

INDIA'S SOFT POWER IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN**TASHI DONDUP****Ph.D. CANDIDATE****CENTRE FOR CANADIAN, US AND LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES,
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ABSTRACT: *India's cultural relations with Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) dates back to pre-independence time and now it has only got further strengthened. Indian literature, movies, philosophies/spiritual leaders, yoga, Ayurveda, classical dances and cuisines are very popular in the region. These Indian cultures are good sources of Indian soft power in the region. These soft powers create a positive image of India in the region and help India intensify its political and economic ties with LAC countries. LAC is a region with rich deposits of natural resources. It is also a big continent with growing population. It offers India a good source of raw material for its industries and excellent market for its products. Politically, LAC region with many countries, with voting rights in UNSC, can play a crucial role in helping India to get a coveted permanent seat in UNSC.*

KEYWORDS: Culture, India-LAC relation, Soft power, UNSC.

Introduction

Historically, India has shown little interest in the countries in the Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). This is because of India's preoccupation with the other regions and the reluctance of our economic policy makers, businessmen and export organisations to make necessary investment to explore new markets (Narayan 1993). Furthermore, India's perception about Latin America as a continent with huge external debt and India's own inward looking economic approach stopped it from establishing trade relations with LAC. Geographical distance and language also created barriers. Latin American countries, on their part, had traditionally either looked to the US or Europe for most of their economic and political ties (Heine 2004). It is only recently, after the end of cold war and opening up of economies of India and LAC, that the two sides have increased bilateral economic and political ties. However, India's cultural relation or cultural influence in the Latin America goes back a long way—even before Independence--and it only got strengthened in the post-independence period. This cultural influence of India on the LAC countries is good instruments of India's soft power in the region. Soft power creates a positives image of a country and creates a strong sense of desire among other countries to imitate and link themselves with the country with strong soft power.

The concept of soft power was originally proposed in 1990 by Harvard professor Joseph Nye. He defined it as "a dynamic created by a nation whereby other nations seek to imitate that nation, become closer to that nation, and align its interest accordingly" (Nye 1990). A country's soft power, according to Nye (2004: 11), rests on three resources: "its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when others see them as legitimate and having moral authority)". Out of three sources of soft power Nye mentioned, this paper will focus on cultural aspect only as India's cultural influence in LAC is strong and it puts Indian soft power in an advantageous position in region.

Sources of India's Cultural Soft Power in LAC***Literature***

The earliest Indian influence in Latin America has been through the writings of poet Rabindranath Tagore. In the early twentieth century Tagore's verses influenced two great Chilean poets, both later Nobel Laureates, Gabriela Mistral and Pablo Neruda (Vajpeyi 2011). Chilean poet Neruda visited India in 1929-- he visited India four times-- and Rabindranath Tagore spent three months in Argentina in 1924-1925 as a guest of literatuer Victoria Ocampo, where he composed some of his poems (Shidore 2013: 45). He wrote a series of poems under the title "Purabi" containing memory of his stay in Argentina (MEA 2013). Victoria Ocampo popularised Tagore's works in Argentina and in other parts of the region. An associate of her, writer Maria Rene Cura, who received Padmashri in 1984, had published for some years a magazine on India called "India eterna y actual" roughly translated as Eternal and Real India. She also ran a cultural centre devoted to India called as "Anand Bhavan" (MEA 2013). To honour victoria's role in popularising the works of Rabinnath Tagore in Latin America particularly in Argentina, Viswa Bharati University gave an honorary doctorate to her and it was handed over to her by PM Mrs Indira Gandhi during her visit to Argentina in 1968 (MEA 2013). Even today Tagore continues to be studied in Latin American universities as one of the first non-European model emerging from European cultural domination (Sengupta 2012).

Mexican writer and thinker Octavio Paz—a noble laureate-- was also immensely fascinated with India's culture and civilisation. He spent six years in India in the 1960s as Mexico's ambassador and wrote some of his finest poems and essays on India in diverse subjects on Sanskrit poetry, Buddhist logic and encounter between Islam and Hinduism (Shidore 2013:45). In the 1990s, he even published a memoir of his time in India, "Vismubres de la India--translated as In Light of India" (Heine and Vishvanathan 2011). In 2010 the Gurudev Tagore Indian Cultural Centre is opened in Mexico City which is gaining rapid popularity with demand for activities and courses in new areas like Bollywood dancing, Indian languages and cuisine, and Ayurveda, etc (MEA 2012).

Indian Classical Dances

Indian Classical dances have also become very popular in LAC. Increasing numbers of Latin Americans are showing interest in Indian classical dances. Prominent among them are Myrta Barvie and Anandida Dasi. Myrta Barvie, from Argentina, has dedicated five decades of her life to Indian dances and has become an icon. She has had an illustrious career as a dancer, teacher, choreographer and writer (Vishvanathan 2012). Anandida Dasi of Argentina is an another Latin American who has become a pioneer of Indian classical dance in the region (Puri 2012). Indian folk dances and music are also becoming popular in Latin America. In January 2015, a group consisting of Rajasthani folkloric dancers and classical instrumental team visited Brazil. They performed in a cultural event jointly organized by the Indian Embassy and Brazil (MEA 2015c).

Yoga and Ayurveda

Ayurveda and Yoga are quite popular in Latin America. Yoga is now practised in the region as a way to attain good health and wellness (Shidore 2013: 45). There are numerous yoga centres in the region and highest numbers of centres is in Brazil. The popularity of yoga in the region is reflected in the fact that many countries in LAC celebrated International Yoga day on 21 June, 2015 in a grand way (MEA 2015a, MEA 2015b).

zyurveda is also becoming popular and numbers of Ayurvedic Spas and massage centres are increasingly growing in the region especially in South America. The Fundacion de Salud Ayurveda Prema (Prema Ayurveda Health Foundation) -- a nonprofit organisation registered with the Argentine government—is actively engaged in the promotion of Ayurveda in Argentina and in other parts of Latin America. In 2001 the foundation has signed a MOU with Gujarat Ayurveda University which granted the foundation the status of collaborating center for teaching, assistance, and research in the field of Ayurvedic Medicine in Argentina (Berra and Molho 2010). The foundation runs Ayurvedic courses in the University of Buenos Aires and the University of Cordoba—both in Argentina. The University of Buenos Aires offers postgraduate and advanced post graduate course in Ayurveda medicine—the university has been offering these course since 2010. Similarly, University of Cordoba started a two year post graduate course in Ayurveda in April 2010 (MEA 2013). As of 2013, more than 450 students from various countries of Latin America have taken and completed the course (Courson 2013). The foundation is also engaged in promoting Ayurvedic courses and workshops in other Latin American countries. It is also entrusted with the charge for providing Ayurvedic training via online by the National University of Chile's School of Medicine (Courson 2013).

Additionally, the foundation is also carrying out translation of some of the important classical Ayurveda texts such as Charaka Samhita and Susruta Samhita—Sanskrit texts on Ayurveda – in Spanish and English (Berra and Molho 2010). Helps of reputed Indian Ayurvedic scholars and doctors are also being sought in promotion of the Ayurveda in the region ((Berra and Molho 2010)

Similar to the foundation in Argentina, Brazil also runs an Ayurvedic foundation called Associacao Brasileira de Ayurveda (ABRA)—Ayurveda Association of Brazil-- to promote Ayurveda in Brazil. The ABRA is engaged in providing courses on Ayurveda to the aspirant practitioners and conducts Ayurveda workshops throughout the country. Additionally, it also undertakes translation of Ayurvedic works into Portuguese to provide Ayurvedic knowledge to the Portuguese speaking populations of the continent (Courson 2013). An International Congress on Ayurveda was organised in the State of Goias in Brazil from 12-14, November 2013 recognising the popularity of Ayurveda in Brazil (MEA 2015c).

Indian Philosophies and Spiritual Leaders

Indian spiritual leaders/foundations are also very popular in LAC and they have many followers. The largest and most important among them is ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) also known as Hare Krishna Movement. The largest and the most important ISKCON centre is in Brazil which was established in 1970s. This ISKCON centre in Brazil become very popular particularly among young and urban dwelling educated middle and upper middle classes and from there it spread to many other cities (Martin 2011). ISKCON centre in Bogota is called ISKCON Bhakti Bagota, where in devotees organise philosophy classes, yoga and culinary courses, mostly attended by young people and students (Das 2011). The foundation has centres in all countries in South America along with ones in Costa Rico, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Panama and West Indies¹. The ISKCON devotees from the region visit India to stay in ISKCON guest houses and they take back Indian clothing, food, and music to reproduce the Indian lifestyle in their countries (Martin 2011). The Art of Living foundation also has large followers in Latin America. Its founder Sri Sri Ravi Shankar is very popular in the region. His popularity in the region helped him in bringing peace/truce between the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) guerrillas and Colombian government. He was conferred with Colombia's highest civilian award the “Orden de la Democracia Simon Bolivar en el grado de cruz Caballero” for his contribution to peace issues around the world, particularly in the Latin American country (NDTV 25 June 2015). Other Indian

¹ For list of ISKCON centres in Latin America see <http://centers.iskcondesiretree.com/latin-america/>

spiritual leaders/organisations popular in Latin America include the Brahmakumaris and Sai Baba which also have many followers there (Shidore 2013: 45, MEA 2015a).

Bollywood

Bollywood's relationship with Latin America goes back to the 1970s when films like "Mother India and Mera Naam Joker" were released in LAC and were a success in its times. Bollywood has huge follower in Peru. According to John Bellido -- head of Lima based Indian Cinema Fan Association, "Peru is no stranger to the phenomenon called Bollywood. Bollywood movies have been rooted in Peruvian hearts for so long" (quoted in Business Standard 4 Sept. 2013). Despite a small Indian diaspora in Peru, modern films like '3 Idiots', 'My Name Is Khan', 'Guzaarish' and 'Ek Main Aur Ekk Tu' received an overwhelming response in the Spanish-speaking nation (Loped 2014, Business Standard 4 Sept. 2014). Bollywood movie "Chennai Express" starring Shah Rukh Khan and Depika Podukone became the first Hindi film to be released in Peru on the same day it hit theaters in India (Business Standard 4 Sept. 2014). Besides Peru, Bollywood is quite popular in Colombia also. This is reflected in the fact that fifteen Bollywood movies were screened at the 2007 Bogota international film festival. In 2009, India was the guest of honour at the same festival. In August 2014, an exclusive premiere of Irrfan Khan starrer "Lunch box" was organised in Bogota by amigos de India (Friends of India)-- one of the biggest Spanish-speaking group promoting Indian culture in Colombia (The New India Express 8 Sept. 2014).

The popularity of Bollywood has also shot up noticeably in Portuguese speaking Brazil in the recent years. The Brazilian O Globo TV telecasted a telenovela serial "Caminho das Indias -- roughly translated as A Passage to India" written by celebrated telenovela author Gloria Perez. This soap opera showcased Indian culture and the love story between a Dalit boy and an upper-caste girl and it became huge success in Brazil (Indiatribune 6 Oct. 2010). The actors are all Brazilian, but the characters manifest Indian, wearing Indian dresses and speak Portuguese but use Hindi terms like *namaste*, *firangi*, *chai*, *chalta hai* etc. (Kurup 2009).

The popularity of Bollywood also attracts many Latin American actresses to work in Bollywood. Mexican actress Barbara More acted as lead heroine in Bollywood film 'Kites' in 2010, Brazilian actress Giselli Monteiro acted Bollywood film 'Love Ajjkal' of 2009. Argentine musician Gustavo Santaolalla composed music for the Amir Khan film 'Dhobi Ghat' in 2011 (Vishwanathan 2014:2). Further, Toonz animation limited of Trivandrum in cooperation with Illusion Studios of Bueno Aires co-produced a cartoon film titled "Gaturro". The film was released in 2010 and was a box office hit (Vishwanathan 2011:16).

Indian cuisines are also gaining rapid popularity Latin America. Indian restaurants are present in many Latin American countries (Smith 2014, MEA 2015a). Furthermore, Presence of large Indian diaspora in countries like Trinidad and Tobago, Suriname, Guyana and Jamaica is also making Indian cultures and tradition popular in these countries. These Indian diaspora in the Caribbean are generally proud of their Indian ancestry and are keen to know more about the land of their origin, its past and present and they keep Indian culture alive in the region (MEA 2000: 195). India's diasporas in Caribbean countries are a huge soft power asset for India.

Conclusion

India's soft power in Latin America has been witnessing a constant surge. Latin American countries have been showing growing interest in Indian culture, arts, movies, dances, music, Ayurveda and yoga. India and many LAC countries maintain a very active calendar of cultural activities and programmes. Indian cultural troupes regularly visit Latin America and participate in their major cultural festivals. Indian soft powers create a positive image of India in the LAC thereby create a favourable environment for further

intensification of political and economic relation between two sides. Latin America--with 44 countries-- is an important region for India as they can help India to get permanent seat in UNSC as and when it goes for reform as each country carries a vote in UNSC. Furthermore, the region is a resource rich with huge deposits of oil, gas, coal, iron ores etc. which India covets. And also the LAC has the largest arable land in the world and largest exporter of Agriculture products. The region can play crucial role in helping India attain energy and food security. Indian Government and its embassies in LAC should promote Indian culture there aggressively and should hold more of cultural festivals like 'India Festival' wherein India's arts, classical dances, music and movies should be showcased. Renowned Indian classical dancers and Bollywood actors/actresses should be invited in such festivals. Further, India should provide scholarship to students from LAC to study in Indian Universities and encourage student exchange programmes so that they can understand Indian cultures and values. These students can play key role in spreading good messages and promote a positive brand India in LAC countries. Movement of tourists from both sides should be encouraged so that people from either side get to see and know the beauty and varied cultures of each other. India should further increase the number of cultural centres in Latin America to promote appreciations of its culture. As of now India has only five Indian Council of Cultural Relation (ICCR) centres in LAC- one each in Brazil, Guyana, Mexico, Trinidad and Tabago and Suriname² while china has 29 Confucius centers in the region (Xiaochen 2014).

2 For list of Indian Cultural Centres abroad see <http://iccr.gov.in/content/list-centres>

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