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The soft power of popular cinema: the case of India

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Abstract

Among BRICS nations, India has the most developed and globalised film industry and the Indian Government as well as corporations are increasingly deploying the power of Bollywood in their international interactions. India's soft power, arising from its cultural and civilizational influence outside its territorial boundaries, has a long history. Focusing on contemporary India's thriving Hindi film industry, this article suggests that the globalization of the country's popular cinema, aided by a large diaspora, has created possibilities of promoting India's public diplomacy. It examines the global imprint of this cinema as an instrument of soft power.

The notion of soft power, associated famously with the work of Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye, is defined by him simply as 'the ability to attract people to our side without coercion'. The phrase was first used by Nye in an article published in 1990 in the journal *Foreign Policy*, where he contrasted this 'co-optive power', 'which occurs when one country gets other countries to want what it wants', to 'the hard or command power of ordering others to do what it wants' (Nye, 1990: 166). In his most widely cited book *Soft Power*, Nye suggested three key sources for a country's soft power: '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)' (Nye 2004a: 11). Despite Nye's focus being primarily on the United States, and the vagueness associated with the concept of soft power, it has been enthusiastically adopted by countries around the world as an increasingly visible component of foreign policy strategy. It is a testimony to the formidable power of the US in the international arena that the phrase 'soft power' has acquired global currency and is routinely used in policy and academic literature as well as in elite journalism across the globe.

The capacity of nations to make themselves attractive in a globalizing marketplace for ideas has become an important aspect of contemporary international relations, as has been the goal of communicating a favourable image of a country or countering negative portrayals in an era of digital global flows, involving both state and non-state actors and networks. In the past decade, many countries have set up 'public diplomacy' departments within their ministries of foreign affairs, while a number of governments have sought the services of public relations and lobbying firms to coordinate their 'nation-branding initiatives,' aimed at attracting foreign investment and tourism (Aronczyk, 2013).

As one of the world's fastest growing economies and with a pluralist and secular polity, India is increasingly being viewed as a global economic and political power. On the basis of purchasing-power parity, in 2015 India was the world's third largest economy,

behind the United States and China, despite being home to 40 per cent of the world's poorest people (Drèze and Sen, 2013; IMF, 2014). Parallel to its rising economic power, is the growing global awareness and appreciation of India's soft power—its mass media, celebratory religiosity (Yoga and Ayurveda) and popular culture (Tharoor, 2012; Hall, 2012; Thussu, 2013). It is important to note that India's soft power has a civilizational dimension to it, the Indic civilization, dating back more than 5,000 years, being one of the major cultural formations in the world, from religion and philosophy, arts and architecture, to language and literature, trade and travel. India is the origin of four of the world's religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism—and as a place where every major faith, with the exception of Shintoism and Confucianism, has coexisted for millennia, India offers a unique and syncretized religious discourse (Sen, 2005; Tharoor, 2012; Thussu, 2013).

India's global influence has a long and complex history. Its soft power in historical terms was directed not toward the West but to Asia. 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, with the widest dissemination of ideas emanating from what constitutes India today, and remains a powerful link between the Indic and the Chinese civilizations (Liu, 1988; Sen, 2005). Narratives on Buddha's life and teachings are still a cultural referent in much of Asia, while traces of Indic languages, cuisine, dance, and other art forms survive in parts of southeast Asia, notably in Indonesia. Buddhism is the state

religion in Thailand (where it arrived from India in second century AD) and a major influence in countries like Sri Lanka, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Japan and China (home to the largest number of Buddhists in the world) (Liu, 1988).

Two of the world's other great religions - Christianity and Islam - also have very long associations with India. Some of the earliest Christian communities were established in South 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 per cent 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. Such demographics also provide India with valuable cultural capital to promote its soft power among Islamic populations.

Adding to this legacy is India's long and continuing encounter with European modernity and its contribution to strategic autonomy epitomised by leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, the apostle of non-violence and tolerance – whose thoughts influenced such leaders as Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela - and Jawaharlal Nehru, independent India's first Prime Minister and an eloquent champion of non-alignment in international relations (Bayly, 2011). This rare combination of a civilization which has strong Hindu-Buddhist foundations, interactions with Chinese civilization and centuries of Islamic influence, and

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integration with Western institutions and ideas, gives India cultural resources to deal with the diverse, globalized and complex realities of the twenty-first century.

From mobile telephony to online communication, India has witnessed a revolution in the production and distribution of its cultural products. Unlike in the West, the media are booming in India: newspaper circulation is rising (India is the world's largest newspaper market); the country has more dedicated television news channels—400 in 2015—than the whole of Europe put together and it is also home to the world's largest film industry. There is a steady growth in the visibility of cultural products from India— from Bollywood cinema to Bhangra music (Gera-Roy, 2010; Kohli-Khandekar, 2013; FICCI-KPMG, 2015, Gehlawat, 2015). The digital revolution has ensured that these are now reaching all corners of the globe, largely through the increasingly vocal and visible 25-million strong Indian diaspora – the second largest after the Chinese and also the world's biggest English-speaking diaspora - and this has contributed to India's soft power (Thussu, 2013).

This change in India's global status has coincided with the relative economic decline of the West, creating the opportunity for an emerging power such as India to participate in global governance structures hitherto dominated by the US-led Western alliance (Zakaria, 2008; Acharya, 2014). Given its history as the only major democracy which did not blindly follow the West during the Cold War years, pursuing a nonaligned foreign policy, India has the potential to take up a more significant leadership role. Despite its growing economic and strategic relations with Washington, it maintains close ties with

other major and emerging powers. India's presence at the Group of 77 developing nations and at the G-20 leading economies of the world has been effective in articulating a Southern perspective on global affairs.

India is also a key member of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), whose annual summits since 2009 are being increasingly noticed outside the five countries, which together account for 20 percent of the world's GDP (Nordenstreng and Thussu, 2015). The United Nations Development Programme's 2013 *Human Development Report* predicts that by 2020 the combined economic output of China, India and Brazil will surpass the aggregate production of the US, Britain, Canada, France, Germany and Italy. As the report, titled *The Rise of the South,* notes: 'economic exchanges are expanding faster 'horizontally'—on a South- South basis—than on the traditional North-South axis. People are sharing ideas and experiences through new communications channels and seeking greater accountability from governments and international institutions alike. The South as a whole is driving global economic growth and societal change for the first time in centuries' (UNDP, 2013: 123).

Within this geo-political environment, there is growing recognition of the importance of soft power in a digitally connected and globalized communication environment, and in this the media play a key role. Despite the unprecedented growth of media and cultural industries in the BRICS nations, particularly in such countries as China, India and Brazil, the global media continue to be dominated by the US. Given its formidable political, economic, technological and military power, American or Americanized media are

available across the globe, in English or in dubbed or indigenized versions fuelling the $1.3 trillion global media and cultural industry, one of the fastest growing in the world, accounting for more than 7 per cent of global GDP. As in the twentieth century, the US remains today the largest exporter both of the world's entertainment and information programmes and the software and hardware through which these are distributed across the increasingly digitized globe (Thussu, forthcoming).

The sources of such 'soft' media power in the United States cannot be separated from its hard power, as the world's most powerful country in economic, political and military terms, expressed in its more than 1,000 military bases across the globe and an enormous defence budget (more than $600 billion in 2013, according to the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies), unmatched by any other nation. It is American hard power that impacts on many countries and helps legitimize the American way of life, promoted through its formidable soft power reserves – from Hollywood entertainment giants to the digital empires of the internet age. As Nye has remarked, US culture 'from Hollywood to Harvard – has greater global reach than any other' (Nye, 2004b: 7).

One reason for the US domination of global media is that the country has always followed a commercial model for its media industry – a venture in which the successive US governments have been a crucial factor. Broadcasting in the United States – both radio and television – had a commercial remit from its very inception. Three main national networks – CBS, NBC and ABC– provided both mass entertainment and public

information. The entertainment element was strong in all three, with game-and-talent shows as well as glamour and celebrity programming becoming the staple diet (McChesney, 1999). In the post-Cold War world, the US-inspired commercial model of media has been globalized, a phenomenon that Hallin and Mancini have characterised as the 'triumph of the liberal model' (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 251).

The global growth of Indian media

The rapid liberalization, deregulation and privatization of media and cultural industries have transformed broadcasting in India over the last two decades (Athique, 2012; Kohli-Khandekar, 2013; FICCI-KPMG, 2015). The unprecedented expansion of television – from a single state channel in 1991 to over 800 channels in 2015, was paralleled by the growth of a new middle-class audience. At the same time the expansion of global digital media industries and distribution technologies ensured that Indian entertainment channels and films are increasingly visible in the global media sphere (Kaur and Sinha, 2005; Iordanova *et al*, 2006; Kavoori and Punathambekar, 2008; Gera Roy, 2010; Gera Roy, 2012; Dudrah, 2012; Schaefer and Karan, 2013; Punathambekar, 2013; Gehlawat, 2015).

With more than 400 round-the-clock news channels and a strong tradition of English-language journalism, Indian perspectives on global affairs are accessible via such channels as News 18 India, TV Today and NDTV 24x7. All three are private networks, while the Indian state broadcaster Doordarshan remains one of the few major state news networks not available in important global markets at a time when global television

news in English has expanded to include inputs from countries where English is not widely used, including Qatar (Al-Jazeera English), China (CCTV News), Russia (RT), Japan (NHK World) and Iran (Press TV). The absence of Doordarshan in the global media sphere can be ascribed to bureaucratic apathy and inefficiency, though, in an age of what Philip Seib has called 'real-time diplomacy,' the need to take communication seriously has never been greater (Seib, 2012). Paradoxically, Indian journalism and news media in general are losing interest in the wider world at a time when Indian industry is increasingly globalizing and international engagement with India is growing from across the globe. 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.

Belatedly, the Indian government has woken up to promoting its external broadcasting. A high-level committee recommended that Prasar Bharati, India's public service broadcaster, should have a 'global outreach' (Prasar Bharati, 2014). Its vision is to: 'create a world-class broadcasting service benchmarked with the best in the world using next-generation opportunities, technologies, business models and strategies. The platform should be designed for new media first and then extended to conventional TV; [and to] outline an effective content strategy for Prasar Bharati's global platforms (TV and Radio) focused on projecting the national view rather than the narrow official viewpoint' (Prasar Bharati, 2014: 15).

While Indian television news may not yet have made any impact globally, the Hindi film industry, popularly known as Bollywood has emerged as one of the most notable examples of global entertainment emanating from outside the Western world (Kohli-Khandekar, 2013; Punathambekar, 2013; FICCI-KPMG, 2015). It remains the prominent manifestation of Indian content in the global media sphere, and is today a $3.5 billion industry, which has helped to make the country an attractive investment destination. Watched by audiences in more than 70 countries, Bollywood is the world's largest film factory in terms of production and viewership: every year a billion more people buy tickets for Indian movies than for Hollywood films. Though India has exported films to countries around the world since the 1930s, it is only since the 1990s and in the new millennium that Bollywood has become part of the 'global popular'. The explosion in the number of television channels was a massive boost for the movie industry, not only with the emergence of many dedicated film-based pay-channels but also for its coverage of the film industry itself, given the huge demand of the new channels for content (Kohli-Khandekar, 2013).

According to industry estimates, the Indian entertainment and media industry was worth $29 billion in 2013 (FICCI-KPMG, 2015). In addition to exporting its own media products, India is increasingly a production base for Hollywood and other US media corporations, especially in areas such as animation and post-production services. These growing cultural links with the US-dominated transnational media corporations also facilitate the marketing and distribution of Indian content. As international investment increases in the media sector, with the relaxation of cross-media ownership

rules, new synergies are emerging between Hollywood and Bollywood and Indian media companies are investing in Hollywood productions. The changing geo-political equation in Asia, which has led to a closer economic and strategic relationship between Washington and New Delhi, has given a boost to this process.

Shashi Tharoor, India's former Minister for Higher Education and a pioneer proponent of its soft power discourse, has consistently argued that India has a 'good story' to tell and its popular culture is well-equipped to tell that story. To what extent has India's popular culture contributed to its global presence and prestige? Has the greater volume of circulation of Indian cultural products through global digital superhighways changed external perceptions of India, enhancing its soft power? Indian industry and government have recognized and endorsed the potential power of culture at the highest level, as India's then Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh observed in 2011, while addressing the annual gathering of Indian diaspora: 'India's soft power is an increasingly important element of our expanding global footprint […] The richness of India's classical traditions and the colour and vibrancy of contemporary Indian culture are making waves around the world' (quoted in Thussu, 2013: 128).

Bollywood as Indian soft power?

The term Bollywood, coined in a journalistic column in India – and contested and commended in almost equal measure – refers to a major cultural industry which dominates all media in India, including television, radio, print, on-line content and advertising. Films also contribute to the massively popular music industry. For some,

the negative connotation of the word Bollywood is that it is a derivative, imitative and low-quality version of the world's richest film factory – Hollywood – but in terms of the production of feature films and viewership, India leads the world: every year on average 1,000 films are produced (apart from the Hindi- language cinema other major film industries within India include the Tamil, Telugu and Bengali – also catering to large diasporic constituencies). Bollywood, as the biggest and the richest, is seen both by government and industry as a soft power asset for India – one of the few non-Western countries to make its presence felt in the mainstream global cinema market.

Cinema in India has a strong pedigree: within months of the invention of the motion picture by the Lumière brothers in France in 1895, films were being shown in Bombay, and film production in India started two years later. In 1913, the first full length Hindi feature film *Raja Harishchandra*, based on the life of a mythological king of ancient India, was released. In the silent era (1913-1931) more than 1,200 films were made in India and in 1931, India entered the sound era, and within a year, 28 full-length feature films in three languages were released (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, 1980). Even before India became an independent nation, films from India were being exported to south-east Asian and African nations. One reason for the popularity of Indian films among other developing countries was their larger-than-life characters, escapist melodramatic narrative style, and song and dance sequences (Rajadhyaksha, 2009). The anti-colonial and progressive ideology which defined the formative years of Indian cinema was also attractive for governments in the communist world. The 1946 film *Dharti Ke Lal* (Children of the Earth) produced by the Indian People's Theatre

Association, was the first film to receive widespread distribution in the Soviet Union. It has been suggested that one candidate for the title of the 'most popular film of all times' is *Awaara (Vagabond*, released in 1951), directed by Raj Kapoor, one of India's most popular actors, as it was very successful in the Soviet Union and China, as well as in many other countries (Iordanova, *et al*. 2006). In Russia, Indian films continue to attract interest: the state-owned channel *Domashny* (Home) broadcasts Bollywood, while India TV, a corporation owned by the Moscow-based Red Media Group, has been showing Indian films and other programming in that country since 2006 (Rajagopalan, 2008). The deregulated and privatized global broadcasting environment and the availability of digital television and online delivery systems have ensured that Bollywood content is available to new and varied international audiences. Expansion, particularly into the lucrative US and European markets during the 1990s, was made possible by the availability of satellite platforms: Indian channels including Zee, Star and B4U (Bollywood for You) became available in Europe on Sky's digital network, and in the US, on Echostar DISH system and DirecTV. With the growing convergence between television and the internet, these channels now have a global viewership (Rai, 2009; Dudrah, 2012; FICCI-KPMG, 2015).

In 2000, the Indian film industry was formally given the status of an industry by the Indian government, authorizing the Industrial Development Bank of India 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, on-line 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 (FICCI-KPMG, 2015).

From a soft power perspective, Bollywood is perhaps more effective among other countries of the global South (Tharoor, 2012). 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. Gone are the days when diasporic communities felt embarrassed about the cinema of their country of origin, perceived by many in host nations as glitzy and kitschy. Today, Hindi films are released simultaneously across the globe, its stars are recognized faces in international advertising and entertainment (Punathambekar, 2013). There are many festivals and functions centred on Bollywood, and prestigious universities offer courses and research into this form of popular culture (Gehlawat, 2015). In 2008, Prime Minister Singh told Indian Foreign Service probationers, that 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' (quoted in Thussu, 2013: 134).

The primary market, though, remains the diasporic one, the UK/US segment of which has been revitalized in the past two decades. Given the importance of London as a global media centre, Bollywood has invested heavily to make its presence felt there: Britain accounts for a fifth of the global revenue for Bollywood's international releases. Eros International, the world's leading producer and distributor of Bollywood films, is headquartered in the British capital (Rai, 2009; Dudrah, 2012; Punathambekar, 2013). From a soft power perspective, it is not so much about the box office figures but the perception of India that its popular cinema creates among diverse foreign audiences and the attributes that appeal across cultures. In recent decades, a transnational attitude has been seen in terms of production values, themes and actors as well as investment in sub-titling in various languages to widen the reach of Indian films beyond the traditional diasporic constituency. Since 2002, Melbourne-based M. G. Distribution has been distributing Hindi films in mainstream cinemas, raising the profile and visibility of Bollywood in Australia, New Zealand and Fiji (Hassam and Paranjape, 2010). In south-east Asia, where the cultural and diasporic networks are a keen audience for Indian popular culture, many recent films were shot on location in the region. Networks such as Zee have country specific channels for Thailand and Indonesia. The promotion of family and community-oriented values in contrast to Western individualism, has made audiences in Muslim countries more receptive to Indian films. Given the large Indian diaspora in the Arab world, the region is a major overseas market for Bollywood: many blockbuster films hold their premiers in Dubai, a cosmopolitan city which is also setting up a Bollywood theme park. Until the 1980s, one third of all film exports from India were

for the diasporic and local populations in the Arab Gulf states. Even now, with the availability of a myriad entertainment programming from across the globe, Indian films continue to be popular in many Arab countries, as evident from the success of such channels as B4U Movies (Middle East). One indication that 'Bollywoodized' content is now specifically produced for Arab audiences, is the launch of Arabic channels by Indian media companies: *Zee Aflam*, Zee's first dedicated movie channel – airing Bollywood films dubbed into Arabic – has been in operation since 2008 (Thussu, 2013).

Bollywood's *'charms'* have also been used to sell military hardware, as illustrated by the short video which leading Israeli weapon's manufacturer, Rafael Advanced Defence Systems*,* produced in 2009 to coincide with the defence trade fair in India. The video with lyrics in English featured a Bollywood-style dance number, where Israeli actors in Indian costumes sing and dance around mock-ups of Rafael's products, about Indo-Israeli defence ties (Thussu, 2013). Geopolitics play a role in the reception of Bollywood in Pakistan too. Indian films were banned by the government there for nearly four decades, though smuggled counterfeit copies of VHS tapes and pirated DVDs were widely in circulation and Bollywood films were also accessible due to increasing availability of satellite television. Since the lifting of the ban in 2008, Bollywood films have become a rage in the country with which India has fought four wars and continues to have difficult relations. With its religiosity, gender representation and family-oriented scripts, the Bollywood version of 'modernization' seem to be more amenable to the Pakistani audience. Bollywood has traditionally demonstrated a strong secular streak, with some of its top stars belonging to India's largest minority community. The 2015

heart-warming film *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* (Dear brother Bajrangi) starring one of the most popular stars, Salman Khan, about a mute little girl from Pakistan who is separated from her mother while visiting a Muslim shrine in India and how a traditional Hindu man, played with aplomb by Khan, takes her back to Pakistan to reunite with her family - did more than many diplomatic rounds of talks to improve people-to-people relations with Pakistan. In neighbouring Afghanistan, Indian films remain hugely popular. When the Indian foreign minister Jaswant Singh visited Kabul after the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, he reportedly carried with him Bollywood films and music tapes for his new Afghan hosts. US government cables released by WikiLeaks pointed to the potential role of Bollywood in promoting anti-extremism across the world, and peace in Afghanistan. A US cable from March 2007 said that high-profile Bollywood actors could play a key role in Afghanistan. 'We understand Bollywood movies are wildly popular in Afghanistan, so willing Indian celebrities could be asked to travel to Afghanistan to help bring attention to social issues there,' it said (quoted in Burke, 2010).

Northern Nigeria too has a long-established interest in Hindi cinema. The mushrooming of Hindi-to-Hausa video studios, where Indian films are routinely adapted or copied for the Nollywood market, indicates their value as cultural artefacts which can be reworked to suit local tastes and sensibilities (Larkin, 2003). The 'visual affinities' of dress, gender segregation, and the limited sexual content in Hindi films, are attributes which Nigerian audiences appreciate. In Indonesia, where Indian cultural and religious influence has a long history, Bollywood films and music are popular, influencing local music. Since the late 1990s, the Indonesian popular music form *dangdut* has borrowed and copied songs

from Bollywood films, setting Bollywood tunes to words in Indonesia's official language Bhasha. Even in East Asia, in countries with their own large, sophisticated and commercialised film and entertainment industries, Indian popular culture has made inroads: in South Korea an internet-based service, TVing, broadcasts such Indian entertainment channels as Zee TV Asia, Zee Cinema, and the Bollywood music channel Zing.

Although Indian films were popular in communist China as a useful alternative to state propaganda and a cheap substitute for a Hollywood extravaganza, they had almost disappeared after China opened up to the West and rapidly developed its own film industry. A decade ago, this changed when a shortened, digitised and dubbed version of the Bollywood film *Lagaan* (Land tax) was released in China. The success in China of the 2009 campus-based comedy *3 Idiots,* featuring another Bollywood superstar Aamir Khan, has brought Bollywood back into Chinese popular consciousness, especially among the younger generation. Though the film had made its mark through DVD sales, as well as on-line viewing, a version dubbed in Mandarin was released in 2011 in theatres across China. The Beijing-based correspondent of *The Hindu* newspaper reported the reaction of a senior Chinese official: 'The film entirely changed mindsets, of even Ministers and entire Ministries. It mesmerised people and convinced them that there was a lot in common between both countries, and that Indian entertainment did have a market in China' (Krishnan, 2012). Aamir Khan's 2015 delightful comedy, *PK,* earned nearly $17 million at the Chinese box office, making it the most successful Indian film ever in China and among other overseas markets. More prints of this film

were released in China than in India. Leveraging Bollywood's popularity in China, could be a useful soft power asset for New Delhi in its dealings with Beijing.

Bollywood's expansion into uncharted territories such as Latin America is an indication of the growing recognition of the soft power of Indian popular culture. A prominent example is the successful Brazilian soap opera *Caminho das Índias* (India - A Love Story), screened in prime-time on TV Globo, and winning the 2009 International Emmy Award for Best Telenovela. One of the most expensive productions in TV Globo's history, it attained an audience share of 81 per cent for its last episode in Brazil, and was distributed to countries around the world, including South Korea, Indonesia, Australia, Russia and Portugal. The 206-episode soap was set in India and Brazil and dealt with Indian themes, including caste, gender and class, with Brazilian actors playing the Indian characters. The series used various cultural props from Bollywood, including the musical score.

Synergies with Hollywood's soft power

The growing visibility of Bollywood outside India has also been bolstered by the emerging synergies with Hollywood. Apart from the US, India is the only other major film market in the world where the majority of the box office is dominated by domestic films – more than 80 per cent in the case of India. Given the size of India's market and its growing economic prowess, Hollywood producers are keen to forge business ties with India. The changed geo-political situation, with India becoming a close ally of the US – pursuing a neoliberal free-market economic agenda – has contributed to facilitating this

relationship (Ernst & Young, 2012; Punathambekar, 2013; FICCI-KPMG, 2015). Since Hollywood is arguably the world's most effective instrument of soft power, having contributed significantly to winning the ideological battle against communism during the Cold War, this collaboration could provide Indian policy makers with useful lessons on how to successfully promote popular culture.

Hollywood-Bollywood collaboration started in earnest in 2002 with the release of the action thriller *Kaante* (Thorns), the first mainstream Indian film to employ a Hollywood production crew, while *Mangal Pandey: The Rising,* became the first Indian-made movie to be released worldwide by 20th Century Fox. Since then, major US studios, notably Columbia Tristar (Sony Pictures), Warner Brothers, Disney Pictures and Fox, have started investing in Bollywood. One transnational player who has succeeded where others have failed is Rupert Murdoch with Fox Star Studios, benefiting also from the extensive presence of News Corporation-aligned companies in the Indian media sphere, notably STAR Plus TV. It also distributed *My Name is Khan,* a film almost entirely set in the US, which addresses a global audience about the issue of anti-Muslim discrimination as a result of 9/11– a sign of the maturing of mainstream Indian cinema. The film which was released in 64 countries and listed by *Foreign Policy* journal as one of the top ten 9/11-related films, provided an important alternative perspective to the wide-spread anti-Muslim prejudices in the West. On the other side of the coin, Indian companies have also started to invest in Hollywood. Reliance Entertainment, owned by Anil Ambani, one of India's leading industrialists, in 2008 invested $500 million in Hollywood flagship Dreamworks*,* founded by Steven Spielberg, heralding a new era of

partnerships. Their most prominent collaboration was the 2012 Oscar-winning film

Lincoln. Indian directors are certainly capable of making films of ambition and for a

global viewership: back in 1998, an Indian filmmaker, Shekhar Kapur directed *Elizabeth*,

a quintessentially English film, while noted Bollywood director Vidhu Vinod Chopra

wrote, co-produced and directed the 2015 Hollywood thriller *Broken Horses.*

The Indian government could learn from the State Department about how it promotes

the 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 and

infotainment in a globalized media world. In the digitised globe, film entertainment in

India is no longer just an artistic or creative enterprise but a global brand, contributing to

the reimagining of India's role on the international stage from that of a socialist-oriented

voice of the Third World to a rapidly modernizing, market-driven democracy with global

economic and cultural connections.

The power of the diaspora

One key reason for the popularity of Indian cinema is the existence of India's extensive

and successful diaspora scattered around the world, their presence going back in some

cases to 150 years (Amrith, 2011). This diaspora is also a critical resource for soft

power dissemination, especially in the United States and Britain, where many Indians

hold influential positions in boardrooms of transnational corporations, Ivy League

universities and premium media organizations (Kapur, 2010). In 2013, Bobby Ghosh

was appointed the editor of *Time International*, the first non-American to achieve such an honour in the magazine's 90-year history. Nitin Nohria became the tenth dean of the Harvard Business School in 2010—the first Asian to be elevated to such a position while Nobel laureate Sir Venkatraman Ramakrishnan was elected the President of Britain's Royal Society in 2015. Satya Nadella, the CEO of Microsoft; Sundar Pichai, chief executive of Google and Shantanu Narayen, President and CEO of Adobe are other notable names. The Indian industrial group Tata owns the luxury brands British Jaguar and Land Rover, while the steel magnate, Lakshmi Mittal, an Indian, is one of the richest men in Britain.

These are, in the words of Nye, 'soft power resources' (Nye, 2004a: 6). India's official public diplomacy infrastructure, though still in its early stages, has begun to engage foreign publics and, in collaboration with increasingly globalizing Indian industries, have been working to project India as an investment-friendly, pro-market democracy (Rana, 2009; Hall, 2012). Communicating such an image has involved a public-private partnership to brand India using the power of Bollywood: to mark the 60 years of India's independence, the Public Diplomacy Division of India's External Affairs Ministry issued three videos on Bollywood, including *Made in Bollywood*; *Bollywood: 60 Years of Romance* and *Hindi in Bollywood*.

As India's international profile has grown many members of its diaspora are attempting to reconnect with the emerging economic powerhouse (Tharoor, 2012). Among the policy elite in India, the diaspora is increasingly viewed as an important dimension of the

country's soft power resources. Traditionally, the attitude of successive Indian governments toward the diaspora was of distance and disengagement, even when Indians abroad were threatened as in 1972, when thousands of Ugandan Indians were expelled by the military dictator Idi Amin. This attitude changed with the coming to power of the pro-business Bharatiya Janata Party government in 1998 which announced the creation of a *Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas* (Day of the Non-Resident Indian) celebrations, and the phrase '*Vishwa Bharati*' (Global Indian) was coined (Government of India, 2002). Since then the day is celebrated annually on 9 January, symbolically chosen to mark the return of Gandhi to India from South Africa in 1914 to lead the Indian nationalist movement. The creation of the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs in 2004, with its mission 'to promote, nurture and sustain a mutually beneficial and symbiotic relationship between India and its diaspora' was another milestone in this diasporic diplomacy (Government of India, 2012).

However, mere possession of such resources does not make a country attractive on the world stage; these assets need to be translated into influencing the behaviour of other states and stakeholders, requiring a concerted effort by policy makers. Unlike China, India's soft power initiatives are not centrally managed by the government. Indeed, the government takes a backseat while India's creative and cultural industry, its religions and spirituality, as well as its active diaspora and businesses help promote Indian interests abroad, a phenomenon likely to accelerate in an increasingly globalized and networked world. As Tharoor notes, 'India benefits from its traditional practices (from Ayurveda to Yoga, both accelerating in popularity across the globe) and the transformed

image of the country created by its thriving diaspora. Information technology has made its own contribution to India's soft power' (Tharoor, 2012: 284).

How effective are India's soft power initiatives? The intangible nature of soft power makes it hard, if not impossible, to measure. Has India's civilizational communication with Asia given New Delhi a greater voice in the continent's geopolitics? How does the popularity of Bollywood help the country's foreign policy? Despite its widespread adoption in international relations literature and within media and policy discourses, the concept of soft power remains a fuzzy one. A very American concept, which emerged from the intellectual and cultural milieu of the world's largest economy, and whose military power is infinitely superior to any of its competitors, US soft power has always been underpinned by formidable hard power. As Van Ham argues: 'US's hard and soft power are dialectically related: US interventionism requires the cloak of legitimacy (morally or under international law), and without it, coercion would provoke too much resistance and be both too costly and ultimately untenable; vice versa, soft power requires necessary resources and commitment to put words into action. Without hard power, attractiveness turns into shadowboxing, and at worst, political bimboism' (Van Ham, 2005: 52).

To make India a more attractive country, especially among other developing nations, would require it to address the serious deprivation that millions of its citizens suffer on a daily basis. Despite its admirable economic performance in the past two decades, India is still home to more poor people than the whole of Sub-Saharan Africa. It is a country

where multiple and multi-layered forms of inequalities persist: India has the largest pool of employable youth in the world but it also has the planet's highest incidence of child labour, despite it being banned in law. While dozens of Indians figure in the *Forbes* list of the world's billionaires, India's rank in the 2013 United Nations Human Development Index was at 136 out of 186 nations (UNDP, 2013). At a time when neoliberalism has created new globalized Bollywood films, nearly 300 million Indians live in abject poverty and deprivation.

The exponents of India's soft power have to consider why India's example of a multicultural democracy has not been generally appreciated by other developing countries, who view the Chinese model of development as more worth emulating: on any measurable developmental index, China fares much better than its western neighbour, having considerably reduced if not yet eliminate poverty among its billion plus population, pulling up more than 400 million Chinese out of poverty in the last two decades, unprecedented in human history (Bardhan, 2010; Drèze and Sen, 2013). As Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen note: 'even though India has significantly caught up with China in terms of GDP growth, its progress has been very much slower than China's in indicators such as longevity, literacy, child undernourishment and maternal mortality' (Drèze and Sen, 2013: 8). India continues to be perceived, accurately, as a country of extreme poverty, structural social inequalities, and cultural backwardness. As Tharoor notes: the benefits of economic growth 'have not yet reached the third of our population still living below the poverty line. We must ensure they do, or our soft power will ring hollow, at home and abroad' (Tharoor, 2012: 288).

As the world becomes increasingly mobile, networked and digitized, will Indian cultural flows help provide an alternative discourse to counter US media hegemony or supplement it? In his 2011 book *The Future of Power*, Nye explored the nature and shift in global power structures – from state to non-state actors. In an age when 'public diplomacy is done more by publics', governments have to use 'smart power' ('neither hard nor soft. It is both'), making use of formal and informal networks and drawing on 'cyber power', an arena where the US has a huge advantage, being the country which invented the internet and remains at the forefront of governing it technologically, and dominating it both politically as well as economically. The Indian presence is also growing in cyberspace. In the last 15 years, India has seen an exceptional expansion in the internet, with an increase of 6,980 per cent. In 2000, only 5.5 million Indians (with a penetration rate of 0.5 per cent of the population) were on-line; by 2015 that figure had grown exponentially and there were 354 million internet users (and the penetration rate had crossed 28 per cent of the population), making them the world's second largest internet users after China. In that year, India surpassed the United States to become the world's biggest 'open' internet. Industry estimates suggest that by 2018 the number of internet users in India is expected to exceed 600 million, increasingly driven by wireless connections (Jeffrey and Doron, 2013; FICCI-KPMG, 2015).

It is interesting to speculate what kind of content will be circulating on the World Wide Web, and in which language, when a much higher percentage of Indians get online. As their prosperity grows, a sizeable segment of young Indians will be going online,

increasingly producing, distributing and consuming digital media, especially using their skills in the English language, the vehicle for global communication. The Indian government's $18 billion 'Digital India' initiative, launched in 2015 – with its slogan 'power to empower', to bring internet access to people across the country, had enthusiastic support from both Indian and global conglomerates: $71 billion was earmarked by Indian conglomerates to provide the last-mile connectivity for electronic commerce and communication. This unfolding digital revolution, particularly significant in a country with strong 'demographic dividend' – India boasts the largest population of youth in the world - will ensure that Indic ideas, including Bollywoodized entertainment, will travel across global electronic superhighways in much vaster volume, and eventually, of greater value, strengthening the already well-established connection between India and its diaspora.

However, beyond Bollywood what would make Indian soft power more effective globally would be for India to devise a developmental path which reduces, if not eliminates, its persistently pervasive poverty and inequality. While growing economic prowess has made some Indians rich and created a globalized Indian middle class, it has also contributed to increased inequality among the poorest, victims of economic and ecological excesses of neo-liberalism – both national and transnational (Kohli, 2012; Drèze and Sen, 2013). One area where an Indian contribution will be particularly valuable is development communication. India was the first country to use television for education through its 1970s SITE (Satellite Instructional Television Experiment) programme (Agrawal, 1977). It is well-equipped to deploy new digital media

technologies to promote sustainable development. An Indian model of development within a democratic and pluralistic system - and in contrast to the Chinese one – would be worth emulating for many nations struggling with developmental models designed by the West. The Indian soft power resources in multilateral bureaucracies, the international nongovernmental sector, and communication and media fields can be harnessed to redefine a development discourse—one which is shaped in New Delhi rather than in New York.

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