



## CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AND DIASPORA POLITICS: INDIA'S SOFT POWER TOOLS IN GLOBAL OUTREACH

Muslima Khatun

### RESEARCH ARTICLE



#### Author Details:

Former Student,  
Rabindra Bharati University,  
Kolkata, West Bengal, India

#### Corresponding Author:

Muslima Khatun

#### DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.260402016>

#### Abstract

This paper explores how India employs cultural diplomacy and diaspora politics as major components of its soft power strategy in contemporary international relations. Drawing upon soft power theory, the study examines how India's cultural heritage, democratic identity, and global diaspora networks contribute to its international influence. Through initiatives such as global yoga promotion, educational exchanges, cultural festivals, and structured diaspora engagement platforms, India seeks to enhance its global image and strategic partnerships. The paper argues that cultural appeal combined with diaspora engagement creates a sustainable framework for influence beyond military or economic means. However, effective coordination and credibility remain essential for long-term impact.

**Keywords:** *Cultural Diplomacy, Yoga, Bollywood and Indian Cinema, Religious Tourism, Digital Media*

### Introduction

India's soft power is a vital part of its global presence, showcasing its rich culture, traditions, values through cultural diplomacy; India connects with other nations, fostering relationships that go beyond politics and economies. This article explores various aspects of India's soft power, including its history, the role of diaspora and the influence of cultural elements like yoga, Bollywood, and cuisine. Undertaking these elements helps us appreciate how India shapes its image and influences the world. India is an ancient civilization with five thousand years of recorded history. Over these long years Indians have perfected many cultural attributes that may be appealing to the rest of the world, what Joseph Nye likes to call "soft power". India produced some great. Over the last Three millennia, India has given birth to many remarkable leaders and thinkers whose ideas still influence The modern world. The Indian tradition has always emphasized non-violence (Ashimsa), tolerance, and mutual respect among people of different cultures and beliefs. Respect of diverse opinions and encouragement of intellectual and scientific inquiry have been essential features of Indian civilization since ancient times. These values helped India develop a culture of harmony and peaceful coexistence., and mutual respect among people of different cultures and beliefs. Respect of diverse opinions and encouragement of intellectual and scientific inquiry have been essential features of Indian civilization since ancient times. These values helped India develop a culture of harmony and peaceful coexistence.

### India's Civilizational Legacy and Its Global Influence

India's civilization, one of the oldest in the world, has contributed profoundly to humanity through its spiritual leaders, philosophical traditions, educational heritage, arts, and cultural practices. Over thousands of years, India has projected values such as non-violence, tolerance, intellectual inquiry, and universal brotherhood. These ideals continue to shape global thought and international relations even in the modern era.

### Gautama Buddha: Messenger of Compassion and Non-Violence

Gautama Buddha Born as Prince Siddhartha, he abandoned the comforts of royal life in search of deeper truth about human suffering. After years of meditation and spiritual discipline, he attained enlightenment at Bodh Gaya and came to be known as Gautama Buddha. His teachings centered on compassion, moderation, and inner awakening. He advocated the "Middle Path," which rejects both extreme luxury and severe asceticism. Through the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, he offered a practical framework for ethical living and spiritual growth. Buddhism gradually expanded beyond India to regions such as China, Japan, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Southeast Asia. In these societies, it influenced philosophy, governance, art, architecture, and

daily life. Temples, sculptures, and monastic institutions across Asia stand as testimony to his enduring impact. Buddha's message reshaped not only Indian thought but also the spiritual and cultural landscape of an entire continent.

### **Ashoka the Great: From Conquest to Moral Governors**

Emperor Ashoka initially pursued territorial expansion through military campaigns. However, the devastating consequences of the Kalinga War deeply transformed him. Witnessing the immense suffering caused by violence, he renounced warfare and embraced Buddhism.

Ashoka thereafter devoted himself to principles of peace, compassion, and public welfare. He promoted ethical administration, built roads and hospitals, and encouraged religious tolerance throughout his empire. His edicts, inscribed on pillars and rocks across the subcontinent, emphasized kindness, justice, and respect for all faiths.

Ashoka's transformation from a conqueror to a moral ruler remains one of the most remarkable examples in world history of ethical leadership and governance.

### **Akbar: Architect of Religious Harmony**

Akbar, one of the most influential Mughal emperors, believed that political stability required social and religious inclusiveness. He strengthened unity by forming alliances with Rajput rulers and marrying a Hindu princess, symbolizing interfaith cooperation. In his court, scholars of different religions—Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jains, and others—engaged in intellectual debates. Akbar introduced Din-e-Ilahi, a spiritual initiative aimed at synthesizing the ethical teachings of various faiths. His policies fostered tolerance, reduced sectarian tensions, and encouraged cultural integration. Akbar's reign stands as a model of pluralism and enlightened statecraft.

### **Mahatma Gandhi: Global Symbol of Non-Violent Resistance**

Mahatma Gandhi transformed India's struggle for independence into a moral movement grounded in truth (Satya) and non-violence (Ahimsa). Through peaceful protests, civil disobedience, and mass mobilization, he demonstrated that moral courage could challenge even the most powerful empire. Gandhi's philosophy extended far beyond India. Leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela drew inspiration from his methods of peaceful resistance. His legacy proves that ethical conviction and non-violent action can bring profound political and social change worldwide.

### **India's Cultural and Intellectual Soft Power**

Beyond individual leaders, India's civilizational strength also lies in its knowledge systems, philosophy, arts, and cultural practices that continue to influence the world.

#### **Yoga and Ayurveda: Global Pathways to Holistic Wellness**

Yoga and Ayurveda represent two ancient Indian systems devoted to the harmony of body, mind, and spirit. Rather than focusing solely on curing disease, they emphasize preventive healthcare, balanced lifestyle, and mental well-being.

Yoga has evolved into a worldwide practice promoting physical fitness, stress reduction, and spiritual awareness. The United Nations' recognition of 21 June as International Yoga Day reflects global acceptance of India's contribution to wellness.

Ayurveda, often referred to as the "science of life," advocates natural remedies, herbal medicine, and disciplined living. Together, Yoga and Ayurveda project India as a source of peace, balance, and sustainable health solutions in an increasingly stressful world.

### **Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: A Philosophy of Global Unity**

The concept of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, drawn from ancient Upanishadic wisdom, conveys the idea that the entire world constitutes one family. This philosophy promotes inclusivity, empathy, and collective responsibility. In modern diplomacy, this ideal shapes India's approach to global engagement. Rather than seeking dominance, India emphasizes partnership, dialogue, and mutual respect. By presenting itself as a cooperative and responsible international actor, India reinforces its image as a peace-oriented and culturally grounded nation.

### **Ancient Educational Heritage: Centers of Knowledge**

India's early universities were among the world's first organized centers of higher learning. Institutions such as Nalanda University and Taxila University attracted scholars from across Asia. Students studied philosophy, medicine, astronomy, mathematics, grammar, and political science. These institutions encouraged debate, research, and intellectual freedom. Today, this legacy strengthens India's role in academic exchange programs and global research collaborations.

#### **Epics and Literary Traditions: Timeless Moral Wisdom**

India's epics, including the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, explore themes of duty, justice, loyalty, and moral conflict. Far beyond religious narratives, they examine universal human dilemmas that remain relevant across cultures and eras.

Sanskrit literature, with its poetry and dramatic works, contributed richly to world literary heritage. Much like classical Greek texts influenced Western civilization, Indian epics and classical writings continue to inspire global scholarship and artistic creativity.

### Cultural Diplomacy through Performing Arts

India utilizes its classical arts as instruments of international cultural outreach. Dance forms such as Bharatanatyam and Kathak combine storytelling, devotion, and refined aesthetics.

Traditional music traditions—Hindustani and Carnatic—reflect centuries of disciplined artistic evolution. Through cultural festivals, exchange programs, and performances abroad, India presents itself as a vibrant and diverse civilization rooted in artistic excellence.

### Culinary Heritage: Food as Cultural Diplomacy

Indian cuisine, celebrated for its diversity and distinctive use of spices, has gained immense popularity worldwide. From rich North Indian curries to South Indian dosas and coastal delicacies, the country's food culture reflects its geography and history. Indian restaurants and food festivals serve as informal ambassadors of culture. Often described as "culinary diplomacy," food creates bonds across communities and fosters goodwill. Through its cuisine, India builds meaningful cultural connections that transcend political boundaries.

### Bollywood and Indian Cinema: Expanding India's Cultural Soft Power

Another powerful dimension of India's global influence lies in its film industry, particularly Bollywood and the broader landscape of Indian cinema. As one of the largest film-producing industries in the world, Indian cinema has played a significant role in shaping global perceptions of India's culture, traditions, and social values. Indian films are not merely a form of entertainment; they serve as cultural ambassadors. Through music, dance, storytelling, and emotionally rich narratives, Bollywood presents India's social diversity, family values, festivals, and traditions to international audiences. The blending of drama, romance, social issues, and music creates a distinctive cinematic style that differentiates Indian films from Western cinema. Over the decades, Indian movies have gained immense popularity in regions such as the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa, Southeast Asia, and even parts of Europe and North America. In countries like Russia, Egypt, and Indonesia, Bollywood stars have enjoyed celebrity status comparable to local icons. This widespread appeal strengthens India's cultural presence abroad without the use of political or military influence. Indian cinema also plays a key role in connecting the Indian diaspora to their cultural roots. For overseas Indians, films become a medium to preserve language, traditions, and emotional ties to their homeland. At the same time, non-Indian audiences are introduced to Indian customs, weddings, music traditions, and moral philosophies through cinema. Moreover, contemporary Indian films increasingly address global themes such as gender equality, social justice, education, and human rights. By portraying both traditional values and modern aspirations, Indian cinema reflects a dynamic society balancing heritage and progress. International film festivals and global streaming platforms have further expanded the reach of Indian storytelling. Music from Bollywood films, with its vibrant choreography and fusion of classical and modern styles, has also gained worldwide recognition. Dance forms showcased in films often spark interest in Indian classical arts such as Bharatanatyam and Kathak, thereby reinforcing other aspects of India's cultural diplomacy.

In terms of soft power, Bollywood contributes by:

- Enhancing India's cultural visibility worldwide
- Promoting positive imagery of diversity and pluralism
- Strengthening diaspora identity and cultural continuity
- Encouraging tourism to Indian locations featured in films
- Building emotional connections that transcend political boundaries

Thus, alongside Yoga, Ayurveda, ancient philosophy, literature, performing arts, and c geographical borders.

### Religious Tourism and Spiritual Heritage: India's Global Cultural Influence

Religious tourism and spiritual heritage play a transformative role in expanding India's cultural influence across the world. As a civilization deeply rooted in spirituality, India has long been regarded as a land of sacred knowledge, meditation, and philosophical exploration. This reputation attracts millions of pilgrims, scholars, and seekers who travel not only for religious rituals but also for cultural understanding and inner growth. India is home to sacred destinations that hold global importance. Cities such as Varanasi, Bodh Gaya, Amritsar, and Haridwar serve as spiritual centers that attract visitors from Asia, Europe, the Americas, and beyond. These places are not only religious landmarks but also living cultural spaces where ancient traditions continue to shape daily life. Through rituals, festivals, temple architecture, and community practices, international visitors experience India's enduring spiritual identity firsthand. One of the most significant ways religious tourism influences global culture is by spreading philosophical ideas beyond geographical boundaries. Pilgrimage circuits related to Buddhism, for example, connect India with countries such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, Japan, and Myanmar. Visitors who travel to Bodh Gaya or Sarnath return home with deeper engagement in Buddhist teachings, strengthening cross-cultural and diplomatic ties. Similarly, Sikh pilgrims visiting Amritsar and Hindu devotees visiting sacred river sites create transnational religious networks that reinforce emotional and cultural bonds. Spiritual tourism also contributes to the global popularity of meditation, mindfulness, and yoga practices. Many international visitors come to India seeking spiritual retreats, ashram experiences, and guidance in traditional philosophies. Upon returning to their countries, they often establish meditation centers, yoga institutes, and study circles inspired by Indian traditions. In this way, India's spiritual heritage quietly shapes global wellness movements and contemporary lifestyle trends. Moreover, large-scale events such as the Kumbh Mela draw worldwide media attention and scholarly interest. These gatherings highlight India's organizational capacity, religious diversity, and civilizational continuity.

Global exposure through documentaries, research, and digital platforms further amplifies India's image as a center of faith and cultural resilience. Religious tourism also complements other aspects of India's soft power, such as cinema, performing arts, cuisine, and education. While Bollywood showcases India's vibrant storytelling and classical arts display aesthetic excellence, spiritual heritage presents a deeper dimension—one rooted in reflection, morality, and universal brotherhood. Together, these elements create a comprehensive global image of India as both culturally dynamic and spiritually profound. In essence, India's religious tourism does more than attract visitors; it fosters intercultural dialogue, promotes shared values of peace and coexistence, and strengthens international relationships. By offering a space for spiritual exploration and cultural immersion, India continues to influence global thought and contribute meaningfully to the world's cultural landscape.

### **Digital Media and the Global Expansion of India's Soft Power**

In the twenty-first century, digital media has become one of the most powerful instruments through which nations project their culture and values. For India, digital platforms have significantly expanded the reach of its soft power by transforming traditional cultural resources into globally accessible content. While India's influence was historically carried through spirituality, literature, cinema, arts, and educational exchange, digital technology has accelerated and amplified this outreach in unprecedented ways. Through platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and X, Indian culture is now shared instantly across continents. Classical dance performances, yoga sessions, music concerts, festival celebrations, and spiritual discourses are streamed to international audiences in real time. This direct communication reduces geographical barriers and allows India to present its cultural narrative without intermediaries. As a result, younger generations around the world engage more closely with Indian traditions, fashion, cuisine, and lifestyle. Digital streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video have further enhanced the global presence of Indian cinema and storytelling. Regional films and web series that were once limited to domestic audiences are now accessible worldwide with subtitles and dubbing. This not only strengthens the global appeal of Bollywood and Indian cinema but also showcases India's social diversity, democratic debates, and evolving modern identity. Through compelling narratives and socially relevant themes, digital entertainment reinforces India's image as a dynamic and culturally rich society. Digital media has also deepened the global reach of India's spiritual heritage. Online yoga classes, meditation sessions, and Ayurveda-based wellness programs allow individuals worldwide to experience India's holistic traditions from their homes. In this way, digital platforms complement religious tourism by spreading spiritual knowledge beyond physical pilgrimage sites. The ideas of harmony, balance, and inner peace associated with Indian philosophy gain renewed relevance in a digitally connected yet stressful world. Moreover, India's large diaspora community uses digital networks to remain emotionally and culturally connected to the homeland. Festivals such as Diwali, Holi, and Eid are celebrated virtually across borders, strengthening shared identity and cultural continuity. Indian diplomatic missions also employ digital communication to promote tourism, education, and cultural exchange programs, enhancing India's image as an open and technologically progressive nation.

Thus, digital media acts as a modern extension of India's civilizational soft power. Just as ancient universities, epics, performing arts, cuisine, and cinema historically shaped India's global influence, digital platforms now provide a fast, interactive, and far-reaching medium to sustain that legacy. By blending timeless cultural values with contemporary communication technology, India projects itself as both deeply rooted in tradition and confidently engaged with the modern world.

### **Indian Restaurants Worldwide as an Instrument of Soft Power**

Indian restaurants across the world have become one of the most visible and effective expressions of India's cultural soft power. Food is a universal language, and through its rich culinary traditions, India has created meaningful cultural connections that transcend political and geographical boundaries. From metropolitan cities in Europe and North America to towns in Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, Indian cuisine has established a strong global presence.

The diversity of Indian food reflects the country's vast geography, history, and cultural pluralism. Dishes such as biryani, butter chicken, dosa, samosa, and various vegetarian curries introduce international audiences to India's regional flavors and distinctive use of spices. The balance of taste—sweet, spicy, sour, and savory—combined with aromatic herbs and traditional cooking techniques makes Indian cuisine unique and memorable. As people experience these flavors, they also become curious about the culture, traditions, and history behind them.

Indian restaurants do more than serve meals; they create cultural spaces. The décor, music, hospitality, and festive celebrations within these restaurants often reflect Indian customs and values. Festivals like Diwali or Eid are celebrated in many overseas Indian restaurants, offering local communities a glimpse into India's vibrant traditions. In this way, restaurants function as informal cultural ambassadors, shaping positive perceptions of India.

For the Indian diaspora, restaurants serve as important centers of cultural identity and community bonding. They help preserve language, culinary heritage, and traditional practices in foreign lands. At the same time, non-Indian customers are introduced to concepts such as vegetarianism, Ayurveda-inspired diets, and the cultural significance of spices. This exchange fosters cross-cultural understanding and mutual respect.

The global popularity of Indian cuisine has also influenced international food culture. Terms like "curry" and "masala" have entered everyday vocabulary in many countries. Cooking shows, food blogs, and social media platforms further amplify this influence, encouraging experimentation with Indian recipes. As a result, Indian cuisine becomes integrated into global culinary trends.

From a diplomatic perspective, culinary outreach often complements official cultural events and international summits, where Indian dishes are served to foreign dignitaries. Such gestures create warmth and familiarity, strengthening bilateral relations in subtle but meaningful ways. This phenomenon, often described as culinary diplomacy, demonstrates how taste and hospitality can shape international goodwill.

In essence, Indian restaurants worldwide play a significant role in expanding India's soft power. By sharing flavors, traditions, and hospitality, they build emotional connections that enhance India's global image as a diverse, welcoming, and culturally rich nation. Through cuisine, India influences hearts and minds—proving that cultural power can be as impactful as political or economic strength.

### **Narendra Modi and the Expansion of India's Cultural Diplomacy**

In the contemporary phase of India's global engagement, Narendra Modi has played a significant role in strengthening cultural diplomacy as a core element of India's soft power strategy. Building upon India's ancient civilizational heritage—ranging from spirituality and yoga to cinema, cuisine, and democratic values—his leadership has emphasized projecting India not merely as an economic or strategic power, but as a cultural and moral force in international affairs. One of the most visible achievements in this regard has been the global recognition of the International Day of Yoga on 21 June by the United Nations in 2014, following India's proposal. This initiative elevated yoga from a traditional practice to a symbol of global wellness and harmony. Mass yoga events organized in different countries, often attended by world leaders and diplomats, have reinforced India's image as a source of peace, balance, and holistic living. In this way, yoga became not only a health movement but also a diplomatic bridge connecting India with diverse cultures. Under Modi's tenure, the philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam—the idea that “the world is one family”—has been repeatedly highlighted in global forums such as the G20 and the United Nations. By foregrounding this ancient principle, India presents itself as an inclusive and responsible global actor committed to cooperation rather than confrontation. This narrative aligns India's foreign policy with its civilizational ethos of tolerance and dialogue, strengthening its moral credibility on the world stage. Cultural diplomacy has also been reinforced through strong engagement with the Indian diaspora. Large-scale diaspora events in countries like the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom have transformed overseas Indian communities into active partners in India's global outreach. These gatherings celebrate Indian culture, language, cinema, and traditions, thereby amplifying India's soft power through people-to-people connections.

Additionally, India's promotion of traditional medicine systems such as Ayurveda, support for Buddhist heritage circuits, and the restoration of cultural monuments abroad have enhanced cultural partnerships with countries in Asia and beyond. By emphasizing shared historical and spiritual ties—particularly with Southeast Asian and East Asian nations—India strengthens diplomatic relations through common cultural foundations. Digital diplomacy has further expanded India's global visibility. Through active use of social media platforms, cultural messages, festival greetings, and policy initiatives are communicated directly to international audiences. This integration of technology with tradition presents India as both modern and culturally rooted. In continuity with India's historical legacy—from Buddha's message of compassion to Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence—Modi's approach seeks to position India as a civilizational state whose influence extends beyond material power. Cultural diplomacy under his leadership demonstrates that India's greatest strength lies in its ability to inspire through heritage, ideas, and shared human values.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, in the broader framework of India's soft power – shaped by spirituality, education, cinema, cuisine, and digital media – Narendra Modi's cultural initiatives represent a contemporary effort to translate ancient ideals into global engagement, reinforcing India's standing as a vibrant and culturally confident nation. In conclusion, the rich heritage of Indian tradition, rooted in non-violence (Ahimsa), tolerance, mutual respect, and the encouragement of intellectual and scientific inquiry, has played a vital role in shaping a harmonious and progressive society. These timeless values have not only strengthened unity among diverse cultures and beliefs within India but have also offered a meaningful message to the modern world. By upholding peace, coexistence, and respect for diversity, India continues to inspire the path toward global harmony and understanding.

**Acknowledgment:** No

**Author's Contribution:** *Muslima Khatun*: Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing

**Funding:** No

**Declaration:** Not Applicable

**Competing Interest:** No

## References

1. Hall, I. (2012). India's new public diplomacy: Soft power and the limits of government action. *Asian Survey*, 52(6), 1089–1110. <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2012.52.6.1089>
2. Indian Council for Cultural Relations. (2023). *Annual report 2022–23*. Government of India. <https://www.iccr.gov.in>
3. Malone, D. M. (2011). *Does the elephant dance? Contemporary Indian foreign policy*. Oxford University Press.
4. Ministry of AYUSH. (2023). *Global promotion of traditional medicine*. Government of India. <https://www.ayush.gov.in>
5. Ministry of External Affairs. (2023). *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas*. Government of India. <https://www.mea.gov.in>
6. Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. PublicAffairs.
7. Rana, K. S. (2011). India's soft power diplomacy. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46(36), 43–48.
8. Tharoor, S. (2012). *Pax Indica: India and the world of the 21st century*. Penguin Books.
9. United Nations. (2014). *International Day of Yoga*. United Nations. <https://www.un.org>
10. Wagner, C. (2010). India's soft power: Prospects and limitations. *India Quarterly*, 66(4), 333–342. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097492841006600403>

## 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) 2026. 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/>