CHAPTER FIVE

Culture as Soft Power—Bollywood and Beyond

In his magisterial book *The Wonder that was India*, the celebrated British cultural historian A. L. Basham recounts an interesting episode: “According to the 11th century Persian poet Firdusi, who collected many legends and traditions of pre-Muslim Persia in his *Shahnamah* (Book of Kings),” Basham writes, “the 5th century [AD] Sasanian king Baharam Gur invited 10,000 Indian musicians to his realm, and gave them cattle, corn and asses, so that they might settle in the land to entertain his poorer subjects, who had been complaining that the pleasures of music and dance were reserved for the rich” (cited in Basham, 2004 [1967]: 515).

The importance of music and dance in India thus has a very long recorded history, forming a significant part of its cultural fabric, one for which it was fabled in the outside world. Indian religious epics are replete with references to art, music, and dance: the *Atharveda* has a section devoted to fine arts, including music. As noted in chapter two, India has been a major transmitter of culture across Asia and beyond. The aim of this chapter is to explore the cultural dimensions of soft power in its elite and popular versions and to what extent India’s high and popular cultures have contributed to its global presence and prestige. Has the greater volume of circulation of Indian cultural products through global digital superhighways changed external perceptions of India? Are its cultural exports useful contributors to its soft power?

Indian industry and government have recognized and endorsed the potential power of culture at the highest level, as India’s Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh observed in 2011 while addressing the annual gathering of Indian diaspora: “India’s soft power is an increasingly important element of our expanding global footprint…The richness of
India’s classical traditions and the colour and vibrancy of contemporary Indian culture are making waves around the world” (Singh, 2011). Shashi Tharoor, India’s Minister of State for Higher Education and a pioneer proponent of its soft power discourse, has consistently argued that India has a “good story” to tell and its popular culture is well-equipped to tell that story (Tharoor, 2007, 2012). The importance of culture more broadly is also being recognized as a tool of India’s foreign policy. Pavan Varma, former diplomat and head of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), has observed that culture “has the potential to shape, alter and impact the ideas and opinions of public communities. From a wide-ranging perspective, culture has the capability to resolve tensions and prejudices—ethnic, religious, communal, national, and international. It can create a climate of tolerance, respect and understanding among nations, religions and entire regions. It is thus an essential medium for peaceful and tolerant contact and communication” (Varma, 2007: 1140–1141).

As elsewhere in the world, high culture in India—including literature, fine arts, classical music, and theater—has low commercial potential in contrast to popular culture. The arts have a small, albeit discerning and committed following and are not sustainable without state support through subsidies or other type of patronage. Recognizing this, the newly independent Indian government established key state-run institutions, such as the Sangeet Natak Akademy (National Academy of Music, Dance, and Drama), set up in 1953 with the motto “Preserving India’s heritage of performing arts.” The Sahitya Akademy (National Academy of Letters), and the Lalit Kala Akademy (National Academy of Arts), were opened the following year. At the inauguration of the Sangeet Natak Akademy, India’s then Minister for Education, Maulana Azad, remarked: “India’s precious heritage of music, drama, and dance is one which we must cherish and develop. We must do so not only for its own sake but also as our contribution to the cultural heritage of mankind” (Sangeet Natak Akademi website).

Such support has ensured that classical Indian music, dance, and fine arts have survived in India and been showcased around the world. The government–supported National Centre for the Performing Arts is also responsible for the protection and promotion of classical music and art and for linking up with global classical music networks through cultural festivals. Broadcasting of classical music on radio and shows promoting classical dance are an integral part of state broadcasting. The government also plans to inaugurate a dedicated television channel for classical music. Apart from such official patronage, organizations like