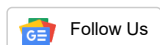


How to renovate India's soft power

Our hard power of domestically made drones, planes, and aircraft carriers must combine with the soft power of domestic universities, think tanks and schools that generate globally relevant books, articles, papers, technology, research, translations, and patents

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Ramdhari Singh Dinkar's poem 'Ye Nav Varsh Hamein Sveekar Nahin' suggests it makes no sense for India to celebrate the new year in December when things are cold, foggy, dark, and barren. He advocates waiting a few months till nature flourishes, colours return, and harvests begin.

Dinkar captured my frustration at being forced to adopt the synchronised global activity slowdown starting mid-December but this Western upstream control of calendars, time zones, measures, protocols, rankings, ratings, and much else represents valuable soft power built on brains. I make the case that geopolitical churn makes accelerating the ongoing renovation of the five pillars in India's intellectual infrastructure urgent. As Buddha said, "Aatma Deepo Bhav". We must become our own light.

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America's explanation for its Cold War victory – that rock music, Hollywood, blue jeans, hamburgers, entrepreneurship, and democracy had more power than the Red Army — led it to champion open markets, global trade and limited state meddling. This global technology diffusion created prosperity via fast learning in [Taiwan](#), Vietnam, Malaysia, South Korea and China. But this abundance mentality is diminishing: America's Treasury Secretary champions friendshoring, its National Security Adviser proposes high fences for "foundational" technology, and its President champions massive government subsidies for private onshore investments. India's "multi-alignment" is currently working, but prudence demands we strengthen our ecosystem for technology, research, and innovation by renovating five pillars: Universities, think tanks, government schools, publishing and translation. Let's look at each.

Universities: The intellectual decline of universities like Shantiniketan, [Delhi](#), Allahabad, Presidency, JNU, etc., represents failed governance and strategy. The book Cold War University by Rebecca Lowen attributes Stanford's success — and therefore Silicon Valley's creation — to aligning with defence priorities. Harvard's \$51 billion endowment represents partnering with alums and philanthropists. Our university renewal has begun: IIT-[Mumbai](#) has a business school, IIM-[Bangalore](#) is starting undergraduate degrees, and IISC is starting a medical school. Biodiversity is also improving. Philanthropy-funded, open architecture governance, non-profit universities like Ashoka are now strong alternatives to studying abroad and will soon soar in imperfect but important global university rankings.

Think tanks: India has a weak mezzanine layer between academia and journalism that bridges the doable with the desirable through research, evidence, and second-best choices. Good government requires a steady stream of good ideas. Milton Friedman argued that in a crisis, “the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.” Think tanks play this role but their challenges in India include the lack of lateral entry into government, domestic philanthropic preferences, justified suspicion of foreign funding, and weak legitimate corporate advocacy. All four challenges are reducing, but domestic resources and policy legitimacy for think tanks will grow our marketplace for policy ideas and generate global soft power.

Government schools: It’s embarrassing that only 50 per cent of India’s kids attend government schools. If anything should be free with quality in a society, it is primary education. Especially since, unlike China, our farm-to-non-farm transition is not happening to manufacturing but to service jobs where the wage premium reflects the need or foundational skills of literacy and numeracy. But though state governments — they directly control most schools — have not reformed governance (allocation of decision rights) and performance management (fear of falling and hope of rising), about 20 have rolled out programmes under NIPUN Bharat. This national mission aims for the universal acquisition of critical foundational skills by 2026.

Publishers: The dominance of the West in publishing books and academic journals is built on history, skills and resources. But the lack of highly-ranked Indian academic journals creates huge disadvantages for our academics since the peer review system is based on soft relationships and technology that are not easily accessible. Especially since this ecosystem is less solid than perceived — almost 50 per cent of peer-reviewed hypotheses are unreplicable or get retracted. Things are less dire in books. Domestic publishers like Juggernaut are taking advantage of the increasing home and backlist bias within global publishers. Poets and strategists know that “the universe is not made of atoms, but stories” — our one per cent global share of children’s books must rise, and our Rs 2,800 crore annual trade publishing market must explode.

Translation: A US foreign policy analyst recently suggested that India and America will now be friends because of what Machiavelli wrote in *The Prince* — the enemy of my enemy is my friend. This ignorant plagiarism — those words were written 2,000 years before by Chanakya in *Arthashastra* — is captured by the upcoming ‘State of Indian Translations Report’ that suggests only 5,600 Indian language books exist in English. Translation scale is a uniquely Indian problem further complicated by the complexity of translating books among Indian languages. The Bhashini Project of the Ministry of IT, the AI4Bharat Centre at IIT-Madras, and the Bharatiya Bhasha Samiti of the Ministry of Education are early energy that will unlock our 21 official, 45 written, and 1,000+ spoken languages for ourselves. And the world.

Soft power is having a bad year, with global military spending exploding after Russia attacked [Ukraine](#). But that war also demonstrates how satellite internet, drones, and soft power validate Voltaire’s view that “God is not on the side of the biggest armies but the best shots”. The world is not returning to Cold War bipolarity or G7 domination. Multi-polarity doesn’t need us to be Western to be modern, but it does need us to be strong. Offshore academics — one articulate US-based Indian economist believes if you are good, you are not in India — are not being as helpful to India’s renewal as I had hoped. So, our hard power of domestically made drones, planes, and aircraft carriers must combine with the soft power of domestic universities, think tanks and schools that generate globally relevant books, articles, papers, technology, research, translations, and patents. NEP 2020 is a powerful policy roadmap for renovating India’s intellectual

infrastructure, and accelerating its rollout will fuel the entrepreneurs, companies and high-wage jobs that will make India stronger. As Ramdhari Singh Dinkar also said, “Kshma shobti us bhujang ko jis ke paas garal ho.” Only the strong can be kind, benevolent or generous.

The writer is co-founder, Teamlease Services