DECONSTRUCTING INDIA'S SOFT POWER TRAJECTORY IN SOUTH ASIA: MAPPING THE CASE OF BOLLYWOOD

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ABSTRACT:

Through its creative engagement with representation, the 'aesthetic approach' in International Relations (IR) not only promotes political discourse but also awakens a profound awareness of our world's realities in an innovative and far-reaching way. This paper attempts to explain the interplay of aesthetics, performativity, and soft power projection focusing on Bollywood's role in shaping India's impact in South Asia. The paper reflects the broader geo-cultural concept of India beyond its mere 'territorialized' idea, which tended to intensify particularly after globalization. Theoretically, enfolding a constructivist approach in IR, which underscores the social construction of reality and the significance of ideas, beliefs, and identities in contouring international relations, it analyzes two Bollywood movies: "Pardes" and "Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge". It explores how these cinematic productions lay symbolic representation, retention of cultural practices, and values that reflect the strategic autonomy of India while preserving diplomatic ties globally. Methodologically, by engaging with themes of tradition, modernity, and diaspora, the paper uses discourse analysis to examine how Bollywood has influenced the maneuvering of India's soft power in its foreign policy discourse by fostering unity and familiarity among audiences.

Keywords: South Asia, Bollywood, territorialized, soft power, Post-colonial, Discourse, Culture

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INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, India has harnessed its cultural heritage, democratic values, and diplomatic initiatives to wield influence in South Asia. India's rich history, branded by civilization, spirituality, and diversity, echoes with its neighbours (Kumar, 2017). India fosters regional ties and glorifies peace through diplomacy, trade, education, and cultural exchange (Mukherjee, 2019). This soft power is manifested in cultural exports, educational opportunities, and democratic ideals, cultivating kinship and solidarity among South Asian countries (Tharoor, 2012; Wagner, 2010).

Embodying aesthetic approaches in International Relations (IR) has added a fine understanding of global politics. This paper explores aesthetics, performativity, and soft power projection, emphasizing Bollywood's role in shaping India's geopolitical influence in South Asia and beyond. The geo-cultural concept of India surpasses its territorial limitations, especially post-globalization, with increased cultural exchange directed towards a more interconnected world. Aesthetic elements like symbolism, imagery, and performance evoke emotions, create shared understandings, and influence perceptions globally. Bollywood - as India's "dream factory" - plays a crucial role in projecting India's soft power (Singh & Sarwal, 2017). Bollywood has a profound influence on Indian society and it plays an important role in constructing narratives of nationhood, romance, and social change (Juluri, 2013).

Soft power implies a country's ability to impact others by cultural appeal instead of coercion (Nye, 2004). Bollywood eloquently provides India's soft power strategy by celebrating Indian values, culture and lifestyles, creating an appreciable image of India that nurtures goodwill (Pandey, 2012). Themes of tradition, modernity, and diaspora in Bollywood movies strategically contour foreign policy discourses (Tharoor, 2009). This paper uses a constructivist approach to IR to assess how *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (*DDLJ* henceforth) and *Pardes* construct India's national identity globally.

Constructivism, featuring the social construction of reality, is well-

defined for evaluating cultural artefacts creating political and social identities. Notwithstanding the foregoing discussions about quantitative methods, proving a case with endless facts & data, the paper uses discourse analysis to inspect themes and narratives in Bollywood films (Gokulsingh & Dissanayake 2004). Discourse analysis centres around language, symbolism, and representation by understanding how cultural texts construct and impart meanings.

Aesthetics analyzes taste and beauty, provoking affective sensibilities. This interdisciplinary approach has led to academic exposure of international politics through literary works, visual art, music, cinema and so on. Ronald Bleiker talks about aesthetics in rethinking global political issues as "an aesthetic approach... assumes that there is always a gap between a form of representation and what is represented therewith" (Bleiker, 2001). Films, as aesthetic emotions, unhide political phenomena more appropriately than traditional means, by conveying complicated political ideas in a reachable and engaging way.

Questioning the field's epistemological processes, the stress on aesthetics in IR evolved into two waves. The first wave, in the 1980s, witnessed postmodernism redefining IR's theoretical frameworks, stressing art and literature (Bleiker, 2001). The recent second wave depends on cinema, theatre, music, and visual arts, showcasing the increasing importance of such non-verbal means. In continuation of this aesthetic turn, the paper grapples with the retention of cultural practices and symbolic representation in *Pardes* and *DDLJ* constructing a narrative of India's cultural identity.

This paper accepts the unavoidable difference between representation and the represented, explaining how characters, dialogues and visual styles in films influence audiences' perceptions, identities and social roles at the global level. The performativity of cultural values in these films showcases the soft power of India, highlighting the idea of India as a cultural carrier cutting across geographical boundaries.

DE-TERRITORIALIZING INDIA'S IMAGE AS A GEO-CULTURAL POWER THROUGH BOLLYWOOD

Globalization involves the increased interconnectedness and interdependence of global markets significantly influencing the projection of India's culture globally (Ghosh, 2011). Bollywood serves as a powerful medium for shaping perceptions about Indian values, culture, and lifestyle worldwide (Ganti, 2012). With the onset of globalization, Bollywood has emerged to integrate differing narratives and cultural dynamics corresponding to global trends.

The impact has simplified a transition from a territorialized idea of India to a deep geo-cultural one (Gupta, 2019). Conventionally, Bollywood narratives were fixed to India's cultural and physical geography, reflecting local socio-economic customs and beliefs. However, globalization has expanded Bollywood's depiction of India, as not merely a geographical being but as a cultural idea beyond national borders (Ganti, 2012). Bollywood's analysis of the Indian diaspora's experiences reflects the transition to cultural hybridity and transnationalism (Mishra, 2002).

The industry's competence to stir traditional Indian narratives with global themes has convened global recognition, enhancing India's visibility globally (Mehta, 2001). Through its various genres, storytelling, and thematic inquiry, Bollywood portrays India as a developed and modern nation accommodating global discourses (Virdi, 2003). The Indian Media and Entertainment sector, as per the FICCI-EY Report 2023, observed cordial growth increasing by INR 348 billion to reach INR 2.1 trillion (FICCI-KPMG, 2015). This significant hike out-shined pre-pandemic 2019 levels by 10%, investigating the sector's exceptional resilience and accommodating the challenges backed by the COVID-19 pandemic (EY Report, 2023).

DDLJ and *Pardes* demonstrate this fusion of traditional Indian beliefs with Westernized lifestyles, serving a wide audience within India and globally. The idea of 'Indianness' excels in geographical borders, fostering a sense of belonging among the Indian diaspora, regardless of their location. This

reaffirms India's position as a cultural ideal in the 21st century (Kaur & Sinha, 2005).

BOLLYWOOD AND INDIA'S SOFT POWER

Introduced by Joseph Nye, soft power is about using non-coercive means to influence others, such as cultural beliefs and diplomacy in place of military and economic coercion (Nye, 1990). Soft power refers to correlating traditional hard power, embodying both passive elements, like cultural and historical features, and effective strategies encompassing public diplomacy and cultural exchange (Nye, 1990, 2004). Culture plays a central role in mending power dynamics and enhancing intercultural understanding (Mazrui, 1990). India, having a rich civilizational heritage and cultural variances, shows a model of soft power grounded in cultural capital. India's economic growth over the past two decades has supported its ability to secure soft power initiatives. Historically, India's soft power has been aimed towards Asia, resulting in strong cultural and social ties (Mankekar, 2015).

Bollywood's history has evolved over the centuries from silent films to a global phenomenon. Early films like Dadasaheb Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) originated from Indian mythology and moved towards advancing national identity. The transformation to sound in the late 1920s brought harmonized sound and musical sequences, founding Bollywood's unique narrative style. The golden age of the late 1940s to 1960s brought iconic filmmakers and socially cognizant films. The 1970s and 1980s saw the mushrooming up of the formula film genre, with artists like Amitabh Bachchan as cultural icons.

Economic liberalization in the 1990s resulted in improved production of films accommodating to the diaspora (Ganti, 2012). In the realm of post-colonial discourse, Bollywood drove the complications of identity and nationhood (Huggan, 2001). The legacy of British colonialism in India impacted governance systems and cultural portrayal (Desai, 2004). Bollywood provides a demanding site for regulating post-colonial identities and examining problems of history and cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994; Bill,

Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2007). According to the latest report by EY, India's Media and Entertainment Industry is forecasted to hit US$ 29.2 billion and US$ 35.4 billion by 2025. India's Advertising revenue is expected to cross US$ 5.42 billion by 2024. Compared to the media and entertainment sector, the share of traditional media sources like television, print, and radio was 58% in 2022 (EY Report, 2023). These statistics reflect the strength of India's soft power arsenal in the armoury of India's foreign policy.

CONSTRUCTING IDEA OF INDIA IMPACTING INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

The constructivist approach in International Relations (IR) underlines the social construction of reality, suggesting that IR are shaped by ideas, beliefs, and identities, not only by economic resources and military power. Constructivist scholars investigate how foreign policy discourses and measures frame national identities. They vary from rationalist, realist, and liberal approaches which consider foreign policy interests as pre-given and changeless. Rather, it believes in the significance of foreign policy discourses and practices of representation, as they are recreated in public and private accounts and actions (Muppidi, 1999).

This approach is segmented into conventional and critical constructivism. Conventional Constructivists by Alexander Wendt emphasizes how state narratives and interests are built by social interactions and how these identities result in specific foreign policy behaviour. For instance, a state's identity as a peaceful nation can help in seeking diplomatic solutions over military interventions (Hopf, 1998). Critical constructivism further questions how identities and truths are created and familiarized by confronting the myths (Hopf, 1998). The paper juxtaposes this approach along with Discourse analysis to reveal how language and narratives affect some foreign policy actions while excluding others.

It is pertinent to look at diverse theoretical traditions that take culture into account. Hans Morgenthau gives notable insight into the interconnection between cultural context and foreign policy. Morgenthau believed that "the

kind of interest determining political action in a particular period of history depends upon the political and cultural context within which foreign policy is formulated" (Morgenthau, 1985). This perception reflects the value of cultural and political aspects in framing foreign policy aims and behaviour. Morgenthau's view allies with Bollywood's role in India's foreign policy by depicting the narratives set in the socio-cultural context of India (Weldes, 1999). The latest 'practice turn' in constructivist research analyzes foreign policy practices such as the creation of security communities such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as "socially meaningful patterns of action, which… reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world" (Chacko, 2018). Thus, this aptly fulfils the choice of constructivism as an approach to tackle local practices in sustaining foreign policy discourses and practices.

The economic reforms in the 1990s and early 2000s positioned India to form goodwill that could captivate foreign direct investment (FDI) and international collaborations upon being considered a culturally rich partner, trusted by other nations (World Economic Forum, 2012). Soft power played an important role in India's foreign policy strategy. *DDLJ* and *Pardes* played an important role in showcasing Indian cultural values in a sound way with Indian diaspora and domestic audiences internationally. *DDLJ*, focusing on family, traditions, and love, became an iconic characterization of Indian culture worldwide, especially among the Indian diaspora. Similarly, *Pardes* highlighted the difference between Indian and Western values by not degrading either and nurturing other aspects of foreign policy. This reflection of Indian culture in these films reassured globally that India's modernization cannot undermine its cultural roots. This also helped in sustaining strategic autonomy, as India engaged globally on its terms, ensuring its economic progress.

RETENTION OF CULTURAL PRACTICES AND INDIA'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

Retention holds the conservation and resonance of foreign policy discourses and practices within the identities of actors, institutional frameworks, dominant visions, and state activities. As explained in Jessop's analysis,

retention includes the integration of chosen cultural practices into balanced actions that reinforce state existence and power (Jessop, 2011). Strategic autonomy is defined as the State's ability to be involved Internationally while preserving its cultural identity and sovereignty.

When *Pardes* (1997) and *DDLJ* (1995) were released, India was transforming to economic liberalization and globalization, moving from a reserved economy to market-oriented principles. This formation required India to portray itself as a developed and advancing nation while retaining its cultural sovereignty. The representation of the Indian diaspora in *Pardes* and *DDLJ* resonates with audiences globally with major Indian populations in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom and neighbours in South Asia . This cultural resonance can lead to profound strategic partnerships and healthy cultural connections while promoting regional stability.

By using discourse analysis, the paper identifies Bollywood's role in contributing to the construction and emergence of India's cultural identity. The paper seeks an answer to this epistemological inquiry of how these films frame perceptions of India, both domestically and internationally. Discourse analysis, grounded in linguistic and sociological traditions, is selected as a qualitative research method to inquire into the interrelation between language, texts, and communicative actions within their social and cultural milieu. Discourses frames reality by constructing and fixing interpretations to the material world, by naturalizing these representations and identities to emerge as 'truth'. They reject the demarcation of knowledge from the social ground, sighting knowledge as constitutive of reality (Dunn & Neumann, 2017).

The use of discourse analysis in studying Bollywood films is justified for several reasons. Firstly, Bollywood films are complex cultural artefacts consisting of visual, auditory, and perspective to form national narratives and social beliefs. Secondly, Discourse analysis gives a comprehensive structure for evaluating these texts and revealing the meaning within dialogues, visuals, and symbols. Lastly, Bollywood films have an international resonance, affecting audiences beyond India. By assessing them, the paper aims to uncover the ways in which these films project an idealized vision of India that resonates worldwide.

Referring to Marx's and Foucault's work, Bob Jessop (2011) defined the development of three key stages in power relations in communities: variation, selection, and retention. Variation refers to modifications in foreign policy discourses and practices, selection includes the adoption of some discourses and practices over others to illustrate acts and legitimize actions, and retention suggests institutionalizing these discourses and practices, accommodating them into firm policies of state power (Chacko, 2016).

The paper focuses on the retention component by highlighting the portrayal of family, tradition, and modernity in these films, institutionalising cultural discourses that sustain India's cultural identity and soft power. This retention of cultural narratives into substantial strategic policies of the State nurtures India's Image as a culturally rich and influential modern State.

ASSESSING THE THEMES OF TRADITION, MODERNITY, AND DIASPORA THROUGH AESTHETICS IN BOLLYWOOD

Bollywood is just not about entertainment. It also shapes the narrative for the state related to modernity, nationhood, and development (Ganti 2004; Dwyer, 2014). Bollywood gained prominence in the post-liberalization era with the opening up of the market economy with the shooting up of global consumption of these films. The Indian diasporic community holds a large chunk of viewership for Bollywood, with presentations being culturally appealing (Mishra, 2002; Pugsley & Khorana, 2011). The Indian diaspora connects to themes like family, altruism, and the depiction of a mix of tradition and modernity (Appadurai, 1996). Such themes are very well reflected in *DDLJ* and *Pardes* and form a cultural continuity (Roy, 2012).

Bollywood plays a crucial role in embedding cultural elements into world consciousness, particularly through perceptions, and the perennial process of institutionalization, reception, and production (Thomas, 1995; Bhattacharya and Pandharipande, 2010). The paper stresses the analysis of identity formation by relating to sociological research and values, moving across the conceptualization of identity as requiring the negative identification of an 'Other'.

Pardes, directed by Subhash Ghai, delves into narratives of cultural identity, diasporic communities, and the tussle between traditional and modern. The story starts with the character Arjun in the film struggling against dual cultural identities and reconnecting with one's cultural traditions amidst the assimilation pressure of being in the USA.

On the other hand, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (*DDLJ*) by Aditya Chopra, is a timeless love story that shows a tussle between the fast and modern life in London with the traditional values of rural Punjab. The movie is about the love story of *Raj* and *Simran*. They fell in love with each other during a trip to Europe and found it difficult to get consent from the traditional and orthodox family of *Simran*. Dialogues in *DDLJ* reflect the cultural ethos and vernacular enunciations depict strong Indian thinking, values, and mindset. For instance, the willingness of *Simran's* father to return to India and his adamance for arranged marriage reflect the tussle between traditional Indian values and modernity. The thrust on *Samskar* (cultural ethos) and *Parampara* (customs) reflects the significance of cultural continuity.

To explore more about employing the constructivist approach, this paper caves into how these cinematic formations use emblematic portrayals and showcase cultural ethos and values. By providing a theoretical framework the approach helps to comprehend how does Bollywood films impact the foreign policy and strategic autonomy of India (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 1999).

Figure 1, shows two scenes, from *DDLJ*, a strong inference can be drawn from the pictures about the rich use of symbols that resonate with the culture and emotions of the audiences from India and the diaspora. In the first scene, *Raj* is seeking the permission of *Simran's* father for their marriage in *DDLJ*. This scene signifies cultural sovereignty as it depicts the significance of consent from the family and attachment to traditional ethos in Indian families. The use of colourful attire, music and traditional rituals in *Pardes* as shown in the wedding scene and the train scene in the climax of *DDLJ* depicts a tussle between the values of tradition and modernity. However, both films do highlight the strong message that there is a need to harmonize traditions with modernity.

Figure 2 shows the dialogue between a father and a daughter and the textual evidence, such as "*Ja Simran, jee le apni zindagi*" (Go, *Simran*, live your life), communicates the importance of individual agency and cultural pride, consequently encapsulating India's cultural sovereignty by arguing for personal happiness and harmonizing it with traditional values. This signifies the flexibility and freedom reflected in Indian traditions.

Fig. 1: Scenes from the movie *DDLJ*

Source: Scroll.in   (https://scroll.in/article/692288/how-ddlj-ruined-my-generation)

Fig. 2: An iconic scene from the movie *DDLJ*

Source: https://sobodiaries.wordpress.com/2016/10/20/jaa-simran-jaa-jee-le-apni-zindagi-ddlj/

Visual arts carve modern subjectivity by enabling a vantage point that consolidates seeing and being seen in particular contexts. They produce

interdisciplinary observations of how images and surveillance practices interlace to govern daily life, backed by institutional spaces that nurture these ideas. This provides different ways of seeing, living, and being in the world, strengthening the significance of visual arts in representing and interpreting our world realities (Lisle, 2017). In *DDLJ*, one of the most significant reflections is the belief in "homeland" or *desh*. Despite being away from India, the characters depict a strong cultural and emotional belongingness to their motherland. This is visible in the way the willingness of *Simran's* father to return to India and follow the traditional customs and practices proves to be a strong reflection of cultural continuity and pride. By examining the dialogues and visuals of these films, the paper analyses how Bollywood sails through the intricacies and peculiarities of globalization while juxtaposing it with India's resilient and vibrant culture.

2.1. Baldev and the pigeons in London.

2.2. Baldev remembers his home in Punjab.

Fig. 3: In the opening scenes from *DDLJ*, Baldev feeds the pigeons in London and remembers his home in Punjab respectively

Source: Mankekar, P. (2015) Unsettling India: Affect, Temporality, Transnationality

The optics in DDLJ prove to be significant in holding cultural meanings. The scenic murals of Punjab showcase India's cultural sovereignty, raising nostalgia for the pastoral beauty of rural India. The mustard greenery of Punjab depicts a picturesque of the heartland of India against the fast cosmopolitan life of Europe. The climax of the film is filled with symbolic representation of traditional rituals and a triumph of love that respects tradition.

Pardes also symbolizes the tussle between traditions and modernity. The character Ganga contrasts with Rajiv as being a symbol of traditional Indian values whereas the latter is western in thought and style. The film depicts the USA as a land of ambitions but morally corrupt, against the idealized portrayal of India as a land of cultural values and moral ethos. Arjun, the third character, is portrayed as a bridge between these two vast lands, symbolizing the optimism of harmonizing traditional ethos with modernity.

Performativity as a tool to institutionalize India's soft Power

According to John Austin, performativity can be described as follows:

> "[H]ow to Do Things with Words, it cannot be said to be either true or false, as a constative utterance might be. In this sense performativity can be said to investigate the pragmatics of language" (Austin, 1962).

In films and plays, performativity in reflected in the ways that cultural art, traditions, and narratives depict what is real and actively form and build societal realities (Hall, 1997). Bollywood plays an important role in building and fostering national identity (Chakravarty, 1993). Film directors and Central Board of Film Certification members ensure diligent, aesthetically entertaining, and culturally accommodative content. This helps create a marvel that is well reflective of the national consciousness, social constructs, and societal practices (Prasad, 1998).

Butler (1990) argues that gender is performative, constructed by repeated acts and societal norms rather than being an inherent identity. These performances continuously reshape and redefine the concept of gender, challenging conventional notions of fixed identity roles. The performativity of traditions and the picturization of the female persona within cultural heritage in these movies reassert the cultural sovereignty of India. Bollywood in this way carries forward the idea of India abroad, contributing to a broader geo-cultural identity and acting as a cultural ambassador of India (Gopinath, 1998). *Lajjo*, the mother of the female protagonist, blesses *Raj* and *Simran* and agrees

to their eloping against patriarchy. This is indicative of female agency in the movie:

> *"My daughter will not give up her love and sacrifice her happiness. Raj, you will bring great happiness to my daughter. My blessings are with you. Take her out of there. Nobody here understands your love. Now take her. I will handle everything. My son, I beg you!"*

This nature of confrontation, though framed in the form of sacrifice and blessing, reflects a criticism against the oppressive patriarchal values and a wish for her daughter's happiness beyond these constraints. Proficiency in the parents' language, respecting elders, love for Indian food, and celebrating religiosity are some of the cultural requisites for Indian identity that *Raj* and *Simran* satisfy in *DDLJ*. These traits are well reflected in *Raj* and *Simran* depicting their connection with Indianness despite their upbringing in a foreign land. This is reflected in *Raj's* proclamation,

> *"I am not eloping. It's not my intention to steal you. Though I was born in England, I am an Indian. I have come here to make you my bride. I will take you with me from here only when your father gives his consent (your hand)".*

The assertion also reflects *Raj's* commitment to Indian traditions and respect for *Simran's* parents' consent against personal desires.

However, the movie also endorses the agency and defiance of its female characters within these cultural limits. To avoid breaking her fast with Kuljeet during the *'karva chauth'* celebration, *Simran* pretends a swoon and have water from *Raj*, which is an example of what Shakuntala Banaji describes as an "ephemeral agency" (Banaji, 2006). Though a subtle act, but signifies her right to choice and love confined within the borders of traditions.

LYRICS AND SYMBOLISM IN FILMS

"*Ghar Aaja Pardesi*" from *DDLJ* and "*I Love My India*" from *Pardes* are songs that explicitly depict Indian identity, asserting emotional bonds with the motherland and rejoicing the cultural heritage.

"Ghar Aaja Pardesi" from DDLJ
"Is gaon ki anpadh mitti, Padh nahin sakti teri chitthi, Yeh mitti tu aakar chume to, Is dharti ka dil jhume" (Bollywoodsongs143, 2024).
(The illiterate soil of this village cannot read your letter, if you come and kiss this soil, the heart of this earth will dance in delight.")

The above-mentioned lines from the song induce a connection between the land and the citizens, emphasizing the emotional connection between the individual and their homeland. The soil signifies the inherent connection between nature and customs in India. Reminding the diasporic community of their roots with the motherland the picturisation of the song is very appealing.

"Maana tere hain kuch sapne par, Hum to hain tere apne, Bhulnewale humko, Teri yaad sataaye re"
(I agree that you have some dreams, we are yours, the ones who forget us, their memories trouble us.)

These lines resemble the aspirations of the diasporic community while connecting to their roots, family relations, and cultural bonds. The word "*apne*" (your own) in the song signifies the everlasting nature of these bonds, fostering the idea that despite being far away from the motherland the connection to one's origins remains the strongest.

"Panghat pe aai matiyare, Chham chham payal ki jhankaren, Kheton mein lehrai sarson, Kal parson mein beete barson"
(The dust has come on Panghat, the chimes of anklets are sounding, mustard is fluttering in the fields, and years pass like yesterday.)

Fig. 4: Picturization of a song from *DDLJ*

Source: YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/@bollywoodsongs143)

This picturization depicts the everlasting beauty of Indian villages, invoking the memories of traditional rural life. The bright mustard crop and the sound of anklets depict the cultural continuity, laying importance on India's rich rural heritage.

"Ghar aaja pardesi, Tera des bulaye re"
(Come home traveller, your country calls you)

The mentioned lines are a direct call to the diasporic community, urging them to come back to their country, their motherland. It appeals to their cultural connection and the welcoming nature of their motherland. The objective is to induce a sense of national unity and belongingness.

"I Love My India" from "Pardes"

Fig. 5: Picturization of a song from *Pardes*
Source: YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/@bollywoodsongs143)

"London dekha, Paris dekha, aur dekha Japan, Michael dekha, Elvis dekha, sab dekha meri jaan, Saare jag mein kahin nahi hai Doosra Hindustaan"

(Seen London, seen Paris, and seen Japan, seen Michael, seen Elvis, seen everything, my dear, there is no other country like India anywhere in the whole world)

These lines signify the unique and unparalleled stature of India among the nations with rich cultures. The comparison elevates and highlights distinctive values of Indian culture, fostering pride among the Indians both within and outside the country.

"Ye duniya ek dulhan, Dulhan ke maathe ki bindiya, Yeh mera India, yeh mera India"
(This world is a bride, the dot on the bride's forehead is my India.)

Symbolizing India's central and crucial stature at the global level the 'world' in the above lines is likened to the bride. The ornament 'bindi' wearable on the forehead of the bride is likened to India. The bindi on the forehead of the bride resembles the carrier of Indian identity at the world stage fostering a

sense of pride and affection towards the country.

"Peehu, peehu bole papihaa, koyal kuhu kuhu gaaye, Hanste rote humne jeevan ke sab geet banaaye"
(Pihu, Pihu said Papiha, the cuckoo sang kuhu kuhu, we made all the songs of life while laughing and crying)

These lines show the connection between the nature and emotions of the people in India, rejoicing in the richness of the Indian way of living. The singing of cuckoo signifies nature's harmony, depicting the richness of culture and emotional vividness of Indian society.

"Yeh saare duniya apne apne geeton ko gaaye, Geet voh gaao jisse is mitti ki khushboo aaye"
(Let this entire world sing its own songs, sing those songs which make this soil smell good)

The above lines of the song are an appeal to the people to celebrate their cultural roots and belongingness. It suggests despite diverse songs on diverse situations, the songs that appeal to the essence of one's motherland are of significance, reasserting cultural pride and identity.
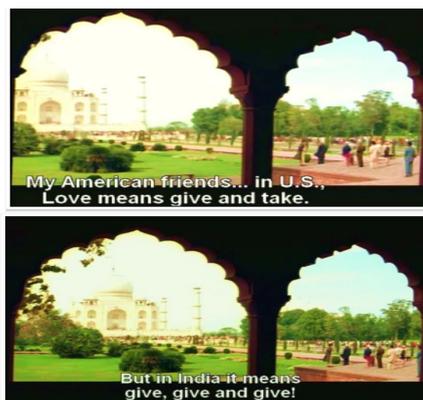
Dialogues from "Pardes"

Fig. 6: Dialogues from *Pardes* asserting India's distinctiveness
Source: Bollywood Food Club

"Yahan ya toh bahut sannata hai, ya phir bahut shor ... aadmi akela hai, ya phir mela hai"
(Here either there is a lot of silence, or there is a lot of noise... the man is alone, or in a crowd)

The dialogue mentioned above goes against the lifestyle in the US as compared to India. It depicts the loneliness and limited social life in the US, in comparison to the communitarian and cheerful societal way of living in India. It highlights the significance of social interactions and society in the Indian way of life, against the alienation observed in individualistic societies such as the US (Sitaji, 2011).

Symbolism of Ganga in "Pardes"

In *Pardes*, Mahima Chaudhary plays the role of *Ganga*. She is the epitome of Indian culture, values and traditions. Her name comes from the sacred Ganges River (Ganga) which is the symbol of purity, spirituality, and continuity. The character is named *Ganga* to assert her identity as connected to Indian traditions, and customs. The river Ganga represents perennial flow without obstruction depicting the unchanging and unchallengeable legacy of Indian customs despite the assimilative pressures of Western society.

Ganga wears Indian jewellery, *bindi*, and *maang tikka* fostering the Indian cultural identity abroad. The attire signifies the strength of Indian culture among the diaspora where, despite being on a foreign land, the traditions and customs prevail.

Fig. 7: Ganga as the female protagonist in *Pardes* and as a metaphor for purity
Source: Bollywood Food Club and Rediff.com

Upon arrival to the US, after she gets engaged to *Rajiv*, *Ganga* is asked to sing at a party. The song she sung was *"Jahan Piya Wahan Main"*. The song depicts her love for her motherland. The song highlighted her emotional belongingness to India. It shows her emotional journey after leaving her father's home and going to a new home after marriage. She remembers her father's home and its courtyard where she had childhood memories. She expresses mixed emotions and nostalgia. She tries to reconcile with her cultural identity and fate being far away from her homeland. However, she asserts that she will be happy with her beloved, wherever he may be. The customary imagery of attachments and nostalgia signifies the movie's reflection on altruism, sacrifice, and a struggle to secure one's own cultural identity amidst change.

IMPACT OF BOLLYWOOD ON THE AUDIENCES OF SOUTH ASIA: DOMINANCE WITHOUT COERCION

The impact of Bollywood stretches substantially over South Asia, influencing the neighbourhood countries. This comprehensive appeal is carried by common cultural and linguistic heritage, reflecting Bollywood as a significant cultural strength in these areas (Ahmed, 2014). Bollywood usually carries popularity surpassing local industries, influencing regional cultural politics and attitude towards India (Punathambekar, 2013). For Bhabha (1994), culture is a place of negotiation and hybridity, where meanings are continuously recreated by resonation and adaptation. This view highlights that cultural identity is not fixed but dynamically framed by interactions and power across different circumstances (Bhabha, 1994).

Bollywood has been immensely popular throughout Pakistan even with the frequent bans and restrictions (Dudrah, 2012). Bollywood proves to be a cultural bridge having a common language and culture across the boundaries. *DDLJ* and *Pardes* have found significant viewership in Pakistan, showcasing the themes of altruism, customs, and the motherland connection of the Indian diaspora (Thussu, 2007, 2012). They resonate with the emotions of the audience of Pakistan. Bollywood films play a significant role in building peace and understanding between the nations (Raja, 2013; Thussu, 2012).

Bangladesh has a large audience who consume a lot of Hindi films and music due to shared culture and identity. *DDLJ* and *Pardes* portrayed familial unity and bonding signifying altruism. The local culture is largely influenced by the fashion, dance and stars of Bollywood. This cultural penetration of familial respect and social harmony in the audience of Bangladesh boosts India's soft power strategy, forming cultural bonding and affinity. Bollywood's international success is rooted in its fusion of traditional Indian features with global cinematic practices, results pleasing to diverse audiences (Bhattacharya and Pandharipande, 2010).

Local cinema in Nepal is also dominated by Bollywood films. Having a shared culture of Roti and Beti, Bollywood's portrayal of Indian tradition finds a welcoming viewership, impacting sociocultural customs. The popularity of *DDLJ* and *Pardes*, which lays thrust upon traditional ethos and familial ties, boosts India's cultural and diplomatic influence in Nepal including the customs and lifestyle (Ganti, 2004).

Sri Lanka is also significantly impacted by Bollywood films being a staple in cinemas and music and dance indispensable to local celebrations. The portrayal of Indian cultural magnificence and traditional values in *DDLJ* and *Pardes* appeals to Sri Lankans, cherishing a sense of common cultural tradition and boosting India's cultural influence in the region.

Bilateral relations are significantly impacted by collaborations and exchanges in cultural events like films, dance and music. The active engagement of Bollywood celebrities and the nomination of films in international festivals fosters diplomatic relations (Athique, 2011). The rich use of music, dance, and visuals depicting universally acceptable themes like Indian customs, traditions, and festivals in *Pardes* and *DDLJ* have proven to be a carrier of Bollywood's image as a cultural ambassador of India (Kumar, 2023).

CONCLUSION: THEORIZING INDIA'S SOFT POWER APPROACH VIA THE CULTURAL REACH OF BOLLYWOOD

Performative acts, symbolic names, and evocative lyrics used in Bollywood perform an important role in showcasing and reflecting the cultural

strength of India abroad. It also reassures the cultural sovereignty of India and signifies continuity and relevance among the diaspora and global audiences (Bose, 2016). The main thrust of this paper revolves around the importance of films in reflecting and shaping political values to project India's cultural image globally.

Movies like *Pardes* and *DDLJ* reflect the use of symbolic representation to project India's cultural sovereignty by engaging with the themes of tradition, modernity, and diaspora. Though showcasing the retention of cultural values, traditions, customs and practices, Bollywood acts as the cultural ambassador of India. Constructivist foundation, methods, and ideas are important in illustrating the alternative building of India's engagements and its skill to realize its foreign policy objective as its multinational interaction rises and domestic political strife magnifies.

The significance of performativity and aesthetics in International Relations (IR) lies in their strength to contribute valuable knowledge to the cultural amplitudes of world politics. Analyzing the disparity between representation and the represented helps in locating the political within this space, contributing to an affluent awareness of international politics. This aesthetic methodology objects to older ways of portrayals, supporting a broader interaction with the cultural narratives of political strategies. By asserting an aesthetic approach to one's study of world politics, one gets a broader understanding of the cultural underpinnings, highlighting the importance of multidisciplinary intelligentsia in sailing through the voyage of international politics.

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