

India's Soft Power Through Cultural Diplomacy's Instruments of Performing Arts

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary international system, soft power has gained increasing significance as states rely more on attraction than coercion to shape global outcomes. Within this context, culture functions as a key resource in international relations. This study examines India's soft power through cultural diplomacy, with a specific focus on performing arts particularly classical dance, as instruments of diplomatic engagement. India's long-standing civilisational traditions provide a strong cultural foundation that enables meaningful international connections.

The study analyses how performing arts operate not merely as cultural expressions but as diplomatic practices that facilitate dialogue, foster mutual understanding, and generate goodwill among nations. It further investigates the conditions under which culture becomes an effective tool of diplomacy, evaluates India's current institutional approaches, and draws comparative insights from other countries that strategically deploy cultural resources.

Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative approach based on document analysis of reports from the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), supplemented by academic literature and selected case examples of cultural engagements. A thematic analysis is employed to examine how performing arts are positioned within India's diplomatic framework.

The findings suggest that India's strength lies in its ability to use performing arts as relational instruments that reduce cultural distance and create spaces for sustained engagement. However, limitations such as insufficient coordination, uneven global outreach, and lack of long-term strategic planning constrain their full potential. The study concludes that a more integrated and strategically aligned approach to cultural diplomacy can significantly enhance India's soft power and its effectiveness in international engagement.

Keywords: Soft Power; Cultural Diplomacy; India; Foreign Policy; Performing Arts

INTRODUCTION

This research is based on the theoretical concept of soft power, introduced by Joseph Nye, which refers to a nation's ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or force (Nye, 1990). In contrast to hard power instruments such as military intervention or economic sanctions, soft power operates through intangible sources of influence that shape preferences, perceptions, and legitimacy in the international system. In contemporary international relations, its significance has increased as diplomatic practices shift toward cultural engagement and global image-building, reflecting broader transformations such as globalisation, the expansion of communication technologies, and the growing role of public opinion.

Within this framework, cultural diplomacy emerges as a central mechanism through which states promote cultural exchange, build mutual understanding, and foster international cooperation through cultural expressions such as performing arts, music, literature, and heritage traditions. It functions at the intersection of culture and foreign policy, enabling engagement with foreign publics through symbolic and affective means rather than formal negotiation alone. Scholars argue that culture operates as a non-threatening and emotionally resonant

medium, allowing states to communicate values and narratives in ways that extend beyond conventional diplomacy (Cull, 2008).

India provides a particularly relevant case due to its vast civilisational heritage and diverse performing arts traditions, including classical dance forms such as Kathak, Bharatanatyam, Odissi, and Kuchipudi, along with classical music traditions. These art forms are not merely aesthetic practices but carriers of historical memory, philosophical ideas, and social values. Through embodied movement, rhythm, and narrative expression, they function as effective mediums of cross-cultural dialogue that can engage audiences beyond linguistic boundaries.

Through institutional efforts led by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), India has promoted cultural performances, artistic delegations, and international festivals to strengthen its global cultural presence. Thussu (2013) notes that India's cultural outreach draws strength from its civilisational continuity, allowing diplomacy to derive legitimacy from historical depth rather than contemporary projection alone. At the same time, existing scholarship points to challenges related to institutional coordination and policy consistency (Malone, 2011). These limitations indicate that cultural potential does not automatically translate into diplomatic effectiveness.

Against this background, this study examines how performing arts function as instruments of India's cultural diplomacy and contribute to its soft power. It seeks to analyse how these art forms facilitate international engagement, shape perceptions, and support diplomatic objectives. By focusing on performing arts as concrete diplomatic practices rather than abstract cultural assets, the study bridges the gap between theoretical discussions of soft power and its practical application in India's foreign policy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent decades, soft power has gained prominence in international relations, generating sustained scholarly attention to culture as a strategic diplomatic resource. In an international system increasingly shaped by interdependence and constraints on coercive power, states have turned toward non-material instruments of influence to shape perceptions and preferences. Scholars note that military and economic power alone are often insufficient to address questions of legitimacy, trust, and long-term cooperation, thereby increasing the relevance of attraction-based forms of influence. This body of work provides the conceptual foundation for examining how performing arts function within cultural diplomacy, particularly in contexts where persuasion operates through symbolic meaning, affective engagement, and people-to-people interaction.

The concept of soft power, introduced by Nye (1990), refers to the ability of a state to influence others through attraction rather than coercion. Nye later identifies culture, political values, and foreign policy legitimacy as key sources of this influence (Nye, 2004). Cultural expressions rooted in historical and civilisational traditions are often seen as especially effective because they convey continuity, depth, and symbolic authority. However, this framework largely remains at a macro level and does not fully explain how specific cultural forms, such as performing arts, function as diplomatic instruments in practice or how their impact is shaped by institutional mediation and audience reception.

Subsequent scholarship situates soft power within the broader framework of public diplomacy. Melissen (2005) highlights a shift toward sustained engagement with foreign publics, while Cull (2008) identifies cultural diplomacy as a central component involving exchange, performance, and collaboration. These perspectives emphasise that cultural diplomacy is most effective when it prioritises dialogue and relationship-building rather than unilateral projection. This is particularly relevant in understanding performing arts, which operate not only as cultural representations but also as interactive practices that foster familiarity and emotional connection.

Cultural diplomacy is also characterised by its long-term and intangible outcomes. Mark (2009) argues that it produces effects such as trust, symbolic recognition, and mutual familiarity, which are difficult to quantify but politically significant. Similarly, Cummings (2003) demonstrates that sustained cultural exchanges can build influence gradually, especially when they are perceived as credible and consistent. These insights highlight that cultural diplomacy operates through indirect and cumulative processes rather than immediate policy outcomes.

Constructivist approaches further underline the importance of culture and identity in shaping international relations. Studies suggest that shared cultural experiences can humanise diplomacy by fostering emotional engagement beyond formal negotiations (Saaida, 2023). Artistic forms such as dance and music function as embodied expressions of identity, communicating meaning beyond linguistic boundaries. While this literature establishes the importance of culture, it often treats it as a broad category, with limited attention to how specific art forms operate within diplomatic contexts.

The emerging field of arts and performance diplomacy addresses this limitation by focusing on artistic practice as a mode of international engagement. Schneider (2006) conceptualises cultural diplomacy as a communicative process grounded in experience and affect, while Brown (2016) argues that performing arts create shared spaces of empathy and recognition. Historical analyses further show that artistic exchanges have long been used to cultivate favourable international perceptions, although their effectiveness depends on authenticity, continuity, and institutional support (Arndt, 2005).

Comparative studies provide additional insight into how states mobilise culture strategically. Research on South Korea demonstrates how sustained investment in cultural industries can translate cultural popularity into diplomatic influence (Jang & Paik, 2012). At the same time, scholarship on India highlights both potential and limitations. Thussu (2013) emphasises India's civilisational cultural strength, while Malone (2011) points to the need for stronger alignment between cultural resources and foreign policy practice. Mukherjee (2014) further argues that India's soft power is often overstated due to gaps in institutional coordination and implementation.

Institutional analyses reinforce this concern. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) plays a central role in promoting Indian culture abroad through cultural centres, delegations, and festivals. While these initiatives highlight the importance of performing arts in India's cultural outreach, studies note that they are often event-based and lack sustained evaluation mechanisms (Isar, 2017). Recent work by Chandra and Sinha (2023) similarly recognises the symbolic value of classical dance in projecting India's identity but points to limitations in funding, reach, and long-term strategy.

Despite extensive scholarship on soft power and cultural diplomacy, several gaps remain. First, culture is often treated in abstract terms, with limited focus on performing arts as distinct diplomatic instruments. Second, India-focused studies tend to be either descriptive or normative, without systematically examining how cultural performances operate within institutional frameworks or contribute to diplomatic outcomes. Third, there is insufficient attention to how audience reception and engagement shape the effectiveness of cultural initiatives.

This study addresses these gaps by focusing specifically on performing arts as instruments of cultural diplomacy in the Indian context. By linking theoretical perspectives on soft power with institutional practices and selected case examples, it seeks to provide a more grounded understanding of how cultural expression operates as a diplomatic resource and the conditions under which it enhances India's soft power.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine how performing arts function as instruments of India's cultural diplomacy and soft power. Given that cultural diplomacy operates through perception, symbolism, and engagement, a qualitative and interpretive approach is appropriate for analysing its role in international relations.

The study is based on secondary sources, including official documents and annual reports of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), which outline India's cultural initiatives and international programmes. These are supplemented by policy reports such as the Standing Committee on External Affairs (2022) and relevant academic literature on soft power (Nye, 1990).

The analysis incorporates selected case examples, including ICCR-organised international festivals, Cultural Exchange Programmes (CEPs) with partner countries, cultural performances at multilateral forums, and diaspora-led initiatives. A thematic analysis of these materials is used to identify patterns in cultural representation, institutional practice, and diplomatic engagement.

The scope is limited to performing arts, particularly classical dance and music, and focuses on institutional initiatives rather than audience-based empirical research.

Theoretical Framework: Soft Power And Cultural Diplomacy

The theoretical foundation of this study is based on the concept of soft power, defined by Nye (1990) as the ability of a state to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. Soft power operates by shaping preferences through legitimacy, credibility, and cultural appeal, making it particularly relevant in contemporary international relations where perception and public opinion play an increasing role.

Nye later identifies culture, political values, and foreign policy behaviour as key sources of soft power (Nye, 2004). Among these, culture becomes especially effective when it is perceived as authentic and relatable by foreign publics. Cultural expressions that carry historical continuity and symbolic meaning can generate trust and familiarity, thereby enhancing a state's ability to engage internationally.

Within this framework, cultural diplomacy functions as a mechanism through which soft power is operationalised. It involves the use of cultural exchange, artistic collaboration, and performance to strengthen relationships and foster mutual understanding (Mark, 2010). Unlike formal diplomacy, which operates through negotiation, cultural diplomacy engages audiences indirectly through experience and interaction. Cull (2008) emphasises that it is most effective when it enables dialogue rather than projection, distinguishing it from propaganda.

This distinction is particularly relevant in the Indian context. India's cultural diplomacy is largely based on exchange and engagement rather than assertive projection, reflecting its broader foreign policy emphasis on pluralism and coexistence. Performing arts, especially classical dance and music, embody this approach by communicating cultural values through shared emotional and aesthetic experience rather than political messaging.

By applying this framework, the study examines how performing arts function as practical instruments of soft power. It analyses how cultural expression contributes to shaping perceptions, facilitating engagement, and supporting diplomatic objectives, thereby linking theoretical concepts of soft power with institutional and cultural practices in India's foreign policy.

Historical Background : Classical Dance And Music

Indian classical dance and music trace their theoretical foundation to the *Nāṭya Śāstra*, attributed to Bharata Muni, which codifies aesthetic principles, gesture, rhythm, and performance theory (Bharata Muni, 1951). It conceptualises performance as a synthesis of emotion, expression, and narrative, positioning it not only as artistic practice but also as a medium of social and cultural transmission.

The concept of *rasa* is central to this tradition, emphasising emotional experience as the purpose of performance. By systematising expressive techniques, the *Nāṭya Śāstra* enables Indian performing arts to communicate meaning beyond linguistic boundaries. This feature contributes to their continued relevance in cross-cultural contexts, particularly within cultural diplomacy.

Over time, these traditions evolved across regions through temple patronage, devotional practices, and courtly refinement. This led to the emergence of distinct classical dance forms such as Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Odissi, and Kuchipudi, each reflecting regional variations while retaining a shared aesthetic framework. Despite stylistic diversity, these forms remain connected through common principles of expression, rhythm, and narrative structure.

Indian classical music developed along similar lines, with early roots in Vedic traditions and later codification in texts such as the *Sāṅgītrāṇakāra* (Sārṅgadeva). These traditions demonstrate continuity, complexity, and symbolic depth, reinforcing India's identity as a civilisation with enduring cultural practices.

India's cultural diplomacy began to take shape after independence, particularly under Jawaharlal Nehru, who viewed culture as a means of promoting India's international identity and supporting its non-aligned foreign policy (Rana, 2011). Cultural exchange was used to present India as a civilisational state committed to pluralism and cooperation rather than power politics.

The establishment of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) in 1950 marked a significant step in institutionalising cultural diplomacy. Through cultural centres, festivals, and artistic delegations, India developed structured mechanisms for promoting its cultural heritage abroad. Over time, these initiatives became increasingly integrated with diplomatic engagements, reflecting the growing recognition of culture as a strategic component of foreign policy.

Institutional Analysis: Iccr, Mea And Cultural Wings

At the core of India's cultural diplomacy framework is the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), established in 1950 with the mandate of promoting Indian culture abroad. ICCR functions as the primary executing agency, organising international cultural festivals, facilitating artistic exchanges, supporting collaborations between Indian and foreign institutions, and promoting performing arts globally (ICCR Annual Report, 2023–24). It maintains cultural centres across regions such as Asia, Africa, Europe, and Central Asia, where regular performances, workshops, and lecture-demonstrations are conducted. These centres enable sustained engagement with foreign publics rather than one-time cultural exposure.

Strategic direction is provided by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), which integrates cultural diplomacy within broader foreign policy objectives. Through coordination with ICCR and Indian missions abroad, cultural initiatives are aligned with diplomatic engagements such as state visits, bilateral anniversaries, and multilateral forums. Parliamentary assessments indicate that cultural activities are increasingly embedded within diplomatic strategy, contributing to relationship-building and international outreach (Standing Committee on External Affairs, 2022).

A key instrument within this institutional framework is the Cultural Exchange Programme (CEP), implemented through cooperation between the Ministry of Culture, MEA, and ICCR. CEPs provide a structured mechanism for bilateral cultural engagement by facilitating exchanges of artists, scholars, and cultural practitioners, along with joint performances and festivals. For instance, India's Cultural Exchange Programme with South Korea, extended for the period 2026–2030, includes initiatives such as cultural festivals, "India Day" celebrations, and academic exchanges aimed at strengthening people-to-people ties (Press Information Bureau, 2024). Similar agreements with countries such as Italy and Egypt institutionalise performing arts exchanges and ensure continuity in cultural interaction (Ministry of Culture, 2023–24).

The implementation of these programmes is supported by ICCR through cultural delegations, overseas cultural centres, and collaboration with local institutions abroad. In addition to performance-based exchanges, CEPs also include educational initiatives such as scholarships and training in Indian classical arts, contributing to long-term cultural engagement beyond short-term events (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023).

Together, this institutional structure reflects a multi-layered approach in which execution, coordination, and policy direction are distributed across agencies. While this framework enables flexibility and diversity in cultural outreach, it also highlights the need for stronger coordination and long-term strategic planning to enhance the effectiveness of India's cultural diplomacy.

Case Studies: Performing Arts In Practice Within India's Cultural Diplomacy

When we take a closer look at specific examples of institutional initiatives related to performing arts in India's cultural diplomacy, we can better see what cultural expression looks like in action as part of the diplomatic process and how cultural expression builds relationships on all levels.

An example of an initiative is the 11th India International Dance and Music Festival (2026), organised by the ICCR from 16 to 18 January 2026 at Baansera Park, New Delhi. There were 174 participants from 8 countries

that performed during the festival, including India, Kazakhstan, Burkina Faso, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Maldives, and Lithuania. There was a wide variety of art forms presented at the festival, including classical dance, music, theatre, Qawwali, and poetry. International participation included some of the international groups such as Kantigui Troupe (Burkina Faso); "Aalam" Folklore Group (Kyrgyzstan); and Sutra Foundation (Malaysia), as well as international collaborations involving European performers. In addition to the international performers, there were many well-established Indian performers who participated in the festival, including Dr L. Subramaniam and Kavita Krishnamurthy (ICCR, 2026).

The importance of the 11th India International Dance and Music Festival goes beyond its size; it also serves as a tool for the diplomatic process. As a venue where international artists can share space and collaborate together, the festival provides opportunities for international artists to interact with one another outside of official diplomatic channels. Additionally, events like this help build non-official international connections and increase awareness of each other's cultures through shared artistic experiences.

Another regional example similar to the 11th India International Dance and Music Festival is Saptasur: Seven Nations, One Melody ("BIMSTEC Traditional Music Festival", 2025), which had participants from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. Through providing a common cultural forum to artists in the region, participating in the BIMSTEC grouping helped promote collective identity and cooperation within the region. This example shows a transition from cultural representation of individual nation-states to regional cultural integration within India's diplomatic practices (ICCR, 2025).

International bilateral Cultural Exchange Programmes (CEPs) are mechanisms that formally establish structures for ongoing cultural dialogue. An example of such an agreement is the 2026-2030 India-South Korea CEP, which includes cultural festivals, academic exchanges and collaborative initiatives such as "India Day" celebrations. These programmes are designed to integrate performing arts into formal diplomatic relations and allow for ongoing dialogue and collaboration (Press Information Bureau, 2024). Similar agreements have been signed between India and Italy/Egypt to further demonstrate how cultural exchange is embedded into formal diplomatic frameworks (Ministry of Culture, 2023–24).

Finally, performing arts are used in multilateral diplomatic contexts. Cultural programmes attached to international forums such as G20 meetings or SCO meetings create informal platforms for diplomats/state officials to meet and engage. These performances contribute to establishing favourable diplomatic environments by promoting familiarity and decreasing cultural differences (ICCR, 2023–24).

In addition to using state-sponsored institutional programmes, diaspora organisations continue to use performing arts to enhance India's global cultural diplomacy. Diaspora organisations and artists organise concerts/performances/workshops/festivals throughout Southeast Asia/Europe that maintain traditional Indian culture while engaging local communities and facilitating long-term cultural presence/people-to-people diplomacy (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023).

Overall, these cases show that performing arts are effective at engaging audiences at multiple levels of international diplomacy (regional/bilateral/multilateral/individual), are successful at creating common cultural spaces for sustained interactions, and emphasise the need for continued institutional support and coordination to convert short-term cultural efforts into longer-term diplomatic successes.

Challenges and Limitations in India's Cultural Diplomacy

The performing arts are among the most vital components of Indian cultural diplomacy; however, there are many organisational and operational factors that limit the success of those efforts. One of the major challenges facing cultural diplomacy in the area of performing arts is establishing how much an individual's attitudes toward a particular country are influenced by an experience with its culture. Because cultural exchanges produce indirect effects and occur at a slower pace than do economic or strategic benefits, it is very difficult to establish causality between specific cultural experiences and successful diplomatic relations or tangible policy results (Ang et al., 2015). For example, large-scale cultural events, such as international dance or music festivals, create awareness and public involvement, yet assessing the long-term effects of those events on diplomatic relations or policy outcomes is challenging due to a lack of formalised evaluation mechanisms.

Additionally, India lacks a methodical approach to consistently evaluate the impacts of cultural programmes. Most evaluations of cultural activities focus on quantitative measures, i.e., the number of attendees or frequency of events, whereas qualitative measures such as whether the cultural programme created sustained interest or changed perceptions are generally ignored. The Standing Committee on External Affairs has indicated that while ICCR does sponsor cultural programming, few efforts have been made to formally monitor long-term outcomes or strategically evaluate the effects of those efforts (Standing Committee on External Affairs, 2022), resulting in a gap between the amount of cultural programming and the actual diplomatic outcome of that programming.

India's global cultural presence is also unevenly distributed. In some geographic areas, e.g., Southeast Asia and parts of Europe, India has strong representation through centres and cultural programming sponsored by the ICCR. However, in other geographic areas, e.g., Africa and South America, India's presence is weak. This difference affects India's ability to provide a consistent message globally and limits the depth of diplomatic relations across regions. Even though India has signed CEP agreements and sent cultural delegations to increase its presence, the lack of permanent cultural infrastructure in some geographic areas severely limits India's opportunity for continued engagement.

Another factor affecting India's cultural diplomacy is competition from other nations. Nations like China and South Korea have spent a great deal of money developing their respective cultural industries, digital platforms and government-funded cultural brands. As a result, both China and South Korea have significantly greater global reach and visibility than India (Nye, 2013). India's own cultural diplomacy has historically relied on classical artistic traditions and institutional programming. While these traditions have tremendous symbolic value, they may have little relevance in today's increasingly fast-paced, media-driven world where entertainment options abound.

A final concern is the issue of accessibility of classical performing arts. Classical dances such as Bharatanatyam, Kathak, and Odissi hold great symbolic value and represent the essence of Indian philosophy. However, these art forms may appear confusing or foreign to people who are unexposed to them. Therefore, cultural diplomacy initiatives using traditional performance arts may only engage with those individuals who are already interested in the arts or have a basic understanding of Indian culture. Consequently, cultural diplomacy initiatives utilising traditional performance arts may not be inclusive (Rana, 2011). Moreover, performances organised by ICCR cultural centres may not adequately explain the context of each performance, therefore limiting the potential appeal to non-cultural enthusiasts.

Lastly, coordination between all entities involved in cultural diplomacy in India is inconsistent. There are three primary organisations involved in promoting cultural diplomacy in India: the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), the Ministry of Culture, and ICCR. Each organisation provides opportunities for creativity; however, they can also promote disorganisation when planning and implementing cultural diplomacy initiatives (Isar, 2017) because no single entity controls all aspects of an initiative. When a series of one-time event-based initiatives take place without being linked together as part of a larger strategic plan to achieve increased diplomatic engagement, then the cumulative impact of those initiatives will be reduced.

In summary, while India has vast amounts of creative material available to use for cultural diplomacy purposes, the impact of that material can only be realised if there are improvements made in coordinating efforts between organisations, providing better methods for evaluating cultural diplomacy initiatives, and increasing access to cultural materials so that more people can participate in those initiatives. These actions will be necessary for further development in the role that performing arts can play in achieving India's soft power objectives internationally.

Comparative Cultural Diplomacy Models

Comparative analysis of cultural diplomacy highlights how different states mobilise performing arts through distinct institutional and strategic frameworks. These approaches demonstrate that cultural influence depends not only on cultural resources but also on how systematically they are organised and projected internationally.

China follows a highly centralised and state-driven model in which cultural initiatives are closely aligned with foreign policy objectives. A notable example is the Chinese dance drama “The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting”, performed in March 2024 for an audience of over 700 foreign diplomats. This production combined traditional aesthetics with modern stage technology to project China’s civilisational identity while reinforcing its global cultural presence (FMPC, 2024). Such large-scale performances are designed not only as artistic showcases but also as strategic tools to communicate national narratives and enhance diplomatic visibility.

South Korea’s model differs significantly, relying on a hybrid structure that combines state support with private-sector cultural industries. The global spread of K-pop concerts and international cultural festivals, often organised with support from agencies such as KOFICE, illustrates how performing arts and entertainment are used to engage global audiences, particularly youth. Events such as large-scale K-pop concerts and cultural showcases have contributed to increased tourism, global media visibility, and favourable public perception (Jang & Paik, 2012). Unlike state-curated performances, these initiatives operate through market-driven dissemination, allowing South Korea to convert cultural popularity into sustained diplomatic and economic influence.

France represents a long-established institutional model centred on cultural education and continuity. Organisations such as Alliance Française and Institut Français regularly organise music festivals, theatre performances, and cultural seasons abroad, often integrated with language training and academic exchange. For instance, French cultural seasons hosted in partner countries combine performing arts with educational programmes, ensuring long-term engagement rather than one-time visibility (Melissen, 2005). This approach emphasises cultural immersion and intellectual exchange, allowing France to sustain influence through institutional presence over time.

In comparison, India’s cultural diplomacy is characterised by civilisational depth and diversity but remains relatively decentralised in its execution. While events such as ICCR festivals and cultural exchange programmes demonstrate active engagement, coordination across institutions is not always consistent (Rana, 2011). India’s reliance on classical performing arts provides symbolic richness and historical continuity, yet its global reach is often limited by uneven institutional presence and comparatively lower integration with digital dissemination.

These comparative examples offer important implications. China’s approach highlights the importance of strong institutional coordination and alignment between culture and foreign policy. South Korea’s experience demonstrates the effectiveness of combining cultural production with global media dissemination and youth engagement. France’s model underscores the value of long-term cultural education and sustained institutional presence. Together, they indicate that cultural diplomacy is most effective when cultural expression is supported by continuity, strategic planning, and audience engagement.

For India, the challenge lies not in the absence of cultural capital but in translating that capital into structured and sustained diplomatic influence. Strengthening institutional coordination, expanding digital outreach, and integrating cultural education with performance-based diplomacy can enhance the effectiveness of India’s soft power. When aligned with foreign policy objectives, performing arts can function not merely as cultural expressions but as long-term diplomatic instruments that foster trust and international cooperation.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how India’s cultural diplomacy operates through classical performing arts and how these practices contribute to the country’s soft power in contemporary international relations. Drawing on the framework of soft power, it demonstrates that influence is exercised not only through material capabilities but also through cultural attraction, symbolic communication, and sustained engagement.

The findings indicate that performing arts function as practical instruments of diplomacy by creating shared cultural spaces that enable interaction beyond formal negotiation. Institutional initiatives such as ICCR festivals, cultural exchange programmes, and multilateral cultural events illustrate how artistic expression is embedded within diplomatic practice. These examples show that cultural diplomacy is most effective when supported by continuity, institutional coordination, and repeated engagement rather than isolated performances.

An important dimension of India's cultural diplomacy emerges through the role of women performers, whose participation extends beyond artistic representation into forms of informal diplomatic engagement. Classical dance traditions in India have historically been sustained and transmitted by women, who continue to function as key cultural intermediaries in global contexts. From a feminist perspective, the significance of these performances lies in the way the body becomes a site of cultural and political meaning. Judith Butler's argument that identity is performed through repeated acts provides a useful framework for understanding how dancers embody and reproduce cultural identity in international spaces (Butler, 1990). Through expressive techniques such as abhinaya, performers communicate narratives of devotion, resistance, and agency, transforming performance into a medium of cultural articulation.

Empirical examples reinforce this dimension. Mallika Sarabhai, through productions such as *Sita's Daughters*, has used performance to engage with themes of gender and social justice in international contexts. Aditi Mangaldas, through contemporary Kathak works presented at global festivals, explores identity and emotional experience, while Geeta Chandran's reinterpretations of figures such as Draupadi foreground voice and moral authority. These examples indicate that classical dance is not static but continues to evolve as a space where gendered narratives are actively negotiated.

At the structural level, patterns of India's international cultural engagement further demonstrate the importance of sustained institutional presence. The network of ICCR cultural centres particularly concentrated in Asia has enabled continuous programming such as performances, workshops, and academic exchanges, contributing to deeper diplomatic and economic relationships in these regions. In contrast, more limited and less institutionalised cultural presence in Africa and South America has resulted in comparatively weaker and less consistent engagement. The Pew Research Center (2025, August 13) data survey reflects this disparity, indicating that India enjoys a more favourable public image in Asia and a moderate perception in Europe, while visibility remains comparatively lower in parts of South America. This variation suggests that differences in cultural exposure and sustained engagement shape international perception. It further indicates that long-term cultural infrastructure, rather than episodic initiatives, plays a critical role in building durable international partnerships.

At the same time, the study identifies key limitations. The impact of cultural diplomacy remains difficult to measure, and institutional mechanisms for evaluation are limited. Many initiatives continue to operate in an event-based format, restricting long-term diplomatic outcomes. There is also uneven global outreach and limited integration of digital platforms when compared to other countries. Furthermore, while women performers play a visible role in international cultural representation, their contributions are not always formally recognised within policy frameworks.

These limitations indicate that cultural diplomacy does not automatically translate into influence; rather, its effectiveness depends on strategic alignment, audience reception, and sustained institutional support. Strengthening methodological clarity, expanding empirical assessment, and engaging more critically with alternative perspectives on soft power can further enhance the analytical robustness of such studies.

Overall, the study argues that India's strength lies in its ability to use performing arts as relational tools of engagement grounded in civilisational continuity and cultural diversity. However, realising this potential requires a more systematic approach that integrates cultural initiatives within broader foreign policy objectives. When supported by strategic planning, institutional coordination, and recognition of cultural actors, including women performers, performing arts can function not merely as cultural expressions but as enduring instruments of diplomacy that shape perceptions, foster trust, and strengthen international cooperation.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study is based exclusively on secondary data sources, including published reports, institutional documents, and peer-reviewed literature. No human participants, personal data, or animal subjects were involved; therefore, formal ethical approval was not required.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data used in this study are derived from publicly available sources, including institutional reports (e.g., ICCR and MEA), survey publications, and academic literature. All materials are accessible through the references cited in this paper.

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