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Soft power: looking beyond American hegemony

Global flows of media and culture have grown not just in volume but also in complexity. While there are still striking imbalances in favor of the advanced industrial societies, it is hardly the case that Asian societies are merely passive recipients of Western ideas and cultural products. Among the scholars trying to make sense of these patterns, Daya Thussu has been a leading light. His many books include the edited volume, *Internationalizing Media Studies* (Routledge, 2009). He also wrote the first book-length study of India's soft power, *Communicating India's Soft Power: Buddha to Bollywood*. Originally published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2013, a South Asian edition has just been published in 2016 by Sage India. *Media Asia* editor Cherian George asked him about his research on soft power and the broader agenda of de-Westernizing media studies.



DAYA KISHAN THUSSU is a professor of International Communication and the co-director of India Media Centre at the University of Westminster in London. He is the founder and managing editor of the Sage journal *Global Media and Communication*.

Cherian George:

You have written extensively about “soft power” in Asia, borrowing a concept developed by Joseph Nye. What do you think makes it a useful and powerful concept?

Daya Thussu:

Despite the vagueness associated with the concept of soft power, it has been enthusiastically adopted in recent decades by countries around the world as an increasingly visible component of foreign policy strategy. The United States, where the concept emerged at the end of the Cold War, also happens to be the world's mightiest military and economic power (hard power) as well as soft power (intellectual, cultural and information power). Given the formidable strength of the US in the international arena, the concept of “soft power” has acquired global currency and is routinely used in policy and academic literature as well as in elite journalism. It is a concept that can be usefully deployed to discuss the role of culture and communication in a globalising marketplace for ideas; to promote a favourable image of a country or to counter negative coverage in an era of digital global flows, involving both state and non-state actors and networks.

- CG:** Based on your engagement with the idea of soft power, in what ways do you think the concept falls short? If you were writing a “health warning” for communication researchers who are thinking of applying the concept, what might that cautionary note say?
- DT:** Professor Nye’s focus is primarily on the United States, and therefore the idea itself is a very American one. It needs to be historicised and looked at with a wider and deeper understanding of what constitutes cultural and intellectual power – beyond the nation-branding discourses that have emerged in the past two decades.
- CG:** You’ve tried to do that in your study of India. How does the Indian case extend and enrich the concept of soft power?
- DT:** What constitutes India today as a nation state is a very old civilisation. That was my starting point, to look at the India case not as an American extension of soft power discourse, but think of an Indian version of it. It is important to note that India’s soft power has a civilizational dimension. The Indic civilization, dating back more than 5,000 years, is one of the major cultural formations in the world. Its manifestation is in diverse forms – religion and philosophy, arts and architecture, language and literature, trade and travel. A civilisation that gave birth to four of the world’s major religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism – and where every major faith, with the exception of Shintoism and Confucianism, has coexisted for millennia, India offers a unique and syncretized religious discourse.

India’s cultural influence across East and Southeast Asia, during the early centuries of the Christian era, was through the spread of Hinduism and Buddhism. The millennia-old relationship between India and the rest of Asia has a strong cultural and communication dimension. Buddhism was at the heart of this interaction and the biggest project of dissemination of ideas emanating from what constitutes India today. Buddhism is a powerful link between the Indic and the Chinese civilizations. Narratives on Buddha’s life and teachings remain a cultural referent in much of Asia, while traces of Indic languages, cuisine, dance, and other art forms survive in parts of Southeast and East Asia.

Successive Indian governments have largely ignored this aspect of Indian influence, though with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, there appears to be more interest. Wherever he has been in Asia – Japan, South Korea, or China – he has invoked the Buddhist links that India has with these countries. The world’s other great religions such as Christianity and Islam too have very long association with India. St. Thomas is supposed to be buried in Chennai

in southern India, and one of the world's oldest mosques is also located in India.

Had British imperialism not partitioned India at independence in 1947, India would have become the world's largest Muslim country in terms of population. Today, India is home to the second largest Muslim population in the world after Indonesia, accounting for 11% of the global total. This minority has contributed significantly to the millennia-old Indo-Islamic culture, notable for its classical music, poetry, and cuisine, and playing a key role in the development of Indian cinema. The top three current Bollywood superstars – Aamir Khan, Salman Khan, and Shah Rukh Khan – were born and raised in Muslim families, as have been some of the finest writers and directors.

- CG:** Ironically, some of the exported influences you mention have become so deeply internalised by the host nations' cultures that they are barely recognised as "made in India". We see this in Southeast Asia, where most Indonesians, Thais and others are not even aware of India's contribution to what they consider their own unique culture. On the one hand, this is an indication of how attractive elements of Indian civilisation have been. But on the other hand, if Indian civilisational exports are so thoroughly domesticated by the host nations, can India to leverage that influence to its advantage?
- DT:** Indian policy makers and intelligentsia have to start looking beyond the Western world and leverage the inter-Asian civilisational links. Here the role of education and communication is very important, especially with the sections of the diaspora. A greater degree of student and faculty exchanges as well as media coverage may also be helpful.
- CG:** With popular culture, there is a more tangible link between Indian cultural products and its national branding. People may lose track of whether a certain designer brand is French or Italian, but everyone knows Bollywood films are Indian. We can measure the Indian film industry's global impact in monetary terms, and that's one of the clearest indicators that global media are not purely Western. However, it's harder to measure whether the film industry has created a cultural or ideological dividend for India. What's your view? Has Bollywood made a difference to India's position in the world?
- DT:** India is the world's largest film factory. More films are produced in that country annually than anywhere else. The so-called Bollywood is one of the many – admittedly the most dominant – film industries in India. India has been exporting films since 1930s under British colonial rule. They have been widely consumed, especially in other developing countries,

primarily because of their larger-than-life characters, escapist melodramatic narrative style, and song and dance sequences. During the Cold War years, the anti-colonial and progressive ideology that defined the formative years of Indian cinema was attractive for governments in the communist world: Hindi films were very popular in the Soviet Union and in China. In more recent years, the deregulated and privatised global media environment and the availability of digital television and online delivery systems have ensured that Bollywood content is available for varied international audiences.

It was only in 2000 that the Indian film industry was formally given the status of an industry by the Indian government, authorizing the banks to provide loans to filmmakers, thus ensuring it could become a major source of revenue as well as an instrument for promoting India's soft power. Such a move was also aimed at encouraging foreign investors to engage with the Indian entertainment industry. One outcome of such official support was that investments began to flow from telecom, software, and media sectors into an industry hitherto operating within an opaque financial system. The ensuing corporatization and the synergies this created made it possible for Bollywood content to be available on multiple platforms, satellite, cable, online, and mobile, resulting in a complex, globalized production, distribution and consumption practices including among the 35-million-strong South Asian diaspora, scattered on all continents.

The Bollywood brand, co-opted by India's corporate and governmental elite and celebrated by members of its diaspora, has come to define a creative and confident India. Today, Indian films are released simultaneously across the globe; its stars are recognized faces in international advertising and entertainment. There are many festivals and functions centered on Bollywood, and prestigious universities offer courses and research into this form of popular culture. In my book, I quote the former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who in 2008 told Indian Foreign Service probationers:

The soft power of India in some ways can be a very important instrument of foreign policy. Cultural relations, India's film industry, Bollywood ... I find wherever I go in Middle-East, in Africa – people talk about Indian films. So that is a new way of influencing the world about the growing importance of India. Soft power is equally important in the new world of diplomacy.

From a soft power perspective, it is not so much about the box office figures but the perception of India – as a country of colorful religiosity and diversity – that its popular cinema creates among foreign audiences, and the attributes that appeal across cultures.

However, a lot more needs to be done to make the popular Indian cinema reach beyond its primary constituency – namely the South Asian diaspora. The Indian government ought to learn from the US State Department how it promotes American cultural industries internationally. As a major information technology power, Indian government and corporations could deploy new digital delivery mechanisms to further strengthen the circulation of Indian entertainment in a globalized media world.

CG: One test of soft power vs. conventional economic power is the competition between India and China. India would seem to have the more globally attractive press culture, yet it is CCTV, China Daily and Xinhua that are making a mark globally, thanks to the Chinese government's massive investments in external propaganda.

DT: Despite having more than 400 round-the-clock news channels and a strong tradition of English-language journalism, the Indian presence in international news and current affairs media – apart from diasporic audiences – is almost negligible. Unlike China, the Indian state broadcaster Doordarshan remains one of the few major news networks not available in important global markets. Private channels, notably News 18 India, NDTV 24 × 7 and Headlines Today, cater largely to the diasporic audience. For private news networks, the need for global expansion is limited, since, in market terms, news has a relatively small audience and therefore meagre advertising revenue.

At a time when Indian industry is increasingly globalizing and international engagement with India is growing across the globe, Indian news media are losing interest in the wider world. This is indeed ironic, given that India has arguably one of the world's most sophisticated, diverse, and multilingual journalism traditions. *The Times of India*, the world's largest English-language broadsheet daily newspaper in terms of circulation, was established in 1838. The increasing presence of Indian-born or Indian-origin journalists in leading international news outlets should also contribute to Indian voices being heard in the global news sphere. Unlike many other developing countries, India has a long history of politically engaged journalism, with its roots in the anti-colonial nationalist movement. An intellectual engagement with the wider world is a rich legacy of Indian journalism.

India is also one of the world's largest English-language news markets, as many of its TV news channels broadcast in English. Some of these channels have a global reach and ambition, and yet without any state support, these cannot operate successfully in a crowded and competitive global news marketplace. Also

important to remind ourselves is the fact that unlike China, the media in India are largely free from government control and even interference, though they are hostage to a crass commercial media ecology dependent on an infotainment-oriented news agenda.

I would also add that despite this, sections of the media continue to perform a Fourth Estate function in the world's largest and noisiest democracy. The growing profile of India on the global scene has been helped by the increasing visibility of its cultural and creative industries, its diaspora, and its media operating in a vibrant and expanding media sphere in one of the world's fastest growing economies. Despite the global economic downturn, in 2015, India posted an economic growth of more than seven percent. Given the size and scale of the Indian media industry and the globalization of Indian businesses, the Indian version of news has potentially an audience base, beyond the diasporic one.

CG: But, as you've said, that potential is unrealised. What accounts for the insularity of India's news organisations?

DT: Primarily, I think it is dictated by the market logic: News networks do not make much money, especially in their global operations. If you look at the top news networks in the world, they are all supported by their respective governments – BBC (indirectly), France 24, RT, DW TV, and CCTV News. Or they are subsidised by major entertainment-driven media conglomerates – CNN is a notable example. However, as Indian economic and geopolitical interests deepen in different parts of the world, the need to provide an Indian perspective on global affairs is likely to grow. I see huge potential for online media: India already has the world's second largest Internet population after China. Unlike China, though, India is home to a big English-fluent, argumentative, and tech-savvy youth: More than 65% of India's 1.2 billion people are below the age of 35, which translates into nearly 700 million. A sizable and growing proportion of this demographic is joining the online world.

CG: For this same issue of *Media Asia*, I interviewed Seiichi Kondo, a retired Japanese diplomat who spearheaded its public diplomacy efforts. Professor Kondo is sceptical about the impact of popular culture – despite the fact that Japan seems to have significantly enhanced its image thanks to anime, manga and J-pop. He argues that these media products only provide the initial attraction; ultimately, soft power is grown by foreigners actually spending time in one's country and getting to know its people and the way they think. Would you agree?

DT: To some extent. In an entertainment-saturated media environment, the image does make a difference in how one imagines a country or a culture. For most people, the interaction with

“foreign” cultures is often mediated through images, mostly provided by the Western world. One factor which favours a country like India is its long history as a civilisational power and its global diaspora which helps disseminate those ideas, both in their popular and elite versions.

CG: Moving away from your studies of soft power, I'd like to ask you about the larger project that I assume such research is part of: the need to “de-Westernise” and globalise communication research. These are discussions that have gone on for decades. What progress do you think has been made, and what remains to be done?

DT: This is indeed very close to my research interest and agenda. I came to teach and study international communication from a slightly different intellectual trajectory, having done a Masters in History and another one in Political Science, followed by a PhD in International Relations from Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi. In addition, I also worked as a journalist both in New Delhi and in London before I shifted fulltime to academia.

Being a student of international politics, I was struck by how much of the international media and communication discourse was shaped by the US-led Western institutions and industries. In the last two decades, I have been doing my bit to encourage further internationalization of research in our field. In my writings, notably in *Internationalizing Media Studies*, I have argued that the globalization of media industries and audiences, combined with the internationalization of higher education – reflected in the changing profile of both faculty and students – requires a new approach for research and teaching of media and communication. I have used the motif of de-Americanization to suggest the ways in which such discourse can be advanced.

Despite the unprecedented growth of media and communication industries in the global South, particularly in such countries as China, India, and Brazil, the global media continue to be dominated by Hollywood or Hollywoodized content. As during most of the twentieth century, the US remains today the largest exporter of both the world's entertainment and infotainment programmes and the computer programming thorough which these are distributed across the increasingly interconnected and digitized globe.

This supremacy is also reflected in the study of media, largely because of the dominance of English as the language of global communication, combined with the fact that the field of communication emerged in the United States. American communication and media schools have produced the majority of textbook and journal publishing in the area, closely followed by Britain. I believe, as in many other fields, the “rise”, or should it be “return”,

of China and India to global prominence, coinciding with the crisis in the neoliberal model of US-led Western capitalism, will challenge traditional thinking and research paradigms for international media and communication as power begins to swing away from the West.

CG: Within the research agenda that you propose, what are some of the lines of inquiry that could productively occupy the attention of young scholars for years to come?

DT: I think one key area of focus should be history. Most media and communication scholars, and not just in Asia, tend to take a very a-historic perspective in their studies. They need to engage with history. This will also inform and enlighten them on how they understand the present. The other area is theorisation. Asian scholars need to think of intellectual frameworks drawing on the rich and diverse cultures of the continent. For example, China and India are not merely nation states: they are civilisational states with their own discourses and ways of thinking. The Chinese version of communism is very different from the European one, and democracy in India is much more complex than the Westminster model on which it is based.

Nearly two decades ago, an Indian historian, Dipesh Chakrabarty, currently at the University of Chicago, wrote an excellent book called *Provincializing Europe*. The time is ripe to view the US as one of the provinces in our increasingly multi-polar world, where many non-Western voices, barely audible before, are now being heard. However, to make sure that this trend continues, it is crucial to undertake research that conforms to international standards of theoretical sophistication and methodological rigor.