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A 2016 Wishlist to Bolster India's Soft Power Push

By Ananda Shankar Jayant | Published: 02nd January 2016 10:00 PM
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As the Make in India idea picks up steam, with agreements signed and investments promised, it is time to look at how we are transporting what's Made in India to newer shores. What's been Made in India over centuries is the country's incredible diversity of art and culture—our strongest tools of soft power.

The robust and plural performing and visual arts of India have always been her cultural calling cards, influencing image, imagery and imagination.

It's time to yoke these influencers, to strengthen and reinforce India's diplomatic and economic global push.

Over the last few decades, this soft power has been harnessed in fits and bursts, through various festivals.

The ongoing Festivals of India Abroad, which usually dovetail a state visit by our leaders, have attempted to showcase bite-sized capsules of the country's cultural wealth. However, the tangible outcomes as follow up to the Festival have not been very forthcoming. How do we ensure a return on investment, on soft power initiatives?

To make our soft power drive, the Festivals of India Abroad, more emphatic, here is my 2016 wishlist:

Advance planning: Prepare at least a year ahead; identify and match themes and artists well ahead, so that relevant and quality works can be created.

The attempt in most of the festivals of showcasing a little bit of everything, collages by colleges, now needs to go to the next level of artistry and aesthetics.

Artiste selection: Create a matrix of artistes, across genres, taking a weighted average of their experience; create a national, dynamic roster of artistes, both renowned and young, and match them to the festival theme; a transparent selection policy; the crucial prerequisite for the success of any festival is ensuring professionalism in curating and delivery.

I always wonder as to why India, with its myriad arts, finds minimal presence at international festivals. How can our soft power find visibility beyond the pale of the state visit or the Festivals of India itself?

Create synergies with other agencies, government and private, including overseas; draw from the collective knowledge pool to present Indian art at concurrent international festivals alongside the Festivals of India.

As all festivals are time-bound, it is establishment of strong linkages with academia, which will sustain the soft power push for longer periods.



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Indian classical dance has many followers across countries. From USA to China, Brazil to Kazakhstan and Russia, students are learning Indian classical dance, albeit with a little Bollywood, too, thrown in. And yet, we have not captured this powerful soft tool, through university positions, scholarships, festivals, exchange programmes and research. (ICCR does have a scheme, but more can be initiated with collaboration between ministries concerned.) A soft power push from within India is just as vital. This can be done by:

- 1) Introduction of arts and arts appreciation in schools
- 2) Nurturing arts, artists and audiences by creating a cultural network of artists, presenters, museums and curators
- 3) Investing in art-related infrastructure
- 4) A call for CSR—Cultural Social Responsibility—for the much-needed funding
- 5) An increase in the budgets of culture ministries
- 6) Harness technology to take art to everyone

This may be a long wishlist, but it is entirely possible for a plan of action to emerge, to harness our soft power strength, so that Made in India will give further impetus to Make in India.

Jayant is a bureaucrat and a classical dancer, choreographer and dance scholar.

ananda.jayant@gmail.com



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