

# India's cultural narrative abroad is overwhelming

Rather than presenting the full spectrum of Indian culture at once, a more strategic approach would be to identify one globally intelligible cultural lane & invest in it consistently.



[Mallika Singh](#)

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Indian-Americans in Houston, Texas | Representational image | Scott Dalton | Bloomberg

## What You Need to Know

India possesses immense cultural potential but its fragmented export strategy dilutes its soft power. The article advocates for a focused, phased approach: identify one globally accessible cultural entry point, invest consistently, and design spillover pathways to introduce wider aspects. This strategy will enhance global engagement, coordination, and yield tangible returns like tourism and goodwill, ensuring cultural influence is remembered.

**I**ndia has some of the most underutilised cultural export potential. Few countries can match its civilisational depth, artistic diversity, or cultural longevity. Yet despite this startling abundance, India's cultural presence abroad remains uneven, episodic, and largely overlooked. Yoga days, film festivals, handloom exhibitions, cuisine showcases, and spiritual tourism campaigns coexist, but rarely reinforce one another, leaving the impression of a country speaking in many voices at once and therefore not quite being heard. This raises an uncomfortable but necessary question. Can cultural excess, without strategic focus, dilute soft power rather than strengthen it?

Soft power is often treated as an organic by-product of civilisational richness. The assumption is that a rich culture, once put on display, will travel on its own merit. But this misunderstands how cultural influence actually works. Audiences do not encounter foreign cultures as coherent wholes; they encounter them through entry points. One does not fall in love with a civilisation in its entirety. One falls in love with a song, a story, an image, a mood, an aesthetic, and only seeks context after. India's current approach to cultural export, however well-intentioned, seems to resist this logic. Multiple institutions promote multiple cultural forms simultaneously, often without a shared sense of sequencing or prioritisation. Each initiative gestures toward India's depth, but together they struggle to create cumulative familiarity. In a global attention economy marked by excess choice and limited patience, this approach risks producing admiration without attachment. What is missing is focus.

Focus does not mean reduction, nor does it require flattening India's pluralism into a single narrative (which is virtually impossible). It simply requires acknowledging that India's cultural influence is better off travelling in stages. Allowing one emotionally accessible, digitally scalable, and capable of building sustained global audiences to take centre stage will

provide a point of entry. Once that anchor is established, other cultural expressions can follow through spillover.

Spillover, in this sense, is not accidental. It is the mechanism through which soft power can compound. An example of this can be seen in the global circulation of Turkish television dramas over the past two decades. What began as the export of serialised television gradually expanded into tourism, fashion, music, and even language learning. Viewers drawn in by narrative and emotion developed a broader cultural familiarity with Turkey itself. Crucially, this spillover was neither incidental nor left entirely to market forces.

A focused cultural strategy is incomplete if it does not plan for what follows success. For a country like India, whose pluralistic cultural landscape is not fit for singular representation, such sequencing becomes essential: Focus should not lead to cultural narrowing. It should allow for strategic ordering—diversity to travel outward rather than compete inward. This suggests a shift in how cultural export is imagined and funded. Rather than attempting to present the full spectrum of Indian culture at once, a more strategic approach would identify one globally intelligible cultural lane and invest in it consistently over time.

The benefits of this approach are both practical and political. A focused strategy allows cultural diplomacy to move beyond symbolism toward infrastructure, supporting creators, platforms, and institutions that can sustain global engagement. It would enable better coordination across ministries and agencies, replacing scattered initiatives with long-term planning. It would sharpen India's cultural narrative abroad, making its diversity more discoverable rather than overwhelming. And, perhaps most importantly, it would improve the conversion of cultural visibility into tangible returns like tourism, creative industries, educational exchange, and goodwill.

India's soft power challenge is one of abundance without architecture. In a world where attention is finite and cultural competition is intense, pluralism alone is not a strategy. Soft power does not grow simply from having many stories. It grows when one story leads the way—and makes the world curious enough to listen to the rest.

There is also another advantage to clarity. Cultural strategies that attempt to do everything are difficult to evaluate and nearly impossible to defend. Focus introduces accountability. It allows policymakers to ask not only whether culture is being promoted, but whether it is being remembered.

## A more creative cultural strategy

Creativity must guide implementation. A phased cultural export strategy does not require inventing culture, but rethinking how it travels. A few possible directions include:

- Create a flagship cultural vertical for a decade

Identify one globally scalable lane, such as streaming-first Indian storytelling, regional-language thrillers, or mythological fantasy adaptations, and commit sustained institutional backing for ten years, rather than rotating cultural priorities annually.

- Build cultural infrastructure

Invest in international writers' rooms, subtitling and dubbing excellence, global talent exchanges, and co-production treaties that make Indian content frictionless to consume abroad.

- Design spillover pathways in advance

If a particular show, music genre, or aesthetic gains traction, ministries should be prepared to activate tourism circuits, design collaborations, language courses, and academic exchange programs tied to that cultural moment.

- Leverage regional aesthetics as distinct brands

Instead of exporting a generic “Indian culture,” develop distinct global identities around specific regions, Northeast folklore fantasy, Malayalam neo-realism, Rajasthani craft design—each treated as its own coherent export identity.

- Invest in digital-native cultural diplomacy

Soft power now moves through streaming algorithms, fandom spaces, and short-form platforms. Strategic partnerships with global platforms and diaspora creators could amplify visibility in ways traditional cultural diplomacy cannot.

- Fund risk-taking creative work

Cultural influence rarely comes from safe, representative art. It comes from emotionally resonant storytelling. Supporting bold, genre-bending, globally legible work may yield more influence than hyper-curated cultural showcases.

- Institutionalise measurement of cultural retention

Move from counting events and festivals toward tracking sustained engagement: Repeat consumption, language uptake, tourism conversion, and long-term audience loyalty.

*Mallika Singh is an Assistant Lecturer at Motwani Jadeja Institute for American Studies (MJIAS), OP Jindal Global University. Views are personal.*

(Edited by Theres Sudeep)