

Indian Cinema as an Instrument of India's Soft Power: Cultural Diplomacy, Social Influence and Global Perceptions

Sidhant Sharma¹, Dr Nandini Sahay², Dr Reena Marwah³

ABSTRACT

Soft power, a concept pioneered by political scientist Joseph Nye, encapsulates a nation's ability to sway others through its culture, values, and ideology (Nye, 2004). The emergence of soft power globally has played a key role in international engagement. It can influence perceptions and directly impact culture, values and ideas. India possesses a rich civilizational heritage that contributes significantly to its soft power resources, among which Indian Cinema occupies a prominent position. This paper examines the role of Indian Cinema as an important tool of India's soft power and analyses its contribution to cultural diplomacy, global image-building and cross-cultural understanding. The study adopts a qualitative research design based on the thematic analysis of several secondary sources, including academic literature, policy documents and also provides a deep interpretation of selected Indian films. Indian Cinema has played a major role in the promotion of Indian culture globally. This global reach has helped in the portrayal of several social themes such as gender equality, education, family values and social inclusion. The study further argues that cinema can serve as an effective complement to conventional diplomacy by enhancing cultural exchange and fostering international goodwill. Finally, the paper concludes that Indian Cinema acts as a

1. Sidhant Sharma, PhD Research Scholar, Amity Institute of Social Sciences, Amity University Noida, - sidhant.sharma.pgt@gmail.com
2. Dr Nandini Sahay, Assistant Professor - III, Amity Institute of Social Sciences, Amity University, Noida- nsahay4@amity.edu
3. Prof. Reena Marwah, Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi, rmarwah@jmc.du.ac.in

vital component of India's soft power apparatus. Therefore, Indian cinema should be deeply integrated into India's broader cultural diplomacy and international engagement strategies.

Keywords: Soft Power, Bollywood, Revenue, Foreign Policy, Culture, Culture Diplomacy, Globalization, Social Change, Cultural Influence

INTRODUCTION

In today's world, culture has emerged as a significant instrument in international relations and global engagement. While nations rely on military and economic realities, they are also dependent on cultural appeal, public diplomacy, and social influence to enhance their international standing. This phenomenon is commonly understood through the concept of soft power (Nye, 1990), which he defined as the ability of a country to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or force.

Soft Power = Attraction + Culture + Values + Diplomacy

Cultural Diplomacy and Popular Culture

Cultural diplomacy refers to the exchange and promotion of cultural ideas, traditions and values to foster international cooperation and mutual understanding. Mark (2009) describes cultural diplomacy as an important mechanism through which states can create positive perceptions and establish long-term relationships with foreign populations. Cultural diplomacy focuses on people-to-people interactions and often produces lasting social and cultural impact.

Popular culture has been one of the most influential components of cultural diplomacy. Scholars argue that films, television programmes, music and digital media possess the ability to transcend political boundaries and communicate national narratives to global audiences (Arndt, 2005). Hollywood's role in promoting American values during and after the Cold War is often cited as an example of cinema functioning as a soft power instrument.

India has a huge advantage in terms of soft power as it has a rich civilizational heritage, diversity, traditions, etc. Over time, India has enhanced the use of its cultural resources, but still, it is unable to garner its huge potential. Some of the major cultural Indian resources include yoga, ayurveda, arts, and Indian cinema (Bollywood). Indian cinema has emerged as one of the most influential instruments of cultural representation globally.

Indian cinema, which is popularly referred to as Bollywood, has developed into a major cultural phenomenon with audiences in Asia, Africa, Europe, North America, the Middle East, Australia and many more places.

Bollywood is not a domestic industry anymore, but has emerged as an important global industry. There are several narratives that are portrayed through Indian cinema, some of these narratives include social values, identity, migration and cultural traditions. Indian movies communicate images of Indian society to diverse audiences worldwide. Films such as *Lagaan*, *Dangal*, *PK*, *Swades*, etc. have gained global recognition. A major competitor of Indian cinema is Hollywood. It is important to examine the role of Hollywood globally to understand the importance of Bollywood.

Role of Hollywood During the Cold War

During the Cold War, Hollywood played a significant role in assisting the United States in winning the ongoing ideological battle against Communism. With the use of Hollywood, the United States was able to spread the U.S values like liberalism, and capitalism across the globe. This played a major role in making the United States of America, the most advanced nation worldwide for almost half a decade. The concept of soft power has been further refined by Nye to focus on three sources of soft power – a country's culture, political values and foreign policy. (Kumar, 2023)

This study examines the role of Indian cinema as an instrument of India's soft power. The specific objectives are as follows:

To analyse and examine the contribution of Indian cinema in promoting cross-cultural diplomacy and international image-building.

To evaluate the influence of Indian cinema in promoting cross-cultural understanding and diaspora engagement.

To explore how Indian cinema addresses social issues such as gender equality, education, social inclusion.

To identify the challenges that are associated with using Indian cinema as a major soft power tool for India.

India's Historic Use of Soft Power

India's growing economic and political power is leading to global appreciation of its soft power. It includes its mass media, celebratory religiosity (Yoga and Ayurveda), and popular culture. Despite being to home to 40 per cent

of the world's poorest people, India was the world's largest economy in 2015 on the basis of purchasing-power parity, behind the United States and China. India's civilisation is around 5000 years old, providing it a cultural edge over other global civilisations. India's cultural civilisation encompasses religion, philosophy, arts, architecture, language, literature, trade and travel. India is also the origin of four of the world's major religions and offers a unique religious discourse having coexisted with every major faith. The spread of Hinduism and Buddhism across East and Southeast Asia during the early centuries of the Christian era was the primary means of India's cultural influence in the region.

Soft Power Resource	Global Influence Area
Yoga	Cultural Diplomacy
Ayurveda	Health and Wellness
Indian Cuisine	Cultural Exchange
Democracy	Political Values
Diaspora	Global Engagement
Indian Cinema	Cultural Diplomacy and Entertainment

Indian history has provided numerous religions to the world such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. Some of the earliest Christian communities were established in South India and India is home to the world's second largest Muslim population after Indonesia. The Indo-Islamic culture in India is known for its classical music, poetry and cuisine and has played a significant role in the development of Indian cinema.

Indian cinema has often been successful in creating a global audience and it has also shaped global perceptions of India. It has also helped break down cultural barriers and promote cross-cultural understanding. The Indian film industry has achieved this through the use of numerous universal themes that are relatable to global audience such as romance, family, friendship, combined with traditional Indian cultural elements.

Existing literature has extensively examined soft power as a foreign policy instrument but there has been limited scholarly attention to the understanding of Bollywood as a soft power resource. The research paper seeks to address this issue by examining the role of Bollywood in shaping India's soft power capabilities.

Component	Description	Indian Example
Culture	Traditions and Values	Bollywood, Yoga, Classical Arts
Political Values	Governance Principles	Democracy, Constitutional Values
Foreign Policy	International Goodwill and Diplomacy	Vaccine Diplomacy, Global South Leadership

Table- Major Components of Soft Power

Role of Indian Cinema- Bollywood's Influence

Indian cinema rightly fits in the cultural category of soft power. It also represents the values, traditions and practices that exist and change in society. Indian cinema has been a significant source of cultural export. There have been several movies that have gained international recognition such as Mother India, Slumdog Millionaire, PK, Dangal and so on. These movies have garnered international attention and have won several awards across different categories. Indian movies are popular not only in China but also in several countries such as Nigeria, Afghanistan, Australia, New Zealand, U.S. etc. India's former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh recognised the role of Indian cinema in forging its soft power resource. While giving a speech, Manmohan stated, 'Soft power in India in some ways can be a vital instrument of foreign policy. Cultural relations, India's film industry- Bollywood- I find wherever I go in the Middle East, in Africa – people talk about Indian films. So that is a way of influencing the world about the growing importance of India. Soft Power is equally important in the new world of diplomacy. This statement was made in 2008, and since then, the film-making scene in India has gone several changes. The huge success of South Indian films such as R.R.R, Vikram, Bahubali, K.G.F and so on. This success of Indian cinema has not only brought huge revenue but also enhanced India's soft power reach on the global platform.

Films produced in India (2024)- Annually	Approximately 2000+ films
Countries where Indian films are viewed	70+ countries
Value of India's Media and Entertainment Sector (2024)	2.5 trillion rupees

Film Industry Revenue (2024)	Approximately 187 billion rupees
Major Overseas Markets	USA, UAE, UK, Australia, China, Canada

Soft Power and Digital Revolution

Due to the digital revolution, India has undergone a major transformation in the production and distribution of its cultural products. Media in India are booming, with a huge rise in newspaper circulation and a large number of dedicated television news channels and the world's largest film industry. India's growing global status and its history of pursuing a non-aligned foreign policy have created an opportunity for it to participate in global governance structures which were previously dominated by the US-led Western alliance.

India has the potential to take up a significant leadership role. It has effectively articulated a Southern perspective on global affairs through its presence in the Group of 77 developing nations and the G-20 nations. India can emerge as a great Southern leader and attain leadership among the Southern nations.

Film	Year	Soft Power Theme	Global Impact
Lagaan	2001	Colonial Resistance and National Identity	Oscar Nomination- Increased Global Visibility
Swades	2004	Rural Development and Nationalism	Popular among Diaspora Audiences
PK	2014	Social criticism and religious discourse	International Commercial Success
Dangal	2016	Women Empowerment and Sports	Massive Success in China

Hollywood to Bollywood

The United States' soft power is closely linked to its hard power, which is manifested in its economic, political and military might, including a large defence budget and numerous military basis across the globe. Hollywood remains one of the major soft power reserves for the United States of America.

According to Nye "The American way of life is promoted globally through its cultural and technological export and US culture has greater global reach than any other. India as a booming economy of the world, is providing a

tough competition to US culture and influence. Indian cinema has become a significant example of global entertainment from outside the Western world, with a 3.5 billion industry and audiences in over 70 countries. Indian cinema is now the world's largest film factory in terms of production and viewership, with more people buying tickets for Indian films than Hollywood films. The explosion of television channels in India has given a massive boost to the movie industry, with the emergence of all-round global coverage.

Indian cinema holds the distinction of producing the highest number of films worldwide each year. The term Indian Cinema is a mixture of 'Bombay' and 'Hollywood', underscoring its geographical and thematic connection to the American film industry. It is now not only an economic engine but also a global cultural powerhouse. Bollywood has increasingly contributed to India's soft power and diplomatic outreach (Press Xpress, 2023). It has now become a cultural juggernaut that etches itself into the collective consciousness. In the making of Indian films, Indian filmmakers articulate their values, visions and ethos, inviting viewers into a shared collective experience. Consequently, Indian cinema is a wellspring of soft power, a force that India cannot afford to ignore or underestimate. It functions as a mirror that provides a way to assess the intricacies of the Indian way of life.

Soft Power, articulated by Harvard scholar Joseph Nye in the 1980s, refers to a nation's skill in shaping global perceptions through non-coercive means, prioritizing charm and persuasion over the economic incentives. It relies on the ability to influence the preferences of others through cultural, ideological and political appeal, leading to a positive international image and widespread goodwill. In today's world marked by limitations of military and technological strength and a global pursuit of peace and unity, soft power emerges as a formidable force capable of knitting nations together in a harmonious new world order rooted in shared human experiences.

The emergence of a world order through soft power can open new global avenues for countries. It can also open the economies and can result in the creation of a worldwide culture, which can also lead to the formation of a world citizenship. Cultural phenomena like Indian cinema can create a cult and can emerge as a beneficial factor for diplomacy and politics.

The industry of Indian cinema is a testament to India's soft power (EcoSoc SRCC, 2023). The roots of Indian cinema can be traced back to "Raja Harishchandra" in 1913. From the talkies of the 1920s to the golden era of

the 1950s, marked by cinematic luminaries like Raj Kapoor and Guru Datt, Indian cinema not only produced artistic masterpieces like “Shree 420” and “Do Bigha Zameen” but also ushered in a transformative era personified by Amitabh Bachchan’s Angry Man Archetype, showcased in films like “Zanjeer” and “Deewar”. This archetype resonated not only with Indian audiences but also captivated those in neighbouring South Asian nations like Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh thus making Amitabh Bachchan an overnight star due to the shared collectivistic cultural identities among the diaspora as well as similar socio-political situations and aspirations of people.

Bollywood’s global rise gained substantial momentum in the post-Cold War era, particularly spurred by the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1991. This pivotal moment opened up a promising market for Indian films in the former Soviet republics. While Indian cinema had already found favour in the Soviet Union since the 1950s, the dissolution of the USSR expanded their influence to nations such as Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Beyond more entertainment, Indian films struck a chord with the post-Soviet generation, playing a significant role in fostering Indo-Russian relations. Icons like Amitabh Bachchan and Raj Kapoor became household names, and Hindi songs became a cultural phenomenon. This lasting impact continues to shape and strengthen ties between India and post-Soviet Russia. During the period from 1954 to 1991, the Soviet Union imported over 200 Indian films, surpassing the number from the United States, which stood over 200 Indian films, surpassing the number from the United States, which stood at 41. Notably, ‘Disco Dancer’ (1982), a Indian film depicting a street performer’s journey to fame, fortune and love after winning an

A pivotal phase in Indian cinema history unfolded with the arrival of filmmakers like Yash Chopra and Manmohan Desai on the scene, introducing escapist cinema. This marked a shift towards unjudgmental depictions of love, romance, and sexuality, embracing Westernisation. Targeting young urban audiences and the diaspora aspiring to a Westernised image of India, these films portrayed a dynamic and cosmopolitan country. Bollywood’s vision extended beyond domestic audiences, recognising a lucrative international market in NRIs and the South Asian diaspora. Many films started featuring NRI-centric stories, resonating with overseas audiences while at the same time captivating a West-influenced crowd that devoured these sights, having been subsumed into the great American ideal, as an aftermath of globalisation. This

form of filmmaking was inherited and taken forward by the likes of Dharma Productions and Yashraj Films, two of the biggest and most celebrated production houses in the country to the present.

Indian filmmakers not only restrict themselves to entertainment but also take a socially responsible stand by delving into significant social and political issues, including poverty, corruption, terrorism, communalism, gender, and human rights. Reflecting India's historical and contemporary narratives, from colonialism to independence, democracy, and globalization, these films offer a nuanced exploration of the nation's experiences. A notable example is Aamir Khan's "Lagaan," which vividly portrays India's historical struggle against colonial oppression through a 19th-century cricket match between British officers and Indian villagers. Other films like Shahrukh Khan's "Swades" and Akshay Kumar's "Namastey London" cater to the NRI audience, tackling brain drain and cultural assimilation. Additionally, productions like "Gadar: Ek Prem Katha" and "Bajrangi Bhaijaan" promote themes of Indo-Pak unity and harmony through cross-border love and friendship narratives. These films have not only achieved commercial success but have also garnered critical acclaim worldwide, earning positive reviews and fostering goodwill and appreciation for India and its values.

Bollywood and Social Perceptions

Film	Social Issue	Soft Power Outcome
Dangal	Gender Equality	Positive Perception of Indian Women
Taare Zameen Par	Education	Awareness of Learning Disabilities
Article 15	Caste Issues	Social Justice Discourse
Swades	Rural Development	Image of Inclusive Development
Bajrangi Bhaijaan	Cross-border Harmony	Cultural Goodwill

It is not only a source of entertainment for millions of Indians but also a cultural bridge that connects the diverse and dispersed South Asian diaspora. Whether they live in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, or other South Asian countries, the diaspora share a common heritage of language, music, dance, and drama that transcends national and religious boundaries. Indian films offer them a glimpse of their homeland, a sense of nostalgia, and a feeling

of belonging. They also foster a spirit of friendship and solidarity among the diaspora, who bond over their mutual admiration and appreciation for Indian cinema. Moreover, Indian cinema has also welcomed artists from neighbouring countries, such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan, to showcase their talents and collaborate with Indian filmmakers, thus creating a platform for cultural exchange and harmony. Indian films have surprisingly gained positive traction in China, despite the historically competitive relationship between India and China. These films have managed to overcome cultural and political barriers, resonating with Chinese audiences who appreciate the emotional and humanistic elements of Indian cinema. This cultural exchange has also facilitated dialogue between the two countries, highlighting shared values and differences. Notable successes in China include Aamir Khan's films like "Dangal," which challenge Indian societal norms, "Secret Superstar," portraying a teenage girl's pursuit of her singing dream, and "PK," a satirical comedy critiquing religious and social practices in India. These films have not only garnered significant box office revenues but have also sparked positive reviews and discussions on social media, contributing to the growing popularity and positive perception of Indian Cinema and India in China.

Cinema is a powerful medium that can influence the perception of different cultures, societies and issues. It is, therefore, important to promote regional cinema on the international platform. It is also essential to address the stereotypical portrayals of India in cinema, such as the exoticization of women, the glorification of violence and the misrepresentation of religions and castes. It should aim to create socially impactful stories that reflect people's realities and challenges, especially the underrepresented segments. Therefore, Indian Cinema emerges as a formidable soft power, transcending borders and cultures. Its ability to resonate with diverse audiences worldwide, foster cultural exchange and showcase the talent of Indian artists on the global stage (EcoSoc SRCC, 2023). As a major cultural ambassador, Indian cinema not only entertains but also plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions and fostering connections on the global stage.

Globalisation and Soft Power: The Pillars of Bollywood

Globalization and soft power have ensured the survival and expansion of Bollywood. The Indian family industry is clearly a symptom of these two

aspects: it is hard to study the impact that the Indian film industry has beyond its borders without the background of these two phenomena (García, 2023).

Challenges to Bollywood's Soft Power

Numerous challenges exist to Bollywood's appeal as soft power. Some of the major challenges are as follows:

Challenge	Impact
Stereotypical Representation	Distorted Image of Indian Society
Commercialization	Reduced cultural authenticity
Political Polarization	Internal Criticism
OTT Fragmentation	Audience Diversification
Regional Cinema Competition	Declining Bollywood Centrality

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that Indian cinema has emerged as a significant instrument of India's soft power by promoting cultural diplomacy. It has provided an international boost to India's image. Through its global outreach and diverse storytelling, Indian cinema has successfully projected Indian values, traditions and social realities to audiences across the world. Films addressing themes such as gender equality, education, social justice, and rural development have contributed not only to entertainment but also to social awareness and international goodwill.

In conclusion, Indian cinema represents one of the most dynamic components of India's soft power apparatus. By integrating cinema more effectively into broader cultural diplomacy initiatives, India can enhance its global position and influence.

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