

**International Conference – 2025: Developed India @ 2047****Charting Multidisciplinary and Multi-Institutional Pathways for Inclusive Growth and Global Leadership held on 4th & 5th April, 2025****Organised by: IQAC - Gossner College, Ranchi****Bollywood as a Tool of Cultural Diplomacy for India****Aishna Surin**

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Abstract

Cinema has always served as a mirror to a society providing visual representation of the way of life upheld by the people of that society. In India, Bollywood which is the Hindi language film industry based in Mumbai can be seen as the true manifestation of the rich cultural heritage and diversity of India. Having a worldwide appeal by transcending boundaries, Bollywood has become a cultural ambassador for India as it has the power to shape the global perception of India and develop a sense of goodwill towards India. The fascination for Bollywood movies, music and dance by the global audience suggests the massive influence that this film industry has been able to create globally making it a key soft power instrument and hence a cornerstone of Indian foreign policy. As a result, Bollywood directly contributes in promoting a positive image of the country, leveraging which India establishes and strengthens its relations with other countries thereby fulfilling its diplomatic objectives. This paper highlights and analyses how Bollywood acts as a tool of cultural diplomacy for the country, examines the challenges that it faces while trying to achieve this and suggests recommendations to address these challenges in order to expand its cultural footprint all over the world which becomes essential for a country like India that seeks to gain regional and global prominence.

Keywords: *India, Bollywood, Soft Power, Cultural Diplomacy.*

Introduction

In the words of Frank Capra, an Italian-American film producer and director, “Film is one of the three universal languages, the other two are mathematics and music” (Maharishi & Bharti, 2024). This statement of Capra aptly captures the immense potential possessed by films to reach to audiences in any corner of the world, transcending linguistic and geographical boundaries, making it an ideal instrument of cultural diplomacy for any country. Cultural diplomacy refers to the practice of using a country's cultural resources to influence audiences abroad and foster goodwill among nations. In this context, Bollywood, a Hindi language film industry based in Mumbai formed by combining the names of Bombay and Hollywood, has emerged as an essential element of India's cultural diplomacy approach. In the international system, where cultural diplomacy is crucial to influencing how the world views a nation, the idea of soft power has grown in popularity hence it is first necessary to understand the connotation and significance of the concept of soft power.

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In the realm of international relations, traditionally power has been characterised and evaluated using the easily quantifiable sources such as economic and military might of a country that comes under the category of hard power and is based on the use of coercion. On the contrary, the theory of soft power was introduced by the American neoliberal scholar, Joseph Nye in 1990 in his book 'Bound to Lead' where he explained this concept as "the ability of a country to influence the behaviour and choices of other countries by attraction and persuasion rather than coercion" (Nye, 1990). To elucidate further, Nye described "hard power as push and soft power as pull" (Nye, 2011).

With the end of Cold War and the transformation of a unipolar world into a multipolar one, the limitations of hard power became more apparent as possibilities and challenges no longer remained confined within the national boundaries of a country but became complex and multidimensional thereby demanding cooperation rather than coercion from countries. The countries that have soft power resources at its disposal are in a better position to influence global affairs. Soft power strategies avoid using the carrot and stick of traditional foreign policy in favour of persuasion through networks, compelling narratives, international norms, coalition building, and the key resources that make one nation appealing to another countries. The prospect of achieving important goals without incurring the heavy costs of using hard power is what makes soft power so alluring (McClory, 2015).

Nye asserts that "a nation's soft power depends upon three resources - culture, political values and foreign policy" (Nye, 2008). A nation's culture encompasses those elements that make it appealing to other nations, such as its history, art, cinema and cuisine. Political values include those values that a nation upholds and that other people believe to be desirable, such as the concept of nonviolence and unity in diversity. And thirdly, foreign policies seek to present the image of a nation as a responsible power. In this scenario, it is the instrument of culture that is of significance to us where the widespread popularity and appeal of Bollywood has tremendously enhanced the soft power of India by constructing a 'positive image' of the country and thereby making it a crucial tool for cultural diplomacy.

Ever since its inception, cinema has been a powerful medium of reflecting the social, political and economic aspects of a society in a manner that traditional mediums of mass media never could. Besides being a great source of entertainment, cinema has long served as a window into the cultures and lifestyles of various social strata. In this backdrop, Bollywood through its varied and multifaceted narratives provides a vivid representation of India's diverse landscape. As the impact of Bollywood extends beyond India's boundaries, it has helped India gain soft power internationally.

Evolution of Bollywood

Bollywood is considered to be the largest film industry in the world due to its production and audience size which has successfully transformed it from a domestic entertainment industry to a global powerhouse making it a potent instrument of Indian cultural diplomacy. With its worldwide following, Bollywood not only provides entertainment but also acts as a platform for showcasing India's ideals, rich cultural heritage and development.



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The history of Indian cinema is believed to have begun in the late 19th century with the introduction of motion pictures. Dadasaheb Phalke, who is also known as the Father of Indian cinema, directed 'Raja Harishchandra' in 1913, a silent film based on the life of King Harishchandra of Solar dynasty, making it India's first motion picture. Early movies were mostly inspired by Indian mythology that sought to foster national identity. Silent films predominated in the first few decades of Indian filmmaking which despite having no sound managed to tell compelling stories using gestures, acting, and images.

Over the ages, Bollywood has evolved from making silent movies to introducing sound in motion pictures which began in the late 1920s and set the stage for a significant technological progress. The first Indian film using sound was Alam Ara directed by Ardeshir Irani in 1931. It marked a turning point in Indian cinema as it combined the visual splendour of silent movies with the recently developed sound technology. With this, films started to connect with viewers at a greater emotional level as dialogues and music were included, creating new narrative opportunities.

Films with social consciousness and renowned directors were produced throughout the golden age of the late 1940s to early 1960s. With stars like Amitabh Bachchan becoming cultural icons, the formula film genre began to take shape in the 1970s and 1980s. As a result of economic reforms in the 1990s that brought about liberalization, privatisation and globalisation, more diaspora-friendly films were produced encouraging a sense of belongingness to the Indian landscape among the Indian diaspora even if they lived miles away from their homeland (Ganti, 2012). Since then, Indian film industry has broadened its appeal, widened its themes and adopted new technological advancements, making constant progress.

Bollywood as a Tool of Cultural Diplomacy

Bollywood serves as a significant tool of cultural diplomacy for India by promoting cultural understanding, generating a positive image of the country, and influencing global audiences through their appeal and cultural resonance. It tries to achieve this in more ways than one.

- Bollywood's role as a cultural ambassador began in the middle of the 20th century when Indian films started gaining popularity globally. Even before India was an independent nation, Indian films began to gain international acclaim and through its representation on global platforms, it got the opportunity to make audiences all over the world familiar with Indian cinema.

In this respect, some noteworthy illustrations are:

- Chetan Anand's 1946 film 'Neecha Nagar' was a groundbreaking work in Indian cinema that encouraged other directors to create films that addressed societal issues. Set in a fictional town named 'Neecha Nagar', signifying its downhill location and lower-class residents as opposed to 'Ooncha Nagar', characterised by its uphill



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location and upper-class residents, the movie portrayed a sharp contrast between the two worlds - of the poor and the rich – and highlighting the economic and social inequalities existing in the Indian society then. After winning the Grand Prix prize, the top honour at the first Cannes Film Festival in 1946, Neecha Nagar became the first Indian picture to receive international recognition, opening the door for the nation's filmmakers to showcase their work abroad.

- Mehboob Khan's 1957 film 'Mother India' was also a landmark as it was the first Indian film to be nominated for an Oscar in the best foreign language film category. The movie told the tale of a widowed mother with two sons who lived in a patriarchal village in independent India highlighting a woman's tenacity in the face of societal and cultural obstacles, earning global acclaim due to its universal theme (Yadav, 2014).
 - 'Slumdog Millionaire' directed by Danny Boyle in 2008, which is although not considered a Bollywood film entirely but it had an Indian cast and was shot in an Indian setting. This groundbreaking film won eight Oscars including Best Picture giving global recognition to Indian cinema.
- Bollywood films promote cultural understanding and appreciation by introducing Indian culture, values, and customs to a worldwide audience. Films like 'Lagaan', 'Jodhaa Akbar' and 'Padmaavat' provided viewers worldwide with an understanding of India's history and traditions by emphasizing historical and cultural narratives.
- Ashutosh Gowariker's 2001 film 'Lagaan' won accolades all over the world and was even nominated for an Academy Award (Oscars) for Best Foreign Language Film. The movie was set in the backdrop of British rule and depicted the relentless grit shown by the Indian villagers against their British rulers in a cricket match which was organised to avoid the payment of excess taxes, locally called "lagaan", by the villagers. The film's depiction of India's colonial past struck a chord with the universal themes of oppression and unity.
 - Ashutosh Gowariker's romantic and aesthetically spectacular historical drama 'Jodha Akbar', which came out in 2008, was based on the tale of the legendary Mughal Emperor Akbar and his Rajput wife Jodha Bai.
 - Jayasi's 16th-century poem of the same name served as the inspiration for Sanjay Leela Bhansali's 2018 film 'Padmaavat'. It told the story of Rani Padmavati, the queen of Mewar, who showed unwavering bravery by committing "jauhar" or self-immolation, alongside other women in the palace to preserve their honour, rather than surrendering to Alauddin Khilji and his army.



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- Certain Bollywood films function as educational tools, tackling social concerns or promoting ideals that our country holds dear such as secularism, in order to paint a favourable image of the country as a whole.
 - The 2009 film ‘3 Idiots’, directed by Rajkumar Hirani, examined issues like education, peer pressure, and the quest for happiness. It influenced viewers not just in India but also abroad, especially in China. The film's distinctive fusion of comedy, drama, and social message appealed to both younger and older audiences. This film was essential to the promotion of Bollywood in East Asia.
 - A man's quest to bring a mute Pakistani girl back to her family was the subject of the 2015 film ‘Bajrangi Bhaijaan’. Its secular viewpoint and message of peace and fraternity struck a chord with viewers everywhere.
 - Nitesh Tiwari's 2016 release of ‘Dangal’ became one of the highest-grossing foreign films in China. Based on the true story of an Indian wrestler and his two daughters, the film was a motivational story about family, perseverance, and gender equality.
- Moreover, the lavish depiction of big fat Indian weddings and the vibrant celebration of festivals like Diwali and Holi arouse interest and respect for Indian culture.
 - The 1995 romantic drama ‘Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge’, more popularly known as DDLJ, was one of the first Bollywood films to genuinely appeal to a global audience. Aiming at the Indian diaspora and shot at foreign locations, the movie found a balance between traditional values and modern aspirations, making it relatable to a wide range of viewers.
 - The 2001 Bollywood film ‘Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham’, which was directed by Karan Johar, was another film that gained worldwide popularity as it was based on relatable themes of family, love and traditions. Its star-studded cast and catchy songs and dances made it a global success both inside and outside of India.
- Seeing Bollywood's potential as a soft power tool, the Indian government organized Indian film festivals abroad such as the 2024 IIFA (International Indian Film Academy Awards) in Abu Dhabi, and screened Bollywood films at other international film festivals like the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) and the Cannes Film Festival. This increases the visibility of Indian cinema in the world exhibiting India’s cultural and artistic abilities and fortifying people-to-people ties.
- The impact of Bollywood is also apparent in this that many Bollywood actors have been made the global ambassadors for famous luxury brands such as Alia Bhatt for Gucci, Deepika Padukone for Louis Vuitton, Priyanka Chopra for Dior, amongst many others, thereby enhancing India’s global visibility.



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- The popularity of Bollywood films has the potential to improve the economy by drawing in foreign partnerships and investments. The brands featured in films is an effortless way to advertise them to global audiences. Moreover, by highlighting India's natural beauty and historical sites, films that are shot in famous Indian locations, such as 'Yeh Jawaani Hai Diwani' in Manali, can boost India's tourism.
- Lately, Indian culture has become more visible and relevant due to the industry's increased global accessibility which has been facilitated by O.T.T. (Over the top) platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, etc. that expands the creative possibilities for filmmaking. Some very famous series like 'Mirzapur' (2018), 'Sacred Games' (2018), 'Kota Factory' (2018), 'Panchayat' (2020), etc. have all got recognition through these online streaming platforms. Not only have they earned fame but at the same time have also widened the scope of storytelling in a way that appeals to audiences of every background.
- Bollywood, in addition to providing entertainment, has also influenced dance, music, and fashion all around the world. Also, local trends and adaptations have been sparked by Bollywood's famous songs and choreography. This is evident in the rise of Bollywood dance classes in foreign countries, global appeal of bhangra and saree, and prestigious universities providing courses and research on Bollywood culture (Dahiya, 2023).

Analysing Bollywood's Role in Cultural Diplomacy

Compared to other nations in the global South, Bollywood has been more successful in using soft power (Tharoor, 2012). From a soft power perspective, the impression that Indian films create of India among international audiences and the things showcased in films that reverberate across cultural boundaries is what is seen as a true success of a film more than its theatre success. And it can be argued that Bollywood has been able to achieve this up to a great extent. This favourable outcome for Bollywood can be attributed to several factors, with some of them being stated here.

Firstly, Bollywood's globalization, which has been facilitated by the sizable Indian diaspora and greater interconnectivity among nations, has given this industry the chance to promote India's culture and image around the world. The existence of India's sizable and prosperous diaspora worldwide is a major factor in the appeal of Indian cinema, particularly in the US and the UK, where a large number of Indians have prominent roles in the boardrooms of multinational firms, Ivy League colleges, and high-end media outlets (Kapur, 2010). Often, Bollywood movies are made keeping the Indian diaspora in mind featuring the kind of lifestyle lived by them when abroad, such as in movies like 'Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham'. Besides boosting overseas revenue, what it does is that it not only popularises these movies among the Indian diaspora by generating in them a sense of cultural connection to their homeland but it also acts as a conduit for others around them to watch these movies thereby introducing host countries to Indian culture. This popularity of Bollywood films can be seen in the words of Shashi Tharoor, an Indian politician and a writer, who said that "Bollywood has brought its brand of glitzy entertainment even to the screens of Syria and Senegal" (Tharoor, 2011).

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Secondly, a significant element that ensures Bollywood's unending relevance is its adaptability with time where aligning with global trends, Bollywood has expanded its horizons by not just depicting local but also international narratives. Bollywood's ability to infuse traditional Indian stories with global themes has garnered worldwide attention, increasing its prominence internationally (Mehta, 2001). 'Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge' serves as an example here demonstrating how traditional Indian beliefs can coexist with Westernized lifestyles thereby targeting audiences not just in India but also abroad.

Thirdly, Bollywood's capacity to emotionally engage a wide range of viewers is one of its main advantages. With a decidedly Indian cultural feel, its stories frequently center on universal themes such as love (Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge), family (Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham), resilience (Dangal), and the victory of good over evil (Lagaan). A huge fan base has grown as a result of this rapport.

Thus, by showcasing Indian values, customs and way of life, Bollywood skilfully illustrates India's soft power strategy creating a positive perception of India that generates goodwill (Pandey, 2012).

Challenges and Suggestions

Even though Bollywood has a significant influence, it still has a lot of unaddressed issues for which certain appropriate actions need to be taken.

Firstly, Bollywood is often criticised for being unrepresentative by portraying only certain regions and populace of the country and ignoring the extensive diversity prevailing in the country. An example here is the misrepresentation or underrepresentation of tribal communities and the regions of South India and Northeast India in popular Bollywood films. This inequity not only sidelines these individuals preventing them from feeling a part of the Indian population entirely but also at the same time it provides a partial representation of India to the world.

In response to this, it is required that Bollywood films need to incorporate more diversity to present an authentic picture of the country by assimilating characters and stories from varied regions, communities and languages. For instance, the Kannada film 'Kantara' depicted the local deities of Karnataka who were believed to be the protectors of forests and its inhabitants and also featured the local dance called "Bhoota Kola" performed to worship the deities, thereby giving global recognition to a local narrative. Such a portrayal not only creates an admiration for the pluralistic culture of India within the country but at the same time also provides a more accurate and inclusive image of the country to the world, augmenting India's soft power.

Secondly, with the commencement of globalisation in India, an obsession has been seen with consumerism and materialism with Bollywood films since the 1990s giving priority to modern aspirations over traditions values. In contrast to this, regional film industries have been able to successfully strike a balance between tradition and modernity.



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As a solution to this, the Indian government can take the initiative to promote the production of those films that highlight the values and traditions of India, showcasing to the world the rich cultural heritage of our country. To attain this, the government can give financial incentives such as tax concessions to those filmmakers who intend to produce such films or promote institutions like National Film Development Corporation (NFDC) to encourage high quality cinema in the country. By doing so, the Indian government can assist Bollywood in maintaining an equilibrium between tradition and modernity and in being the best possible instrument of cultural diplomacy for India.

Thirdly, the rise of Over-The-Top (O.T.T.) platforms have increased the number of movie choices available to the viewers thereby democratising the consumption of content. This in turn has intensified the competition between all types of movies - regional, national and international - available on the same platform, thereby requiring filmmakers to improve the quality of their work if they wish to stay relevant in a globalized entertainment sector.

To meet international standards, Indian filmmakers must invest on improving the artistic and technical abilities of their work. Additionally, they must prioritize on producing films based on original stories and not just entertainment focused films. The success of movies like 'Tumbbad' and 'Andhadhun' and of series like 'Panchayat' and 'Sacred Games' are a proof of how creative storytelling can create an appeal among audiences in both India as well as abroad.

Conclusion

Thus, by effectively addressing its challenges and strategically capitalizing on its strengths, Bollywood can significantly determine India's position in the world. Hence, it can be said that Bollywood not only acts as a source of entertainment for millions but at the same time, it also acts as a cultural bridge connecting the Indian diaspora to their homeland and as a cultural ambassador shaping India's perception on a global stage by mirroring Indian culture and values to the world. In this sense, Bollywood, sometimes referred to as India's "dream factory" plays a pivotal role in exhibiting India's soft power (Singh & Sarwal, 2017).

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