

India's Soft Power in Kazakhstan: Bollywood, Cultural Memory, and the Reconfiguration of Cinematic Diplomacy

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between Soviet-era cultural memory of Popular Indian cinema in Kazakhstan and its possible relevance to contemporary cultural attraction. It investigates the conditions under which accumulated cultural memory may become a resource for renewed appeal and engagement, rather than treating nostalgia or familiarity as evidence of contemporary soft power. Drawing on soft power theory (Nye, 2004), cultural diplomacy, collective memory, and cultural capital, the study combines historical analysis of Soviet-era film circulation with interpretivist qualitative analysis of field observations collected during a two-year stay in Astana (2024–2026). Three age groups, together with observations and informal conversations in taxis, karaoke venues, universities, public spaces, and family gatherings, informed the thematic analysis.

The findings indicate that Indian cinema retains considerable affective and intergenerational significance among older participants, while younger participants reported fewer opportunities to encounter Indian cinema within their contemporary media environment. The evidence therefore distinguishes cultural memory from contemporary soft power. Remembered familiarity may constitute a potential cultural resource, but its relevance to contemporary soft power depends on renewed visibility, accessibility, engagement, and positive audience response. The paper does not claim a complete transition from cultural memory to soft power but identifies a possible pathway toward contemporary cultural attraction.

Using Kazakhstan as a bounded case, the study offers analytical rather than statistical generalization. It concludes with policy implications concerning intergenerational participation, linguistic localization, digital accessibility, and renewed cultural linkages.

Keywords: Soft power, Bollywood, Kazakhstan, cultural diplomacy, Central Asia, generational memory

INTRODUCTION: THE FADING ECHO OF JIMMY JIMMY

During fieldwork in Astana, an informal taxi conversation provided one illustration of the persistence of memories of Indian cinema among some older residents. The driver instantly connected India with Mithun Chakraborty after discovering that the researcher was from India, and he started humming "Jimmy Jimmy Aaja Aaja." Similar allusions to Indian movies were made by employees of restaurants, taxis, shops, and universities, among other commonplace contexts. On the other hand, some younger people were more likely to recognize Turkish dramas and Korean popular culture than Raj Kapoor. These divergent findings offered a preliminary empirical foundation for investigating the distinction between inherited cultural memory and modern media consumption.

The central question is therefore: under what conditions does historically accumulated familiarity with Indian cinema remain cultural memory, and under what conditions, if any, can that familiarity contribute to contemporary cultural attraction and the potential exercise of soft power in a digitally mediated media environment?

Nye (2004) posits that soft power functions through narrative resonance, legitimacy, and appeal. Using cinema as a transnational cultural medium, states can spread identities, values, and emotional frameworks across national borders (Gienow-Hecht, 2010). The film industry in India has always been one of the country's most successful ways to use soft power (Thussu, 2007). During the Cold War, the Soviet Union brought in more than 200 Indian films, which was a lot more than the number of American films that were allowed to be shown in public (Salmi, 1993). These movies were dubbed into Russian and widely shown in Soviet Kazakhstan, which made Bollywood a permanent part of public life.

Kazakhstan's media environment has changed a lot in the thirty years since it became independent. Recent numbers show that 20.4% of young Kazakhs watch South Korean shows and 24.3% watch Turkish shows, but only 7.1% watch Indian movies (Youth and Video Content, 2025). Western streaming services, Korean dramas, and Turkish serials are currently the most popular things for young people to watch. Indian film used to be a big part of culture, but now it seems to be more of a "symbolic residue" than an actual part of culture.

The analysis focuses on four related questions: (1) how Soviet-era circulation embedded Indian cinema in cultural life in Kazakhstan; (2) how that historical familiarity persists in everyday memory and interaction; (3) how changing media environments affect younger audiences' exposure to Indian cinema; and (4) what these changes imply for India's cultural diplomacy.

Kazakhstan's distinctive historical experience and rapidly changing media environment make it a useful bounded case for examining the relationship between inherited cultural memory and contemporary cultural attraction. In the study, Kazakhstan is not a representative of the entire Central Asia. Instead, the Astana evidence is used to investigate a particular mechanism: how cultural familiarity created under one media regime may persist after the institutions that supported it have changed.

At the same time, the example of modern-day Kazakhstan is an example of more significant changes in the media environment in which cultural diplomacy operates. Social media, digital streaming services and recommendation systems have changed the way people discover and consume culture (Appadurai, 1996; Tomlinson, 1999). Younger viewers are exposed to Indian movies, Korean dramas, Turkish television, Hollywood movies, Japanese animation and locally produced entertainment. Therefore, the question is not whether Bollywood has dropped, but whether the historically accumulated familiarity can be replicated as modern involvement under the changing conditions of cultural circulation.

The Kazakhstan case therefore provides only a limited framework to discuss the duration of cultural familiarity and its possible role as a factor in the contemporary appeal of culture. The paper interrogates cultural attractiveness as a contingent outcome in search of new prospects for visibility, access, participation and audience response, rather than a permanent national asset. Any implications outside Astana and Kazakhstan are not presented as proven regional findings, but as hypotheses for comparative study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOFT POWER, CULTURAL MEMORY, AND GENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION

Nye (2004, 2008) defines soft power as the ability to attain desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or reward. Though a cultural resource may not necessarily demonstrate the use of soft power, culture is one possible source of appeal. There are similarities between cultural diplomacy and soft power, but it is necessary to distinguish between the two: soft power is an influence or attraction capacity, while cultural diplomacy is coordinated cultural engagement. This distinction is relevant to the current study because memories of Raj Kapoor, Hindi music, or older movies may show cultural familiarity without necessarily showing contemporary political influence.

The historical background for this distinction is the distribution of Cold War movies. Studies on cinematic rivalry in the Cold War (Shaw & Youngblood, 2014) show that film distribution was strongly connected with government institutions, ideological issues and battles for

cultural power. The conditions of circulation of Indian films in the Soviet Union were different from those of Hollywood imports. Their touching stories, in addition to being appropriate to the political and cultural environment in which they were distributed, had the potential to connect with Soviet viewers. The current study extends prior research by investigating what happens when the institutional conditions that consistently reproduced such exposure disappear.

Collective memory may explain the persistence of cultural familiarity in the wake of the decline of the institutions that created it. While Erll (2011) focuses on the role of media and cultural practices in the circulation of memories, Halbwachs (1992) emphasizes the social frameworks that anchor memories. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital also contributes to the understanding of why knowledge of a particular movie, song or celebrity might become socially valuable. These points of view are the foundation of the analysis, but are not considered equal to soft power. The article defines cultural capital as the social value of familiarity, cultural attraction as affective or positive orientation, collective memory as an analytical mechanism, and soft power as the more difficult idea that needs proof of attraction contributing to influence.

REIMAGINING SOFT POWER IN THE PLATFORM AGE

The study adopts a more targeted analytical framework to investigate the connection between cultural memory and modern cultural appeal under platform-mediated circumstances, even if Nye's framework still serves as the theoretical basis. Algorithms are not considered a novel type of soft power. Rather, algorithmic visibility, platform access, localization, and participatory networks are regarded as enabling variables that influence whether or not audiences come across, revisit, engage with, or debate cultural content. These conditions may affect the opportunity for attraction, but they do not themselves demonstrate attraction or influence.

Such a distinction is quite relevant in the case of Kazakhstan. The institutions kept showing the Bollywood films to the Soviet-era audiences again and again. The Indian cinema was always on display thanks to a strong ecosystem of theatres, television shows and professionally dubbed releases. Conversely, today's audiences consume cultural products through personalized digital feeds, shaped by algorithmic recommendation systems, platform economics, and their own viewing histories. In such a setting, even products of cultural importance could become marginal if they do not establish consistent digital circulation.

The conditions under which cultural diplomacy can maintain exposure and generate prospects for attraction are thus altered by the shift from institutional distribution to platform-mediated visibility. The claim is that accessibility and exposure increasingly determine whether cultural resources can reach audiences, rather than that technology infrastructure in and of itself creates soft power. Comparative examples from Turkey and South Korea are merely used to show potential audience engagement, localization, and circulation mechanisms; they are not seen as proof that these nations have more soft power in Kazakhstan.

The study separates visibility from audience appraisal instead than assuming that reduced modern consumption indicates declining cultural attractiveness. While attraction is evaluated more carefully using reported interest, positive affect, curiosity, and ongoing engagement with the accessible field information, exposure is considered an enabling condition for attraction. The study does not claim to show direct modern soft-power effects because it does not examine shifts in political attitudes or policy preferences. Its contribution is to pinpoint the observable intermediary circumstances that allow cultural memory to become a resource for modern appeal.

COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND THE CHALLENGE OF INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION

Collective memory explains why older generations continue to have strong emotional reactions to Indian cinema even if regular consumption declines. Memory is socially

constructed and perpetuated through communication, institutions, rituals and repetitive activities (Halbwachs, 1992; Erll, 2011). The family conversations, taxi memories, and karaoke performances seen in the research are thus understood as evidence of remembered cultural familiarity. Nor are they always proof of soft power. Analytically, they demonstrate the continued social accessibility of cultural memory even as the institutional infrastructure that once supported Indian cinema has crumbled.

The empirical data points to a common repertory of cultural references: stories are told in social contexts, songs are sung and specific films and celebrities are remembered. These actions show that for some people, Indian cinema is still a cultural touchstone. The key analytical question is what function these memories serve now. They may also help create a pathway from recollection to attraction, sparking interest in India, prompting a second look, conversation or engagement. When confined to nostalgia, they are more properly described as cultural memory or nostalgia, rather than as modern soft power.

Thus, intergenerational transmission is viewed as a mechanism rather than an assumption. For younger viewers to inherit cultural memory, families, organizations, media outlets, or peer networks must provide regular occasions for engagement. Fieldwork suggests that this transmission is less effective in places where it is difficult to find or access modern Indian content in languages salient to the local community. Therefore, the case can sustain a more reserved claim that cultural memory can be a source of potential attraction, but the transformation into modern soft power requires a revitalized mediation, accessibility and involvement.

METHODOLOGY

The study uses an interpretivist qualitative design combining (a) historical analysis of Soviet-era Indian cinema circulation and (b) ethnographic observation in Astana conducted during a two-year residence (2024–2026). The empirical material comprises 45 informal taxi conversations, 8 karaoke observations, everyday interactions involving approximately 200 university students, 30 market/public-space encounters, and 6 family gatherings. These figures describe the number of observed encounters or settings, not a probability sample; their recurrence across contexts was used to identify qualitative patterns rather than to make statistical claims. The analysis compares three age cohorts—45 and older, 30–45, and 18–30—as analytical categories reflecting different media socialization experiences rather than as statistically representative generations. The personal accounts are offered as paraphrased reconstructions from field notes rather than verbatim interview transcripts because the talks were casual and not official interviews; identifying details have been changed or removed to protect privacy.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND ANALYTICAL APPROACH

The analytical process was arranged in a sequential manner, from observation to interpretation. Field notes were initially examined for references to Indian cinema, the context of the reference and the participants' responses to the reference. Second, recurrent content was coded under provisional categories including cultural recall, emotive reaction, family transmission, performative memory, accessibility/language obstacles, modern media preference, and references to India. Third, the categories were investigated within several contexts such as markets, taxis, karaoke parlors, universities, and family reunions, and across the three main age groups. Fourth, the interpretation of the thematic findings was based on the literature on soft power and cultural diplomacy and historical data on Soviet distribution. The analytical chain that emerged was observations → coding categories → cross-context and generational comparison → interpretation of transmission processes → findings on the conditions under which cultural memory may or may not contribute to modern appeal. The frequency of anecdotes is not used in this study as a quantitative index of influence.

The study uses available field data to discuss how this inherited familiarity was expressed in everyday interaction. Historical material was used to reconstruct the institutional context in which Indian cinema was disseminated in the Soviet period. The two types of information

were not considered to be similar types of evidence. Ethnographic observations give us insights into contemporary memory and media practices, while historical sources inform us about the context of dissemination. This divergence makes the inference from past institutional embedding to contemporary cultural memory more compelling without assuming that the former necessarily produced current soft power.

RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY AND REFLEXIVITY

The author was in a specific insider-outsider position as an Indian researcher living in Kazakhstan at the time of his field work. As the participants associated the researcher with Bollywood and India in an automatic fashion, national identity often led to impromptu exchanges. Conversations in cabs, restaurants, campuses, marketplaces, and family gatherings arose naturally in everyday interaction and were subsequently documented in field notes when relevant to the research question. These casual conversations provided insights into the lasting influence Bollywood has had on pop culture.

At the same time, the identity of the researcher required ongoing reflexivity. The participants might have said good things about India since they knew the researcher was Indian. To reduce this risk, observations were gathered over a two-year period across a range of social settings and demographic groups. The repetition of similar stories across different vocations, ages and social backgrounds increased the certainty that the observations were indicative of larger cultural trends rather than unique individual perspectives.

DATA INTERPRETATION AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

Field-note observations were analyzed through a thematic procedure that moved from repeated reading and descriptive coding to broader thematic categories and comparison across settings and age cohorts. The field notes were scrutinized several times to identify common themes, emotional expressions, and patterns of cultural recall. The coding focused on cultural recall, affective attachment, intergenerational transmission, contemporary media consumption, visibility/accessibility, cultural curiosity, and present engagement with Indian cinema. We did not count individual stories as separate cases, but took them as evidence of common cultural processes at work in many social contexts.

Several steps were taken to increase the reliability of the results. First, the extended (2-year) participation reduced the probability that the observations were due to transient events or special circumstances. Triangulation was achieved by comparing field-note themes with the historical record of Soviet cinema circulation and relevant scholarship on India's cultural diplomacy. Finally, to protect participant privacy and the authenticity of the ethnographic stories, identifiable information has been altered and pseudonyms have been used throughout the text.

ETHICAL COMPLIANCE AND USE OF INFORMAL FIELD CONVERSATIONS

A large part of the empirical material for this study is based on naturally occurring informal conversation and everyday interaction that emerged during the author's work and residence in Kazakhstan. These were informal interviews; there was no predetermined interview protocol, no participants were recruited for interviews and the conversations were not systematically recorded for sound. Relevant interactions were then recorded in field notes and included here as contextual qualitative material.

Formal informed consent to later use of these everyday conversations as research data was not obtained. Accordingly, the material is not presented as a formal interview dataset or a representative sample. The stories are paraphrased reconstructions from field notes, with identifying details deleted or changed as needed. They serve as illustrations of recurring cultural themes and interpretive patterns rather than as attributing sensitive views to identifiable individuals.

In addition, the author distinguishes informal conversational material from any audio-visual material that has to be separately permissioned for academic use. The study does not claim

that informal conversations are evidence of population-level attitudes or direct support for Indian foreign policy.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

In this work we purposely favor analytical depth over statistical generalization. While the findings offer insights into media consumption and cultural memory, they are primarily based on experiences in Astana and should not be treated as representative of Kazakhstan as a whole. Further, the article overlooks other important aspects of India's soft power such as higher education, information technology, yoga, Ayurveda and economic cooperation and focuses only on Bollywood. But these limitations also offer openings for future comparative studies using mixed-methods approaches, combining survey-based audience analysis with anthropological observation, to investigate India's broader cultural diplomacy in Central Asia.

SOVIET FOUNDATIONS: THE STRUCTURAL EMBEDDING OF BOLLYWOOD

Between 1954 and 1991, about 210 Indian movies were shown in the Soviet Union (The Indian Express, 2023). This is a lot more than what Hollywood could show. Movies like *Awaara* (1951), *Seeta Aur Geeta* (1972), and *Disco Dancer* (1982) did very well. The Times of India (2025) says that *Disco Dancer*, which starred Mithun Chakraborty, sold more than 60 million tickets in the USSR. People began to affectionately call Raj Kapoor "the Indian Charlie Chaplin."

Indian films were institutionally embedded in Soviet Kazakhstan through professional Russian dubbing, primetime television broadcasts, state-sponsored movie screenings, and cultural framing that contextualized India's anti-colonial struggle and progressive politics (Kakimzhanov et al., 2023). This constant exposure made Bollywood a part of everyday life instead of just a way to see new and interesting things from other countries. This is what is meant by "institutionally embedded cultural familiarity."

A retired teacher in her late sixties, referred to here as Gulmira, recalled that Indian films had been especially meaningful during her youth. She described them primarily in terms of emotion, recalling themes of love, anger, happiness, and revenge. The account suggests that Indian cinema was remembered not simply as foreign entertainment but as part of a broader emotional repertoire associated with the Soviet period.

There are many narrative elements that can explain this resonance: romantic idealism (love that crosses class lines), class struggle (poor heroes against rich villains that echoed socialist stories), family values (respect for parents, loyalty to siblings, and community cohesion), musical expression (song-and-dance numbers that let people escape the harsh realities of everyday Soviet life), visual spectacle (exotic locations that stood out from Soviet aesthetics), and moral clarity (good against evil that was in line with Soviet moral education).

LIVING CULTURAL MEMORY: BOLLYWOOD IN CONTEMPORARY KAZAKHSTAN

TAXI CONFESSIONS: THE ORAL ARCHIVE OF NOSTALGIA

Taxi encounters in Astana provided recurring examples of cultural recall. Middle-aged drivers often associated India with Mithun Chakraborty, Raj Kapoor, Rekha, Hema Malini, or Aishwarya Rai after learning of the researcher's Indian background. These references were unsolicited and appeared across multiple encounters, making taxi conversations a useful setting for observing the persistence of cinematic memory.

Ruslan, 52, taxi driver (May 2024): "Disco Dancer!" I was 17 when I saw it. I went to the movies five times. Five times! My friends and I tried to dance like Mithun. We got silver shirts—well, we made them out of aluminum foil! He shook his head and laughed. "We thought we looked just like him." My mom was really mad and said we looked like idiots. But we didn't mind. Mithun was... how do you say... кумир... an idol.

Nurlan, 58, a taxi driver, said in July 2024, "Raj Kapoor—now that was a real artist." *Awaara*... my dad took me to see it when I was a kid. I still remember the song and how he looked at the woman. I didn't understand everything they said, but I did understand love. I named my

daughter Nargis after the actress. She is now 32 years old and a doctor. She doesn't even know who Nargis was! His voice was both proud and sad.

There were a few patterns in these conversations: spontaneous emotional recall, a focus on specific movies/stars (Disco Dancer and Mithun were the most popular among men aged 45–60), sensory memory persistence (people still remember visual details decades later), nostalgic tonality (people felt both happy and sad about remembering and losing cultural things), and generational lament (people kept saying that younger people don't know these movies).

KARAOKE BARS: PERFORMATIVE MEMORY AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Karaoke halls in Astana had a "Hindi Songs" category in their digital databases, a sign of some institutional traces of the earlier circulation. In eight visits to three places, several patterns emerged, including the collective selection of familiar songs and the enthusiastic participation of older patrons.

"Especially striking was the emotional intensity of these performances. In one observation, an older participant was visibly moved singing a song linked to childhood and a deceased spouse. The episode is an example of how performance can re-stimulate embodied and autobiographical memory, but does not prove contemporary soft power.

The karaoke performance serves as an embodied reenactment that triggers emotional and physical memory in addition to cognitive recall, a phenomenon known as performative memory in anthropology. These people were momentarily living out their younger selves, not just reminiscing about Bollywood.

"THE TWIN SISTERS MOVIE": NARRATIVE PRECISION ACROSS GENERATIONS

Participants in the older cohort frequently recalled *Seeta Aur Geeta* (1972), particularly its twin-sister plot and themes of justice, agency, and vulnerability. The detailed retention of plot points decades after viewing indicates the depth of cultural memory. It is not, however, treated as a direct index of contemporary Indian influence.

A lady in her sixties at a family gathering told the plot of *Seeta Aur Geeta* in detail and related it to her childhood viewings. She told her mother about the experience, equating it to modern serial viewing. The account is presented by paraphrasing field note. It demonstrates how Indian film could be integrated into the narrative repertoire and memory of a family, but also suggests that contemporary family viewing may have moved on to other media products.

This example illustrates the difference between transmission and persistence. A film can be emotionally and cognitively accessible to the person who saw it many times without it being passed on to a younger family member. The analytical conclusion reached is that social reproduction is a necessary condition for cultural memory to be turned into a living cultural practice across cohorts.

"WHY DO YOU DANCE AROUND TREES?": CULTURAL CURIOSITY AS RECOGNITION

Questions about why Indian films depict characters dancing around trees were another recurring form of cultural recognition. Such questions are analytically relevant because they indicate familiarity with a recognizable feature of Bollywood's visual grammar and, in some cases, curiosity about the cultural practices represented on screen.

Madina, 29, runs a salon (April 2025): When she found out I was from India, Madina laughed and asked, "Can I ask you a question?" Why do people in Indian movies always dance around trees? Or in fields with colorful clothes? Is this real? Do people in India really do this?

The question came up in more than one social context and it was more in the nature of curiosity than criticism. Some of the participants spontaneously imitated the dance movements associated with the songs when Bollywood songs were played. Such responses demonstrate recognition and playful engagement, but the available observations do not allow us to determine whether this translated into a broader positive orientation toward India.

The fact that the question about dancing around trees is repeated suggests that a particular cinematic convention had become a recognizable sign of Bollywood. So, it can be seen as an instance of cultural recognition and curiosity. Such recognition may provide a possible intermediate link between cultural familiarity and attraction, but should not be treated as evidence of soft-power influence without further evidence of sustained engagement or changed attitudes.

THE GREAT GENERATIONAL DIVIDE: WHY YOUTH DON'T KNOW RAJ KAPOOR

THE DIGITAL DISRUPTION: FROM CINEMA HALLS TO ALGORITHM-DRIVEN FEEDS

Beriek, a 23-year-old student at Nazarbayev University, said in March 2025, "Indian movies?" Sorry, I don't watch those. I think I've seen a few videos on YouTube and Instagram. But I mostly watch Korean dramas. The stories are more modern, and the production value is higher. They are about technology, relationships, and young people, and they have Kazakh and Russian subtitles. He loves them. We watch Netflix as a group.

During the Soviet era, cultural gatekeeping was political and centralized. The government decided which movies the public could see. The market and algorithms are what drive gatekeeping in modern Kazakhstan. Streaming services like Netflix, YouTube, and local services use recommendation algorithms that put content that gets a lot of watch time, is easy to understand, and costs a lot of money to make at the top of the list.

South Korean content creators have mastered this ecosystem. Korean Cultural Centers hold fan events and language classes to support Korean dramas. They are also strategically licensed to major streaming platforms with prominent placement, professionally subtitled in multiple languages, including Kazakh and Russian, and structured with binge-friendly episode lengths. Partnerships with social media influencers also help them get the word out. Similar measures have not been taken by India. Outside of major metropolitan markets, professional Kazakh or Russian subtitles are rarely available for modern Bollywood films. These differences are consistent with greater contemporary visibility of Korean content, although the present study does not have sufficient platform-level data to quantify relative algorithmic exposure.

LINGUISTIC BARRIERS AND NARRATIVE EVOLUTION

English instructor Maria, 30, November 2025: "I think I made an attempt to see an Indian movie maybe two years ago. It was something old that my mother suggested. However, neither Kazakh nor Russian subtitles were included. Although my mother doesn't speak English well, I was able to locate some subtitles in English. After twenty minutes, we gave up. She wanted to share something from her childhood with me, but we weren't even able to properly access it, which is frustrating."

State studios professionally dubbed Indian films throughout the Soviet era. The disintegration of this infrastructure occurred after independence. In the meantime, Korean dramas have professional Russian and increasingly Kazakh subtitles, while Turkish shows are entirely dubbed into Russian with excellent production quality (Yilmaz, 2024).

Many coworkers over 45 said, "Bollywood has seen significant shift. Awaara, Disco Dancer, and Seeta Aur Geeta were among the successful Soviet films that portrayed global tales. Rich man vs poor man. Evil versus good. However, the Indian diaspora—non-resident Indians in the United States, Britain, Australia, and the United Arab Emirates—is the aim of modern Bollywood. Rich families, international trips, and contemporary metropolitan issues that seem foreign to Kazakhs are all topics covered in the stories. It doesn't feel... pleasant anymore. Bollywood movies from the Soviet era focused a lot on moral purity and class struggle, which were themes that everyone could relate to. Modern Bollywood often has stories about Westernized beauty standards, people from the diaspora who are trying to find their identity, and rich city heroes. Bollywood's successful globalization has made it less appealing in places where its previous simplicity created strong emotional ties.

THE K-DRAMA AND TURKISH SERIAL DOMINANCE

Recent research shows that Kazakh youth watch a lot of different things. For example, 45.1% of them regularly watch Russian content, 20.4% watch South Korean content, 24.3% watch Turkish series, and only 7.1% watch Indian films (Youth and Video Content, 2025).

The given youth-content data demonstrate that the larger part of the surveyed youth population reported watching Turkish, South Korean and Russian films as opposed to Indian ones (Ranking.kz, 2025). These data are not a measure of soft power as they are not directly comparable with ethnographic observations, but they do provide contextual evidence of a competitive media environment. They support a deeper argument that Indian cinema is in fierce competition for the attention of younger viewers.

Turkey provides a useful benchmark to explore the nexus of television exports and cultural diplomacy. In recent studies, the transnational cultural reach of Turkish TV series, the commercial distribution, the exposure of the celebrities and the institutional support have been highlighted (Karslı & Yazgan, 2025; Gultekin, 2026). The current research builds upon this literature to propose mechanisms of regular circulation, localization, and cultural institutionalization rather than claiming an absolute causal superiority over India.

We also see similar connections between cultural production, circulation on the platform, music and fan cultures, and institutional participation in South Korean content. Cultural, educational and people-to-people institutions are interrelated. This is found in the research on South Korea's soft-power diplomacy in Central Asia (Abdurahmonov, 2026). In the case of Kazakhstan these examples give analytical assistance, as they show that modern cultural influence is created not only by specific media pieces but also by ecosystems.

India has already established institutional mechanisms for cultural diplomacy in Kazakhstan through the ICCR and the Swami Vivekananda Cultural Center. These mechanisms include language, art, yoga, education and cultural activities (Kakimzhanov et al., 2023; Meena, 2026). Thus, the problem identified in this study could be the failure to align present institutional efforts with the media platforms that the younger generation utilizes to derive pleasure, rather than the absence of Indian cultural diplomacy. This is a stronger argument than saying India has similar cultural infrastructure.

ANALYSIS: FROM EMBEDDED CULTURE TO SYMBOLIC RESIDUE

The change in Bollywood's status in Kazakhstan shows a big change in how soft power works, from being built into institutions to being based on algorithms. Table 1 shows how this change happened:

Table 1: Soft Power Transformation in Kazakhstan

Condition	Soviet-era circulation	Contemporary circulation
Cultural gatekeeping	Political/institutional	Platform/market-mediated
Distribution	State-supported and relatively predictable	Fragmented; visibility varies by platform and access
Consumption	Collective (cinema halls, family television)	More individualized (smartphones, streaming)
Competition	More limited range of foreign content	Intense competition among global and local content
Conditions for sustained exposure	Institutional repetition, dubbing, broadcast access	Platform availability, localization, discoverability, participation

The difference between the two media environments is more accurately understood as a change in the conditions of cultural circulation than as a direct transformation of soft power. In the Soviet era, the institutional distribution provided repeated and fairly predictable opportunities for exposure. In the present climate, visibility is more fragmented and

dependent on platform availability, localization, audience practice and competition. The comparison thus accounts for why a culturally familiar resource may survive in memory but diminish as a central resource in everyday media consumption.

Our findings suggest that intergenerational reproduction of cultural familiarity relies on social transmission, institutional reinforcement, family communication and ongoing media presence. Where these mechanisms are weakened older generations may have strong memories but these do not form part of the active cultural repertoire of younger audiences. This pattern suggests a weakening of the conditions through which historical familiarity could be replicated as contemporary cultural engagement rather than being evidence of declining soft power in and of itself.

Bollywood itself has changed in ways that have unwittingly diminished its attraction among Central Asians. Bollywood has changed from films from the 1970s to 1980s that featured working-class heroes, rural characters, and themes of class conflict and family honor to films featuring upper-middle-class professionals, diaspora characters, and themes of identity, relationships, and the intricacies of current life. Although this development signifies creative and commercial maturity, it also distances spectators from those who were accustomed to classic narrative forms.

Older Kazakhs fell in love with Raj Kapoor's *Awaara*—a barefoot tramp seeking justice. Contemporary Bollywood protagonists wear designer clothes and vacation in Switzerland. The emotional vocabulary has changed.

CULTURAL MEMORY AS A POTENTIAL RESOURCE FOR CONTEMPORARY ATTRACTION

The findings are consistent with a dynamic model of cultural influence, but with an important caveat. Historical cultural success may leave a reserve of familiarity, emotional association and symbolic recognizability. Such a reserve is not soft power, as such. It may be relevant to contemporary attraction if audiences encounter the cultural resource again, can access it in meaningful forms, engage with it socially and develop a positive orientation toward it. The evidence in this study demonstrates the first half of this process, enduring memory and certain types of contemporary recognition, more clearly than the final result of influence.

The proposed pathway is thus centrally concerned with the structures and practices which render cultural objects available and socially meaningful. In the Soviet period, repeated exposure was given through state-sponsored distribution, professional dubbing, television and theaters. In the world today, discovery might be via streaming services, recommendation engines, social media, peer groups, or localized subtitles. The analytical point is that these changing infrastructures shape opportunities for cultural encounter, rather than being direct evidence of soft power.

The results suggest a problem with visibility and accessibility, but they do not provide evidence that visibility is the only or main explanation for lower engagement among younger participants. Language, access to the platform, peer culture, competition, relevance to the narrative, and changing tastes may also be factors. Digital exposure is therefore considered an enabling condition in a larger pathway from cultural memory to contemporary engagement, and not a full explanation of soft power.

The conceptual distinction elaborated here is between two analytic conditions of cultural influence. We call this 'memory-based influence': the stock of affective familiarity built up through past repeated exposure to cultural products. The contemporary practices that make cultural objects discoverable, accessible, discussable and participatory within digital and social networks they are called "networked influence". They are not alternative definitions or versions of Nye's soft power but rather analytical heuristics. The empirical question is whether networked conditions can revive inherited familiarity as present engagement and attraction.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA'S CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

The Kazakhstan experience shows that successful cultural diplomacy must include a long-range plan that goes beyond the international distribution of films. Bollywood remains India's most recognizable cultural export, but its diplomatic potential is in complementing investments in language accessibility, internet platforms, educational partnerships, cultural institutions, and audience engagement. The successful integration of these components creates self-reinforcing ecosystems in which cultural goods survive across generations.

For India's cultural diplomacy, the Kazakhstan evidence suggests that rebuilding the conditions for cultural encounter may be more important than simply increasing the volume of film exports. Historical familiarity can provide an entry point, but contemporary cultural engagement requires accessible content, relevant formats, institutional support, and opportunities for audience participation. The objective should therefore be cultural re-engagement rather than an assumption that past popularity automatically translates into present influence.

PERSONAL NARRATIVES: THE HUMAN DIMENSION OF CULTURAL LOSS

THE GRANDMOTHER-GRANDDAUGHTER DISCONNECT

At a family gathering in December 2025, Bakhyt, an older participant, remembered Bobby as a favorite Bollywood film, while her 19-year-old granddaughter, Alwa, said she had never seen the film and mostly watched Korean dramas. The account also indicated that the older participant had difficulty finding Bobby with Kazakh subtitles for her granddaughter. The episode, rendered as a paraphrase of a field-note observation, foregrounds a disjuncture between the durability of cultural memory and the pragmatic conditions of intergenerational transmission.

This episode is analytically interesting because the older participant had a strong emotional investment in the film, whereas the younger participant had no accessible route into that cultural repertoire. This is not a demonstration of attraction per se in decline, but rather a demonstration of the ways limited accessibility disrupts the transmission of cultural familiarity and reduces opportunities for renewed engagement.

In the dialogue we see a break in cultural transmission: the senior generation has an extensive repertoire of remembered cultural references but the younger generation may have no accessible channels through which those references can become contemporary media experiences. The problem is better understood as a decline in the social and technological infrastructure supporting intergenerational transmission rather than evidence that younger audiences are eschewing Indian culture.

This example also demonstrates the difference between cultural memory and current cultural activity. An experience can have tremendous emotional meaning for a generation and cannot be repeated for another. The soft power question is whether inherited familiarity is subsequently activated through contemporary exposure and engagement. At present there is more evidence for the former than the latter.

NAMING CHILDREN AFTER STARS AND INDIRA GANDHI

References to children being named after Indian film stars, including names such as Indra, Aishwarya, and Mithun, appear in the field material. Such examples suggest the depth of cultural familiarity associated with Indian cinema among some members of older cohorts. They are interpreted as evidence of historical cultural embeddedness rather than as contemporary measures of Indian soft power.

THE KARAOKE TEARS: MEMORY AS MOURNING

At a karaoke venue, an older participant referred to here as Dinara associated "Jimmy Jimmy Aaja Aaja" with a significant period of her life and with the memory of her late husband. The observation illustrates how Indian popular music could become embedded in personal and

social memory. Its emotional intensity demonstrates the durability of cultural memory, but does not by itself establish contemporary diplomatic influence.

The karaoke episode indicates that cultural products can become intertwined with personal relationships, life events, and collective memories. Such affective attachment may provide a potential basis for renewed cultural interest if the cultural material remains accessible and can be encountered by subsequent audiences. In the absence of evidence that these memories produce present attitudes or behaviours toward India, however, they are more appropriately classified as cultural memory than as contemporary soft power.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: TOWARD STRATEGIC CULTURAL RE-ENGAGEMENT

India's reliance on Soviet-era familiarity alone is unlikely to renew contemporary cultural influence in Kazakhstan. The policy implications should therefore be framed as hypotheses for cultural re-engagement rather than as guaranteed routes to soft power. The evidence suggests that strategies could use historical familiarity as an entry point while simultaneously improving visibility, language accessibility, intergenerational engagement, and opportunities for participation. The proposed measures below should be evaluated through audience research and platform-level indicators before claims about soft-power effects are made.

DIGITAL VISIBILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

Actions:

- Strategic platform partnerships with Netflix, Amazon Prime, and local services (ivi.ru, START, Kinopoisk, Megogo) for Central Asian markets
- Professional Russian and Kazakh subtitling for classic Bollywood films (1950s-1990s) and contemporary commercial hits
- Official YouTube channels offering full classic films with professional subtitles (free access builds goodwill), curated playlists, behind-the-scenes content, and interactive elements
- Social media micro-content: TikTok and Instagram Reels featuring iconic Bollywood dance sequences, partnerships with Kazakh influencers, hashtag campaigns (#BollywoodMemoriesKZ, #DanceLikeMithun)

Expected outcome: Improved discoverability and accessibility of Indian cinema within relevant Kazakh digital ecosystems, to be assessed through measurable baselines such as availability, reach, engagement, and audience response rather than assumed to produce soft power.

LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL LOCALIZATION

Actions:

- Establish Central Asian Subtitling Hub in Almaty or Astana with professional translators fluent in Hindi/Urdu, Russian, and Kazakh
- Commission professional Russian dubbing for select high-priority releases comparable to Turkish series standards
- Develop cultural context guides explaining Indian cultural practices, historical contexts, and contemporary India

Expected outcome: Reduced language and accessibility barriers, with subsequent effects on engagement to be assessed empirically.

INTERGENERATIONAL BRIDGE PROGRAMMING

Actions:

- "Bollywood Sundays" on TV: Work with the Kazakh national broadcaster to set up special family viewing times with introductions and discussions led by the host before and after the show.

- Family film festival events: annual "Remembering Raj Kapoor" festivals, free outdoor screenings, cultural performances before the movie, and dance workshops after the movie.
- Integrating Bollywood into the educational curriculum: Work with Kazakh universities to add Bollywood to film studies, create modules on "Cinema and Cultural Diplomacy," and fund graduate research.

Expected outcome: Increased opportunities for intergenerational cultural transmission and participation, with any resulting changes in attraction requiring separate evaluation.

INDO-KAZAKH CO-PRODUCTION INITIATIVES

Actions:

- Set up an Indo-Kazakh co-production system, which might include a competitive joint-production fund, for stories that explore shared historical or cultural ties, bilingual productions, mixed casts, and films that are partially set in Kazakhstan. Rather than being presented as an evidence-based necessity, the precise budgetary magnitude should be ascertained through feasibility and stakeholder assessment.
- Talent exchange programs: Kazakh filmmakers invited to Bollywood production internships, Indian directors collaborating with Kazakh film studio
- Music collaborations: Bollywood composers working with Kazakh traditional musicians, fusion tracks, Q-pop artists collaborating with Indian producers

Expected outcome: Increased opportunities for culturally relevant participation and audience engagement; effects on attraction should be assessed rather than assumed.

INSTITUTIONAL PRESENCE EXPANSION

Building on existing ICCR infrastructure documented by Kakimzhanov et al. (2023):

Actions:

- Increase the number of activities at the ICCR Cultural Center: Open more centers in Shymkent, Karaganda, and Aktobe; offer free Hindi language classes that focus on film vocabulary; show movies once a month; and work with theaters to show Bollywood movies that have been dubbed in Kazakh.
- Bollywood dance studios: Support establishment of schools in major cities, train Kazakh instructors through Indian dance academies, organize annual inter-city competitions
- Academic diplomacy: Sponsor "Bollywood Studies" professorships, fund research projects, host annual international conferences

Expected outcome: More sustained opportunities for cultural encounter and participation, with their contribution to contemporary attraction evaluated through audience research.

STRATEGIC USE OF CULTURAL MEMORY

Actions:

- Anniversary celebrations: 70th Anniversary of *Awaara* Soviet release, "Mithun Chakraborty Film Festival"
- Heritage project: Create digital archive "Kazakhstan's Bollywood Memories" collecting oral histories from citizens aged 45+, digitizing old posters/tickets/photographs, building interactive website where families can contribute
- Generational dialogue events: "Grandparents and Grandchildren Watch Bollywood" community screenings, facilitated discussions between generations, document exchanges for promotional content

Expected Outcome: Transform nostalgia from passive memory into active intergenerational cultural practice.

BROADER IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA'S CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN CENTRAL ASIA

The findings have few ramifications outside of the current situation. The study does not identify patterns throughout Kazakhstan or Central Asia because it is mostly focused on observations made in Astana. Rather, it highlights a mechanism that can be compared: accumulated familiarity may endure as cultural memory even in the face of a drop in regular contemporary practice when the architecture of cultural transmission shifts.

Kazakhstan serves as an example of a wider transition from the relatively controlled spread of culture to a diverse digital landscape where cultural discovery is shaped by social media, streaming services, recommendation engines, and mobile consumption. This observation should not be taken as proof that cultural influence is solely determined by platforms or that institutions have vanished. Instead, the shifting media landscape modifies the circumstances in which audiences can access and see cultural resources.

Although India's historical cultural ties to Kazakhstan might be a valuable resource for future interactions, the evidence does not support the assumption of broad friendliness in the present. The policy implication is to determine the situations in which current curiosity, access, engagement, or favorable appraisal coexist with hereditary familiarity and to create treatments that can assess whether these intermediate variables result in long-term attraction.

Therefore, in addition to historical cultural memory, cultural-diplomacy techniques may take into account linguistic accessibility, digital convenience, social involvement, and contemporary content. These are not actual measurements of youth preferences throughout Kazakhstan; rather, they represent analytical implications of the Astana fieldwork and comparative literature.

CONCLUSION: CULTURAL MEMORY AND THE CONDITIONS FOR RENEWAL

The field material suggests that the memories of some older respondents in Astana are still embedded in Indian popular cinema. References to songs, films, actors, family experiences, courtship and social events indicate Bollywood's embedding in personal and collective memory. At the same time, the material includes younger participants who are less familiar with this repertoire and who are more open to other kinds of contemporary popular media.

The evidence therefore points to a move away from active and institutionally supported cultural circulation toward more selective survival as cultural memory, in the older cohorts represented in the study. This is not to suggest that Indian soft power has disappeared or that younger audiences are inherently less attracted to Indian culture. Rather it suggests that the processes of cultural transmission have changed.

The study's main contribution is to identify a possible pathway, not to claim a proven causal transition: historical circulation can create a durable cultural memory; contemporary visibility and accessibility can create opportunities to reactivate that memory; engagement and positive audience response may then provide evidence of contemporary attraction. The present study provides evidence for the first two stages and some indications for the third but does not directly measure the final outcome of influence on attitudes or behavior.

This difference also explains the use of terms "memory-based influence" and "networked influence". They are analytical heuristics for describing different conditions of cultural circulation and transmission, not substitutes for the established concept of soft power. The value of the framework is in the guidance it provides for the conditions under which cultural familiarity can be sustained as socially meaningful in evolving media environments.

Hence the policy implication is not that India should merely try to replicate the popularity of the Soviet period. Cultural diplomacy might instead see inherited familiarity as a starting point for renewed localized and participatory engagement. Digital accessibility, linguistic localization, intergenerational programming and institutional partnerships are plausible

mechanisms, but their contribution to contemporary attraction must be tested with evidence from the audience and the platforms.

The Kazakhstan case thus leads to a limited conclusion: historical cultural capital can continue as memory, but memory alone should not be considered contemporary soft power. Its relevance to contemporary cultural diplomacy, then, rests on the ability of shifting media infrastructures and institutional practices to re-link that memory with present audiences.

CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

The main contributions of this study are three-fold. First, it clarifies the distinction between cultural memory, contemporary cultural attraction, and soft power, and explains why nostalgia should not be used as a direct proxy for persuasion or influence. Second, it identifies a possible transmission pathway linking historical institutional exposure to contemporary cultural memory and then to renewed visibility, accessibility, engagement, and potential attraction, while acknowledging that the present evidence does not establish the final causal step. Third, it connects scholarship on Soviet-period Indian film, collective memory, and contemporary platform-mediated cultural consumption through a bounded Astana case. The terms “memory-based influence” and “networked influence” are used as analytical heuristics for examining these processes rather than as alternative definitions of soft power.

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