

Forum Indian Kaleidoscope: The Soft Power of India

Форум „Индийски калейдоскоп: меката сила на Индия“

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The “Indian Kaleidoscope: The Soft Power of India” Forum, with a seminar, discussion panels, creative workshops and demonstration classes, was held at Sofia University Rectorate building on June 3rd and 4th, 2025. It was organised by the Indian Studies Section of the Classical East Studies Department (CESD) at the Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology (FCMP) of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” (SU), in cooperation with the Embassy of India in Bulgaria, and was held with the support of the Devam Foundation, the Friends of India Club, and the East-West Indological Foundation. Conceived as a kaleidoscope of India’s rich and diverse cultural traditions and their role in shaping the country’s global image, the forum sought to explore India’s soft power by presenting research on various aspects of Indian culture, its international presence and influence, India-related education, and academic interest in Indian studies. A special focus was placed on India’s connections with Bulgaria, examining the reception and presence of Indian ideas and practices in Bulgarian society and culture.

The inauguration of the forum was addressed by Prof. Dr Milena Bratoeva from Indian Studies at Sofia University, the Ambassador of India to Sofia H.E. Mr Arun Sahu, and the Dean of Sofia University’s Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology Prof. Dr Gergana Petkova.

Prof. Bratoeva, who chaired the opening, pointed out that “India undoubtedly provides us with some of the most brilliant examples” of forms of “soft power” which have been used since ancient times.

Ambassador Sahu highlighted India’s influence as “deeply rooted in millennia of cultural, philosophical, and spiritual traditions”, as well as that India “has always extended far beyond its borders – not through conquest but through connection”.

Prof. Petkova illustrated the subtle might of India’s impact by sharing an intimate memory of how her sister at the age of eight dedicated to Mahatma Gandhi a musical piece composed by her.

The seminar was held on both days of the forum, at the Conference Hall, and was conducted in a hybrid format, with both in-person and online participation, and with Bulgarian and English as working languages. The five sessions were chaired respectively by Prof. Dr Gergana Ruseva, Senior Assist. Prof. Dr Nikolay Yankov, Dr Boryana Kamova, Senior Assist. Prof. Dr Aleksandar Bogdanov, and Dr Mona Kaushik.

Seminar keynote speaker Prof. Dr Shashibala – Dean of K. M. Munshi Centre of Indology at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in New Delhi, India, who participated online, spoke on “India and Bulgaria: Cultural Connect through Soft Power – Past, Present and Future”.

Further in the seminar followed the presentations:

“India’s Position on the US Indo-Pacific Strategy” (online; in Bulgarian) by Petko Doykov, PhD, current Ambassador of the Republic of Bulgaria to the Republic of Serbia, and former Ambassador of Bulgaria to the Republic of India (2014-2018), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Bulgaria.

“Soft Power in International Relations: the Cases of India and the USA” (in Bulgarian) by Simona Samuilova, PhD, Senior Assist. Professor, Institute for Historical Studies (IHS) – Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS), Bulgaria.

“Bulgaria-India Cultural Contacts in the Light of the Soft Power Issue” (in Bulgarian) by Violina Atanasova, PhD, part-time Assoc. Professor at CESD – Indian Studies, FCMP, SU, long-standing staff of IHS – BAS, Bulgaria.

“India’s Soft Power Trajectory: Tradition, Innovation, and International Influence” by Mona Kaushik, PhD, Researcher, CESD – Indian Studies, FCMP, SU, Bulgaria / India.

“Rising, Modern, and Democratic: India’s Soft Power in Europe, Its Impressive Growth, and Its Complexities” (online) by Ivan Lidarev, PhD in International Relations and Political Science, Visiting Research Fellow, Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), National University of Singapore (NUS), Singapore / Bulgaria.

“Soft Power in Amrit Kaal: Insights from *Power and Purpose*” (online) by Anant Singh Mann, MSc in International Political Economy (London School of Economics), MA in International Relations and Modern History (University of St Andrews), and Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, London, UK / India.

“When Ideas Travel: Educational Collaboration as a Form of Indian Soft Power” by Gagandeep Kaur, Assistant, Interactive Robotics and Control Systems Department, Institute of Robotics – BAS, Bulgaria / India.

“Fine Arts: A Bridge between India and Bulgaria” by Kanchan Sharma, PhD, Visiting Professor, CESD – Indian Studies, FCMP, SU, Bulgaria / India.

“Encounters with Dān Kvikṣoṭa – an Indian Incarnation of Don Quixote” (online) by Dragomir Dimitrov, a graduate of SU’s Indian Studies, PhD, Professor, Indologie und Tibetologie, Philipps-Universität Marburg, Germany / Bulgaria.

“Translation as a Factor of Soft Power” (online; in Bulgarian) by Tatyana Evtimova, Dr. Habil., part-time Professor, Centre for Eastern Languages and *Studies* (CELS), FCMP, SU, Bulgaria.

“The Role of International Festivals in Promoting Indian Cinema” (in Bulgarian) by Andronika Mārtonova, PhD, Professor, Deputy Director of the Institute of Art Studies – BAS, part-time lecturer at CELS, FCMP, SU, Bulgaria.

“The Contemporary and the Traditional in the Reality Series *Indian Matchmaking*” (in Bulgarian) by Irina Kyulanova, a graduate of SU’s Indian Studies, PhD, Senior Assist. Professor, Department of English and American Studies, FCMP, SU, Bulgaria.

“Theatre of India – the Philosophy of Life as Play” (in Bulgarian) by Asya Tsvetanova, a graduate of SU’s Indian Studies, PhD in Indian Literature, current Director, Americas Directorate, MFA, Bulgaria.

“*Abhinayadarpana*’s Translation into Bulgarian” (in Bulgarian) by Romyana Damyanova, author of the translation, a graduate of SU’s Indian Studies, PhD in Indian Literature, Bulgaria; illustrated live by Indian dance performer Katya Tosheva along with students of hers from Kaya Dance School, Bulgaria.

“On the Contribution of Daniela Kaneva to the Bulgaria – India Discourse” (in Bulgarian) by Boryana Kamova, PhD, Researcher, CESD – Indian Studies, FCMP, SU, Bulgaria.

“Shaping Tomorrow, Today: India’s Technology as Soft Power” (in Bulgarian) by Stela Stoilova, MA Programme in Indian Studies at SU, a graduate in Physics, International Economic Relations, and Information Technology, works in the field of IT process management, Bulgaria.

“Ritual, Residue, Surplus: Vedic Sacrifice according to Roberto Calasso” (in Bulgarian) by Irena Kristeva, Dr. Habil., Professor, Romance Studies Department, FCMP, SU, Bulgaria.

“Vipassana Meditation: a Technique for a Calm and Equanimous Mind” (in Bulgarian) by Rositsa Boshnyashka, Assist. Professor, CESD – Indian Studies, FCMP, SU, Bulgaria, and Orlin Konov, Vipassana Bulgaria Foundation, Bulgaria.

“Buddhism as a Soft Power of India: the Global Spiritual Center Bodhgaya” (online; in Bulgarian) by Lyudmila Klasanova, PhD, part-time lecturer, CELS, SU, Bulgaria.

“The Gentle Healing Power of Ayurveda in Bulgaria” (in Bulgarian) by Antoaneta Zarkova, MD, part-time lecturer at Indian Studies, FCMP, SU, President of the Bulgarian Association “Ayurveda”, Bulgaria.

“The Profile of the Contemporary Guru: an Intersection between Tradition, Charisma, and Innovative “Technologies of the Spirit”” (in Bulgarian) by Milena Bratova, PhD, Professor, CESD – Indian Studies, FCMP, SU, Bulgaria.

“Pranayama and Stress” by Nisar Sheikh, **ayurveda and yoga consultant, owner of a consulting and panchakarma centre in Pune**, India.

“Light Relaxation and Pranayama Practice” (in Bulgarian) by Vera Zaharieva, yoga instructor, President of the Bulgarian Yoga Federation, Bulgaria.

After the seminar, on the second day of the forum, at the Aula of Sofia University, as part of the event were also held – all in Bulgarian – demonstration classes in two of the main classical Indian dance styles – Kathak and Bharatanatyam, conducted respectively by prominent Bulgarian Indian dance performers Katya Tosheva, founder and manager of Kaya Dance School, Sofia, and Victoria Marincheva, founder and manager of Dipavali Dance School, Sofia; a meeting with sculptor Zlatko Paunov and artist Doncho Donchev, a Rangoli decoration workshop with Dr Mona Kaushik and students from SU’s Indian Studies, and a screening of excerpts from the documentary „Mahatma Gandhi – the Vigour of Truth“ (2019), presented by Aleksandar Bogdanov, PhD, Senior Assist. Professor, CESD – Indian Studies, FCMP, SU, Bulgaria.

Victoria Marincheva and Katya Tosheva – the most popular Indian dance performers in Bulgaria, are well-known to the Bulgarian audience. Both have participated in numerous performances in and outside Bulgaria, have undergone training in India, master the subtleties of Indian dance art, and perform various styles. With their demonstration classes at the forum, they opened a window to the understanding of this exquisite but complex art, saturated with symbolism and heavily loaded with meaningful expressiveness. Their classes were attended by children from preschool to adults from a variety of backgrounds – academic and artistic.

Zlatko Paunov – a sculptor and art collector born in Tryavna, today an honorary citizen of the city, donated in 1993 to his hometown a personal collection of over 400 art objects from the East, including objects from India; in 2004 it was exhibited in the restored building of the historical old bath in the city, thus creating an unique for the Balkans “Museum of Asian and African Art” in Tryavna. He currently lives in the USA and is the author of monuments of Mahatma Gandhi, erected in the USA (San Francisco and Hawaii) and Japan. At the forum Zlatko Paunov was special guest of the Devam Foundation. He spoke on the love for Bulgaria and his inspirations from India.

The Bulgarian artist Doncho Donchev works with a wide range of materials and techniques. His works – inspired by science, created under the projects “Metamorphoses of Particles” and “Timeline of the Universe”, were presented in 2016 and

2018 at the world's largest elementary particle physics laboratory – CERN, Switzerland. He draws inspiration from the wisdom and symbolism of ancient culture too, and his project “Mythology” was showcased in 2015 at the National Museum of Liechtenstein. In February 2024, Donchev was the only Bulgarian artist invited to participate in the largest global exhibition of art from recycled materials in Doha, Qatar, where he presented eggshells created from paper, metal and wood waste works of his. At the forum at Sofia University, Doncho Donchev gave a presentation on “Recycling – Art Thread” and exhibited several of his latest paintings, including a portrait of Mahatma Gandhi.

The documentary „Mahatma Gandhi – the Vigour of Truth“ of Aleksandar Bogdanov includes interviews with Bulgarian artists who participated in the exhibition organised by the East-West Indological Foundation on the occasion of the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi.

The Rangoli decoration workshop, conducted by Dr Mona Kaushik in the foyer in front of the Aula, was joined by students from SU and guests to the forum.

Special guest at the closing of the forum was Mr Georgi Iliev, Mayor of Slatina municipal district in Sofia, who is a graduate of Delhi University, India. He shared about his time in India, and emphasised the importance of the cultural contacts in Bulgaria-India relations.

The forum was rounded up by Senior Assist. Prof. Dr Nikolay Yankov, Head of Indian Studies at SU, who stated in his words of thanks: “The forum fully lived up to its name. India’s soft power, like the shifting, shimmering images in a kaleidoscope, is a beautiful mosaic of languages, religions, philosophies, dances, films, cuisines and histories. India has reason to be proud of its heritage, but most of all, of its ability to constantly rethink and share it with the world”.

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