

Governmental Intervention in Strategizing India's Soft Power Bollywood, Sports and Beyond

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Abstract

Soft power alongside hard power has become an important component of a country's power and influence today. Joseph Nye, who coined the term in 1990s, describes it as the ability to shape the preference of others through attraction rather than coercion or payments. Though his theory centred around the United States, later several scholars have focused on the concept through Indian lens. The concept of soft power, however, is not a new phenomenon for the sub constituent. Non alignment movement, global leadership in anti-colonial struggles, Nehruvian diplomacy, yoga, cuisine and Indian Diaspora have been a *de-facto* source of the country's soft power. Though there are several works related to the analysis of India's soft power, there are limited publications analysing the role of the government in enhancing the same. Thus, this paper seeks to focus on the role of governmental intervention in harnessing India's soft power in the areas such as sports and entertainment industry taking inputs from various countries around the world.

Keywords: India, soft power, sports diplomacy, Olympics, Bollywood, cricket diplomacy

1. Introduction

Traditionally, power in global politics was always seen in terms of military strength and economic capabilities. However, the changing world scenarios in the late 20th century were contradictory to this neo-realist understanding of the theme. The failure of military and economic superpowers such as the United States (US) in Vietnam (1975) and Soviet Union in Afghanistan (1989), were eye openers for the political theoreticians to reinterpret 'power.' In this context, the unquantifiable concept of power called 'soft power' emerged in International Relations. Joseph S. Nye Jr. (2004), who is credited with coining the term 'soft power,' describes it as the ability to shape the preference of others through attraction rather than coercion or payments. The US is home to iPhone, Hollywood, Disneyland, Harvard, McDonalds, Starbucks and other major products that dominate daily life globally. The attractiveness of these assets as emblems of the American lifestyle permits the country to maximise its soft power and persuade others to adopt Washington's agenda (Tharoor, 2012). Though Nye's theory centred around the US, later several scholars have focused on the concept through Indian lens. The proliferation of democracy, increased globalisation and greater access to technology have increased the significance of soft power in the modern world (Das R. , 2020). This has made the concept of soft power, both theoretically and practically, cross

the boundaries of the US. Countries around the globe started harnessing it because of its vital role in foreign affairs and diplomacy.

India by default qualifies as a soft power with her democratic tradition, peaceful anti-colonial movement, engagements with international institutions and Bollywood (Wagner, 2010). Additionally, other factors like tasty cuisine, rich culture, and vibrant diaspora also contribute to this. However, many scholars argue that this goodwill for the subcontinent has largely been generated in an unplanned manner. This fact might be partially true but concluding that the government has had no role to play in boosting country's soft power can be considered as a literature gap in the conventional understanding of the theme. With the Modi Government coming to power, there are efforts to strategies soft power with governmental intervention. It has primarily concentrated on three soft power elements: Buddhism, Diaspora and Yoga (Mazumdar, 2018). However, the potential for governmental intervention extends significantly beyond the above-mentioned elements. Hence, this paper endeavours to establish a nexus between India's soft power and the government's proactive engagement in enhancing it. The prime focus of the paper lies in scrutinizing the role of governmental intervention in harnessing India's soft power across domains such as the entertainment industry and sports—realms ripe with great potential. For this purpose, the paper is broadly divided into four sections. The first section examines and contextualizes the theoretical debates surrounding the concept of soft power. The second section discusses the evolution of India's soft power and traces out the *de-facto* role of the Indian government in its development. The third section, analyses the role and space for governmental interventions in enhancing the soft power sources like sports and entertainment. The fourth section concludes the article.

2. 'Soft Power' Defined: Theoretical Debates

Power is defined as an ability of an actor to influence the action of another actor (Dhal, 1957). In international relations there are two ways to do it, namely Hard Power and Soft Power. While Hard power primarily depends on military strength and economic capabilities, soft power depends on immaterial factors like culture and values. Joseph S. Nye (2004) who popularised the latter term, describes it as the ability to shape the preference of others through attraction rather than coercion or payments. Soft Power, for him, rests on three important factors: morally strong political values, legitimate foreign policy and attractive culture (Nye, 2006). The concept has undergone changes both in theory and practical implementation from the time it was coined by Nye in 1990. Joshua Kurlantzick (2007), for instance, defines the concept as, "anything outside the military and security realm." His broad definition also included coercive economic investments and diplomatic leverage in the realm of soft power. Brand Finance, which produces the annual Soft Power Index, uses 55 different metrics to assess soft power (Brand Finance's Global Soft Power Index 2024, 2024). In the present understanding, the concept, in fact, also consists of soft elements of Hard power. For instance, the power of attraction generated by India's defence diplomacy in Southeast Asia has yielded India's security relations in the region (Das A. K., 2013). Despite this, in the field of international relation theories, the concept of soft power is not an undisputed idea. As Mario De Martino (2020) points out, most of the debate about the concept revolves around its definition, as the idea of power is itself something abstract. This has created disagreements even among those scholars who subscribe to the concept of soft power. Others have argued that attempts at soft power can backfire, leading to what has been termed 'soft disempowerment.' For instance, the so called 'Humanitarian Interventions' by the liberal democracies to promote soft power values like democracy and human rights (in Iraq, Libya and Syria) were perceived negatively by the public opinion, leading to

reputational damage and deteriorating image of those liberal democracy (Martino, 2020). Additionally, the concept has been subjected to criticism by Neo-realist, rationalist neo-rationalist and others for being ineffective. For instance, many of India's foreign policy goals in South Asia are far from achieved, despite India being successful in pushing soft power in the region (Kumar, 2023). In fact, Joseph Nye (2009) himself introduced a new term "Smart Power" (combination of hard and soft power) to avoid the assumption that soft power alone can produce effective foreign policy. Despite these contestations, soft power is still one of the means to success in world politics. Though it lacks the potential to work alone, its prominence cannot be neglected.

3. Evolution of India's Soft Power: From *De-facto* to *De-jure*

India scores reasonably well in all three parameters mentioned by Nye, i.e., political values, foreign policy and culture. The Gandhian nonviolent struggle against the colonizers and the values adopted by the Indian state in the post-independence era have given moral high ground for the country in the political sphere. In terms of foreign policies, Nehruvian diplomacy, global leadership in anti-colonial struggle, non-alignment stands during the cold war has helped India build an international image. Culturally, Buddhism was the first ship that carried India's soft power consignment to the rest of Asia. Spread of Hinduism to the south east Asian countries under the Chola rule also acted as a *de-facto* soft power element in the past. Today, India's civilizational history and its export of incredible diaspora, art, Buddhism, Yoga and tasty cuisine to the world, have kept culture, at the centre of India's soft power. However, much of these were generated in an unplanned manner, making it India's indirect soft power capabilities (Chauhan, 2014).

Trajectory of India's soft power is worth noting. In one of his speech, historian Ramachandra Guha, claims that if the Republic of India was a startup, then no one would have funded it in 1947 (University, 2016). But after almost seven and half decades later, India is emerging as a genuine south Asian giant which anyone could scarcely neglect. Addition to its fast-growing economy after 1991 economic reforms, India's sphere of attraction in the global stage has contributed immensely to this change. Though, theoretically many scholars consider soft power as a relatively new term in India's foreign policy discourse, in practice, India inherited it since the inception of its democratic system. The Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru through his foreign policy initiatives, made India gain a high international reputation that would, in present day standard, qualify as 'soft power' (Wagner, 2010). Additionally, India's campaign advocating decolonisation and global disarmament added feathers to this cause. Nehru's biggest global success, however, was probably the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement, whereby he tried to bring decolonised third world countries under a single international platform (Wagner, 2010). This engagement earned not just to Nehru, but also to India, a high moral authority in international affairs. Additionally, Nehruvian foreign policy for an extent was successful in achieving his main objectives: democracy, development, peaceful conflict resolution and secularism (Mitra, 2009), further enhancing India's image, particularly among the third world countries. These developments were a result of India's limited material capability, historical experience and geopolitical situation of the time (Kugiel, 2012). For instance, concerns over defence funding and fear of losing hard earned independence, can explain Nehru's adoption of non-alignment movement (Ganguly & Paradesi, 2009). However, the Indo-China war of 1962 and changing global realities of the time made India switch to enhancing hard power and subscribing to a more pragmatic foreign policy approach. Yet, the creation of SAARC, Look/Act East policy, Gujral Doctrine picturizes India's soft power approach towards its immediate neighbours.

Exclusive focus on soft power by the Indian government, as a tool of foreign policy, came with institutionalisation of public diplomacy under the UPA-I regime. The Public Diplomacy division (PDD) was created in 2006 under the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). This period also saw worldwide expansion of the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR). These developments were partly a response to the ‘peaceful rise’ of China in the south Asian region and partly because of excitement about the use of social media among the foreign policy making elite (Hall, 2012). With the Modi government coming to power, India started to develop a more systematic and strategic approach to the use of soft power. The Modi government played a key role in the United Nation General Assembly (UNGA) declaring 21st June as International Day of Yoga (Mazumdar, 2018). India’s vaccine diplomacy during covid-19 pandemic, Act East Policy emphasising on Historical links with Buddhism, and the popularity of Narendra Modi among the Indian Diaspora have contributed exponentially in enhancing India’s soft power. However, the Modi government’s diplomatic efforts abroad to enhance soft power are being negatively affected by hard-line politics at home (Biwas & Goel, 2020). The Hindutva driven laws such as Citizenship Amendment Act (2019) and National Registration of Citizens have attracted international criticism. Abrogation of Article 370, mismanagement of Covid 19 pandemics within the country, mishandling of farmers’ protest (2020-21), Hijab controversy (2022), Manipur violence (2023) and concerns over democratic degradation and minority rights are adversely affecting Modi government’s efforts of building a robust soft power diplomacy.

4. Enhancing Soft Power: Need for Governmental Intervention

Going through the definition and scope of soft power, India should be able to naturally assume its place as global soft power leader. Even so, it is not seen as such a power yet. India has been ranked 29th in the global soft power index 2024 out of 193 United Nation members (Brand Finance’s Global Soft Power Index 2024, 2024). Thus, this section seeks to focus on the role of governmental intervention in harnessing India’s soft power in the three popular areas such as entertainment industry and sports taking inputs from various countries around the world. Mere framing and implementation of developmental agenda to boost productivity in these areas, can itself enhance India’s soft power.

4.1 Bollywood and Beyond

Hollywood, being a critical instrument of American soft power, serves as a significant cultural platform for disseminating the American dream and projecting national propaganda. It has played an important role in promoting the country’s economic and consumer values. Alongside advertising Coca-Cola, McDonald and Apple, Hollywood has made American life desirable. Additionally, narratives of American superheroes saving the world and important decisions being made in the White House have played a crucial role in asserting the image of the United States as a global superpower. Similarly, in India, Bollywood plays an important role in storytelling. Over the years, it has given several global stars like Sharukh Khan, Aishwarya Rai, Priyanka Chopra and A.R. Rehman to name a few. Bollywood productions such as *Drive*, *Don 2* and *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* have got financial support from the authorities in Israel, Germany and Spain to promote their tourism (Das R. , 2020). Despite these noteworthy facts, the contribution of Bollywood in building Indian image globally is substantially less compared to the success of Hollywood in the same sphere. The former has reduced itself into an entertaining industry with no intentions of taking Indian narrative forward. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Bollywood is a private industry and it is well within its right to make movies for entertainment and profit. It is, however, the job of the government to tap into the potential of this industry. Hollywood movies get incentives, tax shelters,

cash rebates and grants from their government. It can use NASA's property and logo. The space agency had also lent its space suit to the 1998 film- Armageddon, while the makers of 2019 Bollywood film Mission Mangal had to create a set that looked like ISRO (WION, 2020).

Another notable case study in this context is the dramatic rise of South Korean popular culture worldwide since the late 1990s, a phenomenon termed as 'Korean Wave' (Hallyu). In 2012, Korean rap song 'Gangnam Style' became the first video on YouTube to reach one billion views ('Gangnam Style' hits 1 billion mark on Youtube, 2012). In 2020, South Korean movie 'Parasite' became the first non-English movie to win Academy awards (Oscars 2020: South Korea's Parasite makes history by winning best picture, 2020). K-dramas, in recent times, have experienced a significant surge in global popularity, becoming a cultural sensation transcending national borders. K-pop bands such as BTS and Black Pink have emerged as hot favourites, particularly resonating with Generation Z audiences globally. Popularity of the Korean cultural industry has resulted in the addition of 26 Korean words to the Oxford English Dictionary (The Guardian view on Korean soft power: harder than it looks, 2022). These developments, alongside bringing economic success to the country, are also making South Korea more desirable and thereby increasing its soft power. However, these successes are partially the result of the proactive role taken by the government of South Korea in the late 1990s. Even though the government was not the sole reason behind the emergence of Korean wave, it has had a positive impact on the cultural Industry of South Korea (Park, 2008)

After the financial success of Jurassic Park in 1993, the Presidential Advisory Board on Science and Technology presented a report to the South Korean President, emphasizing that a Hollywood film's profits were almost comparable to the revenue generated from the export of 1.5 million Hyundai automobiles (Shim, 2006). This acted as a catalyst for the government to strategies media production and globally export their culture. Establishment of the Cultural Export Bureau (CIB) in 1994 and passing of Motion Picture Law in 1995, to attract investments into the film industry, made big business groups like Hyundai expand in the media sector (Shim, 2006). Following the financial crisis of 1997, emphasis on culture improved substantially and was seen as a tool of both economic upliftment and rebranding. During the Presidentship of Kim Dae-Jung between 1999 and 2003, the cultural industry sector received substantial investment from the government (Park, 2008). In 2003, the overall cultural export of South Korea was 650 million dollars; before 1998, this amount was so insignificant that the government did not even keep records (Onishi, 2005). The role of the government in promoting the 'Korean Wave' has drastically increased over the years. In fact, South Korea's Foreign Affairs White Paper, every year, reviews the success of Korea's cultural diplomacy (Sun, 2024). Compared to Hollywood and Korean cultural industries, Bollywood has failed in promoting Indian tourism and lifestyle abroad. It rarely produces movies that appeal to a wide range of ethnicities. Taking cues from authorities in South Korea and the United States, the government of India should start taking a proactive role in promoting Indian Cinema. The Indian film industry is the world's largest producer of movies, producing over 1,796 films in 2023 alone (Basuroy, 2024). This also consists of regional cinemas produced in different Indian languages. However, these regional cinemas are seen as footnotes to the Bollywood Industry (Das R. , 2020). This has substantially hindered the utilization of regional cinema as a soft power asset. Therefore, the government's first role in harnessing Indian cinema as a soft power tool is to give equal importance to the various regional cinema industries alongside Bollywood. Secondly, movies with content driven storytelling must be promoted by the Indian authorities, through tax redemptions and grants. Thirdly, efforts should be made to strip the industries from jingoism and religious intolerance. Vivek Agnihotri's

controversial film ‘Kashmiri Files’ was banned in Singapore for spreading religious hatred (Singapore bans ‘The Kashmir Files’ for its ‘one-sided’ portrayal of Muslims, 2022). Recently, Ajay Devgn starrer *Singham Again* was banned in Saudi Arabia owing to religious conflict portrayed in the movie (Ajay Devgn starrer 'Singham Again' and Kartik Aaryan starrer ..., 2024). These developments can affect the soft power potential of Indian film Industries. Addition to these steps, care should be taken in drawing a line between taking Indian narratives forward and taking the government’s political agenda forward. In the past, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has praised movies like ‘Kashmir Files’ and ‘Kerala Stories.’ The former film was also screened at the 53rd International Film Festival of India (IFFI) in Goa in November 2022 (IFFI jury chief slams ‘The Kashmir Files’: ‘Propaganda, vulgar... shocked, disturbed’, 2022). These efforts by the Indian government promoting ‘Kashmir Files’ and ‘Kerala Stories’ can be seen as a step towards taking BJP’s agenda forward and not towards promoting Indian narrative.

4.2 Sports and Olympics

Sports is one of the very few things that unite people across nations and cultures. In recent time, countries have recognized the significant potential of sports as an instrument of soft power. China became the first country in the world to consciously use sport as a soft power tool during the hosting of 2008 Beijing Olympics. In India, cricket is at the centre of sporting soft power, serving as a strategic tool in building better relationships with its neighbours. India’s proactive engagement in Afghanistan cricket has led to its rise in international tournaments. In the past, cricket diplomacy has served as a channel for the leaders of India and Pakistan to negotiate and defuse tension. Recent announcement of India’s External Affairs minister S. Jaishankar to grant Nepali cricket team a ‘home ground’ in Indian soil has attracted lot of commendation from Nepali cricketers (Historic Move: India Offers Nepali Cricket Team ‘Home Ground’ on Indian Soil, 2024). Popularity of Indian Premier League (IPL) since 2008 has also contributed in enhancing India’s reputation in the cricketing world. However, over dependence on cricket as sporting soft power has several draws back. Firstly, cricket is popular in very few countries around the globe. Thus, to completely encash the sporting soft power of cricket, it is important that the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), the richest cricket board in the world, should promote cricket in different non cricket playing countries. The expansion of the Indian Premier League to include young players from countries like Ireland, Afghanistan, Nepal and Zimbabwe can also contribute in enhancing cricketing soft power (Deokar, 2019). Secondly, Indian cricket is often influenced by the presence of hyper nationalism and jingoism, making it vulnerable for political and military development (Das R. , 2020). This can backfire at times, creating reputational damage to Indian cricket. These drawbacks show the need for India to explore other tools in the field.

For India to emerge as a sporting soft power, it needs structural changes focusing on three prime areas: sports administration, organisation and performance. Firstly, sports administration in India should be free from political hold. Inexperienced Jay Shah backed for the post of BCCI secretary had received widespread criticism. One the other hand, unconditional support by the government to Brij Bhushan Singh, despite him facing serious allegation of sexual harassment against female wrestlers, have severely impacted India’s sporting image worldwide. United World Wrestling (UWW), a global governing body of wrestling, has criticised the arrest of Indian wrestlers protesting against Brij Bhushan and threatens to suspend Indian Wrestling Federation (IWF) if the fresh elections are not held (International wrestling body UWW ‘condemns detention of wrestlers’; threatens suspension if elections not held, 2023). Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) banned All India Football Federation (AIFF), the apex body of Indian football, for “undue influence from third party” (Nair, 2022). Here, the third party is referred to

the Committee of Administrators (COA) appointed by the Supreme Court to run the AIFF. Secondly, the sporting event organising capacity in India is still a questionable aspect. In recent times, mega sporting events like the Olympic and FIFA world cup have emerged as the major source of soft power. China being the first developing country to successfully host summer Olympics, utilised this event to gain a lasting international reputation (Zhongying, 2008). For the host country, the Olympic opening ceremony offers a great opportunity to present itself to the world (Vincent & Johson, 2021). India too, is in a race to bid for the 2036 summer Olympics. However, this is not going to be a cake walk for the subcontinent, considering several past records. In the past, countries like Greece, Russia and Brazil have faced bankruptcy following Olympic hosting (McBride, Berman, & Manno, 2024). Additionally, these events can backfire at times. Qatar, which spent millions of dollars hosting FIFA world cup 2022, faced severe criticism for human rights violation and poor management during the event. Though this was seen as a western centric criticism by many, the reputational damage it did to Qatar's image can not be neglected. In the same line, India too has a poor track record in hosting international events. The Commonwealth Games hosted by India in 2010 were marred by allegations of corruption and financial frauds (Corruption scandal hits 2010 Games, organisers deny charges, 2010). Low attendance and empty seats during the cricket world cup 2023 hosted by India, has attracted criticism citing mismanagement of BCCI (Naaz, 2010).

This brings us to the third and very important aspect in developing India as sporting soft power, i.e., enhancing performance. Since increasing Olympic medal counts and better performances in international sporting events can also play a significant role in boosting soft power, India should concentrate on enhancing its performance. Taking cue from sporting superpowers like the US, Australia and China, India needs to implement structural change in its sports policy. Sports should be integrated with school curriculum in addition to channelling more money into sports infrastructure.

5. Conclusion

Soft power alongside hard power is an important component of a country's power and influence today. Though it cannot independently yield favourable outcomes, its importance in international relations cannot be neglected. Traditionally, many scholars are seen quoting that the people have a greater role to play in harnessing soft power than the government. This may be because the power of attraction has worked without the interference of the state in the past. Even in India, the evolution of Indian soft power has taken place independent of the concrete effort from the government. Today the circumstances have changed. The governments of the United States, China, South Korea and other countries are prioritising soft power and public diplomacy in their policies. The time has come for the Indian government to effectively harness its soft power capabilities for both its domestic and diplomatic ends.

Though India's soft power diplomacy got a strategic approach after the Modi government came to power, its hard-line politics at home have hindered the efforts. Additionally, it has not made any focused contributions to tap into the potential of sports and Indian film Industry. Thus, this paper tried to analyse the role of the government in enhancing soft power elements, taking Indian film industry and sports as case studies. However, the scope for the intervention of the government is not just limited to these two elements of Indian soft power. The proactive role from the government in enhancing tourism, promoting Indian art, cuisine and architecture, and building strong connections with diaspora can positively help India in creating a favourable global image. These governmental efforts at promoting soft power elements like Indian cinema, sports and tourism can have multiple advantages. When tourism booms in a country,

it leads to economic and infrastructural development. Indian cinemas and sports also have equal potential of drawing economic advantages to the country. Thus, in a border perspective, with being a source of high-power status, soft power is also a tool that contributes in strengthening foreign policies and standard of living for the citizens. Though harnessing soft power is not self-sufficient for these causes, they are a necessary component.

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