



Lights, Camera, Action: Cinema as one of India’s Most Powerful Cultural Institutions

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Indian cinema is often reduced to entertainment or flattened under the umbrella label of “Bollywood,” but it actually is one of the most influential cultural institutions shaping modern India. Through the mechanisms of fan networks, caste representation, and regional circulation across dozens of languages, Indian cinema is playing an active role in changing political power dynamics and providing shared national values. It works simultaneously as a social and political organizer within its borders, and a form of soft power abroad, shaping how India is perceived by the world. Looking at Indian cinema is not just about understanding films, but about understanding the factors that explain its influence and power to shape India’s national identity.

INTRODUCTION

On the day before a major star releases a film in South India, roads can close before sunrise. Firecrackers erupt outside theaters that have yet to open their doors while milk is poured over towering cardboard cutouts of major stars and directors. For many fans, this isn’t excessive, but instead a way to show their devotion to film. Cinema in India isn’t something people just watch; it’s something they gather around, argue over,

organize for, and sometimes even fight for. In a country where the language shifts every few hundred miles and political consensus is rare, films create shared emotional experiences tying the nation together that few other institutions can claim.

India produces more films annually than any other country in the world, across dozens of languages and

regional industries (EY-FICCI, 2025). While Bollywood (Hindi-language) might be the most recognizable to the Western audience, industries like Tollywood (Telugu), Mollywood (Malayalam), Kollywood (Tamil), Ollywood (Odia), and more generate world-famous films amidst India's \$61.2B industry (TNN - Times of India, 2025). But cinema's importance isn't just quantitative. For many Indians across socioeconomic dividers and language, class, caste, and region, film has reinforced

and challenged caste hierarchies, structured political loyalty through star worship and fan organizations, and defined who is allowed to be heroic and who is relegated to the margins. Actors are transformed into symbols of strength or honor, capable of commanding loyalty that extends beyond the screen into politics and public life. Beyond India's borders, cinema projects the narratives that shape and define India's values and national identity to the world.

CINEMA, THE PUBLIC SPHERE, AND STATE CONTROL

After achieving independence in 1947, India faced one central issue: How does a country with extraordinary social, religious, and linguistic diversity imagine itself as one nation? Cinema began to emerge as one answer to this question. Early post-independence films showed moral frameworks for citizenship, with movies like *Mother India* showing the nation as resilient and directors like Bimal Roy and Guru Dutt exploring themes like poverty, socialism, and modern identity that resonated with India's audiences navigating the promises and failures of independence.

Cinema was accessible to all social classes, unlike literature or elite theater. Ticket prices were kept low and offered at various price ranges, allowing working-class audiences to attend screenings regularly. Colloquial slang emerged, classifying Indian films as either "mass" (pronounced mah-ss), designed to appeal to wide audiences with swagger and character elevations, or "class," films that are aimed towards urban, wealthier, or elite audiences with subtler themes. Film historians like Ravi Vasudevan note how cinema halls were among the few public spaces where people from different social backgrounds shared a common experience, marking cinema as one of the most democratic cultural forms in post-independence India. By the 1950s and 1960s, going to watch movies at theaters became a routine part of everyday life for millions. Stories during this time continued to focus on themes of upheaval of characters from familial and social stability (Vasudevan, R., 1994). Songs enhanced this accessibility, with national themes embedded into popular culture with radio broadcasts, vinyl records, and later television. Visual storytelling

carried emotion where words failed, and in this way, cinema became a form of informal civic education and a vehicle for patriotic and nationalistic ideas to spread.

India recognized the power of cinema early, institutionalizing state oversight of film content through the Central Board of Film under the Cinematograph Act (Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, 2025). While this oversight was emphasized to be for the purpose of moral safeguards, censorship reflects an understanding that cinema can drastically influence public opinion. A notable recent example of this tension between creative expression and political control is the controversy surrounding the period-drama, *Padmaavat* (2018). This movie faced violent protests, acts of vandalism, state-level bans, and demands for censorship over its controversial portrayal of historical and cultural themes.

A significant amount of the opposition came from Rajput activist groups who argued the film disrespected the legacy of Rani Padmavati, a fourteenth-century Hindu queen revered within Rajput history. Protesters objected to the inclusion of a romantic scene between her character and Alauddin Khilki, a Muslim ruler depicted as the film's antagonist. The film was ultimately cleared by the Central Board of Film Certification and was released with omitted scenes. However, this release clearly revealed how cinema is deeply entangled in identity politics and how cinematic representation can trigger rooted anxieties around caste, religion, and historical preservation within the nation (BBC, 2018). It also exposed the limits of film certification and showcased state authority in the space of film.

SOFT POWER AND GLOBAL REACH

“In the 1980s, political scientist Joseph Nye Jr. coined the term soft power, defining it as a country’s ability to influence others without resorting to coercive pressure” (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). Very few cultural exports in India match cinema’s emotional reach and influential prowess. Indian films circulate across South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and diaspora communities in North America and Europe.

In Southeast Asia specifically, Indian cinema has demonstrated a high degree of cultural penetration. In Malaysia, a significant Tamil diaspora has shaped local film culture to where the release of major Tamil films is treated as a public event. In 2025, actor Rajinikanth’s film *Coolie* led to workplace closures and holidays (Free Press Journal, 2025). In North America, Indian films outperform expectations for non-English-language films and are consistently ranked amongst the highest grossing foreign language films. Cities like Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Doha have large expatriate populations, influencing the dominance of Indian films on weekend theater programming. Multiplexes in the Gulf schedule multiple showings of new Indian releases, a clear cultural link between India and the Middle East.

Indian films now travel not only with diaspora communities but also to mainstream global audiences. The international success of films such as *Baahubali: The Beginning* (2015) and *Baahubali 2: The Conclusion* (2017) was a turning point, showcasing how a regional and Southern language film could also achieve pan-

Indian dominance and international visibility outside of Bollywood. Industry analysts from Forbes emphasize how the Baahubali franchise reshaped Western and global perceptions of Indian cinema by blending Hindu stories and mythical storytelling techniques on a grand scale, positioning India as highly capable of producing cinematic spectacles that could rival Hollywood (Raghunathan, 2017).

This momentum intensified with *RRR* (2022), which gained unprecedented traction among international audiences, critics, and filmmakers. The success in Western markets, including its Oscar win for Best Original Song (*Naatu Naatu* composed by M.M. Keeravani and sung by Kaala Bhairava) and acclaim in U.S. media showed how Indian cinema functions as a soft power without relying on state messaging (Accomando, 2023). *RRR* did not ask audiences to fully understand Indian politics or history in detail, but offered a compelling story of resistance and friendship, reinforcing an argument of Daya Kishan Thussu, a thought leader in international communications, that Indian cinema’s global influence works through affect rather than instruction (Thussu, 2016).

Moreover, India’s Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and the Ministry of External Affairs have supported the showcasing of Indian films at international markets and festivals, with initiatives like the Film Facilitation Office and international film co-production treaties supporting a broader strategy to strengthen India’s cultural footprint globally (Dutta, 2025). Cinema has become a way for India to assert itself as a cultural force to be reckoned with.

FROM BOLLYWOOD TO PAN-INDIA CINEMA

For decades, discussions of Indian cinema centered on Bollywood, shorthand for Hindi language film based in Mumbai, but that framing no longer holds. India has always had strong regional industries, including Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada cinema. What has changed in the last decade is the scale and normalization of regional mobility and the emerging trend of Pan-Indian films, made famous by director S.S. Rajamouli. Films now routinely cross linguistic boundaries with dubbing, subtitling, and marketing strategies, accelerated by streaming platforms

competing for the attention of the national audience. These streaming platforms have added new pressure points. Now, regional films are able to reach national and global audiences without relying on theatrical distribution, enabling small industries or politically risky narratives to easily find viewership through the increased accessibility these platforms bring (Barraza, 2022). Industry reports from EY-FICCI show how regional language content accounts for a growing share of digital viewership in India, with cross-regional consumption. A viewer in North India is now just as

likely to watch a South Indian Telugu or Malayalam film on a streaming platform as a Hindi one, signaling a shift. As digital regulation expands, scholars warn

cinema's future as a space of critique may become increasingly constrained despite its reach continuing to grow (EY-FICCI, 2025).

FAN CULTURE AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS

Across India, fan culture is pervasive. Love for actors and actresses extends far beyond admiration. Fan associations are run like organizations, and host charity drives, blood donation camps, political rallies, and disaster relief efforts. They maintain offices, membership rolls, attendance logs, and hierarchies for participation. Anthropologist Sara Dickey documents how fan clubs function as semi-formal organizations that blend entertainment, social service, and political mobilization (Dickey, 1993). For many young people in India, fan associations provide a sense of community,

identity, and purpose. This is very important because fan clubs operate in a parallel manner to political machines, training their members in organizing crowds and disseminating messaging regarding these celebrities. When stars move into politics, these networks stand as ready-made infrastructures of voting and political support. Social media platforms also amplify fan rivalries and mobilization of public demonstrations, which truly demonstrates the intersection of fandom with civic life and politics.

STARS, AUTHORITY, AND POLITICS

India is one of the few democracies worldwide where film stars have repeatedly transitioned into positions of formal political power. This phenomenon is most pronounced in Tamil Nadu, where several chief ministers have emerged from the film industry. Scholars argue this is not accidental, as cinema in India produces moral authority (Stoddart, B., 2023). Stars embody values like justice and masculinity on

the big screen, and audiences seamlessly transfer that trust into real life. Fan loyalty blurs into political allegiance, and creates loyalty that feels both personal and deeply emotional. While there are some pros to this, such as increased political participation from the general public, corruption and lack of accountability from political figures is an unfortunate trade-off.

CASTE ON SCREEN AND CASTE IN CONFLICT

The cinema industry's content doesn't exist outside of social hierarchy, but instead absorbs and reproduces caste dynamics. While the caste system in India has been outlawed since the adoption of its constitution, caste dynamics still remain ingrained in social norms to a lesser extent. For much of its history, mainstream Indian cinema framed inequality by focusing on discussions on class and poverty instead of explicitly citing caste as the key discriminator. Some film industry scholars have argued this erasure reinforced upper caste norms by presenting them to be universally held beliefs (Kalal, 2024). However, in recent years caste has been confronted more directly, with stories of Dalit assertion, caste violence, and structural oppression

being more popular narrative choices. Films like *Asuran* (2019), for example, have been widely discussed in both academic and public discourse for centering marginalized perspectives in an illuminating manner. These films are often a site of controversy and conflict, with these movies receiving coordinated opposition from dominant caste groups and censorship pressures. These reactions only further prove the point that cinema has the power to destabilize social hierarchies by making inequality more visible. Caste also shapes fandom due to allegiance to certain actors based on caste, where what appears as a fan war online actually functions as a proxy for struggles over dignity, visibility, and power.

CONCLUSION: WHY CINEMA MATTERS NOW

Indian cinema has become the country's most powerful cultural institution not simply because India loves movies, but because movies became a way of life, dating all the way to Independence-era India. Cinema provides unity in a fragmented nation and authority in a crowded democracy. The power of film carries risk: it can deepen divisions just as easily as

it can build solidarity. And yet, the influence of the industry is undeniable, determining the beliefs and values that are integral to Indian society. What India puts on screen, and chooses to leave out, will continue to shape culture, politics, identity, and India's global perception for years to come.



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