

Looking beyond the India hype

Researcher Ksenia Glebova argues that the development of Finno-Indian relations further will require network-building as well as enhancing awareness of Indian culture in Finland and vice versa.

What kind of picture do Indians have of Finland?

When asked this question about Finland most Indians would find precisely one word, if any. Indeed, for the overwhelming majority of Indians, Finland means Nokia. While this can be considered an international success of the Finnish mobile phone maker, it simultaneously signals a one-dimensional picture of the country. Nokia has almost 80 % share of Indian mobile handset market and, as a brandname, enjoys a solid reputation for its durability but not innovation. "It is a phone you can drop and do anything with, save for flushing down the bowl", said Rahul Bose, a Bollywood superstar in a recent interview to an Indian daily.

Apart from Nokia, Finland itself is a largely unknown entity at best associated with cold climate and Europe and, at worst, taken to mean the Philippines due to phonetic similarity in pronunciation. However, most often than not mentioning Finland will stir no association reaction at all.

Finland's departure points in the ongoing scramble for India are humble, to say the least. Traditionally, Finland has had weak links with South Asia and not much has changed since. One can say that Finland is launching its relationship with India from scratch. This can be seen as an advantage in being free from colonial baggage but, at the same time, it means that the lack of previous interaction calls for bigger human resource investments and these are currently not in place. There are currently no degree programmes in South Asian let alone Indian studies at any of the Finnish universities excluding a handful of single issue or introductory courses offered on a one-off basis. One can, however, study for a Master's degree in East Asian studies at the University of Turku. Every year only around 30 Indian students enter Finnish universities and less than a dozen Finns annually take advantage of the Indian state scholarships for studying in India.

Warming up exercises

It seems that for the moment the Finno-Indian relations are certainly enjoying the spotlight and media attention. During her visit to New Delhi in January 2007 Finland's President Tarja Halonen mentioned the attention wave all things Indian are currently undergoing in Finland and emphasised that the focus on India was extremely positive.

Many large Finnish companies such as Nokia and Kone already have established themselves in India and others are to follow suit. A leading Indian daily "The Hindustani Times" reported in March 2007 that Finnish small and medium enterprises (SMEs) were planning to invest 200 million euros in India by the end of year 2007 in

areas such as technology, healthcare, wellness and tourism. President Halonen proposed a cultural dimension to Indo-Finnish trade cooperation when she singled out the multimillion dollar Bollywood film industry and suggested Bollywood films take advantage of exotic Finnish scenery for its shooting locations.

There are indeed many small and medium Finnish companies that want to do business in India but they are not being able to communicate with each other properly so this is where the Finnish Trade Promotion office Finpro comes in to act as a mediator "connecting people" to use the Nokia brand slogan. However, the knowledge or experience of the Indian working culture(s) is largely non-existent in Finland. Hence, there is an urgent need for action to build awareness of Indian culture in Finland and vice versa as well as build networks, if these ambitious plans are to take off the ground.

Catching the India plane

India and Finland are certainly making first steps to coming closer in terms of distance. Finnair already launched a direct flight connection to Delhi at the end of 2006 and in 2007 the Finnish flag carrier will add the direct route from Helsinki to Mumbai, the business capital of India.

The India Programme of the Finnish Innovation Fund SITRA aims to put Finland on the map for Indians. Vesa-Matti Lahti of SITRA says that today Finnish media shows much more interest in India and covers a wider range of issues than a few years ago. Still, the initial approach of presenting India as, first and foremost, a market and a rising economic power prevails. A recent issue of the Finnair inflight magazine aptly summarised the approach in its article "How to cash in on the Indian boom?" claiming that India is "hot, hot, hot and this is not a reference to the climate". Unfortunately, it is exactly the "cashing in" perspective that continues to dominate the coverage of India in Finland whereas other sides of the story lack similar attention. For example, the 2006 take-over of Rovaniemi-based engineering company Saraware by the Indian IT giant Wipro was the first large-scale take-over by an Indian firm in Finland but it passed largely unnoticed by the general public. Also, SITRA's India Programme chooses familiar emphasis on the growing market and middle class consumer power, despite the widespread poverty. As many other things in India, this can be turned upside down. Although the middle class is undoubtedly growing, there is still widespread poverty, malnutrition, child labour, illiteracy and corruption.

Interestingly, today the Finnish media discourse regarding India can be compared to the public debate on Finland's membership in the European Union in the early 1990s. Once again, we are being urged "not to miss the train", "to seize the day" and, ultimately, to "take advantage of the opportunity". The message is clear – "the time to be bullish is now" – but a coherent approach and supportive context reaching beyond the India hype is yet to be seen.

The author works as a researcher for an Indian NGO in Kolkata and is an EVA Junior Fellow 2006.