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## **Soft Power, Hard Look**

**I**t's two decades this summer since the United States hosted the Festival of India, arguably the first projection of Indian soft power in the West. Conceived during Indira Gandhi's prime ministership, the 1985 -1986 extravaganza was executed during the Rajiv Gandhi-Ronald Reagan era.

Over a span of 18 months, 700 events took place in 185 cities and towns in 43 American states. Some 2,500 sculptures, paintings, prints, and craft objects were loaned from India. Hundreds of Indian scholars, performers, craftsmen came to the US to display their work. There were exhibitions of Indian art at museums such as the Smithsonian in Washington and Metropolitan in New York. Zubin Mehta, Ravi Shankar and L Subramaniam mesmerised audiences and their dancing counterparts dazzled them.

For Americans, it was their first taste of India (it was the time Madhur Jaffrey sizzled too). Oh sure, there was a minuscule minority from the Beat and the Beatles generation who had heard Ravi Shankar and read J Krishnamurthi, but for most Americans, it was love at first sight. To this day, there are people in Washington who recall with delight little Bundu Khan Manganiar, with his oversized turban, exhorting the audience to "Shit Down!" (he was 14 then and knew little English) before launching into electrifying folk songs on the Mall where India came alive night after night.

By some estimates, the festival made 1,000 million contacts — four per American — and drew 180,000 column centimeters of coverage, reaching an estimated readership of 375 million. "Never had a foreign country's culture and achievements been brought to America's attention so extensively and in such a short period of time," reads an account of that time. Remember, this was in the pre-Internet era, and Cable TV was also in its infancy.

It was also the first introduction to the US for a generation of Indian artistes. Many began returning regularly for performances. From the time the

Gundecha Brothers gave a concert at the Shiva-Vishnu Temple in Maryland before five people ("But they sang like they were before an audience of 1,000," exulted one who was present), we have come to a stage where they can attract 500 on their annual visits. Last month, Ustad Rashid Khan embarked on 16-city US tour that took him to as unusual a place as Midland-Odessa, a Texas outpost best known for being George Bush's hometown. Many great artistes like Pandit Jasraj and Zakir Hussain now live part of the year in the United States.

The Festival also enthused a generation of NRIs to connect their children to Indian arts. Many Americans too took to Indian music and dance. Last month, Cincinnati Enquirer, Terre Haute Tribune Star, and San Jose Mercury News may not have reported at any length on Manmohan Singh's US visit. But all three carried detailed reports on the arangetrams (stage debut in Bhararan-atyam) of local Indian-American kids — Shriya Raghavan, Jasmine Singh, and Maya Ramachandran — in their area.

Twenty years is a long time, almost a generation ago. Half of India's population and a quarter of US population today were not born at that time. Indian-Americans were only 600,000-strong (two and half million now) and starting to find their feet. Imagine such a festival today — at a time when Indian soft power has acquired more depth — with 24-hour cable, Internet and podcasting. Time for another show on the 60th Independence Day or Republic Day anniversary (in 2007 or 2010), at an age in Indian tradition when certain vows are reaffirmed

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