



The Role of Bhojpuri Culture in India's Soft Power Diplomacy

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Abstract

India's rich cultural heritage has long been a cornerstone of its soft power diplomacy. Among its diverse cultural assets, Bhojpuri culture stands out as a unique and influential medium in connecting with the global community. With a significant Bhojpuri-speaking diaspora spread across countries such as Mauritius, Fiji, Suriname, Trinidad & Tobago, and Guyana, Bhojpuri culture has become a powerful instrument for fostering international cultural ties and promoting India's global image.

This paper explores the multifaceted role of Bhojpuri culture in India's soft power strategy. It examines how Bhojpuri traditions, including folk music, cinema, festivals like Chhath Puja, and the Bhojpuri language, act as cultural bridges, strengthening India's relations with diaspora-hosting nations. Additionally, it highlights the contributions of Bhojpuri-speaking leaders and influencers in shaping diplomatic and cultural narratives. The discussion emphasizes the adaptability of Bhojpuri culture in the global context, showcasing its ability to preserve heritage while fostering intercultural dialogue. By leveraging Bhojpuri culture, India not only enhances its connection with the diaspora but also projects its values of diversity and inclusivity on the international stage. This study underscores the untapped potential of Bhojpuri culture as a critical pillar in India's soft power diplomacy, promoting both cultural pride and global goodwill.

Keywords: Bhojpuri Culture, Soft Power Diplomacy, Girmitiya, Indentured labourer, Jahazi

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Introduction

Bhojpuri culture is a vibrant expression of the lived experiences of millions in India's Hindi heartland and extends to diaspora communities across the globe, particularly in Mauritius, Fiji,

Suriname, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, and South Africa. The Bhojpuri language, a

derivative of the Indo-Aryan linguistic family, is spoken by over 50 million people in India and millions more in diaspora communities. It serves

as a cultural anchor, preserving traditions through oral storytelling, folk songs, and literature. Bhojpuri music, encompassing genres such as Birha, Chaita, and Kajri, captures themes of love, migration, and rural life, resonating deeply with both rural and urban audiences. Folk dances like Jhumar and Nautanki, coupled with festivals such as Chhath Puja, reflect the community's spiritual and social ethos. These cultural elements are not merely artistic expressions but also repositories of historical narratives and collective memory, making them powerful tools for cultural diplomacy. The global appeal of Bhojpuri culture lies in its accessibility and emotional resonance. The Bhojpuri film industry, often referred to as "Bhojiwood," has gained significant traction, producing films that explore themes of migration, identity, and resilience—issues that resonate with diaspora communities. These films, along with music and festivals, serve as conduits for cultural preservation and exchange, enabling India to project its soft power through relatable and authentic narratives.

Soft power, as defined by Joseph Nye, is the ability of a nation to influence others through cultural appeal, values, and diplomacy rather than coercion or force. India's extensive cultural heritage has made it a prominent player in global soft power diplomacy. Among its numerous cultural assets, Bhojpuri culture stands out due to its rich traditions and global reach, primarily through the Bhojpuri-speaking diaspora. This

paper explores how Bhojpuri culture—encompassing language, folk traditions, music, cinema, festivals, and cuisine—has become a key element in India's cultural diplomacy. Special attention is given to its role in fostering international relations, preserving cultural identity among the diaspora, and projecting India's values of diversity and inclusivity.

Historical Context: Bhojpuri Migration and Diaspora:

The migration of Bhojpuri-speaking communities began during the 19th century, particularly under British colonial rule. Indentured laborers were sent to countries such as Mauritius, Fiji, Suriname, Trinidad & Tobago, and Guyana to work on sugarcane plantations. These migrants carried with them their language, music, and festivals, which gradually evolved in their new environments while maintaining their Indian roots.¹

The story of the Bhojpuri people is one of resilience, movement, and the unyielding spirit of a community that carried its language, culture, and dreams across continents. Rooted in the fertile Gangetic plains of northern India, primarily in eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar, the Bhojpuri-speaking region has been a cradle of vibrant traditions, folk music, and a deep connection to the land. Yet, over the past two centuries, waves of migration have scattered Bhojpuri communities far beyond their homeland, creating a global diaspora that

continues to thrive. This is their story—a saga of struggle, adaptation, and cultural endurance. Imagine the 19th-century Bhojpur region, lush fields of rice and wheat swaying under the monsoon rains, villages alive with the melodies of Birha and Kajri songs, and families bound by tight-knit traditions. The Bhojpuri people, primarily agrarian, lived a life intertwined with the rhythms of the seasons. Their language, a melodic offshoot of Hindi, carried stories of love, labor, and devotion to deities like Lord Rama and Goddess Durga. But beneath this idyllic surface, life was often harsh. The region was densely populated, and landholdings were small, fragmented, and barely sufficient to sustain growing families. Periodic famines, heavy taxation under British colonial rule, and a rigid caste system added to their burdens. By the early 1800s, the British Empire’s grip on India tightened, and the Bhojpuri heartland became a recruiting ground for labor to fuel colonial enterprises. This marked the beginning of one of the largest and most transformative migrations in Bhojpuri history.

In 1834, after the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, the demand for cheap labor to work on plantations in far-flung colonies like Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad, Guyana, and Suriname led to the system of indentured labor. The Bhojpuri region, with its surplus population and economic distress, became a prime source of recruits. Agents, often deceitful, roamed villages, promising steady wages, free passage, and a

better life overseas. For many, the decision to leave was born of desperation—a chance to escape poverty, debt, or social oppression. Picture a young Bhojpuri man, Ram Prasad, standing at a riverbank in 1850, clutching a small bundle of belongings. Behind him, his village fades into the horizon; ahead lies a ship bound for Mauritius. He’s heard tales of “tapu” (islands) where work is plentiful, but the journey is daunting. The voyage, often called jahazi (ship-bound), was grueling—weeks or months at sea in cramped, unsanitary conditions. Many did not survive. Those who did arrived in alien lands, their Bhojpuri songs and stories their only tether to home. Between 1834 and 1917, over a million Indians, a significant portion Bhojpuri-speaking, migrated as indentured laborers. Mauritius received the largest number, followed by the Caribbean colonies, Fiji, and South Africa. In these new lands, they worked on sugarcane, cotton, and tea plantations, enduring harsh conditions, low wages, and cultural isolation. Yet, they carried their identity with them—through festivals like Holi and Chhath Puja, through oral traditions, and through their language, which evolved into distinct dialects like “Fiji Hindi” or “Trinidad Bhojpuri.” Life in the colonies was not easy, but the Bhojpuri spirit was unbreakable. In places like Trinidad and Guyana, indentured laborers, or Girmitiya (from the Hindi word Girmit, meaning agreement), built communities that blended their traditions with local influences. Imagine a Saturday evening in a Trinidadian village in the 1880s: the

air is thick with the aroma of Dalpuri and chutney, and the rhythmic beats of Tassa drums echo as families gather to sing Sohar (birth songs) or Bidesia (songs of separation). These gatherings were more than celebrations; they were acts of resistance, preserving a culture thousands of miles from home. Over time, the descendants of these migrants became integral to their adopted societies. In Mauritius, Bhojpuri descendants form a significant portion of the population, and Bhojpuri remains a recognized language. In Fiji, they shaped the cultural and political landscape, with their language influencing local vernacular. In the Caribbean, Bhojpuri music evolved into Chutney music, a vibrant genre blending Indian folk with Afro-Caribbean rhythms. Yet, the diaspora never forgot its roots. Songs like Bidesia captured the longing for the homeland, a theme that resonated across generations.

The post-independence era saw a second wave of migration, driven by economic opportunities and education. Bhojpuri families moved to the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the Gulf countries. Unlike the indentured laborers, these migrants were often professionals or entrepreneurs, settling in cities like London, New York, or Dubai. They established community organizations, temples, and cultural festivals, ensuring that Bhojpuri identity thrived in the globalized world. Today, the Bhojpuri diaspora is a vibrant mosaic, spanning continents and generations. In Mauritius, the annual Chhath

Puja draws thousands to riverbanks, their prayers echoing those of their ancestors in Bihar. In Trinidad, chutney music festivals attract global audiences, celebrating a uniquely Bhojpuri-Caribbean sound. In the United States, Bhojpuri film screenings and cultural events bring communities together, while social media connects the diaspora in unprecedented ways. Yet, challenges remain. In some regions, younger generations are losing fluency in Bhojpuri, as global languages like English dominate. Cultural assimilation, while enriching, sometimes dilutes traditions. In India, Bhojpuri migrants face stereotypes and discrimination, despite their contributions to urban economies. Still, the diaspora continues to evolve, blending tradition with modernity. Bhojpuri cinema, often called “Bhojiwood,” has gained global popularity, with stars like Manoj Tiwari and Ravi Kishan bringing Bhojpuri stories to the world.

The Bhojpuri migration and diaspora are more than a historical phenomenon; they are a testament to human endurance. From the jahazi ships of the 19th century to the bustling cities of the 21st, Bhojpuri people have carried their culture, language, and spirit across borders. They have transformed sugarcane fields into cultural hubs, urban slums into vibrant communities, and foreign lands into homes. Their story is one of longing and belonging, of leaving behind a village but never its soul. As we reflect on this journey, we see a people who, despite

displacement and hardship, wove their identity into the fabric of the world. The Bhojpuri diaspora is a living bridge between past and present, India and the world, reminding us that home is not just a place—it's a song, a story, a prayer carried in the heart. Today, the Bhojpuri diaspora, numbering in millions, serves as a cultural bridge, preserving their heritage while contributing to India's soft power diplomacy. Their cultural practices have become integral to the social fabric of their host nations.²

Key Aspects of Bhojpuri Culture as a Soft Power Tool :

India's cultural diversity is one of its greatest strengths, and within this diversity, regional cultures play a pivotal role in shaping the country's global image. Among these, Bhojpuri culture stands out as a vibrant, living tradition that transcends geographical boundaries and significantly contributes to India's soft power diplomacy. Rooted deeply in the Bhojpuri-speaking regions of Bihar, eastern Uttar Pradesh, and Jharkhand, Bhojpuri culture has travelled far beyond its native soil, carried by generations of migrants and their descendants across the world. This cultural spread has helped India forge emotional and cultural ties with diaspora communities, making Bhojpuri culture an influential soft power tool.

I.Bhojpuri Language and Literature:

Language is often the soul of any culture, acting as both a repository of history and a living medium of identity. Bhojpuri, one of India's most widely spoken regional languages, boasts over 50 million speakers, many of whom reside outside India's borders. This language serves as a vital cultural link that binds the diaspora with their roots and keeps their heritage alive. The promotion of Bhojpuri language and literature has been a significant means of reinforcing cultural connections. Literary festivals dedicated to Bhojpuri poetry, prose, and folk tales are regularly organized, both in India and abroad, fostering a sense of pride and belonging among Bhojpuri speakers. Publications of Bhojpuri literature—ranging from classical poetry to contemporary novels—help preserve the language and simultaneously introduce its rich cultural ethos to new audiences.³ Bhojpuri folk literature, particularly traditional narratives like *Bidesia*, is emblematic of the community's collective experiences. *Bidesia* is a poignant tale about migration, separation, and longing, themes that resonate deeply with the diaspora who have often left their homelands in search of better opportunities. This narrative captures the emotional and psychological landscape of migration, making it not just a literary work but a cultural expression that unites dispersed communities. ⁴ the continued popularity of *Bidesia* and other folk literature in diaspora gatherings and cultural programs underscores the

enduring power of Bhojpuri language and storytelling as soft power instruments.

II. Bhojpuri Music and Cinema:

Bhojpuri culture is rich with traditional music and cinema, both of which have played an extraordinary role in maintaining and promoting the community's cultural identity globally. Folk music, with its myriad forms such as Birha, Kajri, and Sohar, occupies a cherished place in the hearts of Bhojpuri speakers worldwide. These songs, originally composed to mark life's milestones—birth, marriage, harvest, migration, and mourning—carry a deep emotional resonance. The plaintive tones of Birha express the pain of separation and longing, while Kajri celebrates the monsoon season with playful rhythms, and Sohar is traditionally sung during childbirth. Their timeless appeal is evident as these songs are performed at cultural events and family gatherings in the diaspora, reinforcing cultural bonds.⁵ Modern technology has amplified the reach of Bhojpuri folk music. Platforms such as YouTube and Spotify allow these songs to transcend physical and national boundaries, reaching younger generations and global audiences who may not be native Bhojpuri speakers but appreciate its cultural richness. This digital presence not only promotes Bhojpuri culture but also enhances India's image as a culturally diverse and vibrant nation. Bhojpuri cinema, often described as the “cinema of the masses,” has been another powerful

vehicle for cultural dissemination. Unlike mainstream Bollywood, Bhojpuri films focus on local stories, social issues, and cultural motifs that resonate deeply with Bhojpuri-speaking populations worldwide. Films such as *Nadiya Ke Paar* and *Ganga Maiya Tohe Piyari Chadhaibo* are classics that portray rural life, family values, and regional traditions, attracting audiences both in India and abroad.⁶ The international success of Bhojpuri cinema, especially in countries with significant Bhojpuri diaspora communities, has enhanced India's soft power by showcasing its regional diversity and storytelling traditions. These films create a shared cultural space where diaspora communities can reconnect with their roots, while also providing non-Indian viewers with insights into the region's social fabric.

III. Festivals and Rituals:

Festivals are among the most visible and emotionally powerful expressions of cultural identity, and the Bhojpuri community's festivals are no exception. Chief among these is Chhath Puja, an ancient solar festival dedicated to the Sun God and his wife Usha. Traditionally celebrated with great fervor in Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh, Chhath Puja has transcended national borders to become a prominent event wherever Bhojpuri-speaking populations reside.⁷ In countries such as Mauritius, Fiji, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, and Guyana, where significant numbers of Bhojpuri-speaking descendants live, Chhath Puja is celebrated with

rituals, prayers, and community gatherings that replicate the cultural ambiance of their homeland. These celebrations do more than honor religious traditions; they serve as platforms for intercultural exchange, showcasing Indian religious customs and fostering mutual understanding between diverse communities. The rituals associated with these festivals—such as the offering of arghya to the Sun at sunrise and sunset—are imbued with symbolism and reflect India’s ancient spiritual heritage. These practices help diaspora communities maintain their cultural distinctiveness while simultaneously enhancing India’s cultural prestige globally.⁸ Beyond Chhath, other Bhojpuri festivals like Diwali, Holi, and Makar Sankranti are celebrated with regional flavors, rituals, and folk performances, enriching the multicultural tapestry of host countries and contributing to India’s soft power outreach.

IV.Culinary Heritage :

Food is a universal language of culture, capable of bridging divides and creating shared experiences. Bhojpuri cuisine, known for its rustic simplicity and robust flavors, represents a unique facet of India’s vast culinary landscape. Signature dishes such as litti chokha—a baked wheat flour ball stuffed with spiced gram flour, served with mashed vegetables—and thekua, a sweet fried cookie, have gained popularity beyond the Bhojpuri belt. In diaspora countries, food festivals and cultural events often highlight

Bhojpuri culinary delights, introducing global audiences to these traditional flavors. The increasing presence of Bhojpuri cuisine in international food fairs and restaurants not only satisfies culinary curiosity but also acts as a cultural ambassador for India.⁹ The sensory appeal of Bhojpuri food evokes nostalgia among the diaspora and provides an accessible entry point for others to experience the culture. This culinary heritage thus forms a vital part of India’s soft power strategy, strengthening cultural diplomacy through the universal appeal of food.

V.Diaspora Leadership and Advocacy :

The influence of Bhojpuri culture as a soft power tool is further enhanced by the political and social leadership of Bhojpuri-speaking individuals in diaspora nations. These leaders often act as cultural ambassadors, fostering bilateral ties between India and their adopted countries. For example, in Mauritius, leaders such as Sir Anerood Jugnauth, who served multiple terms as Prime Minister and President, have been prominent advocates for the preservation and promotion of Bhojpuri culture. Their leadership has not only enhanced the status of the Bhojpuri community but also strengthened diplomatic relations between India and Mauritius.¹⁰ Similarly, in countries like Fiji and Suriname, Bhojpuri-speaking leaders have played key roles in political, social, and cultural spheres. Their advocacy for cultural preservation

and active participation in international forums amplify India's soft power influence by highlighting the country's pluralistic heritage and global cultural footprint.¹¹ These leaders facilitate cultural exchanges, promote economic cooperation, and serve as bridges between India and their countries, making Bhojpuri culture a cornerstone of India's soft diplomacy.

Bhojpuri culture, with its rich language, literature, music, cinema, festivals, cuisine, and diaspora leadership, constitutes a powerful element of India's soft power toolkit. Its ability to transcend geographical and cultural boundaries and emotionally connect with millions worldwide makes it an invaluable asset in India's cultural diplomacy. Through the promotion and preservation of Bhojpuri traditions, India not only honors its diverse cultural heritage but also projects an image of a culturally vibrant and inclusive nation. In an increasingly globalized world, the role of regional cultures like Bhojpuri in shaping international perceptions and strengthening people-to-people ties is indispensable. India's continued investment in and promotion of Bhojpuri culture, both within its borders and in the global diaspora, will undoubtedly contribute to the country's standing as a leading soft power, enriching its diplomatic engagements and cultural outreach worldwide.

India's Diplomatic Strategy and Bhojpuri Culture :

The integration of Bhojpuri culture into India's soft power diplomacy is evident in several key initiatives. The Pravasi Bharatiya Divas serves as a significant platform for promoting Bhojpuri heritage. During these events, Bhojpuri music performances, dance recitals, and film screenings highlight the vibrancy of the culture, fostering a sense of pride among diaspora communities. For instance, events featuring Bhojpuri folk artists or screenings of popular Bhojpuri films create a shared cultural experience that bridges the gap between India and its diaspora. These interactions not only preserve cultural identity but also strengthen India's diplomatic ties with countries hosting large Bhojpuri-speaking populations. Cultural exchange programs further amplify the global reach of Bhojpuri culture. The ICCR organizes festivals and performances that showcase Bhojpuri music and dance in countries such as Mauritius, Fiji, and South Africa, where Bhojpuri-speaking communities have historical roots dating back to the colonial era. These programs facilitate mutual understanding by introducing foreign audiences to the richness of Bhojpuri traditions while reinforcing cultural bonds with the diaspora. For example, Chhath Puja, a major Bhojpuri festival dedicated to the worship of the Sun God, has gained prominence in diaspora communities, with ICCR-sponsored events showcasing its rituals and music. Such initiatives not only promote cultural heritage but also position India as a nation that values its diverse regional identities. The ICCR's efforts to promote the Bhojpuri language are equally

significant. By supporting language classes, literary festivals, and the publication of Bhojpuri literature, the ICCR ensures that the linguistic heritage of the Bhojpuri community is preserved and celebrated globally. These efforts resonate particularly with younger generations in the diaspora, who may be disconnected from their ancestral language but seek to reconnect with their roots. By fostering linguistic pride, India strengthens its cultural influence and builds lasting connections with global audiences.

Collaborations with Diaspora Organizations

Collaborations with diaspora organizations have been instrumental in promoting Bhojpuri culture as a tool of soft power. Organizations such as the Global Organization of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO) and regional Bhojpuri associations in countries like Mauritius and Fiji work closely with Indian diplomatic missions to organize cultural events. These partnerships facilitate the exchange of artists, scholars, and cultural practitioners, ensuring that Bhojpuri traditions remain vibrant in diaspora communities. For instance, Bhojpuri music and dance festivals organized in collaboration with diaspora groups attract diverse audiences, fostering cross-cultural dialogue and enhancing India's global image. These collaborations also enable India to address contemporary issues faced by the diaspora, such as cultural alienation and identity preservation. By promoting Bhojpuri culture, India provides diaspora communities with a sense of belonging and continuity, reinforcing their emotional and cultural ties to the homeland. This, in turn,

strengthens India's diplomatic leverage, as diaspora communities often serve as informal ambassadors, promoting Indian culture and values in their host countries. India's cultural diplomacy has increasingly embraced Bhojpuri culture. Initiatives such as the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (Overseas Indian Day) and cultural exchange programs provide platforms to celebrate Bhojpuri heritage.¹² Additionally, efforts by organizations like the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) to promote Bhojpuri music, dance, and language globally highlight its importance in India's soft power strategy.¹³ Collaborations with diaspora organizations have further strengthened cultural ties and facilitated the global promotion of Bhojpuri traditions.

Challenges and Opportunities :

While Bhojpuri culture holds immense potential as a tool of soft power, several challenges must be addressed to maximize its impact. One significant challenge is the perception of Bhojpuri culture as a regional rather than a national asset. In India, regional cultures are sometimes overshadowed by more dominant cultural narratives, such as those associated with Bollywood or classical Indian arts. To counter this, the Indian government must continue to elevate Bhojpuri culture through national and international platforms, ensuring it is recognized as an integral part of India's cultural identity. Another challenge is the need to balance cultural

preservation with modernization. As younger generations in the diaspora engage with globalized cultures, there is a risk of losing traditional Bhojpuri practices. Initiatives such as language classes, cultural workshops, and youth-focused festivals can address this by making Bhojpuri culture relevant to contemporary audiences. Additionally, collaborations with international cultural institutions can help integrate Bhojpuri elements into global artistic discourses, ensuring their relevance in a rapidly changing world. Younger members of the diaspora are increasingly disconnected from their Bhojpuri roots due to assimilation into host cultures.¹⁴ While Bhojpuri culture has a strong presence in certain regions, it remains underrepresented on the global stage compared to other Indian cultural assets.¹⁵

The opportunities for leveraging Bhojpuri culture in soft power diplomacy are vast. The global Indian diaspora, estimated at over 30 million, provides a ready audience for cultural initiatives. By strengthening ties with these communities, India can enhance its diplomatic influence in regions such as the Caribbean, Africa, and Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the universal themes of Bhojpuri culture—resilience, community, and spirituality—offer opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue, enabling India to build bridges with diverse global audiences. Social media, streaming services, and online forums provide opportunities to promote Bhojpuri music, cinema, and literature to a wider

audience.¹⁶ Increased governmental and institutional investment in Bhojpuri cultural promotion can enhance its global impact.¹⁷

Conclusion :

Bhojpuri culture is a vibrant and adaptable component of India's cultural heritage, making it a valuable asset in soft power diplomacy. Its global presence, sustained by the Bhojpuri-speaking diaspora, serves as a testament to the enduring appeal of Indian traditions. By leveraging Bhojpuri culture through strategic initiatives, India can enhance its cultural diplomacy, strengthen international relations, and project its values of diversity and inclusivity on the global stage. Investing in the preservation and promotion of Bhojpuri traditions will ensure their relevance and expand their contribution to India's soft power influence. Recognizing the potential of Bhojpuri culture as a critical pillar of diplomacy will allow India to build stronger cultural and diplomatic bridges worldwide. Bhojpuri culture, with its rich traditions and global resonance, plays a pivotal role in India's soft power diplomacy. Through initiatives like the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, cultural exchange programs, and the efforts of the ICCR, India has successfully projected Bhojpuri heritage on the global stage, fostering connections with the diaspora and engaging international audiences. Collaborations with diaspora organizations and the growing influence of Bhojpuri cinema further amplify these efforts, positioning Bhojpuri

culture as a dynamic tool for cultural diplomacy. By addressing challenges and seizing opportunities, India can continue to harness the power of Bhojpuri culture to enhance its global influence, build cultural bridges, and strengthen diplomatic ties. In doing so, Bhojpuri culture not only enriches India's soft power strategy but also underscores the enduring strength of its diverse cultural heritage.

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