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Cultural Exchange Between India and Sri Lanka: Through the Cinematic Lens

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Abstract

Hindi cinema, one of the world's most prolific film industries, has long transcended national borders, serving as a dynamic vehicle of soft power and cultural exchange. This article examines the multidimensional relationship between Hindi films and the cultural-diplomatic landscape shared by India and Sri Lanka, bound by historical, religious, linguistic, and geographical proximities. Drawing on Joseph Nye's (1990, 2004) conceptual framework of soft power, alongside theories of cultural exchange, media imperialism, and transnational cinema, this study traces the trajectory of Hindi film reception in Sri Lanka. It interrogates how cinematic narratives, aesthetic traditions, and popular cultural symbols mediate cross-border identity formation, shared imaginaries, and bilateral understanding. This research, which looks beyond national boundaries, aims to carefully and critically investigate how and to what degree soft power, such as cinema, has contributed to cultural exchange between India and Sri Lanka. The argument made in this paper is that video platforms can facilitate cultural exchanges between Sri Lanka and India. This paper also examines the connection between films shot in Sri Lanka, which help to promote Sri Lanka's beautiful landscapes and boost tourism and the interconnectivity of South Asians.

Keywords

Geopolitical relations, Film tourism, Indian cinema, Soft power.

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1. Introduction

This study investigates the political and cultural exchange between two regions of the Indian Ocean, India and Sri Lanka, through films. This paper attempts to shed light on the numerous film networks and activities that have taken place on both sides of the Palk Strait. India and Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) have a long history of Socio-cultural, religious, and economic ties dating back to early times due to their geographical proximity and shared historical, religious, and linguistic connections. The cultural exchange between these two countries has been significant and has influenced various aspects of their societies, including language, religion, music, dance, art, architecture, cuisine, and literature. However, within South Asia itself, Hindi films occupy a uniquely influential position, operating across linguistic, ethnic, and national boundaries to generate shared aesthetic experiences and cultural identifications that formal diplomacy rarely achieves with comparable intimacy or emotional resonance. The two nations share deep civilizational ties rooted in Buddhist heritage, Sanskrit textual traditions, and ancient trade routes that predate modern nation-states by millennia.

India and Sri Lanka have a strong history of cultural exchanges. Buddhism originated in ancient times in India and spread to Sri Lanka in the 3rd century BCE. Rev. Mahinda, the son of Emperor Asoka the Great. He initiated the order of the monks in Sri Lanka. Later, Sanghamitta Theri also followed his brother, Rev. Mahinda, and she started the order of Buddhist nuns. The arrival of Rev. Mahinda in Sri Lanka is documented in the chronicle Mahavamsa and also mentioned in a rock inscription found in Amaparai after his departure. Buddhism has since been the fountainhead of Sinhalese literature. The teachings of Lord Buddha and Buddhist philosophy have had a profound impact on both countries. Sri Lanka is home to many ancient Buddhist temples and sacred sites, some of which have been influenced by Indian architectural styles. Tamil is widely spoken in India and Sri Lanka. Tamil literature and poetry have been shared between the two countries for centuries. Additionally, Sanskrit, the ancient Language of India, has influenced the development of languages like Sinhala and Pali in Sri Lanka. Indian classical music and dance forms, such as *Bharatanatyam*, *Kathak*, and Carnatic music, have influenced Sri Lankan traditional music and dance. There are also unique Sri Lankan dance forms, such as *Kandyan* dance, which have similarities to certain Indian dance styles. However, these two countries have a long relationship related to entertainment and politics.

2. Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

From the earliest times, international relations in political writings are mostly defined on the basis of power, including in the writings of Thucydides and Machiavelli. Joseph Nye also argued that “power has been central, and it remains perhaps the most important and least understood concept in political theory.” According to Robert A. Dahl, “power is the ability for one actor to influence the actions of another actor that would not have occurred otherwise”. Keeping in mind the complexities of defining power, the concept of soft power, introduced and established by Joseph Nye, holds that “the capacity to shape others’ preferences and behaviours through attraction rather than coercion” is a distinct and consequential dimension of international power. Nye (2004) identifies “three primary sources of a country’s soft power: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)”. Culture, in Nye’s formulation, encompasses both high culture, art, literature, education and popular culture. According to him, the global reach of the United States of America’s popular culture, including music, television and film, is a structural asset of American foreign policy throughout the postwar era, generating reservoirs of trust and identification that have facilitated diplomatic objectives in ways that military or economic instruments are not able to fulfil. Subsequent writers have extended, refined, and critiqued Nye’s framework in productive ways. Bound and Smewing (2010) emphasize that “cultural diplomacy, the deliberate deployment of cultural resources in the service of foreign policy, must be distinguished from the broader, more diffuse operation of soft power through the organic international circulation of cultural products”. The distinction is analytically significant: while the Indian state has progressively developed institutional mechanisms for cultural diplomacy, including the Indian Council for Cultural Relations and the promotion of yoga, classical music, and cinema internationally, the popular reception of Hindi films in Sri Lanka has historically preceded and often exceeded the reach of state-directed cultural programming. This suggests that the soft power generated by Hindi cinema in Sri Lanka operates substantially through market-driven cultural circulation rather than deliberate state strategy, a distinction that Nye himself acknowledges when noting that soft power is often produced by civil society and private actors rather than governments.

Zaharna and Cull have further developed the concept of “public diplomacy” as a field that explicitly incorporates media and cultural production as instruments of international communication. Cull’s taxonomy of public diplomacy “activities such as listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting provide a useful analytical vocabulary for disaggregating the different ways in which Hindi cinema functions in the India-Sri Lanka cultural exchange”. Cinematic exchange encompasses cultural diplomacy in the form of film festivals and co-productions, but also involves elements of

international broadcasting through satellite and streaming platforms, and functions as a mode of what Cull calls “listening” when Indian film makers incorporate Sri Lankan settings, characters, or themes.

3. Globalization and Soft Power

In the historical context of Indo-Sri Lankan cultural, social and political relations, this study seeks to analyze cinema as a cultural and political articulation of diplomacy between these countries. The Hindi cinema Industry has a long history of existence, but it was because of globalization that these film “productions became purposefully accessible internationally”. The popular definition of globalization is “a process that exacerbates the interconnection between countries, but this definition often overlooks its cultural impact”. After the progressive expansion of globalization, Bombay-centric industry is a leading film industry in terms of film production, and the United States leads in revenue. The pattern of exploiting “soft power as a national instrument is not unique to India, nor is the film industry’s use for this purpose; many countries have integrated this strategy into their policies”. This highlights the possible influence of global soft power enterprises. Consequently, cinema and soft power maintain a symbiotic relationship, wherein filmic narratives serve as a primary vehicle for the exercise of cultural influence. Their association occurs in a “progressively global world and has consequently come to know no boundaries.” After the 1990s, the Hindi film industry producers not only deliberately went for location scouting in different parts of the world but also started exploring screens and markets there. R. B. Mehta also mentions that even “though the USA remains at the forefront of soft power, Asian powers have started to do the same. This shows how soft power is a tool for most economic global powers, specifically for India, as its international counterparts also prioritize this strategy”. The investment also increased in the use of soft power with the neighbouring countries. One of the most enduring and significant channels of cultural exchange between India and Sri Lanka through Hindi cinema is the shared religious and mythological vocabulary that animates many Hindi films, particularly those produced before the liberalisation period of the 1990s.

The liberalization of South Asian media markets in the 1990s, and the consequent proliferation of satellite television channels broadcasting Hindi film content continuously, transformed the modalities and intensity of Hindi cinema’s presence in Sri Lanka. The introduction of channels such as Zee TV, Sony Entertainment Television, Star Plus, and subsequently dedicated film channels such as Zee Cinema and Sony MAX, dramatically expanded Hindi film access among Sri Lankan audiences who had previously been dependent on theatrical exhibition or limited state television broadcasting. This expansion was further accelerated in the 2000s and 2010s by the penetration of digital platforms, including streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, SonyLIV, and Hotstar/Disney+, which now make the entire corpus of Hindi cinema available on demand to Sri Lankan audiences with broadband connectivity.

The digital era has also enabled new forms of participatory audience engagement with Hindi cinema in Sri Lanka, including fan communities organized through social media platforms, online commentary and criticism in Sinhala and English, and the participation of Sri Lankan audiences in the global fandoms of Hindi film stars. Research on media consumption patterns in South Asia suggests that Hindi film content consistently ranks among the most-consumed entertainment media in Sri Lanka, with survey data indicating high levels of familiarity with current Hindi films, stars, and music among both Sinhalese and Tamil-speaking Sri Lankan youth.

So, South Asian countries also feel the importance of soft power. Sri Lanka, being a neighbouring country of India, has been significantly influenced by Indian cinema. The first Indian film screened in Sri Lanka was in 1937, and since then, Indian Hindi films have become a significant part of Sri Lankan culture. The popularity of Indian cinema in Sri Lanka can be ascribed to numerous factors, such as shared cultural heritage, language, and religion.

4. Cultural Exchange

This study focuses on cultural exchange, and it is significant to understand the term culture. Edward W. Said mentions that ‘culture’ means two things in particular. “First, it means all those practices, like the arts of description, communication, and representation, that have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political realms and often exist in aesthetic forms, one of whose principal aims is pleasure. Second, ‘culture’ is a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society’s reservoir of the best that has been known and thought.” According to Romila Thapar, “Culture can include at least three activities: to artificially grow microscopic organisms; to improve and refine the customs, manners and activities of one’s life; to give attention to the mind as part of what goes into the making of what we call civilization, or what was thought to be the highest culture.” Raymond Williams has argued that culture is a way of life. In this context, a state that wants to nurture civilized citizens for the nation must prioritize culture. People can also learn about any country’s customs and practices by watching films. Therefore, the entertainment industry is one of the important tools of culture.

Throughout history, despite not always being obvious, there have been links between the state and the entertainment sector. From Roman politicians’ use of amphitheatres for self-glorification. The entertainment industry, including cinema and music, has seldom been free of state institutional intervention and censorship. The study of film studies focuses on the differences between popular and historical films. These writings “warn us against searching for a ‘truthful’ or ‘accurate’ rendition of the past in historicals. Instead, they reiterate that popular films have a unique relationship with history. Hence, these films based on history recreate history for the entertainment of the people.” The entertainment industry has a

significant bearing on the idea of identity. Language is an essential component of the film industry, as with the advent of sound and dialogue, communication with the audience is crucial. Akansha Chandra writes, “Language expresses and constructs identities, often taking precedence over nationalism, religion, gender, and race in defining one’s identity. Within national boundaries, collective and individual identities are often shaped by membership in regional groups. Particularly in South Asia, the tongue has proven more powerful than a flag.” In this context, one can understand the significance of cinema in diverse ways.

5. The Emergence of Sri Lankan Cinema

Sri Lanka has a wonderful cinematic history dating back to the early 20th century. The first film exhibition in Sri Lanka took place in 1903, with the screening of short silent films. In the years that followed, cinema grew in popularity, and the first Sinhalese film was screened in 1947. Sri Lankan cinema emerged in the 1940s and has undergone various phases of development. The early films were heavily influenced by Indian cinema, and many Indian film technicians worked on Sri Lankan films. However, Sri Lankan cinema soon developed its own identity, with filmmakers exploring themes such as politics, social issues, and culture. The 1950s and 1960s produced many Sinhalese films inspired by Indian cinema. These films were often adaptations of Indian movies with a Sri Lankan twist. The journey began in the 1950s with calls from Sinhala ‘cultural patriots’ for a more reliable Sinhala- language films. Within this complex diplomatic landscape, cultural exchange through Hindi cinema has performed a distinctive bridging function, maintaining popular affective connections between the two societies during periods of official governmental friction. Vilasnee Tampoe-Hautin noted that “the final paradox in the study of cinema in Ceylon is the high percentage of cross-cultural frequentation. Statistics reveal that the entertainment potential of a film, whatever language or culture it conveys, carries more weight for the viewer than the intellectual, religious and ideological barriers put up by conservative opponents of popular cinema.”

In 1972, the cinema industry was taken under state administration with the formation of the State Film Corporation. This change in the cinema industry was also mentioned by its chairman, D.B. Nihalsingha: “the nationalization of the Sri Lankan film industry enjoyed only partial success”. In the 1980s, Sri Lankan cinema returned to the private sector and became accessible to the rest of the globe. The arrival of digital technology has revolutionized the film industry, making film production and distribution more accessible and affordable. The responsibility to democratize and popularize music, song and cinema lies with the artists; to do so, they should focus on creating an audience of responsible content consumers. Rajiv Sangle suggested that “this obligation also safeguards the ability to leverage soft power lies primarily with the people, and this has been the case for India so far. When overtly recognised by the state, soft power does not sustain its ‘soft’ allure.”

6. Cultural Exchange through Cinema

Indian films, particularly those from the Hindi film industry, commonly known as Bollywood films, are widely watched in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan actors and actresses have also gained popularity in India. The film and television content exchange has significantly enhanced the cultural experience between India and Sri Lanka. Here are some key points regarding the film and television exchange between the two countries.

Nevertheless, it is logical to say that “India has developed an industry of its own: Bollywood. Bollywood is a combination of the words Hollywood and Bombay (now Mumbai), where this industry grew.” Indian films, particularly movies, have a massive following in Sri Lanka. Many Bollywood stars have a substantial fan base in Sri Lanka. Bollywood films are often screened in Sri Lankan theatres, and the colourful song and dance sequences and the dramatic storytelling have captivated Sri Lankan audiences. Hindi films are often screened in Sri Lankan cinemas, allowing Sri Lankan audiences to experience Indian culture, language, and storytelling. This exposure to Hindi films has increased interest in Indian cinema and its various aspects. Sri Lankan actress Jacqueline Fernandez has acted in many Hindi films mentions in an interview that “Hindi films are very huge here; my father actually learnt Hindi by just watching Hindi films. That is how big it is here. Most people here prefer watching a Hindi film to an English film, even though English is widely spoken here.”

Over the years, there have been collaborations between Indian and Sri Lankan actors, directors, and technicians in the Hindi film industry. Sri Lankan actors have appeared in Bollywood films, while Indian film makers have explored opportunities to work with Sri Lankan talents. These collaborations have further reinforced the cultural ties between the two countries. Notably, veteran Sri Lankan actor Gamini Fonseka achieved recognition in Indian cinema and acted in a few Bollywood films. Additionally, Jacqueline Fernandez has gained popularity in Bollywood and has appeared in numerous Hindi films. Recently, a famous actress in stage shows and theatre, Rashiprabha Sandeepani, debuted in Hindi films.

Hindi films are immensely popular in Sri Lanka and have a large audience. These films have created a bridge between the two cultures, often incorporating Sri Lankan actors, themes, and music. More than 100 films were shot in different locations in Sri Lanka. Notable examples of this cultural exchange are the Bollywood classic *Mera Naam Joker* (1965), filmed in Sri Lanka. This tradition continued, and Several Bollywood films have recently been shot in Sri Lanka, including *Sooryavansham* (1999), *Water* (2005), *Bachna Ae Haseeno* (2008), *Ready* (2011) and *Bombay Velvet* (2015). The major cinematography of *Bombay Velvet* was shot in Sri Lanka. The film was shot at Sri Lanka’s Ranmihitenna Mahinda Rajapaksa National Tele Cinema Park, Hambantota, in September 2013. The film’s shooting was also completed in different regions of Sri Lanka, such as

Colombo, Galle and Pasikudah. Recently, the ‘Over-the-Top’ (OTT) series *The Night Manager* was shot in Sri Lanka. These films have helped showcase Sri Lanka’s beauty to Indian audiences and have helped to increase tourism between the two countries.

Hindi films often feature picturesque locations in India, attracting Indian filmmakers and tourists alike. With its beautiful landscapes, Sri Lanka has also become a favoured shooting location for Bollywood films. This has increased the number of Indian tourists visiting Sri Lanka and vice versa, contributing to cultural interactions between the two nations. In this context, films also help a nation’s economy through tourism, an impact of soft power. Concerning soft power tools, according to Nye, “a country’s soft power exists primarily in three elements: its culture, its political values, and its foreign policy.” Bollywood is part of the culture category in the first element. It is also shown when the Sri Lanka Film Tourism delegation, containing a representative from the Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau (SLTPB) and six film producers, notably including veteran producer Chandran Rathnam, attended as stakeholders in the ‘India International Film Tourism Conclave’ (IIFTC), a multilateral conference convened in Mumbai during 21-23 February 2019. Sri Lanka Consulate General in Mumbai arranged an exclusive discussion with ‘Dharma Productions’, Mumbai’s most prominent film production house.

In contemporary times, there have been many occasions where state functions are enhanced by the expression and appreciation of significant cultural associations through cinema, art and music. This musical exchange illustrates the reciprocal, if asymmetric, character of cultural flows between India and Sri Lanka: while the direction of influence runs predominantly from India to Sri Lanka by virtue of the relative scale and commercial power of the Hindi film industry, Sri Lankan musical and aesthetic contributions have also found their way into the broader South Asian cultural commons. The blockbuster success of “*Manike Mage Hithe*” by Yohani is one of the defining moments for “the enrichment and upliftment of music and art, reviving cross-cultural and ancient ties that form a more significant identity of the sub-continent to which people still subjectively relate even though such an identity of oneness is not formally defined”. The reception of the above song also shows that, for music and songs, the Bombay film industry is now looking towards the south as compared to its normal dependency on the west side of the nation.

7. Collaborative Projects

India saw value in joining forces for entertainment; co-production is the right choice. This way, co-produced films would not be scrutinized by the Sri Lankan audience, as they would be believed to be Sri Lankan and Indian equally. The revenues from films would increase locally, as overseas producers get a smaller percentage than homegrown ones. Co-productions between India and Sri Lanka have been an essential aspect of the cultural exchange between these two countries.

Co-productions have enabled film makers from both countries to collaborate and learn from each other. The first Indo-Sri Lankan co-production was *Nidhanaya* (1972), directed by Lester James Peries, which was a critical and commercial success. Such collaborations facilitate artistic exchanges and foster cultural ties. For instance, the film *A Flying Jatt* (2016), starring Tiger Shroff and directed by Remo D'Souza, was a joint production between Indian and Sri Lankan production companies.

Indian Hindi Movies are also remade in Sri Lanka, like *Hera Pheri* (2000) as *Raja Horu* (2013), and *Jab We Met* (2007) as *Suwanda Denuna Jeewithe* (2010), and *Munna Bhai M.B.B.S.* (2003) as *Doctor Nawariyan* (2017). Many other Tamil movies have also been remade into Sinhalese. These Sinhalese remakes of Hindi movies help people better comprehend each other's cultural traditions by exposing them to a shared cultural experience.

Film festivals serve as platforms for showcasing films from both countries, promoting cross-cultural understanding. Sri Lanka's capital, Colombo, hosted the International Indian Film Academy (IIFA) awards in June 2010. IIFA Brand Ambassador Amitabh Bachchan said, "We need to develop a greater association between Sri Lankan and Indian cinema. We can form a strong force, representing this part of the world in world cinema." The Indian Film Festival of Sri Lanka and the Colombo International Film Festival feature a wide range of Indian films, including Bollywood productions, while providing a platform for Sri Lankan filmmakers to showcase their work in India.

The Film Heritage Foundation and the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) initiated a collaborative rescue initiative in Sri Lanka, establishing institutional partnerships grounded in sustained cultural engagement. The above relationship originated approximately eight years prior, when Dammith Fonseka, son of the acclaimed Sri Lankan actor Gamini Fonseka, participated in the inaugural Film Preservation and Restoration School convened in Mumbai in 2015 under the auspices of a FIAF scholarship. The preservation curriculum further facilitated transnational participation, incorporating representatives from the National Archives of Sri Lanka, thereby establishing a framework for multilateral knowledge exchange and professional capacity-building across South Asian film archival institutions. Dammith was particularly interested in learning how to preserve his father's legacy for posterity. These collaborations indicate that soft power can spread through unexpected channels. Hard power and soft power have an interdependent relationship. Nye believes, for example, that "using English as a lingua franca, although initially cultural, is now a clear example of hard power, while using one's armed forces for humanitarian services is soft power". The dichotomy between hard power and soft power is analytically useful as a first-order categorization, but it obscures the deeper truth that these two forms of power are mutually constitutive. Hard power provides the structural credibility, the material

reach, and the enforcement capacity without which soft power appeals would be weightless. Soft power supplies, like music and films, legitimize narrative, the normative architecture, and the alliance-building capital without which hard power becomes unsustainable and self-undermining.

8. The Future of the Cultural Exchange Between India and Sri Lanka

Nye identifies soft power as a means of shaping 'others' preferences. However, it is very influential in that it can help achieve foreign policy diplomatic purposes. At the opening ceremony of the 67th annual convention of the Travel Agents Association of India (TAAI), held at the historic Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall (BIMCH), the President of Sri Lanka, Ranil Wickremesinghe, suggested making the BIMSTEC region a single "borderless" tourism area. If all the members accept his suggestions, cultural exchange between India and Sri Lanka through films can continue and evolve in new and exciting ways. Co-productions, film festivals, and other initiatives will continue to promote cultural exchange and foster collaboration between filmmakers from both countries.

9. Conclusion

This research study has examined the role of Hindi cinema as a medium of cultural exchange and soft power in the India-Sri Lanka bilateral relationship, tracing the historical trajectory of Hindi film reception in Sri Lanka, analyzing specific dimensions of cinematic cultural exchange, and exploring the implications of this exchange for diplomatic relations. In conclusion, cultural exchanges between the two Indian Ocean countries can contribute to improvement in South Asia. Cinema has significantly influenced the cultural relations between India and Sri Lanka. Indian cinema has had a substantial impact on its Sri Lankan counterpart, and the latter has also influenced India. As the film industries in both countries continue to grow, one can expect to see more collaborations and exchanges. Increasing interaction between the two countries will help not only with people-to-people contact but also in terms of economic possibilities between the two countries. It is also felt that the interaction of India and Sri Lanka in every sphere, such as cultural, economic and political has increased. Looking ahead, the Sri Lankan film industry can expand its horizons to explore the beautiful landscapes in India. This could give the Sri Lankan people further exposure to Indian culture and heritage, thus promoting bilateral relations and eventually leading to better political and economic ties between the two countries. Moreover, this interaction also reflects the films' soft power and the geopolitical significance of cinema. Thus, one can argue that soft power influences the hard power of any country and can enhance it to a greater extent.

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