



IIAS Public Governance Series Vol. 7

VIKSIT BHARAT

@ 2 0 4 7

GOVERNANCE TRANSFORMED



C.K. MATHEW, SURENDRA NATH TRIPATHI
C. SHEELA REDDY & A.P. SINGH

Viksit Bharat @2047

Governance Transformed

C. K. MATHEW, SURENDRA NATH TRIPATHI, C. SHEELA
REDDY, A. P. SINGH, EDITORS

Mathew, C.K., Tripathi, Surendra Nath, Reddy, C. Sheela, and Singh, A.P. (2025), *Viksit Bharat @ 2047: Governance Transformed*, IIAS Public Governance Series (Vol. 7, 2nd ed.), Brussels: IIAS-IISA, 717+xvi p.

© Mathew, C.K., Reddy, C. Sheela, Tripathi, Surendra Nath, Singh, A.P., and the authors of the individual chapters, 2025. The views expressed in this book are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect those of the institutions they were or are associated with.

Published under a CC BY licence agreement by
The International Institute of Administrative Sciences, Brussels,
2025, <http://www.iias-iisa.org/>



IIAS Public Governance Series
Vol. 7, 2nd Edition
Series Editor: Steve Troupin
(IIAS)

ISBN: 9798306547237; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46996/pgs.v7e2>

Chapter 9. The Medium Is “More” than the Message

Dr. Sanjeev Chopra³⁵

In an age where the “medium is more than the message,”³⁶ the obsession with trying to understand anything and everything in terms of “easy-to-understand categories” with easily identifiable performance parameters has its pros and cons: classification makes it easier to understand complex realities, but the counterfactual is equally significant—the context and perspective are often lost. Thus, we grade nations, or regions within nations on multiple parameters like GDP,³⁷ GNP,³⁸ GHI,³⁹

³⁵ Dr. Sanjeev Chopra is retired civil servant

³⁶ “The medium is the message” is a phrase coined by the Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan and the name of the first chapter in his book *Understanding media: The extensions of man*, published in 1964. Joseph Nye popularised the concept of “soft power” in the late 1980s by postulating that “Power is the ability to influence the behaviour of others to get the outcomes.”

³⁷ Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is now a commonly accepted measure to capture the economic development of a country. Some economists prefer to look at GDP per capita, rather than the overall GDP.

³⁸ Gross National Product (GNP) refers to the total value of all the goods and services produced by the residents and businesses of a country, irrespective of the location of production. GNP takes into account the investments made by the businesses and residents of the country, living both inside and outside the country.

³⁹ “Gross National Happiness” is a term coined by His Majesty the Fourth King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, in the 1970s. The concept implies that economic indices are not the only measure to understand whether people are “happy” or not. It has now been adopted by the UN.

EoL,⁴⁰ transparency, human rights, calorific count to meet nutrition parameters, access to justice, preparedness for disaster, health, education, and so on. At the end of the year, we offer bouquets to those who have improved their ranking, and the helmsmen of those who lose out receive brickbats. Having said this, some categories are more amenable to measurement while others are more nebulous. Thus, while it is possible to measure financial inclusion or internet penetration or calorific intake or the number of fighter aircraft, the ability to understand the impact of civilisational values in the context of a nation's cultural influence in its immediate, extended, and global spheres with terms like soft or smart power is fraught with epistemological issues because civilisational values predate the conceptual category of soft power.

What Is Soft Power?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “soft power” as “power (of a nation state or alliance, etc.) deriving from economic and cultural influence, rather than coercion or military strength.” Joseph Nye popularised the concept of “soft power” in the late 1980s by postulating that “Power is the ability to influence the behaviour of others to get the outcomes you want” (Nye, 1990). There are several ways to achieve this: one can coerce others with threats; one can induce them with payments; or one can attract and co-opt them to want what one wants. This soft

⁴⁰ “Ease of Living” refers to the overall quality of life that individuals and communities experience, encompassing economic, social, environmental, and cultural variables. It is a term that is frequently used to assess the liveability of a city or country.

power⁴¹—getting others to want the outcomes one wants—co-opts people rather than coerces them. Soft power contrasts with “hard power”—the use of coercion and payment. Soft power can be wielded not just by states but also by all actors in international politics, such as NGOs or international institutions. It is also considered by some an example of the “second face of power,” which indirectly allows one to obtain the outcomes one wants. A country’s soft power, according to Nye, rests 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 others see them as legitimate and having moral authority)” (Nye, 2009).

Soft power resources are the assets that produce attraction, which often leads to acquiescence. Nye asserts that “seduction is always more effective than coercion, and many values like democracy, human rights, and individual opportunities are deeply seductive” (Nye, 2009).

The Civilisational Values of Bharat Predate the Nation-State of India

However, for any discussion on India’s soft power in the contemporary setting, we have to look at the civilisational values of Bharat. As mentioned earlier, Joseph Nye came up with the definition only in 1990. A hundred years before that, Swami Vivekananda’s stirring address at the World Parliament

⁴¹ A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries—admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness—want to follow it. In this sense, it is also important to set the agenda and attract others in world politics, and not only to force them to change by threatening military force or economic sanctions. This soft power—getting others to want the outcomes that you want—co-opts people rather than coerces them.

of Religions in Chicago in 1893⁴² created a sense of deep respect, wonderment, and adoration for India even when it was under the rule of the British. Gurudev's *Geetanjali*⁴³ received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913, and the Mahatma⁴⁴ became an icon of peace, non-violence and "truth" well before India became a republic. Even before this, Max Mueller⁴⁵ and Herman Hesse,⁴⁶ among others, had made the wisdom of the Upanishads and of Gautama Buddha known to the world at large. India's civilisational values, from dance forms and epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* to traditions in music, healing, martial arts, and governance principles from the *Shanti Parva* and Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, influenced regions far beyond its modern political boundaries. These cultural and philosophical contributions were prevalent well before the Republic of India was defined by Article 1 and the First Schedule of its Constitution.

⁴²The World Parliament of Religions (WPR) was held in Chicago in September 11-27, 1893, as part of the World's Columbian Exposition. The WPR is considered the first organised interfaith gathering and the birthplace of the modern interfaith movement. The event brought together representatives of 10 religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shintoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, to find common ground.

⁴³ Internationally, *Gitanjali* (in Bengali) is Tagore's best-known collection of poetry, for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913. Tagore was the first non-European to receive a Nobel Prize in Literature and the second non-European to receive a Nobel Prize, after Theodore Roosevelt.

⁴⁴ The title of "Mahatma" was given to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi by Rabindranath Tagore, the Bengali poet, author, and philosopher. Tagore first used the title in a letter to Gandhi in 1915, writing, "To the one whom India's millions call Mahatma—to him my grateful homage."

⁴⁵ Friedrich Max Müller was a British philologist and Orientalist of German origin. He was one of the founders of the Western academic disciplines of Indology and religious studies. Müller wrote both scholarly and popular works on the subject of Indology.

⁴⁶ Hermann Karl Hesse was a German-Swiss poet, novelist, and painter. *Siddhartha: An Indian novel* is a 1922 novel by Hermann Hesse that deals with the spiritual journey of self-discovery of a man named Siddhartha during the time of the Gautama Buddha.

Public Diplomacy in Democratic Polity

Another proposition needs to be articulated at this juncture. Gone are the days and times when the relations between countries were based solely on the personal whims and fancies of the sovereign and the ruling elites. These days the larger public, as well as civil society and markets, also play an equally important role in determining the relationships between sovereign nations. Nations make conscious efforts to make themselves and their way of life more acceptable to those they are interacting with. The English or the American way of life thus becomes an attraction. This is where public diplomacy—a set of mechanisms through which a country's foreign policy positions are transmitted to its target audiences—becomes a salient factor. This involves looking at outreach in the near to short, medium, and long term. According to Joseph Nye, public diplomacy “is neither mere propaganda nor a public-relations campaign. It involves building long-term relationships that create an enabling environment for government policies.” The first and most immediate dimension is daily communications, which involves explaining the context of domestic and foreign policy decisions. This dimension also involves preparation for dealing with crises. The second dimension is strategic communication, which develops a set of simple themes, much as a political or advertising campaign does. While the first dimension is measured in hours and days, the second occurs over weeks, months, and even years. The third dimension of public diplomacy is the development of lasting relationships with key individuals over many years or even decades, through scholarships, exchanges, training, seminars, conferences, and access to media channels. India has done well in the first two dimensions, but more work needs to be done with respect to the third. We are getting there, but it will require a holistic and coordinated strategy for the same.

In the near to short run, Prime Minister Modi⁴⁷ has made the best possible use of his social media handles in communicating India's priorities and expectations—through and beyond COVID, during the G20 presidency,⁴⁸ during his foreign travels and whenever heads of state and government have visited India. He has also shared his thoughts on an entire range of subjects—from the preservation of the environment to the promotion of Yoga and Sanskrit. The current External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and his predecessor Sushma Swaraj⁴⁹ were equally adept at using the Twitter (now X) handle, not just to communicate, but also to respond to issues raised by citizens. The way India has been able to evacuate her expats during difficult situations—whether in Kuwait or Ukraine—has added to India's soft power because a nation which can exercise its power and influence well beyond the confines of its own geography also builds respect for itself in the comity of nations.

Looking Beyond Borders: History, Geography, and Capability

The reference to geography is important, for the prime determinant of a nation-state is its “defined territory.” Ambassador

⁴⁷ The only Prime Minister (after Nehru) to have been elected for a third consecutive term in 2024. Earlier, he was the Chief Minister of Gujarat state from 2001 to 2014.

⁴⁸ The G20 Summit is held annually with a rotating presidency, and in 2023, India held the presidency. The group does not have a permanent secretariat and is supported by the previous, current, and future holders of the presidency, known as the troika. Brazil is the current chair and hosting the 2024 summit.

⁴⁹ Sushma Swaraj served as the Minister of External Affairs of India in the first Narendra Modi government from 2014 to 2019. After Jawaharlal Nehru, she was the second person to complete a five-year term as the Minister of External Affairs.

Viswanathan⁵⁰ states that the three main factors which determine the foreign policy of a country include its geography, history and capabilities. "Geography is a given." As they say, a country cannot choose its neighbours, and engagements and conflicts are always more pronounced with neighbours. This also fits well with the Mandala theory expounded in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. Securing a nation's border and having a full granary are the hallmarks of a successful sovereign. For Kautilya, power is threefold: MANTRANA SHAKTI (power of counsel and diplomacy) being the most important, followed by PRABHU SHAKTI (power of treasury and army), and finally UTSAH SHAKTI (power of valour). While military and economic power is important, the decision to use the right foreign policy instrument based on the context is critical for success. This is reminiscent of Joseph Nye's conceptualisation of "hard," "soft," and "smart" power. He emphasises the need for smart strategies that combine the full spectrum of soft and hard power through what he calls "contextual intelligence" —the intuitive diagnostic skill that helps policymakers align tactics with objectives to create smart strategies. The geography of a land has an intimate connection with its history. The external borders and internal boundaries of a nation are never frozen in time, and neither the highest mountains nor the deepest blue waters have prevented the movement of people, ideas, trade, and commerce. As history determines mind sets, outlooks, and vision, the construction of the historical narrative⁵¹ is of paramount importance and can be well illustrated by the way history is taught in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh with different myths, heroes, and villains. Thus, for several decades, Pakistan refused to acknowledge its "Indian heritage," and

⁵⁰ Distinguished Fellow at Observer Research Foundation (ORF) and a member of the Indian Foreign Service for 34 years, Viswanathan has a long and diverse experience in international relations and diplomacy. His foreign assignments include Belgium, Zaire, Czechoslovakia, Germany, China, Italy, Côte d'Ivoire, the USA, and Nigeria.

⁵¹ For an understanding of how historical narratives are constructed, see the Prologue to my book, *We the people of the states of Bharat*.

preferred to identify itself with those who crossed over to India in military campaigns across Sindh and Afghanistan. For a while, they identified themselves as the successor state to Medina⁵² with a unique pan-Islamic identity. However, with the break-up of Pakistan in 1971,⁵³ the Islamic myth was shattered. India, on the other hand, has been constructing its civilisational narrative on the cultural geography from the kingdoms and principalities outlined in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*—extending from Gandhar (the modern-day Kandahar in Afghanistan) to the Mansarovar Lake in Tibet, the thousand islands (Lakshadweep, visible from the shores of Dwarka, and extending right up to the Maldives), and the lands under the princes of Kamrup and Pragjyotisha beyond the Brahmaputra.⁵⁴ When Buddhism received royal patronage, missionaries were sent out not just to the neighbouring Sri Lanka, but also to Tibet, China, Korea, Thailand, Champa (Vietnam), Laos, and Kampuchea⁵⁵ (now Cambodia).

⁵² The first Islamic State, or the State of Medina, was the political entity established by Muhammad in Medina in 622 C.E. under the Constitution of Medina. It represented the political unity of the Muslim Ummah (nation).

⁵³ East Pakistan broke away from West Pakistan after the 1971 War of Liberation which was led by the Mukti Bahini. The latter received support from the Border Security Force and the Indian Army.

⁵⁴ In ancient Sanskrit literature both the names “Pragjyotisha” and “Kamrupa” were used as designation for ancient Assam. Its antiquity can be established from the fact that it has been mentioned in the two great epics—the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*—and also in the Puranas.

⁵⁵ Kampuchea derives from the Sanskrit name *Kambojadeśa*, composed of *Deśa* (“land of” or “country of”) and *Kamboja*, referring to the descendants of Kambu (a legendary Indian sage from the ancient Indian kingdom of Kamboja).

For Bangladesh, the “knight-in-the-shining armour” is Murshid Quli Khan,⁵⁶ the founder of Murshidabad, who while owing his notional allegiance to the Mughal Emperor had virtually declared his autonomy. In their narrative, Bengal lost her “sovereign status” after the Battle of Plassey.⁵⁷ Many Bangladeshis regard the last Nawab of Bengal, Siraj ud-Daula as the forebear of their nation: proud to be Bengali, proud to be Muslim, but independent of any authority from Delhi. Bangladesh has adopted Gurudev’s *Amar sonar Bangla*⁵⁸ as the national anthem. However, far more important than history and geography is the “current capability” of a nation, and this is subject to what a nation acquires over a period of time. These could be in the military, economic, or technological domains. With new capabilities, the foreign policy approaches of a country are always “work in progress.” New interests outside the country’s neighbourhood develop. Phrases like “extended neighbourhood” and “strategic interests” have become common parlance in discussions on international relations. But it is clear that the triad of the three—history, geography, and capability—together determine the contours of soft power. In the interesting twists and turns of history, what may have initially been posited as an instrument of domination and control may, over time, play a role in the reverse:

⁵⁶ Murshid Quli Khan (ca. 1660–June 30, 1727), also known as Mohammad Hadi and born as Surya Narayan Mishra, was the first Nawab of Bengal, serving from 1717 to 1727. Ten years after the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, the Mughal throne was not in a position to assert any real authority, and though the Nawabs of Bengal accepted Aurangzeb’s successors as their de jure sovereigns, for all practical purposes, Bengal was an independent entity. It was also India’s most prosperous region, excelling in agriculture, trade, commerce, and manufacturing.

⁵⁷ The Battle of Plassey was a decisive victory for the British East India Company, under the leadership of Robert Clive, over the Nawab of Bengal, Siraj ud-Daula, and his French allies on June 23, 1757. This marked the beginning of British rule over India, starting with the revenue administration of Bengal.

⁵⁸ *Amar sonar Bangla* is the national anthem of Bangladesh. “An ode to mother Bengal” was written by Bengali polymath Rabindranath Tagore in 1905, while the melody of the hymn was adopted from the Baul singer Gagan Harkara’s song “Ami kothay pabo tare” set to Dadra Tala.

the English could have never imagined that Macaulay's Minute on Education⁵⁹ would give India the world's largest reserve of English language competency skills, both within the country and in the larger diaspora.

The Role of the Diaspora

While the origins of the 20 million strong Indian diaspora⁶⁰ can be traced to the route of indentured labour patronised by the Empire, their next generation overcame the initial handicap; picked up linguistic, mercantile, entrepreneurial, and political skills; and began to shape the destiny of their adopted homelands. Post-independence, while the first wave of migration was that of blue-collar workers, the next set of people who left the shores to seek fortunes in Europe, the United States (hereafter USA), Canada, and Australia were qualified professionals who became part of the intellectual, corporate, media, legal, and political elite.⁶¹ Thus began their informal role and influence in projecting India's soft power (Viswanathan, 2019, September 4). The Indian diaspora is becoming a real asset as more and more of them achieve success in their respective fields in different countries. As early as 1989, the

⁵⁹ Macaulay's Minute on Education in 1835 was the seminal tract in which he set out to explain his proposal for promoting English education in India at the expense of Arabic, Persian, and Sanskrit, which were being taught in colonial schools.

⁶⁰ They are spread across all continents and have become prosperous, famous, and influential over the last two decades. They not only help in disseminating our culture but also have, on occasions, contributed to promoting our foreign policy goals.

⁶¹ They became aware of the extraordinary power and influence exercised by Israel through expat Jews on the foreign policy and security regime of the USA. Likewise, the very strong bond between the UK, USA, Australia and Canada can be traced to the Anglo-Saxon Protestant work ethic.

Global Organization of People of Indian Origin⁶² was established in the USA, and it started organising conventions and conferences. The editor of *Think India* and Rajya Sabha member D. P. Tripathi⁶³ then proposed that the responsibility should be entrusted to the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), or a new ministry tasked with this job. He was also critical of the in-built “elitist” bias of the MEA, in which the workers found it difficult to access the embassy. This is how the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs⁶⁴ was constituted from 2004 to 2016, but was later merged with the MEA.

The first Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) was organised on January 9, 2003, by the MEA to mark the return of Mahatma Gandhi to India from South Africa. The PBD provides a platform for the overseas Indian community to engage with the Indian government and the people of the land of their ancestors for mutually beneficial activities. This day marks the contribution and achievements of overseas Indians in various fields, fostering a strong connection between the homeland and its diasporic communities. It serves as a reminder that regardless of their geographical location, Indians remain connected to their cultural and historical roots. From 2004 to 2016, the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs was tasked with the responsibility of connecting with the diaspora and organising the PBD. It was later merged with the MEA.

⁶²

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_Organization_for_People_of_Indian_Origin

⁶³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/D._P._Tripathi

⁶⁴ Established in May 2004 as the Ministry of Non-Resident Indians' Affairs, it was renamed as the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) in September 2004. Positioned as a “Services” Ministry, it provided information, partnerships, and facilitation for all matters related to Overseas Indian Origin. It was merged with the Ministry of External Affairs on January 7, 2016.

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/govt-to-merge-overseas-ministry-with-ministry-of-external-affairs/story-X8AHuelYqoKucSd32jODmL.html>;

<https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=137567> - :~:text=The Ministry of Overseas Indian,Indian Diaspora closer to India

This connection with the political, economic, and cultural leadership paid rich dividends. Former diplomat, and currently a parliamentarian, Shashi Tharoor points out that the best example of this was during the negotiations of the Indo-US Nuclear Deal in the early years of the first decade of this century. Many influential Indians in the USA did remarkable work in lobbying Congressmen and Senators and bringing them to our point of view. As Indian-origin voters begin to play an important role in the electoral politics of their adoptive countries, the policy pronouncements of their leaders have to take the sensibilities of these voters into account. Even when they are not voters, but are key stakeholders in economic decision-making, the change has become visible—literally and metaphorically. Thus, the lighting up of the Burj Khalifa⁶⁵ in colours of the Indian tricolour and the establishment of a temple in UAE⁶⁶ in 2024 are clear indicators of the growing strength of India's diaspora.

The Many Shades of Power: Hard, Soft, Smart, and Sharp

Let us examine the term “power” in all its manifestations. Power comes from the Latin word *potere*, which means “to be able.” It means “possession of the qualities or attributes required to do something, or get someone else to do something.” It is different from consensus because, in consensus, there is an implicit willingness. Power is the ability to enforce the diktat—

⁶⁵ The Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest skyscraper, in Dubai lit up with India's Tricolour to commemorate India's 77th Independence Day. The official Instagram handle of Burj Khalifa shared a clip showing the skyscraper lit up in the colours of India's Tricolour—saffron, white, and green.

⁶⁶ The BAPS Hindu Mandir, Abu Dhabi, in the UAE, is a traditional Hindu temple built by the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha. Inspired by Pramukh Swami Maharaj (1921–2016) and consecrated by Mahant Swami Maharaj on February 14, 2024, this is the first traditional Hindu temple in Abu Dhabi.

irrespective of the willingness of the other person or institution. The ultimate epitome of power—the ability to enforce its mandate—is the nation-state, both within its boundaries (through police, attorneys, and courts) and beyond its borders (through its defence forces). It may be mentioned here that power is exercised in families, communities, and societies as well, but this power is “informal” and usually based on custom, adage, and past precedent. This has its limitations, and whenever there is a clash between the two strands of power, the possibility of formal systems carrying the day is brighter.

Scholars have also pointed out that in the absence of hard power—military strength and economic power—soft power by itself does not carry much weight, especially during critical times. India realised, much to its chagrin in the 1962 war with China, that even though India had been a member of two very powerful organisations—the NAM⁶⁷ and the Commonwealth⁶⁸—support for our position was lukewarm. Likewise, much to Pakistan’s disappointment, the OIC’s⁶⁹ support for its position in its wars against us has not been overwhelming. In fact, thanks to India’s outreach, India was invited to the OIC with Observer status. As such, before any nation can talk of soft power, the world at large has to acknowledge its military might, economic

⁶⁷ The Non-Aligned Movement is a forum of 120 countries that are not formally aligned with or against any major power bloc. It was founded with the view to advancing the interests of developing countries in the context of Cold War confrontation. After the United Nations, it is the largest grouping of states worldwide.

⁶⁸ The Commonwealth of Nations, often simply referred to as the Commonwealth, is an international association of 56 member states, the vast majority of which are former territories of the British Empire from which it developed. They are connected through their use of the English language and historical-cultural ties.

⁶⁹ The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, formerly the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, is an intergovernmental organisation founded in 1969. It consists of 57 member states, 48 of which are Muslim-majority. In 2019, India made its maiden appearance at the OIC Foreign Ministers’ meeting as a “guest of honour.” 2019 was the 50th anniversary of OIC.

muscle, and political stability. The intervention of India in the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, followed by the assertion of our nuclear ability Pokhran-I in 1974, the economic reforms in 1991, Pokhran-II in 1998, the Kargil victory in 1999, the refusal to accept China's position on the contested border with Bhutan and India in the last decade, coupled with the competence to move into space through our Lunar and Mars Missions (Chandrayaan⁷⁰ and Mangalyaan⁷¹), and the presence of our own frigates and naval aircraft carriers in blue waters have slowly, but surely, moved India many notches higher in global perception. Here is a nation whose economic juggernaut is gaining strength, whose defence preparedness into theatre commands makes her a formidable power in the region, and is now ready for showcasing her soft power through her vibrant and diverse culture, vibrant arts, spiritually edifying yoga, books, civilisational heritage, multiple and affordable cuisines, cultural markers from Bollywood, and the successful conduct of general elections—the great festival of democracy in India.

Soft Power Today: Default or Design

But it is also important to acknowledge that that until very recently, India's soft power was more by default rather than by design, and it is only in the last two decades that India has made a conscious effort at extending the outreach of its public diplomacy through a mutli-pronged approach—principally through the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR), but

⁷⁰ The Chandrayaan programme, also known as the Indian Lunar Exploration Programme, is an ongoing series of outer space missions by the Indian Space Research Organisation for the exploration of the Moon. The programme incorporates a lunar orbiter, an impactor, a soft lander, and a rover spacecraft.

⁷¹ India's Mars Orbiter Mission, or MOM, was the country's first mission to the Red Planet. The mission tested key technologies for interplanetary exploration and studied the Martian surface and atmosphere from orbit for eight years, far exceeding its projected lifespan.

also through other agencies and knowledge institutions—from the International Solar Alliance⁷² to the National Centre for Good Governance (NCGG),⁷³ through scientific and research organisations, and participation in the UN and its allied agencies, including the Peace Keeping Force.

The entire domain of Public Diplomacy came up for discussion in the meetings of the Standing Committee on External Affairs in December 2022. Chaired by parliamentarian P. P. Choudhari, it gave some suggestions to enhance the effectiveness of the outreach of public and cultural diplomacy. These included the restructuring and strengthening of ICCR, institutionalising the coordination mechanism between the MEA and functional ministries, enhanced budgets for outreach and resolving the manpower constraints in carrying out even the required number of programmes—whether it be for Yoga or Indian classical music, or the teaching of Sanskrit and Hindi. One must realise that ICCR has to play a role similar to that of the British Council of the United Kingdom (hereafter UK), the Pro Helvetia of Switzerland, and the United States Equestrian Federation (USEF) of the USA with its network of libraries and fellowships. Other successful examples include Germany, Spain, Italy and Portugal which have institutes named for Goethe, Cervantes, Dante Alighieri, and Camoes, respectively. One has to reckon with the fact that Beijing has set up nearly 500 Confucius Centres to teach Mandarin and present Chinese culture to

⁷² The International Solar Alliance is an alliance of more than 120 signatory countries, most being sunshine countries, which lie either completely or partly between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn.

⁷³ The National Centre for Good Governance (NCGG) is an autonomous institute under the aegis of the Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances, Government of India. Its mandate includes bringing about governance reforms through studies, training, knowledge sharing and promotion of good ideas. It seeks to carry out policy-relevant research and prepare case studies; curate training courses for civil servants from India and other developing countries; provide a platform for the sharing of existing knowledge and pro-actively seek out and develop ideas for their implementation in the government, both at national and international Level.

international audiences. In contrast, India has only 35 Indian Cultural Centres in different parts of the world. As strategic affairs expert Raja Mohan⁷⁴ pointed out, by the middle of the last decade, China's external propaganda budget was close to US\$10 billion, nearly 15 times larger than the US State Department's "public diplomacy."

The MEA submitted that the budgetary allocation for the ICCR was inadequate. The Committee observed that the ICCR would require at least ₹500 crore to accommodate the current demand from embassies and cultural centres. More than that, we also need to strengthen not just the numbers of the diplomatic corps, but also our representation in trade missions as well as global bodies like the FAO, IFAD, WFP, UNESCO, and UNICEF. While India is the leading producer of agricultural commodities, and is an important player in international agriculture development, and contributing substantially to food and nutrition security, there is just one representative of the Ministry of Agriculture accredited to all three agencies in Rome. We should have a much larger delegation comprising officers not just from the Agriculture Ministry, but also from the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR); Rural Development; Food and Public Distribution; and Environment, Forest and Climate Change Ministries.

The Power of the Broadcaster

The ICCR and the MEA must also connect with the Information and Broadcasting Ministry, as well as the India-based electronic media, including the lead broadcasters in the corporate space. The duration of several language programmes of All India Radio (AIR) has been curtailed—both due to

⁷⁴ C. Raja Mohan is Visiting Research Professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, and a contributing editor on international affairs for *The Indian Express*.

financial constraints and limited listenership—but the challenge is to revisit the programme structure of the AIR broadcasts by shifting the focus from news to human-interest stories with greater emphasis on Bollywood, regional films and popular music. If K-Pop⁷⁵ is ruling the roost, the challenge is to bring in contemporary numbers from A. R. Rahman⁷⁶ and Diljit Dosanjh.⁷⁷ Tie-ups with local FM stations, which will also share tips on weather and traffic conditions, have to be incorporated if we want the drivers in Lhasa to tune into the Tibetan service of the AIR.⁷⁸ Currently, the foreign-language broadcasts are in Arabic, Baluchi, Burmese, Chinese, Dari, French, Indonesian, Persian, Pushto, Russian, Sinhala, Swahili, Thai, Tibetan, and English (General Overseas Service). The Indian languages are Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Konkani, Kashmiri, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Nepali, Punjabi, Saraiki, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu, but these also need to be carried forward to the geographies where our diaspora is concentrated. Not having the national broadcaster Doordarshan, or for that matter any other India-based channel, in the major international capitals and the two seats of the UN—New York and Geneva—also limits our

⁷⁵ A form of popular music originating in South Korea as part of South Korean culture. It includes styles and genres from around the world, such as pop, hip hop, R&B, rock, jazz, gospel, reggae, electronic dance, folk, country, disco, and classical, on top of its traditional Korean music roots.

⁷⁶ An Indian music composer, record producer, singer, songwriter, musician, multi-instrumentalist, and philanthropist, A. R. Rahman is popular for his works in Indian cinema, predominantly in Tamil and Hindi films, with occasional forays in international cinema. In 2010, the Indian government conferred him with the Padma Bhushan, the nation's third-highest civilian award.

⁷⁷ Diljit Dosanjh is an Indian singer, actor, film producer, and television personality. He works in Punjabi music and subsequently in Punjabi and Hindi cinema.

⁷⁸ In terms of the number of languages transmitted, the range of socio-economic variety it serves, and the size of its broadcasting organisation, Akashvani, is the largest radio network in the world. AIR's home service comprises 420 stations located across the country, reaching nearly 92% of the country's area and 99.19% of the total population, and has programming in 23 languages and 179 dialects.

ability to understand and comment on global events as they are happening. Visiting journalists, however perceptive, cannot be a substitute for resident correspondents (like Mark Tully⁷⁹ of BBC in India). It is now seen that while the UK, USA, China, Russia, France, and the Qatar-backed Al-Jazeera⁸⁰ have their correspondents in New Delhi, India needs to do the same.

Leverage All Resources

The Standing Committee on External Affairs noted that both the MEA and the Ministry of Culture are engaged in the promotion of India's cultural diplomacy but often do not leverage each other's resources. While the Ministry of Culture formulates policy and evolves projects for the propagation of culture, the ICCR is the executing arm in the external domain responsible for the preservation of cultural heritage within and outside India. The Committee recommended the formation of a working group between the MEA and the Ministry of Culture to coordinate and plan cultural diplomatic activities. The Education Ministry and the National Book Trust⁸¹ must also play an important role by organising book fairs across the world. A Yoga Certification Board, and a Yoga resources portal giving information about all the yoga festivals in the country will also

⁷⁹ Sir William Mark Tully, KBE, is a British journalist and the former Bureau Chief of the BBC in New Delhi, a position he held for 20 years. He worked with the BBC for a total of 30 years before resigning in July 1994. The recipient of several awards, Tully has authored nine books.

⁸⁰ Al Jazeera English is a 24-hour English-language news channel operating under Al Jazeera Media Network, which is partially funded by the government of Qatar. In a bid to broaden its reach, Al Jazeera introduced an English-language division in 2006.

⁸¹ National Book Trust (NBT) is an Indian publishing house, which was founded in 1957 as an autonomous body under the Ministry of Education of the Government of India. The activities of the Trust include publishing, promotion of books and reading, promotion of Indian books abroad, assistance to authors and publishers, and promotion of children's literature.

help in the promotion of inbound tourism. While it is true that the number of tourists is growing, the country can earn precious foreign exchange by sharing information about the different fairs and festivals across the length and breadth of the country. The tourism departments of states can also play an important role in this.

Another point that needs to be discussed is leveraging the connection of state governments with non-resident Indians (NRIs) from their region. Punjab, Gujarat, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Goa, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, and Telangana are some of the states which have a dedicated cell to look after their NRIs. Many also organise internship programmes for the youth and students from their region, especially with regard to language learning, culture, and heritage. It may be a good idea to associate the state governments with the promotion of language, tourism, heritage, and culture with the relevant stakeholders. The assistance can extend to support for organising marriage ceremonies and other religious programmes which the community may want. Many states like Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Punjab have been organising or supporting the organisation of global meets for the official languages of their respective states. This too would be a strong instrument of soft power. Individuals and institutions have also endowed chairs in Ivy League universities—for example, the Tamil Chair at Harvard.

A Question Mark on the Ranking Criterion of Soft Power

One final point. The current measures of ranking the soft power of nations leave much to be desired. Unlike the transparent and publicly verifiable indices used by multilateral institutions like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), or well-established bodies like the World Economic Forum for

Ease of Doing Business (EoDB), the criteria employed by agencies leave much to be desired. This is reinforced when China—a country with such a poor track record of transparency in business, where all economic data is released only by government sources without any independent verification—is placed third, above France, Germany, Japan, Korea, and Switzerland. There are two ways of looking at this conundrum. The first is to ignore it, but the other is to offer another methodology and a more acceptable platform. India should make a strong case that this task be entrusted to UNESCO⁸²—the UN body tasked with the promotion of education, science, culture, arts, museums, and heritage sites. Newer norms should also include issues such as the willingness, or otherwise, of nations to meet their global commitments to reduce carbon emissions and address the growing concerns regarding ecology and the environment.

The Olympics of 2036 and a Seat on the UN High Table

There are two significant milestones that India is now aspiring for, and both of these will go a long way in strengthening India's soft power status. These are accomplishments which have already been achieved by China. While Chinese opposition to India's Olympics bid for 2036⁸³ may not be so direct, as it is a one-off event, they may offer their support to the competing bids from Indonesia, Türkiye, and Chile. Indonesia has offered

⁸² The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is a specialised agency of the United Nations with the aim of promoting world peace and security through international cooperation in education, arts, sciences, and culture.

⁸³ Encouraged by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) head Thomas Bach, India would be bidding for the 2036 Games hosting rights but will face competition from strong contenders like Türkiye, Chile Saudi Arabia, Indonesia and Qatar, among others.

its proposed new capital of Nusantara as a possible venue, while both Türkiye and Chile have proposed their respective capitals of Istanbul and Santiago. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have also offered to host the games. In 2021, backed by both the Government of India and the Indian Olympics Association, the Government of Gujarat and the Ahmedabad Urban Development Authority (AUDA) hired PwC as its consultant, which identified 22 sites in Ahmedabad and Gandhinagar with the potential to host the Olympics in 2036. A new, state-of-the-art sports complex named the Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Sports Enclave (SVPSE) is being built in Ahmedabad for multi-sport venues. The cost of the enclave is estimated to be around ₹4,600 crore (US\$551 million). However, when a nation (and a city) hosts a sporting event on this scale, the soft power index is bound to go up—for in addition to sportspersons, sport administrators, commentators, and media personalities, there is an unprecedented potential to attract tourists as well.

And then, of course, there is the milestone of getting to the High Table on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).⁸⁴ While resistance to the expansion of the UNSC can be expected from China, other permanent members like the UK, France, and USA whose GDP, unlike India's, is not on the ascendant—are not keen to change the status quo. For the last few decades, and especially after Prime Minister Modi became India's helmsman, the country has been advocating for UNSC reforms (Dabhade, Manish S. (2017; *The Times of India*, 2024, April 1). India contends that as the world's largest democracy and a significant global player, its inclusion would better represent the interests of developing nations and align with the contemporary geopolitical

⁸⁴ The Security Council consists of 15 members, of which five are permanent: China, France, Russia, the UK and the USA. These were the great powers that were the victors of the Second World War (or their recognised successor states). Permanent members can veto (block) any substantive Security Council resolution, including those on the admission of new member states to the United Nations or nominees for the office of Secretary-General.

landscape. Furthermore, India emphasises its substantial contributions to UN peacekeeping missions as a justification for permanent membership, underlining its role in upholding international peace and security. Additionally, India asserts that its expanding economy and political influence merit a permanent seat, enabling effective decision-making on global security matters and fostering regional stability by addressing conflicts and promoting dialogue among neighbouring countries. Moreover, India advocates for a more inclusive UNSC to fortify multilateralism and ensure diverse representation in decision-making processes, underscoring its historical commitment to the UN Charter's principles. This is what is drawing countries in Africa, Latin America, and Central Asia in support of India's position. This has also been supported by the President of the 78th Session of the UN General Assembly, Dennis Francis. He has expressed optimism about India's potential to secure a permanent seat on the UNSC during his visit to India in January 2024 (*Mint*, 2024, January 24).

Responding to a question on the absence of the largest democracy from the Security Council, he said, "*India is a mature, highly respected member of the United Nations. It is a leader in many ways. And I'm sure that that fact is not lost on the members of the General Assembly. So, I wish the government and people of India every success in their quest to assume membership of the council on a permanent basis.*"

India is strategically positioning herself as a key player on the global stage, taking a lead role in multilateral forums like BRICS, SCO, BIMSTEC, and IBSA, while actively engaging with platforms such as the OECD, G7, and WEF. Her contributions to reshaping global food and energy security, driving climate change discourse, advocating equitable trade, and championing Africa ensure that her three components of power—*mantrana shakti* (strategic influence), *prabhu shakti* (sovereign authority), and *utsah shakti* (dynamic energy)—extend far beyond her immediate neighbourhood to encompass the seven seas and five oceans.

References

- Dabhade, Manish S. (2017, December 24). *India's pursuit of United Nations Security Council reforms*. Observer Research Foundation.
<https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-s-pursuit-of-united-nations-security-council-reforms>
- Mint*. (2024, January 24). UNGA president expresses optimism on India's UNSC permanent seat bid, says "India is a mature UN Member."
<https://www.livemint.com/news/world/unga-president-expresses-optimism-on-indias-uns-c-permanent-seat-bid-says-india-is-a-mature-un-member-11706101715154.html>
- Nye, Joseph, Jr. (1990). *Bound to lead: The changing nature of American power*. Basic Books.
- Nye, Joseph, Jr. (2009). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. Hachette.
- The Times of India*. (2024, April 1). India's quest for UN Security Council permanent membership: A holy grail of its foreign policy.
<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/ashoks-statecraft/indias-quest-for-un-security-council-permanent-membership-a-holy-grail-of-its-foreign-policy/>
- Viswanathan, H. H. S. (2019, September 4). India's soft power diplomacy. IIM, Tiruchirappalli (MEA website).