

## Sky is the Limit to India's Soft Power

Amb. Lakshmi Puri

When the Golden Globe Award for 'Best Original Song' was announced on 10 January 2023, the roar of applause for the winning movie 'RRR' was echoed manifold in India and the world. It signified the celebration of India's vibrant cinematic tradition—globally the largest, most prolific and variegated—but also of the richness and virtuosity of Indian art and culture itself. As India emerges from decades of diffidence to assume a more prominent position on the world stage, this victory feels like a new moment for India@75, a celebration of its soft power renaissance.

A country's soft power, according to Joseph Nye, rests on three resources: its attractive culture, the political values it lives up to, and foreign policies perceived by others as legitimate and having moral authority. It seeks preferred outcomes through attraction and influence rather than coercion or payment in international relations. PM Modi has consciously posited the idea of the civilisational state of India on the world stage and has sought to swell the tide of its consequential soft power in his global engagement strategy.

As he averred, "India is not only a nation, but also an idea and a culture." One of the oldest, largest and greatest civilisations, India—unlike other civilisations—has maintained continuity with its glorious past. It has built a unique, assimilative and universalist culture that extends beyond historical territory, ethnolinguistic groups, and modes of governance. From this 5,000-years-old tree of wisdom emanate various branches of social, political, spiritual and transcendental thought that govern everyday life in India. They manifest themselves in India's vision and policymaking on, and for, global public good.

The G20 theme of "One Earth, One Family, One Future" under India's presidency in 2023 adopts the core tenets of humanism. On issues of global primacy, especially on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in the spirit of Gandhian Sarvodaya through *Antyodaya* – India's self-belief and actions are being commended. Whether it is his vision for cleanliness, sanitation, housing, food, and energy for all, or digital and financial inclusion and skilling missions, PM Modi has pioneered solutions that are replicable to scale in the Global South.

Winner of the ‘Champion of the Earth Award’, PM Modi has drawn upon India’s deep conviction about harmony with nature to espouse the causes of Green Development, Lifestyle for Environment Mission, and his *Panchamrit* Action Plan on climate action. This is now a priority theme of India’s G20 Presidency. His leadership on climate justice has won acclaim from developed and developing nations alike. Similarly, India’s Vaccine Maitri, health cooperation, and humanitarian assistance have evoked appreciation.

The Modi government seeks to harness India’s soft power on a wider canvas, to drive a positive India narrative, and to capture alignment in global and regional geopolitics as the global order is re-formed in the wake of the pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The Prime Minister’s pronouncement of “this is not the time for war” and propagation of the ‘*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*’ philosophy has gleaned many international admirers. Soft power is complementary to and mainstreamed into India’s military and economic capabilities. There is a paradigmatic shift in our strategic culture. He has led from the front, and has made concerted efforts to popularise India’s soft power.

Yoga, of course, has become the most successful carrier of India’s soft power. It has become global phenomenon with yoga chant echoing from Japan to the US and from Saudi Arabia to Brazil! The UN General Assembly resolution to make 21 June as the ‘International Day of Yoga’ with the highest support of 175 member-states testifies to its universal appeal. Ayurveda, beauty and wellness, and the flavourful palettes of Indian cuisine have captivated the world. Diwali is fast becoming a global festival.

Indian films are a significant cultural export and influencers of global mores and trendsetters. Raj Kapur and Satyajit Ray shaped the world of cinema forever. Actors like Amitabh Bachchan, Rajinikanth, Hrithik Roshan, Aamir Khan, Shahrukh Khan, Prabhas, and Ram Charan have fan following in Asia, Arab and African countries besides Europe, and North and South America. Internet, YouTube, OTT and social media platforms have further spread the popularity of Indian stories, and classical and modern music and dance. The wider creative industry of India, including design, textile, fashion, painting, sculpture, crafts, architecture, languages and literature, are admired and emulated for their original and rich aesthetic and design sensibilities with amenability to fusion.

India is leveraging its intrinsic intellectual capital and entrepreneurial genius in positioning the country at the forefront of global knowledge, ICT, and increasingly, Tech 4.0 capabilities that include AI. Unsurprisingly, many of the biggest industry and tech leaders in the West are of Indian origin. India is today the fastest-growing entrepreneurial ecosystem in the world. India's emerging economy story is buttressed by its cultural and historical people-to-people links with every corner of the world through trade, travel and tourism as well as its flourishing diaspora of 32 million, with 2.5 million Indians migrating overseas every year – the highest in the world.

India's soft power as the mother of all democracies, and the world's largest, pluralistic and tolerant one, has come into sharper focus with its consensus building, and cooperative and mutual benefit ethos which is also the UN ideal. This is in stark contrast to the approach of some authoritarian large powers with their use of coercive power to further their national interests at grave cost to other nations.

It is imperative that India wins this battle of ideas and systems because it portends the success of India's own sustainable development model and the Indian way as much as it validates a viable democratic national and international order. As President Biden said to PM Modi during the Quad Summit in May 2022, India's handling of the pandemic showed that "democracies can deliver" and busted the myth that "autocracies can better handle the rapidly changing world." The Global South expects India to reinforce a model of collaborative development that does not reduce diplomacy to a zero-sum game. The Prime Minister himself acknowledged that, "the world is looking at India proudly and with anticipation....searching for solutions to the problems on the soil of India. This change in the world, in the thinking of the world is the result of our experiential journey of 75 years."

India is reaping both intended gains through well-executed government efforts but also many unintended gains from the soft power of 'brand India'. Given its huge potential of demographic dividend towards the goal of a 40 trillion economy by 2047, the reservoir of the largest youth and women power, matched with robust democratic institutions and strong military capabilities, India is on the pathway to becoming a leading power. Its burgeoning soft power will ensure that this rise is benign, benevolent and peaceful, one that strengthens a democratic, sustainably developed, and rules-based global

order. India's farsighted thought leadership draws strength from Swami Vivekananda who foresaw "that form of Mother India, the Mother goddess, who shall once again be the Vishwaguru and would lead the world."

\*\*\*

*[Writer is a retired Indian diplomat, former Assistant Secretary-General at the United Nations, and former Executive Director of UN Women.]*