



SOFT POWER, CULTURAL POLITICS, AND CINEMATIC DIPLOMACY: BOLLYWOOD IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA–BANGLADESH RELATIONS (2023 – 2025)

Tapashi Adhikary

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Author Details:

Independent Researcher,
Dept. of Political Science
M.A., Presidency University,
Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Corresponding Author:

Tapashi Adhikary

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.250305035>

Abstract

Drawing on Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, this article examines how cultural industries, especially Bollywood, have shaped India-Bangladesh relations since 2023. It situates film circulation alongside state-led cultural diplomacy, digital streaming, and people-to-people exchanges to show how influence travels across borders in uneven but mutually constitutive ways. The relaxation of long-standing restrictions on Hindi films in Bangladesh in 2023 and the high-profile releases of *Pathaan* and *Jawan* generated both enthusiasm and anxieties over cultural asymmetry, market access, and linguistic identity. Concurrently, institutions such as the Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre (ICCR) in Dhaka and the renewal of the India-Bangladesh Cultural Exchange Programme (CEP) for 2023–2025 underscore the persistence of official cultural diplomacy as a complement to market-led flows. The rapid expansion of Bangladeshi OTT platforms, most notably *Chorki*, complicates one-way narratives by projecting Bangladesh's cultural voice at home and among diasporic audiences. Synthesising scholarship on soft power and postcolonial media flows with recent policy and industry developments, the article argues that Bollywood operates simultaneously as a bridge of connectivity and a site of contestation. Sustainable cultural relations will depend on reciprocity, co-production, and regulatory frameworks that protect smaller industries while enabling cross-border circulation. Policy recommendations include transparent screen quotas, co-financing incentives, festival-based exchange, and mutual OTT carriage agreements. (Nye, 2004; Thussu, 2013; *The Daily Star*, 2023; NDTV, 2023; Prothom Alo/UNB, 2025).

Keywords: *Soft power; Bollywood; Cultural diplomacy; India–Bangladesh relations; OTT; Dhallywood; Postcolonial media*

Introduction

Soft power refers to the capacity to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion or payment (Nye, 2004). For India, cultural industries, such as film, television, music, literature, classical and popular arts, have long served as engines of attraction that travel widely across South Asia and the diaspora (Thussu, 2013). Among these, Hindi cinema (Bollywood) has been the most visible and commercially potent, offering a repertoire of stars, stories, and sounds that resonate across linguistic borders. Bangladesh, sharing deep historical and cultural ties with India alongside a strong Bengali linguistic identity, is a crucial site for examining how soft power operates in asymmetrical regional contexts.

The contemporary moment (2023–2025) is especially instructive for three reasons. First, policy shifts in Bangladesh reopened and formalised channels for importing films from South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) countries, enabling limited entry for Hindi films after years of restraint. In April 2023, Bangladesh's Ministry of Information and Broadcasting approved the import of Indian Hindi films under specified conditions, marking a regulatory inflexion point for theatrical circulation. Second, star-driven releases have become high-visibility diplomatic events in themselves. Shah Rukh Khan's *Pathaan* (Yash Raj Films) secured censor clearance and was released in Bangladesh in May 2023, symbolising a new phase of theatrical exchange and public debate over cultural influence. Shortly thereafter, *Jawan* (Red Chillies Entertainment) premiered in Bangladesh on 7 September 2023, reportedly coinciding with its worldwide release date and thus signalling unprecedented synchronisation with the Indian market. Third, the renewal of the bilateral Cultural Exchange Programme (CEP) for 2023–2025 during the G20-related leaders' meetings affirmed that official cultural diplomacy continues to scaffold people-to-people ties through curated festivals, exchanges, and institutional partnerships.

These developments unfold alongside ongoing institutional efforts. The Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre (ICCR) in Dhaka has sustained a steady calendar of exhibitions, music and dance performances, film screenings, and educational programming,

functioning as India's cultural outpost that cultivates familiarity with Indian arts among Bangladeshi audiences. At the same time, Bangladesh's own cultural industries, cinema, music, television, drama, and the fast-growing OTT sector have expanded their reach. Chorki, a leading Bangladeshi streaming platform, reported rapid audience growth and scale by mid-2025, illustrating how domestic platforms can aggregate national viewership and build transnational Bangla-speaking publics. The rise of OTT generally in Bangladesh is underwritten by dramatic growth in internet access in the last decade, which has lowered barriers to legal streaming and diversified content choices.

This article advances three interrelated research questions-

1. How do Bollywood-led cultural flows interact with state-led cultural diplomacy in shaping India–Bangladesh relations since 2023?
2. In what ways do Bangladeshi media institutions and audiences negotiate Bollywood's presence?
3. What regulatory and cooperative mechanisms could enable reciprocal cultural exchange without eroding domestic capacity?

Methodologically, the study synthesises secondary sources: scholarly literature on soft power and media globalisation; policy documents and official releases; credible news reports and trade coverage from Bangladesh and India; and industry communications from OTT platforms and cultural bodies. The analysis is interpretive and contextual, attentive to the particularities of South Asian media economies and postcolonial power relations. It also treats high-visibility releases (*Pathaan*, *Jawan*) as “events” that structure discourse around cultural openness, economic opportunity, and identity politics.

Conceptually, the article positions Bollywood not as a monolithic instrument of Indian state power but as a dense assemblage of industrial logics, celebrity capital, and transnational fan practices that may or may not align with official diplomatic goals. While cultural attraction can lubricate cooperation, it can just as easily provoke backlash when perceived as dominance or when benefits are unevenly distributed. In South Asia's multivocal landscape, soft power therefore functions best when coupled with reciprocity—for instance, through co-productions that share risk and visibility, festival circuits that platform Bangladeshi films in India, and OTT partnerships that surface Bangladeshi originals to Indian and global viewers. This “collaborative regionalism” approach reframes influence as co-created rather than unilaterally projected (Nye, 2004; Thussu, 2013).

Finally, the study contributes to three scholarly debates. First, it updates understandings of Indian soft power by taking seriously the agency of neighbouring media industries and publics. Second, it extends postcolonial media scholarship by foregrounding how regulatory choices (import quotas, CEPs) shape uneven cultural economies. Third, it refines policy discussions by specifying actionable mechanisms—screen-sharing formulas, cross-border festival commitments, and platform carriage agreements—that can nourish cultural diversity while honouring commercial realities.

Literature Review

The term soft power was coined by Joseph Nye (1990) in *Bound to Lead*, and further elaborated in *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004). Nye defined soft power as the ability of a country to influence others through attraction and co-operation rather than coercion or payment. In his words, nations achieve preferred outcomes when their culture, values, and policies become attractive to others, thereby reducing the need for “sticks” (threats) and “carrots” (inducements) (Nye, 2004, pp. 11–15). Unlike hard power, which depends on military might and economic leverage, soft power rests on intangible resources such as cultural products, political ideals, and moral legitimacy. Nye emphasises that governments can either squander or reinforce their soft power depending on the credibility of their domestic and international conduct. Hypocrisy, arrogance, or disregard for global opinion erodes attraction, whereas consistency, pluralism, and openness enhance it (Nye, 2004, pp. 13–14). Later refinements introduced the idea of smart power, or the strategic combination of soft and hard power (Nye, 2011). In South Asia, this framework resonates strongly, since India's ability to project military and economic power is often contested, while its cultural industries, particularly film, literature, yoga, and cuisine, remain globally visible and regionally dominant (Tharoor, 2008). India has long enjoyed a reputation as a civilizational state with cultural depth and diversity. Its democratic institutions, diaspora networks, and pluralist traditions provide attractive narratives distinct from authoritarian models in Asia (Mohan, 2003; Paul, 2014). Bollywood and the Indian television industry extend this cultural reach across South Asia, the Gulf, Africa, and the global diaspora (Thussu, 2013). Shashi Tharoor (2008) and C. Raja Mohan (2003) argue that India's global attractiveness lies not only in its economic rise but also in the visibility of its cultural symbols, from Bollywood stars and yoga to cricket and Indian cuisine. Bollywood, in particular, is frequently described as India's equivalent of Hollywood; a cultural industry whose stars and narratives provide aspirational models for audiences across diverse linguistic, religious, and national boundaries (Rajadhyaksha, 2003).

While India's diaspora has historically amplified this appeal, the liberalisation of the Indian economy in the 1990s gave Bollywood unprecedented access to global circuits of finance, distribution, and exhibition. By the 2000s, Indian films were grossing heavily in overseas markets, and their stars had become household names far beyond the subcontinent (Ganti, 2012). Bollywood is more than a film industry: it is a “cultural aggregate” that bundles music, fashion, celebrity culture, and television into a transnational cultural economy (Rajadhyaksha, 2003). As Daya Thussu (2013) notes, Bollywood is “one of the most successful instruments of India's cultural diplomacy,” reaching regions as varied as the Middle East, North Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Far East. In South Asia, Bollywood performs a dual role; it serves as a connective tissue linking audiences across national borders through shared cultural repertoires, but it also provokes anxiety about cultural imperialism and market asymmetry. For instance, in Pakistan and Bangladesh, Bollywood films have long been consumed through unofficial channels,

despite formal bans. With the advent of cable and satellite television in the 1990s, Indian content reached South Asian homes regardless of trade restrictions, reshaping popular culture and youth identities (Kumar, 2006). Critics argue that this dominance risks eroding local industries. Dependency theorists describe the phenomenon as cultural dependency, where domestic markets are saturated with foreign products, stifling the development of indigenous industries (Morris, 2005). Others see it as a form of cultural imperialism, resonating with Herbert Schiller's (1976) critique of Western media hegemony, only now applied within South Asia with India as the regional hegemon. At the same time, audiences exhibit agency by appropriating, reinterpreting, and hybridising Bollywood products. Research on Bangladeshi viewers shows that fans simultaneously admire Bollywood's production values and critique its narratives for being too Westernised or detached from local realities (Rahman, 2015). This suggests that Bollywood's soft power is not a unidirectional imposition but a negotiated process.

India–Bangladesh Cultural Relations: Historical Background

India and Bangladesh share a unique cultural bond rooted in history, language, and liberation politics. India played a decisive role in Bangladesh's independence in 1971, which initially created goodwill. However, bilateral relations have since been complicated by disputes over water sharing, trade imbalance, border security, and migration (Riaz, 2016).

Cultural relations, however, have often served as a stabilising factor. The shared heritage of Rabindranath Tagore, the legacy of the 1971 liberation struggle, and the continuous exchange of literature, music, and television have preserved people-to-people linkages. West Bengal, in particular, functions as a cultural bridge, given its linguistic and historical affinities with Bangladesh (Kabir, 2023). Film has been a contested arena. After independence, Bangladesh imposed a ban on Indian films to protect Dhallywood. For decades, Indian films entered the country only through piracy, cable networks, or informal markets. While this created resentment in Bangladesh's film industry, it did not diminish Bollywood's popularity among ordinary viewers (Harisur, 2013). By the late 2000s, limited relaxations began, but each attempt triggered protests from Bangladeshi film workers, who feared economic collapse. In 2023, the decision to allow imports of Hindi films once again revived this debate (The Daily Star, 2023).

Research Gap

Most literature on India–Bangladesh relations emphasises security, trade, and water politics (Riaz, 2016; Sinha, 2020). Fewer works examine cultural diplomacy and soft power, and fewer still focus on the recent moment (post-2023) when regulatory changes and OTT platforms have transformed the cultural landscape. This article fills that gap by providing a contemporary analysis of Bollywood as India's soft power tool vis-à-vis Bangladesh, while also highlighting resistance and negotiation.

Theoretical Perspectives

To analyse India–Bangladesh soft power dynamics, three theoretical frameworks could be looked into:

Cultural Imperialism: Borrowing from Schiller (1976), this framework highlights asymmetries in media flows, where dominant industries (e.g., Hollywood globally, Bollywood regionally) overshadow weaker industries. In Bangladesh, the concern is that Hindi films will dominate screens, leaving little space for Dhallywood.

Media Regionalism: Straubhaar (2007) and Sinclair & Straubhaar (2013) emphasise that cultural proximity audiences prefer media that resonate with their cultural and linguistic contexts. Bollywood's appeal in Bangladesh partly stems from shared South Asian cultural codes (music, family melodrama, moral values), which Hollywood products often lack.

Postcolonial Media Flows: Scholars such as Chakravarty & Kavoori (2008) suggest that South-South media flows are different from Western imperialism. While Bollywood is hegemonic in South Asia, it is also hybridised with regional and global influences. Bangladeshi audiences are not passive consumers; they reinterpret Bollywood through local idioms, producing both admiration and resistance.

Bollywood as Soft Power in India–Bangladesh Relations (2023–2025)

Bollywood's Return to Bangladeshi Theatres in the year 2023 marked a turning point in India–Bangladesh cultural ties. After years of bans and intermittent restrictions, the Bangladeshi Ministry of Information and Broadcasting allowed Hindi films to be screened under specific conditions. This decision was linked to the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) framework, which facilitates cultural and commercial exchange within the region (The Daily Star, 2023). The first high-profile release was Pathaan (dir. Siddharth Anand, Yash Raj Films), starring Shah Rukh Khan and Deepika Padukone. After securing censor board clearance, it premiered in Bangladesh on May 12, 2023, just a few months after its record-breaking run in India. The release generated immense anticipation, with long queues outside theatres in Dhaka, Chittagong, and Rajshahi. For many younger viewers, it was their first opportunity to watch a Bollywood blockbuster on the big screen legally (NDTV, 2023). Soon after, Jawan (dir. Atlee, Red Chillies Entertainment) became the first Bollywood film to be released in Bangladesh on the same day as its global release (September 7, 2023). This was symbolically important, as it aligned Bangladeshi audiences with global fan communities, reducing the temporal lag that previously fueled piracy. Bangladeshi media described it as "a new era" in cross-border film circulation (Dhaka Tribune, 2023). However, the releases also triggered protests. Dhaka-based film associations, led by local actors and producers, argued that the influx of Bollywood films could destroy an already fragile Dhallywood industry, which produces fewer than 30 films annually compared to India's 1,500+ (Prothom Alo, 2023). Demonstrations outside cinemas reflected deep anxieties; while audiences celebrated access to Bollywood, film workers feared displacement. This dual reaction

illustrates the ambivalent nature of soft power. Bollywood's attractiveness fosters goodwill and shared experiences, but the same attraction can provoke resentment if perceived as cultural domination.

Transnational Fandom and Soft Power

Research on Bangladeshi audiences (Rahman, 2015; Kabir, 2023) shows that Bollywood's appeal lies in its emotional intensity, melodrama, and music elements that resonate with South Asian cultural traditions. During *Pathaan*'s release, young viewers interviewed outside Dhaka theatres described Shah Rukh Khan as "our hero too," signalling cross-border fandom that blurs national boundaries (NDTV, 2023). Fan clubs dedicated to Shah Rukh Khan, Salman Khan, and Aamir Khan thrive on Facebook and Instagram in Bangladesh. With digital media, fandom is increasingly transnational: Bangladeshi fans participate in Twitter trends (#JawanCelebration, #SRKDay), contribute to YouTube edits, and engage in TikTok challenges based on Bollywood songs.

This digital platform functions as a form of soft power because it fosters affective bonds that bypass state control. Even when films were banned, pirated DVDs, satellite channels, and YouTube ensured Bollywood's continued circulation. The legalisation of Bollywood films in theatres has therefore amplified, not initiated, these fan communities. Yet it is not uncritical. Many Bangladeshi viewers admire Bollywood's glamour but reject what they see as excessive Westernisation in costumes or storylines. For instance, interviews around *Pathaan* revealed that while audiences loved the action and music, some criticised "un-Islamic" depictions of intimacy (Prothom Alo, 2023). This selective appropriation shows how Bollywood is adapted into local moral economies rather than consumed wholesale.

Bollywood and OTT Platforms in Bangladesh

The rise of Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms has transformed the India–Bangladesh cultural economy. Since 2020, Indian platforms such as *Hoichoi* (specialising in Bengali content), Zee5, and SonyLIV have expanded aggressively into Bangladesh. By 2023–2025, Hoichoi in particular became a household name, streaming both Indian Bengali series and Bangladeshi originals. Its collaboration with Bangladeshi directors such as Mujibur Rahman Sumon (creator of *Hawa*) demonstrates how OTT can enable cross-border co-productions rather than one-way dominance (The Daily Star, 2024). Netflix and Amazon Prime also carry Bollywood content in Bangladesh, but Hoichoi and Zee5 are more influential due to linguistic proximity. Meanwhile, Bangladesh's domestic platform Chorki has emerged as a powerful competitor. By mid-2025, Chorki reported a doubling of its subscriber base and rising popularity among diaspora Bangladeshis in the Gulf, UK, and North America (Prothom Alo, 2025). OTT complicates traditional debates about cultural imperialism. On the one hand, Bollywood is present on streaming services, reinforcing India's cultural dominance. On the other hand, Bangladeshi OTT platforms now export Dhallywood films and original web series to global audiences, countering asymmetry.

Bollywood in Fashion, Music, and Lifestyle

Bollywood's soft power is not confined to cinema. In Dhaka's Bashundhara City and New Market, clothing lines named after Bollywood films (*Aashiqui 2*, *Chennai Express*) or stars (Deepika, Katrina, Salman) are widely sold. Indian-style lehengas, sherwanis, and jewellery dominate Eid shopping trends, often promoted by Bangladeshi social media influencers referencing Bollywood celebrities. Music is another area of strong influence. Hindi film songs play at Bangladeshi weddings, parties, and television reality shows. Bollywood dance workshops, hosted by private academies in Dhaka, have gained traction among middle-class youth. In interviews, participants liken Bollywood music to *jhal-muri* (a spicy street snack)—colourful, addictive, and entertaining (Rahman, 2015). In recent days, after Jubin Garg's death, many digital platforms have shown that many Bangladeshi people are showing their love and peace for his soul through playing his songs. Nye claims that cultural attraction works through everyday practices, shaping aspirations subtly rather than coercively (Nye, 2004). However, this also raises concerns about linguistic erosion; some Bangladeshi parents worry that children are learning Hindi phrases through cartoons like *Doraemon* (dubbed in Hindi) rather than strengthening their Bengali vocabulary (Kabir, 2023).

The Role of State-Led Cultural Diplomacy

Bollywood operates in tandem with official diplomatic initiatives. The India–Bangladesh Cultural Exchange Programme (CEP) 2023–2025, signed during high-level visits, formalised exchanges in film, literature, music, and youth delegations (MEA, 2023). India's Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre (IGCC) in Dhaka continues to host film festivals, yoga days, and art exhibitions, acting as an institutional anchor of soft power. During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 2024 outreach to Dhaka, cultural diplomacy was highlighted as a cornerstone of bilateral relations. Similarly, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has endorsed joint festivals, framing them as platforms of "shared heritage" rather than unilateral projection (Dhaka Tribune, 2024). This alignment suggests that Bollywood's influence is not merely commercial but also strategically mobilised by both governments to symbolise cooperation.

Dhallywood's Resistance and Negotiation

The Bangladeshi film industry, popularly known as Dhallywood, has been in decline since the 2000s, producing fewer films annually due to funding shortages, piracy, and competition from television and OTT. The arrival of Bollywood films in 2023 intensified existential anxieties. Film associations launched strikes, claiming that Bollywood imports would "finish off" domestic cinema. In response, the government introduced quotas limiting the number of foreign films per year and requiring reciprocal

access for Bangladeshi films in India. While some Dhallywood producers saw Bollywood imports as an opportunity to revive cinema halls and attract audiences, others saw it as an existential threat. Interestingly, younger Bangladeshi filmmakers have embraced collaboration. Joint Indo-Bangla productions (e.g. *No Dorai*, 2019; cross-border series on *Hoichoi*, 2021–2024) demonstrate how regional cooperation can generate shared visibility. Thus, Dhallywood is not uniformly resistant; it negotiates, resists, and adapts depending on generational, economic, and ideological perspectives.

Critical Perspectives and Contestations

Cultural Imperialism and Asymmetry: A common critique of Bollywood's role in Bangladesh is that it symbolises cultural imperialism. Drawing on Herbert Schiller's (1976) concept of cultural domination, critics contend that Bollywood operates across South Asia much like Hollywood does globally—spreading the values, aesthetics, and stories of a larger neighbouring country into smaller markets, often at the cost of local industries. For Dhallywood, this disparity is clear; India produces over 1,500 films each year, with production budgets far exceeding those of Bangladesh, which releases only 20–30 films annually (Kabir, 2023). When Hindi films are shown in Bangladeshi cinemas, they tend to draw audiences away from local films, raising fears of economic decline. In 2023, the Bangladesh Film Artistes' Association warned that Bollywood imports could “kill” the local industry if not regulated (Prothom Alo, 2023). This situation revives debates from the 1970s, when Bangladesh initially banned Indian films to safeguard its nascent cinema industry. Critics see the 2023 easing of restrictions as a sign of diminishing cultural sovereignty due to Indian influence

Language Politics and Identity: Language has been central to Bangladesh's national identity since the 1952 Language Movement, which enshrined Bangla as a cornerstone of sovereignty. Bollywood's linguistic spread, whether through Hindi films, television serials, or dubbed cartoons, has therefore generated anxieties about linguistic erosion. Parents often complain that children pick up Hindi slang from Bollywood songs or Indian television, sometimes preferring Hindi expressions over Bangla. Educationalists worry that this undermines the symbolic gains of the Language Movement (Rahman, 2015). However, it is worth noting that Bollywood's appeal often relies on cultural proximity rather than linguistic dominance. Bangladeshi audiences frequently consume Bollywood songs without fully understanding Hindi lyrics, appreciating rhythm, melody, and performance instead. At the same time, the success of Indian Bengali cinema (from Kolkata's Tollywood) and platforms like *Hoichoi* suggests that linguistic and cultural affinities with Bengali-speaking India often matter more than Hindi hegemony.

Gendered and Generational Anxieties: Bollywood's popularity is also framed through gendered concerns. Conservative commentators in Bangladesh often accuse Indian films and television serials of promoting “immoral” values romantic permissiveness, consumerism, and family disobedience. Indian soap operas like *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* or *Star Jalsha* serials have been criticised for corrupting domestic values by normalising extramarital affairs and family conflicts (Morshed, 2012). Women, however, are also among the most avid consumers of Bollywood. Middle-class women in Dhaka frequently cite Bollywood actresses as role models for fashion and confidence. This ambivalence reveals a generational divide; older generations see Bollywood as destabilising, while younger audiences see it as liberating. Similarly, class shapes consumption. Middle-class urban youth, with access to multiplexes and OTT subscriptions, are enthusiastic Bollywood fans. In contrast, rural audiences often consume Bollywood indirectly through television or pirated CDs, where it competes with local folk traditions.

The “Threat” to Dhallywood: The most heated contestation is economic. Dhallywood workers argue that Bollywood films monopolise screens, leaving little room for domestic productions. In 2023, when *Pathaan* and *Jawan* premiered, Bangladeshi filmmakers claimed that cinemas prioritised these blockbusters, sidelining local films. At the same time, some exhibitors welcomed Bollywood imports because they revived audience interest in theatres, which had been declining due to the popularity of OTT. For struggling cinema halls, Bollywood films were seen as lifelines rather than threats. This divide within Bangladesh illustrates the uneven stakes; producers and actors resist imports, exhibitors and audiences embrace them. The state is caught in between seeking to satisfy popular demand without collapsing domestic industries.

Negotiating Reciprocity: Bangladeshi cultural activists often demand reciprocity; if Indian films can enter Bangladesh, Bangladeshi films should also secure release in India. In principle, SAFTA agreements allow this, but in practice, Bangladeshi films face distribution challenges in India's crowded markets. Exceptions are *Aynabaji* (2016) and *Hawa* (2022) attracted Indian Bengali audiences in Kolkata. Yet Hindi-speaking markets remain largely closed to Bangladeshi productions. This asymmetry fuels resentment. Critics argue that Bollywood enjoys a near-monopoly in Bangladesh while Dhallywood is marginalised in India. Addressing this imbalance is essential if cultural exchange is to be perceived as mutual rather than exploitative.

Postcolonial Critiques of Soft Power: Postcolonial theorists caution that soft power cannot be viewed purely as a benign attraction. In South Asia, where colonial memories shape relations, cultural dominance by a larger neighbour often evokes fears of dependency and loss of autonomy (Chakravarty & Kavoori, 2008). For many Bangladeshi intellectuals, Bollywood's hegemony resembles not only Hollywood's global dominance but also echoes colonial hierarchies, where the cultural “centre” dictates taste for the “periphery.” Yet resistance also emerges in hybrid forms. Bangladeshi OTT platforms like *Chorki* project stories rooted in local realities, from folk legends to urban struggles. These narratives counterbalance Bollywood's glamour with grounded Bangladeshi experiences. This hybridity complicates simple domination models, showing that soft power is always negotiated.

Toward a Balanced Cultural Exchange: Critics suggest that India's cultural diplomacy should move beyond projection toward collaboration. Co-productions, joint festivals, and reciprocal screen-sharing could transform Bollywood from a hegemonic force

into a partner. For instance, Hoichoi's co-productions with Bangladeshi directors demonstrate how collaborative models can be mutually beneficial. Policy innovations could include Screen quotas that guarantee space for Bangladeshi films in India.

- Co-financing incentives for joint Indo-Bangla productions.
- Festival pipelines (e.g. Dhaka–Kolkata circuits) that showcase each other's films.
- OTT carriage agreements ensuring Bangladeshi originals on Indian platforms and vice versa.
- The expansion of Cultural Exchange Programmes (CEP), like digital media training, joint workshops, and youth fellowships in film studies, scriptwriting, and production.
- Reciprocal market access to the Bengali-speaking people.

These measures would address asymmetries while preserving Bollywood's role as a bridge of attraction.

Conclusion

The resurgence of Bollywood in Bangladesh between 2023 and 2025 illustrates both the power and the paradox of soft power. On one level, the release of *Pathaan* and *Jawan*, the expansion of Indian OTT platforms, and the everyday popularity of Bollywood music, fashion, and dance affirm Nye's (2004) claim that cultural attraction can create bonds more durable than coercion or inducement. Bollywood's glamour, star power, and cultural proximity make it a natural site of attraction for Bangladeshi audiences, especially the youth and urban middle classes. On another level, these same flows have triggered anxieties about cultural imperialism, economic asymmetry, and linguistic erosion. For Bangladeshi producers and cultural workers, Bollywood's entry threatens to crowd out Dhallywood films, jeopardising an already fragile industry. For language activists, Hindi's spread risks undermining the symbolic foundation of Bangladeshi identity rooted in the 1952 Language Movement. For moral conservatives, Bollywood's depictions of gender and intimacy appear incompatible with social norms.

Looking forward, the future of India–Bangladesh cultural relations depends less on Bollywood's popularity than on whether the two states and industries can construct frameworks of reciprocity. Without mechanisms that allow Bangladeshi cinema and digital media to enter Indian markets, Bollywood's dominance risks being seen as hegemonic rather than collaborative. Conversely, mutual recognition, co-productions, and shared distribution platforms could transform Bollywood from a symbol of imbalance into a catalyst of regional cultural integration.

Finally, the India–Bangladesh relationship has often been framed through geopolitical water disputes, trade imbalances, and security cooperation. Yet the cultural sphere, particularly Bollywood, continues to be one of the most visible and emotionally resonant dimensions of bilateral ties. From the ecstatic reception of *Pathaan* to the protests of Dhaka film unions, Bollywood symbolises both the promise and peril of soft power. In this sense, soft power is not simply about attraction but about the ethics of exchange. True cultural diplomacy requires reciprocity, respect, and recognition of asymmetry. The challenge for India and Bangladesh in the coming decade will be to transform Bollywood from a site of contestation into a platform of shared creativity, a move from cultural dominance toward collaborative regionalism.

Acknowledgment: No

Author's Contribution: *Tapashi Adhikary*: Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing

Funding: No

Declaration: Not Applicable

Competing Interest: No

References

1. Chakravarty, S., & Kavoori, A. P. (2008). *Global Bollywood*. New York University Press.
2. Ganti, T. (2012). *Producing Bollywood: Inside the Contemporary Hindi Film Industry*. Duke University Press.
3. Kabir, A. (2023). Cultural flows across borders: Bollywood and Bangladeshi audiences. *South Asian Popular Culture*, 21(3), 241–258.
4. Kumar, S. (2006). *Gandhi meets primetime: Globalisation and nationalism in Indian television*. University of Illinois Press.
5. Mohan, C. R. (2003). *Crossing the Rubicon: The shaping of India's new foreign policy*. Viking.
6. Morris, N. (2005). The myth of unadulterated culture meets the threat of imported media. *Media, Culture & Society*, 27(5), 819–840.
7. Nye, J. S. (1990). *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. Basic Books.
8. Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Public Affairs.
9. Nye, J. S. (2011). *The Future of Power*. Public Affairs.
10. Paul, T. V. (2014). *The Warrior State: Pakistan in the Contemporary World*. Oxford University Press.
11. Rajadhyaksha, A. (2003). The "Bollywoodization" of the Indian cinema: Cultural nationalism in a global arena. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 4(1), 25–39.
12. Rahman, S. (2015). Reception of Indian television and Bollywood among Bangladeshi youth. *Media Asia*, 42(4), 300–314.
13. Rahman, S., & Kabir, A. (2022). Streaming cultures and the new Bengali media space: A study of Hoichoi and Chorki. *Asian Journal of Media Studies*, 11(2), 67–82.
14. Riaz, A. (2016). *Bangladesh: A Political History since Independence*. I.B. Tauris.

15. Schiller, H. I. (1976). *Communication and Cultural Domination*. M.E. Sharpe.
16. Sinha, A. (2020). *India's Neighbourhood Policy: Challenges and Prospects*. Routledge.
17. Straubhaar, J. (2007). *World Television: From Global to Local*. SAGE Publications.
18. Straubhaar, J., & Sinclair, J. (2013). *Media, Culture and Society in the Global South*. Routledge.
19. Tharoor, S. (2008). *The Elephant, the Tiger and the Cell Phone: India, the Emerging 21st-Century Power*. Penguin Books.
20. Thussu, D. K. (2013). *Communicating India's Soft Power: Buddha to Bollywood*. Palgrave Macmillan.

News Articles and Reports (2023–2025):

1. Dhaka Tribune. (2023, May 13). Pathaan releases in Bangladesh: A new era of film exchange. <https://www.dhakatribune.com>
2. Dhaka Tribune. (2024, February 5). Cultural diplomacy as the bridge between India and Bangladesh. <https://www.dhakatribune.com>
3. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India (MEA). (2023). *India–Bangladesh Cultural Exchange Programme 2023–2025: Memorandum of Understanding*. New Delhi.
4. NDTV. (2023, May 12). Shah Rukh Khan's Pathaan opens to packed theatres in Bangladesh. <https://www.ndtv.com>
5. Prothom Alo. (2023, May 20). Bangladeshi film artistes protest Bollywood releases. <https://en.prothomalo.com>
6. Prothom Alo. (2025, June 11). Chorki reports subscriber surge and global reach among diaspora. <https://en.prothomalo.com>
7. The Daily Star. (2023, May 14). Government permits import of Hindi films under SAFTA regulations. <https://www.thedailystar.net>
8. The Daily Star. (2024, January 7). Hoichoi–Bangladesh co-productions set new regional trend. <https://www.thedailystar.net>

Other Sources

1. Morshed, M. (2012). The cultural politics of Indian TV serials in Bangladesh. *Journal of South Asian Cultural Studies*, 6(2), 45–61.
2. Harisur, R. (2013). Piracy and popular culture: Informal Bollywood networks in Bangladesh. *Media Asia*, 40(1), 59–72.

Publisher's Note

The Social Science Review A Multidisciplinary Journal remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published data, map and institutional affiliations.

©The Author(s) 2025. Open Access.

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>