

Cinematic Soft Power and Cultural Asymmetry: Spain's Tourism and Diplomatic Gains Through Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara

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Abstract

The role and importance of popular culture in globalisation: Popular culture is perceived to be one of the important mediums by which nations express their identity, values, and their potential to attract. Cinema forms a prominent role in creating international images by turning unfamiliar places into emotionally friendly cultural spaces.

This research focuses on exploring the concept of film-induced tourism and cultural soft power through the case study of "Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara" and its influence on India-Spain cultural relations outside the realms of conventional diplomatic and financial interactions. This study is an extension of theoretical assumptions underpinning soft power theory, cultural diplomacy, and film tourism. The research demonstrates an attempt to utilize the concept of film-induced tourism and its implications for cultural relations, thereby emphasizing the capacity of film as a medium in facilitating informal diplomatic ties and cultural collaborations.

Keywords: Soft power; Bollywood; Bilateral-relations

INTRODUCTION

Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara functioned as a powerful instrument of cultural soft power by portraying Spain as an aspirational, emotionally engaging, and culturally rich destination, significantly boosting Indian outbound and cinematic tourism, fostering interest in Spanish language and culture through institutions such as Instituto Cervantes, and encouraging bilateral cultural collaborations between Indian and Spanish tourism and cultural bodies. However, the film's impact on India-Spain relations remained asymmetric, as Spain gained greater international visibility and cultural appeal, while India's cultural projection through the film largely remained domestic despite deep emotional resonance among Indian audiences.

In the contemporary globalised world, cinema has evolved beyond its traditional role as a medium of entertainment to become a significant channel of cultural exchange and international influence. Films today travel across borders more easily than ever before through digital platforms, satellite television, and transnational distribution networks, allowing audiences to engage with foreign cultures from the comfort of their homes. This growing reach has enabled cinema to function as an informal ambassador of national identity, shaping how countries are perceived by international viewers. Landscapes, festivals, cuisine, language, and everyday lifestyles depicted on screen often leave a lasting impression, influencing travel aspirations, consumer behaviour, and cultural curiosity. As a result, films increasingly contribute to nation branding and tourism promotion, sometimes more effectively than official government campaigns.

Within this framework, Bollywood occupies a unique position. As one of the largest film industries in the

world, Indian cinema commands a vast domestic and diasporic audience whose viewing choices frequently translate into real-world travel trends. Popular Hindi films have historically stimulated tourism to destinations such as Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and Australia by romanticising foreign locations and integrating them into emotionally resonant narratives. These films do not simply showcase places as backdrops; rather, they weave them into stories of love, friendship, self-discovery, and adventure, encouraging viewers to associate these destinations with aspiration and personal fulfilment. Consequently, Bollywood has become an unintended yet highly effective agent of cultural diplomacy and soft power, influencing international tourism flows and cross-cultural engagement.

Released in 2011, *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* exemplifies this phenomenon. Set against the vibrant landscapes of Spain—from the streets of Barcelona and the Costa Brava to Seville’s flamenco culture and the La Tomatina festival—the film integrates Spanish culture organically into its narrative of friendship and self-realisation. Instead of promoting Spain through overt advertisements, the film relies on immersive storytelling and emotional identification, allowing viewers to experience the country through the characters’ journeys. This subtle yet powerful representation transformed Spain into an attractive and desirable destination for Indian travellers, leading to increased tourism enquiries, higher visa issuance, and greater participation in Spanish language and cultural programs. Institutions such as Instituto Cervantes also witnessed growing interest, indicating that the film’s influence extended beyond travel to deeper cultural engagement.

At the same time, the case of *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* reveals important questions about the direction and balance of cultural influence. While Spain benefitted from enhanced visibility and economic gains through tourism, India’s cultural projection through the film did not generate equivalent recognition abroad. The exchange therefore remained uneven, highlighting the complexities of soft power dynamics in which one nation may benefit more prominently than the other. By examining this asymmetry, the study seeks to understand how popular cinema can simultaneously act as a tool of cultural diplomacy and reflect unequal flows of global cultural influence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bollywood as a Tool of Soft Power

Existing scholarship identifies Bollywood as an important source of India’s cultural soft power, capable of influencing international audiences by projecting Indian values, lifestyles, and narratives. Bollywood has been shown to extend India’s cultural reach beyond national borders, strengthening emotional and cultural connections through popular media rather than formal diplomatic channels.

Cinema and Cultural Diplomacy

Cinema is widely studied as an effective medium of cultural diplomacy due to its ability to shape national images and foster cross-cultural understanding. Films communicate cultural meanings, social norms, and aspirations in ways that traditional diplomacy cannot, making them powerful tools in influencing perceptions and facilitating international cultural engagement.

Film-Induced (Cinematic) Tourism

Research on film-induced tourism highlights the role of cinema in motivating audiences to visit on-screen destinations. Visual storytelling, emotional identification with narratives, and destination branding contribute to increased tourist interest and travel behaviour, establishing cinema as a key driver of tourism flows and cultural exchange.

Previous Studies on Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara and International Tourism

Studies focusing on Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara note its significant influence on Indian outbound tourism to Spain, with the film generating heightened awareness and interest in Spanish landscapes and cultural experiences. However, most research primarily examines tourism outcomes, often relying on descriptive or correlational evidence.

Gaps in Existing Research

Despite these insights, limited attention has been given to ZNMD as a broader soft power and cultural diplomacy tool. There is insufficient analysis of language learning, institutional cultural promotion, and the asymmetrical nature of cultural influence between India and Spain. This study addresses these gaps by examining the film's wider cultural and diplomatic impact beyond tourism.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Soft Power Theory (Joseph Nye)

The end of the Cold War marked a significant shift in the nature of international relations, where power was no longer measured solely through military strength or economic dominance. In an increasingly globalised and interconnected world, nations began recognising the importance of influence through culture, ideas, and values. Traditional “hard power” strategies—such as coercion, sanctions, or force—proved costly and often ineffective in building long-term goodwill. As a result, scholars and policymakers turned their attention to alternative forms of influence that relied on attraction rather than compulsion.

It was within this changing global context that Joseph S. Nye Jr., a political scientist at Harvard University, introduced the concept of soft power in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Nye argued that countries could shape the preferences and behaviour of others not only through economic incentives or military pressure, but also through the appeal of their culture, political ideals, and foreign policies. With the rapid expansion of mass media, cinema, tourism, and digital communication, cultural products increasingly became tools through which nations projected their identity and built international reputation.

Popular culture, especially films, music, and entertainment media, emerged as powerful carriers of soft power because they cross borders easily and influence perceptions at the emotional level. Cinema, in particular, can showcase landscapes, lifestyles, traditions, and values in ways that formal diplomacy cannot, often encouraging tourism, cultural exchange, and people-to-people connections. Consequently, films began functioning not merely as entertainment but also as informal instruments of cultural diplomacy and national branding.

This study is grounded in Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, which he defines as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments” (Nye, 2004). Unlike hard power, which relies on military or economic force, soft power operates through cultural appeal, political values, and foreign policies that are perceived as legitimate and attractive by others. Nye argues that culture plays a crucial role in shaping preferences and perceptions at the international level, often influencing audiences more effectively than formal diplomatic efforts.

According to Nye, cultural products such as films, music, and literature can generate emotional identification and admiration, thereby enhancing a country's international image and influence. Cinema, in particular, serves as a powerful soft power resource because it communicates values and lifestyles through storytelling rather than direct persuasion. When audiences connect emotionally with cinematic narratives, they are more likely to develop favourable attitudes toward the culture and country being represented.

In this context, *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* is analysed as a vehicle of soft power that enhanced Spain's cultural attractiveness among Indian audiences. The film did not promote Spain through conventional advertising or state-led campaigns; instead, it relied on emotional engagement, aspirational imagery, and personal narratives of freedom and self-discovery.

Cultural Diplomacy and Popular Culture

This framework draws on theories of cultural diplomacy that highlight the growing importance of popular culture in shaping international understanding and informal diplomatic relationships. Cultural diplomacy refers to the exchange of ideas, values, traditions, and cultural expressions between nations with the aim of fostering mutual understanding and goodwill. As Milton C. Cummings defines it, cultural diplomacy is “the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding” (Cummings, 2003). In the contemporary global media landscape, this exchange increasingly occurs through popular cultural forms rather than exclusively through state-sponsored initiatives.

Scholars argue that films operate as powerful cultural texts that circulate meanings across borders and allow audiences to emotionally engage with foreign cultures. Cinema, therefore, becomes a site of informal diplomacy, shaping perceptions through storytelling, aesthetics, and emotional resonance rather than official messaging.

Within this context, *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* functions as a medium of cultural diplomacy by strengthening India–Spain relations through popular culture. The film enabled Indian audiences to identify with Spanish spaces and practices while embedding them within a familiar Bollywood narrative. By facilitating cultural recognition and emotional connection beyond formal diplomatic channels, *ZNMD* demonstrates how popular cinema can act as an effective tool of cultural diplomacy in the globalised era.

Cinematic Tourism Theory

Cinematic tourism theory explains how visual narratives in film motivate travel behaviour by transforming locations into symbolic and experiential destinations. Through repeated exposure to visually striking landscapes, cultural practices, and lifestyle experiences, audiences begin to associate particular destinations with the emotions and narratives presented on screen. These cinematic portrayals create a form of imagined familiarity, where viewers feel a connection to a place they have never physically visited. As a result, films can function as powerful marketing tools for destinations by embedding travel aspirations within entertainment.

In the case of *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*, the film's portrayal of Spanish landscapes, traditions, and leisure culture played a significant role in shaping Indian audiences' perceptions of Spain as an attractive and aspirational travel destination. Scenes featuring activities such as the La Tomatina and the Running of the Bulls created visually memorable experiences that were integrated into the narrative of friendship, self-discovery, and adventure. These depictions encouraged audiences to imagine themselves participating in similar experiences, thus transforming cinematic consumption into potential travel motivation. Consequently, the film illustrates how cinema can stimulate international tourism flows and contribute to the branding of destinations through emotional storytelling and immersive visual imagery.

Critical Media

Critical media and postcolonial perspectives provide an analytical lens for examining the unequal power

relations embedded in global cultural exchanges. These approaches focus on how media representations shape perceptions of national identity, cultural authenticity, and global prestige. In the context of transnational cinema, they highlight how certain countries benefit more from international exposure while others remain culturally peripheral. Such perspectives emphasize that cultural flows are not always reciprocal; instead, they often reproduce existing hierarchies in global media systems.

Applying this framework to *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* reveals how the film functioned as a platform for promoting the cultural landscape of Spain to Indian audiences. Spanish culture, architecture, and festivals were framed as exotic, liberating, and aspirational, which contributed to the country's visibility within the Indian tourism market. However, the exchange was not entirely symmetrical. While Spain gained international tourism exposure and cultural branding through the film, India's cultural representation remained largely centred on the characters and their personal journeys rather than on showcasing Indian cultural heritage to a global audience.

Representation of Spain in *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*

Cinema plays a significant role in shaping cultural perceptions and influencing public interest in foreign countries. The Bollywood film *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (2011), directed by Zoya Akhtar, serves as a strong example of how films can act as tools of cultural promotion and soft diplomacy. Through support from the Spanish government, positive reception in both India and Spain, and its influence on tourism, cuisine, and language learning, the film helped create widespread interest in Spanish culture among Indian audiences.

The Spanish government actively supported the production of *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*, recognising the potential of Bollywood's large international audience. Assistance was provided mainly through the Spain Tourism Board and regional authorities in Catalonia, Andalusia, and Navarre. The filmmakers were granted access to iconic locations such as Barcelona, Costa Brava, Seville, Ronda, and Pamplona. Logistical support, filming permits, and regional tax incentives made Spain an attractive and practical choice for shooting. Spanish authorities also ensured that cultural events like La Tomatina and the Running of the Bulls were portrayed authentically, helping to present Spain as vibrant, welcoming, and culturally rich.

In India, the film was received with critical and commercial success. Audiences strongly connected with its themes of friendship, self-discovery, and personal freedom. Equally important was the film's visually appealing portrayal of Spain, which transformed the country into an aspirational yet relatable destination for Indian viewers. Spain was not shown merely as a scenic backdrop but as an integral part of the story. As a result, many Indian viewers developed a strong emotional association with the country, leading to increased curiosity and admiration.

The reception of the film in Spain was also positive. Spanish audiences and media appreciated the respectful representation of Spanish traditions, landscapes, and regional diversity. Tourism authorities in Spain acknowledged the film's contribution to raising Spain's visibility in India and viewed it as a successful example of film-induced tourism. This reinforced Spain's interest in collaborating with international film industries as part of its tourism promotion strategy.

One of the most noticeable impacts of the film was the growth of Spain-themed tourism packages in India. Travel agencies began offering itineraries inspired by the film, often highlighting destinations and festivals shown in the movie. Spain gradually emerged as a popular European travel option among Indian tourists. Additionally, the film contributed to increased interest in Spanish cuisine. Dishes such as paella, tapas,

and sangria gained popularity in Indian metropolitan cities, as Spanish food became associated with a relaxed and enjoyable lifestyle.

The film also encouraged greater interest in the Spanish language. The use of Spanish music and dialogue added authenticity and charm, making the language appear appealing and accessible. Following the film's release, Spanish began to be seen by many young Indians as a language linked to travel, culture, and global exposure.

Spain's growing popularity as a filming hub for Indian cinema reflects its strategic blend of diverse landscapes, strong governmental support, and global visual appeal. Over the past decade, Spain has emerged as a preferred destination not only for Bollywood but also for regional Indian film industries. After the success of *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*, filmmakers increasingly recognised Spain's ability to offer a wide range of visually striking locations within a single country. Films such as *Dil Dhadakne Do* (2015) continued this trend by featuring Barcelona, reinforcing Spain's image as a sophisticated Mediterranean setting.

More recent productions like *Pathaan* (2023) and *Tu Jhoothi Main Makkaar* (2023) showcased Spain's scenic coastline, with Mallorca's Cala Llamp and Cala Almunia providing dramatic backdrops for popular song sequences. Spanish cities such as Cádiz and Málaga have also featured prominently, as seen in *Pathaan*, *Nannaku Prematho* (2016), and *Dhamaka* (2021), where historic architecture, deserts, and iconic bullrings were used effectively. In addition to visual diversity, Spain offers efficient filming infrastructure, streamlined permissions, and attractive tax incentives, making it economically appealing for large-scale productions. Together, these factors have positioned Spain as a reliable and visually versatile filming destination, strengthening its presence in Indian cinema and further enhancing its cultural visibility among Indian audiences.

Impact on Indian Perceptions of Spain

The tourism impact of *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* was swift and significant. According to *The Economic Times* (2011), Spain Tourism received 600,000 enquiries from India after the release of *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*. The trend continued to rise, with nearly 200,000 Indian visitors recorded by 2018, as reported in *The Economic Times* (2019).

Travel agencies in India created special "ZNMD-themed tours," offering packages that followed the film's route. These itineraries usually included scuba diving lessons on the Costa Brava, drives through the Andalusian countryside, and visits to Tomatina and Pamplona. The idea of a "Bollywood Road Trip in Spain" became a strong marketing tool, especially for honeymooners and groups of friends.

Spain's regional tourism boards also capitalized on the film's success. The Valencia Tourism Board noted a significant rise in Indian participants at the Tomatina festival from 2012 onward. Likewise, hotels in Seville and Barcelona began offering vegetarian meals and hiring Hindi-speaking staff to meet the needs of the growing Indian clientele. Airlines like Lufthansa and Emirates saw an increase in connecting flights from Indian cities to Madrid and Barcelona in the years following the film.

Even years after its release, *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* remains an unofficial tourism campaign. The Spanish Tourism Office in Mumbai often cites the film as one of the most successful examples of film-related tourism. In 2021, during the film's 10th anniversary, Spain's ambassador to India, José María Ridao, publicly credited the movie with changing Spain's image among Indian travellers from a distant European nation to an accessible, exciting destination.

Trends in Indian Tourism to Spain Post-2011

Following the release of *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* in 2011, Spain witnessed a noticeable rise in interest from Indian tourists, particularly among young, urban, middle- and upper-middle-class travellers. The film positioned Spain as an aspirational leisure destination, contributing to increased outbound tourism from India through travel packages, themed itineraries, and experiential travel inspired by the film's narrative. This trend reflects the broader impact of cinema in shaping tourism preferences and consumer behaviour. Tourism growth was especially visible in regions featured prominently in the film, such as Catalonia, Andalusia, and Valencia. Beyond leisure tourism, these regions also attracted Indian youth through educational and cultural mobility, including participation in Spain's English Language Assistant programmes. Such migration patterns indicate that film-induced interest extended beyond short-term tourism to longer-term cultural and educational engagement with Spain.

Spanish tourism boards and regional film commissions played an important role in sustaining this momentum by collaborating with Indian travel agencies and promoting film locations as tourism assets. These institutions leveraged ZNMD's popularity through marketing campaigns, location branding, and facilitation of international film shoots, demonstrating how state and regional actors can strategically capitalize on cinematic exposure to generate economic and cultural benefits.

While film-induced tourism can create immediate economic gains, its long-term sustainability remains debated. The durability of tourism growth depends on continued cultural engagement, infrastructure development, and diversified tourism offerings beyond cinematic appeal. In the case of Spain, sustained interest from Indian tourists suggests that ZNMD acted as a gateway rather than a temporary stimulus, although long-term growth requires strategic planning to avoid over-commercialisation and ensure culturally and environmentally sustainable tourism practices.

Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power Outcomes

Informal Diplomacy through Popular Cinema

Beyond tourism statistics, *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* functioned as a form of informal diplomacy by familiarising Indian audiences with everyday Spanish customs such as tapas, flamenco, and the siesta, presenting them as joyful and relatable rather than exotic. Simultaneously, the film generated curiosity in Spain about Bollywood's emotional storytelling and production scale, encouraging renewed interest in Indian cinema. Through narrative and emotion rather than state-led messaging, popular cinema facilitated mutual cultural recognition between the two countries.

Public–Private Collaborations Post-ZNMD

The film's success prompted both governments to support deeper cultural collaboration, including agreements between Spain's Ministry of Culture and Sport and India's Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to streamline film production processes. Spanish production companies began exploring co-productions with Indian studios, while tourism boards and film commissions actively marketed Spain as a filming destination. These initiatives were further reinforced by private actors such as universities and cultural institutions hosting Bollywood-themed events and film screenings.

Spain's Soft Power Gains vs. India's Cultural Projection

Applying Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, the outcomes of ZNMD reveal an asymmetrical cultural exchange. Spain gained significant soft power in India by enhancing its cultural attractiveness and national image through emotional storytelling rather than conventional branding. While Bollywood acted as an

informal ambassador for Spain, India's cultural projection through the film remained largely domestic, with limited reciprocal impact on Spain's broader public consciousness.

Long-Term Bilateral Cultural Engagement

What began as a single cinematic event evolved into sustained cultural engagement. Spain's continued efforts to attract Indian film productions, the inclusion of Spanish cinema in Indian film education, and the expanding role of Instituto Cervantes in promoting language learning indicate institutionalisation of this cultural relationship. Academic initiatives such as "Bollywood Days" at Spanish universities further demonstrate that the impact of *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* has extended into a long-term bilateral cultural partnership rather than remaining a one-time phenomenon. The film has also been included as part of a marketing management course in Spain.

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