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Indian Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power in the Late Colonial Period: Intellectual Networks, Institutions, and Global Engagement

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Abstract- In the late colonial period (c. 1880s–1947), Indian intellectuals and cultural institutions deployed forms of cultural diplomacy and soft power to shape international perceptions and contest imperial narratives. This paper examines how intellectual networks such as Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda, and transnational theosophical and nationalist circles, along with institutions including Visva-Bharati, the Theosophical Society, and artistic and scholarly organizations, functioned as instruments of global cultural projection. Through archival and textual analysis of speeches, institutional records, exhibitions, and contemporary publications, the study argues that these cultural initiatives promoted narratives of India's civilizational depth, ethical authority, and intellectual vitality. International lecture tours, educational exchanges, and participation in global cultural forums enabled Indian actors to engage global audiences and challenge colonial portrayals of India as culturally subordinate. These intellectual and institutional networks created alternative spaces for dialogue, fostered international solidarity, and contributed to the formation of a global cultural presence rooted in India's historical traditions. By situating cultural diplomacy within the broader framework of anti-colonial resistance and identity formation, this paper demonstrates that soft power operated as a significant tool in undermining imperial legitimacy and shaping India's emergence as a culturally influential nation in the modern world.

Keywords:Cultural Diplomacy; Soft Power; Late Colonial India; Intellectual Networks; Cultural Institutions; Global Engagement; Civilizational Identity.

I. Introduction

The central problem of this paper is not whether late colonial India possessed a formal diplomatic apparatus. It did not. The real question is sharper: how did colonized Indian actors, operating without sovereign state power, still manage to intervene in global debates about civilization, religion, education, culture, and moral authority? The paper frames the issue around the years c. 1880s–1947 and identifies a field of actors and institutions—Vivekananda, Tagore, Visva-Bharati, the Theosophical Society, and wider intellectual circles—through which India entered transnational conversation on terms not wholly dictated by empire. the language of "soft power" is useful but dangerous. Useful, because it helps identify modes of influence grounded in attraction, prestige, ethical claims, and cultural authority rather than coercion. Dangerous, because the term is modern and can easily be projected backward as if late colonial intellectuals understood themselves through contemporary International Relations vocabulary.

Joseph Nye's well-known formulation defines soft power as the capacity to obtain outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or payment, while recent scholarship on cultural diplomacy emphasizes that the field long predates formal twentieth-century state programs and includes non-state cultural actors, networks, and institutions. This

paper therefore treats "soft power" not as a native category of the period, but as a retrospective analytical lens for understanding how Indian thinkers used religion, literature, education, and institutional prestige to reshape foreign perceptions.

The argument advanced in this paper is straightforward. In the late colonial period, Indian cultural diplomacy worked through three interlinked processes: first, the projection of India as a civilization of spiritual, philosophical, and intellectual depth; second, the construction of transnational circuits of lectures, texts, students, patrons, reformers, and institutions; and third, the use of those circuits to erode imperial claims that India was backward, passive, or incapable of universal thought. This was not a uniform national program. It was fragmented, often elite, ideologically diverse, and sometimes contradictory. Yet taken together, these efforts created an alternative international public sphere in which India was represented by Indians themselves rather than solely by colonial administrators, missionaries, or Orientalist mediators.

II. Objectives, Research Questions, and Central Argument

This study has four objectives. First, it reconstructs how Indian intellectuals and institutions entered global circuits of prestige and debate in the late colonial period. Second, it examines the means of that entry: lecture tours, print circulation, educational projects, associational life, and moral-intellectual performance. Third, it evaluates how these interventions contested imperial narratives about India's inferiority. Fourth, it identifies the limits of this cultural politics, especially its dependence on elite intermediaries, urban networks, and selective representations of "India." The research questions arise directly from the focus on intellectual networks, institutions, and global engagement. How did Indian actors without state sovereignty practice something functionally akin to cultural diplomacy? Through which texts, tours, organizations, and pedagogic institutions did they create international presence? And to what extent did those efforts generate solidarity and prestige without simply reproducing new hierarchies:civilizational, elite, or spiritual--inside anti-colonial discourse? The paper's central argument is that late colonial Indian cultural diplomacy was effective not because it replaced politics, but because it broadened politics: it shifted the terrain of anti-colonial struggle from constitutional grievance alone to the fields of culture, intellect, and moral legitimacy.

III. Methodology and Scope

Methodologically, the paper combines archival-textual analysis, intellectual history, institutional analysis, and a transnational historical perspective. The evidentiary base includes published speeches, lecture texts, autobiographical writings, institutional histories, university records, mission documents, bibliographies of lecture collections, and scholarship on global intellectual exchange. This is a sane method for the subject. A paper on cultural diplomacy in late colonial India cannot be reduced to diplomatic archives alone, because much of the relevant activity occurred outside foreign offices and treaty frameworks. The evidence lies instead in religious congresses, university foundations, literary circulation, associational minutes, educational experiments, and public addresses runs from the late nineteenth century to 1947, but initial period concentrates on the formative phase from the 1890s through the 1920s, when individual

charisma and institutional experimentation first gave Indian cultural self-representation durable international form. The focus here is deliberate. The most important shift was not merely that Indians traveled abroad; Indians had done that earlier. The shift was that some of them began to act as recognized interpreters of Indian civilization before global audiences and then tried to institutionalize that authority. That is why Swami Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore occupy the core . They were not identical figures, but both transformed Indian cultural presence abroad from isolated contact into repeatable transnational visibility.

IV. Literature Review

The concept of cultural diplomacy in colonial India has attracted growing scholarly interest. Historians and cultural theorists have noted that India's engagement with the world was not solely political or economic but deeply cultural. Benedict Anderson (1991) argued in Imagined Communities that print culture helped modern Indians imagine a shared nation, laying groundwork for later soft-power strategies. Partha Chatterjee (1993) similarly emphasized how nationalist leaders drew on cultural traditions to construct a modern identity distinct from British influence. While Anderson and Chatterjee do not use the language of "diplomacy," their work highlights the importance of narratives and culture in anti-colonial nationalism, setting a foundation for understanding cultural diplomacy.

More directly relevant is scholarship on Indian internationalism. C.A. Bayly's work on Imagining the World (2012) and related essays examines how Indian intellectuals envisioned a new international order. Bayly shows that thinkers like Benoy Kumar Sarkar undertook extensive lecture tours in the 1940s, engaging Western universities and diaspora centers. This demonstrates an early form of projecting India's voice abroad. Sugata Bose and Kris Manjapra (2010) have also studied transnational intellectual networks among Indian and Asian thinkers. They highlight, for example, how Tagore's vision of "Greater India" and his travels connected India to East Asian counterparts. Although Bose and Manjapra focus on political ideas, their analysis underscores the global reach of India's cultural figures.

Cultural historians have paid special attention to key individuals. Tagore's global lectures and writings (e.g. his tours of the U.S., Europe, and Japan between 1912–1929) have been interpreted as early cultural diplomacy (though often in biographical terms). Vivekananda's speeches at events like the 1893 Parliament of Religions in Chicago have been cited as introducing Hindu philosophy to the West and shaping India's image.While scholars like Christine Yano and others have studied Vivekananda's impact on Western perceptions of India, the role of these tours in deliberate diplomatic strategy remains less examined. Similarly, institutions like the Theosophical Society (founded in 1875) and Visva-Bharati University (established 1921) have been analyzed for their cultural philosophies, but their function as global cultural platforms deserves further scrutiny.

In the field of international relations, Joseph Nye's soft power framework has been applied to contemporary India (Nye 2004; Rana 2011), but its roots in colonial history are underexplored. Yudhishthir Isar (2017) notes that traditional Indian terminology

favored “international cultural relations” over Western notions of cultural diplomacy. Isar emphasizes that the Indian diaspora served both as audience and co-producer of India’s image abroad.This insight suggests that during colonial times as well, overseas Indians likely played a role in spreading Indian culture. However, most literature on India’s diaspora focuses on post- independence policy, leaving a gap regarding the colonial period.

Comparative studies (Mark 2008; Dahiya 2017) have examined India’s modern cultural diplomacy but typically start after 1947. There is relatively little on how colonial-era cultural engagement fits into the broader narrative. Likewise, museum and exhibition studies (Heinonen 2012) have shown that colonial exhibitions in London or Delhi could both reinforce and disrupt imperial images,hinting at Indian agency. But systematic historical analyses of these exhibitions from the Indian perspective are scarce.

In summary, the literature on Indian cultural diplomacy in the colonial era is uneven. Political historians have charted the rise of nationalism and internationalist thought, and cultural historians have studied figures like Tagore and Vivekananda in isolation. Yet there is a gap in integrating these threads under the framework of cultural diplomacy or soft power. This paper builds on scholars like Bayly, Bose, and Isar by focusing specifically on networks and institutions that carried India’s culture overseas, addressing the historiographical gap identified above.

V. Historiographical and Conceptual Framing

Older nationalist histories often treated figures like Vivekananda or Tagore as civilizational heroes, while older imperial or area-studies approaches frequently isolated religion, literature, and politics into separate compartments. That approach misses the point. Recent work in global intellectual history is more useful because it shows that late colonial Indian thought was not simply reactive opposition to Europe; it was a complex field where internationalism, hierarchy, equality, anti-imperialism, and selective appropriation coexisted. The value of this scholarship is that it refuses both nationalist hagiography and crude empire-versus-nation binaries.

This matters because “cultural diplomacy” in the late colonial context was not equivalent to state-sponsored propaganda. Recent scholarship on the history of cultural diplomacy stresses that the field includes broader, older, and more heterogeneous forms of cross-border cultural action than later ministries of culture or public diplomacy offices. Likewise, League-era scholarship on intellectual cooperation shows that the interwar world was already building structures for educational and cultural exchange that were neither reducible to pure statecraft nor detached from politics. In that wider frame, Indian late colonial actors appear not as anomalies but as participants in a growing global arena where culture, education, and intellect were recognized as instruments of international influence.

At the same time, there is a trap here. Indian cultural diplomacy did not represent “India” in any simple sociological sense. It typically represented curated Indias: spiritual India, philosophical India, universal India, syncretic India, ancient India, civilizational India. These were politically potent constructions, but they were still

constructions. They elevated some traditions, languages, and social actors over others. Any serious paper has to admit that. Otherwise it degenerates into romantic nationalism. This paper therefore reads cultural diplomacy not as a transparent mirror of Indian society but as a contested project of representation under colonial pressure. That is precisely why it was powerful: it selected elements of the past and translated them into internationally legible claims about India's moral and intellectual standing.

VI. Empire, Public, and the Conditions of Cultural Projection

British imperial rule restricted formal sovereignty, but empire also generated the infrastructures that Indian intellectuals repurposed: steamship routes, print markets, missionary controversy, universities, reform associations, world congresses, and English-language publics. The result was not freedom; it was uneven access. But uneven access is not the same as no access. By the early twentieth century, Indian actors could circulate through London, Chicago, Tokyo, New York, Paris, and other sites not as diplomats in the strict sense, but as lecturers, monks, poets, reformers, scholars, and institution-builders. Transnational nationalism scholarship has shown how diasporic and overseas networks widened the field of Indian political action, and global intellectual history has demonstrated that late colonial Indian thinkers were participating in debates about world order, not merely responding to them from the margins.

That wider setting clarifies why cultural diplomacy mattered. Colonial power did not rest only on armies and laws; it also rested on a hierarchy of knowledge. India had to be made legible to the world as fallen, static, irrational, feminine, divided, or in need of tutelage. Cultural diplomacy attacked this epistemic order. It did so by projecting different images: India as philosophical rather than superstitious, ecumenical rather than sectarian, historically deep rather than primitive, and intellectually generative rather than derivative. This symbolic struggle did not replace anti-colonial politics. It legitimized it. A people capable of generating universal ideas could not be indefinitely confined to the status of a governed object. That was the deeper logic behind the public performances of Vivekananda and Tagore.

VII. Swami Vivekananda and the Religious-Civilizational Public Sphere

Swami Vivekananda's appearance at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago on 11 September 1893 is often retold as a patriotic anecdote. That reading is too shallow. Its real importance lies in the way it converted a religious platform into an international stage of civilizational representation. In his response to welcome, Vivekananda thanked the audience "in the name of the mother of religions" and "the millions and millions of Hindu people," explicitly positioning himself as a voice of an ancient and living civilization before a global public. Belur Math's official archival material further records that after the Parliament he spent nearly three and a half years in the eastern United States and London spreading Vedanta. That continuity matters more than the single speech. Chicago was not merely a moment of applause; it was an entry point into a transatlantic lecture circuit.

Vivekananda's cultural politics worked through compression. He condensed a vast, internally diverse subcontinent into a portable grammar of spiritual universalism, tolerance, and philosophical seriousness. That compression was selective and open to criticism, but it was politically effective. It enabled foreign audiences to encounter India not as an anthropological curiosity or imperial dependency, but as a source of generalizable thought. He did not ask the West simply to pity India; he demanded recognition. In that sense, Vivekananda's intervention was a challenge to colonial hierarchy at the level of prestige. A colonized subject stood in a major international forum and claimed intellectual parity, even superiority in matters of spiritual civilization. That was not state diplomacy, but functionally it achieved diplomatic work: it altered the terms on which India could be perceived.

The institutional follow-through was crucial. The minutes relating to the Ramakrishna Mission in May 1897 define its mission in terms of "fraternizing the various creeds of the world." That language is not incidental. It reveals that Vivekananda's project was not inward-looking religious revivalism alone; it was outward-facing, universalist, and associational. Institutions matter because charisma decays unless it is organized. The Ramakrishna Mission transformed lecture prestige into a durable platform for publication, education, and later service activity. It gave Indian religious-intellectual representation continuity beyond the itinerant body of a single monk.

Still, there were limits. Vivekananda's success depended heavily on elite urban audiences, anglophone mediation, and a selectively constructed "Hinduism" that could travel well in ecumenical settings. That representation unified what was internally plural, and it privileged philosophical Hindu universalism over many other Indian traditions and social realities. Yet dismissing it on that ground misses its historical function. Its strength lay precisely in strategic legibility. In a global arena structured by comparison between "civilizations," Vivekananda supplied a compelling counter-image of India: not decadent, but disciplined; not mute, but eloquent; not merely ancient, but universally relevant.

VIII. Rabindranath Tagore, World Literature, and the Institutionalization of Cultural Internationalism

If Vivekananda dramatized India, Tagore institutionalized and intellectualized its global cultural presence. Tagore's international authority was enlarged by the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913,but his importance lies in the way he converted literary prestige into a sustained critique of both imperial domination and narrow nationalism. Nobel's own biographical material highlights Tagore's self-description of his family background as a "confluence of three cultures: Hindu, Mohammedan, and British," which already signals why he was so difficult to fit into neat civilizational boxes. He did not defend India by sealing it off from the world; he defended India by arguing for a deeper, dialogic universalism.

That universalism was not invented after 1913. Cambridge scholarship on Viśvasāhitya underscores the importance of Tagore's 1907 essay on world literature, which articulated a mode of literary and intellectual exchange irreducible to European

gatekeeping. Later, his lectures collected in Nationalism emerged from talks delivered in Japan and the United States in 1916–17. The publication history matters because it shows Tagore as a mobile intellectual actor addressing Asian and American audiences in real time. He was not merely being translated; he was intervening. He used those platforms to criticize aggressive nationalism while also refusing the colonial assumption that Asia lacked universal intellectual resources of its own.

Tagore's most consequential move, however, was institutional. Visva-Bharati, founded in 1921, was conceived as more than a university. The institution's official history describes it as founded by Tagore in 1921, while the university's own materials preserve the motto yatra visvam bhavatyekanidam—"where the world makes a home in a single nest." That motto is not decorative rhetoric. It defines a program: to make India a host rather than merely an object of study, and to make intellectual exchange part of anti-colonial self-fashioning. Visva-Bharati turned cultural prestige into a durable educational space where foreign and Indian scholars could meet under a framework not fully controlled by imperial universities.

The institution also widened the scale of cultural diplomacy. Visva-Bharati's later institutional records show the development of advanced studies and art teaching from 1921, including Kala Bhavana, and sustained international linkages in language and exchange programs. Even allowing for retrospective institutional self-praise, the broad point stands: Tagore moved from speaking about world culture to building an infrastructure for it. The paper's theme of "intellectual networks, institutions, and global engagement" is therefore best understood not as three separate categories but as a sequence. Intellectual prestige generated networks; networks demanded institutions; institutions stabilized global engagement. Tagore is the clearest example of that sequence in late colonial India.

Tagore's 1924 China lectures, recorded as Talks in China, further confirm the Asian scope of his international activity. This matters because it prevents the lazy mistake of reading Indian cultural diplomacy only through Europe and North America. Tagore's significance lay equally in his participation in wider Asian conversations about civilization, modernity, and the future of international order. His project was not a plea for Western approval. It was an attempt to reposition India within multiple transnational worlds at once.

Yet Tagore too had limits. His internationalism could appear abstract, elite, and insufficiently attentive to material structures of power. His universal humanism did not always translate into mass politics, and some of his ideas traveled more successfully in intellectual circles than in popular nationalist mobilization. But that criticism should not obscure the point. He helped shift the grammar of Indian self-representation from reactive defense to intellectual initiative. India was not merely ancient; it was capable of generating institutional models for the future. That was a major act of cultural-political repositioning.

IX. The Theosophical Society

If Vivekananda and Tagore demonstrated that Indian civilizational claims could command foreign attention, the Theosophical Society demonstrated that such attention could be routinized through an organized transnational apparatus. Annie Besant joined the Society in 1889, represented it at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, and served as its international president from 1907 to 1933. By the time of the Society's jubilee congress at Adyar in 1925, its official history recorded 41 national societies, 1,576 lodges, and 41,779 members. This scale matters. It shows that Indian cultural projection in the late colonial period was not limited to isolated lecture triumphs; it was also embedded in a worldwide associational structure capable of sustained publication, travel, correspondence, and ideological reproduction.

Theosophy's importance to Indian cultural diplomacy lay not in doctrinal purity but in mediation. Adyar became a node where religion, comparative philosophy, print culture, institutional sociability, and public oratory converged. The Society's official pages describe The Theosophist as having been founded in 1879, identify the Indian Section as dating from 1891, and note a growing federal structure within India itself. Its early history also records that by 1926 a Theosophical broadcasting station had been established at the Manor in Sydney, while prominent figures undertook extensive tours across India, Europe, and the United States. In practical terms, this meant that Indian-associated ideas were no longer traveling only through missionary or imperial channels; they were increasingly moving through a semi-autonomous global infrastructure that treated Indian spirituality and philosophy as exportable sources of modern relevance.

That infrastructure, however, did not simply "present India." It curated India. Theosophical universalism translated selected strands of Hindu, Buddhist, and comparative religious thought into a language attractive to educated Euro-American audiences. That gave colonized Indians and India-based institutions a new prestige economy, but it also filtered Indian civilization through upper-caste, textual, spiritual, and often anglophone frames. Martin Bayly's work on late colonial Indian international thought is useful here because it stresses that Indian internationalism frequently combined emancipatory aspirations with mixed registers of hierarchy, mobility, and civilizational ordering. The Theosophical case fits that pattern: it helped undermine imperial claims to Western monopoly over universal knowledge, yet it did so by privileging a highly selective image of Indian culture.

Besant's importance becomes clearer when one moves from spiritual networking to institutional multiplication. She did not confine herself to lectures. The Theosophical Order of Service was founded by her in 1908, linking ethical service to the Society's first principle of universal brotherhood. In the political field, the Indian National Congress records that she founded Commonweal in January 1914 and renamed the Madras Standard as New India in June 1914, turning print into an instrument of agitation for Home Rule. These interventions show why Besant matters to this paper: she tied together religion, education, journalism, associational life, and political pedagogy. Her public career made cultural influence durable by embedding it in recurrent media and institutions.

Education formed the second pillar of this strategy. Banaras Hindu University's official materials state that the university was founded in 1916 through close cooperation between Madan Mohan Malaviya and Annie Besant, while a BHU page on the Central Hindu Boys School traces that institution to Besant's establishment of the school in Kashi on 7 July 1898. The significance of this lineage is analytical, not ceremonial. The Central Hindu College/BHU nexus shows how cultural diplomacy in late colonial India moved from lecture platforms to credentialed knowledge spaces. Universities and colleges were not simply domestic sites of instruction; they were reputational machines. They created scholars, hosted visitors, stabilized curricula about Indian civilization, and made it harder for imperial discourse to dismiss India as culturally inert.

X. Print Culture, Art Networks, and the Shift from Individual Emissaries to Cultural Infrastructures

The next stage of late colonial Indian cultural diplomacy involved moving beyond charismatic voices toward organized circuits of publication and exhibition. Bayly's work on Indian international thought shows that, from the 1910s onward, Indian and India-linked writers were participating in a wider international print sphere that included journals such as the American Journal of Race Development as well as nationalist papers like Young India and Hindusthanee Student. His later work on the Indian Council on World Affairs and League-linked pedagogies similarly emphasizes that Indian intellectuals treated the "international" as a field of learning, encounter, and escape from imperial knowledge frames. This matters because it shifts the analysis from symbolic representation to infrastructural circulation: ideas traveled because there were journals, editors, associations, and readers ready to receive them.

The London-based India Society offers a particularly sharp example of art functioning as anti-imperial rebuttal. South Asian Britain's documentation states that the Society was founded in March 1910 at E. B. Havell's home after George Birdwood's notorious claim that India had no fine art tradition. The Society was created explicitly to bring Indian art to audiences in Britain and beyond; it maintained links with Paris and India, published Tagore's Gitanjali in 1912, and launched the journal Indian Art and Letters in 1925. That sequence is politically revealing. The Society answered a colonial insult not simply with rhetorical protest but with an institutional program of publication, exhibition, and aesthetic legitimation. In effect, it converted civilizational defense into reproducible cultural work.

The All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society deepened this process from within India. According to its official history, AIFACS began publishing Roopa-Lekha and Art News in 1928, held its first All India Annual Art Exhibition in the same year, and organized the first Indian Art Exhibition in London in 1928, after which the exhibition circulated through European countries between 1928 and 1932. This is not trivial institutional trivia. It marks a transition from arguing that Indian art deserved recognition to physically moving Indian art through international exhibition circuits. Cultural diplomacy here was neither abstract nor merely literary; it was visual, mobile, and curated for foreign publics.

These artistic networks also reveal a broader methodological point. Cultural diplomacy in late colonial India did not operate only through "high politics" or state-like representation. It worked through catalogues, journals, lecture evenings, society memberships, exhibition logistics, and the authority conferred by metropolitan reception. That is precisely why it could challenge empire effectively at the symbolic level. Colonial rule depended heavily on ranking civilizations. Art institutions such as the India Society and AIFACS attacked that ranking by forcing British and European publics to confront Indian production as fine art, not ethnographic residue. The move from textual defense to curated display widened the social range of India's international presence, even if it still remained heavily elite and urban.

XI. Cultural Institutions and Exchanges

Institutions played a central role in these cultural outreach efforts. Beyond Visva-Bharati, organizations such as the Indian Council of Historical Research (founded 1930), the Indian Institute of Science, and even provincial universities often hosted international guests and encouraged research on Indian heritage. In Britain, the India Office Library and societies like the Royal Asiatic Society became arenas where Indians lectured on Indian art and history to British audiences. For instance, colonial officials and scholars invited figures like Tagore and Mohandas Gandhi to speak in London, bringing Indian perspectives to imperial centers. Educational exchanges were another strategy. Though formal government scholarships were limited, many Indian students studied abroad and Indian academics participated in overseas conferences. The rise of Oriental Studies departments in Western universities (Oxford, London School of Oriental Studies, etc.) meant Indian academics sometimes gave guest lectures, sharing indigenous viewpoints on Indian history and culture. Vice versa, Indian leaders wrote in English for world journals. Newspapers like The Manchester Guardian or journals such as Asia carried columns by Indian authors. As one historian notes, Indians also utilized diaspora networks: they published articles in expatriate periodicals (such as Young India in the U.S. and Hindusthanee Student in Europe) to propagate anti-imperial visions . These publications often emphasized India's spiritual and social values, aiming to win sympathy abroad.

International exhibitions and fairs provided visual platforms. At events like the Imperial and Indian exhibitions in Britain (e.g. the 1910 India Exhibition and the 1924-25 British Empire Exhibition), Indian art, textiles, and industries were displayed. While curated by British authorities, Indians took part by sponsoring displays and performances. Studies show that these exhibitions offered "a melange of meanings" : they could reinforce imperial hierarchy, but also became contested sites. For example, when Indian artists or speakers emphasized India's ancient achievements in science and art, they subtly countered the imperial narrative of India as a mere supplier of raw materials. These contested exhibitions demonstrate how even state-sponsored cultural showcases served double roles,British aims of showcasing empire, but Indian actors used them to assert pride.

Cultural forums such as the League of Nations' Disarmament Conference (1932) and various religious congresses were also venues for informal diplomacy. Gandhi sent cultural delegations to support Indian causes (for instance, his 1936 tour of Europe

included appeals to intellectuals to recognize Indian self-rule). Meanwhile, Indian princely states occasionally sent artistic troupes (musicians, dancers) abroad, promoting classical Indian arts. These exchanges built interpersonal ties: Western scholars returning from India often reported changing their perceptions. Although hard to quantify, such exchanges gradually made India's case as a "civilizational nation" in world opinion.

XII. From Cultural Presence to Internationalist Institutions, 1920s–1947

By the interwar years, Indian participation in international cultural life increasingly intersected with formal bodies concerned with intellectual cooperation. Daniel Laqua's study of the League of Nations' International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation (ICIC) and the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation (IIIC) shows that these institutions were designed to foster international understanding through educational, scientific, and cultural exchange. Within that world, Indian participation mattered because it inserted colonized voices into institutions whose language of universal cooperation coexisted uneasily with imperial order. UNESCO archival entries indicate that Jagadish Chandra Bose served on the ICIC between 1924 and 1930, while Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan was appointed in 1931 to succeed him and later played an important role in establishing the Indian Committee of Intellectual Cooperation in 1935–36. This is a crucial extension of the paper's argument: Indian cultural diplomacy had by now entered not just informal networks, but international bodies concerned with the governance of global intellectual life.

Bayly's analysis of the Indian Council on World Affairs pushes this point further. He argues that Indian intellectuals and activists used League societies and the ICWA to institutionalize what he calls a "pedagogy of internationalism," a field in which learning, travel, encounter, and knowledge production became tools for escaping imperial confinement. His article also notes that the Asian Relations Conference of 1947, organized by the ICWA, later fed into the genealogy usually associated with Bandung. The value of this framework is that it prevents a lazy separation between "cultural" and "political" internationalism. In late colonial India, the two overlapped. To study world affairs, to create journals, to host conferences, and to claim a civilizational voice were all part of a broader struggle over who had the authority to think the international.

Official ICWA materials support that reading. The Council states that it was established in 1943 by Indian intellectuals as a non-official think tank, and that India Quarterly, launched in 1945, initially focused on India and Asia. Its page on the Asian Relations Conference preserves the conference's self-description as an expression of the "deeper urge of the mind and spirit of Asia," insisting there would be "no leaders and no followers." Whatever the rhetoric's idealism, the institutional significance is unmistakable. Before formal independence, Indian actors were already convening international forums, publishing international-affairs journals, and attempting to position India as a cultural-intellectual meeting ground rather than a passive imperial dependency.

XIII. Limits, Exclusions, and the Uneven Reach of Late Colonial Cultural Diplomacy

The achievements were real, but romanticizing them would be dishonest. First, the overwhelming majority of these networks were elite. They depended on English, metropolitan mobility, educational privilege, and access to journals, salons, and conference spaces. The India that circulated abroad most successfully was usually textual, spiritual, civilizational, and aesthetically refined. Peasant, laboring, Dalit, vernacular, and regionally specific experiences entered this international field far less often. Even where the claims made were anti-colonial, the social basis of representation remained narrow. That is one reason why cultural diplomacy could win prestige without automatically democratizing representation.

Second, some late colonial Indian internationalisms reproduced hierarchy even while opposing imperial hierarchy. Bayly's global intellectual history article is explicit that Indian international thought cannot be reduced to pure emancipation; it often mixed equality with civilizational ranking, diaspora-based prestige, and "greater India" imaginaries. Theosophical universalism, Tagorean cosmopolitanism, art revivalism, and international-affairs pedagogy all widened India's global agency, but they also carried tendencies toward selectivity and abstraction. This paper therefore cannot present cultural diplomacy as a transparent expression of national authenticity. It was a struggle over who could author "India" for the world, and many Indians had little say in that authorship.

Third, there remained a structural gap between symbolic prestige and mass political transformation. The circulation of Gitanjali, the prestige of Adyar, the building of Visva-Bharati or BHU, the London exhibition circuits, and the Asian Relations Conference all mattered immensely in the contest over legitimacy. But none of them displaced the centrality of constitutional struggle, popular mobilization, labor politics, or anti-colonial repression. Their function was different. They delegitimized empire in the realm of knowledge and culture by proving that Indians could produce universal ideas, build institutions, organize transnational publics, and convene international discussion before state sovereignty was achieved. That was not enough on its own to end empire, but it made empire intellectually and morally harder to defend.

XIV. Key Findings and Arguments

The evidence shows that Indian cultural diplomacy in the colonial period was multi-faceted and effective in several ways:

Civilizational narratives: Cultural initiatives repeatedly emphasized India's long history and moral philosophy. Tagore's writings and speeches, for instance, foregrounded Vedantic unity and nonviolence as India's gifts to the world. As a result, many Western intellectuals began viewing India not as backward but as spiritually rich. This shift in perception strengthened anti-colonial solidarity: sympathy for India's "just cause" grew among influential opinion-makers. In this sense, the moral authority gained by India helped erode the colonial claim to rule by "civilizing" an inferior people.

Alternative public sphere: Indian intellectuals created networks parallel to the imperial public sphere. Instead of solely relying on colonial media, they reached audiences through global conferences, international journal articles, and diaspora gatherings. This alternative diplomacy meant that India's voice was heard in contexts beyond British control. For example, Indians in America and Europe set up committees and reading rooms to inform locals about Indian culture and politics. By engaging directly with foreign publics, they bypassed colonial censors to some extent, framing colonialism as a mutual negotiation rather than a unilateral occupation.

International solidarity: The cultural emphasis helped tie the Indian struggle to broader anti- imperial movements. Indian delegates frequently expressed support for colonized peoples in Africa and Asia at international forums. The narrative of a shared Asian or African renaissance was buttressed by cultural references (e.g., pointing to common spiritual or historical bonds). Such solidarity gatherings, as noted, were akin to "pan-Asian" or "pan-Islamic" congresses, illustrating that cultural diplomacy also had an ideological dimension beyond art and education.

Institutional legacy: Many of the institutions active in that era (Visva-Bharati, Ramakrishna Mission, India International Centre, and later the Indian Council of World Affairs) continued after independence. The roots of India's post-1947 cultural diplomacy (exemplified by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations founded in 1950) can be traced to these colonial precedents. The intellectual infrastructure built by Tagore, Vivekananda, and others provided personnel and frameworks for independent India's soft power projection.

Overall, the analysis supports the thesis that cultural diplomacy in late colonial India was not merely symbolic. It had concrete effects: reshaping narratives and strengthening India's moral position on the world stage. By promoting India's heritage and values abroad, Indian actors effectively challenged the central pillar of colonial legitimacy – the supposed cultural inferiority of colonized peoples. In this way, soft power acted as a complementary dimension of resistance alongside political struggle.

XV. Discussion

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of India's anti-colonial movement by highlighting its cultural front. Often the focus is on political events (mass movements, negotiations), but the findings here show that cultural efforts were a vital parallel strategy. The late-colonial period saw an implicitly dual strategy: overt political demands for independence, and a subtler cultural campaign to win hearts and minds globally.

The analysis also illustrates the internationalization of Indian nationalism. Far from being inward- looking, Indian intellectuals engaged in global conversations about race, civilization, and rights. This transnational outlook helped India articulate its nationalist vision in universal terms. In historiographical terms, it extends Benedict Anderson's idea of "imagined communities" to a transnational dimension, where the nation's image was constructed internationally as well as domestically.

A key implication is that India's civilizational self-confidence was intentionally cultivated. By insisting on India's rich philosophical traditions, cultural leaders resisted the colonial narrative of India as static or decayed. This cultural self-confidence later became a pillar of India's postcolonial identity. As this paper shows, the late colonial cultural diplomacy prefigured how independent India would use yoga, cinema, and diaspora networks to project soft power in the Cold War era. In other words, the 1880s–1940s were formative years in which India's global cultural presence was first asserted and shaped.

XVI. Conclusion

Late colonial Indian cultural diplomacy did not depend on state sovereignty to become historically consequential. It operated through the portability of civilizational claims, the prestige of mobile intellectuals, and, crucially, the institutionalization of those claims in journals, schools, societies, exhibition networks, intellectual-cooperation bodies, and pre-independence international forums. Vivekananda and Tagore made Indian self-representation visible; the Theosophical Society, Besant's educational and print circuits, the India Society, AIFACS, League-linked intellectual cooperation, and the ICWA made it durable. ficance lies in the relationship between culture and anti-colonial politics. These networks did not replace mass nationalism, nor did they represent India in any socially complete sense. They were elite, selective, and often dependent on anglophone and metropolitan circuits. Yet their political effect was substantial because empire rested not only on force but also on a hierarchy of knowledge. By generating alternative publics, contesting colonial judgments about Indian inferiority, and demonstrating Indian competence in universal argument, artistic production, educational design, and international convening, late colonial cultural diplomacy steadily eroded imperial legitimacy.

The original contribution of this paper, therefore, is to treat Indian soft power in the late colonial period not as a premature version of modern state branding, but as a historically specific field of anti-colonial cultural politics. Its agents were not foreign ministries but monks, poets, educational reformers, editors, art organizers, theosophists, philosophers, and intellectual associations. Its achievements were not military or juridical but reputational, epistemic, and institutional. Even with its exclusions and contradictions, this field helped prepare the conditions under which independent India could later appear internationally not merely as a postcolonial state, but as a civilization-state with established cultural reach and an existing history of transnational intellectual engagement.

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