**Topic: Projecting Culture, Shaping Perceptions: India’s Use of Cultural Diplomacy in Global Engagement**

**Introduction – Upal Mitra**

In today’s world, power is no longer measured solely by armies or economies. Influence often travels through far less obvious channels—through stories, images, performances, and ideas. Culture, once seen as something belonging to the realm of tradition or heritage, has gradually taken on a strategic role in diplomacy. For India, this turn toward cultural diplomacy isn’t a sudden development, but more of a return—a continuation of patterns long woven into its history. What makes India’s case especially compelling is not simply the richness of its culture, but the way it has learned to share it, to let it speak across borders without losing its rootedness. India’s global cultural presence stretches back centuries. Well before words like “soft power” were coined, India was influencing faraway societies—not with force, but with philosophy, art, religion, and music. From the gentle spread of Buddhism through Asia to the movement of Sanskrit texts and aesthetic ideas across oceans, India’s cultural reach was deep and often unspoken. After independence, leaders like Nehru and Maulana Azad recognised this strength and sought to give it formal shape. The establishment of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) in 1950 wasn’t just a policy decision; it reflected a worldview—a belief

that India’s place in the world could be built not only through alliances or trade, but through shared understanding and exchange. What sets India apart is its subtle, almost understated approach. Cultural diplomacy here has never quite resembled the glossy, image-driven strategies favoured by some Western nations. In India’s case, it has often felt quieter, more like an invitation than a performance. There is something characteristically Indian about projecting identity without shouting about it. Cultural outreach has taken many forms, from dance and cinema to yoga and literature, but the thread running through them is a certain openness: the desire to connect, not to impress. In recent years, this instinct has gained renewed importance. As India becomes more visible on the global stage, its culture has followed, sometimes leading the way. Bollywood, for instance, has found unexpected resonance in distant corners of the world, while traditional forms like Bharatanatyam or Hindustani music continue to draw audiences abroad. The Indian diaspora, now a powerful global presence in its own right, has helped amplify these connections. More than just ambassadors, they have become bridges between worlds. India’s use of cultural diplomacy, then, is not merely a strategy, it’s a way of seeing the world. It suggests that influence doesn’t always come from dominance; sometimes, it comes from the quiet confidence of sharing who you are. And in an age where misunderstandings run deep, that kind of diplomacy might be one of the most needed and enduring forms of engagement.

**Background and Literature Review – Salome George**

India's rich past is a reflection of its approach to cultural diplomacy, which is based on the values of its ancient civilisation. Historically, we can observe that India had an impact on distant areas by spreading religion, art, and ideas, especially through Buddhism, Sanskrit literature, and philosophical teachings. Thus, India's cultural ideals spread throughout Asia, establishing the foundation for what would eventually be known as cultural diplomacy. To strengthen India's cultural diplomacy internationally, post-independence Indian leaders Maulana Azad and Jawaharlal Nehru founded the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) in 1950. By integrating culture into its foreign policy, this calculated action allowed India to project influence via literature, art, education, and spirituality.

This article signifies the importance of soft power through Joseph Nye’s theory of soft power (2004). Nye’s theory explains influence through attraction rather than coercion. Building on Nye, scholars like Daya Thussu (2013) have analyzed India's use of cinema, yoga, and diaspora engagement as tools of soft power. The roles of academic exchanges through ICCR scholarships, global festivals, etc., are also highlighted in the research that helps shape international perceptions about India. However, much of the existing literature is top-down. It revolves around government-led initiatives or state-led strategies. Research is limited to understanding more about India’s cultural diplomacy at the grassroots level, especially how foreign audiences interpret and internalize Indian cultural messaging.

**Yoga, Religion & Global Outreach – Yuvraj Singh Sengar**

*सर्वे भर्वन्त सखिनः। सर्वे सन्त खनरामयाः।*

*सर्वे भद्राखि पश्यन्त। मा कखिद्ःिभाग्भर्वत॥*

*—Shanti mantra,*

*verse-2.1.1-Taittriya Upanishad*

The above lines state the core idea of the Vedas, which wishes for happiness and good health for all, irrespective of caste, sex, or class. This thought prevails in India's cultural diplomacy; to connect the thought of good health and well-being, yoga is the best thing one can use as a tool of cultural diplomacy.

Yoga is a renowned health & wellbeing practice around the globe. In 1894, when Swami Vivekananda first went to Chicago to attend the Parliament of Religions and spoke about India and Hinduism, in his lecture, he explained India's vibrant culture that shapes Indian civilisation and way of thinking. 1896 marks a year when swami Vivekananda wrote the book *Raja Yoga* in Manhattan, which made a major impact on the world’s understanding of yoga. Another personality, Maharshi Mahesh Yogi, spread yoga to the West by having visitors such as The Beatles. In the 1960s, Maharshi had many foreigners as yoga practitioners (BBC,2017). In modern day, spiritual leaders like Sadhguru, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar are spreading yoga & spirituality worldwide with the help of their organisations like ISHA foundation and Art of Living respectively. These organisations have members across the globe spreading Indian spiritualism irrespective of territorial boundaries. On December 10, 2014, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s proposal in the UN to declare June 21 as International Yoga Day was proclaimed. This proposal was endorsed by 175 UN member states (United Nations Office for Partnerships, n.d.). It laid the bedrock for Yoga as India's tool of cultural diplomacy in the 21st century. On the first International Yoga Day, PM, along with nationals from 84 countries and over 35000 participants, performed yoga together, both numbers were recorded in the Guinness Book of World Records (Press Information Bureau, 2015). This strengthens India’s soft power in the global system. Yoga is a part of the Sanatan culture of India, this culture consists of the world’s third-largest religion, Hinduism, and the roots of Buddhism. India is known as the land of Buddha and Mahavir, i.e., the symbol of peace and contentment worldwide. This is the age where narratives play a crucial role in a nation’s diplomacy. By projecting an image of a peaceful nation, one can achieve its goals with soft power only. The spread of Ramayana across Southeast Asia and Buddhism across the world creates the narrative of being culturally rich civilization. These cultural factors give India an upper hand in critical negotiations on the international stage.

**Cinema, language, and cuisine – Tanishq Raj**

Cinema, language, and cuisine serve as vital instruments of India’s cultural diplomacy, subtly shaping perceptions and fostering emotional connections across borders. Among these, the influence of Indian cinema, particularly Bollywood, has emerged as one of the most powerful cultural exports. The vibrant storytelling, emotive music, and colorful aesthetics of Hindi films have resonated with global audiences, especially in countries with significant Indian diaspora such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and the Gulf nations. Beyond Bollywood, regional cinema—from Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, and Malayalam industries—has gained international recognition through streaming platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime, which have enabled Indian content to transcend linguistic barriers and find new audiences worldwide. The popularity of Indian films is not only a cultural phenomenon but also a strategic tool of diplomacy. Films such as Lagaan, Dangal, and RRR have been showcased in international film festivals and often depict themes of resilience, tradition, and communal harmony, aligning with India’s broader soft power image. In many cases, Indian cinema serves as a first introduction to Indian society for foreigners, influencing how the world perceives the nation’s values and social fabric. Language is another dimension of India’s soft power. Hindi, one of the most widely spoken languages globally, has found new appeal through cinema and music. Efforts by institutions like the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and the Ministry of External Affairs to promote Hindi and Sanskrit abroad, through cultural centers, language classes, and literary events, have revived global interest in India’s linguistic heritage. Sanskrit, often associated with yoga and ancient wisdom, enhances India’s image as a civilizational power grounded in philosophical and spiritual depth. Cuisine, meanwhile, remains one of the most accessible forms of cultural diplomacy. Indian food is celebrated for its rich flavors, diverse ingredients, and regional variety. From Michelin-starred Indian restaurants in London and New York to street food festivals in Tokyo and Berlin, Indian cuisine has carved a niche in global palates. Signature dishes like butter chicken, biryani, masala dosa, and samosas have become culinary symbols of India’s cultural richness. The rise of Indian celebrity chefs and the global spread of Indian restaurants reflect how cuisine promotes intercultural appreciation and dialogue. In combining cinema, language, and cuisine, India crafts a multifaceted cultural identity—one that is dynamic, inclusive, and deeply rooted in tradition.

# Art, Literature, and Festivals in India’s Cultural Diplomacy – Ananya Sharma

India’s engagement with the world through its *art, literature, and festivals* serves as a powerful tool of *cultural diplomacy*. These cultural expressions do more than celebrate heritage—they actively shape how the world perceives India, portraying it as a country rich in *creativity, tradition, and diversity*. As subtle yet influential forms of *soft power*, they allow India to build global goodwill and foster *cross-cultural understanding* without coercion or political pressure.

*Indian art, both traditional and contemporary,* plays a crucial role in global cultural outreach. Classical dance forms like *Kathak, Bharatanatyam, and Odissi ar*e regularly performed by Indian cultural troupes across the world. These performances are not merely artistic—they carry deep *mythological, spiritual, and philosophical* meanings, offering international audiences insight into India’s civilizational values. Meanwhile, modern Indian artists such as *Subodh Gupta and Nalini Malani* have gained prominence in global exhibitions and biennales, bringing contemporary Indian perspectives to global platforms. In the literary sphere, *Indian literature* is another pillar of cultural diplomacy. From *Rabindranath Tagore*, the first non-European Nobel Laureate in Literature, to contemporary voices like *Arundhati Roy* and *Jhumpa Lahiri*, Indian authors have contributed significantly to global literary discourse. Their works often explore universal themes of identity, displacement, resistance, and social transformation, making Indian narratives widely accessible and relatable. Efforts by organizations like Sahitya Akademi and *ICCR* to translate regional Indian literature have expanded the global audience for India’s rich linguistic traditions. Additionally, the globally hosted *Jaipur Literature Festival* acts as a hub for cultural exchange, spotlighting Indian authors and connecting them with international literary circuits. Festivals represent a third and equally dynamic aspect of India’s cultural projection. Celebrations like *Diwali, Holi, and Navratri* are now observed in countries far from India’s shores, thanks in part to the Indian diaspora and initiatives led by Indian embassies. These events allow foreign audiences to experience Indian culture firsthand, often through food, music, dance, and rituals. *The Festival of India,* officially supported by the Indian government, has been organized in countries like *France, South Africa, and Indonesia*, featuring exhibitions, performances, and craft displays that encapsulate India’s cultural wealth.

Together, India’s art, literature, and festivals form a triad that reflects both its ancient traditions and modern identity. These cultural elements do more than preserve heritage, they actively build bridges between nations, nurture empathy, and enhance India’s global visibility. In a world where influence is increasingly shaped by narratives and values, India’s cultural diplomacy offers a uniquely human and enduring approach to international engagement.

**Educational & Academic Exchanges, Tourism, and Cultural Diplomacy in India – Ananya Paul**

India’s soft power is an intricate blend of tradition, diplomacy, and education, shaping global perceptions through lived experiences rather than formal policy. This influence is not imposed but naturally absorbed, woven into daily encounters with Indian culture through literature, music, or academic exchanges. Unlike conventional geopolitical strategies, India’s approach operates through cultural familiarity, fostering a connection beyond borders. India's strategy emphasizes indirect cultural influence, aligning with Nye’s (2004) conception of soft power, where attraction and co-option replace coercion and payment as means of influence. Education plays a significant role in this global outreach, with initiatives such as the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) serving as gateways to intellectual collaboration. These programs welcome students and professionals from over 160 countries, embedding them into India’s academic and cultural landscape. The "Study in India" initiative, launched in 2018, amplifies this effort, transforming India from a study destination; it has become an immersive space for intellectual and personal growth. By blending intellectual rigor with personal development, the program contributes to India's image as a nurturing and dynamic learning environment (Chatterjee, 2021). Beyond academics, Indian universities encourage interdisciplinary engagement, dissolving rigid boundaries between disciplines and fostering vibrant international collaborations. These exchanges are reshaping classrooms into hubs of dialogue and discovery, reinforcing India’s role as a center of learning and cultural convergence. Cultural influence remains central to India’s presence on the world stage. The Kumbh Mela, a UNESCO-recognized event, is a convergence of tradition, diplomacy, and environmental stewardship. More than a pilgrimage, it has evolved into a platform where conservation efforts, governance strategies, and cultural heritage intersect, providing international delegates with firsthand exposure to India's societal depth. Varanasi exemplifies this cultural resonance. Its partnership with Kyoto reflects India’s ability to establish global cultural linkages, while nearby Sarnath extends India’s Buddhist heritage into South and Southeast Asia. These historical narratives reinforce India’s soft power, turning heritage into a diplomatic tool. The "Incredible India" campaign further enhances engagement, inviting the world not merely to observe India but to experience it. These efforts collectively establish India’s global influence as enduring rather than transient. The Synthesis of cultural diplomacy, education, and international initiatives ensures that India’s Presence is not only recognized but deeply embedded in global conversations.

Role of Indian Diaspora in Cultural Diplomacy – Yash Dabhi

The Indian diaspora has emerged as a vital component of India’s cultural diplomacy. By acting as cultural ambassadors, they promote India’s rich cultural heritage and values abroad, thus fostering mutual understanding and strengthening India’s soft power. The diaspora communities, through their daily interactions, cultural events, festivals, and participation in the social and political life of host countries, play a critical role in showcasing the vibrancy and diversity of Indian culture. Diasporic engagement forms one of the cornerstones of cultural diplomacy. It helps lay the cultural foundation upon which other aspects of diplomacy, such as economic and political ties, can be built. Indian diaspora communities in countries like the US, UK, Canada, and African nations preserve and promote Indian cuisines, festivals, languages, and classical arts, reinforcing cultural identity both at home and abroad. Diasporic engagement contributes significantly to forming a positive narrative about India. By demonstrating the inclusive and pluralistic nature of Indian society, the diaspora helps counter negative stereotypes and enhances India’s reputation as a diverse and democratic country. Cultural diplomacy thus becomes a vehicle for promoting India’s values of harmony, respect for diversity, and peaceful coexistence. Beyond cultural diplomacy, diasporic communities also contribute to India’s strategic interests in various ways.The Indian diaspora often lobbies for India’s interests in the political systems of host countries. Whether through formal diaspora organizations or informal networks, they influence decision-makers to adopt policies more favorable to India. Diaspora-led businesses and trade networks bolster economic cooperation, opening new markets for Indian goods and services. For instance, The India Africa Trade Council an NGO with offices across India and Africa leverages diaspora connections to facilitate trade, policy advocacy, and business engagement between India and African nations Ryuko Hira, Indian-born investor in Japan heads the HMI Hotel Group and has a $2.5 b investment footprint honoured with Padma Shri for strengthening Indo-Japanese economic ties. The diaspora acts as a bridge that connects India and the host country’s government, encouraging collaborations in areas like security, education, and technology. For instance, Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute funds binational academic exchanges, fellowships, and seminars that foster Indo-Canadian cultural and intellectual cooperation. In peroration, the Indian diaspora is not just a passive extension of India abroad, it actively shapes India’s global image and bolsters cultural diplomacy efforts. By strengthening cultural identity, forging mutual respect, and supporting India’s strategic interests through lobbying and advocacy, diasporic engagement has become an indispensable tool in India’s soft power arsenal.

**Case Studies of Impact: India’s Use of Cultural Diplomacy – Siddharth Singh**

Southeast Asia: Buddhist and Linguistic Links:

India’s cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia is deeply rooted in shared religious and linguistic heritage. The spread of Buddhism and Hinduism from India, dating back over two millennia, profoundly shaped the region’s art, architecture, language, and societal norms. Buddhist diplomacy, in particular, has been a cornerstone of India’s engagement, with initiatives such as the revival of Nalanda University and Buddhist circuit tourism projects reinforcing spiritual and cultural ties with countries like Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The Theravada Buddhist tradition, prevalent in Southeast Asia, traces its origins to India, strengthening cultural bonds and facilitating people-to-people connections (India vs Disinformation, 2024). Linguistically, Sanskrit and Pali have influenced the scripts and vocabularies of languages such as Thai, Khmer, and Javanese, while Indian epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata have been adapted into local folklore and performing arts.

Africa: Technical Training and Cultural Outreach:

India’s engagement with Africa is characterized by a blend of technical cooperation, educational exchange, and cultural outreach. The Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme, launched in the 1960s, has provided training to thousands of African professionals in fields such as information technology, finance, rural development, and renewable energy (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, n.d.). India’s Pan-Africa e-Network Project has further facilitated tele-education and telemedicine across the continent. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) offers nearly 900 scholarships annually to African students, while institutions such as the Mahatma Gandhi Institute in Mauritius and the establishment of IIT-Madras’s campus in Zanzibar exemplify India’s commitment to educational partnership. Cultural diplomacy initiatives, including Bollywood film screenings, yoga promotion, and the celebration of Indian festivals, foster mutual understanding and people-to-people ties, positioning India as a partner of choice in Africa’s development.

US/UK: Diaspora, Bollywood, Academic Exchanges:

In the US and UK, India leverages its large diaspora, Bollywood, and academic exchanges to shape perceptions and foster goodwill. The Indian diaspora, one of the world’s largest, plays a vital role in promoting Indian culture, values, and interests abroad. Bollywood, as a global entertainment powerhouse, has popularized Indian music, dance, and fashion, enhancing India’s soft power and intercultural appeal. Academic and cultural exchanges, such as the Fulbright Programme and the UK/India Year of Culture, facilitate mutual understanding, research collaboration, and educational mobility (Granthaalayah Publication, 2024). These initiatives are complemented by joint cultural festivals, theatre collaborations, and the celebration of Indian traditions, which reach millions and strengthen bilateral relationships. Such multidimensional engagement ensures that Indian culture remains a vibrant and influential force in Western societies, contributing to positive perceptions and deeper partnerships.

**Conclusion – Salome George**

India’s soft power approach through its cultural diplomacy showcases a fusion of heritage, variety, and current relevance. India established itself as an economic, political, and civilizational actor with its cultural representation through the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), Indian festivals, academic exchange programmes, the spread of Yoga, religion, cuisine, Bollywood, and the Indian diaspora being the cultural ambassadors of India. It has helped shape global perceptions positively. India’s vast and rich culture speaks for itself. It does not use aggressive measures and branding strategies, but instead, emphasizes authenticity and human connection. Indian culture is widely recognized and is spreading in Southeast Asia, Africa, and the West. Nevertheless, this influence needs to be sustained, and thus, future efforts must be more inclusive and multidimensional. India’s cultural diplomacy needs to be evaluated at the grassroots level to gain perception, and even in specific countries. It needs to adapt to the evolving narratives around identity, inclusion, and representation.

Suggestions for future research or Action:

For future research, researchers could examine and evaluate the global perception on India’s cultural diplomacy, especially in rural areas where influence could be limited. Researchers can also analyze how India through social media, projects its soft power online. Also, analyse the long-term diplomatic or financial effects of cultural diplomacy programs, such as those involving tourism and education, using policy impact analysis.

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