

Eighth Pupul Jayakar Memorial Lecture Cultural Diplomacy: Leveraging India's Soft Power

April 18, 2016

Shyam Saran

I wish to thank the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage, INTACH, for inviting me to deliver the 8th Pupul Jayakar Memorial Lecture. INTACH is one of the most important centres of excellence in our country, dedicated to the preservation and promotion of Indian cultural and historical legacy. And, it is no surprise that like several other sister institutions, it owes its existence to Pupul Jayakar's initiative. She was passionate about India's art and culture, its craft traditions, its intangible cultural assets such as folk songs and story-telling. She was, in every sense, an embodiment of the finest sensibilities bequeathed to us by India's rich cultural and spiritual heritage. She was as much at home with the country's vivid and colourful tribal culture as she was with the complex aesthetics and layered symbolism of its most classical and elevated art forms. In fact, it would be fair to say that the entire spectrum of art, from the tribal to the formal, from crafts to classical forms, was to her, a seamless continuity.

Pupul Jayakar was influenced deeply by theosophy and became a follower of one of its best known spiritual masters, J. Krishnamurti. One of my treasured possessions is an autographed copy of her celebrated biography of the spiritual guide and teacher. This was her gift to me in the midst of the Festival of India in Japan in 1987/88, which I regard as one of our most successful forays in cultural diplomacy, showcasing the breathtaking range of cultural experiences that India has to offer. The Festival in Japan, just like the earlier Festivals in the US and France, was meticulously choreographed by Pupul Jayakar. As coordinator of the Festival in the Indian Embassy in Japan, I had the rare privilege of working closely with her, putting in place nearly 30 events – performing arts, theatre, exhibitions, fashion shows and film festivals, which eventually covered as many locations throughout Japan. Japanese TV channels carried Festival related programming of over 100 hours, all without cost, bringing Indian culture as a living phenomenon into the homes of millions of Japanese. And over this veritable cultural feast presided Pupul Jayakar, not inappropriately known as the Czarina of Indian culture. I am honoured to have been invited to deliver this address in her memory.

The Festivals of India, which have now been institutionalized, were conceived by her, and embody in practical form, what cultural diplomacy is all about, demonstrating its capacity to deliver impacts that often elude traditional diplomacy, to which it still plays second or even third fiddle. I believe that the role of culture in international affairs is consistently under-estimated and therefore, under invested in.

What is cultural diplomacy? In a study carried out in the U.K. a couple of years ago, the following definition was offered:

“Cultural diplomacy may be best described as a course of actions, which are based on and utilize the exchange of ideas, values, traditions and other aspects of culture or identity, whether to strengthen relationships, enhance socio-cultural cooperation, promote national interests and beyond. Cultural diplomacy can be practiced by either public sector, private sector or civil society.”

This is an operational definition of cultural diplomacy and useful as a frame of reference. But in fact cultural diplomacy has a much deeper significance than is captured in the associated semantics. We may not always be aware of this but culture provides the operating context for politics. It is the prism through which people perceive each other, nations interpret each other and mediate their differences and celebrate their affinities. The state has a key role to play but not an exclusive role because culture relates to people, their deep seated attitudes and ways of living. Cultural diplomacy pursued by the state is most effective when it plays an enabling role, providing opportunities, platforms and resources for people themselves to get into the business of engaging, debating and sharing their cultural lives with counterparts in other countries. This may be in the form of art, language, literature, history, performing arts, theatre, or just workshops and seminars. The range of cultural exchanges really has few limits. The mutual familiarity, awareness and understanding created through such encounters generates cultural literacy. And cultural literacy is indispensable to acquiring a capacity to interpret actions by other states and navigate the inherent diversity that characterizes inter-state relations. What may positively influence one state may mar relations with another. There is no standard formula or generic template. Each country and its people are unique and their cultural particularities need to be understood even while making the effort to help them understand our own. In some cases, as with the Chinese or the Japanese, knowledge of their languages and the complex nuances that underlie the use of words is indispensable. In other cases, language may not be a barrier such as with Pakistan, but there may be cultural or psychological chasms of a different kind.

Most misunderstandings and even conflicts between states, as between people, arise from misperceptions and faulty interpretations of behavior. And cultural illiteracy is usually the culprit. But much of this is intangible, difficult to measure and even to articulate but it is critical to diplomacy, not a mere supplement to it.



Diplomacy is anchored in cross-cultural engagement which engenders a cultivated sensitivity to the cultural idiom of a country one is dealing with. It is this sensitivity which confers the ability in a diplomat to sense the shifts in moods and expressions of his interlocutor and read the clues to a reality that often lies hidden behind formal articulations. I would go further and add that it is not only familiarity with other cultures that is necessary for a diplomat to discharge his duties effectively. There is need for cultural empathy. One needs to have a compelling curiosity about the culture of a country one is exposed to, its history, customs and traditions and, yes, the dreams and aspirations of its people. This applies to friend and adversary alike. The ability to locate current interaction in a broader cultural context, may help enhance the positive and limit the negative impact on inter-state relations. This enables genuine dialogue and not merely conversations.

Thus I see cross cultural engagement as an essential and enabling component of successful diplomacy and this goes beyond promoting cultural exchanges.

While serving as a diplomat in several countries, I had the opportunity to explore and appreciate the cultures that I came in touch with. But in doing so I also felt the urge to know about my own culture in all its bewildering variety. This in itself was an exciting journey but it was a journey that ran parallel to the mission of exposing others to our own cultural heritage, delighting in discovering both unexpected affinities and often novel perspectives on the human experience. The diplomat becomes both an interlocutor and an interpreter, the medium through which cultures speak to each other and hopefully break down the persistent national stereotypes and prejudices which undermine mutual understanding and peace.

Let me take you back to the Festival of India in Japan to demonstrate the power of culture to project in a most powerful manner, the inclusive, accommodative and secular fabric of India. At the inauguration of the Festival, the Dagar brothers, Nasir Moinuddin and Nasir Aminuddin, sang an exquisite Shiva Stuti, which held the large Japanese audience spell bound. After the Inaugural ceremony there was a reception in the foyer where Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and his Japanese counterpart, Takeshita were mingling informally with guests. Takeshita wanted to meet the Dagar brothers whose singing had deeply impressed him. When he was introduced to the brothers, Takeshita asked Aminuddin about the composition that he had been singing. Aminuddin replied that it was an ancient invocation to Lord Shiva, seeking his mercy and benediction. Takeshita expressed surprise, exclaiming, "But are you not a Muslim?"

And Aminuddin replied, Yes I am a Muslim but also a devotee of Shiva. I pay homage to Allah through my song in praise of Shiva.

A thousand words could not have conveyed the Indian spirit as powerfully as this single sentence from one of India's great artistes.

Another instance of the power of culture in diplomacy is my own experience with a Festival of India I organized in Indonesia in 2002. There were several music and dance performances, exhibitions and jointly choreographed programmes with Indonesian artistes. The island of Bali was one of the most important venues for us given its cultural connections with India. The then governor of Bali was a most enthusiastic sponsor and several events were slated to be held there in the last phase of the Festival. In a meeting I had with him on October 10, we had fixed the inauguration for October 18 with a flute recital by Hari Prasad Chaurasia. A day after I returned to Jakarta came the horrifying news about a terrorist bomb attack in the tourist district of Kuta in Bali with over two hundred people dead. I called the Governor and offered my condolences but also conveyed that I was cancelling the Festival in Bali in the wake of the tragedy. I was surprised when the Governor literally begged me not to cancel the Festival saying that Bali needed the Festival more precisely because the tragedy had taken place. I demurred pointing to inevitable concerns about security of the artistes and the possible negative reaction amongst Indonesian people that we were celebrating a cultural festival- a happy occasion- just a few days after the unprecedented and tragic loss of life in the terrorist attack on the island. The Governor's response was to again reiterate that his people needed the balm of culture to cope with this tragedy and India could provide the solace they needed. He said that many foreigners were leaving Bali in fear; would India, too, abandon Bali?

That settled the argument as far as I was concerned. We went ahead with the Festival. At the inauguration, in a hall designed to accommodate 750 people, there were hundreds more, several outside in the courtyard watching the event on giant screens. The Governor and his entire Cabinet were in attendance. Pandit Hari Prasad ji dedicated his outstanding recital to the people who had lost their lives in the bombing incident. It was truly an emotional moment. Next morning while I was walking in the main street of the capital, ordinary Balinese came up to me, grasped my hand and said Thank you. The Festival in Bali coming as it did just after the trauma of the terrorist outrage, got far greater response and coverage than it would have in normal circumstances. It created a wave of goodwill for India and sense of cultural and spiritual affinity which still pervades the island.



We have several programmes of cultural and academic exchanges with South East Asian countries but we often lack modesty in speaking about our cultural affinities. Some Indian scholars alienate their South East Asian counterparts by suggesting that South East Asia got its culture and art from India. True that throughout South East and East Asia as well, one encounters the colours and sounds of India every where. But whatever cultural assets they may have borrowed from India, our neighbours to the East transformed these into exquisite examples of local genius and creativity. What has been at work here is not cultural imposition but a creative exchange that enriched both. To watch a performance of the Javanese Ramayana at the ancient Prambanan Temple at Jogjakarta is exciting precisely because its Indian origins have been lovingly reworked with local flavours to create a uniquely Indonesian product. We see what is Indian in it but mostly neglect the beauty of the layers of colour and meaning that Indonesians have added to it through the ages. We need to be humble in claiming cultural parentage. Pride if any should be in rejoicing that our ancestors provided a cultural spark which led to such a powerful surge of creativity and artistic expression in our extended neighbourhood. Cultural diplomacy should enable a joint journey of exploration of this historical process because this was a cultural encounter unparalleled elsewhere in the world.

Even in the Indian sub-continent which is a shared cultural space, there is need for sensitivity towards the inherent anxiety which our neighbours have about their own cultural identity being overwhelmed by the power of Indian culture. Cultural affinity needs to be pursued with humility and a readiness to acknowledge the many contributions made by neighbouring countries in enriching our shared culture of the sub-continent.

The success of Bollywood as a facet of Indian popular culture is legendary though treated with some disdain by votaries of high culture. The final event of the Festival in Indonesia was a Bollywood extravaganza of song and dance with Shah Rukh Khan as the main performer. Though the show was held in a large stadium, there was almost a stampede. Shah Rukh is probably better known in Indonesia than some of its own leaders and all his films are instant hits in the country. Amitabh Bacchan is an instantly recognisable face from the shores of Africa, across the Gulf and on to South East Asia. Raj Kapoor's Awaara Hoon and Nargis's Mother India are still remembered in Russia and China. And no matter what barriers are erected by the Pakistani state, Bollywood and its stars still rule the Pakistani imagination. The Indian state has had little to do with this most powerful instrument of cultural impact, but it could certainly leverage it to the country's advantage.

I attach value to cultural diplomacy for another reason, which has to do with the excitement of discovering the many treasures of India's own cultural heritage, lost to us because of loot and plunder or the ravages of time and weather, which lie embedded in the cultures of the many countries which constituted India's extended neighbourhood through the centuries. This extended neighbourhood was defined by the monsoon winds which linked peninsular India with the countries of South East Asia and the Far East on its eastern flank and the Gulf, Arabian peninsula and the east coast of Africa on its western flank. But there was also the many centuries of interaction with Central Asia along the caravan routes threading across the high mountains and deserts to the north. The Mughal empire created a unique Indo-Persian cultural space whose fascinating story has been detailed in Audrey Truschke's recent book, "Culture of Encounters- Sanskrit at the Mughal Court." India is a cross-roads culture, its cosmopolitan temper, its embrace of plurality, being the precious legacy of its lying astride both the maritime and caravan routes of the past. It had much to give to its neighbourhood and the colours and echoes of India are to be found throughout this extended neighbourhood. Equally, one must acknowledge, our own culture carries the imprint of what we learnt from our neighbours, both far and near. The exploration of the history, philosophical traditions, language and scripts, sacred literature, architectural forms and art idioms of countries in this extended neighbourhood is one of the most important missions of cultural diplomacy. This exploration has to be a shared enterprise with our partner states. This will reveal as much of our own history and culture as it would theirs and through this will be born a stronger sense of affinity, a shared frame of reference which more traditional diplomacy can draw upon.

During my assignments in China, Japan, Indonesia, Nepal and Myanmar and visits to Tibet and Xinjiang, I was struck by how much of India's sacred literature, both Hindu and Buddhist, were preserved in temples and monasteries and even in modern libraries. There were original texts in Sanskrit or Pali; there were also translations in local languages. Let me share with you an example from Japan. While serving in Japan, I had the opportunity to visit the ancient monastery town of Koyasan, not far from the ancient capital of Kyoto. Koyasan is associated with the name of Kobo Daishi, a Buddhist monk, who lived from 774-835 AD. Like many other Japanese Buddhist monks, Kobo Daishi also travelled to China to study under Chinese masters. Kobo Daishi spent several years in Xian, the then Chinese capital, where he learnt Sanskrit and studied Buddhist scriptures under an Indian scholar, Pandit Prajna, who had come all the way from Nalanda, which in those days was truly the knowledge capital of Asia. On his return to Japan, Kobo Daishi introduced the Sanskrit syllabary in the Siddham script, to the Japanese language and this forms the basis of katakana, the supplemental phonetic alphabet which is used together with Chinese characters or the Kanji. But Kobo Daishi also brought



with him a very large stock of Buddhist scriptures, Sanskrit texts on secular subjects such as astronomy and medicine and scholarly commentaries, which are still stored in an ancient library at Koyasan and are treated as a national treasure. Kobo Daishi's "Catalogue of Imported Items" gives us an idea of the wealth of invaluable Indian historical, sacred and secular texts which he had accumulated over his many years in Xian and which are not only the cultural legacy of Japan but also of our own country. A very old and distinguished Japanese monk at Koyasan, in whose company I visited the library, told me that several of the texts no longer existed anywhere else in the world, the originals and even translations having been destroyed in wars, revolutions, civic strife, fires and disasters over the centuries. Should not cultural diplomacy enable a joint Indo-Japanese project, which may have to be spread over several years, to research this invaluable source of our own forgotten history?

The period between the 8th to the 12th centuries was one of intense cultural, indeed knowledge exchange between India and the Arab world, with Central Asia playing the role of intermediary. This has been meticulously chronicled in Frederick Starr's "Lost Enlightenment". During this 500 year period, Central Asia was invaded by the Arabs and Arabic soon became the lingua franca of the entire Islamic world stretching from the margins of Europe to the edges of the Indian subcontinent. Classic Sanskrit texts on Indian medicine, mathematics and philosophy, travelled to Central Asia where they were translated into Arabic and transmitted to the Arab peninsula. The medical treatises of Charaka and Susruta, the mathematical and astronomical theories of Aryabhata and Brahmgupta were translated into Arabic by well-known Central Asian scholars like Khwarazmi, Ibn Sina and Al-beruni. Several of these treatises were already available in Persian from earlier exchanges between Iran and India. These include 6th century Persian translations of Pancatantra and the Hitopadesa. These, in turn, found their way to Europe, becoming part of the European renaissance from the 12th century onwards. The Indian numeral system, the concept of shunya or zero and the decimal, the calculation of pi and the notion of negative numbers and integers, are part of India's intellectual legacy which spread far beyond its borders including to Europe and China.

The world today presents new challenges to the practice of cultural diplomacy. At one end of the spectrum, the communications and information revolutions, have brought humanity much closer than at any time in history. There are vastly expanded opportunities to directly experience other cultures through travel or to learn about them through virtual media. There is a continual exposure to different ways of life, cultural norms and traditions and cuisine. An international Yoga Day has made this quintessentially Indian heritage a global phenomenon and reinforced India's soft power. This increasing interaction among different countries, peoples and cultures is leading to cultural enrichment, a growing appreciation of what is best in every culture and, hopefully, a heightened cultural sensitivity to the particularities of individual cultures. The intensity of cultural interaction globally is leading to a burst of creativity and intellectual ferment across the world and this is welcome. The U.K. study on Cultural Diplomacy which I referred to before says: "As opportunities for global contact and exchange are proliferating as never before, and because of these contacts, culture itself is changing. Cultures are meeting, mingling and morphing." But there is also a dark side that has been unleashed by the same proximity, for example, the fear of a loss of identity, a sense of being culturally adrift in a world being transformed with unprecedented rapidity. Indian culture has been constantly evolving, changing and adding new layers of experience, but always retaining the eternal strands that define its identity. But there are times when we tend to reject the present and the promise of the future in favour of a remembered past and ancient glory. But as Nehru observed in a comment about culture: "A nation cannot prosper if it merely imitates its ancestors. What builds a nation is creative, inventive and vital activity."

Mechanical imitation inhibits the process of engagement and dialogue not only between cultures but between generations born into the same culture. Instead of celebrating diversity and sharing cultural experiences, we begin to raise walls around us and seek to stifle the very impulses which keep our culture alive and vibrant. A culture that does not share will soon stagnate and die. Cultural diplomacy is all about sharing not showing.

I truly believe that open and liberal societies, in particular plural democracies like our own, are far better equipped to successfully navigate the increasingly congested world which is emerging. The hall mark of a great and successful power of the future will be the ability of its people to handle diversity and adapt to different cultures. In seeking our place in the world, India should be careful not to devalue the very strengths we possess as a confident and accommodative, indeed assimilative culture. We must not encourage a political culture which feeds on division, exploiting fears of the loss of imagined identities and creating a sense of siege. Our democracy is a citizen based democracy. Individual eccentricity has always found place in our culture and we must retain space for every individual to give full play to his genius, free from narrowly defined cultural categories or uninformed prejudices. If we are to engage other cultures in a productive dialogue we must reaffirm confidence in our own and learn to accept and celebrate the diversity that lies at the heart of the idea of India.



Let me conclude by going back to Nehru, whom I consider as a rare example of a modern Indian, steeped in his country's innate cultural values and yet conscious of India's myriad connections and even indebtedness to other cultures of the world. Nehru considered nationalism as a limiting concept because from his point of view nationalism considered civilizations as unitary creations. But civilisations had emerged from interconnections with each other and India more so than the others. Therefore he said, the history of one society necessarily required knowing the history of other societies. It is this exciting adventure of mutual discovery that cultural diplomacy is all about. This is message that Pupul Jayakar sought to convey through the Festivals of India and which is more than relevant today.

I thank you for your attention.
