

## The soft power myth



TICKER

MIHIR SHARMA

Has “soft power” been over-rated?

Traditionally, many have argued that it is a significant component of a nation-state's international influence. India, for example, has consistently emphasised soft power components of its international outreach — International Yoga Day being one of the most recent and high profile aspects of this

strategy, but Hindi movies have perhaps been the most long-standing component. No evaluation of Sino-American tensions going forward is complete without an analysis of how American soft power is a crucial aspect of its competitive arsenal.

But some recent developments make it clear that this narrative needs to be complicated. The United States' National Basketball Association or NBA has run into trouble following a statement by an official for the Houston basketball team that expressed support for the pro-democracy protestors in Hong Kong. There was an outcry in mainland China, and the NBA dissociated itself from the statement. One Chinese-origin owner of an NBA team — Joe Tsai, an early backer of Alibaba — managed to respond by linking the tweet to the Opium Wars in the nineteenth century. (Mainland Chinese nationalists can link anything to the Opium Wars, presumably because they have so little other reasons for a grievance against the world.) Subsequently, fans expressing pro-Hong Kong sentiments have reportedly been ejected from American sports games (basketball again, but this time in Philadelphia).

The NBA is very popular in mainland China. The traditional “soft power” assumption here would be that this means that American values of free speech and openness have a route into mainlanders' hearts thanks to their fondness for the NBA. But perhaps that traditional assumption is wrong — in fact, it might be the case that we need to do a full 180-degree turn, and wonder if it works in the opposite direction in some cases. When you rely on the private sector to project soft power, then, it is now becoming clear, the profit motive means that you are in fact providing a lever to other countries instead of extending the strength of your own.

Hollywood movies have long been subject to this phenomenon. During the Cold War, it was common to have movies that impacted on geopolitical issues in which the villains were related somehow to the Eastern bloc, or which expressed the Western bloc's values in clear contradistinction to those the Soviet Union might espouse. But you would struggle to imagine a similar movie made about mainland China in recent years. Now that it is a giant market for any big-budget movie, not a single value expressed through movies is likely to challenge the foundation of the Communist Party's authoritarian control. Worse, it will mean that studios bend over backward to indulge every single whim of the Chinese government or the most extreme of its hyper-nationalist online commenters. Earlier this year, when the trailer for the sequel to the 1980s classic *Top Gun* was released, the extent to which studios are willing to go became clear. In the original movie, Tom Cruise's leather jacket carried patches from the air forces of American allies, including Japan and Taiwan. In the sequel, the jacket was identical — except those patches were missing. Nothing underlines the cowardice of Hollywood more than the fact that it is willing even to compromise on a movie about courageous mavericks.

You think that's the deepest they're willing to go? Consider that the last reboot of *The Karate Kid* didn't have the protagonist practising karate at all. Nope, it was all kung fu, because karate is clearly too offensively Japanese for Chinese audiences.

What is truly ridiculous is that nobody imagines that the NBA or Hollywood is likely to kowtow to American power in the same way. NBA stars and managers can happily insult either Democratic or Republican parties, the president, the American system of government. Fans shouting “Help Puerto Rico” at a sports game are never going to be ejected. Hollywood constantly makes movies viciously attacking American political parties or big business or international finance. But Beijing's authoritarian power or its irredentist impulses would not be challenged in the same way. An outspoken Houston basketball star, who created headlines in the past by speaking out about police violence against African-Americans, on this occasion said “we love everything they're (China) about”. The contrast could not be more stark.

Soft power is supposed to be about the ability to project values. But it turns out that the only people who are successfully projecting their values on to the rest of the world using American soft power are the mainland Chinese. Only money matters. That's the hardest power of all.

## Passport and patriotism

My Indian passport has many disadvantages. But it's me



WHERE MONEY TALKS

SUNANDA K DATTA-RAY

Passports are a hateful token of the politicisation of a fractured world, symbolising the elevation of petty national sovereignty above universalism that explains Brexit. There's a sense of utter finality, too, about the booklet I have just collected from India House in London for it will in all probability be my last passport. I said so casually to the cheerfully scruffy but very helpful consular assistant who was horrified. “You mustn't say such things!” he exclaimed in Hindi, “and during the puja too in Kolkata!”

My old passport, which has now been cancelled although it could have run to mid-

November, was also issued in London. India's deputy high commissioner in Singapore was responsible for the one before. I had forgotten the man until half-way through a diplomatic occasion in another part of the world it suddenly dawned on me that he had once been my benefactor. Unusual for an Indian bureaucrat, he had been too polite to mention the debt. I say debt because in the bad old days before Maneka Gandhi's plea established a citizen's right to a passport, successive passport officers in India made one feel like a grovelling applicant for illicit favours. One incumbent hinted that a reciprocal gesture would not be amiss.

He dismissed my existing passport, also issued in London, as a document of convenience given only because the government in its compassion didn't want to leave an Indian abroad unprotected. Now that I was back, my financial, educational, political, professional and social credentials would be scrutinised before deciding if I was a fit person for the President of the Republic of India to accept responsibility for me. The police, too, were on the take. Groups of them turned up night after night for free drinks and dinner at a Chinese restaurant whose owner and his family were waiting for passports to be emigrated. Of course, there were and are many

much more serious abuses by both the authorities and VIPs like the Indian tycoon who mistakenly pulled out his second passport, a Swiss one, at a five-star hotel reception. But those are beyond my ken.

My worst passport memory is from Dhaka's dingy Lalbagh police station way back in 1965 when I had to pay several visits to ancestral Brahmanbaria in what was then East Pakistan. Deplaning in Dhaka, one had to rush to register at Lalbagh as the law demanded before boarding the Green Arrow train for Chittagong. There was always a pile of red India-Pakistan travel passports to be cleared, and the police officer on duty always shoved my blue passport to the bottom of the heap. Each time he came to it, he would again put it last and continue with the red passports while I gnawed my nails in anxiety for fear of missing the train. Once I made so bold as to hesitantly draw his attention to my dilemma and received such a snarl and a shouted order that I retreated in terror. East Pakistan is now Bangladesh. The police registration requirement has gone. But has the mind behind the law, the attitude that shaped it, changed?

I once bumped into Mother Teresa wandering around Bangkok airport looking lost. Offering to help her check in, I asked if she

had a white passport and she produced one that was red, explaining, “The Indian government has very kindly given me this diplomatic passport.” At the Air India counter, where I also checked in, she was, of course, instantly recognised, lionised and upgraded. Some time later, she appeared on the spiral stairs leading down from business — or first — class looking for me. She wanted to know what a white passport was. When I explained it was an official passport, she murmured, “Thank you. That will be very useful for my sisters who have to bring back medicines and things”, and went back to her business — or first class — abode.

I have often been asked in the 65 years that I have travelled continuously (not counting a family visit to Brahmanbaria in pre-passport 1949 when we all had single-sheet India-Pakistan travel papers) why I didn't acquire a British passport. The answer isn't any lofty patriotism. The answer is that I would have been embarrassed to plonk down the royal coat of arms (or the American eagle for that matter) on a third country's immigration counter. It would have seemed like impersonation. My Indian passport has many disadvantages. But it's me. Being for 10 years, the new one will last out my lifetime.

LUNCH WITH BS ▶ AMRUTA FADNAVIS | BANKER, SINGER & SOCIAL ACTIVIST

## A life of her own

Fadnavis talks to Pavan Lall about her vision of India, getting trolled online, and her views on what it would take to fix the country's infrastructure

When one holds a public office, enduring the vicissitudes of fame are par for the course. For the spouse of a VIP, however, such an existence can include exhilarating pros and unimagined cons. That's something Amruta Fadnavis, wife of Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, has learned to come to terms with — and as some would say — the hard way.

Our lunch venue is at the sprawling Varsha Bungalow, the Chief Minister's official and imposing residence in the heart of Malabar Hills complete with gun-toting security personnel, patrol cars and the accompanying bureaucracy. As we meet during the Ganpati festivities, the menu will be vegetarian, I am told. En route to the dining hall, I am greeted by my hostess, who at first appearance could easily be mistaken for a TV soap star and at 40 may well be among the youngest in her position.

She was born to parents based in Nagpur. Her father, Sharad Ranade, was an ophthalmologist, and her mother, Charulata Ranade, a gynaecologist. Her early years were spent learning music, playing tennis and assisting her parents in social projects that included free eye check-up camps for the underserved. She is emphatic that her performance in the classroom was remarkable. “It was always first or second in school, nothing else,” she says. Was that because of an unbridled love for academics? “No, it's because I am very competitive,” comes the answer with a slow-spreading smile.

Our *thalis*, made of an alloy of nine different metals, arrive along with glasses of water and extras. It's a colourful medley of classic Marathi fare that includes dal, a cabbage preparation, spiced soybean, green beans and yogurt. Fadnavis is served a mixed green salad speckled with red pomegranate grains. I throw her a quizzical look. “Too many sweets, too much eating out the last few days,” is the explanation.

So what's it like to be a VIP's wife? I see a smile appear. “It's easier to get things done quickly. Every door opens, you always get a reception, and the associated respect and prestige is wonderful,” she says. The downside? Her life is always under public glare. “I get trolled online for singing — which is my hob-

by; I'm actually mocked,” she laments. For the record, while Fadnavis counts Asha Bhosle and Lata Mangeshkar as her all-time favourites, she also experiments with Toni Braxton and Celine Dion ballads.

And then there are the barbs. Only recently, social media was rife with speculation that Axis Bank, where she's worked for the last decade, was on an account-opening spree for police officers. The suggestion was the accounts were awarded to Axis because of her husband's position. Fadnavis, vice-president and corporate head for West India at Axis Bank, says those accounts were opened several years ago — well before her husband became chief minister. Then she shrugs as if to say those are things you can do precious little about.

Before coming to Mumbai, Fadnavis got a BCom degree from the GS College of Commerce & Economics in Nagpur and then an MBA in finance from Symbiosis College in Pune. After that she joined Axis Bank in 2003 as an executive trainee. Then, around 2005, she was introduced to her husband-to-be by her parents through some common friends. “The marriage was completely arranged with horoscopes being compared and all.” After a couple of months or so of knowing each other the couple decided to take the plunge.

Was two months long enough time to take a decision of a lifetime? “At the time Deven (Devendra) was a second-time MLA from Nagpur West and we knew nothing about politics but had heard that he used his position for a lot of social work and bringing about change, which resonated with my parents and me,” she says, adding that she made it clear from day one that she would not be tied to the kitchen by her apron strings and would have a life of her own. “He was okay with that,” Fadnavis says.

She has actually built a life of her own. In recent years, Fadnavis has walked the ramp in New York as a showstopper to promote the cause of young girls, has sung with Amitabh Bachchan, adopted two villages to help modernise them, worked with acid attack victims and even won awards for playback singing. “I'm a different person when I'm on stage,” she tells me.

I take a bite of a crisp roti and scoop up



ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

some green vegetables. They're not oily but have a fiery after-kick. I try the dal which is similarly punchy. Seconds later, waiters magically appear to replace empty segments on my plate. I realise this is a trap and that the *thali* will never be over unless I dismiss the waiters once and for all.

What irks Fadnavis about India? Her

answer would match that of any young urban educated professional, except she has an inside track. “It's clearly the poor infrastructure and heavy traffic but I can tell you that new project files have been cleared, work has started and those things will make a difference when completed.”

Part of the problem is that all the talent in this part of the nation ends up in Mumbai. Decentralising the city and developing satellite towns is one solution. For example, moving government offices to townships nearby would reduce the incoming traffic to certain pockets of the city. “Cities need more parks. There ought to be a park five or 10 minutes from all homes,” she adds. The other issue she feels strongly about is farmer suicides. People killing themselves for ₹25,000 is frustrating, she says. “We have to create systems where landlords can't push people to their deaths because that perpetuates a cycle. Children of such people also go ahead and commit suicide,” she says, adding, efforts are on to change things around. She then talks about scientific farming and a water conservation scheme named Jalyukt Shivar Abhiyan that aims to make Maharashtra a drought-free state by 2019.

I'm done with my lunch and taste a little bit of the *gulab jamun* placed in front of me. “That's homemade... from Nagpur,” she says. When will India's political parties come together for a common vision instead of adopting a winner takes all approach designed to obliterate the Opposition? “There's a reason for that and you have to ask what is the driver of politics? Ask any young person who wants to get into it and the real reason will be fame, money and power — not to bring about empowered change in the society.” The other issue is that we have just too many political parties in the system, not to mention extremities of wealth, she adds.

A growing concern is that India is staring at a protracted economic slowdown. Is that something that concerns the banker in her? “We are in a down cycle and there are liquidity issues, and there is a definite slowdown that is more pronounced in some sectors than others — namely, real estate, manufacturing. More liquidity ought to ease the stress and it's important to realise that this is a cycle and that it will get better.”

What is that one wish the chief minister's wife has? “I wish for India to be a super power but with compassion, without losing our core values and while keeping tolerance in place.”

That's a platform that might have a political future one day...

## History keeper of Beni Ka Purwa



PEOPLE LIKE THEM

GEETANJALI KRISHNA

I am increasingly fascinated by ‘lived’ oral histories, especially, the ones told to me by people who have been on this planet for almost a century. Some time ago, while in Beni Ka Purwa, a tiny hamlet in UP's Banda district, I met 95-year-old Mulia Devi. Bent double but surprisingly spry, she'd just finished cleaning the village temple when we saw each other. She invited me to sit with her in the shady courtyard. I did and she rewarded me with her story.

Mulia Devi came to Beni Ka Purwa (named after her late husband) as a 12-year-old bride. She recalled with precision when each tree was planted, and

every pond or well dug in the village. Sadly, she could also chronicle the demise of each big tree and the drying up of every single village well and pond. Listening to her, I realised she wasn't just the village's history keeper — she was also a living chronicle of its transformation from being a water-abundant area to one now known for its crippling summer drought.

“When I arrived in this village, all one had to do was dig a two-foot trench and groundwater would pool in,” she said, her fingers busy on rosary beads. The pond across the temple had water all year round. “Over 30 years ago, my family had a well made next to it,” she said. “When the well was being dug, there was so much water at 24-feet that they couldn't dig any deeper.” Not far from it, there was a larger pond. “It was deep enough for an elephant to drown,” she recalled. With the increasing pressure of population and the consequent need for more land and water, the two ponds started drying up in the summer about 10 years ago. “The land just couldn't keep up with the thirst of the growing population,” she said. “Only the pond in front of the temple remains; the bigger pond has long gone and houses have been built over it now,” she said.

Small farmers aren't able to till their

land anymore because of water scarcity. “People seem poorer than they used to be though paradoxically, they have more money than their fathers did,” she said.

It began to rain and Mulia Devi commented that a good monsoon could breathe new life into the trees and wells in the village. For, every successive drought has resulted in the demise of the trees her husband and father-in-law planted decades ago. Mulia Devi pointed to a depression on the banks of the pond. “A huge neem tree stood here, planted when I came here as a bride over 80 years ago,” she said. “When it fell, I felt an old friend had died.” With the gradual demise of old trees, she said as she hobbled over to offer prayers at the base of an ancient peepal, the villagers lost much more than the shade they provided. “The death of every tree eroded the soul of the village,” she said.

Mulia Devi has also noticed that over the last few years, people are digging more and more tube wells in the village. “The more the number of tube wells, the less the amount of water there seems to be,” she said. “In the same way, the more the number of people in my village, the lonelier I feel now that my generation is almost entirely gone.”

## With friends like these...



PEOPLE LIKE US

KISHORE SINGH

If you're known by the company you keep then ours hasn't been particularly salubrious. Among our motley friends are gasbags, kleptomaniacs, pretenders and charlatans. There are those who've pinched our ideas, jobs and friends. We've been asked out for dinner to a restaurant but left to pay the bill on some flimsy pretext. Our cars have been borrowed and returned battered and bruised. Some have asked for loans of clothes, others of furnishings, some even our home for setting up meetings with prospective suitors for their children whose weddings we haven't been invited to.

“I like maverick people,” I've explained to my children when they've held them up as examples of people not to fraternise with. (Truth is, I find it difficult to pass moral judgement on others.) “You don't give up on people simply because of some tiny flaw,” I've explained to them. Only to be reminded of the time one “forgot” to return a considerable sum of money he'd borrowed on the promise of returning it the following day. Another was found lurking in the neighbourhood bushes after inviting us home, to be informed by his wife that they weren't in the mood to entertain that evening, and slamming the door on our face. Or the night that a neighbour asked to be allowed home to watch the World Cup on our television because his TV was bust, then asked his friends over, who helped themselves to our bar and left the home trashed.

There are some we've supped with, or had a drink or coffee with — often as a professional courtesy — who are cooling their heels in judicial custody in London, Mumbai or New Delhi. It's enough to cause you to lose faith in mankind. Those are the ones who flew too close to the sun, but our intimate circle is less prone to such grand malarkey, more likely to pinch hotel towels than shareholders' wealth.

The proof of our pilferage is confined to the odd toilet roll, ashtray or salt-and-

pepper set — pinched with confidence rather than guilt. There has been the occasional robe too, but only when the hotel has helpfully initialised it with the letters of one's name, making recycling impossible. I don't really like the slippers provided in hotel rooms, so I've never had the urge to pick those up — but my wife has managed to save a set of fruit plates purloined one visit at a time from her hotel room, when buying a dozen might have been simpler — and less expensive.

And what does one make of an acquaintance — my wife's — who, when invited to spend an evening with us, left behind a large gift bag which, when opened after she had left post several hugs and endearments, turned out to consist of several years' assiduous collecting of hotel pickings — soaps, shampoos, conditioners and moisturisers? At a loss, my wife did the only sensible thing — promptly shared the spoils with the staff. A seasoned thief when it comes to pinching plants from her varied circle of friends, she stands vigil when her kitty gang visits to ensure they don't return the compliment. Unfortunately, she isn't always on her guard when inside the home — which is why we don't know who made off with the cutlery at the last party. Be warned: She'll be watching closely when we visit next.

