

India's Soft Power: Challenges and Opportunities

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1. Introduction

Why are we back to discussing a concept that is at least two decades old and much debated since then? First, there is a fairly dramatic transformation in the global power map in the last few years. Trump's America has changed the role of the U.S. in the world in a very fundamental way, pulling back from an active role in many parts of the world as well as in the U.N. and most multilateral platforms. China has come out of the closet in terms of more publically asserting its role as the second global superpower. This is most visible in its aggressive positioning in U.N. processes but increasingly portends a tectonic shift in geo-politics in all its dimensions. Europe has also been consumed by internal challenges triggered by the explosive growth of right wing populism which has resulted in Brexit and political turmoil in so many countries. With the growth in its economy and pervasive presence in the world of internet technology and software, India has undoubtedly acquired a larger voice on the international stage in the last decade or so. The decisive second term victory of a Hindu majoritarian party brings new opportunities and challenges to India's soft power. At any rate, not much specific work has been done to understand the role of India's soft power, let alone factoring the contemporary realities.

This paper is by no means aiming to fill this gap through a comprehensive scholarly study on this complex subject. It is a limited exploration to identify some key opportunities and challenges for India in today's context very much from a practical standpoint. We hope it will serve to trigger further research and action.

This paper has benefitted not only from the extensive literature that exists on soft power but also rich conversations with a wide range of experts and practitioners in the world of foreign policy, international relations and global policy-making. It begins with an overview of the concepts of soft and smart power, working under the assumption that the two exist and can be beneficial if utilised effectively. It will then focus primarily on India – its variety of soft power resources and its potential. For this purpose, the paper will break the concept of soft power in the Indian context into two parts: state driven and non-state driven soft power. The paper will then proceed to analyse these resources and interrogate whether India can use its soft power effectively in its quest to become a “great” power in today’s world. This paper recognises that soft power is a broad concept with multiple interpretations; it also recognises that India has too great a number of soft power resources to fit under one umbrella. However, in an attempt to narrow its scope, the paper will focus only on certain key areas of opportunity in the Indian context.

2. Soft Power: An Overview

For the benefit of those who are new to these concepts and to remind readers who need a quick refresher, power is the ability to get people to do something they would not otherwise do.^[1] While the notion of hard power – of warfare and coercion – is an age old one, the term ‘soft power’ has been coined in its contemporary sense at the turn of this century by Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye. He defined soft power as the ‘ability to shape the preferences of others,’^[2] mainly through attraction. In an interdependent world where traditional power resources have become costlier, technology, education and economic growth have risen as important factors

determining a country's power.^[3] The power to influence others *wants*– to make them align their interests with your own – enables an actor to achieve its desired outcome without having to use coercion ("sticks") or inducement ("carrots").^[4] It can do so by capitalising on various assets, such as a country's culture, political values and foreign policy, as well as by legitimising itself to the world and standing beside popular channels of communication. This leads to others admiring the nation and aiming to follow in its footsteps, which increases its power.^[5]

Whilst the term 'soft power' is relatively new, the concept itself is not. It can be argued that historically, ideology – Nazism, fascism, communism, capitalism etc. – and transcontinental institutions have played an equally important role during conflict as aggression and warfare. In today's world, the rising trend towards interdependence and technological advancement has made sticks-and-carrots methods of exerting power more expensive, resulting in a global shift towards soft power. Soft power has been globally recognised as a desired tool for expanding power and is a vital part of every nation's foreign policy. The way a country exerts its soft power is not only limited to its government: in fact, international institutions and transnational corporations play a big role in its enhancement as well. These institutions can not only grant loans and balance trade, but can also disseminate the values and ideology associated with a particular country. For example, American ideology dominates international institutions like the IMF and World Bank, the so-called Bretton Woods institutions, whose headquarters are located in Washington. This, along with the universalisation of American culture – of brands like McDonalds, Coca Cola and Apple – and the vast economic resources possessed by transnational corporations based in the USA, is extremely beneficial in promoting American soft power across the world.

Hard power is the ability to change what others do through coercion or inducement, while soft power is the ability to shape what others want through attraction. Hard power cannot be exercised effectively if soft power – the second face of power – is ignored, because there will always be consequences that come with the manipulation of global interdependence. However, the need for soft power raises with it the question of how to measure it. The concept has long been criticised for being immeasurable, with critics claiming that it is impossible to measure the effect of soft power on policy outcomes.^[6] Nevertheless, it can be argued that calculating a country's spending on public diplomacy, number of Nobel prize winners and foreign immigrants, life expectancy, and various other resources could help measure the extent of its soft power.^[7] Moreover, while soft power may not have a tangible effect on policy outcomes, the idea of *reciprocity* could potentially ensure that it makes a significant difference in gaining favourable outcomes in negotiations.

Soft power, since the time it was coined by Joseph Nye, has become increasingly important in international relations. It is globally recognised as a key aspect of a country's power and is a subtle but underlying determinant in the success or otherwise of a country's foreign policies. In our conversations, we encountered the familiar and legitimate scepticism about soft power, particularly from "realists" in the international relations sphere. But even those who found the concept woolly conceded that some elements of it could be used to good effect as long as it is part of a blended model of soft and hard power. The irony is that Joseph Nye, who was the Assistant Secretary of Defense in the U.S. Government, knew the value of hard power more than most others.

It is evident to us that the notion of soft power is important, real and should be studied further in today's ever-changing world. In this paper, we will be focusing on India as a rising world power and analysing its immense soft power potential, working under the assumption that soft power exists and can be beneficial if utilised efficiently while accepting that it cannot function alone, and is not a substitute for military and economic power. This concept of blended power or smart power is further elaborated in the next section.

3. Smart Power

While proponents of hard power place greater importance on economic sanctions and military intervention, those of soft power focus on using a plethora of assets that promote attraction (by disseminating culture, political values and ideology) to achieve a desired outcome. Although hard and soft power have traditionally been viewed as dichotomous, it must be noted that power has always been a relationship between two actors and their multiple sources of power.^[8] As in any relationship, there is a complex interplay of multiple factors in action, none of which are mutually exclusive. All the different elements are bound to coincide, to complement or interfere with each other. Subsequently, hard power cannot be exercised arbitrarily without paying heed to soft power. The two cannot be separated from one another, since the difference between them is one of degree, not of kind. This combination of hard and soft power, of strong arm pressure and attraction, is known as 'smart power.' Wilson defines it as "the capacity of an actor to combine elements of hard power and soft power in ways that are mutually reinforcing such that the actor's purposes are advanced effectively and efficiently."^[9] Smart power is thus an ideal combination of both hard and soft power.

Changing international conditions have resulted in a complete alteration of the traditional view of power. Developing countries have moved into the centre stage of international relations and the world has become digitised. In a digital world, power is flexible, making it important to have a powerful voice in various channels of communication. This shift towards an 'Information Age' means that non-state actors can also wield power: extremist organisations have boundless access to technology, information and means of warfare.^[10] To cope with this, nation-states need to embrace smart power – the attraction of shared values and goals with the very real support of hard power resources – to engender cooperation.

The United States has long been a proponent of smart power. In fact, one of the main reasons for the successful pursuance of its goals – fuelled by soft power resources such as channels of communication – is because of the country's corresponding hard power, which is well-recognised across the globe. Similarly, nation branding, promotion of culture and public diplomacy constitute important soft power resources. These do have a certain impact on improving a country's standing in the world, but are only truly effective when backed by hard power. Consequently, countries tend to exploit the inherent interconnectedness of the dichotomised faces of power and move towards a more consistent notion of smart power to maximise their potential.

This paper, however, will focus more on studying the soft side of power, while understanding and accepting that the reality is always one of blended power. We will break the concept of soft power into two separate but interconnected parts: state-driven soft power and non-state driven soft power. The segment on state-driven soft

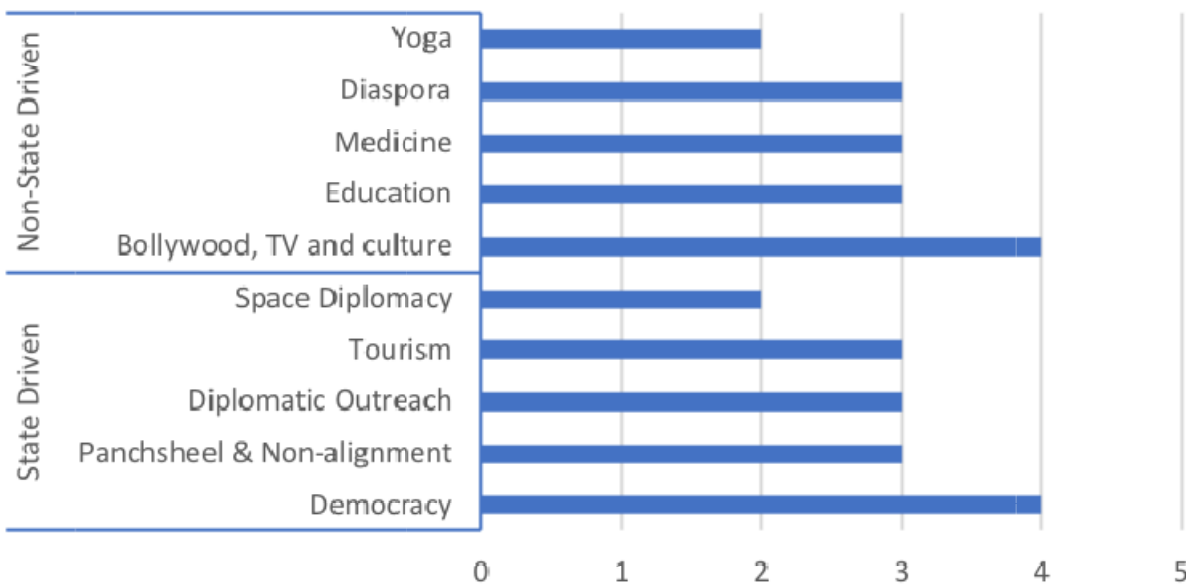
power will involve the role of the Indian government as well as non-state actors backed by it in furthering Indian culture and values – including democratic values, tourism, education and space diplomacy – abroad. Similarly, the non-state driven soft power portion will focus on the soft power resources of the Indian television industry and diaspora. Since soft power is defined as the ability to attract others,^[11] this paper will critically analyse what makes India attractive to other countries whilst simultaneously discussing potential methods to capitalise on it.

4. India's Soft Power Potential

Historically, India has always been a country with immense soft power potential; in fact, soft power in the nation can be traced back to the Cold War, when it used its Nehruvian ideas of non-alignment and peaceful coexistence – *Panchsheel* – to play a hugely influential role in international relations. India paved the way for itself to gain precedence in the geopolitical sphere not through military advancement or securitisation, but by building upon what it learnt during its freedom struggle: Gandhian ideas of non-violence or *ahimsa*, Nehru's Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and the globally acknowledged Non-Aligned Movement. In the early post-independence years, India was widely admired for having secured independence from the British and for standing up for the global South, despite its own internal challenges of extreme poverty and diversity. The use of soft power, which brought with it a sense of moral high ground and legitimacy, thus helped India become an inspiration for developing nations across the globe. Some of the halo remains but obviously much has changed in the last 70 years.

Apart from the literature review, in the absence of any recent large scale perception surveys on this subject, for our paper we undertook a small-scale primary research that involved conducting interviews with a group of about 20 experts – renowned persons in the fields of academia, policy and government, who had already engaged with the concept of soft power. We asked our respondents what they thought constituted both India's biggest soft power resources and its biggest challenges. For the resources segment, there were many key areas of opportunity; what stood out were India's commitment to liberalism and democracy.

Major Sources of India's Soft Power



Findings from primary research - 1

It is evident that India is a strong contender in the field of soft power – with its cultural dissemination through cuisine, classical dance and music, yoga and Ayurveda, festivals and various art forms, and its strong support for the values of democracy and liberalism. However, despite its immense soft power potential, all accounts suggest that India has not been able to efficiently deploy its resources and convert it into “power” to enhance its standing in the world. Research such as the Power Index published by the Lowy Institute rank India fourth for overall power in Asia; surprisingly, it is in the spheres of diplomatic influence and people-to-people diplomacy that India falls short of countries such as Japan and China. For example, India ranked 9th for its number of Asian international students enrolled in 2016-17 – an area of “low diplomacy” that could prove to be extremely beneficial if utilised efficiently. According to the power index, India is an “underachiever” – a country whose resources far exceed its influence.^[12] Based on a wide array of indicators including economic resources, military capability and diplomatic and cultural influence, the power index ranks India 4th out of 25 countries for overall power, with a score of 41.0 (still a considerable distance away from the USA’s score of 84.5).^[13] For cultural influence, it ranked 4th, but its score of 49.0 lagged behind China’s 58.3 and the USA’s 86.7.^[14] What is most surprising, however, is that it is in the sphere of diplomatic influence and people-to-people diplomacy – which are categories of soft power – that India falls short of countries like Japan and China.^[15] The globalisation of education is a prime example of India’s insufficient low diplomacy: according to the index, India has far too few academic exchanges and very limited inflow of international students – which prevents a cross-pollination of ideas – despite being a country that has incredibly high interest from foreign nations.



India's influence remains low despite having a vast number of resources.

Similarly, it is worrying to note that despite doing relatively well in some areas of the power index, India did not even make it to the top 30 countries in the survey "Soft Power 30,"^[16] which ranks countries in the world on the basis of their soft power. This raises the question of why India, a country with a plethora of soft power resources, is unable to transform its resources into tangible outcomes; whether the country's 'soft' aspects are overshadowed by its hard ones.

If we keep in mind Nye's idea of what comprises soft power – culture, political ideology and a good foreign policy, – it is easy to see that India still has immense potential in the field.^[17] India possesses a countless number of soft power resources that could prove to be incredibly beneficial if harnessed properly – while simultaneously preserving any gains made in the sphere so far. Most importantly, while the need for more

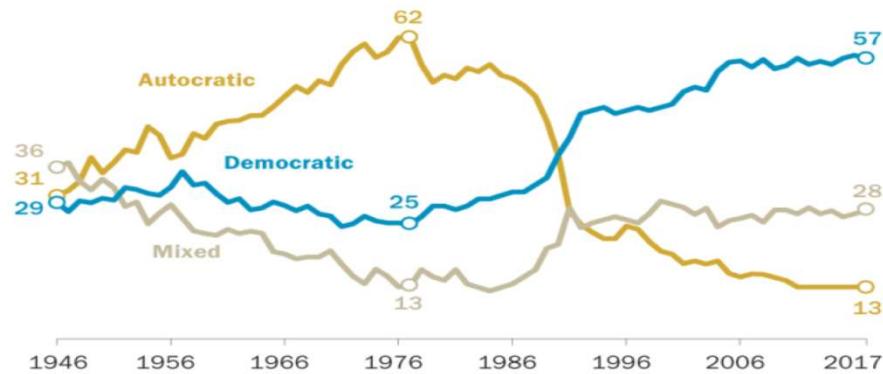
conventional resources such as yoga, Ayurveda, cuisine, cinema and television cannot be denied, the importance of India's less conventional soft power resources – such as its successful satellite launches, its disaster management systems (which have shown exceptional world class capabilities in recent times in Orissa, Kerala and Tamil Nadu) and the role played by its diaspora – must also be stressed upon.

4.1 State-Driven Soft Power

The Indian state, like all other states, plays a big role in promoting soft power – not only by measures taken through state diplomacy, but also through the very structure of the state itself. Being a democracy, at least structurally speaking, is one of India's key advantages, one that connects it to countless other nations through shared beliefs and values. As seen below, according to data provided by the Pew Research Center, 57% of countries with populations of 500,000 and above were democracies at the end of 2017.^[18]

More than half of governments are democracies

% of countries under each regime type, 1946-2017



Note: Data available only for 167 countries included in the Polity IV database. Countries labeled "mixed" have a blend of democratic and autocratic regime characteristics.

Source: Center for Systemic Peace's Polity IV Project.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Data from the Pew Research Center showing that more than half of the 167 countries included with populations of at least 500,000 were democratic at the end of 2017.

Democratic countries are respected by other nations and often do better in the business environment^[19]. India, as the world's largest functioning (albeit self acclaimed) democracy, has been known for its commitment to democratic values and its historic civilisational imprint. It is also one of the biggest contributors to troops for UN peacekeepers and is complimented for its diversity of culture and religion, with an amalgamation of hundreds of dialects and countless religions including but not limited to Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism. This plurality and liberalism is valued by countries across the world, particularly in the West but also those in many parts of Asia and Africa with whom India shares historical and ideological

connections. Moreover, it can be argued that India's support for liberal democracy places it ahead of countries like China in the eyes of the world.

The Government of India also plays a direct role in promoting the country's soft power. The Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) has centres in around 37 countries, including Egypt, Germany, Russia, China and Mexico, the most prominent one being the long standing Nehru Centre in London. These centres focus on organising events that aim to increase people's cultural knowledge of India. More initiatives, such as 'Understanding India' and 'Destination India' are also apparently set to be launched in coming months. Aside from using public knowledge to garner appreciation for India, the Government also connects with its diaspora – a recognised soft power resource – by holding conventions like the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD), which has been celebrated annually since 2003. These conventions utilise activities and dialogue to engage with the overseas Indian community, ensuring they feel involved while simultaneously reminding them of the country's vast soft power resources. In addition to such conventions taking place in India, PBD's are also held at a regional level. In the past, PBD's have been held in countries such as Canada, South Africa, and the USA, acting as an outreach to the diaspora. Notably, these events are also often attended by members of Parliament of the host country. In addition to the promotion of Indian culture globally, the Indian government's foreign policy also naturally attaches great importance to its neighbourhood. Policies like the Act East Policy, the Neighbourhood First Policy and the Connect Central Asia Policy, all have a significant soft power component. The Ministry of External Affairs has a Public Diplomacy Division that has specific responsibility for the soft power elements.

Similar to its democratic strength, India's predominance in technological affairs and space diplomacy is another primarily state-driven soft power resource with immense potential. With its *Mangalyaan* mission in 2013 and its launch of PSLV-C37 (104 satellites in a single rocket) in 2017, India's space initiatives have garnered appreciation across the globe – in particular, the launch of the South Asian satellite (previously called the SAARC satellite) by the Indian Space Research Organisation, which is meant to serve the purposes of all SAARC countries except Pakistan. India's exceptional space technology thus provides cheaper and more cost-effective alternatives to developing countries to launch satellites, and in the case of the South Asian satellite, to reap the benefits of a common satellite. For the South Asian satellite, member countries only have to bear the cost of their independent operating ground systems, while having the opportunity to send representatives to be part of an intergovernmental team for the management of the satellite. This is beneficial to all member countries, especially those such as Bhutan and the Maldives who do not have their own space programmes and aim to emulate India's example. If utilised effectively, India's space diplomacy can help further its interests and strengthen bilateral and multilateral relations both within South Asia and internationally in the global south. Moreover, its satellites can also help deal with disaster management, a trait which is necessitated by powerful issues like climate change. An example of this could be the satellite-enabled Cyclone Warning Centers and other remote-sensing facilities that have helped preempt natural disasters and thus allowed for adequate action to take place. In line with New Delhi's neighbourhood-first foreign policy initiative, these facilities could enhance their scope to include India's neighbours. Measures like these would not only benefit the region at an environmental scale, but would also help strengthen India's role within the region. Space diplomacy

thus carries with it a lot of potential; it is an aspect of India that can be utilised to further its standing in the world.

Another way the Indian state can improve its soft power outreach is by focusing on tourism, a resource which is thoroughly underutilised in the country. The tourism /campaign *Incredible India* is a rare example of a powerful and innovative initiative from the government. But there is huge potential to do more in this arena. Oddly enough, tourism is not listed as a subject in either the Union, State or Concurrent lists of the Government, falling between stools and causing operational challenges. Tourism requires careful strategic coordination not just between Governments at all levels but also with citizens groups and with local communities. Tourism, as an instrument of soft power, can be used to influence diplomatic relations between India and other nations; in particular, Asian countries that share similar cultural and religious beliefs. Besides increasing revenue and popularising Indian culture, increased tourist levels would bring with it the spinoff benefit of connecting with other countries at a cultural and spiritual level, which will subsequently lead to stronger ties.

India has a civilisational connect with various Asian countries that it can utilise to enhance its standing in the world. Buddhism – which originated in India – is massively popular in Japan, most of South-East Asia and Nepal. The huge influence of Buddhism in these countries provides them with a spiritual link with India, whose culture has historically been disseminated through Buddhist teachings.^[20] *Bodh Gaya*, said to be the place where Buddha attained enlightenment, is one of the most important Buddhist pilgrimage sites. But there are many more including Sarnath in U.P. and so many locations in Odisha.

The capabilities of India's state and government at the national and state levels offers enormous learning and training opportunities for developing country governments from across the world. We have referenced federalism, satellite launching and disaster management as few emblematic areas.

4.2 Non-State Driven Soft Power

The best soft power initiatives are rarely state-driven. This could be through private institutions or individuals. It is hard to measure the benefits of soft power propagated solely by individuals. Institutions can promote soft power to help ensure tangible outcomes, while simultaneously measuring and analysing the effectiveness of steps that have been taken. India has an abundance of powerful institutions that can push for its soft power, including its think tanks and NGOs, the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), and Bollywood. One of India's most powerful sources of soft power is its diaspora which is made up of individuals but is also a collective force.

Out of these, Bollywood has proudly been one of India's key soft power resources, with unparalleled popularity not just with the South Asian and Indian diaspora but also in the Middle East, parts of Africa and even as far as Latin America. However, what is less known is the popularity of Indian soap operas outside India – particularly in countries such as Afghanistan, Vietnam and parts of Africa. In Afghanistan, there is a lack of indigenous television series; this results in a vacuum that is filled by international media. Of these, Indian soap operas – in particular, the infamous *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* – is the most popular. Although the popularity of Indian shows have received

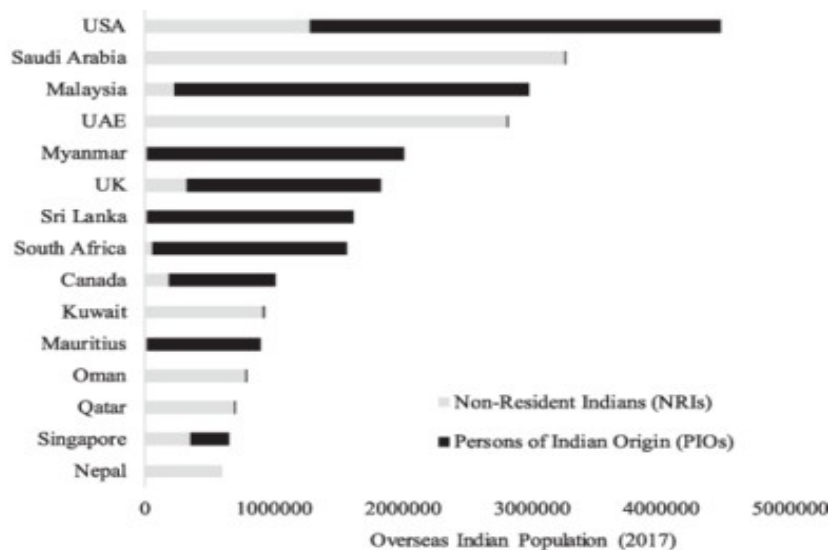
severe criticism from the Afghan government for posing a threat to Afghani values and culture, it does not seem to ebb.

The situation in Vietnam is similar. In 2015, Google released a list of the most widely-searched terms in various countries of the world.^[21] According to the list, the Vietnamese-dubbed version of the popular Indian soap *Balika Vadhu – Co Dau 8 Tuoi* was incredibly famous, consistently topping Vietnamese charts since 2013. In fact, *Balika Vadhu* runs in sixteen languages across eighteen countries, including Swahili and Serbian.^[22] Evidently, international audiences have taken a liking to Indian television series. From the time when China became one of the first foreign countries to open its doors to Indian television over a decade ago, the industry has expanded tenfold, resulting in an equivalent increase in opportunities for India's four big domestic channels: Zee, Sony, Colors and Star TV^[23]. As the Economic Times, producer Rajan Shashi said: "The market has grown beyond our Asian diaspora. Television represents more Indian culture and more Indian than our films."

The rising popularity of Indian television – which is the dissemination of Indian culture in the most basic way – is a key soft power resource that could warm the hearts of those living abroad and cause them to subconsciously support India. This can be discerned by the fact that one in six Vietnamese people view India in a favourable light^[24]. Although this perception could be based on a variety of factors, the possibility of widespread appreciation of Indian television in Vietnam playing a role in the same cannot be denied. Appreciation of Indian cinema and television could also lead to a greater understanding and appreciation for its culture, which could potentially deepen the bonds between the two countries by the development of understanding at an

individual, people-to-people level. As far as we can tell, this potential, however, has not yet been leveraged by India and harnessed for foreign policy purposes in any systematic way.

The Indian diaspora (we group Indian nationals and people of Indian origin together for this purpose) has a big role to play in enhancing India's standing abroad. It has the power to facilitate dialogue and engender cooperation by transcending borders. As shown in the diagram below, millions of people of Indian descent reside in countries like the United States of America, the U.K., Canada, South East Asia and even some island states in the Caribbean and the Pacific. The oil rich Gulf countries in the Middle East have a huge Indian guest worker population (in most cases far larger than the local population).



Main countries of residence of the Indian diaspora in 2017, with data from Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) [25]

Many of the CEOs of corporate giants are or have been Indians: PepsiCo, McKinsey, MasterCard, Diageo, not to mention many larger numbers at the C-Suite level as a whole. In the information technology world, Indians or Indian origin executives have a huge footprint with the heads of some of the largest corporations being Indian including Google, Microsoft and Adobe. Indians - faculty and students - have a significant presence in terms of quantity and quality in the top academic institutions and knowledge tanks in the English speaking world. The Dean of Harvard Business School, the recent Nobel Prize winner for Economics at MIT, the previous RBI Governor in Chicago, the Nobel Prize winner for chemistry a few years ago, are all in this long list of luminaries.

Similarly, Indian art and culture is popularised by fashion designers such as Sabyasachi and Manish Malhotra and artists such as Pandit Ravi Shankar and A.R. Rahman, all of whom are recognised worldwide. The Indian diaspora, which is known for its achievements, has helped strengthen India's position in the world by causing an increased respect for India, its culture and diversity, and its quality of education across the globe. This is a relatively recent phenomenon as Indian emigres to the richer countries started to come from the more educated professional class, particularly doctors and engineers. Traditionally, the vast majority of the Indian diaspora were either petty traders or labourers who had little formal education and struggled to make ends meet. In the west they were often the butt of ridicule as the corner shop and/or cheap motel owners. The notable exceptions were Indians who went as teachers to Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria and a few other African countries as well as Indonesia where

Indians have earned respect with the older population because of their association with knowledge and learning.

Similar to the power of institutions is the power of individuals in strengthening India's soft power, also known as low diplomacy. There are various instances where the two intersect: for example, individuals are vital for promoting cross-country educational exchanges, but this cannot be accomplished without institutions in place that permit them to do so.

Low diplomacy – which can form bonds based on commonalities in culture and spiritualism, or simply gain appreciation for India – is thus vital in the promotion of soft power. The power of the diaspora to connect with people of different cultures and with different value systems is one of India's most important – and most underutilised – resources. When talking about the power of the diaspora, the Ministry for Overseas Indians said that the best way to implement India's soft power is for the diaspora "to showcase its social, political, and cultural assets abroad." One such cultural asset is Yoga, which is a continually growing trend in today's world and has recently gained powerful additions in the form of Ayurveda and integrated medical tourism. An example of this is the recent visit of Prince Charles and his partner to a holistic health retreat in Bengaluru. However, although India has an abundance of these soft power resources, the diaspora can only do so much without state-driven initiatives in place to further their interests. Although the line between state driven and non-state driven soft power is blurry, for the purpose of clarity, this paper demarcates the two. A possible way, then, that the power of the people could be built upon by the Indian Government is by furthering educational exchanges between states, which have been successful in

creating lasting bonds between countries in the past. Educational exchanges facilitate the cross-pollination of culture at the people-to-people level, which can help garner appreciation and, at the larger scale, translate into diplomatic efforts and economic cooperation. Multiple Heads of State have studied in India, including Aung San Suu Kyi from Myanmar, General Hussain Muhammad Ershad of Bangladesh, John Samuel Malecela of Tanzania, Sitiveni Rabuka of Fiji and countless others, hailing from places as diverse as Bhutan and Nepal to Ghana and Malawi. These leaders all have a special connection with India, which results in better diplomatic relations. The example of former Afghan President, Hamid Karzai, is an extremely relevant one. India provides 1000 Afghan students with scholarships to pursue their higher education annually. Afghani elites like to send their children to study in India, many of whom become diplomats and government officials. Similarly, the Fulbright Scholarship programme is an example of how the US used this lever to its hilt. These empirical examples highlight how this cross-pollination leads to a warmer friendship between the two countries. India should extend a similar olive branch to other countries across the globe; the higher influx of international students will lead to an increased revenue, and it will have a lasting impact from the soft power angle. It has to be noted, however, that not only has India cut back on this, but it has also made life increasingly difficult for foreign students and scholars with visa restrictions and in many cases, Xenophobic attacks – particularly against African students. Growing security concerns for female students is also an additional concern. In short, although low diplomacy is a promising way to heighten India's soft power, there is much work to be done even at the domestic level to effectively utilise it.

5. Moving Forward: Can India Leverage it's full Soft Power Potential?

There is virtually no nation which does not possess soft power. But as is clear from the previous sections, because of its rich historical and civilisational uniqueness and it's proud place as a moral and political leader in the fight against colonialism and injustice, India has a huge handicap, endowed with exceptional soft power potential. On the soft power front, it is indeed a "super power" in the developing world.

We are left with two troubling questions as we look ahead, the first being that despite having a great reservoir of soft power and an even greater potential to grow it further, why India has singularly failed to adequately benefit from it. The second and much more consequential one is whether under the current regime which fundamentally believes and practises hard power domestically and with its neighbours, there is any possibility of India better leveraging it's soft power.

The first question requires careful study in of itself and is not a focus of this paper. But it is clear from the previous sections that the state in the last few decades, regardless of the party in power, has done very little to grow India's state-driven soft power and even less in terms of enabling the non-state driven soft power. An important aspect of state-driven power is it's diplomatic arm both in the multilateral domain and through it's embassies and other initiatives in the bilateral domain. India has historically stood firmly with the G77, non-alignment and the voices from the global south on the international stage. Unfortunately over time, Indian delegates earned the reputation as procedurally

competent and clever but frequently defensive and self-serving in their approach. They often came across as self-obsessed and sometimes downright arrogant. The diaspora almost always experienced Indian embassies as inefficient, bureaucratic and even unfriendly. None of this was helpful in building up India's soft power. The clientelistic networks of the most powerful bureaucrats and politicians and their families in Delhi and regional capitals in India reproduced itself in key global capitals and the non-state soft power whether industry, culture or arts as institutions or diaspora members as individuals rarely got thoughtful and consistent support from the state. Most of their successes were despite and not because of the state. This is partially why leveraging did not take place and India's soft power potential remained untapped.

Soft power – the ability to shape the preferences of others – is regarded as the power of attraction. The soft power of a country, using Nye's framework comprises of three aspects: its culture, political values and foreign policies. In today's world, the United States – previously a soft power hegemon – is facing a sharp decline in its soft power. This is commonly attributed to the election of Donald Trump – following which American soft power dropped three places in the Soft Power Index – and his 'America First' policy that followed suit. The United States' agenda of trade protectionism and zero-sum unilateralism has gone against the values it once stood for. Its commitment to human rights has been overshadowed by economic nationalism, evident by its decision to leave the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and to reduce foreign aid, as well as by its harsh immigration policy. Alongside the UNHRC, the USA has withdrawn from the Paris climate accord and the Iran nuclear deal. It has also threatened to pull out of the World Trade Organisation and allegedly has plans for deeper cuts to the State Department. These actions contradict the USA's ideals of

liberalism, cooperation and multilateralism – it has shown the world that America, a country which has gone against its ideals, no longer has any moral authority or diplomatic capability. People have begun to question the country's legitimacy.^[26] Consequently, the USA has fallen from 12th to 16th in the Government sub-index.^[27] Although Trump's 'America First' policy may have short term economic benefits for the country, it has the potential of harming its long-term strategic interests by eroding its soft power, which is evidenced by the USA ranking 21st – making it one of the bottom three – in polling data that determined favourability towards a country.^[28]

Moreover, the rise of right-wing groups and hate crimes in America's domestic political arena have also had detrimental effects on its soft power. This has led to a vacuum in the geopolitical sphere, which paved the way for nations like China to fill up the vacuum. China has already begun its ascent onto the front stage of international relations. The "hide your strength bide your time" phase for China is over and China under President Xi is an entirely transformed animal - confident and expansionist. It is promoting its culture by successfully opening hundreds of Confucius Institutes across the globe, which constitute part of a larger international re-branding initiative. [29] In an attempt to increase its soft power, it has ratcheted up investments to further its relationship with various countries, and has been focusing on its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to connect Asia, Africa and Europe in order to increase trade and economic growth. The success of BRI would give China immense power, and could potentially lead to the country gradually becoming top dog, replacing the United States.

Similarly, India is a country with considerable soft power potential; although we have to understand that comparing it to China, a country that is much more powerful in

economic and military terms, is a bit delusional. Nevertheless, its potential cannot be denied, even though its weakening democracy at home could prove to be a big challenge. When we asked our respondents what they thought constituted the biggest challenges to India's soft power, the most common answer was religious intolerance and the increased number of hate crimes – both of which erode India's traditional democratic and secular values. India, under the current regime has become increasingly aggressive towards any form of dissent and the foundational checks and balances of any healthy democracy i.e. independent media, judiciary, civil society etc. The country's handling of domestic disputes – including but not limited to caste-based violence, lynching over beef allegations, rights of adivasis and taking away Kashmir's special status have all taken its toll on India's soft power.^[30] On almost all global democracy indices like Freedom House^[31], Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem)^[32] – where it dropped in rankings from 70th to 85th in the liberal democracy index –, Reporters Without Borders^[33] – falling from 133th to 140th from 2016 to 2019 for world press freedom –, India's ranking has slipped in recent years. In fact, they raise an important concern that many share: whether or not India remains a democracy in spirit. There is little doubt that all of this has damaged India's soft power image globally.^[34]

It is hard to take any 'soft' Indian initiatives seriously when India behaves with a sort of cognitive dissonance. Moreover, human rights violations and violence within the country could effectively lessen its standing in the world stage and could even result in the imposition of sanctions. If looked at domestically, the Indian state, irrespective of the party in power, has never been soft on its detractors but the current regime has taken it to another level entirely. It is often described as the imposition of an undeclared emergency and all indications are that it will only get worse.

Even as the domestic democracy deficit is growing, the current regime has alienated pretty much all its neighbours, some by choice, others by bungling. The collapse of constitutional morality, in particular, has reduced India's standing in the eyes of its neighbours. The country's 'Neighbourhood First' policy was meant to prioritise improved relations with its immediate neighbours, but in reality its relationships are at an all-time low. No government in India has had the courage of finding a way of ending its conflict with Pakistan and Pakistan hasn't helped either. The elite on both sides of the border find many benefits for themselves in keeping this conflict simmering. For India's current Hindu nationalist regime, attacking Pakistan as a Muslim state and a historical enemy, is a core part of its identity. With the unprovoked stripping of Kashmir's special status and rights of the people of Kashmir, India has consciously chosen to further alienate Pakistan and China.

The neighbouring country that we looked at more closely for the purpose of this paper was Nepal, as India's long-standing ally with probably the greatest socio-cultural congruence, and strongest social and economic and political relationships. Off the record discussions in Kathmandu with a small number of key leaders in government, civil society and business revealed the historical soft power of India has been pretty much decimated, despite ongoing cultural links and open borders after the blockade of 2015. The blockade, which Nepal claims was imposed by India after it adopted a new constitution, led to shortages essential supplies and isolated the nation. This alienation now spans all generations even the older people who have strong religious links into Hindu holy shrines in India. The prices of fuel and medicine skyrockets and scarcity affected not just the poor but also the rich. So while Indian soaps and

Bollywood films continue to be part of the normal Nepali diet, there is palpable hostility against India which will be hard to reverse for some time to come.

There are even whispers of RSS camps operating in Nepal from across the border which are being closely monitored by the government. A commonly heard line was that India and Nepal's past and future are permanently linked as one cannot change one's neighbour. The relationship between the two governments were described as "normalised" but the fact is that there is complete mistrust in the current regime in Delhi and a deep sense of betrayal. For many in the establishment in Nepal, the main issue with Delhi's foreign policy makers and leaders has always been that of arrogance and treating Nepal as a vassal state. 'They haven't come to terms with the fact that this is not the Nepal of the 1950s when India had its own cabinet minister in the Nepal government and made all major decisions. The new reality of a legitimately elected government that is stable is impossible for India to reconcile with,' we were told. Most decision makers in the leftist ruling government in Nepal fundamentally disagree with the Hindutva driven authoritarian style of the current Delhi regime but there is a good working arrangement on a day to day basis now that Nepal has put down its red lines.

The actions of the current regime in Delhi have pushed Nepal into the arms of China. With the new infrastructure, roads, ports and military agreements signed by China, there is a complete rebalancing of power with India. The massive reception for President Xi. during his recent visit, not just by the government but by the people of Nepal had the sense of a rebound relationship by a spurned lover. China's footprint is already pervasive: Mandarin is compulsory in the education system that receives Chinese funding, Confucius centres unobtrusively spread Chinese soft power. Government

staff are taken in droves to Beijing ostensibly for 'training.' Nepali authorities made it a point to tell us that neither India nor China will be allowed to use Nepali territory to destabilise each other, but the Chinese are not known to offer free lunches.

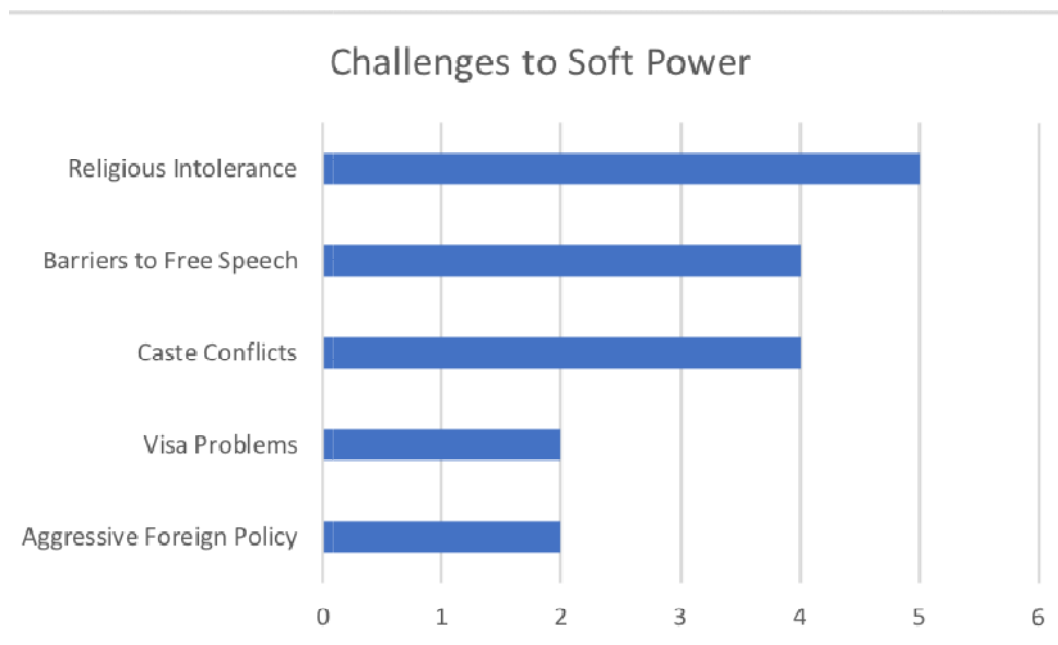
Similarly, India's relationship with Sri Lanka depends on the effect of the Sri Lanka election outcome that has seen the return of Rajapaksa. Despite there being many similarities between the two strongmen Gotabaya and Modi, and although there has been a sense of bonhomie following the visit of India's Foreign Minister Jaishankar to Colombo and the new President Gotabaya to Delhi, there remains much to be worried about. Moreover, all is not well even with the country's relationships with nations like Bhutan and the Maldives, which are often touted as success stories by the Indian government.

In short, there are big question marks on the soft power front for India in South Asia and its super assertive and powerful eastern neighbour.

The rise of hate crimes and weakening democracy in India also bring to the forefront a very intriguing question: does the 'new' India even *want* to be a soft power? Many people are of the opinion that India wants to break free from its historical 'softness,' characterised by panchsheel and non-alignment, and portray itself as a rising hard power in the world. The Indian PM missing the second successive NAM Summit is a clear message as is India openly aligning itself with Israel. It can further be argued that Jaishankar's Goenka memorial speech, which talks about India's diplomatic agenda, its place in the world and the future of its foreign policy, sounds like the death knell for soft power in Indian foreign policy.^[35] But for the purpose of this paper, we are

assuming that India does want to be a soft power and aims to leverage it to improve its standing in the world.

Focusing on the challenges posed to India's soft power, the findings from our primary research highlight that domestic issues and international relations are not, in fact, mutually exclusive.



Findings from primary research - 2

The two directly affect each other. This can also be seen by India's worsening relationship with some of its neighbours due to its handling of domestic issues. As mentioned earlier, Indo-Pak relations have been at an all-time low since the Government of India decided to neuter Article 370 of the Indian Constitution. Pakistan observed this 15th August – India's Independence Day – as a Black Day, with a massive

protest organised outside the Indian High Commission in Islamabad. Similar protests were seen in London. India has also been on thin ice with Bangladesh – who has historically been a friendly neighbour – due to India's implementation of the NRC, which deemed millions of Indian citizens 'illegal Bangladeshi immigrants' and effectively rendered them stateless. Thus, India's domestic dealings have caused friction in the South-Asian neighbourhood. This is compounded by issues like the country's cosying up with Israel, which could risk alienating friendly Muslim states. All of these have the potential to cause significant friction in the region.

Like China, India has the unique reality of having its diaspora in most of South-East Asia, which is helpful in progressing soft power but can also often create tensions. The risk of tension can be increased by India's foreign policy – one of the three pillars of soft power – which is extremely aggressive. Experts from the ASEAN region told us how India tries to extend its role as the regional hegemon of South Asia to South East Asia and ends up isolating itself from the other countries in the region. For example, the Indian Government is known to stall multilateral agreements and block the movement of labour. The fact that India wants to push free movement for its labour while resisting labour from other countries entering India is also a source of irritation in the region. In general, most of the elites and members of the foreign policy establishment in the South East Asian context are seen to be in a wait-and-watch mode with India, who they generally perceive as being unreliable and stubborn. It is important to focus on the image that is portrayed to other nations, because that can have a big impact on India's soft power. All of these factors must be effectively dealt with before seriously pursuing any soft power initiatives.

Democracy can prove to be an immense soft power resource if it is leveraged efficiently. For this, India needs to fix its democracy at home, focusing on internal corruption and lawlessness and its external image – which is of a very inward-looking country that does not want to engage much internationally except to protect and promote its own interests or to seek acknowledgement for its contributions (a view fairly widely held off the record inside the UN system as well). It is only once India starts remediating these issues and fully utilises its soft power resources that other countries will view India in a good light and take any 'soft' initiatives furthered by the state into serious consideration.

There does exist the argument that soft power lies in the eyes of the beholder. India's joining of the jingoistic majoritarian club exudes a certain appeal to those who share its sentiments – as evidenced by the number of supporters present at the *Howdy Modi* Summit with Trump in Houston this year. It is still unclear whether India's actions will have any ramifications in a world where the number of countries with elected authoritarians and right wing populism has been growing. It has also been argued that these things don't stick e.g. the bounce back of U.S. soft power post the invasion of Iraq with the arrival of Obama. But seeing the result that similar issues – increased hate crimes etc. – had on the soft power of the United States, it is important for India to address them and take measures to adequately tackle them.

It is also important to note that India currently faces pressure on multiple fronts – military, economic and 'soft'. The obstacles to soft power are compounded by things like the economic slowdown, which itself affects India's ability to influence others, and military pressure caused by friction in South Asia. In conclusion, our work has

resoundingly reaffirmed the immense potential of India's soft power. There is also no doubt that there is today an incredible leadership opportunity on the world stage that India, with its unique historical soft power advantage, should be seizing. This paper has sought to unpack this potential and identify a few high return best bet pathways. But despite our best efforts to come up with an ambitious and positive plan to capitalise on this exceptional global moment in time, it is evident that India currently lacks an enabling environment for the successful promotion of its soft power. Even if we accept that the world of international relations embodies the *Dwaita* philosophy and has mastered the art of living with contradictions and selectively looking the other way, no state can sustain being a bully domestically and with its neighbours and don a soft power mask internationally at the same time. There is no hope of changing the regime characteristics and turning this situation around in the near future and we need to come to terms with this reality.

It cannot be denied that the country's hard power is on the rise; India needs to complement this with a similar increase in its soft power to ensure a beneficial tangible outcome. In order to salvage the current situation, India will have to use a multi-pronged approach in the medium to long term – perhaps by focusing on combining its hard and soft power into a smart power initiative – in order to avoid losing its legitimacy (which is vital for soft power) in the world. For example, it can continue to expand its economic influence throughout the globe, while also focusing on strengthening relations with its diaspora and improving diplomatic outreach. Using India's huge market to leverage power offers new potential as well, although it would require the country to clean up its act for western investors – particularly in the spheres of human rights and environmental protections. Similarly, using its FDI abroad is not insignificant as a point

of leverage and can manifest into a part of a combined smart power initiative. Until then, however, it is more realistic for India to place its current focus on preserving the soft power gains it has made over the years – by relying on non-state actors.

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