

Redefining India's Global Image: The Role of Bollywood and Regional Cinema in Cultural Diplomacy with West Asia

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at how Indian cinema continues to evolve as a tool for cultural diplomacy by examining how Bollywood and regional films affect India's foreign policy and international relations. The study investigates how film traditions affect West Asia's perception of India along with how film festivals and foreign co-productions affect the country's diplomatic efforts. The study particularly focuses briefly on the case studies of *RRR*, *Manjummel Boys*, *Leo*, and *The Disciple*. The study investigates how film traditions affect West Asia's perception of India along with how film festivals and foreign co-productions affect the country's diplomatic efforts. This research investigates the following objectives: 1) To explore how Bollywood and regional Indian films can be used as tools of soft power and cultural diplomacy. 2) To look at how it displays Indian identity, values, and social problems to the global audience. 3) The focus is to probe into how international co-productions and film festivals shape the global popularity and strategic importance of Indian films; especially centring on *RRR*, *Manjummel Boys*, *Leo*, and *The Disciple*. 4) To examine how people in West Asia react to and interpret these films, especially through internet and digital media. The study posits important questions such as: 1) How do Bollywood and regional Indian films help with cultural diplomacy and soft power? 2) How do they demonstrate Indian culture and values to the global audience? 3) How do co-productions and film festivals affect the international popularity and diplomatic importance of *RRR*, *Manjummel Boys*, *Leo*, and *The Disciple*? The study uses a qualitative approach to explore these questions and objectives. It includes thematic analysis of films to identify common narratives and cultural messages, case studies of famous international collaborations and festival screenings, and an examination of audience responses on global platforms along with observations of online discussions and fan communities about how Indian cinema is received and interpreted in the West Asian countries. The research therefore intends to provide a comprehensive understanding of cinema's role in cultural diplomacy, the relative impact of Bollywood and regional films, and foreign collaborations in defining India's global image through *RRR*, *Manjummel Boys*, *Leo*, and *The Disciple*.

Keywords: Cultural diplomacy, Soft power, Indian cinema, West Asia, Regional cinema

INTRODUCTION

Joseph Nye, an American political scientist, coined the term "soft power" in the 1990s and further developed it in his renowned publication, "Soft Power: A Means to Success in World Politics" (2004). According to him, "soft power" is the capacity of a country to use methods of co-option and seduction rather than threats. He argued that in the 21st century, it is more beneficial to employ a combination of soft and firm authority (Kulkarni, 2024).

Throughout the Cold War, Hollywood significantly contributed to the United States' efforts to win in the ideological war against Communism. Using cinema as a tool, it propagated U.S. values such as liberalism and market capitalism to foreign countries, which are not specific to the US only. In the 1990s we see that countries like South Korea also made significant investments in the music and film industry, which is now evident in the development of K-pop (Kumar). In his book, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, Nye

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proposed three sources of soft power: a nation's culture, political beliefs, and foreign policy (Joseph S. Nye, 1990). When it comes to Indian cinema, it rightly fits in the first category as it plays a significant role in portraying the culture and beliefs of India. However, discussions of soft power in relation to Indian cinema have predominantly concerned Bollywood films in the past, giving little credit to regional cinema (Kumar n.d.). This is mainly because Bollywood films have undeniably served as a substantial medium of cultural export and with easy access to regional films from different parts of the country in the present era, cinema of India overall has seen remarkable changes in bridging socio-cultural gaps.

We are well aware that Bollywood and India's regional cinema has had a significant impact on cultural diplomacy and in fostering ties with other countries through its portrayal of diverse cultures, values, and languages, leading to intercultural understanding as well as depicting a positive insight of the country. Indian films are a popular option in many countries due to the vibrant storytelling and colourful visuals that attract audiences worldwide. Bollywood has therefore emerged as an essential part of India's soft power and has had a long history of bringing together a global audience through its relatable characters, catchy music, and sometimes even stories based on true events that resonate with a global audience. Dance routines with intricate choreography often draw people in, along with Indian classical dance which communicates stories through gestures and movements (Maharishi and Bharti, 2024).

Bollywood films are extremely popular around West Asia, which has helped India's soft power by promoting cultural awareness, changing people's minds, and fostering relationships across borders. Indian actors and films have always been a source of entertainment in the Gulf states, the Arabs have consistently shown love and admiration for Indian cinema and music by streaming the films in their respective countries. We are recently seeing multiple collabs and film festivals taking place, especially in Riyadh and UAE, where Bollywood actors make appearances, further strengthening cultural relations through the medium. When it comes to Indian television, we have seen them having a global appeal – even people from parts of Africa as well as Europe often express their thoughts about the culture, diverse languages, traditional family dynamics, social issues that are prevalent in India. We see it portrayed on social media quite often these days, where a global audience is reacting to Indian

television as well as mainstream Bollywood films. Social media, of course has played a huge role in bringing the global audience together in recent years where handles like Instagram, X, Facebook, and YouTube have given an easy access to viewers. Also, OTT platforms with mostly no censoring, have given Indian films a new push into the realm of world cinema where it can compete with the global film industry and put forth its foot as an important tool for soft power relations.

UAE being the hub of Indian diaspora, has been one of India's largest non-oil trading partners at \$65.4 billion (2024-25) and the main centre for Bollywood films (Shah, 2025). It has also been a host of about 4.3 million Indian expatriates (Shah, 2025). Shah Rukh Khan is one of the main faces for Dubai tourism, more recently joined by Indian cricketer Virat Kohli and actors such as Anushka Sharma, Saif Ali Khan, and Sara Ali Khan. The trade between India and UAE amounted to \$98 billion (2024-25), which CEPA (Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, 2022) aims to reach \$100 billion by the year 2030 (Shah, 2025). In the recent years, we have seen Saudi Arabia become a centre of entertainment market where celebrities from Hollywood as well as Bollywood make regular appearances at the film festivals. Furthermore, South Indian diaspora in the region (about 21.8%) have played a significant role in making Tamil, Telugu, and Malayali films popular among the masses in KSA. Uplifting the ban from films in 2018 under its Vision 2030, the country has seen a massive surge in its economy. Saudi based filmmakers are now seen to be flourishing with the opportunity to portray their culture and narrative through films, making their film industry a rapidly growing sector. This rise of cinematic sphere in the region is becoming a powerful tool for bridging cultural gaps, promoting an understanding of their region, language, and breaking stereotypes. Along with becoming one of the largest consumers of global cinema, the region is now growing towards becoming a creator of their own cinema. India's rise to become an important force on the world stage in the 21st century can be attributed not just to its financial and demographic strength, but also to its rich cultural tapestry, which is best shown via films. India's film industry, with Bollywood as its most well-known face, is at the centre of the country's soft power strategy. There are also many regional cinemas that depict authentic stories. These different styles of films work together as cultural ambassadors, changing how people around the world see

things and promote understanding between cultures by means of the art of storytelling.

Literature Review:

In his influential 1990 book, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, Joseph Nye challenges the then-prevailing notion that America's global influence was in irreversible decline. Instead, Nye argues that American power was not just about military or economic strength (hard power), but increasingly about the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction, persuasion, and appeal—a concept he called soft power. Nye defines soft power as “the ability to get others to want what you want” and contrasts it with hard power, which relies on coercion or inducement (Joseph S. Nye, 1990).

The research paper by Rajesh K. Venugopal analyses how Indian regional cinema—especially from Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Marathi, and Bengali industries—has become a powerful tool of soft power and cultural diplomacy by depicting authentic local narratives, addressing social issues, and gaining international acclaim through film festivals and streaming platforms. Subtitling, dubbing, and OTT have enabled global audiences to appreciate India's diversity, challenging Bollywood's dominance and presenting a nuanced, multicultural image of India worldwide (Venugopal, 2025).

M.K. Raghavendra, in his book, *Bipolar Identity* (2001) traces the development of Kannada cinema from 1940s to the 21st century. The author here investigates the conflict between the ‘region’ and the ‘nation’ in the regional consciousness by focusing on the function of regional language cinema. Raghavendra investigates the impact of the linguistic division of the states in the 1950s on the regional identity and traces the development of Kannada cinema to its origins in a princely state under indirect British control.

Beyond Bollywood: The Cinemas of South India (2017) by M.K. Raghavendra is an anthology that explores the rich histories, themes, and unique cultural identities of Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and Kannada cinemas. It analyses their narrative styles, social relevance, and how they differ from Bollywood, offering a comprehensive, scholarly look at South Indian film industries (Raghavendra, 2017).

Ramesh Chandra and Manasi Sinha examine India's use of visual and performing arts—including Bollywood—

as key instruments of soft power in international politics. It discusses the role of government initiatives, diaspora engagement, and cultural diplomacy through global art exhibitions, film festivals, and digital platforms in projecting a vibrant image of India and building diplomatic relationships worldwide (Chandra and Sinha, 2023)

Asma Ayob and Marisa Keuris in their paper explore how Indian regional cinema serves as a powerful tool of cultural diplomacy and soft power through authentic narratives and socio-political themes. The research emphasizes the role of international film festivals, subtitling, and digital platforms in expanding global reach and fostering cross-cultural understanding of India's diverse identity (Ayob and Keuris, 2017).

C.S.H.N. Murthy criticises the conventional notion of Bollywood as India's principal soft power asset, claiming that it promotes postmodern consumerist culture rather than India's deeply ingrained traditional values. Instead, he sees Tollywood (Telugu cinema) as a more legitimate flagship soft power resource since it preserves traditional Indian culture, values, and multi-genre storytelling that resonates globally while maintaining cultural integrity (Murthy, 2016).

During the 1950s and 1960s, Bollywood unintentionally served as a soft power tool, forging global linkages through films about postcolonial struggles, poverty, and optimism. It focuses on the reception of Indian film in the Soviet Union, Africa, and Turkey, emphasising its significance in fostering cultural affinity and alternative modernity during the Cold War, in addition to state-led diplomatic efforts (Singh, 2021).

Sony Jalarajan Raj and Adith K. Suresh's study analyses the worldwide acclaim of the song “Naatu-Naatu” from RRR, contending that its amalgamation of traditional Indian dance and contemporary cinematic grandeur captivates Western listeners via an Orientalist perspective. Although lauded for its vibrancy and cultural significance, the dance risks being relegated to mere exotic entertainment, obscuring its profound political and anti-colonial implications (Raj and Suresh, 2025).

Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* is seen as a cinematic representation of rural Bengali culture, destitution, and human fortitude where he encapsulates the spirit of Bengali customs, familial connections, and the harsh realities of existence via authentic people and quotidian challenges, positioning the film as a seminal work in Indian and global cinema. It is seen as one of the many significant pieces of regional Indian cinema (Yadav

and Mehta, 2022).

Governments and embassies are increasingly using movies for public diplomacy. They organise film festivals, cultural weeks, and India-focused retrospectives at worldwide locations, depicting its rising status as soft power. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and Ministry of External Affairs have also promoted Indian films at international festivals and marketplaces. International film co-production treaties and the Film Facilitation Office (FFO) are part of India's cultural expansion agenda.

This opens additional doors for new filmmakers and producers to acquire scholarships, collaborate globally, and represent Indian narratives worldwide (Dutta, 2025).

Beyond Bollywood, OTT platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime have helped Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, Marathi, and Malayalam films cross language barriers and reach new audiences globally. Indian cinema is a cultural phenomenon and an effective diplomatic tool. *Lagaan*, *Dangal*, and *RRR* have all appeared at international film festivals and helped promote India's soft power image by focusing on resilience, tradition, and community (Sengar, 2025).

METHODOLOGY

The research adopts a qualitative, multi-method approach to comprehensively explore the cultural diplomacy role of Bollywood and regional cinema. Firstly, it conducts detailed thematic analysis of selected films; scrutinizing storylines, characters, themes, and cultural representations to understand how Indian identity, values, and social issues are portrayed for global audiences. Case studies of prominent international collaborations and film festival screenings (such as co-productions and award-winning entries) are used to illustrate how cross-border partnerships and festival exposure elevate the diplomatic profile and international acceptance of Indian cinema. This paper also incorporates an analysis of global audience responses by systematically exploring online forums, reviews, and OTT platforms, thereby capturing diverse international receptions and interpretations. Additionally, there is a review of government and institutional initiatives (such as foreign co-production treaties and film promotion offices) that facilitate cinema as a diplomatic tool. Triangulating these methods, the research paints a comprehensive picture of how films function as vehicles of soft power in shaping international perceptions of India.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Early Post-Independence Era

Spanning from a period of 1920s to the 1950s Indian film industry was propelled by renowned directors like as Guru Dutt and Raj Kapoor, consequently beginning to influence the global landscape of the 1950s and 1960s. People throughout the Middle East, Africa, and Eastern Europe grew to appreciate and love Raj Kapoor's films, particularly *Awaara* (1951) and *Shree 420* (1955), along with Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zamin*. In the year 1957, Mehboob Khan's film, *Mother India* became a massive blockbuster in domestically as well as internationally. In the midst of the cold war, Indian cinema became what is known as *cinéma vérité* or cinema of truth. The filmmakers would employ themes related to the actual conditions that plagued the world at the time. Known as the 'Golden Era' of Bollywood, the period from 1947 to the 1960s employed themes such as poverty, sacrifice, love, suffering of women, and the everyday struggle of ordinary citizens resonated deeply with the broader audience. These works, also addressing the issues of society such as social justice and political struggles of a new independent nation provided global audience with an insight into India's growing aspirations and apprehensions. These films were also responsible for the depiction of post-independence ethos, therefore evoking sympathy for India and garnering admiration for it as a nascent, optimistic democracy (Dua, 2024). BR Chopra's *Naya Daur* (1957), a social drama film was based on the repercussions of the Second Five Year Plan and on the growing industrialisation of the country. The film is a reflection of the consequences of the new policies in rural India, as well as the urban-rural divide (Singh, 2021). Even though it is a critique of these policies, it nonetheless explores the long-term implications of Nehru's idea of modernisation. It is worth noting that Nehru never did use the Hindi film industry as a tool for cultural diplomacy and awareness, the cinema itself depicted the socio-political conditions, socialism, and the idea of 'India' which in turn facilitated the global outreach of Bollywood (Singh, 2021).

History of Bollywood as a Tool for Cultural Diplomacy

After India gained independence in 1947, the subsequent decades witnessed a significant rise in the Bollywood industry. Both mainstream Bollywood and

regional films developed into a cultural phenomenon within the Indian subcontinent, also serving as vital instruments of India's soft power. As a result, they played a crucial role in shaping global perceptions and functioned as an effective means of cultural diplomacy. Indian cinema, according to Joseph S. Nye's *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* is rightly placed under the category of culture, reflecting values and different ways of life. While leaders of India like Jawaharlal Nehru stressed on the importance of cinema in social as well as political spheres and viewed it with openness, Mahatma Gandhi was sceptical of it. The Film Enquiry Committee (FEC) was set up by Nehru in 1949 which was responsible for the assessment of film industry, and proposed ways for further improvement (Cherian, n.d.). In the year 1960, it was under his leadership that led to the establishment of two of the most important pillars in Indian cinema, the first one being the Film Finance Corporation (FFC) and the other which is what we know as the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) (Cherian, n.d.). He believed cinema to be a tool for education and awareness of the masses. The former Prime Minister of India, Dr. Manmohan Singh, in one of his speeches addressed Indian cinema's role in maintaining its soft power. He stated: "Soft power of 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 Middle East, in Africa – people talk about Indian films. So that is a new way of influencing the world about the growing importance of India. Soft power is equally important in the new world of diplomacy" (Kumar, n.d.).

The Global Expansion of Bollywood

The optimism and patriotism of the 1950s was, however, replaced by growing apprehension after the 1962 war and demise of Jawaharlal Nehru. It gave way to what we know as the era of 'Angry Young Man' pioneered by Amitabh Bachchan. A range of films from the late 1960s to the 1970s portrayed themes of common man struggling on the verge of economic decline and subsequently the demise of Nehruvian socialism. Films such as *Sholay* (1975), *Zanjeer* (1973) and *Deewar* (1975) starring Amitabh Bachchan, reflected postcolonial realities that resonated with the audience across borders going through the same struggles. This period also led to an increase in Bollywood's influence among South Asian diasporas globally, especially in the Middle-East, UK, and

US acting as a cultural link for migrants. The cinema of this era, therefore, was essentially anti-establishment. It was against socio-political injustices, depicted the dichotomies of rich versus poor, and the suffering of women. The representation of these themes became widespread not only in the diasporic communities, but also in the neighbouring South Asian countries (Dua, 2024). Indo-Russian relations were strengthened over time and Russia, notably imported a total of 200 films, crossing the USA in the years spanning 1954 to 1991 (Dua, 2024). This included Raj Kapoor's *Awara* and Babbar Subhash's *Disco Dancer* which emerged as the highest grossing Indian film in the Soviet era.

The 1980s and 1990s saw the emergence of Bollywood as a significant instrument of soft power and cultural diplomacy, transforming India's global image. These decades saw the shift from its conventional and melodramatic roots to a more flexible approach, with themes connecting people from all over the world. The diaspora, especially, was the most impacted by this change. The 1980s also witnessed cross-productions between Indian cinema and cinema of other countries, especially the Soviet Union. The film *Ali Baba aur 40 Chor* was in fact a result of this collaboration (Malhotra, 2017).

Indian cinema cemented relationships and promoted understanding, traditionally opening its doors to artists from the neighbouring countries, thereby enhancing creative exchanges and regional harmony. This cultural exchange not only enriched the story-telling of Bollywood but also enriched the overall cultural picture of South Asia. The industry's ability to bridge divides and foster collaboration continues to be a powerful force in promoting unity and diversity in the region.

Indian Cinema's Role in Cultural Diplomacy with West Asia

Bollywood has had an effect on cultural diplomacy as early as the middle of the 20th century, and have also served as a connecting link for the Indian diaspora to their roots and show people all around the world India's distinctive mix of music, dancing, and drama, especially in the Gulf region because of its relations with India which date back to centuries earlier. These films are great in spreading Indian values like love, family, strength, the inevitable triumph of good over evil, and overcoming obstacles because of their ability to be emotional, dramatic, and visually appealing (Sonal, 2025). Shah Rukh

Khan, Irrfan Khan, Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, Amitabh Bachchan, and more recently Priyanka Chopra and Deepika Padukone are examples of Indian celebrities who are well-known outside of India. These actors operate as unofficial “cultural diplomats.” Their movies, such as *My Name is Khan*, *Kabhie Khushi Kabhie Gham*, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, have been played in theatres all throughout Europe, Africa, South America, and especially in the Gulf region. This proves the fact that movies can connect people from different backgrounds via shared thoughts and experiences. Indian cinema became popular in the Arab region in the 1940s and 1950s when it was, in fact, introduced by the Egyptians from the city named Tangier or the “City of the Straits” (Khosa, 2024). The cinema is said to have spread from this city through Indian merchants during the colonial era who then moved towards the Arab region during World-War 2. Although primarily screened for Indians in the Arab world, they became a popular source of entertainment for the locals as well because of the dubbing which made it easier for them to understand the films better (Khosa, 2024). Two of the most famous dubbing artists who helped popularise the cinema of India were the names Ibrahim al-Sayyeh and Muhammad al-Hussaini. Along with Indian films, these artists were responsible for dubbing Western films from France, England, and Italy as well (Khosa, 2024). Indian cinema at that point also provided the audiences with themes of resilience, love and sacrifice for the nation, and fight for liberation from the colonial rule which resonated with the Arab audience, therefore leading to more popularity of Indian cinema. Over the decades, the admiration and appeal for Bollywood increased tenfold; from television and theatres to multiple screening platforms now available, Indian cinema has always had a strong audience in the Arab world.

India and West Asia Cultural Link through Cinema

In the last few years, films like *Dangal*, *Secret Superstar*, and *3 Idiots* have won over fans in the Gulf states as well as China. This shows that India can use films to build its reputation and get people to admire it. Bollywood stars have also been a part of mainstream Hollywood such as Priyanka Chopra’s debut with TV – series called *Quantico*, and later her film *Baywatch* marked her way into the hearts of a global audience. Aishwarya Rai’s film *The Pink Panther 2* and her various appearances on Cannes film festivals and Met Gala have

made her one of the most recognized Indian celebrities. Similarly, Irrfan Khan made multiple appearances on Hollywood films such as *Life of Pi*, *The Amazing Spider-man*, and *Jurassic World*, among others. Met Gala has become an annual thing where we see various Indian celebrities showcasing their culture and heritage by adorning sarees, Indian jewellery, and dresses designed by Indian celebrity designers in order to bring their culture to the spotlight and hence become a source of soft power for cultural relations.

Red Sea International Film Festival (RSIFF) hosted by Saudi Arabia in Jeddah and launched in 2019, is an initiative by their government to foster cultural ties at a global scale by introducing their own cinema as well as catering to the cinema of the world. This initiative includes the Red Sea Fund, the Red Sea Souk, and Red Sea Labs turning Saudi Arabia into a hub for cinematic sphere which was not present earlier (RSIFF, 2025). Celebrities such as Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, Alia Bhatt, Salman Khan, Rekha, Kriti Sanon represented Indian cinema at the festival in 2025, giving an example of their strengthening cultural relations. Hollywood and West Asian celebrities also made an appearance, where 38 women filmmakers were awarded, taking this festival to a global stage (Hameed, 2025).

Indian cinema has always helped in establishing relations that go beyond economic and political ones, fostering ties through shared themes of love, kinship, and resilience. The large-scale popularity of Indian cinema, especially in the Gulf states has helped in fostering cross-cultural dialogues, thereby uniting diverse groups of people. One of the reasons why Bollywood has had so much impact on West Asia is its ability to portray larger than life, universally felt scenarios and with its vibrant storytelling, it has functioned as an efficient tool for soft power relations between the two nations. With this comes the familiarity of Indian culture and values; people watch Indian cinema and get acquainted with what India stands for as a nation, therefore building trust. In countries like Iran, Egypt, Africa, along with South Africa, the impact of Indian cinema went beyond mere entertainment. The post-independence cinema of Raj Kapoor, Bimal Roy, Guru Dutt, and Mehboob Khan resonated with the recently independent nations or those fighting for independence by depicting the shared sentimentality, and themes of fight, resilience, and victory over the colonisers (National Economic Forum, 2025). For the Arab audiences, Indian films have been able to shift the focus

from a Western perspective to these “societies in transition” (Srouf, 2024) with which they find resonance.

Indian cinema in essence comprises of not just Bollywood films, but is in fact home to a number of film industries located in Tamil Nadu, Bengal, Assam, Maharashtra, and Kerala, where more than twenty regional languages are spoken (Srouf, 2024). This means that the nature of Indian cinema is ‘plural’ in nature, that is, it cannot be defined by Bollywood alone, and is home for many genres ranging from independent art films to commercial ones (Srouf, 2024). All these varied genres are authentic representations of India depicted by different regions of the country. In the last several years, this regional cinema has been a potent vehicle for cultural diplomacy. It narrates complex, real stories that highlight India’s diversity. This includes South Indian cinema in various languages such as Malayalam, Tamil, and Telugu films, Bengali films, along with Marathi, Assamese, and Manipuri films. These films have been showcased at famous international film festivals held annually like Cannes, Berlin, and Venice. Indian classics like Satyajit Ray’s *Pather Panchali* (Bengali) is one of the most famous films that have received awards and nominations, along with *Kumbalangi Nights* (Malayalam), *Sairat* (Marathi), *Super Deluxe* (Tamil), and the recent Oscar-winning *RRR* (Telugu).

Bollywood and India’s regional cinemas serve as dynamic instruments of cultural diplomacy and soft power. Together, they are an indication of India’s rich culture and diversity, thereby transforming global culture and global perception of India during a period of unprecedented international trade and connection.

The Rise of Over-the-top (OTT) Streaming Platforms

The rise of global streaming platforms and film festivals has made these regional treasures easier to find around the world, which means that more people than ever have access to Indian stories. *The Lunchbox* (Hindi, Marathi), *Jallikattu* (Malayalam), *Court* (Marathi), and *Visaranai* (Tamil) are some of the monumental films that have not merely demonstrated the complex Indian society and culture, but further revolutionised how people think of the country as a place of creativity, diversity, and advancement. In an honest and artistic manner, these films address significant issues such as caste, gender, poverty, and justice, thereby altering the perceptions of individuals worldwide and dispelling misconceptions.

Popularity of Indian Television in the Gulf

Indian films and TV shows on OTT platforms such as the *Baahubali* franchise, *Gully Boy*, *The White Tiger*, *Delhi Crime* (series), *Sacred Games* (series), have emerged as an integral component of events around the world. All these have made a lasting impact at film festivals and this unprecedented reach has resulted in a surge in India’s influence, which has inspired interest, admiration, and even collaboration from filmmakers and industries worldwide. Indian television soaps have seen a major fan following in the Gulf states before the rise of online streaming platforms, dubbed in Arabic on the channel called ‘Zee Alwan’ (owned by an Indian media conglomerate) launched in the UAE in 2012 (*Zee Alwan*, n.d.). Some of the serials include *Kumkum Bhagya*, *Kundali Bhagya*, and *Pavitra Rishta* which initially aimed to target the South Asian diaspora in the UAE but became popular with the Emiratis as well. As of 2025, the channel still operates and aims to bridge cultural gaps between India and the Emirati audience by streaming Indian television shows and films (*Zee Alwan*, n.d.). Along with Zee Alwan, Zee Aflam was launched in 2009 and MBC Bollywood in 2013 which televised Bollywood films dubbed in Arabic, primarily catering to the Emirati audience (Mitra, 2021). However, according to the ‘Media Use in The Middle East’ survey in 2019 by Northwestern University Qatar, the television viewership fell to a large extent as compared to 2013 due to online streaming platforms and social media. In Qatar and Jordan, it fell down by 26 and 22 percentage points, respectively. However, older women (45+) have been recorded to watch more television as compared to younger women and men, those around the age of 18-24 (Dennis *et al.*, 2017).

Popularity of Indian filmmaking in the Gulf

While we can discern the extent of popularity of Indian cinema and TV shows in West Asian countries, it becomes important to note that a lot of Indian filmmakers (particularly from Bollywood), choose GCC countries as their location for shooting films. Over the years we have seen a growing trend among the filmmakers to shoot either songs or full-length feature films in these countries. Popular locations include UAE (particularly Dubai) where films like *Happy New Year* (2014), *Welcome* (2007), and *Pathaan* (2023) were primarily shot. Other regions include Oman where popular films like *Once Upon a Time in Mumbai Dobaara* (2013) and *Awara Paagal*

Deewana (2002) were shot. In Abu Dhabi, we have seen some Bollywood hit films being shot such as *Tiger Zinda Hai* (2017), *Race 3* (2018), *Bharat* (2019), *Bunty aur Babli 2* (2021), and *War 2* (2025). Ras Al-Khaimah is another location where film like *Airlift* (2016) was shot (Ayu, 2022). Moreover, the tie-up between these Gulf states and Bollywood has been hugely beneficial for the economies of both the places; with Shah Rukh Khan being the ambassador for Dubai Tourism since 2016 (#BeMyGuest), it has been a tremendous profit for Dubai as well as India. Along with gaining popularity and a huge fan base there, the trend also facilitated Dubai to win the Tourism Destination category at the 2017 International Tourism Film Festival held in Latvia (Mitra, 2021). Also, according to Sreya Mitra's research, Hindi films, most of the time, if not always, surpass Hollywood films at the box office. For instance, in 2015, at the release of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* and *Dilwale* (starring Shah Rukh Khan), the latter earned about AED 11,375,845 as compared to the former, which was only able to earn AED 10,281,456. Bollywood theme parks in Dubai, which showcase everything related to Bollywood, is yet another example of the long-lasting cultural relations between the two nations. It represents how the local people as well as the Indian diaspora are closely linked to Indian cinema (Mitra, 2021).

Indian Regional Cinema as a Tool for Soft Power

Aside from Bollywood being a significant actor in forging soft power relations with global audiences, India's regional cinema is an equally important platform. While 'Bollywood' has been used as a generic word for the Indian film industry globally, film industries in South, West, and East have gained fame and acknowledgment in the recent years (Venugopal, 2025). The prevalence of Hindi language films has been seeing a gradual decline among the population. Conversely, films from the Indian regional film industry have significantly surpassed predictions about their commercial returns, undermining the national and worldwide fame and significance of Bollywood. These films are also putting a focus on regional audiences within localised areas of India (Shirodkar and Chakraborty, 2025).

In the UAE, South Indian cinema remains a fierce competitor for the mainstream Hindi films which is not the case with the rest of West Asia. Since the Gulf is also saturated with people from South India like Malayalis and Tamilians, Bollywood does face contention (Srou,

2024). Tamil language films like *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018) and *Ratsasan* (2018), and Malayalam language films such as *Premam* (2015), *Pulimurugan* (2016), *Jacobinte Swargarajyam* (2016), *Ee Ma Yau* (2018), *Lucifer* (2019) and *Kurup* (2021) were some of the massive hits in the GCC countries (Kavil, 2021). According to news reports, from 2017-2019, movies in Hindi as well as other Indian regional languages earned about 600 crores in the whole of Gulf region. In Saudi Arabia, however, the love for Bollywood remains unbeaten, and with the recent introduction of the Red Sea Film Festival, Saudi citizens keep flocking towards mainstream Bollywood celebrities like Shah Rukh Khan, Ranveer Singh, and Akshay Kumar (Ross, 2023).

The reception of Indian regional film significantly impacts India's cultural diplomacy, which in turn influences the global perception of the nation's art, social challenges, and its multicultural identity. It has transcended domestic boundaries and has therefore achieved international acclaim (Venugopal, 2025). One of the reasons why regional cinema gets a lot of acclaim internationally as well as on national grounds is because of the portrayal of its rich diversity and traditions of India's many communities. These films provide global audiences with nuanced perspectives on Indian life, challenging monolithic representations and offering insight into the country's pluralistic fabric. OTT platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hotstar have given regional cinema necessary means to present itself in front of global audiences. With more visibility through these platforms, and with subtitles and dubbing in various languages, it has become easily accessible to the global audience, in turn promoting India's image.

We can thus determine that regional cinemas have the ability to portray India's rich and diverse culture with greater depth than a conventional Bollywood film. They can be of more benefit as compared to mainstream Hindi cinema in the sense that they address local and national concerns, considering both regional and national identities in their chosen audiences (Raghavendra, 2017). Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955) is a classic example of Indian regional cinema that put India on a global map and explores themes of poverty, family dynamics, and the passage of time in rural Bengal (Yadav and Mehta, 2022).

Market Share Shift: Regional Films vs Bollywood

In the financial year 2023-2024, a total of 17431 films were issued by the Central Board of Film

Certification out of which 5855 certificates were issued to films, and 11576 certificates were issued to digital films (Annual report 2023-2024). Regional films were taken up for production by NFDC in 2023-2024 in various languages such as Ladakhi, Assamese, Manipuri, Sikkimese, etc. depicting equal importance in developing Indian cinema (Annual report 2023-2024). Regional cinema including those in Malayalam, Telugu, and Tamil, have seen significant rise on the box office as well as audience engagement in the recent years. According to recent survey, regional films have gained more popularity in establishing their footing in the film sector, with 60% share as Bollywood drops to 40% (Regional films gain ground with 60% share as Hindi cinema drops to 40%: Report, 2025). Malayali cinema has been the main highlight with recent films like *RRR*, *Manjummel Boys*, *Premalu*, *Aavesham*, *L2: Empuraan*, *Baahubali 1 and 2*, *Thudarum*, *Marco*, among many others. According to reports, in the year 2024, regional films contributed 60% of the market, with Malayalam cinema experiencing an impressive growth to secure a 10% share, while Telugu cinema attained its highest domestic collections at Rs. 2,348 crore. Although generating Rs. 11,833 crore, the second-highest total ever, the year had a 6% decrease in viewership and a persistent dependence on blockbuster films for revenue, highlighting changing audience choices and the increasing impact of regional markets (Regional films gain ground with 60% share as Hindi cinema drops to 40%: Report, 2025). Shashi Tharoor, one of the main proponents of India's soft power discourse, asserts that India has a 'good story' for its audiences, given the cultural diversity of the place (Thussu, 2016). This diversity is what enables Indian cinema to appeal to diverse audiences.

Global Success of Indian Regional Cinema: Case Studies of *RRR*, *Manjummel Boys*, *Leo*, and *The Disciple RRR* (S.S. Rajamouli, 2022)

Challenging Bollywood's domination with the Arab audiences and becoming a favourite worldwide, the film's reach was mainly facilitated by online streaming platforms. With subtitles and dubbing being the options on online streaming platforms such as Netflix, Hotstar, and Amazon Prime, it has contributed to overcoming linguistic barriers and established Indian culture as a global influencer, in line with the government's objective to showcase its rich legacy through cultural exports. Along with becoming a

huge success among the Indian and foreign masses in Europe, UK, US, and Canada, an equally excited response took over Asian countries like South Korea and Japan, along with the GCC; consequently, presenting an opportunity for the nation to further expand its global standing. South-Korean Ambassador Chang Jae-bok was also shown to be enjoying the song 'Naatu-Naatu' composed by MM Keeravani which has bagged a Golden Globe award for the best original song (Gupta, 2023). The film being based on anti-colonial themes resonated with the global audience and garnered worldwide support and recognition. It narrates real-life story of two revolutionaries - Alluri Sitarama Raju and Komaram Bheem fighting against the British rule in India in the 1920s (Gupta, 2023).

During the 2020 Dubai expo, the cast of *RRR* made a special appearance and discussed their film with the media and fans, acknowledging the massive South Indian fan base in the region (Manjusha Radhakrishnan and Manjusha Radhakrishnan, 2022). Thanking the UAE audience for being a huge market for Tamil films at the expo, Ram Charan, one of the stars, pointed out, "I really got a great reception when we were at Expo 2020 Dubai. They have trusted us and given us this appreciation; I really want to make them feel proud and give them better films. Thank you so much UAE for *RRR*" (Parker, 2023). Following this, the film was released across big screens, including IMAX at the Mall of the Emirates, delivering both audio and visual pleasure. According to reports, the film earned around Dh 9.5 million which is \$2.568 in the UAE alone, with Qatar generating \$500,000 in only 10 days, followed by Kuwait at around \$378,468, and Saudi Arabia at \$290,118 (Bindu Rai, Entertainment Editor and Bindu Rai, Entertainment Editor, 2022). Most part of its success lies in its availability in various languages on OTT platforms which serves in recognition of Indian regional cinema worldwide. Consequently, it is just as crucial to acknowledge it as a Tollywood film rather than a major Bollywood production.

However, according to a 2025 study, a lot of the film's international appeal is in part due to the West's perception of India from an Orientalist gaze (Raj and Suresh, 2025). The narrative of *RRR* uses this perspective, characterised by its portrayal of exotic locales, heroic figures with superhuman capabilities, age old tale of good triumphing over evil, grandiose action sequences, and exaggerated cultural rituals, thus reducing and stereotyping Eastern cultures for Western

consumption (Raj and Suresh, 2025). More critics have come forward with statements revolving around Indian cinema's growing obsession with Hindu nationalism, pointing towards Rajamouli's negation of Muslim, Christian, and Sikh freedom fighters in the film (Qureshi, 2023).

Manjummel Boys (Chidambaram S. Poduval, 2024)

The film achieved the status of the highest-grossing Malayalam film by exceeding 200 crore rupees in the global market (Alexander, 2024). A low budget film with lesser-known actors but a gripping screenplay was able to transcend cultural and linguistic barriers by the power of social media. The plot revolves around friendship, where a group of friends attempt, and gradually succeed, to save their friend from the deep caves of Kodaikanal in Tamil Nadu. While the popularity of the film is widely attributed to its plot, writing, and the exceptional performances of the actors, but one of the main reasons for its unprecedented success lies in its appeal to viewers globally. The presence of OTT platforms and the availability in different languages have played a major role in helping achieve that. Aside from this, the film undoubtedly received much appreciation and recognition at film festivals such as the Kino Brave International Film Festival in Russia, the 7th Malaysian International Film Festival in 2024, (Malaysia International Film Festival, MIFFest, 2024) and the one held in Goa at the 55th International Film Festival of India (IFFI) (Desk, 2024).

According to IMDB report, the film earned 73.45 crore rupees in the overseas market, which is the highest of the year 2024. In India, the film was the highest grossing Malayalam film of 2024 earning 241 crore rupees (2024: *Malayalam Box Office Verdict (Collection)*, 2024). At the UAE box office, the film earned a total of \$2.98 million in its fourth weekend (Bose, 2024). The film also topped UAE's google search film trends and the reasons are multiple - from curiosity on social media apps to cultural significances with the South Indian population; the love for the film is a reflection of the shift taking place from mainstream Bollywood to the regional sector. The success of Manjummel Boys sets an example of how a regional film made on a limited budget can reach international markets in this digital age (Fatima, 2025).

Leo (Lokesh Kanagaraj, 2023)

A Tamil-language film starring Thalapaty Vijay

instantly became a blockbuster in the GCC, especially UAE. Even though based on a Hollywood film, *A History of Violence*, the film achieved incredible reception from the audience – both diasporic Indians and the Arabs. With its release on October 19 2023, the film received over 300,000 cinema goers in the first four days of its release (Manjusha Radhakrishnan, 2023). It has become the highest grossing (55.93 crore rupees) Tamil film at the UAE-GCC box office (Koimoi, 2024). There is action, drama, and a plot twist surrounding the story of a man who forced to join a drug cartel. Moreover, as of 2024, there are about 9.3 million Indians residing in the GCC countries which is beneficial for the film revenue (India's World, 2025).

The Disciple (Chaitanya Tamhane, 2020)

A Marathi-language film by Chaitanya Tamhane, it focuses on the protagonist's musical journey. Entering at the 77th Venice International Film Festival, it became the first Indian film since Mira Nair's *2001 film Monsoon Wedding* to enter the main competition. It was presented at the 2020 Toronto International Film Festival, where it received the Amplify Voices Award. Netflix obtained the distribution rights for the film, which was released on their streaming platform on 30 April 2021 (Brooks, 2021). A lot of the success of Marathi films like other regional ones is because of dubbing in various languages alongside their availability on OTT platforms. According to Sandeep Juwatkar, a Mumbai-based actor, these platforms have provided a significant chance for regional Indian films to access international audiences. He claims that despite numerous Marathi films winning National Awards, only a handful have garnered attention in the foreign market due to insufficient distribution outlets. The emergence of Netflix and other OTT platforms has afforded Marathi filmmakers enhanced opportunities to produce and present Indian culture and values through their material to the global audience (D'Mello, 2020). Numerous independent and experimental Marathi films have been able to win positions at international festivals, addressing a remarkable array of topics. Harshad Nalawade's *Follower*, selected for the Rotterdam Film Festival and featuring a limited theatrical distribution, examines the radicalisation of India's young, portraying the life of a small-town troll with empathy (Inamdar, 2025). Marathi cinema can also be seen to be reaching the Gulf nations, mainly due to Marathi speaking audiences and the regular Indian film screenings make it known to the

local audiences as well.

Conclusion:

The success of Indian regional cinema has significantly altered the notion of India as a monocultural nation. The linguistic, ritualistic, and traditional variety of India is frequently overshadowed by Bollywood's dominance in the global media landscape. Nevertheless, regional film honours this diversity through its own narratives rooted in various languages and cultures. In conclusion, cinema serves as a powerful geopolitical instrument. It can mould public perception and affect cultural values and ideas. Consequently, it has emerged as a significant instrument of soft power in geopolitics. This implies that nations might utilise movies to accomplish their international objectives through non-military avenues (Abraham, 2024). This instrument may be implemented by nations with diverse objectives. As discussed above, films can exhibit a nation's culture and customs to an international audience, fostering a favourable perception of the country and highlighting its unique qualities abroad. Furthermore, films possess the capacity to influence public opinion. Hollywood films have significantly influenced American popular culture and disseminated the nation's ideals and views globally. Also, films foster connections across nations. They can facilitate cultural exchanges, establishing a conducive climate for diverse cultures to resolve disagreements amicably. This has strengthened India's cultural relations with the West Asian region for decades now. Film festivals and international partnerships provide a pertinent example. They have united filmmakers from these nations and helped foster cross-cultural comprehension. Cultural exchanges and collaborative film productions, therefore, enable individuals from diverse geographical zones to engage and acquire knowledge that can alleviate tensions and foster diplomacy.

As we are aware, one of the major factors in the Indian film industry's earnings has been the popularity of Indian films abroad. A KPMG analysis indicated that overseas box office revenues increased at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 9.2% from 2014 to 2019. The film industry has contributed to the media and entertainment sector's increased share of the nation's GDP (Gupta, 2023). For instance, Saudi Arabia, being the largest region where 3 million Indians reside, proved to be a significant region for a diverse range of entertainment and media content in 2020. From

Hollywood films to Bollywood and regional Indian cinema, the country is exposed to a vast range of genres. The entertainment market in the West Asian countries has seen a considerable growth and was expected to grow further at a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 9.0% (in the UAE), from 2021 to 2028 (The Research Insights, 2025). People now have access to multiple genres in multiple languages, either dubbed in their languages or with subtitles, leading to the said expansion in the entertainment business. Media and entertainment content from countries like India, China, and South Korea have seen an unprecedented growth as compared to that of mainstream Hollywood in the recent years. Soft power directly co-relates to economic growth of a country and with India getting recognition for its cinema at a global level such as Academy Awards and nominations at other international stages, has had a tremendous positive impact. It has helped Indian cinema gain access to international distribution markets, leading to foreign investment, which has proved to be instrumental for the economy as a whole. For the producers as well as policy makers of the Indian state, investing in the film market has been greatly profitable.

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