

# Cross-Border Popularity of TV Dramas between India and Turkey: A Study of the Global Exchanges of Media and Soft Culture

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## Abstract:

The global circulation of media and cultural products has significantly reshaped transnational cultural interactions in the 21st century. The relationship between India and Turkey offers a compelling example of how media flows contribute to Soft Power and cultural diplomacy. Through television dramas, cinema, and digital platforms, both countries engage in a dynamic exchange of narratives, values, and aesthetic forms, fostering cross-cultural understanding beyond formal political relations. The global television landscape has undergone profound transformation in recent decades, with television soap operas emerging as significant cultural commodities that travel across national boundaries. Two of the most notable phenomena in this terrain are Indian soap operas and Turkish television dramas (“*dizileri*”), both of which have achieved substantial cross-border popularity. While scholars have extensively studied the globalization of television content, comparatively less attention has been paid to bilateral or reciprocal audience flows, particularly between India and Turkey. This research paper examines the transnational circulation, audience reception, cultural dynamics, and socio-political implications of soap operas exchanged between India and Turkey. Drawing upon academic literature on globalization of media, cross-cultural communication, and transnational television flows, this paper situates the popularity of these cultural texts within broader theoretical frameworks of soft power, cultural proximity, audience uses and gratifications, and media economics. It argues that the mutual fascination with each other’s serial dramas reflects deep cultural resonances shaped by family structures, emotional narrative forms, and media distribution networks that extend beyond formal broadcast channels. Furthermore, this paper highlights how such cross-border popularity both reinforces and challenges local cultural norms, offering insights into the evolving media ecologies of India and Turkey.

**Key Words:** Indian Soap Operas; Turkish *Dizileri*; Global Media; Soft Culture; Cultural Proximity; Transnational Television Flows; Media Ecologies; and etc.

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## Introduction:

Television soap operas have historically dominated domestic television markets across the world, functioning not only as entertainment but also as social and cultural texts reflecting gender norms, family values, and socio-economic tensions. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Indian soap operas became a staple of domestic television, expanding their reach across Asia, Africa, and Europe. Simultaneously, Turkish television dramas initially exported across the Balkans and the West Asian region but later gained global attraction, reaching Latin America, South Asia, and beyond. The transnational circulation of these serials underscores shifting patterns in global media flows, where non-Western media products now compete alongside traditional Western exports.

In the early 21st century, global media markets have witnessed the transnational circulation of television content. This paper explores historical context, media globalization, audience reception, cultural exchange, narrative affinity, socio-political contexts, and implications for cultural diplomacy and media industries. It also examines the cross-border popularity of soap operas between India and Turkey. Drawing from academic research, industry reports, and audience studies, this research analyzes why these fictional serials cross borders, appeal to diverse audiences, and create cultural connectivity.

The mutual popularity of Indian and Turkish soap operas poses a compelling case to explore how seemingly localized narrative forms resonate across different cultural contexts. Although political and economic relations between India and Turkey have often experienced highs and lows, cultural exchange through television dramas presents an alternate axis of engagement, revealing audiences' preferences for melodramatic aesthetics, strong family narratives, and emotionally intensive plots.

Media globalization accelerates cultural exchange, but it also raises questions about representation, cultural identity, and power dynamics in global media flows. Turkey and India, two culturally rich nations with long histories of storytelling and dramatization, offer an intriguing site of study for understanding how media products can resonate far beyond their origin. Multiple dramas from India and Turkey have emerged and made a substantial place in both the international markets. Indian TV dramas like *Iss Pyaar Ko Kya Naam Doon?*, *Saath Nibhaana Saathiya*, *Madhubala*, *Balika Vadhu*, and *Saraswatichandra* have been aired on Turkish channels like KANAL D. While Turkish dramas beginning with *Feriha* in 2015 have followed multiple other dramas like *Fatma Gul*, *Kuzey Guney*, *Kizil Goncalar*, *Masum*, *Ertugrul*, *Osman* and others. These have been consumed by Indian audiences via online platforms, social media, and video on demand services.

Hence, this paper investigates three central questions:

1. What factors have driven the cross-border popularity of Indian soap operas in Turkey and Turkish soap operas in India?
2. How do audiences in Turkey and India engage with these transnational dramas, and what social and cultural gratifications do they derive from them?
3. What broader implications do these cross-border media flows hold for theories of cultural proximity, soft power, and media globalization?

## Theoretical Framework:

The theoretical framework is developed given into consideration the three popular approaches to the study of media and television.

(a) Cultural Proximity and Transnational Audiences: One central theory in understanding global media consumption is cultural proximity, which posits that audiences prefer media content that reflects cultural values similar to their own (Straubhaar, 1991). Cultural proximity suggests that shared traditions, family structures, and social values make certain foreign media products more relatable than others, even

within diverse linguistic or national contexts. In the case of Indian and Turkish soap operas, scholars have argued that the shared emphasis on family, community, and moral conflict creates fertile ground for cross-border appeal, despite linguistic and cultural differences (Sherin, 2024).

(b) **Soft Power and Media Exportation:** Joseph Nye's concept of soft power (the ability of a country to influence others through cultural or ideological appeal rather than coercion) has been widely applied to media studies. Media exportation, particularly of serial dramas that embody social values and lifestyles, has become a crucial vector for projecting national image and cultural influence abroad. Turkish soap operas have been recognized as a form of soft power, contributing to Turkey's global cultural footprint through emotional engagement and cultural familiarity (Aytac et al., 2024). The concept of Soft Power, introduced by Joseph Nye, emphasizes the ability of a country to influence others through attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 2004). Media and cultural exports are central to this process. In the context of globalization, cultural flows are multidirectional, enabling non-Western countries such as India and Turkey to emerge as influential cultural producers (Appadurai, 1996).

(c) **Audience Uses and Gratifications:** This approach examines how audiences actively seek media to satisfy specific psychological and social needs. This perspective has been applied to Turkish viewers of Indian soap operas, revealing motivations such as identification, relaxation, moral support, and escapism. These findings indicate that viewers selectively use transnational soap operas to fulfil emotional and social needs, rather than merely consuming them passively (Yücel & Çapraz, 2022).

### **Historical Context of Soap Operas in India and Turkey:**

Indian television history is replete with serialized drama formats that reflect complex family structures and social dilemmas. Beginning with early classics such as *Hum Log* and later mainstream commercial soaps, Indian serials developed an expansive domestic audience and a recognizable aesthetic rooted in melodrama. Over the decades, Indian soap operas extended their reach beyond national borders, resonating with audiences in South Asia, West Asia, and parts of Africa. Their themes centered on familial duty, romance, and morality have universal appeal among diverse audiences.

India's television industry has long been dominated by daily soap operas characterized by extended family narratives, dramatic twists, social values, and emotional engagement. Serial dramas such as *Kyunki Saas*, *Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* and *Kasautii Zindagii Kay* became household names in the 1990s and 2000s, shaping popular television culture. Indian soap operas traditionally focus on familial relationships, moral lessons, and social hierarchies, often appealing to a broad demographic of viewers across the subcontinent. The export of Indian television dramas also began in the early 2000s. Markets in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and other regions have historically aired Indian dramas dubbed in local languages. This export has been part of India's soft power projection through entertainment.

On the other hand, Turkish television dramas, commonly referred to as "*Dizileri*", emerged as a major cultural export from the early 2000s. With high production values, long narratives, and emotionally charged storytelling, Turkish series began to dominate screens across the Balkans and West Asia before entering Latin American and South Asian markets. By the 2010s, Turkey had become one of the largest exporters of scripted television content globally, reflecting both industry growth and deliberate strategies of media distribution (Aytac et al., 2024). Turkish television drama emerged as a global phenomenon in the 2000s. Early successes, such as *Gümüş (Noor)*, became widely watched in the West Asian countries and beyond. Turkish soap operas are known for their high production values, cinematic look, compelling narratives and emotional intensity. These dramas often explore social, familial, romantic, and historical themes that appeal to diverse audiences beyond Turkey. By the mid of 2010s, Turkish series were being broadcast in over 150 countries, generating substantial export revenues.

Indian soap operas often have long continuous runs, daily episodes, and an emphasis on familial complexity, extended casts, ritualistic celebrations, melodrama, and moral polarization. In contrast, Turkish dramas usually have shorter seasons, weekly broadcasts, cinematic visuals, and an emphasis on romantic and personal growth. These structural differences influence viewer expectations and engagement patterns. Indian series provide habitual daily immersion, while Turkish soap operas offer discrete narratives that may appeal to viewers seeking more contained storylines. Both Indian and Turkish soap operas emphasize family, romance, honor, and social relationships, albeit in culturally specific ways. The cross-border appeal arises from these shared values, allowing audiences to identify with emotional struggles and relational dynamics despite differences in language and context. Turkish dramas often embed modern themes with traditional values, presenting protagonists navigating between personal desires and societal norms. Indian soap operas often foreground extended family dynamics, moral lessons, and episodic tension that sustain long-term viewer loyalty.

### **Cross-Border Popularity of Soap-Operas between India and Turkey:**

Indian soap operas have gathered a dedicated audience in Turkey. The preference for Indian serials among certain Turkish audiences reflects more than mere novelty; it indicates how narrative styles deeply rooted in family and moral expectations resonate beyond linguistic and national boundaries. Indian soap operas often foreground multi-generational households, hierarchical family relations, and moral adversity (elements that find cultural proximity with traditional segments of Turkish society).

*Iss Pyaar Ko Kya Naam Doon?* (broadcasted in Turkey as *Bir Garip Aşk*) became extremely popular, reportedly topping ratings for several years and consistently attracting viewership. Other Indian serials like *Iss Pyaar Ko Kya Naam Doon? Saath Nibhaana Saathiya*, *Madhubala*, *Balika Vadhu*, and *Saraswathichandra* were also broadcasted and gained attention among Turkish audiences. Unlike typical Turkish primetime serials that air weekly, Indian series were broadcast daily, creating habitual engagement among viewers.

Academic research has explored why Turkish viewers watch Indian soap operas. A primary and face to face interaction with Turkish female viewers revealed multiple motivations including identification with characters, entertainment, moral support, and relaxation. Many viewers cited the appeal of traditional values, familial roles, and emotional storytelling in Indian soap operas that contrasted with some local Turkish series. Additionally, the content served as an escape and provided viewers with narrative satisfaction.

Similarly, Indian audiences engage with Turkish dramas not simply as foreign narratives but as textual experiences that offer alternate narrative styles compared to Indian soaps. Turkish series are often appreciated for their comparatively concise storytelling structures, European aesthetic sensibilities, and romantic or historical themes, which contrast with the long-running melodramatic acts typical of Indian serials.

With Hindi dubbing, *Feriha* introduced Indian audiences to Turkish storytelling in 2015 marked by romance, drama, and complex characters. Its success helped Zindagi TV channel to become a top entertainment channel in India. In the years following the initial success of Turkish dramas in India, several other series were systematically dubbed into Hindi and distributed through television networks as well as emerging digital streaming platforms. Prominent examples include *Ask Laftan Anlamaz* and *Bizim Hikaye*, both of which garnered considerable popularity among Indian audiences due to their compelling narratives centered on romantic relationships, emotional conflicts, and intricate family structures. These thematic elements closely align with the sensibilities of Indian viewers, thereby facilitating cross-cultural reception and engagement.



Subsequently, the circulation of Turkish television content expanded significantly, with a diverse range of series such as *Fatmagül'ün Suçu Ne?*, *Kuzey Güney*, *Kızıl Goncalar*, *Masum*, *Diriliş: Ertuğrul*, and *Kuruluş: Osman* gaining widespread traction in India. This growing consumption has been largely driven by the proliferation of online streaming services, social media platforms, and video-on-demand (VoD) technologies, which have enabled greater accessibility and audience reach. Scholars have noted that the global dissemination of Turkish dramas, often referred to as “dizi,” reflects broader patterns of transnational media flow and cultural globalization, wherein non-Western content increasingly challenges traditional media hierarchies (Kraidy & Al-Ghazzi, 2013; Yesil, 2015).

Moreover, the appeal of these series lies not only in their high production quality but also in their ability to portray culturally nuanced yet universally relatable themes, thereby fostering what Koçer (2019) describes as a “cultural proximity” with audiences beyond Turkey. In the Indian context, this has translated into sustained viewer engagement and the gradual integration of Turkish serials into the broader landscape of global entertainment consumption (Kaptan & Kraidy, 2018).

Digital media has played a crucial role in accelerating cultural exchange. Social networking sites such as Instagram and Twitter enable the formation of transnational fan communities. These platforms facilitate the sharing of subtitles, fan edits, and discussions, thereby enhancing audience engagement (Jenkins, 2006). Such participatory cultures transform viewers into active cultural intermediaries, contributing to the reinterpretation and localization of foreign media content.

Multiple factors contributed to the Turkish soap opera boom in India like the cultural resonance and familial narratives, high quality production, exotic appeal with familiar themes, and platform accessibility. Indian and Turkish societies share social structures that value family, honor, and relationships. The emotional narratives and dramatic conflicts in Turkish series resonate with Indian viewers who are familiar with long-running family dramas. Turkish series are often produced with higher technical standards, cinematic aesthetics, and strong narrative pacing, which provided a refreshing contrast to some Indian daily soaps. Turkey’s cultural elements its blend of traditional values with modern narratives offer Indian audiences a sense of both novelty and familiarity. Romance, familial obligations, and social conflicts are universal themes that create empathetic connections across cultural boundaries.

The popularity of Indian and Turkish soap operas in each other’s markets can be understood within the broader context of media globalization, where content flows are no longer dominated by Western (especially American) media. Instead, regional producers and broadcasters utilize global distribution networks, OTT platforms, dubbing, and localization strategies to reach new audiences. The advent of digital platforms has accelerated cross-border content consumption, enabling subtitling, dubbing, and targeted distribution strategies. OTT platforms have been instrumental in expanding the reach of Turkish dramas in India and Indian serials in Turkey. While recent geopolitical tensions have triggered boycott calls and removal of certain Turkish content in India, the overall trend reflects enduring audience demand. Media content seldom exists in a vacuum separated from politics. Geopolitical developments like recent tensions between India and Turkey over broader regional issues, have influenced cultural exchange. In India, certain segments have called for boycotts of Turkish content on digital platforms due to political disagreements. These developments demonstrate how political relations can shape media circulation and audience reception beyond artistic value. However, cultural products like soap operas also act as soft diplomacy channels. Shared media experiences can foster cultural understanding, challenge stereotypes, and create empathetic connections between distant audiences. Digital platforms (OTT) have made it easier for Indian audiences to access Turkish dramas with language dubbing or subtitles, broadening the viewer base beyond traditional television.

The popularity of Turkish series stimulated discussion about narrative structures and storytelling formats in India. Some industry commentators argue that Turkish dramas, with finite season lengths and coherent arcs, influenced viewer expectations compared to Indian soap operas that often run for years. This has contributed to debates over content quality and narrative diversity in Indian television.

### **Indian Television Dramas in Turkey:**

Indian cinema especially Bollywood had made inroads into Turkish society long before the TV dramas. Indian films, known for their music, dance, and melodrama, have historically attracted global audiences, including in Turkey (Dwyer, 2014). With the rise of global streaming platforms like Netflix, Indian films and series are becoming more accessible to Turkish audiences. This has led to increased familiarity with Indian cultural practices, festivals, and social norms.

In 2015, the Indian television drama *Iss Pyaar Ko Kya Naam Doon?* was imported to Turkey and was broadcast on local channels as *Bir Garip Aşk*. Its success marked a significant moment in media exchange, showcasing the potential for Indian soap operas to attract substantial Turkish viewership. Subsequently, multiple Indian series like *Saath Nibhaana Saathiya*, *Madhubala*, *Balika Vadhu*, and *Saraswatichandra* were dubbed and aired on Turkish channels like KANAL D, with some achieving top ratings in prime slots.

The Indian culture, fashion, clothing, make-up, popular food, family etiquettes, dance numbers, songs, festivals, different regional cuisines, touristic places and other traditional and cultural attractions of India are well understood by the Turkish viewers through the dramas. Apart from the popularity of Bollywood, these Indian dramas and TV series are regularly impacting the Turkish viewers. Scholarly research employing the uses and gratifications framework found that Turkish female viewers embraced Indian soap operas for several reasons:

- Identification with characters and emotional experiences
- Guilty pleasure entertainment
- Relaxation and escape from daily routines
- Moral support, reflecting traditional values
- Idealization of familial and romantic ideals

This study emphasized that social and cultural values (particularly those aligning with traditional family structures and religious observances) directly influenced the appeal of Indian serials in Turkey. Notably, some Turkish viewers watched Indian soaps as a critique of increasingly liberal content in domestic Turkish dramas perceived as morally “explicit” (Yücel & Çapraz, 2022).

### **Turkish Television Dramas in India:**

The entry of Turkish television dramas into the Indian market is another fascinating discourse. One of the most prominent aspects of Indo-Turkish cultural exchange is the increasing popularity of Turkish television dramas in India. Series such as *Diriliş: Ertuğrul*, *Ask Laftan Anlamaz*, and *Bizim Hikaye* have been widely consumed by Indian audiences through dubbed versions on platforms like YouTube and MX Player. These dramas resonate with Indian viewers due to shared cultural values such as family cohesion, emotional storytelling, and moral conflicts. Scholars argue that Turkish series offer a blend of modernity and tradition, which aligns closely with Indian socio-cultural sensibilities (Kraidy, 2017). This has contributed to Turkey’s cultural visibility and soft power in South Asia.

The introduction of Turkish serials into the Indian media space occurred mainly through digital and alternative channels rather than mainstream broadcast television. The first Turkish drama that achieved breakthrough success in India was *Adını Feriha Koydum* (broadcast as *Feriha*) on the Indian channel

Zindagi in 2015. Later, other Turkish series were dubbed into Hindi and made available on Indian television and digital platforms. These included *Ask Laftan Anlamaz* and *Bizim Hikaye* among others, which captured Indian viewers' interest with themes of love, conflict, and familial relationships. Since then, multiple Turkish series like *Fatma Gul*, *Kuzey Guney*, *Kizil Goncalar*, *Masum*, *Ertugrul*, *Osman* and others have been consumed by Indian audiences via online platforms, social media, and video on demand services. However, the popularity of the series of *Dirilis Ertugrul* and *Kurulus Osman* aired through online platforms in India have dominated all the other Turkish serials viewership in India, perhaps because these were the series aired during Covid-19 lockdown period in India from 2020-2021 due to which people have utilised most of their time watching these elaborated and long episodes of the series.

When it comes to the distribution channels and viewership of Turkish dramas in India, although India's television landscape is dominated by domestic soaps and regional language serials, Turkish dramas have cultivated a niche audience through alternative access mechanisms including social media syndication, online streaming, and community sharing. These distribution circuits highlight how emergent digital media ecologies enable cross-border cultural flows independent of traditional broadcast channels.

### **Cross-Border Impact and Implications of Indian and Turkish Dramas:**

While Indian soap operas often feature extended family sagas and morally heightened conflict sustained over years or decades, Turkish dramas employ a tighter narrative structure with enhanced cinematic production values. These differences shape how each tradition is received abroad like Indian dramas attract viewers through prolonged emotional involvement, whereas Turkish series appeal through intense, episodic narratives with high visual quality.

Both Indian and Turkish serials demonstrate that cultural proximity is not limited to linguistic similarity. Instead, proximity arises from shared themes such as family loyalty, love, sacrifice, and honour that resonate across cultures. This underscores the complexity of audience preferences, which combine cultural specificity with universal emotional drivers.

The cross-border circulation of Indian and Turkish soap operas has several implications for media industries like the opening of the economic opportunities, creative influences and format innovations, as well as, cultural representation and identity. Exporting television content opens new revenue streams. Turkish media exports are estimated in the hundreds of millions of dollars, bolstered by international syndication rights. Indian content, while historically exported to neighboring regions, also finds niche audiences globally. Exposure to foreign dramas encourages innovation in domestic television industries. Indian producers may consider tighter narrative curves and production values seen in Turkish dramas, while Turkish broadcasters may adapt elements of Indian storytelling that appeal to their audiences. The popularity of soaps across borders raises questions about cultural representation. These media products carry cultural norms, values, and images of everyday life. While they can foster understanding, they may also perpetuate stereotypes if not contextualized critically.

The export and import of soap operas between India and Turkey also contribute to soft power dynamics, wherein both countries project aspects of their cultural values abroad through entertainment media. Turkish dramas have strengthened Turkey's cultural presence in India and other global markets, while Indian soap operas have resonated in Turkey in ways that reaffirm traditional family norms. The circulation of serial dramas highlights the decentralization of media distribution, where global flows occur through digital platforms beyond conventional television networks. This shift allows audiences to access foreign content without formal licensing, creating new patterns of media consumption and influencing local media ecologies. Moreover, cross-border popularity of television serials fosters intercultural dialogue, enabling audiences to encounter alternative cultural scripts and social imaginaries. It also

prompts hybridization, where narrative forms influence local content production styles and expectations. Since the exchange between Indian and Turkish media has also led to cultural hybridization, so the Turkish fashion trends, particularly modest clothing styles and jewellery, have influenced Indian consumers. Similarly, Indian wedding aesthetics, music, and dance have gained visibility among Turkish audiences. This process reflects what scholars describe as “glocalization,” where global cultural products are adapted to local contexts (Robertson, 1995). The result is a blending of cultural elements that transcends national boundaries. Despite these positive exchanges, certain challenges persist. Political tensions and diplomatic disagreements occasionally affect media distribution and cultural collaboration. Additionally, language barriers and limited institutional partnerships can restrict the depth of exchange.

## Conclusion:

The global exchanges of media and soft culture between India and Turkey highlight the growing importance of cultural diplomacy in international relations. Through television, cinema, and digital platforms, both countries engage in a meaningful dialogue that fosters mutual understanding and cultural appreciation. These exchanges not only expand entertainment markets but also strengthen people-to-people connections, demonstrating the power of media as a tool of soft influence in a globalized world. The cross-border popularity of soap operas between India and Turkey illustrates the powerful role of television drama in connecting diverse cultures. Through shared themes of love, family, conflict, and resilience, both Indian and Turkish soap operas have captivated audiences across linguistic and cultural barriers. The narrative structures and cultural values embedded in these soaps have facilitated transnational appeal. While Turkish dramas offered Indian audiences a new aesthetic and structure of storytelling, Indian soaps provided Turkish viewers with traditional emotional narratives that resonated with personal and social needs. In an increasingly globalized media environment, content flows between India and Turkey reflect broader patterns of cultural exchange, media economics, and audience agency. Despite political tensions that may complicate cultural flows, the enduring popularity of soap operas demonstrates the deep human desire for stories that reflect shared emotional experiences.

The cross-border popularity of soap operas between India and Turkey exemplifies the globalizing force of contemporary media industries. Far from being a unidirectional export from Western media centres, television dramas from India and Turkey circulate through audiences, practices, and platforms that reflect complex cultural affinities. Indian soap operas have gained attraction in Turkey through cultural proximity and shared social values; Turkish dramas have found an Indian audience through alternative distribution channels and narrative appeal. These phenomena illustrate how media globalization operates not merely through transnational capital flows but through audience engagement, cultural resonance, and narrative exchange.

Understanding the reciprocal popularity of soap operas between India and Turkey contributes to broader debates in media studies about the future of global entertainment, the role of culture in shaping media consumption, and the transformative potential of non-Western media forms in global cultural landscapes.

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