Shifting Perceptions of Power: Soft Power and India’s Foreign Policy

Uma Purushothaman*

Abstract

Soft power’s importance has increased in the context of globalisation and the growing disquiet over the use of military power for achieving foreign policy objectives. This paper focuses specifically on soft power in India’s foreign policy and sources of India’s soft power like the Indian diaspora, Indian culture, etc. It also looks at what affects India’s soft power inimically and how to increase its soft power.

Traditional approaches to security studies in international relations have always laid emphasis on the concept of power. Power is the ability to achieve one’s purposes or goals and at the most general level, it is the capacity to influence the behaviour of others to get the outcomes one wants. There are several ways of influencing the behaviour of others. To achieve the desired outcomes, one can coerce with threats, induce with payments, or attract and co-opt to get people to want what one wants. The concept of power comprises everything from the ability to keep oneself alive to the ability of a government to promote economic growth. The ability to obtain the outcomes one wants is often associated with the possession of certain resources like population, territory, natural resources, economic strength, military force and political stability. This has been the traditional concept of power (‘hard power’) in international politics, especially for the Realist school.

Power and statecraft are essential elements of Realism. This tradition can be traced to Thomas Hobbes and his assertion of the basic perpetual and restless human desire for ‘power after power’. Classical realists suggest that States increase their power in order to ensure their own security and to survive as independent entities. The realist tradition portrays international politics as a ‘state of nature’, an essentially anarchic system in which each State is forced to help itself and give priority to its own national interests.

According to the realists, security of the State is attained and preserved through the maximization of power and the elements of national power include: geographical boundaries, large territorial size, the capacity for self-sufficiency in natural and industrial resources and a strong technological base, all of which contribute to a strong military capability. Kenneth Waltz’s structural realism employs the notion of international anarchy and sees States as basic units of the international system. The central concern of an anarchical international system is power. It is conceived as a self-help system with States primarily seeking survival and security. Wars and conflicts are the usual consequences of this state of affairs as states seek power,
resources and territory, often at the cost of other States. The desire to dominate other States increases as a State’s power capabilities grow. Power indeed is the key factor in States’ balancing behaviour.

However, the level of threat that may arise from an external source is another important variable in determining the States’ behaviour in international politics. In this regard, Stephen Walt suggests ‘threat’ to be more significant than ‘power’ and his ‘balance of threat theory’ initiated an expansion of applications pertaining to traditional realist and neorealist theories. Several theoretical as well as historical case studies focusing on power and the balancing behaviour of the States gave rise to more severe criticism of realist and neorealist theories. Some of them challenged the notion of power and the idea of balance of power because they explained only the grand strategy of the major States of the twentieth century. However, post-Cold War international politics is characterized by major shifts in approach from the traditional realist perspective on ‘power’. This paper focuses specifically on the shifting perceptions of power in India’s foreign policy. Apart from analysing the dynamics of hard and soft power in India’s foreign policy, the paper also attempts to identify the role of soft power and its impact and influence on the foreign policy decision-making of India.

**Soft Power in International Politics**

A new form of power—‘soft power’—has become increasingly discussed in the post-Cold War era. The term ‘soft power’ was first coined by the Harvard University Professor, Joseph Nye (1990), in his book, Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power. Nye (2004) developed the concept further in his book, Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics. Soft power in international politics arises from factors such as the dominant values, internal practices and policies, and the manner of conducting international relations of a State. Soft power is the ability to obtain what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises due to the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies, that is, through elements which are ‘real but intangible’.

The success of soft power heavily depends on the State’s reputation within the international community, as well as the flow of information between States. Thus, soft power is often linked to the rise of globalization and neoliberal theory. Popular culture and media is often identified as a source of soft power, as is the spread of a national language, or a particular set of normative structures. A nation with a large amount of soft power and the goodwill so won can inspire other countries to acculturate, thus avoiding the need for expensive hard power expenditures.

**Power in the post Cold War Era**

Hard and soft power can be regarded as two extremities on a continuum of power. They involve different ideas, interactions and institutions for foreign policy whether in the areas of security, politics or economics. Ideally, hard power strategies focus on military intervention,
coercive diplomacy, and economic sanctions in order to enforce national interests resulting in confrontational policies vis-à-vis neighbouring countries while soft power strategies stress on common political values, peaceful means for conflict management, and economic co-operation in order to achieve common solutions. Though soft power cannot produce results as fast as hard power, its effects are more long-lasting and it is less expensive than hard power. The importance of soft power is due to its ability to influence others unintrusively and unconsciously. It is thus an indirect way to get what you want and hence has been termed the ‘second face of power’.

Power is becoming less fungible, less coercive and less concrete today. Co-optive behavioural power and soft power resources are not new. However, recent trends and changes in political issues have made them more significant. Today’s major powers are not as able to use their traditional power resources to achieve their purposes as in the past. Private actors and small states have become more powerful on many issues. At least five trends have contributed to this diffusion of power: economic interdependence, transnational actors, rise of nationalism in weak states, the spread of technology and changing political issues.

The developments in communications and transport in recent times have had a revolutionary effect on economic interdependence. The declining costs of transportation and communication have revolutionized global markets and accelerated the development of trans-national corporations that transfer economic activity across borders. The process of modernization, urbanization and increased communication in developing nations has also diffused power from governments to private actors. Social awakening has increased nationalism in poor or weak States and this, in turn, has reduced the scope of applying traditional military power as this has made military intervention and external rule more costly. The spread of modern technology has also enhanced the capabilities of backward states. The ability of great powers to control their environments despite impressive traditional power has also been weakened due to the changing nature of issues in world politics. According to Nye, in the information age, three kinds of countries are in a good position to gain soft power: (1) ‘those whose dominant culture and ideas are closer to prevailing global norms (which now emphasize liberalism, pluralism, and autonomy), (2) those with the most access to multiple channels of communication and thus more influence over how issues are framed, and (3) those whose credibility is enhanced by their domestic and international performance’.

The importance of soft power in the contemporary world can be seen if we look at why China pulled out all stops to hold a successful Olympics. The success of the Beijing Olympics has helped increase China’s soft power around the world with the associated benefits. The success has showcased China’s strong capabilities, enhanced mutual understanding between the Chinese and foreign citizens and will in all probability encourage its further opening up. This is evident in the words of Zheng Yongnian, Director of the East Asian Institute of the National University of Singapore: “After the Olympics, more attention would be paid to changes in China ... because China has become a power in the eyes of the West. They would monitor or supervise the development of this important country”. The need to increase its soft power explains why China is promoting the study of the Chinese language and culture by establishing
Confucius Institutes on the lines of the Alliance Francaise and the British Council across the world. Another example is the Unites States’ increased funding and emphasis to public diplomacy post 9/11 and the Iraq War because its unilateral use of hard power in Iraq and Afghanistan has led to the growth of anti-Americanism in many parts of the world and decreased its soft power significantly.

Soft power grows out of the ‘cultural milieu of society’ and can only be created by the people; the State has little or no role to play in its creation. However, the State can accentuate its soft power through various means like public diplomacy. Public diplomacy is the process by which ‘direct relations are pursued with a country’s people to promote the interest and values of those being represented’. The soft power of a country rests mainly on three resources: ‘its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad) and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority).’

Sources of India’s Soft Power

India has always been a country with tremendous ‘soft power’—as can be seen from the fact that unlike the rise of China, its ‘rise’ is not being viewed with trepidation and alarm in many countries. India’s soft power is very high in the countries of South East Asia due to their shared heritage and civilization and they are now called its ‘civilizational neighbours’. Unlike the other emerging Asian powers like China and Japan, India has a unique advantage in these countries as India does not have border disputes with any of them. Indian culture is appreciated in its immediate neighbourhood in South Asia. India has influenced countries both in its immediate neighbourhood and extended neighbourhood like Persia (now known as Iran) for centuries. India continues to have tremendous potential for soft power because of its culture and civilizational links—its large diaspora, popular films, music, art and historical and cultural links with several countries around the world all contribute to its soft power.

Culture

Culture is the most important source of soft power. India is at a very advantageous position as far as culture is concerned and has historically enjoyed much soft power. According to T.V. Paul and Baldev Nayar, Indian culture offers one of the most dynamic alternatives to Western cultural values. India has had a long history of civilizational and cultural links with countries as far-flung as Iran, Rome and South East Asia. Its riches and splendour have attracted traders and travellers for thousands of years. Countries in Southeast Asia still have remnants of Indian traditions: the Angor Vat temple in Cambodia, temples and pagodas in Thailand, Myanmar as well as the presence of several Sanskrit words in languages like Bahasha Indonesia prove the influence of Indian culture on these countries. India, as the land where the Buddha preached, has positive connotations for Buddhists all over the world. Buddhism spread from India to China and other countries through Buddhist monks and scholars came to India to study at its universities leading to a healthy exchange of ideas right from ancient times the influence of which is apparent throughout Asia even today. India’s continued soft power in the Asia-
Pacific can be seen in the proposal by India to revive the once world famous Nalanda University in partnership with China, Japan, South Korea and Singapore. This initiative is an example of the convergence of the soft power agendas of five different countries. Islamic preachers from India are believed to have spread the religious and cultural values of Islam in Singapore and Malaysia. Also, as one of the few places in the world where Jews were welcomed and not persecuted, India enjoys much soft power in Israel.

India’s diaspora is a huge soft power asset. There are millions of Indian diaspora spread across countries as far as Fiji, Guyana, Malaysia, Mauritius, Surinam, South Africa, Sri Lanka and Trinidad. While Indians were taken over as indentured labours to far-flung parts of the British Empire in the nineteenth-century, a professional elite from this expatriate community has found its way to the United States (US), Canada, Australia, and other nations of the West in the twentieth century. They have contributed immensely to the countries they have settled in and command influence and respect in these countries. In fact, the Indo-American community in the US has been found to be the most educated immigrant community in the US. The recent upturn in Indo-US relations has a lot to do with the lobbying, influence and reputation of the Indo-American community. Countries like Fiji and Mauritius have large Indian communities with people of Indian Origin holding important political positions.

One of India’s most successful and enduring imports—yoga—is practised all over the world both as a form of exercise and as a stress-buster by millions of people. Yoga is already a global phenomenon and is rapidly becoming part of mainstream culture, particularly in the West.

Indian cuisine with its subtle use of spices and herbs grown across the Indian subcontinent is also becoming popular in the West, particularly in the United Kingdom (UK) which is home to a large Indian diaspora. In fact, Shashi Tharoor claims that in the UK today, Indian curry houses employ more people than the iron and steel, coal and shipbuilding industries combined. Indian food has also gained popularity in other Western countries and there are many Indian restaurants in the larger cities of the US and Canada.

Elements of popular Indian culture like music and movies have a wide following in many countries. The power of music can bridge borders and bring people closer. Indian music and movies have a large international market and have become increasingly popular abroad, particularly in Asia, Europe, Africa and West Asia. Even in countries like Russia, Syria and Senegal, Indian films, particularly Hindi (Bollywood, which is the most important movie industry after Hollywood) movies, have a following. Indian movies are popular and watched not only in South Asian countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka due to their close proximity with India and due to certain similar cultural outlooks present in the movies but also in Europe, Africa and the Middle East. South Asia is already dominated by Indian music and movies to the extent that at times it has even bred some resentment against India. In fact, Pakistan had earlier banned Indian television channels and films though recently there have been some collaborations between Bollywood and the Pakistani film industry. Wax statues of several actors from the Indian film industry at Madame Tussaud’s in London bear testimony to the influence of Indian cinema and India’s soft power. The overwhelming Oscar
success of ‘Slumdog Millionaire’, where three Indian artists/technicians won individual Oscars, shows the potential for Indian films and artists to contribute to India’s soft power. When Indian writers win international awards like the Man-Booker prize, when India becomes the guest of honour at international book fairs like the Frankfurt Book Fair, when Indian movies are screened at International Film Festivals like Cannes and when Indians win awards like the Nobel and Magsasay awards, India’s soft power is built.

The success of Indian companies like Infosys Technologies and Wipro Technologies in the Information Technology (IT) sector; success of other multinational companies like the Tata Group and Reliance Group; and the worldwide recognition of the academic excellence of the Indian Institute of Management (IIMs) and Indian Institute of Technology (IITs)—the centres of excellence for higher training, research and development in science, engineering and technology in India—have contributed to the new image of India as a country with English educated, enterprising people. In the US, for example, the stereotypical Indian is no longer a starving peasant, but a highly professional IT specialist who tells helpless Americans how to work with their computers. Indians constitute the epicentre of the Silicon Valley revolution and India have moved from being a job-seeking economy to one that is being driven by demand in developed nations for services and migrant workers from developing countries.

India’s spirituality is much needed in these days of conflict and strife. India’s tolerance for different religions and cultures is legendary. This is the land which has preached ‘Vasudhaiva Kudumbakam’ (the world is my family) and Loka Samastha Sukhino Bhavanthu (let there be peace in the whole world) after all. India’s message of secularism which actually means different religions co-existing in harmony with each other, rather than the Western concept of separation of religion and the State is a valuable lesson in these days when there is so much strife in the name of religion.

India’s diplomats have also played a role, though how big it is cannot really be measured that being the nature of soft power itself, in increasing India’s soft power. India’s diplomats have played important roles in international for a in the 1960s and 1970s and continue to play significant roles in international negotiations like climate change. India’s diplomats are trained in India’s culture and values, communication skills as well as the work in the media and Indian Parliament. This helps them connect with governments as well as people of other countries. With increasing globalisation in culture as well as the media, India’s influence through its culture is likely to increase in the future.

**Foreign Policy**

A country’s foreign policy is defined as the basis and framework of its relations with other countries. The behaviour of one State can either have a favourable or adverse effect on another. This prompts every State to minimize the problems of adverse action and maximize the favourable actions of foreign States. Joseph Nye says that a country’s foreign policy can increase its soft power if its foreign policy is perceived by other countries and people to be ‘legitimate and having moral authority’. India’s foreign policy has been based on moral values.
from the time of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who remains a tremendous influence on Indian foreign policy even today. India’s soft power, in any case, got a major boost with the way it achieved independence. The legacy of the Indian freedom movement and that of its leader, Gandhi, certainly built India’s soft power from the very beginning as a country which had achieved independence with non-violent methods. This soft power was consolidated by the foreign policy agenda set by Nehru.

Moreover, even before independence, leaders of the Indian National Congress supported the freedom struggles of people under colonial rule in Asia and Africa. This support, both political and material, continued even after independence. Many thousands of Indian soldiers also lost their lives in the fight against Nazism and Fascism in World War II. India also strongly decried Apartheid and racial discrimination at international fora. Its refusal to join either bloc during the Cold War and sending a medical contingent rather than armed combatants to the United Nations (UN) force in Korea in 1950 also enhanced its standing in the world community, particularly the countries of the Third World. This is proved by India’s getting the chairmanship of the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (NNRC) set up in 1953 after the Korean War and India’s mediating role in bringing about the Indo-China Peace Agreement after the French were defeated by the Vietnamese. As J.N. Dixit argues, ‘India’s acceptability as a reconciliatory and mediator was both remarkable and illogical because this credibility and diplomatic success of India had nothing to do with its economic resources or military power’. In fact, it was an expression of India’s soft power and the respect Nehru commanded in the newly-independent countries of the world as leader of the Non Aligned Movement (NAM). Nehru was determined to “forge a world order that eschewed, or at least hobbled, the use of force in international politics”. India even supported China’s claim for a permanent seat on the United Nations (UN) Security Council. Thus, till the 1962 Sino-Indian war at least, India’s soft power especially among Third World countries was tremendous and India was the rallying point for many of these countries.

The 1962 Sino-India war marked a turning point in Indian foreign policy to one shorn of most of the idealist rhetoric and moral grandstanding of the Nehruvian era. This shift was also in part due to the realization among Indian policy makers that all the trust (soft power) that India enjoyed in the Third World was of little use as few of these countries came out in support of India. The Sino-India war, the Indo-Pak wars of 1965 and 1971 and the integration of Goa, Daman and Diu in 1961 into the Indian State were instances where India used hard power to achieve its objectives, though these two wars were admittedly forced on India. Indira Gandhi’s strong personality was reflected in her foreign policy making. Unlike her father, she was a practitioner of realpolitik. She believed that India’s foreign policy should be tied to the country’s economic, political and security interests and that these interests primarily depended on India becoming strong and self-reliant though she continued to support the NAM. Subsequently, she established a strategic partnership with the Soviet Union, upgraded India’s defence capabilities, won a war against Pakistan in 1971 (dividing that country so as to secure India’s strategic environment among other reasons) and even tested a nuclear device in 1974. However, the 1971 Bangladesh war was also framed as ‘humanitarian intervention’ to maintain India’s standing in world politics and to ensure that there was minimal effect on its soft power.
Both of Indira Gandhi’s tenures as Prime Minister saw a return to traditional concepts of International Relations like realism and balance of power and the dominance of strategies identified with hard power. All this certainly did nothing to add to India’s soft power. The Morarji Desai government took several initiatives to improve relations with China, the US and Pakistan, thus improving the country’s image in the world. Rajiv Gandhi’s visit to China in 1988 again showed India as a State committed to improving relations with its neighbours. But the deployment of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) to Sri Lanka was largely seen across the world as ‘interference in another country’s internal affairs’, something which is almost a sacrilege in international relations. Thus, India was seen as a hegemon through much of the 1970s and 1980s, particularly by its neighbours.

In the post-Cold War era, particularly after liberalization, privatization and globalization, there has been a shift towards more conciliatory relations with the world at large through shedding of some of the Cold War ideological baggage so that the West was no longer seen as an adversary/imperial colonial power to be resisted at every point. India has moved closer to the US than ever before in history while maintaining robust relations with Russia and China. After the 1990s, India has tried to play down its ‘big brother’ image in South Asia by taking initiatives to resolve disputes with its neighbours and scrupulously avoiding interference in the internal affairs of its neighbours. Wagner argues that India’s regional policy after the 1990s has been characterized by greater emphasis on soft power strategies. One example of this is the ‘Gujral doctrine’ which introduced the principle of non-reciprocity, emphasising that India not only had a bigger responsibility, but should give more to the smaller neighbours than she would receive. This doctrine echoed domestic changes in India, especially the economic liberalisation post-1991. This shift towards soft power was not caused due to altruistic reasons, but due the fact that India’s hard power approach of the 1970s and 1980s was not very effective in achieving its goals. Despite having more sources of hard power, India was not able to transform the military victory of 1971 over Pakistan into a long-lasting solution of the Kashmir issue.

The limitations of the hard power strategy also became evident in the 1990s when the conflict over Kashmir continued and sparked off bilateral crises. Moreover, with globalization and liberalization of the economy, as countries became more interdependent, India could not afford to antagonise other countries by stressing on its hard power capabilities. It is in this context that India has strengthened its soft power strategies like moving towards closer economic cooperation through initiatives like the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SSARC) and proposals for confidence building measures (CBMs) with other countries. This new emphasis on ‘soft power’ continued even when the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government led by the hawkish Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power and despite the 1998 Pokhran tests. In fact, even after the tests, India adopted the policy of unilateral self restraint and imposed a unilateral moratorium on further tests to assuage worldwide condemnation of the tests and salvage some soft power. The NDA’s initiatives to increase people-to-people interaction between India and Pakistan and other CBMs that it initiated with Pakistan were also attempts to improve India’s image in Pakistan and increase its soft power.
India has also shown interest and taken the initiative in solving long-standing border disputes with its neighbours like China and Bangladesh in recent times.

The Kargil war between India and Pakistan of 1999 was important in terms of soft power due to two factors: it won over world support for India as most countries accepted India’s contention that Pakistan was at fault for initiating the intrusion and India won global respect for its restraint in not crossing the border; second, it proved the limitations of hard power as being nuclear powers, neither of the two countries could attack each other for fear of a full-fledged nuclear war. India’s support for the Palestinians at the UN has also ensured that its soft power is intact in the Arab countries even while its relations with Israel are growing.

In an ironic situation, even the Indian Army has shown that it is not averse to using soft power. India’s participation in UN peacekeeping operations can be interpreted as an attempt to increase its soft power in countries around the world. The Indian Army has also attempted to use soft power in militancy-affected states like Jammu & Kashmir to win the ‘hearts and minds’ of people in places where there is insurgency. ‘Operation Sadbhavana’ in Jammu and Kashmir and other operations in which the Indian army has built infrastructure, refugee camps and given medical aid to people in militancy-infested regions are good examples for this.

The best example of India’s successful use of soft power can be seen in its relations with Afghanistan helping it steal a march over its traditional rival, Pakistan in the hearts of the common Afghans. Since the fall of the Taliban, India has focussed on the reconstruction of Afghanistan through aid for building infrastructure like dams and roads and providing scholarships for Afghan students. Indian television operas and Hindi movies have become the primary source of entertainment for Afghans, particularly those in cities and towns.

Another recent instance was India’s restrained response to the 26/11 terror attacks in Mumbai. Despite much jingoism among the general public as well as the media, India chose not to go in for military mobilisation or air strikes, but instead chose to focus on terror cells in Pakistan. The sole surviving terrorist who was captured has also been given legal rights and a lawyer to argue his case. Compare this with what happened in Guantanamo Bay with prisoners who have not even been proved guilty in a court of law in the world’s oldest democracy, the US!

India’s high economic growth after the Cold War has also contributed to a positive image about India globally. India has been one of the best performers in the world economy in recent times with an average growth rate of around 7 per cent annually. India is seen as a best foreign direct investment (FDI) and joint ventures destination and its achievements in some sectors of the economy have propelled it to the status of an economic power to be reckoned with. Quite a few Indian companies are today listed on the National Association of Securities Dealers Automated Quotations (NASDAQ) index and the global recession has not affected India in a big way, pointing towards the strong fundamentals of the Indian economy.
At the institutional level, India quite a bit of institutional power due to its leadership of the G-77, G-22 and NAM. However, a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, which continues to remain on India’s wish-list, will add significantly to its soft power.

**Political Values**

India is the world’s largest democracy. India’s biggest asset in terms of soft power is its successfully-functioning democracy which has survived despite many challenges. Unlike most other developing countries, India has established democratic traditions. In any case, a democracy would have more soft power than a military dictatorship and an authoritarian regime. The fact that India has never had a military dictatorship and yet has managed to solve, to some extent, many of the problems it faced at the time of its independence has been appreciated all over the world. India has proved that democracy can work even in a poor, illiterate country and is not the exclusive preserve of the rich Western countries. India has had free and fair elections since independence. India’s democracy has allowed traditionally marginalized sections of society like Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women to participate in governance. In fact, Bhutan’s and Nepal’s recent shift towards democracy was encouraged by its neighbour India’s example of a thriving democracy. India’s commitment to democracy builds India’s moral power as well as soft power. India’s support for democracy and freedom are other values which enhance its soft power.

The presence of a free press in which all shades of opinion are allowed to be expressed also contributes to India’s soft power. India has a thriving civil society which has never shied away from trying to solve social ills. It works in areas ranging from poverty alleviation to environmental issues often challenging government decisions by taking recourse to the courts. India, unlike most Asian countries, also has a fiercely independent judiciary which has often played an activist role in taking up many issues important to the public, but neglected by the government. Though court cases may take years to reach a judgement, the public continues to have faith in this organ of governance.

**What Erodes India’s Soft Power?**

While some initiatives like ‘Operation Sadbhavana’ are being mentioned here as increasing the soft power of the Indian State among its own people, several other initiatives like Salwa Judum initiative in the state of Chhattisgarh have, in fact, alienated the people from the State by stressing on hard power to fight radical Leftists (Maoists) who are carrying out an armed struggle against the State in several parts of India. In this case, the state itself armed one section of the people—mostly the village youth and tribals—against the radical Left (thus falling back on hard power) and lost credibility with the people not only by ‘outsourcing’ its functions to the local people, but also by resorting to hard power (arms and police) to quell resistance leading to numerous incidents of human rights violations. Moreover, the Salwa Judum itself has been accused of rape, torture and extortion.
Human rights violations by instruments of the State like the Police and the Army reflect badly on a country which has a very liberal Constitution, thus eroding its soft power. The use of torture to extract confessions and continued use of the capital punishment (though used very rarely) when most countries have abolished these practices also affect the country’s soft power negatively. India needs to ratify the 1987 UN Convention against Torture to prove its commitment to civil rights. India’s poverty, the increasing gap between the rich and the poor, communal tensions and riots are other factors which build a negative image of India abroad. Unhygienic conditions, dirty roads, bureaucratic red tape, delays at airports and railway stations, etc. are some other factors which affect India’s soft power.

India is ranked a dismal 134 out of 182 countries in the Human Development Index of the UN Human Development Report FOR 2009; this is something which seriously affects India’s soft power bringing back the earlier images of the 1950s of an overpopulated, poor country with underfed people. Economic reforms have led to high growth rates, but this growth is restricted only to a few sectors like Information Technology, Communications, etc. The liberalisation of the Indian economy has arguably not brought in ‘trickle-down’ benefits to many poor, rural parts of India and has instead widened the gap between the rich and the poor. This, in turn, has led to the evolution and growth of Maoist groups operating in as many as 170 districts in the country. In fact, so deep and widespread is the poverty that unless India can realize a sustained economic growth at approximately 7 per cent per annum for the next decade, it will not be able to significantly reduce endemic poverty. Corruption is also widespread in the country and adds to the misery of the poor. Transparency International’s 2009 Corruption Perception Index put India at the 84th position out of 180 countries. A large number of Indians are also illiterate. While on the one hand, India boasts of world class institutes like the IITs and IIMs, India has failed to provide even primary education to large sections of its population. Child labour is also widespread in the country. India has millions of malnourished, hungry people. It ranked 65 in the Global Hunger Index developed by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), showing a level of hunger that has been described by IFPRI as ‘alarming’.

Unresolved disputes with its immediate neighbours also affect India’s soft power potential. India needs to resolve these disputes reasonably if it wants to be seen as a global power deserving a seat on the UN Security Council. Relations with authoritarian States like Myanmar’s military junta, however strategic they are, can erode India’s claims of promoting democracy and thereby its soft power. Again, while India can justifiably claim that it helped push Nepal and the Maoists there towards democracy, peace and stability in 2008, its alleged interference in Nepal’s internal affairs in May 2009 has lowered its standing in Nepal and other neighbours. Instead of upholding the principle of supremacy of the civilian power over the military, India allegedly chose to support a general, whose loyalty to the deposed King is well known. Moreover, even earlier, India’s attempt to save the monarchy by sending Karan Singh, a royal himself, as an envoy to Nepal in 2006 in the midst of the democracy movement, raised eyebrows in Nepal. It seemed that India believes in civilian supremacy and democracy only in its own country and is willing to sacrifice these principles at the altar of its larger strategic interest of undermining the Nepalese Maoists to prevent Nepal from becoming closer to China. India’s nuclear tests in 1974 and 1998 also affect India’s soft power. India is one of the few
countries which has refused to sign the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT). While on the one hand, India purports to be in support of nuclear disarmament, it possesses nuclear weapons and is a de facto nuclear weapons state. This is seen as double standards by many developing countries, countries which have been India’s friends since its independence. India needs to negotiate this tricky situation to restore its credibility in these nations. India’s shift to a ‘realist’ foreign policy after the Cold War has alienated many traditional friends. For instance, there is disquiet in the Arab states about India’s increasingly warm ties with Israel, which is based on arms sales and intelligence cooperation. The improvement in Indo-US strategic relations at a time when US soft power is at its lowest in most countries also erodes India’s soft power in countries that are not part of the Western bloc.

The lack of success in sports and a non-existent sporting culture are also impediments in the growth of India’s soft power. No other aspect of culture has the capacity to bring together powerful tool for international engagement as sports does. For instance, China, having held an extremely successful Olympics and having topped the medals tally, has gained new-found respect from countries across the world.

Unresolved disputes within India, like the ones in Kashmir and the North-East also affect India’s soft power. The very fact that these disputes continue despite years of democracy are proof that the benefits of democracy and development have not reached people in these regions.

**Conclusion**

Soft power can be increased by augmenting funding for cultural activities in embassies, promoting India aggressively and starting India study centres all over the world on the lines of British Council, American Information Resource Centers, Alliance Francoise and the Confucius Institutes started by China. These institutes increase their respective countries’ soft power by projecting a favourable image of their countries to the outside world through public relations exercises. The Indian Foreign Service (IFS) should give more emphasis to public diplomacy and more initiatives like friendship years with different countries should be started. More funding should be given for public diplomacy. India should also hold more cultural festivals abroad showcasing different aspects of its culture. The doors of Indian universities should be opened to foreign students through scholarships and student exchange programmes so that they understand Indian culture, interests and values by the time they go home and propagate a favourable image about India. For this, more funds should be allotted to the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR). Tourists must be welcomed to India so that more people see the beauty and varied culture of India. Indian tourists abroad also convey the image of a new, rich and confident India. They must also be advised to be polite and to respect the traditions of the countries they visit. There should be more focus on sports infrastructure development in schools so that the world gets to know India as a sporting nation. The Pravasi Bharatiya Divas initiative by the Indian government is a laudable attempt to tap into the economic and political resources of the Indian diaspora all over the world. But India needs to do more so that the diaspora feels welcome and wanted by India.
Foreign aid is another factor which can enhance a country’s soft power. With India projected
to be one of the largest economies of the world by 2025, it will certainly have enough economic
power to help other poorer countries. So, India must put in place a well-coordinated foreign aid
policy and needs to increase its aid to poor countries, particularly African countries. This aid
must be well targeted and must be purely humanitarian in character so as to increase India’s
soft power. Towards this end, an agency on the lines on US Agency for International
Development (USAID) must be established.

India needs to ensure that the benefits of democracy and economic reforms reach the needy.
This would help bring those fighting the Indian State into the mainstream. It has certainly taken
some steps towards this by encouraging those fighting against it in Kashmir and the North East
to engage in the political process. This effort seems to be working and must be encouraged.

India has a huge population, vast territory, has high military expenditure, has the third
largest number of armed personnel in the world and has well-equipped army, navy and air force
and is a de facto nuclear power as well as a space power thus establishing its hard power. India
is also rapidly emerging as an economic powerhouse in terms of growth rates and gross
domestic product (GDP) and is projected to be the third largest economy by 2025 after China
and the US by the World Bank. India’s huge middle class and their purchasing power, its huge
pool of skilled workers and the fact that it has one of the largest pools of scientists in the world
add significantly to its economic potential and hard power capabilities. Thus, India has both the
elements needed for hard power—military strength and economic power. As seen above, India
also has a substantial amount of soft power and has the potential to augment it. India needs to
give more emphasis to soft power and rein it to achieve foreign policy objectives as soft power
resources like state capacity, diplomatic or strategic strength and quality of the national
leadership are very important to a country’s “latent capabilities into actualized power”.38

India, at various points in its history, has used both hard power and soft power. However, a
reliance on one or the other exclusively would not help in achieving foreign policy objectives.
Soft power cannot be used in all situations just as hard power cannot be used in all
circumstances. But if used effectively in conjunction with hard power, it can yield better results
than if only hard power is used. This use of a judicious combination of soft and hard power has
been termed as ‘smart power’ by some scholars like Suzanne Nossel. India has a lot of potential
for this ‘smart power’, blessed as it is with abundant soft power as well as hard power
elements. The Indian State needs to wake up to this potential and tap into it to achieve its global
ambitions and foreign policy objectives.

Endnotes

1 Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye (1977), Power and Interdependence: World Politics in


10 Ibid.


18 Nye, op. cit., n.16.


27 Ibid., pp. 46–47.

28 Ibid.


30 Dixit, op.cit., n. 26, p. 88.

31 Wagner op.cit, n. 9.


33 Wagner op.cit, n. 9.
34 Ibid.


36 Paul and Nayar, op. cit., n. 19, p. 58.

37 Ganguly op. cit., n.29, p.4.

38 Paul and Nayar, op. cit., n. 19, p. 32.