

Soft Power, Cinema, and Democratic Discourse

Aneesha Henry^{a*}, Asheesh Saini^b

^aAssociate Professor, Pearl Academy, New Delhi, India.

^bProfessor, Pearl Academy, New Delhi, India.

Corresponding Author:

Aneesha Henry

Associate Professor, Pearl Academy, India.

Email:

aneesha.henry@pearlacademy.com

Article info

Received: 28 September 2024

Accepted: 30 November 2024

Published: 30 December 2024

Keywords:

Soft Power, Hindi Cinema, Democratic Discourse, Cultural Representation, Propaganda vs. Creative Expression.

How to cite this article: Aneesha Henry and Asheesh Saini, "Soft Power, Cinema, and Democratic Discourse", *International Journal of Politics and Media*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 25-33, Dec. 2024. Retrieved from <https://ijpmonline.com/index.php/ojs/article/view/59>

Abstract

When he first proposed the idea of soft power, Joseph Nye distinguished it from propaganda in a crucial way. He pointed out that "the instruments of soft power are not fully under the control of governments" since "culture and values are deeply rooted in civil societies." The complex interplay of soft power, democratic discourse, and Bollywood filmmaking in India is the subject of this theoretical study. Underlying the approach is Joseph Nye's important difference between propaganda and soft power, which he uses to stress that the former does not originate from governments but rather from the culture and values already present in civil populations. Soft power relies on credibility, as pointed out by Nye (2008), who cautions against propaganda-style deceptive messaging. Just as propaganda aims to transmit themes, soft power frequently arises as an unforeseen byproduct of artistic expression (Elliott, 2010). However, when it comes to cinema, the distinction between propaganda and soft power can become blurry. This is because films frequently reflect state-driven goals through their political and economic instrumentalization. As a cultural vanguard, Hindi film reflects and questions society standards, serving as a platform for the negotiation of democratic principles and standards. This article takes a look at Hindi films and how they change stories about democracy, how they promote conversations about equality, justice, and society ideals. It is a study to look at how Hindi cinema depicts democratic ideas and how it affects both viewers and filmmakers. It comes up with some important points on how culture, politics, and storytelling work together.

1. Introduction

Joseph Nye's concept of soft power emphasizes a nation's ability to influence others not through force or monetary incentives but by making itself attractive and appealing. When Nye first introduced the notion of soft power, he made an essential distinction between soft power and propaganda. Unlike propaganda, soft power operates beyond the full control of governments. As Nye (2008) observed, "*the instruments of soft power are not fully under the control of governments,*" since they rely on culture, values, and ideas that are deeply embedded within civil societies. For soft power to be effective, credibility is crucial; when governments attempt to control or manipulate their message, they risk being perceived as insincere or propagandistic, undermining their influence. Elliott (2010) further argued that propaganda primarily serves to convey a particular, often narrowly focused, message, whereas soft power arises more organically. It is often a by-product of cultural expression, such as films, music, and literature, which attract global audiences without a direct intention to persuade or control. Joseph Nye's idea of soft power emphasizes a nation's capacity to sway others by allure rather than force or financial inducements. This impact arises from cultural, ideological, and political allure,

frequently conveyed through artistic and expressive methods. Cinema emerges as a potent instrument of soft power. Hindi cinema, especially Bollywood, demonstrates this dynamic by acting as a global platform for India's rich culture, democratic principles, and sociological intricacies.

2. Soft Power versus Propaganda: The Distinctions

Nye distinctly differentiated soft power from propaganda. Soft power is founded on authenticity and emerges naturally via cultural expression, in contrast to propaganda, which typically aims to spread controlled, manipulative themes. This autonomy is essential for believability. When a government seeks to actively control or manage cultural narratives, it jeopardizes trust and diminishes its authority to mere propaganda.

Elliott (2010) distinguishes propaganda from soft power in art. Soft power is an inherent byproduct of creativity, while propaganda is designed to communicate certain ideas (Elliott, 2010:166). Elliott emphasises that propaganda is primarily reliant on government control, while soft power is shaped by society and independent of government (Elliott, 2010: 167). This contrast emphasises that propaganda is state-driven, whereas soft power reflects society's culture (Jang, 2018). Cinema has always shaped impressions of foreign cultures,

often being the only source of information about "others" in an increasingly interconnected but nervous globalized society. Films, as a vital tool of soft power, quietly shape perceptions of outsiders while enabling nations to craft aspirational identities through cultural narratives rather than traditional advertising.

During the Cold War, Hollywood played a significant role in assisting the United States to win the ongoing ideological battle against Communism. Using the cinema, Hollywood spread U.S. values like liberalism and market capitalism in other nations. Although the concept of soft power was devised by considering the American influence over the world and its soft power resource, other countries also utilized it. South Korea strategically uses culture to increase its global impact. After the late 1990s Asian financial crisis, South Korean policymakers decided to use their music industry for cultural diplomacy. This resulted in considerable cultural infrastructure investments and a Ministry of Culture. K-Pop is a global phenomenon that shows how cultural products may change a nation's image.

3. Bollywood as a Medium of Soft Power

Cinema is a cultural asset that can be affected by political and economic pressures, sometimes instrumentalized to serve national or ideological goals. However, when art forms like cinema retain their creative autonomy, they can foster genuine, lasting connections across cultures, thus enhancing a nation's soft power in a way that feels authentic and credible. Hindi cinema, as a cultural expression, goes beyond mere entertainment to reflect and examine societal values, anxieties, and aspirations, especially in the context of a rapidly transforming, post-liberalized India. Bollywood films explore a range of complex issues, such as corruption, communal tensions, economic inequalities, and the impacts of modernization. By tackling these subjects, Hindi films offer global viewers insight into the unique challenges of Indian democracy and the evolving dynamics of its social structure, presenting a nuanced image of the nation that resonates with diverse audiences. Bollywood, thus, is a potent instrument of soft power that fuses traditional Indian values with modern global influences; it shapes how people see Indian culture and encourages them to connect across cultural boundaries. Its relevance in advancing global democratic discourse and cultural diplomacy is highlighted by its skills in navigating the intricacies of cultural hybridity, gender politics, and modern identity.

Hindi films present a vivid representation of Indian culture, encompassing vibrant festivals, music, familial relationships, and social dynamics. Films such as *Lagaan* (2001), an Academy Award nominee, depicted India's colonial history and resistance, while *Dangal* (2016) emphasized gender equality and empowerment, striking a chord with global viewers. In recent years, films such as *RRR* (2022) and *The Lunchbox* (2013) have significantly contributed to the advancement of India's cultural diplomacy. *RRR*, featuring big storytelling and pan-Indian appeal, garnered international recognition, winning an Oscar for Best Original Song (Naatu Naatu), highlighting India's rich musical legacy. Simultaneously, *The Lunchbox*

(2013), a nuanced examination of urban isolation and interpersonal relationships, achieved global acclaim, resonating with Western viewers through its universal themes.

4. Film as a Tool for Cultural Diplomacy

Cinema frequently serves as an unofficial representative, embodying the values of its nation of origin. Films establish emotional bonds that surpass geographical and political limitations, promoting mutual comprehension and benevolence. This is evident for India in the resonance of Bollywood throughout varied regions such as the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia. In nations such as Nigeria, Bollywood films have emerged as a cultural mainstay, impacting local narratives in Nollywood, while in Afghanistan, they have offered a means of escapism and cultural affiliation.

5. The Function of Creative Autonomy in Augmenting Soft Power

Although governments may see film as a significant cultural export, efforts to use it for political ends can be counterproductive. Genuine storytelling is essential for maintaining credibility and cultivating authentic cultural resonance. For instance, South Korea's *Parasite* (2019), which received the Academy Award for Best Picture, emerged as a soft power success not due to governmental sponsorship but because it genuinely portrayed socio-economic gaps, resonating on a worldwide scale.

India's cinematic contributions are most significant when they maintain their creative autonomy. Some films, such as *Bharat* (2019), embody nationalistic themes, but others, like *Gully Boy* (2019), portray grassroots realities and adolescent ambitions. Collectively, these narratives present a complex portrayal of India, bolstering its international standing in a manner that appears genuine rather than contrived. Joseph Nye's notion of soft power emphasizes the importance of cultural authenticity and believability. Bollywood's international presence illustrates how cinema can function as an effective instrument of soft power by highlighting a nation's variety, ambitions, and principles.

6. Bollywood's transnational appeal

India is the world's largest producer of films, releasing between 1,500 and 2,000 movies annually across more than 20 languages. In 2023, Hindi films accounted for 44% of India's total box office revenue, marking an increase from 33% in 2022. The impact of Indian cinema on viewers around the world, especially in underdeveloped countries, is nothing new. *Awaara* (1951) and *Dharti Ke Lal* (1946) were early exports that attracted notice internationally; the latter film's progressive themes and melodramatic storylines made it very popular in China and the Soviet Union. Indian films have been a mainstay on networks like Domashny and India TV since the 2000s (Rajagopalan, 2008), making films like *Disco Dancer* (1982) legendary in markets like Russia.

Films that fought for workers' rights and personal strength, such as *Mother India* (1957), struck a chord with viewers all over the world. The film was up for an Oscar in 1958, showed on British TV, and kept Nigerians enthralled

for ten years following its debut (Larkin, 1992). The Indian diaspora played a significant role in the distribution of Indian cinema internationally from the 1950s to the 1980s. They did this by exchanging cinematic memorabilia such as cassettes, posters, and other swag. *Awaraz* (1951) and *Sholay* (1975) were subsequent worldwide triumphs, but early successes like *Sant Tukaram* (1937), which received an award in Venice, solidified Bollywood's position.

Viewers in South America, Africa, and Asia love Bollywood because, in contrast to Hollywood's emphasis on individualism, it focuses on family, morality, and cultural identity. As an example, the Hausa people of Nigeria identify with Bollywood because the films' depictions of traditional dress, close-knit families, and the ethical challenges posed by Westernization reflect their own cultural standards (Larkin, 2003; Singh, 2013). As a medium that connects Islamic heritage with Western modernity, Indian cinema has created a "third space" for Hausa audiences. Indian cinema has established a foothold even in nations like Senegal and Peru, where the diaspora is tiny. Akon, a Senegalese artist, contributed a Hindi song to *Ra.One* (2011), continuing Senegal's entry to Bollywood, which started with *Aan* (1953). Nollywood offshoots, Bollywood-themed nightclubs, and the ZeeWorld channel's continued success in Nigeria are all signs of Bollywood's impact on the country (Luedi, 2018). Bollywood films set in India, such as *Secret Superstar* (2017), *Dangal* (2016), and *3 Idiots* (2009), have been huge successes in China, a country that has never before opened its doors to foreign film production. Despite China's stringent film quotas, Aamir Khan has become a prominent cultural ambassador by appealing to young Chinese viewers through Indian soft power. Hollywood companies co-produced Indian films like *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), and Malaysian directors adapted stories from Bollywood.

7. Music and Dance as storytelling tools in Hindi Cinema

Hindi cinema wields immense soft power globally, particularly through its music and dance. Songs and dance sequences are central to Bollywood films, creating a cultural impact that transcends borders and promotes Indian traditions, values, and creativity. The artful integration of diverse elements—comedy, song and dance, romance, villainy, and morality—defines Bollywood's unparalleled cinematic style, captivating both globalized Indian and Western audiences alike. This dynamic fusion of dance, music, and storytelling positions Bollywood as a pivotal force in shaping cultural identities, ideologies, and translocal narratives, transcending boundaries to forge a universal connection through the power of its vibrant storytelling. The foundation of Hindi film's musical identity lies in its deep connection to India's classical traditions. Scenes set to music and dance are essential in Bollywood, serving as powerful mediums for storytelling, evoking strong emotions, and expressing universally relatable cultural narratives.

Songs fulfill several important functions, including advancing the narrative by setting the scene for future

action or enacting crucial turning points in the narrative. Bollywood's songs, often staged as elaborate dance routines, serve as a narrative and emotional medium, blending classical Indian forms like Bharatanatyam and Kathak with regional folk traditions and contemporary global styles. These performances transcend mere entertainment, offering a space to articulate emotions that words alone cannot convey—confessions of love, revelations of inner turmoil, and pivotal moments of self-discovery. They become a visual and emotional symphony, integral to the storytelling fabric of Indian cinema.

Contemporary hits like *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008) and *Raag Desh* (2017) keep alive this legacy, while classic films like *Bajju Bawra* (1952) and *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960) introduced audiences to India's classical music traditions. Assamese Bihu rhythms, Rajasthani melodies, and Punjabi Bhangra are all examples of regional folk traditions that Bollywood borrows and blends with global influences like jazz and hip-hop. The global impact of Bollywood music reached new heights with achievements like "Jai Ho" from *Slumdog Millionaire* winning an Academy Award in 2008. Songs like "Kala Chashma" and "Chammak Challo" have transcended their cinematic origins to become international party anthems, demonstrating the universal appeal of Bollywood's musical storytelling. The global trend of lip-syncing to "San Sanana" from the 2001 Hindi film *Asoka* in traditional Indian attire on TikTok in May 2024, accompanied by the hashtag "#AsokaMakeup," highlights yet another example of the enduring global influence of Hindi film songs.

In recent years, the digital era has revolutionized our consumption and reinterpretation of cinematic spectacles. YouTube has become an influential place for creative expression, facilitating the amalgamation of Bollywood videos with local traditions. An intriguing instance of this is the amalgamation of Algerian rai and Tunisian mizwid music with Bollywood dance sequences, resulting in Bollymizwid and Bollyrai. Rai and mizwid, originating from North African musical traditions, have traditionally served as mediums for youth opposition to both Islamist and secular powers (Langlois, 1996). By amalgamating these culturally significant genres with Bollywood's dynamic dance sequences, filmmakers have produced a distinctive hybrid that contests societal conventions and state-controlled media (Seddon, 2010). This bold action not only reinvents Bollywood but also offers a forum for Algerian and Tunisian youth to articulate their identities and ambitions. Through the appropriation and recontextualization of Bollywood, these videographers have developed a potent instrument for cultural subversion, contesting the established quo and motivating a new generation of artists and activists.

Dance in Hindi films integrates classical Indian dance forms like Bharatanatyam, Kathak, and Odissi with regional folk dances such as Garba and Lavani. The symbolic undertones of these features allow them to communicate emotions and societal ideals in a manner that is relatable across different cultures. Films like *Bajirao Mastani* have showcased traditional dance forms like Marathi Lavani, while movies such as *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* have popularized Punjabi Bhangra on the global stage. This

fusion approach extends to the integration of Western dance styles, with contemporary Bollywood choreography often blending classical Indian movements with hip-hop, salsa, and modern dance elements. In Bollywood's highly censored cinematic landscape, dance and song have evolved as expressive tools to evoke moods and fantasies of sensuality and eroticism. Emotional and romantic tension between characters is often heightened through suggestive choreography, iconic motifs like the 'wet-sari' aesthetic (Dwyer, 2000b), and metaphorical imagery such as fountains erupting or dream sequences brimming with symbolic passion. These creative devices subtly navigate censorship, providing an artistic outlet for exploring themes of desire and intimacy while maintaining cultural sensibilities.

The industry's success in cultural promotion has been amplified by its willingness to embrace international collaboration. Renowned composers like A.R. Rahman has worked with global artists such as Andrew Lloyd Webber, while international performers like Akon and Diplo have contributed to Bollywood productions. These collaborations have helped bridge cultural gaps and created new avenues for musical expression. Bollywood's influence extends beyond entertainment into lifestyle and fitness, with Bollywood dance classes and workshops gaining popularity worldwide. The incorporation of Bollywood routines in international dance competitions and shows has further cemented its position in global pop culture. Moreover, iconic songs and dance sequences from films like *Devdas* and *Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani* continue to captivate audiences and influence dance trends globally.

8. From Masala to Modernity: The Transformative Journey of Hindi Cinema

Indian film has developed through the years because of its adaptability to shifting social, political, and economic conditions, all the while staying true to its cultural roots and appealing to a wide range of audiences. According to Ganti (2004), Indian cinema may be divided into three separate periods: the one immediately following independence in 1947, the turbulent early 1970s, and the liberalized age that began after 1991. Following India's independence, the film industry mostly stuck to a formulaic framework with its roots in old-school theatrical practices. According to Hemphill (1998), these movies typically had love stories, comic segments, six songs on average, archetypes of characters, and happy endings that brought society or morality back into balance. These formulaic films started being called "masala films," and according to Nandy (2008), showcase a wide range of cultures, combining various elements from classical and folk traditions with modern and traditional elements in order to provide something "for everyone." An obsession with creating dichotomies such as tradition vs. modernity, Indian against Western, and spiritual versus material was prevalent in Bollywood narratives from 1947 to 1990, shaped by nationalist ideas (Ganti, 2004). Consistent with nationalist rhetoric in post- and colonial India, these dichotomies frequently cast India

in a morally better light compared to the West. During this time, Indian cinema helped foster a romanticized view of the country and its people, thus solidifying the idea of India as a distinct spiritual and cultural entity (Viridi, 2003).

Filmmaking during this era demonstrated cinema's capacity to be an artistic medium as well as a weapon for democratic discourse and soft power, laying the framework for Bollywood's worldwide reach. As the main mediator of this national imaginary, Bollywood constructed a complicated but understandable framework that reflects the ideals of a united nation by navigating caste, class, community, and gender divisions through familial relationships (Viridi, 2003; Gooptu, 2011). In Bollywood's depiction, the Indian "home" is often portrayed as an idealized utopia rooted in traditional values, with the family theme reinforcing patriarchal structures and devotion to age-old practices. Women in particular were portrayed as passive individuals preserving these customs, with their power being associated with subservience, according to Viridi (2003).

More creative freedom and international investments in the Indian film industry were made possible by the opening of markets (Dwyer, 2010). With the relaxation of regulation and the departure of nationalist clichés, Bollywood started to expand its storylines. While earlier films often focused on restrictive family structures, others, such as *Baabul* (2006) and *Prem Rog* (1982), addressed issues like widowhood, and by the 1990s, movies began portraying women as independent individuals navigating complex situations. For example, characters in *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* (2006) and *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (2003) deviated from the previous narrative norms by showcasing widows and single mothers as self-sufficient and independent. Films like *Vicky Donor*, which dealt with infertility, *Dostana*, which dealt with homosexuality, and *Salaam Namaste*, which dealt with live-in relationships, began to tackle complicated and taboo subjects at the turn of the millennium. Simultaneously, stories such as *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* and *Dil Chahta Hai* exemplified the hopes and confidence of contemporary youth in India.

Additionally, transnationalism changed Bollywood's narrative style, enabling directors to examine cultural fusion while preserving aspects of culture. Films from the diaspora, such as *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001) and *Salaam Namaste* (2005), highlighted the flexibility of cultural identities and offered hope for balancing traditional values with contemporary influences. Protagonists' depictions have also changed significantly. In earlier decades, middle-class Indians fought for independence through stories about doctors, engineers, farmers, and other working-class people. A change in audience tastes and social mores is reflected in the fact that modern heroes often represent rich urban lifestyles.

9. Imaginary Homelands: Bollywood as a Tool for Diasporic Memory and Pride

With an estimated 32 million people living abroad, the Indian diaspora is an important factor in Bollywood's global popularity. Hindi films serve as a unifying cultural force for the Indian diaspora, transcending divisions of caste, religion, and class prevalent in the homeland. By vividly showcasing

Indian traditions, values, and languages, these films foster a deeper connection to cultural roots and instill a profound sense of belonging. For diaspora communities, Bollywood acts as a bridge to their heritage, enriching their understanding of India's diversity while nurturing a shared cultural identity in their adopted countries. Since India's economic liberalization in 1991, Bollywood films have changed, reflecting its expanding global audience, evolving storylines, and function as a cultural bridge. Diasporic Bollywood films provided a platform for reimagining cultural heritage while navigating modernity, frequently set against the geographical setting of India. By reflecting cultural heritage and presenting the motherland as an idealized place, films evolved into a vehicle for diasporic pride. For people juggling many identities, this imaginary country offered solace and a feeling of community despite its distance (Brosius & Yazgi, 2007). The idea of cultural hybridity and the "third space" of enunciation, proposed by Homi Bhabha, provide a useful framework for understanding this dynamic interaction (Bhabha, 1994). Bollywood's diasporic films show how the industry may tackle these dual identities by providing Indian expats with a link to their heritage while also allowing them to engage with contemporary values abroad.

Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (1995) marked a significant turning point in Indian cinema by centering its narrative on a diasporic character, highlighting the evolving role of Bollywood in connecting with global audiences. Building on this legacy, films like *Kites* (2010) expanded Bollywood's international reach, breaking new ground as the first South Asian film released in 35 new countries. Aggressive overseas marketing of films such as *Raajneeti*, *My Name is Khan*, *3 Idiots*, and *Ghajini* further cemented Bollywood's global presence.

In regions like England, Fiji, the United States, and Tanzania, Indian films serve as cultural touchstones, evoking nostalgia and creating archives of shared memories for diaspora communities. These films function as cultural mediators, offering the diaspora a means to reconnect with their roots, rekindle a sense of Indianness, and bridge the emotional and cultural distance from their homeland. This interplay between homeland narratives and diasporic experiences underscores Bollywood's profound role in fostering cultural continuity and identity across borders. According to Ray (2000) and Singh (2013), Bollywood serves as a cultural bridge for second-generation diaspora members, offering them a profound sense of belonging despite their geographical distance from India. Through its vivid depictions of Indian traditions, languages, and values, Bollywood not only entertains but also educates younger generations about their heritage. It becomes a medium through which they reconnect with their roots, fostering a shared cultural identity and preserving a link to their ancestral homeland amid the complexities of their globalized lives. According to Dudrah (2006), Bollywood films are frequently utilized by immigrant parents to impart Indian traditions and

values to their children. Indian communities in the US and UK learn about family roles, courtship ceremonies, and communal duties through seeing these videos. Younger diasporic viewers find inspiration for self-monitoring and identity formation in Bollywood's idealized portrayals of love, family, and tradition (Koppedraier, 2005). Even though Bollywood promotes traditional values, it also questions them by highlighting the importance of love above marriages arranged by blood relatives. Diasporic viewers are able to balance their respect for collective family values with their desire for personal liberty because of this duality (Punathambekar, 2005).

10. The Evolution of Fashion Through Hindi Cinema

Hindi cinema has emerged as a significant cultural force in shaping fashion and clothing preferences within Indian society and beyond. This phenomenon reflects a complex interplay between cinematic representation and societal fashion adoption, where the medium not only disseminates style trends but also serves as a powerful tool for cultural transmission and identity formation. The influence of Hindi cinema on fashion operates through multiple channels of cultural diffusion. Primarily, it serves as both a mirror reflecting contemporary social norms and a catalyst driving consumer preferences in clothing and personal presentation. The impact of this influence is particularly evident in the way specific costumes from influential films transcend their original cinematic context to become cultural phenomena, significantly influencing clothing choices across various social contexts, from ceremonial occasions to everyday wear.

Bollywood has shaped fashion choices for decades, from Madhubala's classic anarkali outfit in *Mughal-e-Azam* to Mumtaz's embroidered saree in *Brahmachari*. The 1970s witnessed a significant shift toward countercultural aesthetics, exemplified by Zeenat Aman's flower child styling in *Hare Rama Hare Krishna*. The 1980s showcased a fusion of Western and Indian styles, with stars like Sridevi and Salman Khan popularizing neon saris and fitness-inspired attire. Sadhana Shivdasani's iconic 1960s hairstyle, famously dubbed the "Sadhana cut" and first showcased in the film *Love in Simla* (1960), along with Dev Anand's signature hair puff and Amitabh Bachchan's reintroduction of the French beard during the 1970s through the 1990s, became defining fashion statements for people to emulate. *Dil To Pagal Hai* (1997) and *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998) introduced casual Western styles and athleisure as everyday fashion, featuring items like tracksuits, branded T-shirts, and sportswear that reflected India's growing connection with global fashion. Madhuri Dixit's rich purple sari in *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* (1994) and Preity Zinta's bridal outfit in *Veer-Zaara* (2004) set lasting trends for wedding fashion, inspiring designers and brides even today. Actors like Salman Khan and Karisma Kapoor established standards for physical appearance, which extended to accessories, hairstyles, and even fitness trends.

The 1989 film *Maine Pyaar Kiya* launched two notable trends: polka-dot ensembles worn by Bhagyashree became

widely popular among young women, while Salman Khan's leather jackets and "Friend" cap influenced college fashion. Similarly, Kareena Kapoor's ornate shararas in *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* transformed bridal and formal wear preferences. Casual fashion underwent substantial changes through films like *Cocktail* (2012) and *2 States*, where leading actresses Deepika Padukone and Alia Bhatt popularized modern silhouettes such as jumpsuits, palazzo pants, and elegant long skirts. According to Kumar et al. (2020), aviator glasses became a fashion accessory must-have after Huma Qureshi's portrayal in *Gangs of Wasseypur* gave them a modern spin. The early 2000s saw Bollywood's influence expand further. Aamir Khan's spiky hairstyle and goatee in *Dil Chahta Hai* (2001) became a defining look for urban young men. Other influential styles included Shah Rukh Khan's "POLO" shirts and "COOL" pendants from *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998). Recent years have witnessed Bollywood's continued impact on fashion. Films like *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (2011) influenced vacation wear, while *Ae Dil Hai Mushkil* (2016) and *Raazi* (2018) sparked renewed interest in contemporary interpretations of traditional Indian attire. Even specific accessories, such as Ranveer Singh's distinctive sunglasses in *Gully Boy* (2019) and Ayushmann Khurrana's colorful sneakers in *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui* (2021), have initiated new trends.

Bollywood's influence on fashion extends beyond mere imitation to reflect broader societal changes and aspirations. These films encourage viewers to shape their identities through fashion, often by blending traditional and contemporary elements. This influence stems from the industry's ability to tap into cultural aspirations, reflect societal shifts, and inspire viewers to adopt the styles they see on screen, thus representing a significant form of soft power

11. Social Relevance and Hindi Cinema

Indian film is a living, breathing medium that reflects society, promotes cultural dialogue, and wields soft power on a worldwide scale. Bollywood has recently broadened its focus to include modern themes, reimagines identity, and questions long-held conventions; at the same time, it has strengthened its grip on culture, fashion, and democratic storylines.

Initially named 'The Young Guns of India', *Rang De Basanti* (2006) stands as a pivotal milestone in Indian cinema, evolving beyond mere entertainment to serve as a cultural and political reference point. By intertwining the narratives of India's liberation fighters with the challenges faced by contemporary youth, it reconceptualized patriotism as active involvement in society issues rather than just veneration of the past. The film's impact persists as a model for civic participation and a cinematic standard, compelling each generation to assume responsibility for their nation's future. Each narrative possesses a distinct trajectory. In mythology, heroes frequently succumb to demons in caverns, which is integral to the narrative. *Rang De Basanti* compelled the protagonists to perish, against the audience's wishes. Individuals cherish heroes and wish to retain them, but existence is not characterized

by tidy conclusions; it encompasses loss and sacrifice. The heroes exhibit heroism via their readiness to sacrifice their lives for a cause. The narrative illustrates how, subsequent to achieving independence from British rule, we became subjugated by our own systems and started turning against one another. It is not solely about offering a tidy solution to our problems; it is about fostering a debate. *Rang De Basanti* serves as a discourse with the populace, urging them to contemplate the contemporary challenges we encounter. The film profoundly impacted Indian youth, motivating them to interrogate corruption, governmental apathy, and institutional deficiencies. The depiction of youthful characters evolving from apathy to action reflected the internal struggles of a generation in search of identity and purpose, while its emotional resonance, amplified by A.R. Rahman's poignant music, made a lasting impression on viewers. *Rang De Basanti* catalyzed actual civic movements, shown by the protests around the Jessica Lal case, illustrating cinema's capacity to inspire collective action. The film also criticized corruption in defense procurement and validated unconventional forms of protest, such as candlelight vigils, which have since become lasting emblems of peaceful resistance. "Rang De Basanti" portrays India as a vibrant democracy, showcasing its capacity for introspection and transformation while significantly amplifying its cultural diplomacy and soft power. By intertwining themes of justice, activism, and societal change with a creative blend of historical and contemporary narratives, the film set a new standard for socially conscious cinema. Its success paved the way for impactful films like *Article 15* and *Pink*, which further explored pressing social issues within India's democratic framework. The film's ability to marry economic triumph with profound political relevance exemplifies how art can influence both hearts and policies. *Rang De Basanti* not only inspired filmmakers to tackle intricate narratives and social commentary but also galvanized audiences to engage with the democratic process, proving that cinema, as a cultural force, is both a mirror and a catalyst for societal progress.

With its raw and unflinching portrayal of Punjab's drug crisis, *Udta Punjab* (2016) left a profound impact on Indian society and cinema. The film delves into the state's narco-politics, exposing the far-reaching consequences of a system that has normalized drug abuse. By highlighting the devastating effects of substance addiction on individuals and communities, it brought an often-overlooked issue into the national spotlight. *Udta Punjab* also scrutinized the complicity of political and administrative establishments, sparking widespread discussions about their role in perpetuating the crisis. Its compelling narrative, bolstered by powerful performances, ensured that the issue moved from the periphery to the forefront of public consciousness. The film faced intense censorship battles, with authorities initially attempting to dilute its hard-hitting message to safeguard Punjab's image. However, its eventual release and overwhelming public support showcased cinema's ability to challenge systemic failures and spark conversations about sensitive topics. By addressing addiction, corruption, and social disintegration, *Udta Punjab* reaffirmed Bollywood's potential as a medium for cultural introspection and

societal reform, redefining the role of film as a catalyst for meaningful change.

Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* (2014), a poignant adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, skillfully examined the intricate realities of Kashmir with depth and sensitivity. By blending personal tragedy with the political turbulence of the region, the film explored profound themes of identity, betrayal, and state violence. Through its unflinching portrayal of enforced disappearances and human rights violations, *Haider* shed light on the harsh realities faced by Kashmiris, challenging prevailing perceptions of the conflict. The film's bold critique of government policies in Kashmir ignited widespread discussions, earning both acclaim for its courage and criticism for its stance. Its narrative compelled audiences to confront the human costs of political unrest and nationalism, sparking an essential dialogue on the price of war. Beyond its compelling storytelling, *Haider* resonated as a deeply moving commentary on the enduring impact of conflict, urging viewers to empathize with those caught in its crossfire. Hailed for its artistic bravery, *Haider* pushed the boundaries of Indian cinema, proving that Bollywood could address politically charged and socially complex subjects with finesse. The film expanded the scope of mainstream storytelling, cementing its place as a landmark in Indian cinema for its audacious exploration of sensitive topics and its ability to provoke critical thought.

Mulk (2018) tackled the pressing issue of communalism in India, offering a deeply nuanced exploration of Islamophobia and national identity. Through the story of a Muslim family accused of harboring a terrorist, the film dismantled prejudices that marginalize minority communities and boldly criticized the exploitation of religion for political gain. It underscored the urgent need for secularism, unity, and mutual respect in an increasingly polarized society. By confronting societal biases and emphasizing the responsibility of media and institutions in shaping perceptions, *Mulk* ignited crucial conversations about prejudice and inclusivity. The film's powerful courtroom drama served as an allegory for the trial of India's democratic values, resonating deeply with audiences across cultural and religious divides. Its honest portrayal of complex issues encouraged viewers to question systemic discrimination and advocate for equality. Beyond its cinematic brilliance, *Mulk* became a cultural touchstone, sparking meaningful dialogue about the importance of upholding constitutional principles in the face of divisive politics. The film's impact extended far beyond entertainment, positioning it as a vital piece of art that challenged narratives and championed the ideals of justice and democracy.

Padmaavat (2018) was talked about a lot because of how great of a movie it was and how controversial it was when it came out. The movie got favorable reviews for its beautiful visuals, complex plot, and strong acting, but it also got negative reviews for how it showed Rajput pride and the controversial practice of Jauhar (self-immolation). Some groups violently protested the movie, saying it lied about their culture. This brought issues of artistic freedom and identity politics to the attention of the whole country.

Even though there were problems, like calls for bans and censorship, *Padmaavat* became a huge commercial hit, showing that India can make movies that are praised all over the world. Bollywood's role as a source of soft power, showing Indian culture to people all over the world, was emphasized by the film's grandeur and portrayal of historical and cultural topics. But it also started heated arguments about how it romanticized old traditions, which made people think about how art, history, and current values all affect each other. *Padmaavat* became more than just a movie because of this; it started talks about how movies should shape cultural and historical stories.

Bollywood has continually reflected India's changing identity by addressing important societal issues. The foundation for socially aware filmmaking was laid by early films like *Achhut Kanya* (1936) and *Shiraz* (1928), which dealt with caste-based inequality and untouchability. Some recent films have boldly addressed gender and caste concerns, such as *Article 15* (2019) and *Thappad* (2020), respectively. While *Article 15* uses privileged police officers to examine caste inequality, *Thappad* uses the aftermath of a single incident of domestic abuse to critique patriarchal standards. These films showcase Bollywood's increasing openness to delicately tackle heavy subjects.

Masaan (2015) and *Newton* (2017) are two films that provide insightful critiques of caste and democracy. *Newton* brings attention to the inconsistencies of the Indian voting system inside a tribal framework, whereas *Masaan* portrays the fights of individuals trying to break free of gender and caste norms. *Jhund* (2022) also uses a real-life story to demonstrate how athletics can empower underprivileged people via the telling of a hopeful and resilient narrative.

Changes have been noticeable in Bollywood's portrayal of gender politics. Consent, resiliency, and structural injustice are common themes in films like *Darlings* (2022), *Pink* (2016), and *Chhapaak* (2020). *Chhapaak* tells the true story of an acid attack survivor, showing her path to empowerment and justice, while *Pink* fearlessly reframes the conversation around women's autonomy and consent. Domestic violence and how society views abuse are explored in *Darlings*, a dark comedy that also serves as social commentary.

Bollywood has also broken new ground by including LGBTQ+ characters and stories in traditionally taboo tales around mental health. The 2016 film *Dear Zindagi* normalizes conversations about mental health by exploring therapy and psychological wellness. *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (2020) tackles homophobia, presenting a same-sex love story with humor and sensitivity, while *Badhaai Do* (2022) portrays a marriage between a gay man and a lesbian woman navigating societal expectations.

Bollywood has been reimagined as an international powerhouse with blockbusters like *RRR* (2022) and *Gully Boy* (2019). While *RRR* is a pan-Indian blockbuster that commemorates the fight against colonial tyranny, *Gully Boy*, which draws inspiration from Mumbai's underground rap scene, explores class problems and self-expression through music.

There have been significant advancements in the

reimagining of masculinity and individuality in Bollywood. Despite their backlash, films like *Kabir Singh* (2019) have ignited discussions on the idealization of toxic masculinity. On the other hand, *Chhichhore* (2019) emphasized the importance of mental health and resilience through a compassionate depiction of friendship and parenting. The changing views on gender roles and emotional fragility in Indian society are mirrored in these stories.

Filmmakers now have more leeway to explore risky ideas and storylines because of the proliferation of streaming platforms. Films that delve into intricate topics like sexuality, ambition, and human agency, such as *Lust Stories* (2018) and *Monica, O My Darling* (2022), manage to evade conventional forms of restriction. Indian films like *The White Tiger* (2021) and *Delhi Crime* (2019) have been able to reach worldwide audiences thanks to the over-the-top (OTT) revolution, which has increased their visibility and, by extension, India's soft power. Part of what makes Bollywood unique is the fact that it serves as both a kind of entertainment and a cultural critic. Bollywood maintains its democratic purpose by showcasing films that tackle social justice, gender equality, personal empowerment, and identity. As it develops, Indian film becomes more influential in shaping social narratives and promoting cross-cultural understanding, solidifying its status as a cultural powerhouse on a global scale.

12. Conclusion

Bollywood isn't just a cinematic powerhouse; it's a cultural diplomat, a social commentator, and a political force. By weaving together captivating narratives, soulful music, and mesmerizing dance, it has the power to shape perceptions, challenge norms, and inspire change. As a medium of soft power, Bollywood has the unique ability to project India's vibrant culture and democratic values onto the global stage. From the iconic dance numbers to the thought-provoking dramas, Bollywood films have the potential to spark conversations about pressing social issues. Movies like *Dangal* and *Pink* have not only entertained audiences but also ignited debates on gender equality and women's empowerment. By showcasing the diversity of Indian society, Bollywood challenges stereotypes and fosters a sense of inclusivity.

Bollywood has a special knack for telling stories that connect with all kinds of people because of the way it combines traditional values with modern issues. By delving into important topics such as social justice, gender equality, and identity politics, it encourages thought-provoking discussions that are in line with democratic principles. Films like *Gully Boy*, *Pink*, and *Dangal* show India as a dynamic and changing society while also highlighting the voices of the underprivileged. As vehicles for individual and communal self-reflection, these films demonstrate cinema's ability to challenge social norms and bring about transformation.

Bollywood has transformed India's cultural diplomacy into a powerful instrument of soft power, thanks to its impact on the world arena. Cinematic works such as *RRR* and *The Lunchbox* demonstrate the power of storytelling

to create storylines that go across national boundaries and foster empathy and collaboration. Bollywood dramatizes the democratic spirit of India and promotes understanding between cultures via its moving narratives, demonstrating that cinema is a global language.

Despite living in a more globalized and linked world, Bollywood has maintained its cultural essence and is adapting to reflect the complexity of modern identity. It blends art with advocacy, leaving a cinematic and sociopolitical legacy, and acts as a cultural ambassador.

Martin Scorsese famously said, "*Cinema is a matter of what's in the frame and what's out.*" The meticulously crafted stories of Bollywood have the ability to mold our perception of the world and our role within it. As we navigate the complexities of the 21st century, Bollywood remains a beacon of hope, a celebration of diversity, and a testament to the enduring power of cinema.

Conflict of Interest: The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

Funding : The author has not received any grant or financial support for this research.

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