Beyond Visibility: Relationship Cultivation, Audience Evidence, and Claims About India's Cultural Diplomacy

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Abstract

Culture has always been an important way for countries to connect with people beyond their borders. For India, this connection draws on a rich and diverse cultural heritage that includes yoga, cinema, music, dance, cuisine, literature, festivals, and traditional knowledge systems. These cultural resources help introduce India to international audiences and create opportunities for dialogue, exchange, and mutual understanding. However, the growing visibility of Indian culture does not necessarily mean that India's cultural diplomacy has achieved its wider objectives.

This paper examines the difference between making Indian culture visible and building meaningful relationships with international audiences. It argues that cultural diplomacy should not be evaluated only through the number of events organised, people reached, social media views generated, or countries in which cultural programmes are conducted. These indicators are useful, but they cannot independently explain what audiences think, how they interpret cultural experiences, or whether their engagement develops into lasting relationships.

Drawing on the concepts of soft power, public diplomacy, and relationship cultivation, the paper proposes a mixed-methods framework combining institutional document analysis, audience surveys, and qualitative interviews. It explores how cultural exposure may influence knowledge, perceptions, trust, and continued engagement while recognising that audiences interpret cultural messages through their own experiences and political environments. The paper also highlights the difficulty of attributing changes in international attitudes to cultural initiatives alone. It argues that the long-term value of India's cultural diplomacy depends not simply on how widely Indian culture travels, but also on how people respond to it, whether meaningful connections develop, and whether claims of diplomatic influence are supported by credible evidence.

Keywords: India, cultural diplomacy, soft power, public diplomacy, audience engagement, relationship cultivation, international communication, mixed-methods research

1. Introduction

Culture often creates connections that formal diplomacy cannot achieve on its own. A film, a musical performance, a shared meal, a university exchange, or a conversation about traditional knowledge can introduce people to another society in ways that official statements and diplomatic meetings may not. These experiences can encourage curiosity, challenge existing assumptions, and create opportunities for people from different backgrounds to understand one another.

For India, culture offers many such opportunities. Its traditions of yoga, classical music, dance, cinema, literature, cuisine, festivals, and philosophical thought have attracted interest across different parts of the world. Indian cultural engagement also takes place through educational exchanges, cultural institutions, diplomatic missions, diaspora communities, artists, and digital platforms. These activities are important because international relations are shaped not only by governments but also by the perceptions and experiences of ordinary people. Cultural engagement can create opportunities for India to build connections with students, artists, researchers, professionals, and wider international

communities.

A cultural festival may attract a large audience, and an Indian film may reach millions of viewers. A yoga event may generate considerable public interest, while a cultural institution may successfully organise programmes in several countries. All these achievements demonstrate reach and activity. They do not necessarily establish that audiences have developed greater trust in India, gained a deeper understanding of Indian society, or become more willing to maintain relationships with Indian institutions.

This distinction is important when discussing soft power. Joseph S. Nye (2008) explains soft power as the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion or payment. However, attraction itself cannot be assumed simply because a country's cultural products are popular. People may enjoy Indian cinema without agreeing with Indian government policies. They may practise yoga for personal well-being without developing a stronger interest in India as a country.

Such responses do not make cultural engagement unsuccessful. They show that its outcomes can be varied and more complex than a single measure of national popularity suggests. This paper therefore argues that India's cultural diplomacy should be examined through three connected questions: how Indian culture becomes visible internationally, how audiences experience and interpret that culture, and what evidence demonstrates that meaningful relationships or wider diplomatic outcomes have developed.

2. Understanding India's Cultural Diplomacy

India's cultural diplomacy draws on a wide range of cultural resources. These include traditional art forms, contemporary entertainment, educational exchanges, language, heritage, food, festivals, and different forms of knowledge and intellectual expression. Together, they present international audiences with multiple ways of encountering Indian society.

Institutions such as the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) play an important role in promoting cultural exchange and strengthening connections between India and other countries. The Ministry of Culture and India's diplomatic missions also contribute to international cultural engagement through programmes, exhibitions, performances, exchanges, and institutional partnerships.

These activities provide a foundation for cultural diplomacy, but their significance should be understood in relation to their objectives. Organising a cultural event demonstrates that an activity has taken place. Attracting participants shows that the activity has reached an audience. Whether participants learned something, developed a new perspective, or continued their engagement afterwards requires additional evidence. For example, an international cultural festival might introduce visitors to Indian music and dance. Some participants may simply enjoy the performances, while others may become interested in learning an Indian language, studying Indian history, or collaborating with Indian artists. Both responses are valuable, but they represent different outcomes.

Similarly, a university exchange programme may involve fewer participants than a large cultural festival, yet it may create professional relationships that continue for years. Its influence may therefore be less visible initially but more sustained over time. The lesson is not that smaller programmes are necessarily more effective or that large cultural events lack value. Rather, cultural initiatives should be evaluated according to what they are intended to achieve and the evidence available to demonstrate those achievements.

3. The Problem with Measuring Success Through Visibility Alone

Visibility is an attractive measure because it is relatively easy to count. Institutions can record the number of events conducted, participants reached, performances organised, scholarships awarded, online views generated, or media reports published.

Such information is useful for administrative reporting and programme planning. It helps explain how widely an

initiative has been delivered and whether its immediate objectives have been met. The difficulty begins when these figures are used to make broader claims about cultural influence.

A large audience does not necessarily mean that people understood the cultural message. Positive reactions to a performance do not automatically indicate trust in the country associated with it. Even a favourable opinion of India may have developed through personal friendships, travel, education, news coverage, or family connections rather than through a particular cultural programme.

Four distinctions are therefore essential.

First, **visibility is not the same as understanding**. People may encounter Indian cultural content without learning much about its history or meaning.

Second, **understanding does not always produce attraction**. A person may understand a cultural tradition but feel little personal interest in it.

Third, **attraction does not automatically create a lasting relationship**. Enjoying an event may not lead to further interaction or collaboration.

Finally, **a positive relationship does not by itself prove diplomatic influence**. Demonstrating such influence requires evidence that the relationship contributed to an outcome relevant to a clearly defined diplomatic objective. These distinctions encourage a more realistic understanding of cultural diplomacy. They do not diminish the importance of visibility; they help explain what visibility can and cannot tell us.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Soft Power and the Meaning of Attraction

Joseph S. Nye's work on soft power provides an important starting point for understanding cultural diplomacy. According to Nye (2008), a country may influence others through the attractiveness of its culture, political values, and policies.

This idea helps explain why cultural engagement matters in international relations. A country's influence does not depend entirely on its economic resources or military capabilities. Its ability to attract interest, inspire confidence, and establish connections may also contribute to its international position.

However, cultural attraction and diplomatic influence are not identical. A person may admire Indian cinema, enjoy Indian food, or appreciate yoga without necessarily developing a favourable opinion of every aspect of India. Cultural appreciation may also exist alongside political disagreement. For this reason, soft power should be understood as a potential source of influence rather than an automatic result of cultural popularity. The presence of attractive cultural resources creates opportunities, but the extent to which those opportunities produce meaningful outcomes must be examined.

4.2 Cultural Diplomacy as an Opportunity for Exchange

Nicholas J. Cull (2008) explains public diplomacy through several related activities, including listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting. His framework is useful because it recognises that international communication involves more than sending messages to foreign audiences.

Listening is particularly important. When institutions understand how audiences respond to cultural programmes, they can improve their communication and create activities that better reflect participants' interests.

A cultural event designed only to present a favourable image of India may achieve its immediate promotional objective. However, an event that also encourages discussion, collaboration, and feedback may create additional

opportunities for mutual understanding.

This does not mean that cultural promotion and cultural exchange must be treated as opposites. Both can have a place in public diplomacy. The important question is whether the programme's objectives and its methods are consistent with the outcomes being claimed.

4.3 Relationship Cultivation and Trust

Cultural diplomacy becomes more meaningful when an encounter leads to continuing engagement. A single performance may create interest, but repeated interactions can give participants opportunities to understand one another more deeply.

Storie (2018) examines relationship cultivation in public diplomacy, highlighting the processes through which relationships are initiated, developed, and maintained. This perspective suggests that relationships require more than an initial meeting. They may depend on communication, reliability, responsiveness, and opportunities for continued interaction.

Tam and Kim (2017) also contribute to this discussion through their framework for assessing diplomatic relationships. Their work considers dimensions such as trust, empathy, interactional bilateralism, and relational continuity. These concepts are particularly relevant to India's cultural diplomacy. Trust may develop when participants find an institution reliable and its representatives credible. Empathy may grow when people have opportunities to understand perspectives different from their own. Reciprocity becomes visible when participants feel that they can contribute to a conversation rather than merely receive a message. Continuity can be observed when people remain in contact or continue collaborating after a programme ends.

Nevertheless, none of these outcomes should be assumed simply because a cultural event was successful in attracting attention. They require appropriate measurement and evidence.

4.4 Audience Interpretation and Personal Experience

International audiences do not interpret cultural messages in the same way. Their responses are shaped by their interests, education, personal experiences, social relationships, and knowledge of the country concerned.

For example, a foreign student may become interested in India through an academic exchange, while another person may encounter Indian culture primarily through films or digital media. Someone else may have a longstanding connection with India through friends, colleagues, or family.

These experiences can influence how people interpret cultural initiatives. The same programme may generate curiosity among one group, deepen existing knowledge among another, and leave a third group largely unaffected.

Audience research should therefore avoid treating foreign publics as a single, uniform audience. It should examine differences in experience, motivation, and interpretation.

It should also make room for mixed responses. A participant may appreciate Indian culture while holding critical views about a political issue. Another may enjoy an event but have no interest in further engagement. Such responses are important because they provide a more complete picture than a simple positive or negative rating.

4.5 The Need for Better Evaluation

Cultural diplomacy requires evaluation methods that connect activities with the outcomes they are intended to achieve.

The UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport's evidence review of soft power provides a useful comparative reference for thinking about resources, mechanisms, outcomes, and wider objectives. Such an approach encourages researchers to examine the process through which an initiative might produce an effect rather than assuming that the

presence of a cultural activity proves its success.

For India, institutional records can establish what programmes were organised and how many people participated. Surveys can help assess changes in knowledge or attitudes. Interviews can explain why participants responded in particular ways. Follow-up studies can establish whether relationships continue over time.

Each method answers a different question. Their combined use can provide a more balanced assessment of cultural diplomacy than any single indicator alone.

5. Research Objectives and Questions

The broad objective of the proposed study is to examine how India's cultural diplomacy can be evaluated beyond conventional measures of visibility and institutional activity. The first specific objective is to examine the relationship between exposure to Indian cultural initiatives and audience knowledge, familiarity and interest. The second is to understand how cultural experiences may contribute to trust, reciprocity, empathy and continued communication. The third is to distinguish institutional outputs from audience outcomes and longer-term effects. The fourth is to develop a mixed-methods framework that combines documentary, survey and interview evidence. The fifth is to identify the conditions under which claims about India's international cultural influence can be made credibly.

The first research question asks how institutions describe and measure the success of India's cultural diplomacy. It focuses on institutional objectives, reporting practices and the indicators used to demonstrate performance. The second asks how international audiences respond to Indian cultural initiatives and how these responses relate to knowledge, perceptions and trust. The third asks what encourages or discourages people from maintaining relationships after participating in cultural activities. The fourth examines whether institutional measures of reach and participation provide an adequate account of audience outcomes. The fifth asks what evidence is needed to distinguish cultural visibility from sustained relationships and demonstrable diplomatic influence.

These questions are designed to be complementary. Institutional documents can show what programmes aim to achieve and how success is reported. Surveys can reveal patterns across participants. Interviews can explain the meanings and experiences behind those patterns. The comparison of these sources can identify areas of agreement and disagreement. For example, an institution may describe a programme as interactive, while participants may report that they had few opportunities to contribute. Such a difference would be analytically important because it would reveal a gap between programme design and audience experience. The study aims to understand how India's cultural diplomacy can be evaluated beyond measures of visibility.

Its objectives are:

1. To examine the relationship between cultural visibility, audience engagement, and soft power.
2. To understand how cultural experiences may contribute to trust, mutual understanding, and sustained relationships.
3. To distinguish programme outputs from audience responses and wider diplomatic outcomes.
4. To develop a mixed-methods framework for studying cultural diplomacy.
5. To identify the evidence needed to support credible claims about India's international cultural influence.

The research is guided by five questions:

RQ1: How do institutions describe the success of India's cultural diplomacy?

RQ2: How do international audiences respond to Indian cultural initiatives, and how do these responses relate to their knowledge, perceptions, and trust?

RQ3: What encourages or discourages people from maintaining relationships after participating in cultural activities?

RQ4: Do institutional measures of reach and participation provide an adequate account of audience outcomes?

RQ5: What evidence is needed to distinguish cultural visibility from sustained relationships and demonstrable diplomatic influence?

The study expects that interactive and sustained engagement may be more closely associated with relationship development than occasional exposure alone. It also expects that prior attitudes, personal experiences, and political context will influence audience responses. These expectations require empirical testing and are not presented as established findings.

Institutional culture represents the shared values, attitudes, expectations, relationships, and everyday practices that shape life within an educational organisation. In special education, this culture can determine whether inclusion becomes a meaningful institutional commitment or remains limited to formal policies and statements. A genuinely inclusive culture is one in which students are respected as individuals, differences are understood as part of human diversity, and support is provided without creating unnecessary stigma or exclusion.

The development of an inclusive institutional culture begins with leadership attitudes and behaviour. Leaders influence the language used within institutions, the way staff respond to student concerns, the importance attached to accessibility, and the extent to which different stakeholders participate in decision-making. When leaders demonstrate respect, empathy, fairness, and openness, these values can become part of everyday institutional practice. Conversely, when management focuses exclusively on compliance and performance, staff may find it difficult to prioritise individual student experiences.

A supportive institutional culture also encourages collaboration among teachers, counsellors, special educators, therapists, administrators, parents, and other professionals. Students may have educational, communication, behavioural, social, and physical support requirements that cannot be addressed effectively by a single teacher or department. Collaborative practices allow professionals to share knowledge, coordinate interventions, and develop a more comprehensive understanding of individual learners.

Belonging is another important feature of institutional culture. Students should feel that they are accepted members of the educational community rather than individuals who are merely accommodated within it. Their participation in classroom activities, cultural programmes, institutional events, peer interactions, and decision-making processes can strengthen their sense of belonging. An inclusive culture also requires institutions to recognise and address discrimination, negative stereotypes, inaccessible practices, and attitudes that may restrict student participation.

Institutional culture must therefore be evaluated through the experiences of its members. Formal policies and infrastructure are important, but the everyday relationships and opportunities experienced by students provide a more meaningful indication of whether an institution is genuinely inclusive.

6. Conceptual Framework: From Visibility to Relationship Outcomes

The proposed framework identifies cultural visibility, audience understanding, attraction, trust, relationship cultivation, sustained engagement and possible diplomatic outcomes as distinct but connected dimensions. It is designed to guide empirical investigation rather than to claim that all cultural initiatives produce the same sequence of effects.

Cultural visibility refers to the extent to which audiences encounter Indian cultural resources. Exposure may occur through formal events, educational programmes, media content, digital platforms, travel, personal relationships or community activities. It should be measured in terms of type, frequency and context rather than through a single general question. Someone who has watched one film has a different exposure profile from someone who has studied an Indian language or participated in an exchange programme for a year.

Audience understanding refers to the knowledge and interpretation developed through exposure. It may involve familiarity with a cultural form, awareness of its historical context, recognition of regional diversity or the ability to

distinguish between different traditions. Self-reported knowledge can be useful, but it should not be the only measure. Where appropriate, factual questions or open-ended prompts can provide additional insight. Researchers should avoid assuming that a participant's confidence in their knowledge necessarily corresponds to accuracy.

Attraction refers to interest, appreciation or positive engagement with particular cultural resources or experiences. It can be expressed through enjoyment, curiosity, willingness to attend further activities or interest in learning more. Attraction should be specified carefully. A participant may be attracted to a particular art form without developing a broader favourable view of India. The object of attraction must therefore be clear.

Trust concerns confidence in the individuals or institutions involved. It may relate to the reliability of programme information, fairness of procedures, quality of delivery, respect for participants and willingness to respond to concerns. Trust in a cultural organisation should be distinguished from trust in the national government or in Indian society generally. The research instrument should identify which relationship is being assessed.

Relationship cultivation refers to the processes through which contact is initiated, developed and maintained. It includes communication, reciprocity, responsiveness and opportunities for mutual contribution. It may be visible in repeat participation, personal contact with organisers, collaborative activities or continued exchange of information. It is not limited to formal institutional partnerships; it may also involve informal professional or personal connections.

Sustained engagement refers to the continuation of interaction beyond the original cultural encounter. It may include attending further events, joining an alumni network, pursuing language study, collaborating with Indian researchers or artists, maintaining professional contact or participating in another exchange. Researchers should distinguish between intention and behaviour. A participant may express interest in future engagement but may not have an opportunity to act on that intention.

Possible diplomatic outcomes are the wider consequences that institutions may seek to support through cultural engagement. These could include stronger educational partnerships, greater opportunities for cultural collaboration, durable professional networks or contributions to mutual understanding in a particular bilateral relationship. The framework does not assume that every relationship produces a national policy outcome. It requires researchers to define the relevant objective and identify the evidence connecting the cultural initiative to that objective.

The framework also recognises contextual variables. Prior attitudes, previous travel, family and professional relationships, language ability, media exposure, political developments and demographic characteristics may shape the relationship between cultural exposure and audience response. These factors should be considered in the research design because they may influence both participation and outcomes.

The proposed model can be expressed in a broad sequence: cultural visibility may create opportunities for audience understanding; understanding may contribute to attraction; attraction and positive interaction may support trust; trust and reciprocity may facilitate relationship cultivation; and sustained relationships may contribute to selected longer-term outcomes. Each link is contingent. The model allows for feedback loops, alternative pathways and interruptions. For example, a person may develop trust through a long-term educational relationship without first having high levels of general cultural knowledge. Another may have substantial cultural knowledge but little interest in institutional engagement.

7. Discussion: Rethinking the Success of India's Cultural Diplomacy

7.1 From cultural presentation to meaningful engagement

Cultural presentation is an important starting point. International audiences need opportunities to encounter cultural traditions, artistic forms and contemporary expressions. Yet presentation alone may not provide the interaction required for deeper understanding. The design of a programme should reflect its objective. If the objective is awareness, a performance or exhibition may be suitable. If the objective is learning, the programme may need contextual explanation, workshops or educational material. If the objective is relationship development, participants may need opportunities for dialogue, collaboration and follow-up.

An international yoga programme, for example, could include practical sessions alongside discussions about the historical and philosophical contexts of yoga. Such a programme would not assume that all participants share the same

motivation. It would recognise that some may be interested in physical practice, others in well-being and others in philosophy. By acknowledging these different entry points, organisers may create a more responsive experience.

A film festival could similarly move beyond screenings by including discussions with filmmakers, scholars, students and local audiences. Participants could explore questions of representation, language, social change and artistic interpretation. The aim would not be to secure agreement with a preferred national image. It would be to create a setting in which audiences can engage with cultural material and develop their own informed responses.

7.2 Trust is developed through institutional conduct

Trust cannot be generated solely through persuasive communication. Participants assess institutions through their actual experiences. They notice whether information is accurate, whether organisers are prepared, whether selection procedures are fair, whether accessibility needs are considered and whether commitments are fulfilled. These practical details may appear administrative, but they influence the credibility of the institution.

Follow-up communication is particularly important. A participant who receives useful information after an event may feel that the institution values continued engagement. A participant who is ignored after expressing interest may conclude that the event was designed only for immediate visibility. This does not mean every participant must receive extensive individual attention. It means that follow-up arrangements should be proportionate to the programme's objectives and the expectations created.

Institutional responsiveness also includes the willingness to receive criticism. If participants report that a programme did not represent the diversity of Indian culture or that the format limited their participation, organisers can use that feedback to improve future activities. Ignoring criticism may weaken trust, while responding constructively can demonstrate institutional seriousness.

7.3 Reciprocity and shared cultural production

Cultural diplomacy is often described as an exchange, but the term can become symbolic if participants have little opportunity to contribute. A genuinely reciprocal programme recognises the knowledge and creativity of all participants. It may involve joint performances, collaborative exhibitions, co-produced media, shared research or exchanges in which international partners help shape the agenda.

Reciprocity does not require every participant to contribute equally in every respect. Institutions may provide funding, venues or administrative support, while artists and scholars contribute specialised knowledge. The important point is that the programme should not treat international participants only as an audience to be persuaded. Their perspectives should have a meaningful place in the interaction.

Such an approach can also challenge simplified representations of national culture. When artists and scholars from different countries work together, they may identify similarities, differences and areas of disagreement. These conversations can produce a more complex understanding than a one-way presentation. They may also create professional relationships that continue beyond the original programme.

7.4 Digital visibility and the challenge of depth

Digital platforms have expanded the circulation of Indian cultural content. Films, music, dance, yoga instruction, educational material and cultural commentary can reach audiences who may never attend a physical event. Digital media can support repeated exposure and enable interaction across geographical boundaries. It can also allow smaller organisations and independent creators to reach international publics.

However, the measurement of digital engagement requires care. Views and likes are not equivalent to attention, understanding or trust. A short video may attract a large number of views because of its entertainment value, while a smaller educational discussion may generate more sustained engagement. Comment counts may include disagreement, spam or reactions unrelated to the cultural message. Digital metrics should therefore be interpreted in relation to the objective and the quality of interaction.

A more meaningful evaluation could examine repeat participation, the substance of comments, questions asked, completion rates where available, participation in online discussions, requests for further information and movement

from online engagement to offline activities. Even these measures would not independently establish diplomatic influence, but they could provide a richer account of audience behaviour.

Digital engagement also creates risks. Content may be removed from its original context, misrepresented or circulated through hostile commentary. Audiences may encounter competing narratives about India at the same time. Cultural institutions should therefore understand digital communication as an environment of interpretation and contestation rather than a channel in which messages retain complete control over their meaning.

7.5 Recognising mixed and critical audience responses

A credible evaluation system should make room for mixed responses. A participant may admire Indian music but dislike the organisation of an event. Another may appreciate a scholarship opportunity while disagreeing with a government policy. A third may enjoy an exhibition but feel that it presented only a limited range of cultural experiences. These responses should not be forced into a simple positive or negative category.

Critical feedback can help institutions understand where programmes need improvement. It can also reveal that audiences are engaging with cultural material in a thoughtful way. However, criticism should be interpreted carefully. A negative response may relate to the event's logistics, the content, the institution, the country or a wider political issue. Researchers should identify the object and context of the response before concluding.

The ability to recognise disagreement is particularly important for public diplomacy. If institutions measure success only through favourable reactions, they may create incentives to avoid difficult topics or suppress critical perspectives. Such an approach could weaken the credibility of cultural exchange. A more mature approach recognises that mutual understanding does not require uniform agreement.

7.6 The problem of attribution

Attribution is one of the most difficult issues in evaluating cultural diplomacy. Suppose a survey finds that participants in a cultural programme report more favourable views of India than people who did not participate. It would be tempting to conclude that the programme improved perceptions. Yet people who already had favourable views may have been more likely to attend. Participants may also have travelled to India, studied Indian culture or formed personal relationships before joining the programme.

A cross-sectional survey cannot easily distinguish these possibilities. Researchers should collect information about prior attitudes and previous exposure. Where possible, they may use pre- and post-programme measures, comparison groups or longitudinal follow-up. Even then, causal claims should be proportionate to the design.

Cultural diplomacy also operates alongside news coverage, political events, economic relationships, educational opportunities and personal networks. A change in international opinion may reflect several influences at once. It may be more appropriate to describe a cultural programme as contributing to an outcome rather than causing it, unless the research design provides stronger evidence.

Attribution should also be distinguished from contribution. A programme may contribute to a relationship by creating an opportunity for contact, even if it cannot be shown to have caused a later diplomatic decision. This is still a meaningful outcome, but it should be described accurately.

8. Practical Implications for Indian Cultural Institutions

The framework has practical implications for the ICCR, the Ministry of Culture, Indian diplomatic missions, universities, cultural organisations and other institutions involved in international cultural exchange. It does not prescribe a single model for every programme. Instead, it suggests that evaluation should begin with a clear statement of the programme's objective and the outcomes that can reasonably be expected.

Institutions should distinguish between programmes designed primarily for visibility and those designed for learning, exchange or relationship development. A large public festival may reasonably prioritise reach and participation. A scholarship programme may place greater emphasis on educational experience, alumni engagement and continuing institutional connections. A collaborative artistic project may be evaluated through the quality of cooperation,

participant experience and the continuation of joint work.

Audience feedback should be collected in ways that are appropriate to the programme. Short feedback forms may be sufficient for a one-time event, while longer-term initiatives may require interviews, follow-up surveys and alumni tracking. Feedback should be analysed and used rather than collected only for reporting purposes. Institutions should communicate, where possible, how participant suggestions have influenced later programmes.

Follow-up arrangements can be strengthened through opt-in mailing lists, alumni networks, professional communities, collaborative opportunities and invitations to future activities. Such arrangements should respect privacy and avoid treating participants as permanent promotional contacts. Continued engagement should be voluntary and relevant to their interests.

Institutions may also benefit from developing a common set of evaluation principles. A shared framework could improve comparability while allowing programmes to use indicators suited to their objectives. It should include outputs, immediate outcomes, relational measures and longer-term indicators. It should also provide space for qualitative feedback and critical responses.

Reporting should distinguish clearly between what has been delivered, what participants have reported and what has been demonstrated through follow-up evidence. For example, an institution may state that an event reached a certain number of participants. It may separately report that survey respondents described increased familiarity with a cultural tradition. If a later study finds that some participants maintained collaborative relationships, that outcome can be reported with information about the method and timeframe. These claims are more credible when they are not merged into a general statement that the event increased national influence.

Institutional learning is another practical benefit. If evidence shows that interactive programmes are associated with stronger understanding, organisers may consider expanding workshops or discussion formats. If participants report that they want more information after events, institutions may develop follow-up resources. If digital engagement is high but continued participation is low, organisers may review whether online activities provide clear pathways to further involvement. Programme design should begin with the audience and the intended outcome. Organisers should consider what participants are likely to know, what interests they may bring and what practical barriers could affect participation. They should also consider whether the programme offers opportunities for questions, contribution and feedback.

A programme that presents several cultural forms may benefit from contextual explanation. A workshop may need appropriate materials and trained facilitators. A collaborative event may require time for participants to plan and work together. A digital programme may need accessible content, clear moderation and a way for participants to continue the conversation.

The evaluation method should match the programme. Counting attendance is appropriate for measuring reach, but it is not sufficient for assessing trust. A satisfaction form may provide immediate feedback, but it cannot establish relational continuity. A follow-up survey may be useful for examining continued engagement, while interviews can explain why participants did or did not remain involved.

8.1 Implications for institutional coordination

Because India's cultural diplomacy involves multiple actors, coordination can improve the quality of evaluation. Institutions may use different definitions of participation, engagement and success. A shared vocabulary can make it easier to compare programmes and identify gaps. Coordination does not require all institutions to pursue identical objectives. It requires them to be transparent about what they are trying to achieve and how they assess progress.

Partnerships among cultural institutions, universities, research centres and local organisations can also support better evidence collection. Researchers may help design surveys and interviews, while programme organisers can provide access to participants and records. Such collaboration should preserve research independence and ensure that participants can provide critical feedback without concern about consequences.

The framework proposed in this paper has limitations. First, international audiences are highly diverse. Findings from one country, institution or programme may not be generalisable to other settings. Cultural practices may have different meanings across societies, and the same programme may be received differently depending on local political and

social conditions.

Second, self-reported measures of knowledge, trust and attraction may be affected by social desirability, memory and individual interpretation. Participants may overstate their knowledge or provide favourable responses because they believe that is expected.

Researchers can reduce, but not eliminate, these problems through neutral wording, confidentiality and appropriate measurement design.

Third, access to international participants may be uneven. Institutions may be more able to contact participants who had positive experiences or who remain connected to their networks. People who disengaged may be harder to reach. This can produce selection bias. Recruitment strategies should make efforts to include participants with different experiences, including those who did not continue their engagement.

Fourth, causal attribution is difficult. Cultural diplomacy takes place alongside many other influences on international perceptions. Cross-sectional data can identify associations but cannot by themselves establish that a cultural initiative caused a change. Longitudinal designs, pre- and post-programme measurement and comparison groups may strengthen the evidence, although each design has practical and methodological limits.

Fifth, the proposed constructs may not operate identically across cultures and languages. Trust, reciprocity and empathy can have different meanings in different contexts. Measurement equivalence should be examined before comparing scores across countries. Researchers should also be alert to the possibility that a scale developed in one setting may not capture the full meaning of relationships in another.

Future research could compare different types of cultural initiatives, such as festivals, scholarships, yoga programmes, film festivals and collaborative arts projects. Such comparisons could examine whether certain programme characteristics are associated with particular forms of engagement. They should not assume that one type of programme is universally more effective. The value of an initiative depends on its objectives, audience and context.

Comparative studies across regions could explore how local media environments, historical relationships and political conditions shape audience interpretation. Research could also examine the role of diaspora communities as cultural intermediaries, while recognising their internal diversity and independent agency.

Digital cultural diplomacy offers another important area for future research. Studies could examine how online exposure relates to offline participation, how audiences interact with cultural content over time and whether digital communities develop relationships with institutions or creators. Researchers should distinguish between algorithmic reach, active engagement and sustained connection.

Longitudinal research is especially important. A survey conducted immediately after an event may capture satisfaction and short-term interest, but it cannot establish whether participants remain engaged six months or a year later. Follow-up studies could examine whether participants attend further programmes, maintain contact, pursue education or collaborate professionally. Such research would provide stronger evidence about continuity.

Future work could also examine the relationship between cultural diplomacy and policy attitudes, but this should be done carefully. Researchers would need to define the policy outcome, identify relevant comparison conditions and consider alternative explanations. It may be more realistic to investigate whether cultural engagement contributes to familiarity, trust or willingness to communicate than to assume that it changes a government's policy position.

9. Conclusion

India possesses a wide range of cultural resources that create opportunities for international engagement. Yoga, cinema, music, dance, literature, cuisine, festivals, languages, heritage and traditional knowledge systems have helped introduce Indian culture to audiences across different parts of the world. Cultural institutions, diplomatic missions, universities, artists, diaspora communities and digital platforms contribute to this presence in different ways.

Yet the international visibility of Indian culture should not be confused with the achievement of diplomatic influence. The number of cultural events organised, participants reached, countries covered or digital interactions generated can demonstrate the scale of activity. These indicators cannot independently explain what audiences understood, how they interpreted their experiences, whether they trusted the institutions involved or whether relationships continued after the

original encounter.

The central argument of this paper is that cultural diplomacy should be evaluated through a more complete understanding of audience experience and relationship development. Cultural visibility creates an opportunity for engagement, but the quality of that engagement depends on context, interaction, institutional conduct and the meanings audiences attach to cultural experiences. Understanding, attraction, trust, reciprocity, empathy and continuity are related dimensions, but they should be measured and interpreted separately.

The proposed framework offers a way to investigate these dimensions through institutional document analysis, international audience surveys and semi-structured interviews. It recognises the value of quantitative measures while also acknowledging that personal experiences and audience interpretations require qualitative attention. It further recognises that cultural diplomacy operates within a complex international environment in which political developments, media representations, prior attitudes and personal relationships influence perceptions.

For Indian cultural institutions, the practical implication is not to abandon measures of reach. Rather, it is to place reach within a wider evaluation structure. Institutions should identify the objective of each programme, record its outputs, examine audience responses and consider whether further engagement occurs. They should create opportunities for participants to contribute, respond to feedback and maintain relationships where this is appropriate to the programme.

The wider theoretical implication is that soft power should not be inferred from cultural popularity alone. Attraction may create opportunities for influence, but influence requires evidence. A positive cultural experience may be meaningful even when it does not produce a measurable policy outcome. A continuing educational or artistic relationship may be valuable even when its contribution to national reputation cannot be quantified. These outcomes should be recognised on their own terms rather than exaggerated into claims that the evidence cannot support.

Ultimately, the value of India's cultural diplomacy should not be judged only by how widely Indian culture travels, but also by the quality of the connections that follow. Visibility may open the door to international engagement. Mutual respect, trust and reciprocity may help keep that door open. Whether those relationships contribute to wider diplomatic objectives is a question that requires careful research, credible evidence and a willingness to acknowledge complex or critical audience responses.

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