

The Land of the Better Story: India and Soft Power

By Shashi Tharoor

It is increasingly axiomatic today that the old calculations of “hard power” are no longer sufficient to guide a country’s conduct in world affairs.

INFORMED KNOWLEDGE about external threats to the nation, the fight against terrorism, a country’s strategic outreach, its geopolitically-derived sense of its national interest, and the way in which it articulates and projects its presence on the international stage, are all intertwined, and also conjoined with its internal dynamics. There can no longer be a foolproof separation of information management from policy-making, of external intelligence and internal reality, of foreign policy and domestic culture. A country’s role on the world stage is seen more and more as a reflection of its society.

At the same time, states operate in an era of competition with others, seeking to promote their security by leveraging their assets. And this is where “soft power” comes in.

As an Indian, I am a little concerned about those who speak of our country as a future “world leader” or even as “the next superpow-

er.” Many Indian thinkers and writers I respect have spoken of India’s geo-strategic advantages, its economic dynamism, political stability, proven military capabilities, its nuclear, space and missile program, the entrepreneurial energy of our people and the country’s growing pool of young and skilled manpower as assuring India “great power” status in the new century.

This notion of “world leadership” is curiously archaic. The very phrase is redolent of Kipling ballads and James Bond adventures. What makes a country a world leader? Is it population? India is on course to top the charts, overtaking China as the world’s most populous country by 2050. Is it military strength? India already has the world’s fourth-largest army. Perhaps nuclear capacity? India’s status in this regard was made clear, if not formally recognized, in 1998. Is it economic development? There, India has made extraordinary strides in recent years; it is already the world’s fifth-largest economy in PPP (purchasing-power parity) terms and continues to climb, though too many of its people are still destitute, living amidst despair and disrepair. Or could it be a combination of all these, allied to something altogether more difficult to define – the power of example?

In answering this question, India must determine where its strengths lie as it seeks to make



**COERCION
(STICKS)**

the 21st century its own. Much of the conventional analysis of India's stature in the world relies on the all-too-familiar indices of Gross Domestic Product, impressive economic growth rates (7% a year over the last five years, and talk of even 8% in the next five), and our undoubted military power. But if there is one attribute of independent India to which increasing attention is now being paid around the globe, it is the quality which we would do well to cherish and develop: our "soft power."

The idea of soft power is relatively new in international discourse. The term was coined by Harvard's Joseph Nye to describe the extraordinary strengths of the United States that went well beyond military dominance. To quote Nye, "power is the ability to alter the behavior of others to get what you want, and there are three ways to do that: coercion (sticks), payments (carrots) and attraction (soft power). If you are able to attract others, you can economize on the sticks and carrots." Traditionally, Nye explains, power in world politics came down to military strength: the side with the larger army was likely to win. But even in the past, this wasn't enough – after all, the U.S. lost the Vietnam War, and the Soviet Union was defeated in Afghanistan. Enter soft power. To quote Nye again: "the soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)."

For Nye, the U.S. is the archetypal exponent of soft power. As home to Boeing and Intel, Ford and the iPod, Microsoft and MTV, Hollywood and Disneyland, McDonald's and Starbucks, the U.S. is home to most of the major products that dominate daily life around the globe. The attractiveness of these assets, and of the American life-

**PAYMENT
(CARROTS)**

**ATTRACTION
(SOFT POWER)**

Power is the ability to alter the behavior of others to get what you want, and there are three ways to do that: coercion (sticks), payments (carrots) and attraction (soft power). If you are able to attract others, you can economize on the sticks and carrots

style of which they are emblematic, is that they permit the U.S. to maximize its “soft power” – the ability to attract and persuade others to adopt the American agenda, rather than relying purely on the dissuasive or coercive “hard power” of military force. Its subtly-deployed soft power is therefore as important, if not more so, to the U.S. than its well-established “hard” power.

In his book, *The Paradox of American Power*, Nye took the analysis of soft power beyond the U.S.; other nations too, he suggested, could acquire it. In today’s information era, he wrote, three types of countries are likely to gain soft power: “those whose dominant cultures and ideals are closer to prevailing global norms (which now emphasize liberalism, pluralism, autonomy); those with the most access to multiple channels of communication and thus more influence over how issues are framed; and those whose credibility is enhanced by their domestic and international performance.”

Bollywood is bringing its brand of glitzy entertainment not just to the Indian diaspora in the U.S. or U.K. but to the screens of Syrians and Senegalese – who may not understand the Hindi dialogue but catch the spirit of the films, and look at India with stars in their eyes as a result.

diplomacy ever since. The U.K. has the British Council, the Swiss have Pro Helvetia, and Germany, Spain, Italy and Portugal have, respectively, Institutes named for Goethe, Cervantes, Dante Alighieri and Gulbenkian. Today, China

THE RISE AND RISE OF INDIAN TELEVISION Source: *The New York Times*

In 2005, the approximate revenue generated by the Indian television industry was US\$3.4 billion, twice that of the Bollywood industry

Advertising spending on Indian television increased by 21 percent a year, on average, from 1995 to 2005, reaching US\$1.6 billion

Indian television is delivered via satellite and cable to the globe, and is particularly popular in Afghanistan, Iran and the Soviet Union

At first glance this seems to be a prescription for reaffirming today’s reality of U.S. dominance, since it is clear that no country scores more highly in all three categories than the United States. But Nye himself admits this is not so: soft power has been pursued with success by other countries over the years. When France lost the war of 1870 to Prussia, one of its most important steps to rebuild the nation’s shattered morale and enhance its prestige was to create the Alliance Française to promote French language and literature throughout the world. French culture has remained a major selling-point for French

has started establishing “Confucius Institutes” to promote Chinese culture internationally. But soft power does not rely merely, or even principally, on government. For the U.S., Hollywood and MTV have done more to promote the idea of America as a desirable and admirable society than the Voice of America or the Fulbright scholarships. “Soft power,” Nye says, “is created partly by governments and partly in spite of them.”

What does this mean for India? It means giving attention, encouragement and active support to the aspects and products of our society that the world would find attractive – not in or-

der directly to persuade others to support India, but rather to enhance the country's intangible standing. Bollywood is already doing this by bringing its brand of glitzy entertainment not just to the Indian diaspora in the U.S. or U.K. but to the screens of Syrians and Senegalese – who may not understand the Hindi dialogue but catch the spirit of the films, and look at India with stars in their eyes as a result. (An Indian diplomat in Damascus a few years ago told me that the only publicly displayed portraits that were as big as those of then-President Hafez al-Assad were those of Amitabh Bachchan.) Indian art, classical music and dance have the same effect. So does the work of Indian fashion designers, which recently dominated the show windows of New York's chic Lord and Taylor department store. Indian cuisine, spreading around the world, raises our culture higher in people's reckoning; the way to foreigners' hearts is through their palates. In England to-

Last year, Disney spent US\$44.5 million to acquire a 15 percent stake in UTV, a production company based in Mumbai, and to buy Hungama, a children's channel created by UTV

day, Indian curry houses employ more people than the iron and steel, coal and shipbuilding industries combined.

When India's cricket team triumphs or its tennis players claim Grand Slams, when a bhangra beat is infused into a Western pop record or an Indian choreographer invents a fusion of kathak and ballet, when Indian women sweep the Miss World and Miss Universe contests, or when "Monsoon Wedding" wows the critics and "Lagaan" claims an Oscar nomination, when Indian writers win the Man, Booker or Pulitzer Prizes, when each of these things happens, our

country's soft power is enhanced. (Ask yourself how many Chinese novelists the typical literate American reader can name. Indeed, how many non-Western countries can claim a presence in the Occidental mind comparable to India's?) And when Americans speak of the IITs with the same reverence they used to accord to MIT or Caltech, and the Indianness of engineers and software developers is taken as synonymous with mathematical and scientific excellence, it is India itself that gains in respect.

In the information age, Nye has argued, the side with the better story to tell often wins. India must remain the "land of the better story." As a society with a free press and a thriving mass media, whose people whose are daily encouraged to unleash their creative energies, India has an extraordinary ability to tell stories that are more persuasive and attractive than those of its rivals. This is not about propaganda; indeed, it will not work if it is directed from above, least of all by government. But its impact, though intangible, can be huge.

Take one example: Afghanistan is clearly a crucial country for our national security. Our foreign policy mandarins have their work cut out for them there, and I would be surprised if Afghanistan isn't a priority for the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), India's foreign intelligence agency. But the most interesting asset for India in Afghanistan doesn't come out of one of our famous consulates in the border regions. It comes, instead, from one simple fact: At 8:30 in the evening, Afghans are overwhelmingly occupied with the Indian TV soap opera "Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi," dubbed into Dari, which is telecast nightly on Tolo TV. It's the most popular television show in Afghan history, considered directly responsible for a spike in the sale of generator sets and even for absences from religious functions which clash with its broadcast times. "Saas" has so thoroughly captured the public imagination in Afghanistan that, in this deeply conservative Islamic country where family problems are usually hidden behind the veil, it's an Indian TV

show that has come to dominate society's discussion of family issues. I have read reports of wedding banquets being interrupted so that the guests could huddle around the television for half an hour, and even of an increase in crime at 8:30 p.m. because watchmen are sneaking a look at the TV rather than minding the store. One Reuters dispatch recounted how robbers in Mazar-i-Sharif stripped a vehicle of its wheels and mirrors recently during the telecast time and wrote on the car, in an allusion to the show's heroine, "Thanks, Tulsi". That's soft power, and India does not have to thank the government or charge the taxpayer for its exercise. Instead, Indians too can simply say, "Thanks, Tulsi".

Of course, official government policy can also play a role. Pavan Varma, the current head of the Indian Council on Cultural Relations, has argued that "culturally India is a superpower" and that cultural diplomacy must be pursued for political ends, "keeping in mind our priorities on a global scale." A casual glance at last year's calendar already shows India consciously seeking to leverage its soft power in Europe. India dominated discussions of the "creative imperative" at Davos in January, was "partner country" for the Hanover Trade Fair in May and then "theme country" at the Bonn Biennale, a cultural festival for theatre lovers. India starred at the Frankfurt Book Fair in October where it was the country of honor; the same month saw the launch of the Festival of India attract throngs in Brussels. The Festival of India is an interesting example of what India is consciously trying to showcase. It incorporates a classic exhibition called Tejas (or effulgence) highlighting early images of iconic Indian art from the last 1,500 years, more recent exquisite paintings in the Kangra style, contemporary photographic exhibitions on Satyajit Ray, performances by some of India's world-renowned performing artists, a food festival, a fashion show and inevitably a section on business opportunities in India.

That's all very well, and kudos to the Indian Council for Cultural Relations for organizing it.

But I would argue that soft power is not just what we can deliberately and consciously exhibit or put on display; it is rather how others see what we are, whether or not we are trying to show it to the world. To take a totally different example: Politically, the sight in May 2004 of a leader of Roman Catholic background (Sonia Gandhi) making way for a Sikh (Manmohan Singh) to be sworn in as Prime Minister by a Muslim (President Abdul Kalam) – in a country 82% Hindu – caught the world's imagination and won its admiration. No strutting nationalist chauvinism could ever have accomplished for India's standing in the world what that one moment did, all the more so since it was not directed at the world.

So it is not just material accomplishments that enhance our soft power. Even more important are the values and principles for which India stands. After all, Mahatma Gandhi won us our independence with non-violence and satyagraha, classic uses of soft power before the term was even coined. Pandit Nehru was another skilled exponent of soft power: he developed a role for India in the world based entirely on its civilization and its moral standing, making India the voice of the oppressed and the marginalized against the hegemonic big powers of the day. This gave the country enormous standing and prestige across the world for some years, and strengthened our own self-respect as we stood, proud and independent, on the world stage. But the great flaw in Nehru's approach was that his soft power was unrelated to any acquisition of hard power. As the humiliation of the 1962 Sino-Indian border war demonstrated, soft power has crippling limitations. Instead of Theodore Roosevelt's maxim, "speak softly and carry a big stick," we spoke loudly but had no stick at all. Soft power becomes credible when there is hard power behind it; that is why the U.S. has been able to make so much of its soft power. Let us be clear: soft power by itself is no guarantee of security.

As Nye himself has admitted, "Drinking coke or watching a Bollywood film does not automatically convey power for the U.S. or India. Whether

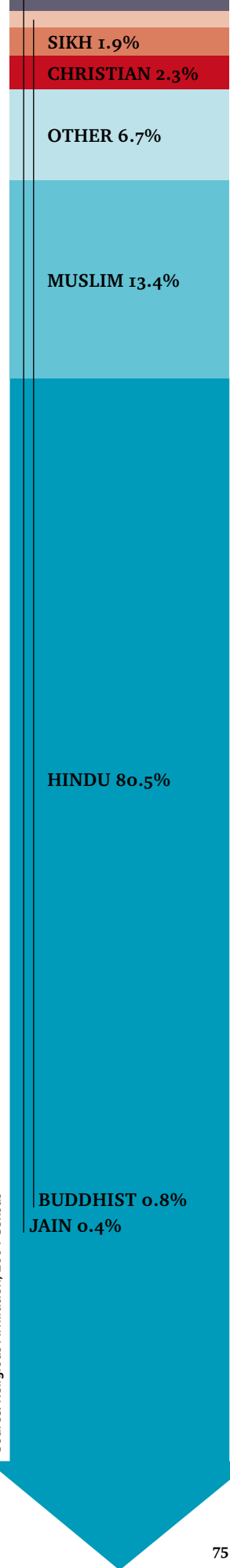
The sight in May 2004 of a leader of Roman Catholic background (Sonia Gandhi) making way for a Sikh (Manmohan Singh) to be sworn in as Prime Minister by a Muslim (President Abdul Kalam) – in a country 82% Hindu – caught the world’s imagination and won its admiration.

the possession of soft power resources actually produces favourable outcomes depends upon the context.” That context is often one of hard geopolitics. Soft power is one arrow in a nation’s security quiver. It is not an all-purpose panacea.

So I have little patience for those who would naively suggest that soft power can solve all our security challenges. A jihadi who enjoys a Bollywood movie will still have no compunction about setting off a bomb in Mumbai and the U.S. has already learned that the perpetrators of 9/11 ate their last dinner at a McDonald’s. To counter the terrorist threat there is no substitute for hard power. But where soft power works is in attracting enough goodwill from ordinary people to reduce the sources of support and succor that the terrorists enjoy, and without which they cannot function.

But this means we also need to solve our internal problems. When Nye wrote of the prospects for India developing its soft power, he observed that our country “still faces challenges of poverty with 260 million people surviving on less than one dollar a day, inequality tied to a caste system, and corruption and inefficiency in the provision of public services.” In other words, until we can tackle and eliminate such problems, the negative perceptions they generate will continue to undermine our appeal. Which brings me full circle back to our earlier discussion of global security.

As we speak of leveraging our soft power, we must also look within. We must ensure that we do enough to keep our people healthy, well fed, and secure not just from jihadi terrorism but from the



Source: Religious Affiliation, 2001 Census

As we speak of leveraging our soft power, we must also look within.

We must ensure that we do enough to keep our people healthy, well-fed, and secure not just from jihadi terrorism but from the grinding terror of poverty, hunger and ill-health.

grinding terror of poverty, hunger and ill-health. Progress is being made: we can take satisfaction from India's success in carrying out three kinds of revolutions in feeding our people – the “green revolution” in food grains, the “white revolution” in milk production and, at least to some degree, a “blue revolution” in the development of fisheries. But the benefits of these revolutions have not yet reached the third of our population living below the poverty line, a line drawn just this side of the funeral pyre. We must ensure they do, or our soft power will ring hollow, at home and abroad.

At the same time, if we want to be a source of attraction to others, it is not enough to attend to these basic needs. We must preserve the precious pluralism that is such an asset in our globalizing world. Our democracy, thriving free media, contentious NGOs, energetic human rights groups, and the repeated spectacle of our remarkable general elections, have all made of India a rare example of the successful management of diversity in the developing world. But every time there is a Babri Masjid or a pogrom like the savagery in Gujarat in 2002, India's soft power suffers a huge setback. Those who condoned the killings in Gujarat have done more damage to India's national security than they can even begin to realize. India must reclaim its true heritage in the eyes of the world.

India's ethos has been an immeasurable asset for our country. Let us not allow the specter of religious intolerance and political opportunism to undermine the soft power that is India's greatest asset in the world of the 21st century. Maintain that, and true world leadership in promoting global security – the kind that has to do with principles, values and standards – will follow.

Shashi Tharoor is the U.N. Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, and was India's official candidate to succeed Kofi Annan as U.N. Secretary General in 2006. He is author of nine widely acclaimed books, including *India: From Midnight to the Millennium* (1997).