroad, while the sister organisations of the ruling party attack those icons at home (Cartoon 1, below). Historical revisionism is similarly undermining some of the well-known icons of India (Cartoon 2, below).¹⁰

	
<p>An “Incredible India” poster promoting the Taj Mahal as a tourist destination</p>	<p>A Chinese poster for the movie <i>Dangal</i></p>

¹⁰ A related example comes from the field of science and technology. In the early days of this government, members of the ruling party, including ministers, and its sister organisation inundated the media with [anachronistic debates](#) about ancient India’s scientific achievements. The government cannot simultaneously contribute to the erosion of scientific temper in society and hope to [leverage](#) technological prowess.

<p>BUSINESS AS USUAL</p> <p>By UNNY</p> <p>Trumpji can come to UP and skip Taj Mahal</p> 	
<p>Cartoon 1: <i>Indian Express</i>, 28 June 2017 (Lucknow, late city edition)</p>	<p>Cartoon 2: “Beware of us, we have just now defeated Akbar.” On the revision of textbooks claiming that the Mughal Emperor Akbar lost the Battle of Haldighati to his Hindu rival. (http://www.humsamvet.in)</p>

The government has to appreciate that soft power resources need space to thrive and are not like instant coffee that is available just in time when it is needed. A good example of this is provided by the government’s attempt to use [Sufism](#) to reach out to the larger Muslim world, even as the ruling party’s sister organisations are contributing to the long trend of marginalisation of the traditional liberal voices within Islam in the Indian Subcontinent.

How Useful is India’s Soft Power?

India has the largest Shia population and Persian language archives outside Iran and is home to the world’s largest Zoroastrian population. While India and Iran share a millennia-old multifaceted relationship, Iran does not allow nostalgia to influence the pursuit of national interests. Imam Khomeini’s ancestors migrated to the Lucknow region, one of the most important centres of Shia culture in the Indian Subcontinent, in the late-eighteenth century and left for Najaf in the mid-nineteenth century before settling in Khomein in Iran, where they were known as Hindi.¹¹ It is also likely that Imam Khomeini’s ecumenism was influenced, among other things, by the work of the Lucknow-based Shia thinker Sayyid ‘Ali Naqi Naqvi. Imam Khomeini reportedly “denied” his Indian connection, however, and rebuffed the Indian Government’s attempt to approach him soon after the Islamic Revolution through Lucknow’s traditional Shia élite.¹²

Another example of the limited usefulness of soft power is in order. Regarding India’s success in canvassing support for the International Yoga Day, India’s External Affairs Minister [noted](#) that:

An unprecedented 177 out of the total 193 member states of the United Nations; joined-in as “co-sponsors” to the resolution for “International Yoga

¹¹ Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani visited Lucknow in 1995.
¹² The connection has been very recently [remarked](#) upon by Gholamreza Ansari, Iran’s Ambassador to India.

Day” ... in the history of the United Nations, this is the highest number of co-sponsors ever for any Resolution of this nature [who] not just supported India, but expressed their public willingness to own the initiative as well ... from the time Prime Minister Modi first formally initiated this proposal during his maiden address to the 69th session of the United Nations General Assembly on 27th September 2014, it took exactly 75 days for its formal adoption by the entire United Nations, last Friday, on the 11th of December. The speed and ease with which this proposal moved to final fruition, is a remarkable achievement in itself.

But how many of those countries will support an Indian candidate for the office of UN Secretary-General or India’s candidature for the Security Council? An assessment of what India gained from participation in the Non-Aligned Movement leads to similarly dismal conclusions. The above examples illustrate the inherent and severe limits to conversion of soft power into tangible gains in the international sphere. Moreover, India does not have an ecosystem within which to harness soft power earned through, say, its contribution to disaster relief and peacekeeping. For instance, in 2004, Indian disaster management teams were the first to reach tsunami-hit countries across the Indian Ocean Region, yet late comers such as the US received more coverage in the international media. More recently, India was the first and also the biggest source of assistance after the recent earthquake in Nepal, but the crass coverage by some of India’s private news channels allowed the anti-India lobby there to whip up a [backlash](#) against India.¹³

Soft Power needs a Hard Foundation

Soft and hard powers are complements rather than substitutes and the former has limited use in isolation. So, soft power cannot make up for the shortfall in hard capacity because it is in itself dependent upon the latter. Soft power can serve as an appetiser (to make an opening) or a dessert (to cap a successful hard power push), but cannot substitute the main course that rests on hard economic and political capacity. Modi cannot continue to travel through the world with the icing because, sooner than later, people will ask for the cake. So, soft power cannot be operated entirely independently of hard power. In other words, there is no escape from hard power, something that Nehru’s India realised rather belatedly. The under-developed Buddhist pilgrimage circuits, the shoddy arrangements for the 2010 [Commonwealth Games](#), the rudderless [Nalanda University](#), the less-than-satisfactory performance of the [South Asian University](#), the launch of the [South Asia satellite](#) before ground infrastructure was built in the beneficiary countries, and the poor capacity to complete [overseas projects](#) on time are illustrative of how the incapacity to complete brick-and-mortar projects on time limits the ability to harness soft power.¹⁴

India’s soft power resources can be nurtured and better used to advance its foreign policy interests, if the government unobtrusively provides infrastructural support for soft projects and refrains from interfering in the cultural and social lives of people. So far, Modi has

¹³ Hyper-nationalists in the media who ostensibly aid the ruling party not only undermine democracy at home, but also hurt India’s interests abroad.

¹⁴ India’s urban squalor, rural poverty and social inequalities also seriously dent its soft power.

cleverly used foreign policy “achievements” in domestic politics. Before long, however, he will have to factor in how his party’s domestic politics are affecting the country’s soft power aspirations and foreign policy objectives.

Postscript: Shortly after writing this article, I was struck by the fact that I had completely forgotten the fact that a decade ago, when Tata Motors launched the [world’s cheapest car](#), the Nano, and [acquired](#) Jaguar and Land Rover around the same time, India aroused enormous [interest](#) across the world. All of a sudden India began to be seen as capable of economic and technological dynamism. In fact, for a while, it seemed that India could take over as the next workshop to the world with its cost-effective innovations. “Nano” was the buzzword in those days; everything was becoming *nano*, from [hotels](#) to [homes](#). But that was precisely when “politics” took over and the euphoria – in hindsight, the hype – crash-landed. The opposition pushed the West Bengal Government into a corner by claiming that selling agricultural land for the construction of a factory was against the interests of the [poor](#). Tata Motors had to hurriedly shift its Nano factory from West Bengal on the eastern coast to business-friendly, west coast Gujarat.¹⁵

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¹⁵ Ironically, over the last decade, millions have left India’s eastern states, including West Bengal, for economically dynamic western and southern states to work in factories run by companies such as Tata Motors. While the dream of making India the workshop to the world died a premature death and [investor confidence](#) was dented for a long time to come, the anti-Tata protests in West Bengal also affected India’s national politics. The protests culminated in the downfall of West Bengal’s three decades-old communist government in a bitterly-contested election in 2011. More importantly, the then Gujarat Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, [stepped into](#) national politics and led his party to an unprecedented electoral victory in the 2014 parliamentary elections and formed the first majority government in three decades.

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