



## ARTICLE

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# Soft-power, culturalism and developing economies: the case of Global Ibsen

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**ABSTRACT** This paper on soft-power connected with culturalism *vis-à-vis* Henrik Ibsen, draws its essence from the term ‘soft power’ coined and defined by Joseph S Nye Jr. and read in contiguity with ‘culturalism’ that Arjun Appadurai connotes as “identity politics mobilised at the level of the nation-state”. On these terms, the present author perceives ‘soft power’ as a force that affects or is expected to affect not just few specially endowed individuals in any given society; rather as one that works upon the mindscapes of the commoner, or in the collective unconscious. The quintessential social critic that inheres Ibsen the playwright, is here looked upon as such a reservoir of soft-power, whose dramatic oeuvre and its subsequent global reception have ignited ideas of social reform and thus have become part of Norwegian culturalism and soft power. While the Norwegian Government has funded projects and encouraged institutional collaborations in this connection, individuals too have taken up vital roles in establishing intercultural links using Ibsen as their ambassador. At present Ibsen is part of cultural exchange between Norway and many developing countries of Asia and Africa. What happens to the targeted receivers of such soft power is a valid question and this paper explores soft power from the perspective of the third world marginalised subject position. Dwelling upon specific channels of Norwegian soft-power that have proven world-wide currency, and the indefatigable ways in which Ibsen has been a major tool in such soft diplomacy, this paper attempts to analyse how Ibsen the dramatist has eventually become a significant part of Norwegian culturalism as soft power whose outreach is aimed at the egalitarian ideal, hence imbued with enormous potential to function as a strong influence in intercultural affairs.

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## Introduction

Basically drawn from the concept of ‘soft power’ coined by Joseph S Nye Jr. who defines power as “the ability to influence the behaviour of others to get the outcome one wants” (Nye, 2004, p. 2), this paper aims to draw scholarly attention to the fact that Ibsenian textualities have by and large been used in Norwegian government’s foreign policy for its revelatory contexts of humanitarian perspectives and human rights. While most statist forces conceive of power in terms of hard power—that is, the power of force or coercion, Nye argues that today’s world needs soft power, which he defines as “... the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments” (p. 10). He claims that the origins of soft power lie in a country’s culture, political ideals and policies (p. 10). Therefore, when a country’s policies are seen as legitimate by others, its soft power and thereby, acceptance, are enhanced. For numerous reasons that have evolved in a globalised ‘one world’ order, the need today is ever more for soft power as opposed to all forms of coercive hard power. Factors like unipolarity in international polity, global capitalism, consumerist culture, debates over identity, nationality and nationalism, migrancy and exile, assimilations and ruptures, have cumulatively affected not just individuals but also national and global societies. Bracketed together, these have made hard power increasingly prone to redundancy, while soft power has emerged as a viable option by default.

## Theoretical framework

It might logically be questioned how and why the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen fits into such comprehension of soft power. Here one needs to relate with the essence of culturalism, of which a major author of any culture is an integral part. Florian Znaniecki comments in his book *Cultural Reality*: “Our whole world, without any exceptions, is permeated with culture” (Znaniecki, 1919, p. 16). Culturalism is indeed a better and more specific replacement for naturalism and idealism, which have the attendant perils of generalisation. Each individual perceives the world through her/his own cultural construct, and this does not *ipso facto* change by external forces. “Therefore to the savage his magical technique seems as successful as scientific technique seems to the modern engineer” (p. 17), opines Znaniecki, but at the same time he gives an account of historical development of culture that has perforce necessitated value and action. The savage would gradually learn to use scientific technique, given the fact that he experiences the machine in reality and eventually, is convinced of its value. The change that occurs in this cultural exchange between the modern engineer’s culture that inspires and influences the savage, and the savage’s culture that trusts and thereby legitimises the acceptance of the modern engineer’s culture indicates a trend of cultural evolution through which development occurs. Thus culturalism and soft power are two sides of the same coin. The problem with culture, as Appadurai writes, is that it has been viewed as “a matter of one or other kind of pastness” (Appadurai, 2004, p. 60), while development is generally seen in terms of the future. Importantly however, Appadurai admits that most approaches to culture “do not ignore the future” but they “smuggle it in indirectly, when they speak of norms, beliefs, and values as being central to cultures, conceived as specific and multiple designs of social life” (ibid, 60–61). Nye becomes important in this connection for three reasons, as he writes, (i) “Seduction is always more effective than coercion, and many values like democracy, human rights and individual opportunities are deeply seductive” (p. 10), (ii) “Power always depends on the context in which relationship exists” (p. 10), and (iii) a country’s culture, when it is attractive to others, becomes a part of the soft power (p. 11). Therefore, it is assumed

that culturalism as a driving force and soft power as its motivational agency work on an individual if they are cohesive.

One can identify three key dimensions in every serious understanding of culture identified by Appadurai, that go on to create the bases behind the acceptance of Ibsen as a valuable instrument of Norwegian soft power: “relationality (between norms, values, and beliefs); dissensus within some framework of consensus (especially in regard to the marginal, the poor, gender relations, and power relations more generally); and weak boundaries (perennially visible in process of migration, trade and warfare now writ large on globalising cultural traffic)” (Appadurai, 2004). Ibsen has been the strongest ambassador of Norway’s culture as he is a reservoir of norms and values that represent Norway to the world outside, where similar values and norms are either present, or the absence of which is strongly felt. Today Norway is one of those countries that top the humanitarian activities indexes, which in turn has given this country its distinctive identity. Gender equality, which is the strongest social and political agenda in Norway, is something that Ibsen advocated in his own country, and his play *A Doll’s House* spread across Europe and subsequently the whole world the message of women’s claim of equal rights. Environmental pollution and lack of democratic values in state polity—maladies against which Ibsen advocates, are also serious concerns in the global scene. These issues were being addressed through staging Ibsen in Norway and elsewhere and today Norway stands as on the top ranking countries that have achieved targets in eradicating such maladies.

The Indian statesman Shashi Tharoor rightly comments that, “Increasingly, countries are judged by the soft-power elements they project on to the global consciousness” (p. 282); and Norway, as Ibsen’s homeland, is regarded as a country with potential soft-power. Several conscious attempts to employ Ibsen as part of soft-power are evidenced since the inception of the practice of cultural diplomacy across the globe, all of which have contributed to create awareness on crucial issues like women’s emancipation, gender equity, capitalist unipolarity, globalisation, rise of religious fundamentalism, and the like. Interestingly, as Ibsen travel history evinces, he has been taken to those parts of the world that had preordained situations regarding the issues mentioned above, in which situations an author of his ilk was always in public demand, whether consciously voiced or sub-consciously missed. What matters in soft diplomacy is attracting people and affecting people’s opinions, and Ibsen as a pioneer of individual freedom and human rights easily becomes a seductive tool of influencing opinion to the extent of his thoughts being appropriated, as has been witnessed in the last two hundred years.

## Ibsenism as culturalism

Though Ibsen comes from one of the most developed economies of the world, he is so very unlike representations of first world popular culture like Hollywood films, MacDonald’s, Coca Cola, or such other icons that have gained heady popularity worldwide. As part of global mass culture these are in no way negligible, but the pervasive influence of Ibsen on humanitarian issues has a much deeper and far reaching consequences. He writes about social infrastructure, explores the limits of social boundary, interrogates social practices, and his characters revolt against inequalities and injustice in ways that cut across geographical limits to reach out to the marginalised in different spectrums of life. The contexts that lend themselves to the appropriation of Ibsen in different cultures are much more cogent, and the values he upholds embrace greater universal currency than the temporal attractions or coercions of globalisation the examples of which are

already given and which are in effect transitory. Ibsen works as a developing stimulus for the countries involved in any cultural exchange through him. Nye mentions Norway's supremacy in using soft power in economic aid or peacemaking. He writes that "in the past two decades Norway has taken a hand in peace talks in the Philippines, the Balkans, Colombia, Guatemala, Sri Lanka, and the Middle East. Norwegians say this grows out of their Lutheran missionary heritage, but at the same time the posture of peacemaker identifies Norway with values shared by other nations that enhance Norway's soft power" (Nye, 2004, p. 10)<sup>1</sup>. Ibsen could be mentioned with equal emphasis as he has become the pre-text of Norway's cultural aid programmes (with specific sociopolitical targets within their purview) in countries with developing economies.

The two directions of the globe that Ibsen's work has majorly travelled to—the western countries and the rest of the world, have had multiple social contexts but a definitive single line of socio-political achievements in view. Why Ibsen travelled and to what effect is clearly mentioned by Erika Fischer-Lichte in her 'Introduction' to *Global Ibsen*, where she writes that Ibsen conquered the theatres of Europe, North America, Australia and parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America by the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ibsen's plays created heated debates over aesthetic, cultural, social and political issues. Fischer-Lichte writes, "It is not by chance that the great demand for Ibsen's plays coincided with processes of modernisation taking place in these cultures – processes to which the plays contributed and in which they played an important role" (Fischer-Lichte, 2011, p. 1). In a recent study Narve Fulsås and Tore Rem, (Fulsås and Rem, 2018) have shown how Ibsen conquered the page and stage in Europe. In England especially after the publication of a few books (including Bernard Shaw's *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*) and *A Doll's House* performed at The Novelty theatre in 1889 with Janet Achurch as Nora, Ibsen had his breakthrough. While the books on Ibsen connected him with democracy, socialism, etc., the performance connected him with women's rights. Edmund Gosse, William Archer, Bernard Shaw were keen on establishing Ibsen as a social reformer in the 1920s while after a few years M. C. Bradbrook, Brian Westerdale Down, John Richard Northam and P.F.D. Tennant read Ibsen in the light of New Criticism—both groups of writers established Ibsen as one of the major dramatists of the English speaking world. Marvin Carlson's remarks resonate Fischer-Lichte, "It is surely not coincidental that the two periods of Ibsen's greatest popularity on the American stage, the opening years of the twentieth century and the 1960s and 1970s, were also the years of America's most active feminist movements (Fischer-Lichte, 2011, p. 42)." In this connection Frode Helland writes,

Ibsen's first international, or European, breakthrough was made possible with plays that had strong political topicality—*Pillars of Society* (1877) and *A Doll's House* (1879) influenced the political debate in major European countries and it is an interesting fact that these aspects are still strong in practice. Be it in Africa, Europe, the Americas or Asia, his plays are staged by artists who find them relevant here and now. This relevance and the concrete theatrical expression it leads to, however, can only be characterised as extremely diverse, in every aspect. (Helland, 2015, p. 5)

Jacqueline Martin writes how *A Doll's House* was received by the Australian audience in 1889 with Janet Achurch in the lead role and how the reception changed with the modes of Australian feminist movements after a hundred years, "as the situation for women in general has been questioned in Australia in the twentieth century, so too has *A Doll's House* found new relevance and been met with greater acceptance" (Martin, 2011, p. 61).

It is to be noted that Ibsen was part of theatre practice in these countries that were in no way financially dependent on Norway's support. In some Asian countries Ibsen travelled as precursor of a new theatre form, but simultaneously he was identified as a foreign playwright through whom critical social issues could be sorted out. For example, in China he became part of spoken drama, as well as part of the traditional opera forms and at the same time he was the most important and most discussed Western author in the 1920s and 1930s who was frequently used and adapted by major figures of the May 4th Movement. Chinese intellectuals like Lu Xun and Hu Shi regarded Ibsen as a figure they could employ to liberate China from its feudal heritage. They used Ibsen to promote democracy, human rights and women's liberation. Kwok-Kan Tam in his book *Ibsen in China: 1908–1997* has divided Ibsen's reception in China in four phases<sup>2</sup> and has shown how Ibsen continued to appeal to the Chinese readers and audience throughout the century. He connects Ibsen with Chinese literary revolution, May Fourth Movement, emergence of romanticism, wartime China, Chinese socialism and beyond. He writes:

From the beginning, the modern Chinese theatre was social and political theatre. Although there were no distinctively formed Ibsenite groups in China, there were dramatists, such as Hong Shen and Tian Han, who openly professed themselves "Chinese Ibsens." [...] In fact, one of the major reasons for introducing Ibsen to China was that the messages derived from his plays constituted a powerful attack on the conventional moral institutions in China. [...] Although in the late 1920s and early 1930s some Chinese critics called for a reconsideration of Ibsen from the perspective of art, still the general tendency was to moralise him, which, however was supported by the practical view that Ibsen's drama was useful for social reform in China. (Tam 2001, pp. 12–13)

Nie Zhenzhao adds to this by listing a number of Chinese scholars who have greatly influenced Ibsen Studies in China. He writes that Ibsen is one of those literary figures who "possess great influence on and attractions to Chinese intellectuals" (Zhenzhao, 2006, p. 26). According to him, since the 1980s Ibsen has earned "a new generation of Chinese readers, and become one of the most significant writers for scholars to study" (p. 26). Sheila Melvin rightly comments that Ibsen became a household name in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the creation of a new Chinese culture (Melvin, 2006, p. 15).

However, Ibsen's contribution to theatres in weaker economies has been even more significant. In African and Asian countries where theatre hardly gets government patronage, Ibsen created opportunities for theatre practitioners. Referring to the first Ibsen performance in Africa (of *A Doll's House* directed by Charles Charrington and Janet Achurch in the lead role) Helland writes that the history of Ibsen in Africa is connected to Western colonialism. He pointedly states,

The richer countries of the world use a small, but increasing, part of their wealth on so-called soft diplomacy or soft-power, often by supporting culture in poor countries. In the Norwegian case this means that a theatre can get much needed economic support to stage an Ibsen play. This is not in any way a practice that I am against or critical of in principle; I find it only fair and reasonable that Western countries should try to support cultural sectors in countries where they have contributed to produce the general poverty in question. But it has to be done in ways that do not add insult to injury, by being able to negotiate the specificities of place and local context. (Helland, 2016, p. 26)

Helland's apprehension and his suggestions are valid as most colonial Western cultures used hard power along with soft power in promoting their culture to the colonies. However, dissemination of Norwegian culture through Ibsen's texts did not happen through coercion; rather it was always connected with soft power. Most remarkably, in these weaker economies too, Ibsen did not remain a foreigner. His texts were always related to local issues and developmental programmes. In Bengal in colonial India the first production of *A Doll's House* happened to be the one directed by Charrington and Achruch in the lead role in 1891, but this neither had any immediate impact on the Bengali intelligentsia (Ahsanuzzaman, 2009, p. 70) nor was it in the theatres for a long time. According to Ahmed Ahsanuzzaman the Bengali intelligentsia discovered Ibsen only in the 1950s when "the key issues woven into the fabric of Ibsen's plays were also the issues that were changing the Bengali culture. It was this social reality that paved the way for the staging of Ibsen in Bengali theatre (Ahsanuzzaman, 2009, p. 70).

The same may have happened in Africa as there is no trace of any significant Ibsen play after Charrington's *A Doll's House*, till the newly formed independent states identified the issues connected with the processes of modernisation and welcomed Norwegian soft diplomacy to intervene amidst them. In Zimbabwe, for example, Ibsen became part of the New Horizon Theatre Company presided by Robert Mshengu Kavanagh (Robert McLaren) that treat environment issues, women and children's rights, future of Africa, etc. as central themes of its teamwork. They have hence received Norwegian financial assistance to produce two Ibsen plays.

In Bangladesh, the Centre for Asian Theatre arranged several international Ibsen conferences with the help of the Norwegian embassy in Dhaka since it commenced operations in 1997. This was a high time for radical questionings of and consequent changes in the status of women in Bangladesh. This was also a time for inclusion of Ibsen in the syllabi of most of the English departments of the existing public universities in the country, as shown elsewhere by the present author (Huq, 2009). In 2009 there was a huge theatre festival in which marginal theatre groups were given financial assistance to produce plays on sociopolitical issues. It is therefore evident that whenever Ibsen travelled to any part of the globe, there was either the woman question or the question of industrial pollution or bankrupt politics in public debate that gave the plays relevance.

According to Nye, the sources of a country's soft power rest primarily on three resources among which one is its culture (in places where it is attractive to others). Norwegian culture includes its prime literary resources, of which Ibsen is an integral part. On the other hand, Norway's political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad, according to Nye) include the universal humanitarian values of which Ibsen is a representative in infinite ways. Ibsen focused on, for example, "bourgeois family life and values, industrial pollution and corporate cover-up" (Fischer-Lichte, 2011, p. 1), democracy and people's rights, bankrupt political views and consequences, all of which are problems faced universally. When a country's culture "includes universal values and its policies promote values and interests that others share, it increases the probability of obtaining its desired outcomes because of the relationships of attraction and duty that it creates. Narrow values and parochial cultures are less likely to produce soft power" (Nye, 2004, p. 11). Therefore, Ibsen has become a major cultural resource and resonance for Norway, and has become part of Norwegian developmental goals in respect of human resource development on a global scale.

A discussion of strategic planning is undoubtedly necessary as "Converting resources into realised power in the sense of obtaining desired outcomes requires well-designed strategies and

skilful leadership" (Nye, 2004, p. 3). Ibsen is now an integral component of Norway's foreign policies, and this paper stresses upon the fact that Ibsen has, to a great extent, legitimised Norway's moral authority over developing countries (Nye, 2004, p. 3). The claim is strengthened by a few examples drawn from activities that have happened and are still happening across the globe.

The first example will be drawn from the scholarship schemes created for the Faculty of Humanities, University of Oslo for the overseas students of Centre for Ibsen Studies during the last years of the earlier millennium. Centre for Ibsen Studies was established in 1991 and started functioning in 1993. Opening up a postgraduate study and attracting university students to it is obviously part of farsighted human resource development plan of a country. In that respect, Ibsen Studies is obviously part of Norwegian human resource development planning, not just on a professional axis but also from the perspective of disseminating an ideology that propagates egalitarian values. Studying Ibsen is different from studying any other subject, because Ibsen promotes through implicational praxes certain values like gender equality, empowerment of women, ensuring the rights of common people, combating superstition and prejudices, critiquing bankruptcy politics that become transmittable through Ibsen Studies. Significantly, this area of connecting Ibsen with global issues became a feasible option for international students as it came to be offered in English. Moreover, deserving and meritorious scholars from developing countries have had ample scope of applying for scholarship schemes under Norwegian Government's foreign aid programmes like NORAD/NOMA/Quota<sup>3</sup> that are readily accessible. This way, academic exchange has been a proven means of extending soft power for Norway, wherein Ibsen becomes the vehicle of cultural interface.

The offering of Ibsen Studies as a discipline in itself at a time when gender awareness and women's empowerment was a burning issue in less developed and post-colonial countries has contributed its might to creating interest in Ibsen and enhancing his visibility in many parts of the third world. For example, many Bangladeshi universities included Ibsen in their syllabi in the 1990s, as argued by Sabiha Huq in her MPhil dissertation (Huq, 2009). It would be simplistic to look upon the simultaneous fact of Ibsen being taught in a third world country and inclusion of Ibsen Studies as a discipline in a Norwegian University as coincidental, for that is how ideas travel in the true spirit of the global. The connections are evident in the rising gender equality measures taken simultaneously in the developed and the developing countries, sharing of values and dictating of actions.

One may typically refer to the British Council or American Cultural Center, or even the Confucius Institute or the Goethe Institute which are, respectively, the Chinese and German cultural centres per se. The nomenclatures of these professional bodies are equivalent to the Ibsen Centre in that the institutions function as global centres for cultural and educational exchanges of the particular countries. The British Council, that claims to be the oldest cultural relations organisation, was started in 1934 and opened its first overseas office in 1938, just before the cessation of Britain's colony in undivided India. The organisation's history witnesses the fact that in the 1930s when the world was facing instability and extreme ideologies were raging across Europe, the British Government thought it wise to operate an organisation through which Britain's soft goals of foreign policy that were perforce replacing its colonial interests would continue to be transmitted outside the UK. In 1940 the organisation's Royal Charter set forth its mission of 'promoting a wider knowledge of [the UK] and the English language abroad and developing closer cultural relations between [the UK] and other countries' (British Council, 2018).

In India the organisation commenced its journey right after the independence of India in 1948. Whether this was in spirit a neocolonial continuation of the colonial spirit writ large in Macaulay's 'Minutes of Education'<sup>4</sup> is a proposition that can spark much debate; but it has with time, definitely contributed to the influence of English education that the colonial administrators began much before. Promotion of English learning programmes, as well as different cultural exchange programmes never let India or the other Commonwealth countries go off the cultural control of England over the years. Today the British Council not only promotes its own culture to the huge community in India, but also promotes advancement by creating opportunities for the young population to expand their knowledge and movement in terms of employment. The same has happened in Bangladesh and Pakistan, two other offshoots of the Partition of India by Britain's two-nation theory. At a deeper level, Britain has retained its cultural dominance in the sub-continent even years after its failure to hold the subcontinent under its political control, and this is unabated even after seven decades of partitioning it off. One needs to distinguish between the neocolonial aspect of the so-called social and moral uplift programs of developing nations and the true enhancement of human rights policies through such cultural dominance, in order to weigh and ensure the maximum privilege one can get out of it. Even if the British Council may be an evolved form of a colonial hangover, the Ibsen Centre can in its own right exist as an enhancer of the legacy of modernism. The British Council and the Goethe Institute were established by their respective governments but Ibsen Centre is not a governmental body. It was established by the University of Oslo; though it is fully financed by the Norwegian authorities it enjoys full autonomy when it comes to its priorities, which in effect increases soft power as Nye's argument goes. As a nation with a Lutheran heritage<sup>5</sup>, if the endorsement of the Norwegians' claim mentioned in Nye be a stated fact of policy, this can doubly enhance the country's soft power.

Ibsen Centre houses the secretariat of the International Ibsen committee, which arranges the International Ibsen Conferences. Such grand scale Ibsen Conferences date back to 1965 which took place in Oslo. Since then fourteen International Conferences have been held in different countries. Hundreds of participants from different cultures have come together at these conferences, and Ibsen has become a hub of causal connect for international cooperation and exchange of values. This is obviously an achievement on a global perspective. Nonetheless, where do these conferences take the academia from different countries is a valid question, as the researchers could gather more frequently had there been regional Ibsen sub-centres to follow up on the activities and demands of international Ibsen scholars.

Ibsen Centre also conceptualises and executes different international projects under its aegis. 'Ibsen between Cultures', 'Ibsen in Translation', 'Ibsen Stage'—are some such projects undertaken by the Centre's distinguished faculty and international communities are formed within the parameters of these projects. Sharing of values and collaboration between the developed and developing happens in the process, and it is obviously a contribution that bolsters diplomatic strategies by striving to foster cultural engagements. Though not on a massive scale, such projects on Ibsen have thus enriched Norwegian soft power, and have the potential to do much more.

We live in a world where exchange of values happen through international cooperation and a country may have policies regarding international or bilateral projects, which are part of its soft power. Norwegian Government has funded such projects through the Research Council of Norway. There have been quite a number of individual projects on Ibsen that were funded through the research council, the outcomes of which are innovative

doctoral dissertations from different universities of Norway. This Paper selects as samples only the larger projects that were provided to individuals and organisations of different countries, and have played their part in extending the diplomatic goals of Norway.

International Ibsen Festival, Ibsen Awards Programme and Nora's Sisters are some of the projects that Norwegian government has taken up over the years. International Ibsen Festival is an initiative of the National theatre and is carried out on corporate sponsorship, though remarkably enough, the major contribution for the 2006 Festival to commemorate Ibsen's death centenary came from the Ministry of Culture (Holledge et al., 2016, p. 96). Even today subsidies come through the annual budget of the theatre. Theatre groups from all over the world participate in the festivals. An invitation to the festival raises the status of the concerned theatre repertory regionally, as its touring increases after the participation in the festival (Holledge et al., 2016, p. 99).

Ibsen Awards Programme is also sponsored by Norwegian government and through the scholarships, projects on adaptation of Ibsen plays are funded. Young artists, theatre directors and translators are encouraged through the scheme. This is an effective mechanism to promote Norwegian culture via Ibsen. There have been several translations and performances of Ibsen in Norway and elsewhere in the world under this programme.

Nora's Sisters, a project of Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the Department for Culture, Public Diplomacy and Protocol is the most significant in terms of soft diplomacy. The project report justifies the title of the project on the following lines:

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has taken the initiative to a series of seminars, to be organised by Norwegian embassies abroad. The aim of the project is to use Ibsen's work as a starting point and source of inspiration for debates and discussions related to gender equality and gender roles in contemporary society in different countries and cultural contexts. Inspired by Nora, the main female character in Ibsen's play "The Doll's House", the project is called "Nora's Sisters". (Decision Brief, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c)

The project clearly mentions that Ibsen is the *raison d'être* for 'Nora's Sisters' and "Experience has shown that Ibsen is a good platform for promoting one of the five pillars of Norwegian foreign policy—namely gender equality" (Annual Report 2007, p. 4). Jonas Gahr Støre, Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Erik Solheim, Norwegian Minister of International Development in 2006 write in their joint foreword to the 'Nora's Sisters' brochure that Ibsen raised fundamental questions about human relationships and social conditions. The author never showed women and men how to lead their lives. "He proposed neither changes to government policy nor specific measures. As a result each new generation of women in every country, whether developed or developing, can consider the questions Ibsen raises in their own context" (Nora's Sisters Brochure, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, pp. 6–7). They also write that Norwegian foreign policy and development cooperation focus on prompting gender equality, and they believed that Ibsen's plays can play an important part in the government's efforts through the issues they raise. They finally expressed their hope that through the 'Nora's Sisters' seminars there will be an opportunity to raise public awareness.

Hanna Andrea Kraugerud argues whether Ibsen is really the best tool for promoting democracy, justice and women's rights. She suggests that it would be better to leave such sociopolitical issues on the human rights organisations. But in the same paper she argues that if Ibsen had to be relevant in countries like

Norway, where divorce is readily available and women participate in the labour market, there must be new readings of Ibsen. She rejects the idea of “consolidating an Ibsenian feminism which left the original play long ago, and is now living its own politically correct life in a stereotyped information brochure” (Nora’s Sisters Brochure, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, p. 13). Thereby, she accepts that there has been a gradual change in the Norwegian way of life since Ibsen’s days and perhaps the Norwegians have attained the humanitarian standards that Ibsen demanded. According to her, if the countries with lower developmental indices had to achieve the same standards, Ibsen should be read and no innovation should be asked for to understand him. From a South Asian subject position, the present author disagrees with this view in some respects, for a financially dependent ‘Nora’ in Bangladesh, India or Pakistan still cannot possibly walk out of the house and marriage even though one has been familiarised with Ibsen. For example, the noted Bengali thespian Sambhu Mitra adapted *A Doll’s House* as *Putul Khela* in Kolkata where he made Bulu, the Bengali counterpart of Nora, leave her husband. The production was staged in Kolkata theatres for more than thirty years with mixed volatile responses, but as oppression of wives has stopped neither in West Bengal nor in India at large, it is evident that the play has not been able to effect revolutionary social change. Yet ends do not always justify the means, and ‘ends’ in themselves are often qualified. The questioning of the pervasive ground realities of patriarchy is always work in progress; hence Ibsen remains a dramatist whose works should be made known for creating awareness against multi-pronged ills of society.

Nora’s Sisters held seminars in New York, the USA (2006), Oslo, Norway (2006), Cairo, Egypt (2006), Korea, Mozambique, Malawi, Tel Aviv, Israel (2007), Spain, Hungary, Russia, Vietnam, Brazil, New Delhi and Pune, India (2006 and 2008), Beijing, China (2007), Ramallah, Palestine (2008) and France (2012). Wherever it was arranged, the focus was on international development through disseminating the ideologies of Ibsen.

On 2nd November 2006, in New Delhi, HRH Norwegian Crown Prince Haakon commented at the opening seminar of Nora’s Sisters that Nora’s moral questions transcend gender and those are asked every day in the real world. He believed that the seminar would create an opportunity to discuss Ibsen in the context of India’s long and varied history and multicultural society, and would initiate debates. One may ask if it is possible to read Ibsen in India where sometimes the basic notion of gender equality is missing on both sides of the divide. To extend the cue from Mitra’s adaptation mentioned earlier, it is a matter of social concern that on the one hand India does not take legal cognisance of marital rape; on the other, Indian Penal Codes 498 and 498A<sup>6</sup> remain heavily skewed and run the risk of imprisoning a husband on charges leveled but yet to be proven. As such, cultural connections made through such performances of Ibsen can induce much necessary thought in terms of proactive action towards balanced legislations. As the Crown Prince anticipated, readings and re-readings of Ibsen could go a long way in stirring healthy debates, through which many issues could be discussed in the public domain. Thus Ibsen may be employed to have some effect on the large Indian society as regards moral values and healthier understandings of gender equations.

The following year Nora’s Sisters seminar was arranged at Peking University which was popularly called a seminar on women’s rights, and the then Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg addressed women’s education as a development indicator. For all the brouhaha surrounding this Asian giant economy, Chinese society still suffers from many social ills, and as was evident through the proceedings of the seminar (Nora’s Sisters, 2007), Ibsen could initiate debates and challenges in a pertinent context.

In 2008 the seminar was arranged in Ramallah and the Norwegian MP, Ms. Inga Marte Thorkildsen in her speech focused on ‘Women in Politics in Norway’ and related to her personal experience of serving a second term in Parliament at the age of thirty one. Relevant parts of her delivery are excerpted here for enunciation:

I would like to start by saying a little bit about the current situation in Palestine. As a Norwegian, born into freedom and wealth, it feels enormously important to come here. More than ever, the outside world needs to see with its own eyes what you experience as a consequence of the occupation. It’s upsetting and I wish the international community would respond in a different way than they do now. [...] And I really hope that women and youth will be allowed to take important positions in the political and civil system, because true democracy comes from representation of all parts of a society.

[...] It fills me with pride to be part of a global movement for women’s rights. It’s really special to know that at the same time as Norwegian women and men celebrate and demonstrate on this very day, people in Palestine do the same. And in different parts of the world, millions of people engage in a world-wide struggle for women’s human rights.

[...] We must fight for the right to be seen as human beings, not as dolls without intellectual capacity, subjectivity and freedom of choice. Nora’s sisters must unite. (Nora’s Sisters, 2008)

The Norwegian MP’s emotional reaction to the backward position of the Palestinian women shows how Ibsen has enormous potential to produce soft power. Holledge, et al. write:

Even though it was never stated explicitly in the policy documents relating to Nora’s Sisters, over half of the seminars took place in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), among them significant sites of recent violent conflict: Palestine, Banda Aceh, and Uganda. The format of the seminars placed Norway as the country not only asking the questions but also living the answers. Norway was represented as a legislative utopia in the fight for gender equality. (Holledge, et al. 2016, p. 102)

Ibsen as part of Norway’s soft power is, therefore, irresistible, if seen from this doubly marginalised women’s perspective. However, the fact is that Ibsen never remained imprisoned in the moral utopias of a feminist literary or theatre tradition. His global outreach has happened in numerous formats, the effects of which defy practical quantifiability.

Another project that has vital importance in this discussion is ‘Ibsen between Cultures’. Led by Professor Frode Helland of the Centre for Ibsen Studies and comprised of a group of international scholars, its goal was to “reach an understanding of Ibsen’s function as a global dramatist. As the ‘Project Description’ envisaged, the focus therefore was on understanding how an Ibsen play was evaluated, how the value of the plays showed alterity, constantly being shifted, transferred and appropriated when localised in new cultural contexts. The project offered Doctoral positions to two international students; and the advertisement mentioned the University of Oslo’s goal of recruiting more women to academic positions, and thereby encouraged women to apply. Furthermore, the University of Oslo also has had a goal of recruiting more immigrants in academic positions, and immigrants too were encouraged to apply. It has hence been on record that hundred percent of the project’s doctoral positions were given to non-Norwegians. This is an extraordinary use of

Ibsen within culturalism and beyond. With an intention to scrutinise “the part played by Norwegian authorities and Norwegian policies in the dissemination of Ibsen throughout the world” (Helland, 2016, p. 19) as “Norwegian authorities promote Ibsen as part of their ‘soft diplomacy’” (Helland, 2016, p. 19). This way the project itself played a pivotal role in promoting Norwegian ‘soft power’. American, Australian, Chinese, Indian, Bangladeshi scholars and theatre practitioners were involved in the project and thus it was a great site for international cooperation that pervaded levels of economies and cultures. The dissertations produced by the researchers appointed in the project (one Bangladeshi male and one Chinese female), keeping theatre practices as their key points, discussed how Ibsen became an agent of women’s liberation in India and China, respectively. The far reaching effect of this project is that these researchers are working at their respective work places where the dissemination of their research is producing far reaching influences on their students. For example, Ahmed Ahsanuzzaman, the Bangladeshi researcher who teaches at Khulna University in Bangladesh, has supervised a number of female students who acknowledge in their theses that their outlooks have been groomed through the Ibsen’s texts and they have inculcated to a large extent the faculty of independent thinking.

‘Ibsen in Translation’ is another project that was initiated by Frode Helland, funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Norway, NORLA, and the Centre for Ibsen Studies. The project which has been completed lately has produced a total of 96 translations. It is remarkable that the translators are all women except one, which is obviously a key indicator of the project’s policy regarding the gender perspective. The key area to watch out for once this project culminates is how revelatory each Ibsen text turns out to be when simultaneously viewed in different cultures. Such cultural negotiations in real time using Ibsen as a global paradigm are indeed a unique venture of soft power. It can be expected that these translations will engage in a dialogue with their readers and will share the idealism and political vision that Ibsen produced in these plays, with each having their own ‘glocal’ contexts ingrained in the emergent texts.

Pursuant to the fall of the older ideologies like tolerant nationalism and Marxism, the world has become prey to fundamentalism and fascism. Uneven globalisation has caused an imbalance of military and political power and there is a constant threat of rising terrorism. Ibsen, it is held, can have a role to play in the present scenario. The example of India can again be given here. Beni Prasad informs us that from 1928 onwards, the Russian five-year plans attracted much attention and received warm approval in India:

The plans seemed to point the right way to the liquidation of poverty and the attainment of an up-to-date economy. The economic depression which began in 1929 hit India hard, turned the mind to fundamental reorganisation, and enhanced the admiration for Russia, which alone was untouched by the depression and which alone had abolished unemployment. (Prasad, 1944, p. 51)

It was so because of Mahatma Gandhi’s enormous sympathy with and understanding of the peasant masses that constitutes almost ninety percent of the Indian population. But since the 1980s after the fall of the Soviet bloc and the rise of neo-liberal economy in India, there has been a paradigm shift in political ideologies as well. Religious fundamentalism grew in India and riots took place in many places of the country whose secular fabric has always been hailed. Rustom Bharucha adapted Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt* in 1995 to show how Ibsen may constitute an ideological framework for the distracted Indian nation (Huq, 2014). The event of the demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya in 1992 was his focus. As democratic ideals cannot be injected from outside, Bharucha had

to Indianise Ibsen. He staged the play in Mysore, a city that is away from the capital and had witnessed important political upheavals over centuries. He tried to achieve two things: to show that Indian states are to be given equal attention to resist the cultural hegemony of the centre. On the other hand, he wanted the audience to feel that Indian cultural identity was being challenged by the neoliberal economy and globalisation.

Another significant individual effort in this regard is that of Kamaluddin Nilu, a theatre director from Bangladesh. He staged several major Ibsen plays in Bangladesh, and each time he produced a play, he could connect it with the contemporary development situation in the country. For example, he produced *Ghosts* and *A Doll’s House*, respectively, in 1996 and in 2001 when there were heated debates regarding gender equality (Huq, 2009). Nilu produced *Brand* in 2004 when religious fundamentalism was strongly visible in the country (Ahsanuzzaman, 2009). In 2000 Nilu produced *Peer Gynt* that had the much vaunted millennium development goals at its background (Huq, 2014).

However, the question is whether efforts of such individual nature can make substantial inroads towards addressing local cultures in societies where basic standards of living are yet often compromised. There is actually no scale to measure the impact of soft power whether on vertical or on horizontal planes. However, it is evidenced through these events that some individuals are intimately connected with spreading Ibsen as a liberator even in the age of mindless globalisation, and Bharucha of course is one of them. It also evidences that Ibsen’s success lies as much in his being used as Norway’s “soft power” as in the recipient countries’ desire for “cultural internationalisation” in which individuals play their roles. This Paper thus comes also with a clarion call for more of united efforts to promote Ibsenian ideologies throughout the subcontinent, in order to achieve visible effects. An extension of the Centre for Ibsen Studies could be a possible agency for promoting such humanitarian values both from academic and activist perspectives across the region.

Ibsen has been a successful dramatist all over the world for two kinds of interpretation, according to Kwok-Kan Tam— Marxist-socialist and aesthetic-formalist (Tam, 2001). For these two interpretations Ibsen became popular in both the East and West. Tam writes:

It is true that Ibsen became both popular and controversial in his life time mainly for the disputes he raised in his plays. However, as society changed and the political and social issues—such as women’s rights, freedom of speech, syphilis, and water pollution—depicted in Ibsen’s plays were no longer as acute as they previously were, Ibsen’s social ideas and themes gradually lost their explosive appeal to the audience. (Tam, 2001, p. 2)

However, with the emergence of New Criticism technical, innovations in drama by Ibsen have made the world rediscover Ibsen, and today he is “mainly a dramatist, not a social critic” (Tam, 2001, p. 3). Nonetheless, it does not mean that Ibsen’s sociopolitical appeal is lost once and for all, as new interpretations of his plays along the political lines that are arriving in the world theatre scene as is evidenced in the case of New Horizon Theatre Company in Zimbabwe. The global promotion of Ibsen was peaked in 2006 in relation to the centennial commemoration of Ibsen’s death, and it ignited new ways of receiving Ibsen’s message by different audiences. The catering of these receptions was done by the Centre for Ibsen Studies. Unfortunately, early in 2018 a move was afoot to disband the Centre for Ibsen Studies, the first step towards this end being the curtailment of its annual budget. Through e-mails, letters and open comments in the media, citizens not only from Norway but also from many Asian and African countries who were groomed culturally and honed

professionally at the Centre, responded immediately in protest. While such responsive activism at preserving what many perceive as a centre of global humanitarian ideology came as a relief, the very move did leave deeper questions lurking in the mind. As a negative possibility it hit hard not only as an act of self-effacement of what is broadly perceived as a Norwegian cultural identity, but pervasively as a tangible threat to the phenomenal and ever-relevant Ibsen scholarship across continents. Such emotive response both from the alumni of the Centre and of general believers in the cult of Ibsenism can be rationalised if one perceives the implications of Ibsen studies on developing/under developed economies with regard to their societal mindsets and ever widening contours of cultural matrices.

### Conclusion

This paper has tried to register the Norwegian efforts to use Ibsen as part of soft diplomacy and the reception of such efforts in target countries. Ibsen as a dramatist enjoys great influence outside of Norway and his image has been used in ideological assimilation of the developed and the developing. Tam's analysis of the "complex relations in the politics of reception" (Tam, 2001, p. 3) of Ibsen in China has been observed to evaluate how and why Ibsen has the potential to create 'the velvet hegemon' (Nye, 2003, p. 74). It is evidenced that Ibsen's original ideas were the first and foremost reasons for people's interest in him that have made him one of the most successful political reformers of our time. Conversely, the cultural and social contexts of the receiving cultures made them respond differently to his plays. There have been two distinctively different streams of Ibsen reception since the 1920s: one view aestheticised Ibsen and the other politicised him. Both the Marxist-socialist and the aesthetic-formalist views made Ibsen an adorable dramatist among his readers and audiences in the West (representing Western Europe and North America) and Soviet Russia. Edmund Gosse, William Archer, James Huneker and Bernard Shaw treated Ibsen as a social reformer who upheld ideas such as iconoclasm, individualism, and feminism. Even before the existence of the Centre for Ibsen Studies there were such active individuals who held a high regard for Ibsen's political values such as democracy and human rights. At present some of the issues have lost their currency, especially in the developed world. Yet, there are countries where issues such as democracy, human and gender rights are burning, for which Ibsen's political views are of great importance. On the other hand, there are perhaps even more individuals in today's theatre world who hold Ibsen's dramaturgy high on their list of priorities. The UK has been the main transmitter of Ibsen through the English translations of his plays and as it seems from the existing documents, as He Chengzou comments rightly that Ibsen had a larger impact on China than anywhere else in the world (Melvin, 2006, p. 15). Today the non-government agencies, as well as individual scholars are playing significant roles in promoting Ibsen.

It is to be noted that while some developing and under-developed countries in Asia and Africa are beneficiaries of Ibsen as Norwegian soft power, many opt to remain outside of it. What makes them resistant to Ibsen studies can be a new issue for further research. What impact Ibsen has created or can create in the global capitalist world is yet another problem to deal with. Despite these it is to be acknowledged that The Centre for Ibsen Studies has been a veritable platform for grassroots level networking among such academicians and theatre practitioners, for which its destiny and ambits of functioning as a hub of Norwegian cultural exchange and soft power should remain beyond question. Rather, it is the need of the hour to expand its physical existence beyond Norwegian boundaries, and to initiate diplomatic-academic channels through which this country's

national/cultural heritage can expand through regional sub-centres to assume more proactive roles in 'other' worlds where Ibsenism continues to unfurl newer and necessary meanings.

### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this paper.

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### Notes

- 1 Founded in 1891 at Bergen as Det Norske Lutherske Kinamisjonsforbund (the Norwegian Lutheran Federation for Mission in China) and subsequently headquartered at Oslo since 1913, it is a cluster of independent organisations within the Lutheran Church of Norway. It is not so much its traditional and conservative work within Norway that is the focus in this paper; the present author rather perceives its overseas focus that combines traditional missionary activities with an onus on developmental projects that directly pertain to the augmenting of human resources. Prior to the Communist take-over of China in 1949, the Lutheran Mission had worked for over sixty years during which time it commissioned about 240 missionaries as reported on its official website. Subsequently, it has had a large presence in Ethiopia, Tanzania, Hongkong, Taiwan, and Japan. It later spread also to Peru, Bolivia, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Mali, and Mongolia. Such missions included the setting up of educational institutions, vocational training centres, along with theological seminaries – in other words, the onus was on community development factoring in local realities. This makes the Lutheran heritage distinctly different from British colonial pursuits.
- 2 1908–1927, 1928–1948, 1949–1976, 1977–present (2001, p. 12).
- 3 The Quota programme for the underdeveloped and developing countries were discontinued from the academic year 2016–2017.
- 4 Macaulay's Minute of 1835: In view of the raging controversies between the Orientalists and the Anglicists in 19th century colonial India over the aims of British educational policy, the type of education to be imparted, the medium thereof et al., Thomas Babington Macaulay's Minute on Education, written on 2nd February 1835 and promulgated by Lord William Bentinck in March 1835, has always been of pivotal importance. Macaulay was convinced that the subjects needed to be 'educated' and even more convinced that no Eastern language would suffice to do that; hence it had to be English, which in his words "...stands preeminent even among the languages of the West". Not just this, he further stated, "In India, English is the language spoken by the ruling class. It is the language spoken by the higher class of natives at the seats of Government. It is likely to become the language of commerce throughout the seas of the East..." While the pragmatic content of Macaulay's Minutes cannot be disputed, there is definitely much to debate from a culturalist standpoint as far as the determinate suppression of indigenous languages is concerned. Source: <http://home.iitk.ac.in/~hcverma/Article/Macaulay-Minutes.pdf>.
- 5 This argument stands on Nye's account even though Norwegian scholars do not support the statement.
- 6 It is an undeniable fact that gender imbalance amounting to persecution of women in different spheres of life remains an abiding problem in South Asian societies and amounts in some degree even to a subaltern status by way of internal colonisation by patriarchy. That said, it is however worthwhile in an age of Masculinity Studies to cast a look at Articles 498 and 498A of the Indian Penal Code. While the former considers only men as being guilty of adultery and hence liable to prosecution; the latter, in itself a law to ensure safety of women in their matrimonial homes, has virtually proven itself draconian in that it made for arrests simply on the basis of complaints filed by 'affected' women. It is on record that the Supreme Court of India has voiced concerns over such uncalled for arrests, and has had to take measures against pre-arrest and anticipatory bail provisions. Drives to reduce gender disparity and ensure a more egalitarian inclusive society must take cognisance of both sides of the coin. Source: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/supreme-court-takes-note-of-misuse-of-section-498a-makes-it-bailable/articleshow/65805285.cms>.

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