

Connecting Through Cultures: An Overview of India's Soft Power Strength, edited by Vinay Sahasrabuddhe and Sachchidanand Joshi, Wisdom Tree, 2022, 240 pp., \$10 (Hardcover), ISBN 9788183285872.

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To what extent a culture could build, connect and help a civilization make progress may well be understood by this anthology that brings together a rare and vivid collection of essays on India's cultural assets with an aim to revisit, rekindle and reclaim her soft power legacy. *Connecting Through Culture* captures the vast treasures of Indian civilization, compressed and capsuled brilliantly by a galaxy of twenty-five most notable scholars. In just 240 pages, it is both fascinating and painstaking to write about a civilization which is thousands of years old. This edited volume has been divided into four broad sections (altogether 23 small essays) viz. India's Traditional Knowledge, Arts in India, Indian People and Universal Heroes. Challenging as it appears, each essay represents a tapestry in the gallery of Indian cultural historiography—reminiscing her past glory, concerns over what India lost in course of time and a way forward towards restoring what have been lost. Deciphering each essay would direct towards a reservoir of wisdom. This book could amaze many readers (even Indians) who do not have a background in Indian cultural and knowledge tradition—tracing centuries old cultural footprint of India that has paved the way for civilizational connection with the outside world, from both historical and comparative perspective.

Another significant aspect of this book could be understood in light of challenges of contemporary world—howsoever interconnected and interdependent, it appears to be septic

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with narrow national identities, fractured by ideological wars, apocalyptic aggression and cultural supremacy of one over other. *Connecting Through Culture* endorses the idea that Indian knowledge system and philosophical wisdom could lead towards global good by reminding the world that the way towards peaceful co-existence and sustenance of humans could only be paved through cultural confluence, mutual respect and dialogue. Collective consciousness and harmony within oneself and with the surrounding could be learned from Indian culture and philosophy. To make this a point, this book tells various tales about India's worldview that has been 'gentle, proud and happy' within herself and thus have attracted and influenced people surrounding her, not by threat, warfare or conquest but by centuries of peaceful engagements. An interesting example of the message of syncretic existence through Indian festivals could be the celebration of Garura Panchami and Naga Panchami dedicated to the worship of eagle and snake (natural adversaries) respectively, on the same day.

Against the prevalent idea of soft power being seen as complementary to or comparable with hard power, this book refers to culture (a soft power) not as a 'tool to impress and influence anyone' but as a way of life—a linchpin of Indian identity, the basis of her relations with far and near neighbourhood. The book presents a strong case for 'philosophies, languages, art and culture' in the growth of Indian civilization (or for that matter any civilization) compared to acquiring territory and material wealth, which is based on short lived glory. This book is a significant contribution towards understanding the gems of pre-colonial India whose image for the outside world has remained distorted, for obvious reasons, until recent decades.

Music, dance, cinema, cuisine, craft, folk art, architecture and heritage, and textile have had an enormous role in helping people connect across cultures. These art forms in India have been perceived spiritually, having a strong connection with the cosmos that we are all part of. The dancing *Shiva* or *Nataraja* (the lord of dance) statue, for example, has been placed at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) in Geneva to symbolize 'deeply spiritual and metaphysical moorings of Indian classical dance'. Another example could be of Indian cuisine which is a blend of cultures with 'therapeutic and aesthetic' values, with a unique philosophy, and wisdom that 'food is what sustains life and everything else follows'. The book has elaborated on the role of culture—fairs and festivals, the spirit of democracy and belongingness—in shaping the people and society in India.

This book also describes the spirit of sustainable plurality and functional autonomy, unlike the monarchs in the Europe who had divine rights, Indian monarchs never had divine or absolute rights, they were subject to consensual decision-making guided by a counsel or committee. A culture of accommodation has remained pivotal in sustenance of Indian democracy, also reflected in the Indian constitution. Since time immemorial, cultural exchanges in terms of philosophy, religion, knowledge-system, etc., were facilitated by commercial ties with Southeast Asia (the spread of Buddhism being the most significant) and with the Greeks, Romans, Persians, Arabs and Africans to the West. In modern times, the vehicle of colonization led to forced and voluntary migration of Indians to the different parts of the world, and more recently economic opportunities resulting from globalization and

technological advancements have furthered this migration. Recognition of success stories of Indian diaspora bear testimony to diaspora as India's soft power asset.

The book also underlines philosophies of great Indian Gurus and scholars like Gautam Buddha, Sri Guru Nanak, Swami Vivekanand, Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, who have greatly influenced India's worldview. These philosophers have built a legacy of cultural synthesis and peaceful co-existence, spiritual awakening, social harmony, non-violence and national integration. The book illustrates the dynamics of Indian society that also resonates with global dynamism and directs towards possible pathways for socio-cultural cohesion.

The limitation of this book derives from its biggest strength—an attempt to condense the history of a centuries-old civilization, with complex ideas and philosophies in 240 pages. The book presents many intricate stories of Indian tradition with limited context for readers unfamiliar with India. At some places it seems like a directory with key ideas and ideals that must need to be comprehended for better understanding. Although the blurb of the book defines it as an overview of India's soft power strengths, the future edition of this book may provide more stories and narratives with detailed socio-cultural and economic backgrounds.

Overall, the editors of this book have done an incredible job by bringing forth this masterpiece on India's soft power strengths. This book is a must-read for scholars and practitioners across the disciplines of humanities and social sciences and for everyone who is interested in understanding India or have concerns towards shared human challenges.

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