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Raj Kapoor and India's Foremost Cinematic Soft Power Breakthrough

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The 'Showman' Raj Kapoor, one of Bombay's finest actor-filmmakers, is hardly extricable from nostalgic reminiscences of India's cozy bilateral history with Russia. His unmatched acceptance in the erstwhile Soviet realm also remains a citable emblem of Indian cinema's globalizing prowess. While there is no dearth of odes to Kapoor's Soviet tryst, however, few acknowledge its relevance for independent India's soft power, which was still nascent in his times. Alongside, that the Indo-Soviet partnership was not quite organically forged is often an overlooked observation.

Applying the art of alluring instead of arm-twisting, soft power has fast matured into a *sine qua non* of international political conduct. It allows one nation-state to attract the political confidence of another by exporting appealing non-coercive entities to it, often through non-state routes. As the concept's father, Joseph Nye Jr. puts it, soft power is the 'second face of power' which 'rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others' by 'co-opting [...] than coercing' them, reducing the reliance on conventional hard power 'inducements or threats'. By leveraging 'attractive personality, culture, values, [...] and moral authority', it encourages policy-makers to put pen before sword (Nye 2009, p. 4). The intent, almost Gandhian, is canny: to conquer hearts and minds overseas with cultural, artistic, gastronomic, sporting, scientific, and such seemingly apolitical "soft" exemplars.

In being a conduit for power, however, soft power comes with a catch. The primary measure of its success is in 'getting others to want the outcomes that [a state] want[s]' (Nye 2005, p. 5-6). A nation-state's soft power showcase, Nye clarifies, cannot merely be 'a matter of ephemeral popularity, [but] a means of obtaining outcomes' (Nye 2008, p. 94). A vibrant apparatus for nation-branding does not organically imply foreign policy gains, or, as Jing Sun remarks, 'we can fall in love with [...] foreign goods and still remain suspicious of foreign governments' (Sun 2012, p. 8). Do political outcomes, however, attain the deserved heed in studies of soft power prowess? Take the case of India, which now draws ample attention as an economically, militarily, and culturally substantive nation-state. Yet, assessors of its soft power capability tend to certify success by merely lauding the resources utilized. For instance, Nicolas Blarel hails cricket – the region's beloved sport – as a 'strong soft power resource for India,' citing that the 'Indian Premier League (IPL) has reinforced the narrative of India's rise' (Blarel 2012, p. 30). The reprimand that the controversial, scandal-hit league has drawn from foreign detractors like James Astill may, however, point in a less favourable direction (Astill 2013).

Changing the Reels

India's vibrant cinema – especially Bollywood or Bombay-made Hindi films – is a leitmotif in the discourse on its soft power. Its linkage to India's political gains, though, often remains obscure. Daya K. Thussu chronicles how India's popular culture products are 'amenable to Pakistani audiences' without revealing the relevance of such convergences for Islamabad's hawks (Thussu 2013, p. 140). Likewise, Sunitha Chitrapu's interpretation of Bollywood's output as a soft power resource is restricted to a mere appreciation of its mass appeal and prosperous profits abroad (Chitrapu 2013). The intricacies of how and why India's cinematic charm quotient augments its political reputation and aims in other nations are often lost between the lines. To bridge this gap of branding and reception, popularity and power, it shall be useful to exemplify an episode that occurred decades before Bollywood

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became the \$4.5 billion industry of today (Ghosh 2013).

In the late 1940s, the decolonizing Indian state remained 'suspicious of [...] Bombay cinema' fearing its potential to 'engender problematic versions of modernity and tradition in the form of beliefs, attitudes, and practices.' Instead, the state-run Films Division snubbed 'frivolous entertainment and focus[ed] on fostering [...] scientific temper' through documentaries (Dass 2015, pp. 189-90). The Jawaharlal Nehru administration, nevertheless, chose not to quash Bombay's independent film circuit. The elite audiences of the time were already drawn to its frugal art-house products for the social prescriptiveness they promised. Bollywood's grounds were fertile for the affiliates of the Indian Peoples Theatre Association's (IPTA) – artists who reputedly 'drew a lot from [...] Soviet ideas' (Bhatia 2016) – to imbibe their socialist-realist staples. Even before India's independence, a Hindi film inspired by Maxim Gorky's acclaimed Russian play, *The Lower Depths*, and written by Khwaja Ahmed Abbas, the IPTA stalwart, had bagged a *Grand Prix* at the inaugural Cannes Film Festival (Bhatia 2015). Meanwhile, few studios, except the likes of Bombay Talkies, were interested in consistently producing simpler song-and-dance fables for mainstream consumption. It was then that the actor Raj Kapoor invested in film-making and founded RK Films in 1948.

Abbas and Kapoor crossed paths when they collaborated to create *Awara* (The Vagabond; dir.: Raj Kapoor) in 1951. The film's intellectual moulders, led by noted IPTA alumni – from Abbas and his co-writer VP Sathe to lyricist Shailendra – artfully balanced socialist-realism and populism to maximize its outreach (Dwyer 2013, p. 21). Sathe later clarified the intention in an interview: 'Raj Kapoor was to represent [the] new [postcolonial] order.' Mihir Bose is amongst those who note *Awara's* 'clever references to the position of the communists' (Bose 2008, ch. 10). Kapoor, himself, went on to elucidate:

'I tried to create a balance between entertainment and what I had to say to the people. *Awara* [...] had the theme of class distinction [and] the greatest juvenile romantic story, wrapped in the poverty that the post-Independence era had inherited. [...] The change that people wanted, they saw in the spirit of the young [protagonist].' (Nanda 2002, p. 63)

The Plot-Twist

In its stirring indictment of arrogant affluence, stiff regressivism, and class gaps through the poignant tale of an ostracized youth, *Awara* not just voiced the marginalized but championed what Soviet cinema had long pioneered: on-screen dialectics between the binaries of society. India's Nehruvian state converged in a similar direction, emulating the Gosplan – the Soviet Planning Committee, which designed quinquennial economic plans – for its First Five-Year Plan (1951-56) and instituting the First Constitutional Amendment to stomp out feudal supremacy over land. By 1954, India's Planning Commission explicitly avowed to 'advance [India] to a socialistic pattern of society' by 'emphasiz[ing] heavy industrialization [and] state control' (Guha 2007, pp. 143-52). Despite its apparent consonance with the Soviet model of nation-building, however, New Delhi notably stood divorced from Moscow. Since Stalin 'hardly [...] understood the new India,' the Kremlin's mouthpieces derided Nehru as a 'running dog of Western imperialism' due to India's partake in the British Commonwealth and aversion of the Cold War's bloc factionalism (Kaul 1991, pp. 20-21). Nikita Khrushchev later regretted how the Soviet politburo could spot 'nothing to indicate socialist construction' in India (Simha 2014). The bilateral bitterness worsened to the extent of a diplomatic refusal by Soviet diplomats to condole Gandhi's assassination in 1948 (Kaul 1991, p. 21). Thus, while Bollywood film-makers could eventually 'inject "proletarian" angles into films to tailor to the Soviet market,' Raj Kapoor had no such export-assuring advantage while making *Awara* (Gopal & Moorti 2008, p. 31). Preceding it, the failure of Abbas' *Dharti ke Lal* (Sons of the Land, 1946) in Moscow had exhibited that not all proletarian-themed films could enchant the cinematically informed Soviet audiences (Bose 2008, ch. 10).

The political tide fortunately turned during *Awara's* release. As communist North Korea invaded the West-backed South in 1950, Nehru's notion of bloc nonalignment unveiled its pliant utility. After India supported a West-led UN resolution to condemn the attack on South Korea, it abstained from a subsequent motion to authorize military aid to South Korea, stinging the Americans and surprising the Russians. Soon, India's arbitrational activism towered. Amidst the conflict, KM Panikkar, India's ambassador to China, stood as the sole pacifier between Peking and Washington to curtail escalations. Following the ceasefire of 1953, VK Krishna Menon rallied the UN General

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Assembly towards a 'formula for the repatriation of prisoners of war.' Finally, the repatriation was implemented by Indian forces led by General KS Thimayya (Chandra, Mukherjee & Mukherjee 2008, pp. 136-37). India's commitment to conflict resolution and, more essentially, its refusal to cower to American pressure, served as a thawing agent in the Indo-Soviet equation.

'The Soviets [...] offered to send 50,000 tons of wheat' to grain-deprived India in 1951, once the US Congress refused to do so (Guha 2007, p. 113). After the Korean War's end coincided with Stalin's sudden demise in 1953, 'softer' routes of bilateral image-correction began to emerge. The de-Stalinizing 'Khrushchev thaw' gifted much-craved relaxations on cultural imports, including cinema, to the Soviet republics. The resultant spike in demand encouraged Raj Kapoor to distribute *Awara* to the newfound socialist market in 1954. Translated as *Bradgaya*, the film's Russian release instantly captivated audiences, catapulting Kapoor as a relatable underdog's idol and a 'sex-symbol' across the Soviet sphere (Fedotova 2013). His impassioned performance and narration profoundly impacted the Russian cinephile quite like DW Griffith had much earlier. *Awara* sold around 64 million tickets as the third-most viewed foreign film in Soviet history (Fedotova 2013). The Soviet state ensured its translated prints reached the farthest corners, including its expedition camps at the North Pole. Between their two promotional visits to Moscow in 1954 and 1956, Raj Kapoor and Nargis, *Awara*'s star protagonist pair, became celebrities for Russians (Bose 2008, ch. 10). Russian parents chose to name their newborns after their screen names (Reuben 1995, p. 89). Even a decade after its Russian release, *Awara* found a local remake – titled *Avare* (dir.: Semih Evin) – in the Soviet Union's pro-NATO neighbor, Turkey.

Conclusion

The film's soft power worth for India – and Bollywood – is, nonetheless, not captured by the lasting imprint that it left on Russian popular culture. The fact that *Awara* found mentions and tributes in a 1968 Solzhenitsyn novel (*Cancer Ward*), a 1983 Soviet drama (*Farewell*; dir.: Valentin Rasputin), or a 2007 Russian music project (*The Best Songs of World Cinema* by the Doctor Watson Ensemble) does not signify much for India's policy basket (Joshi 2015, p. 151). Instead, that *Awara* was a soft power nutrient for New Delhi's infant rapprochement with the Kremlin was evident in the eager promotion of it by Moscow, which, as an aid to its stature, galvanized the return of creativity inside the Soviet Union and symbolized, alongside, the widening acceptance of its ideals outside. For India, packing socialist aspirations, realist semantics, anti-dogmatic boldness, and provoking music, *Awara* wooed Russia's staunchest Indophobes. It legitimized and catalyzed the Soviet Union's rediscovery of Indian society and leadership. Reaching out to postwar Russians before Nehru, the film ensured that the Indian Prime Minister received a rousing reception – befitting a friend from an evidently fraternal society – upon his maiden official visit to Moscow in 1955. On his return home, when Nehru met Raj Kapoor's father, Prithviraj, he 'took [him] aside and said: "what is this film that your son has made? [The Russians were] talking about it all the time"' (Nanda 2002, p. 106).

Nye argues that the ability of a state to derive favourable outcomes from another through soft means is reliant on 'the attractiveness of [the former's] political ideals' and whether these are 'seen as legitimate in the eyes of others' (Nye 2005, x). The purpose of soft power resources, in other words, is to convey 'the real [...] message of deeper values' and convince recipients enough to trust the conveyor (Nye 2005, x). *Awara*, as the inadvertent non-state soft power tool, facilitated this for India in the Soviet Union by thwarting most misgivings about Indian society, baring the painful hardships of the Indian commoner, and exhibiting how New Delhi's brand of socialism was as much an aspirational experiment as Moscow's. Nehru's Moscow trip – an 'important geopolitical turning point' (Haider 2015) – was reciprocated in months. Scenes of Khrushchev and Nikolai Bulganin garnering garlands across India's cities took the global media by storm. The *LA Times* labeled it 'a watershed for the Soviet Union's relations with India' (Kamalakaran 2013). Military-economic aid coupled with big-brotherly shielding at the UN followed for India from Russia, with love. By the 1960s, Raj Kapoor had the repute to purportedly stroll into Moscow without a visa (IANS 2016). *Awara*, in Kapoor's words, was his 'little contribution to USSR-India friendship' (Nanda 2002, p. 77). Mourning his demise in 1988, the state-run TASS Russian News Agency hailed him as the 'best-known Indian in the Soviet Union after [...] Nehru, Indira Gandhi, and Rajiv Gandhi' (Reuben 1995, p. 340). By then, he had long cemented Bollywood as India's heralded soft power asset.

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