

Framing the Nation on Global Screens: Indian Cinema as Soft Power and Its Role in Shaping International Perceptions

Mahima Jain

BA (English), CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bangalore

ABSTRACT

Soft Power is an act of attraction and persuasion based on cultural values, history, and policies promoting the culture of a nation that systematically contributes to the image of a nation. This study examines how contemporary Indian Cinema as a tool of Soft Power contributes to shaping international perceptions about India and influence it's cultural and diplomatic presence globally through the analysis of films and cinematic representation. The paper also explores how Indian films have achieved widespread international popularity by appealing to the global masses, constructing India's geopolitical stance. The paper undertakes the comparative analysis of the three films – The Lunchbox (2013), RRR (2022), and The Kerala Story (2023) – each one of them representing a distinct theme. Drawing upon Joseph Nye's concept of Soft Power, the films showcase how Indian Cinema contributes to India's cultural diplomacy by blending together the influence of cultural and emotional connections along with contradictory and divided debate. Each film promotes India's soft power by projecting varied images of India, such as India as emotionally and culturally intimate in The Lunchbox; India as powerful and nationalist in RRR; India as coercive in The Kerala Story. Using qualitative textual analysis, the study adopts Joseph Nye's idea of soft power as an analytical framework to trace cultural intimacy, empathy, nationalist narratives, and strategic assertiveness, combined with the scrutiny of the global circulation of these films through international film festivals, streaming platforms, awards, and international media coverage. By critically examining this, this paper delves into a deeper understanding of how cinematography plays a pivotal role in shaping the national image and international perception in the contemporary global order.

Keywords: soft power, cinematic representation, geopolitical stance, cultural diplomacy, national image, international perception

1. Introduction

In today's contemporary era, diplomacy and global influence are not merely confined to economic or political aspects. Cultural diplomacy is equally important, and hence it has become a tool of soft power. Soft power serves the key functions of mutual understanding, dismantling prejudices, and building cultural empathy that shapes the global image of a nation. Today, when hard power and global instability are on the rise, storytelling through films plays a significant role as an instrument of soft power in carrying out cultural diplomacy and shaping international perceptions.

Cinema, for India, acts as a dynamic force that represents what India actually is and shapes global attitudes and perceptions about its culture, values, and society. Indian films are not just a source of entertainment,

but they redefine how the world perceives India through narrative symbolism, emotional connection, musical richness, and everyday and social themes. Films shape how countries are imagined internationally. Global circulation of Indian films has made them the subject of a transnational cultural text, from just being a national product. With the fast evolution of streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney Hotstar, international film festivals, and global theatrical releases, the circulation of Indian films has sped up across diverse countries and has reached a wider range of audiences.

The research aims to analyze how Indian cinema functions as a tool of soft power by shaping international perceptions regarding India, sparking cultural diplomacy, and contributing to India's stance in global affairs. The research poses a central question: How does Indian cinema function as a tool of soft power in shaping international perceptions about India and the influence of Indian cinema across the world? to explore the nature of Indian cinema as a cultural ambassador. The paper also examines how digital distribution of Indian films through streaming platforms has expanded the global reach and influence of Indian films.

Soft power cannot always be positive and stable; it can sometimes be contradictory as well. Indian cinema represents multifaceted and repugnant images of India shaped by the diversity of genres, narrative focus, and audience reception, which can be seen through the three films taken – The Lunchbox, RRR, and The Kerala Story. The Lunchbox embraces a minimalistic and contemplative narrative style of emotional depth, everyday urban lifestyle, and food practices, making international audiences apprehend India as humane and culturally textured. On the other hand, RRR, being an action-packed film, projects the notion of heroism and nationalism. On the contrary, The Kerala Story paves its way to the global masses through controversy rather than consensus. Such representations place India at the center of the depiction of political realities, which may pose a risk to soft power.

The study is elucidated through the theoretical lens of Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, stating culture to be the most powerful element that reaches the audiences and connects emotionally. By aligning Indian cinema with a theoretical lens, the paper contributes to the broader aspect of film studies and international relations. The paper also constructs the national identity by examining both the areas of convergence through cultural portrayal as well as divergence through contestation in Indian films.

2. Research Methodology

Scholarly thinking about the representation of Indian cinema has evolved through several phases, from the 1960s era of romance and grandeur of Bollywood to today's content-focused and globally connected storytelling. Understanding the changing dynamics of Indian cinema, scholars and researchers began to incorporate the regional film industry as well, such as Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, Marathi, and Bengali, not just limiting their interpretation to the Hindi film industry. Besides providing entertainment, Indian cinema has transformed into a tool for soft power, exhibiting India's image internationally in the present century. This study employs a qualitative textual analysis approach to investigate the framing of the image of India on global screens. This investigation adopts American Political Scientist Joseph Nye's concept of soft power as an analytical framework to trace cultural intimacy, empathy, nationalist narratives, and strategic assertiveness, combined with the scrutiny of the global circulation of these films through international film festivals, streaming platforms, awards, and international media coverage. British Sociologist and Cultural Theorist Stuart Hall gave a reception theory that enables an examination of how global audiences interpret, negotiate, or resist meanings encoded in the films. By combining Joseph Nye's concept of soft power with Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model, the study allows the analysis of

how Indian cinema shapes international influences. Scholars like Stephanie Dennison and Rachel Dwyer argue that cinema configures both national and transnational identities within global politics, underscoring its role in shaping cultural diplomacy.

3. Review of Literature

Scholars and researchers have examined how Indian cinema projects national identity, shapes international perception, and places India in a geopolitical stance. Similar scholarly works, such as Venugopal, K., Rajesh in *Global Reception of Indian Regional Cinema and its Impact on Cultural Diplomacy: A Critical Analysis*, analyse the growing significance of regional films for global audiences, emphatically situating Indian regional cinema while Dutta, Kartik in *Soft Power Through Cinema: How Indian Films Are Changing Global Perception* explores how Indian cinema has become a dynamic force of cultural diplomacy. Shrivastava, Pradeep, in *Shaping Narratives Through Cinema: India's Soft Power and National Identity*, situates Indian cinema within broader debates on cultural politics and international relations; meanwhile, Vijayasathy, V., in *Impact of Globalisation on Indian Media and Entertainment Industry*, highlights the impact of globalisation on the Indian media and entertainment industry. Takhar, Amandeep in *Maclaran Pauline and Stevens Lorna, Bollywood Cinema's Global Reach: Consuming the "Diasporic Consciousness"* illustrates how the globalization of Bollywood affects the Indian diaspora at a local level whereas Thompson, Dr. Emma in *The Impact of Streaming Platforms on the Film Industry* examines how the rise of streaming platforms has transformed Indian film industry and Taneja, Bhavana in *Beyond the Indian Film Industry: India's Expanding Footprint in Global Entertainment* overlooks the scope and depth of Indian entertainment reach. Sarkar, Santanu, and Choudry, Anuradha, in *Indian Cinema and Cultural Identity: Negotiating Tradition, Modernity, and Global Influence*, explore how Indian cinema negotiates the intersection of tradition, modernity, and globalization through a multidisciplinary approach. Kahrazeh, Yaser and Arash, Beidollahkhani in *The Role of the Popular Indian Cinema (Bollywood) in Image Construction and Nation Branding of India: Global Perception of India's Attraction* emphasizes the role of Indian cinema in spreading the positive perception of India's nation branding and increasing its popularity around the world whilst Paul, T. V. in *Soft Power Revisited* examines how India's cultural, political and diplomatic strengths contribute to its global soft power.

4. Global Reception of Indian Regional Films

Indian regional films are on a continuous rise globally, appreciated for their multicultural and multilingual prospects. Regional Indian cinema, comprising various languages such as Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, Marathi, and Bengali, is widely reaching global spheres, reflecting cultural narrativization and raw storytelling. Indian films like *RRR* made it through the global headlines with the win of an Oscar for the best original song in 2023. Such films become globally sensational films, influencing global masses towards Indian production. Directors like S.S. Rajamouli and Mani Ratnam, along with actors like Ram Charan and Jr. NTR, have earned international recognition, contributing to India's soft power globally. Streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Disney Hotstar have screened Indian films and made them reach globally. With easy access to Indian films through these platforms, there is not only a change in box office returns but also a foreign audience gaining interest in Indian storytelling. Just like the craze of K-pop and Hollywood, Indian cinema has also established its place within the global audience's hearts, helping strengthen the cultural ties. Indian films making their way through international film festivals in Cannes and Venice, like *The Lunchbox*, officially getting selected at Cannes in 2013,

speak to the wow factor of Indian cinema. Major global entertainment giants such as Sony, Warner Bros., Fox, and Disney have already invested in India's production. The collaborations with Indian-origin actors like Priyanka Chopra Jonas, Dev Patel, and Kal Penn continue to flourish, asserting creative leadership in today's multipolar world.

5. The Lunchbox (2013): Indian Emotionality and Minimalism

The Lunchbox, directed by Ritesh Batra, breaks from Bollywood regular romance and connects with the minimalistic view of emotionality and romance. Through a contemplative narrative style, the film beautifully blends romance without any physical desire. The film highlights the simplistic language of Love through the exchange of food and notes. Food here acts as a metaphor that sets the meeting between two strangers, with a sharing of each other through notes.

The reaction to the film by US viewers, examined through a YouTube video, connects various metaphorical and symbolic dots. The plot of the film and the way it transforms keep the viewers hooked till the end of the film. The themes of daily urban life, food practices, and soft romance make the audience grapple with their seats. The viewers recognize that some metaphors, such as the basket coming down every time, represent a physical manifestation. The untold communicative connection between the aunty and the female protagonist, Ela, without revealing the face of the aunty, influences the viewers about the relationship between neighbors in Indian society, framing the perspective of how India connects with its neighboring states. The exchange of notes acts as a symbol of sunshine for both of them during the time when they felt something was missing in their life. The viewers also empathize with the real-life delivery partners upon witnessing the hardcore struggle of the delivery system. Food delivery in the film makes the viewers recall the significance of food in keeping people together.

Overall, the film acts as a positive soft power, simply through the representation of Indian values. The critical examination of the film through public reaction unveils that the uncomplicated plot, with the blending of subtlety and romance conveying the simple message about living your life on your own terms, and another one, quoting that sometimes a wrong train gets you to the right station, is what influenced the audience to get attracted towards India. The intimacy and minimalist narrative of the film contribute to its grand spectacle.

6. RRR (2022): Spectacle, Nationalism, and Globalization

RRR, directed by S.S. Rajamouli, showcases the grand spectacle with Indian history taking up the center and cultural nationalism with a heroic formula. The film does not merely portray heroism or nationalism, but also romanticizes the bromance between the two male protagonists, appealing emotionally to the audience. The viewership engagement inspected through the reaction videos on YouTube suggests the interest of the audience in such high-volume films with the themes of history, drama, action, and romance. The foreign audience feels overwhelmed by Indian cinema after watching this film. With the depiction of Indian history during the time period of the British Raj, the film retains the viewers' interest in knowing more about Indian history, culture, and lore. The audience feels emotionally connected with the Indians after witnessing the kind of torture they faced. Expressing their concerns through the criticism of the British Raj in India reveals that the foreign audiences feel the wounds of the Indians. From cinematography to stunt work, the audience was engrossed in the film narrative. The viewers reacted with the comparison of the film with John Wick's films, stating that this film poses the potential to hold the audience's grip upon its narrative till the very end.

Ultimately, the viewers prioritize the film on the basis of its historical context, cultural and emotional connection, as well as action-packed elements. The actors in the film, Ram Charan and Jr. NTR, played a crucial role in shaping the audience's perception through their natural acting, which the audience felt connected with. The musical strength of the film has leveraged upon the audience's influence through its originality, where the crowd in the Chinese theatre seems to have gone crazy over the Nattu Nattu song from the film. This highlights the notion that the film has deeply impacted global audiences, sparking a grand spectacle.

7. The Kerala Story (2023): Ideology and Politics of Representation

The Kerala Story, directed by Sudipto Sen, focuses on the radicalization and the plight of women in Kerala. The film explores the themes of vulnerability, exploitation, and resilience, illustrating Indian cinema's role in shaping debates on social conflict and identity. Such films underscore the ability of Indian cinema to accentuate political conflict and social vulnerability, emphasizing broader debates on nationalism and ideological identity.

The investigation into foreign viewers' reactions to this film on YouTube presents both pragmatic and antithetical viewpoints. Though the film constructs an irreconcilable narrative about India, it also balances out India's soft power. This has been explored through the audience's standpoint, stating their interest in exploring such films as they represent realism. The viewers sympathize with the girls after watching them trapped and radicalized. The claim of the representation of true events and the affective realism showcasing contemporary settings of religious conversions and women as victims, political storyline, minimal fantasy elements, and emotional trauma framed as lived experience keep the viewers captivated, even if the portrayal is contested. These features, despite being films with contradictory notions, tend to appeal to viewers when it comes to content-based storytelling. This marks the shift of Indian cinema towards impact-driven storytelling from fantasy-based narratives.

Despite its identification, the film foregrounds a shift from attraction to anxiety with victimhood, radicalization narratives, and religious conflict. The film reinforces stereotypes about extremism and presents India as divided in the context of religion. Though the audience finds the film to be a must watch but, on the other hand, it also generates social tension in their minds over factual accuracy, statistical claims, and political framing. Hence, at the same time, this film enhances the national image as well as generates contested meanings.

Indian cinema has continuously evolved as a dynamic force contributing to India's soft power and negotiating the complexities of globalization. By undertaking YouTube reaction videos by the foreign public of the chosen films, The Lunchbox, RRR, and The Kerala Story, this paper explores the features of Indian cinema shaping international perceptions. The films serve as pivotal examples illustrating filmmakers' ability to adapt, innovate, and evolve. The films follow up narrativizing storytelling with mise-en-scene components, highlighting how India is depicted globally. The films were taken up to describe India's soft power and cultural diplomacy as both constructive and pessimistic. The findings reveal that Indian films not only shape but also transform international viewpoints through the portrayal of India's diversity in cultural practices. Every film carrying a distinct theme contours the global viewers' mindset that outlines India's national image in their thoughts. Films like The Lunchbox and RRR structure the historical, cultural, nationalist, and romantic understanding of India, while films like The Kerala Story build up anxiety and social tension among the global masses, generating contested meanings. This

underlines that soft power is not always stable, and Indian films tend to communicate diverse narratives simultaneously.

8. Discussion

The study conducted interviews with three different people from different places that facilitated the research towards a more nuanced direction. The first impression is derived from Bonolo's insights, a resident of South Africa who has watched several Indian films. The majority of Indian films hooked into by him covers the themes of romance, emotional empathy, and Indian culture. The best part about the films watched by Bonolo was how Indian films condemn Indian culture, value system, and universal movement. Bonolo found himself revisiting Indian films because of the rendition of love. The very fact he liked here is how the essence of love is retained in Indian films, spreading the message of co-existence with love and harmony across the globe. Bonolo confessed that Indian films transformed his viewpoint regarding India from a violent nation to a peace-making and harmonious one. This suggests that Indian films, apart from entertainment purposes, tend to reshape audiences' mindsets globally.

Another insight is gained through Ledia Bano's conscious thought about Indian films. Hailing from Albania and currently residing in Norway, Ledia's primary areas of interest highlight watching Indian films based on humor, drama, realism, and Indian culture. Ledia has engaged with numerous films such as 3 Idiots, Ghajini, The White Tiger, A Suitable Boy, and many more. The films mentioned by her touched her internally through their narrative structure and emotional embodiment. Through her interaction, it was settled that her adored theme about Indian films is coming-of-age drama when 3 Idiots was mentioned by her as her go-to Indian film that she would never get jaded of. The kind of socio-economic mobility blending in with other aspects, such as true friendship, support, and solidarity, makes her engaged with the film alongside the framing of the Indian image. Indian films have also refined her understanding of Indian culture, festivals, and values, which she came to know only after watching Indian films.

Further, Ayush's illumination of Indian films contrasted between the optimistic and pessimistic nature of the presentation of Indian society in the films. Tracing his origins from Nepal, Ayush has been residing in India for two years now and has gradually developed an interest in Indian films. The films mentioned by him are KGF Chapter 1&2, Bahubali; mainly the regional films. The film choices suggest his interest tilting more towards the themes of power, political influence, and revenge. The inquiry interprets the facts of realism, persuading him to explore more about India through its cinematography. After looking deeply into Ayush's responses, the research establishes the dual nature of Indian cinema. It was observed that the portrayal of Indian society in some Indian films varies from that of the actual one. This is explained by Ayush through the example of the film Singham, which showcases vigilant justice, rather than justice delivery in India, which is not based on vigilantism. Thus, Indian films neutralize the global perspectives about India.

These case studies, based on personal interaction, reveal that Indian films culturally influence the global audience's thought process through streaming platforms. Through the analysis, it was discovered that all three people first came across Indian films through streaming platforms, either Netflix or Amazon Prime Video. This suggests that streaming platforms have played a crucial role in not only circulating Indian films globally but also reforming India's cultural diplomacy. Films like The White Tiger and A Suitable Boy are American-Indian co-productions with Indian cast and Indian setting; still, foreign audiences like Ledia Bano prefer to watch due to the Indian cast and Indian setting of society. Apart from this, Bonolo's ideological transformation about India's image after watching Indian films marks the high-level influence

of Indian films on the global public. Such case studies suggest that Indian films not only attract people through their cinematography or narrative structure, but also through the influence of Indian people, cities, and values. Indian actors such as Priyanka Chopra Jonas, Adarsh Gourav, and Rajkumar Rao in this American-Indian co-produced film, *The White Tiger*, directed by Ramin Bahrani, suggest that the global public draws their influence from Indian people, cities, and even fashion, where the foreign public is witnessed wearing Indian outfits such as sarees, kurta-pajama, etc. On the contrary, case studies highlighting vigilantism in films like *Singham* raise concerns regarding India's soft power. But over time, the Indian film industry has evolved towards a realism-focused narrative pattern, balancing concerns about India's soft power.

9. Conclusion

The findings conclude that Indian cinema, acting as global soft power, contributes to shaping India's national identity. Indian films, including regional ones, continue to impact foreign audiences not only through entertainment but also through India's culture and its narrative patterns. Soft power cannot always be stable; it can sometimes even provoke counterarguments, but it still tends to balance all the counterparts through cultural diplomacy. This suggests that despite producing controversial films, Indian cinema continues to influence global audiences through its representation of realism and cultural aspects. While the study provides a comprehensive analysis, a key limitation is its reliance on a limited selection of films. Future research could broaden the study by incorporating various other theories, such as gender studies, psychoanalytic film theory, etc., with a wider range of films. The research extends the scope towards film studies and international relations. The paper provides the public with an extensive understanding of the functioning of Indian culture as soft power. It also builds positive perspectives on Indian cinema and generates a feeling of nationalism among the public after witnessing the influential impact of Indian cinema globally. The study allows the general public not only to view films for entertainment purposes but also to enhance their film analysis ability. Ultimately, the research proposes an understanding of the influence of Indian films on global masses to the filmmakers, assisting them in examining the global public's interests for a wider reach and collaborating with diverse international production houses.

11. References

1. *The Lunchbox*. Directed by Ritesh Batra, Curzon Film World, 2013.
2. *RRR*. Directed by S.S. Rajamouli and Pen Studios, D.V.V. Danayya, 2022.
3. *The Kerala Story*. Directed by Vipul Shah and Sudipto Sen, Sunshine Pictures, 2023.
4. Venugopal, Rajesh. "Global Reception of Indian Regional Cinema and Its Impact on Cultural Diplomacy: A Critical Analysis." An Online Peer Reviewed / Refereed Journal, vol. 3, no. 2, Mar. 2025, p. 802. theacademic.in/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/68.pdf.
5. Shrivastava, Pradeep. "Shaping Narratives Through Cinema: India's Soft Power and National Identity." *International Journal of Humanities Social Science and Management (IJHSSM)*, vol. 6, no. 1, Jan. 2026, pp. 144–52. www.ijhssm.org
6. Vijayasathya, V. and Annamalai University. "IMPACT OF GLOBALISATION ON INDIAN MEDIA AND ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY." *International Journal of Current Research and Modern Education (IJCRME)*, vol. I, no. II, 2016, pp. 151–53. ijcrme.rmodernresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/131.pdf.

7. Takhar, Amandeep, et al. "Bollywood Cinema's Global Reach: Consuming the 'Diasporic Consciousness.'" Journal of Macromarketing, by Macromarketing Society, journal-article, 14 May 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0276146712441799>.
8. Thompson, Emma and University of Edinburgh. "The Impact of Streaming Platforms on the Film Industry." CINEFORUM, 2024, pp. 19–21.
9. Sarkar, Santanu, et al. "Indian Cinema and Cultural Identity: Negotiating Tradition, Modernity, and Global Influence." IAFOR Journal of Cultural Studies, vol. 10–10, no. 1, 2025, pp. 157–59. iafor.org/archives/journals/iafor-journal-of-cultural-studies/10.22492.ijcs.10.1.07.pdf.
10. Dutta, Kartik. "Soft Power Through Cinema: How Indian Films Are Changing Global Perception." Indian Film Institute, www.indianfilmstitute.org/post/soft-power-through-cinema-how-indian-films-are-changing-global-perception
11. Taneja, Bhavana. "Beyond the Indian Film Industry: India's Expanding Footprint in Global Entertainment." Franchise Journal, www.franchisejournal.com/beyond-the-indian-film-industry-indias-expanding-footprint-in-global-entertainment
12. Arash Beidollahkhani, Yaser Kahrazeh. "The Role of the Popular Indian Cinema (Bollywood) in Image Construction and Nation Branding of India: Global Perception of India's Attraction." Journal of Subcontinent Researches, vol. 14, no. 43, pp. 213–28.
13. Paul and McGill University. "Soft Power Revisited." CURRENT HISTORY, by Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press, Apr. 2014, p. 158.
14. CineDesi. "THE LUNCHBOX Movie Reaction Part 1/2! | Irrfan Khan | Nimrat Kaur | Nawazuddin Siddiqui." YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=SYAOG6-UUGA
15. CineDesi. "THE LUNCHBOX Movie Reaction Part 2/2! | Irrfan Khan | Nimrat Kaur | Nawazuddin Siddiqui." YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3h8KI9RxQI
16. Cinemondo Insider Movie Reviews. "The Lunchbox - Full Review! Irrfan Khan | Nimrat Kaur." YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=eaCOKI0KNN8
17. Cinema Gek. "Our FIRST Indian Movie Was a MASTERPIECE...RRR Movie | Reaction." YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=LdsHuKDMtUY
18. Sorta Stupid. "Foreigners Watched **RRR** for the FIRST TIME - PERFECT MOVIE." YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDlqr3qxJGg
19. Cinemondo Insider Movie Reviews. "The Kerala Story Trailer Reaction! Hindi | Vipul Amrutlal Shah | Sudipto Sen | Adah Sharma!" YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWbsNjReSzI
20. The Demouchets REACT 2.0. "The Kerala Story Official Trailer | the Demouchets REACT." YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8LFZOcHTvE