

Cinematic Heritage Mapping: How Gujarati Films Promote Culture, Tourism, and Regional Development

Dr. Jayshree Sidhpuriya¹, Dr. Hemlata Agarwal², Dr. Ranjan Sabhaya³

¹Assistant Professor, S. R. Luthra Institute of Management, Sarvajani University, Surat.

²Professor, S. R. Luthra Institute of Management, Sarvajani University, Surat.

³Assistant Professor, S. R. Luthra Institute of Management, Sarvajani University, Surat.

Abstract

Gujarati cinema, often referred to as Dhollywood or Gollywood, has played a pivotal role in preserving and perpetuating in Indian and Gujarat. This research paper delves into the intricate relationship between cinema and the preservation of cultural values, traditions and societal norms, even highlighting heritage. This study explores how Gujarati cinema acts as a powerful medium for cultural preservation by showcasing diverse aspects of Gujarati culture, including traditional ceremonies, festivals, familial structures, and regional customs. Films such as Lalo, Reva, Hellaro, Bhavai, and representations of the White Rann have played a significant role in bringing regional identity to a broader audience. This research paper aims to shed light on the intricate synergy between Gujarati cinema and the preservation of India's cultural tapestry and its impact on the tourism industry. Using a mixed-methods approach, including secondary tourism data, government reports, and content analysis of films, the study demonstrates a strong nexus between film, cultural branding, and tourism-driven economic growth. The paper also provides policy and pedagogical recommendations to capitalize on this potential for sustainable heritage development.

Keywords: Gujarati cinema, Tourism, economic development. Culture, Narrative.

1. Introduction

Gujarat, in western India, is a repository of profound cultural, historical, and architectural heritage—from ancient Indus cities to medieval forts, folk traditions to pilgrimage circuits, and salt deserts to vibrant tribal rituals. Tourism in Gujarat has surged in recent decades, not solely due to religious and business travel but increasingly because of heritage tourism, driven in part by cinematic representations. Cinema, especially regional Gujarati films and Bollywood productions set in Gujarat, serves as a potent cultural medium that visualizes, dramatizes, and brands the heritage landscape.

This paper investigates how Gujarati cinema and films shot in Gujarat explore the state's cultural heritage and how that exploration interacts with tourism growth and economic development. Case studies such as Lalo, Reva, Hellaro, Bhavai, and cinematic depictions of the White Rann provide the foundation for analysis. By correlating film themes with state tourism data and economic indicators, this research shows how cinema contributes to both heritage awareness and tangible economic benefits.

The films selected for this study serve as essential waypoints in the evolution of Gujarati cinema's role as a cultural preserver. They are windows into different eras, each reflecting the societal nuances and aspirations of its time. The following is a curated list of Hindi films that have been selected for in-depth analysis in this research study, representing key milestones in the preservation of Indian cultural heritage:

2. Literature Review

The study by Juluri (2013) is a comprehensive exploration of the cultural and social significance of Bollywood cinema. The study delves into how Bollywood shapes and

reflects the identity, values, and aspirations of India. Juluri argues that Bollywood serves as a unifying force for diverse communities within India and functions as a potent cultural ambassador abroad. The book emphasizes Bollywood's role in reinforcing and perpetuating Indian cultural heritage, bridging generational gaps, and projecting India's cultural diversity on a global stage. Overall, the study highlights Bollywood's enduring influence as a symbol of Indian culture and a means of cultural preservation.

Joshi (2015) explores how Bollywood cinema shapes public perceptions of India. Joshi argues that Bollywood presents an idealized and fantasized version of India, which often diverges from the complex reality of the country. The study delves into how Bollywood contributes to constructing a collective public imagination of India, influencing cultural and national identity. It highlights the power of cinema in creating a "public fantasy" of India that reflects the aspirations, values, and desires of both Indian and global audiences. The book underscores the significant role of Bollywood in shaping the global perception of India.

Mehta & Pandharipande (2011) offer a comprehensive examination of Bollywood's role in the context of globalization. The study explores how Indian popular cinema, particularly Bollywood, has evolved and adapted in response to global influences. It delves into the ways in which Bollywood has contributed to shaping the nation's identity, both within India and among the diaspora. The book highlights how globalization has transformed Bollywood into a cultural phenomenon with a global reach, while also raising questions about the preservation of Indian cultural authenticity in the face of these changes.

Tirumala (2009) examines how Bollywood films influence the cultural identity formation of second-generation Indian Americans. The research investigates how these individuals engage with Bollywood, which is a significant cultural export from India, and how it contributes to their sense of identity, bridging the gap between their Indian heritage and American upbringing. The study finds that Bollywood plays a crucial role in reinforcing cultural ties, preserving traditions, and fostering a sense of belonging among second-generation Indian Americans, showcasing its profound impact on their cultural identity construction.

Dwyer (2006) investigates the intricate relationship between religion and Indian cinema. The study explores how Indian films depict and influence religious beliefs, rituals, and cultural values. Dwyer analyzes the portrayal of gods and mythology in cinema, demonstrating how it both reflects and shapes religious discourse in India. The book also examines the impact of cinema on religious practices and the blurred lines between the sacred and the cinematic. Overall, it reveals how Indian cinema serves as a significant cultural force in shaping the country's religious landscape and contributing to the ongoing evolution of religious traditions.

Other Literature Review

Cinema and Cultural Tourism

Film-induced tourism is a well-researched phenomenon: destinations featured in films often experience an increase in tourist footfall due to their on-screen exposure (Beeton, 2016; Hudson & Ritchie, 2006). Cinematic place-branding creates a "film-scape" that audiences can identify with and later visit, thereby converting mediated imagery into physical travel.

Heritage Identity and Regional Cinema

Regional cinema plays a democratizing role in preserving and promoting local traditions. Gujarati films are uniquely positioned to articulate the region's folk forms (Garba, Bhavai),

architecture (forts, stepwells), and religious practices. Such cinematic productions function as cultural texts that embed identity and memory into public consciousness (Desai, 2018).

Economic Impact of Cultural Events

Research on festivals like Rann Utsav show that cultural events can generate significant economic activity, supporting artisans, generating employment, and building heritage infrastructure (Gupta & Sharma, 2023). When these events tie into cinematic narratives, their economic footprint can expand further.

3. Methodology

This research paper's main objective is to examine how Gujarati films (Lalo, Reva, Hellaro, Bhavai) portray cultural heritage, folklore, and regional identity. Also, to assess the economic contribution of Gujarati cultural films, including box-office performance, tourism growth, and related sectoral benefits.

This study employs a mixed-methods strategy:

1. Secondary Data Analysis: Tourism statistics from Gujarat Government and media reports, including heritage site footfall, festival attendance, and economic revenue.
2. Film Content Analysis: Qualitative review of selected films — Lalo, Reva, Hellaro, Bhavai — focusing on heritage portrayal (architecture, ritual, place) and narrative themes.
3. Economic Inference: Correlation of heritage tourism data with cinematic representation to infer economic impacts such as artisan revenue, visitor spending, and festival income.

Given the exploratory nature, direct causality is not always established, but strong correlational patterns and mechanisms are identified.

4. Exploring Gujarati Culture & Heritage through Cinema

4.1 Lalo (Junagadh's Heritage)

Although Lalo is a more regionally focused Gujarati film, its depiction of Junagadh's forts, dargahs, and temples has the potential to shape heritage tourism. Tour operators could integrate film-based tours, guiding visitors through Uparkot Fort and Girnar in the footsteps of cinematic narrative, thus creating a heritage-film walking route.

Lalo (Gujarati) brings to life the historical and architectural heritage of Junagadh, including Uparkot Fort, Mahabat Maqbara, and the Girnar temples. The film portrays local traditions, Sufi pilgrimage, and community life woven with Junagadh's tangible heritage. Through its narrative, Lalo fosters a renewed appreciation for Junagadh's layered past and underrepresented architectural marvels. This cinematic representation strengthens local identity and potentially draws niche cultural tourists interested in heritage walks, fort tours, and Sufi sites.

Total Collections

As of Day 38, *Laalo* recorded ₹52.75 crore net box-office collection in India. (India Today report, 17 Nov 2025) Earlier, by Day 34, the film crossed ₹36 crore net, continuing a strong run (Times of India report, 2025). By Day 42, the film reportedly crossed ₹60 crore in India net collections, making it one of the biggest Gujarati blockbusters (Indian Express Gujarati report, 2025). Worldwide Collections -A box-office tracking source reports ₹88.4 crore worldwide gross and ₹74.85 crore net, across around 29,887 shows (Sacnilk Box Office data).

4.2 Reva (Narmada Pilgrimage)

Reva dramatizes the Narmada Parikrama, reinforcing pilgrimage as heritage tourism. Tour planners can leverage the film to promote river-side heritage packages, combining ritual, nature, and cinematic storytelling. The film's reach helps in promoting spiritual tourism linked to Narmada's landscape and traditions.

Reva dramatizes the spiritual journey of the Narmada Parikrama, highlighting ghats, ashrams, and riverside rituals. The film's use of river landscapes, religious symbolism, and pilgrimage narrative builds a cinematic pilgrimage route. This not only reinforces the Narmada's iconic spiritual status but implicitly markets the river's cultural tourism potential. For viewers unfamiliar with Narmada tradition, Reva opens a window to religious geography in Gujarat and inspires deeper exploration.

Reva (Gujarati) collected ₹20 crore worldwide gross (Wikipedia – Reva (Film), Box Office) and Industry analysis articles note that Reva was a commercially successful Gujarati film, despite moderate initial box-office numbers (Topflix review summary, 2024).

Reva won National Film Award for Best Gujarati Film (66th National Awards, 2019), boosting its visibility and contribution to Gujarati cinema.

In 2025, the pilgrimage concluded with 9,09,900 (approx 9.10 lakh) devotees completing the 15-kilometre route between key ghats (Rampura to Shaherav/Tilakwada/Rengan etc.) along Narmada.

The 2025 Parikrama saw extensive arrangements by local administration: boating facilities (about 70 boats), crowd-management, sanitation, medical support, transportation (buses), and other amenities across ghats — indicating that a significant “pilgrim economy” and logistical infrastructure was mobilized.

4.3 Hellaro (Garba and Kutch Culture)

Hellaro's national prominence spotlighted Kutch's folklore, dance, and social life. Following this, the White Rann region, already promoted through Rann Utsav, saw increased media attention. The film helped amplify Kutch's identity, encouraging tourist circuits that include artisan workshops, Garba performances, and desert stays. The strong performance at Rann Utsav reflects this blended tourist-cultural economy.

Hellaro is centered on Garba dance in Kutch, blending folklore, gender roles, and rural life. The film's setting in remote Kutch villages and its portrayal of community-driven, ritualized performances bring to screen the authentic fabric of Kutch's intangible heritage. The narrative empowers women, highlighting not just cultural expression but socio-cultural transformation. *Hellaro*'s national recognition (National Film Award, 2019) elevated the visibility of Kutch's cultural traditions, reinforcing the significance of folk traditions in heritage tourism.

According to one listing, *Hellaro*'s gross box-office collection (domestic + overall) is given as ₹ 16 crore. *Hellaro* isn't just entertainment, it acts as a cultural-heritage representation of Kutch and Gujarati folk traditions, giving visibility to regional identity and heritage through cinema. *Hellaro* won Best Feature Film at the 66th National Film Awards — first Gujarati film to ever win this top honour.

4.4 Bhavai (Folk Theatre)

By presenting Bhavai theatre onscreen, the film opens possibilities for theatrical tourism: heritage festivals could reintroduce live Bhavai performances for visitors, or

heritage walks may include evening performances in traditional settings, connecting film viewers to live culture.

Bhavai, as a traditional Gujarati folk theatre form, is richly performed in the eponymous film. The theater's style, humor, musicality, costume, and social commentary are presented as living heritage. By dramatizing Bhavai, the film preserves and revives a centuries-old performative tradition, reaffirming its cultural relevance. For audiences and students alike, Bhavai serves as both entertainment and cultural education, fostering interest in theatre tourism and folk performance.

The film's gross (₹ 57 lakh) vs reported budget (₹ 9 crore) suggests that "Bhavai" was a commercial failure / "disaster" in box-office terms, as per publicly available box-office tracking.

4.5 White Rann: Cinematic & Festival Imagery

While not tied to a single film, the White Rann (salt desert of Kutch) is central to gallery-style imagery in tourism-promotion films, documentaries, and cultural media. The ethereal landscape, salt flats, tent city, and cultural performances are often featured in promotional cinema, travel videos, and festival coverage. These images have powerfully branded the White Rann as a must-see destination in Gujarat's cultural tourism portfolio.

The annual Rann Utsav is the primary driver of this growth. Tourist numbers increased from just 0.62 lakh in 2011 to 4.66 lakh by 2017–18, marking an impressive 657% rise. The momentum has further accelerated in recent years. In 2023–24, the festival recorded 7.42 lakh visitors, compared to only 2.07 lakh in 2022, showcasing rapid expansion in tourist inflow. Projections for the 2024–25 season estimate that tourist arrivals could exceed 10 lakh, indicating strong demand and sustained popularity. During the 2023–24 season, artisans and handicraft sellers at Rann Utsav earned approximately ₹6.65 crore, while food-stall vendors generated around ₹1.36 crore in revenue. Permit fees, transportation services, and parking collections brought in over ₹4 crore for the local administration during peak months. The rising tourist influx has created thousands of direct and indirect jobs in hospitality, transportation, event management, handicrafts, guiding services, and the informal sector. Local artisans producing embroidery, Bandhani textiles, Rogan art, leatherwork, and pottery benefit immensely from direct market exposure and large seasonal demand created by tourists.

The "Tent City" at Dhordo has expanded to house nearly 400 premium tents, offering 3-star amenities, entertainment zones, cultural shows, and adventure activities. Better road connectivity, upgraded accommodation, increased private investment in resorts, and transport facilities such as the Bhuj airport have made the remote desert region more accessible.

4.6 Other Cinema Reflections: Lion of Gujarat and Bollywood

Though less frequently studied academically, films like *Lion of Gujarat* and Bollywood sequences shot in Gujarat contribute to heritage visibility. These films often feature forts, rural landscapes, and regional life, projecting Gujarati culture to broader audiences. Such cinematic exposure invites nationwide tourist interest and supports heritage as a travel brand.

In the financial year 2019–20, a total of 523,660 tourists visited Gir including both the main sanctuary (GNPS) and the Devaliya safari zone — generating ₹ 10.78 crore in revenue as per the Indian express. More recently, after a high-visibility visit by the prime minister in early 2025, the region saw a surge: over a 20-day period, tourist numbers

rose from 49,681 to 59,009 — an increase of 18.8%. Furthermore, in 2021, the sanctuary recorded 5,09,956 visitors, bringing in ₹ 9.72 crore in government revenue as per the Gujarat Samachar Newspaper. The surge in visitors drives demand for lodging (hotels, guesthouses, homestays), transport (jeeps, taxis), local guiding services, food and local crafts, and other hospitality-sector services. This creates employment opportunities for local residents, from hotel staff and drivers to guides, cooks, gardeners, and craftsmen.

5. Examining the Tourism & Economic Impact

5.1 State-wide Tourism Trends

Gujarat recorded 18.59 crore tourist visits in 2023–24, a 24% increase from the previous year. (Vansiya, Y. N., & Ragothaman, S. 2012) Among these visitors, a significant subset is drawn to the state's religious and heritage attractions. Economic Times Travel World reports that many tourists cite heritage, religious, and leisure tourism as core motivators. This surge reflects not only improved infrastructure but also growing cultural interest.

5.2 Heritage Site Footfall

Gujarat's 18 declared heritage sites received over 36.95 lakh visitors in 2024, per state government data. This includes UNESCO-recognized attractions. The increasing footfall underscores rising cultural tourism interest, with heritage sites becoming more central in Gujarat's tourism narrative.

5.3 White Rann / Rann Utsav Impact

The Kutch Rann Utsav has become a major cultural festival, attracting 7.42 lakh visitors in 2023–24, including international tourists. The festival generated approximately ₹6.65 crore in handicraft stall revenue and ₹1.36 crore from food vendors in the 2023–24 season. Permit fees alone contributed ₹4 crore as of January 2025. For the 2024-25 season, visitor projections exceed 10 lakh, highlighting exponential growth.

5.4 Heritage Infrastructure Investment

In 2023–24, Gujarat pledged ₹428 crore in heritage investments. Major allocations include ₹185 crore for Dholavira (Indus site) and ₹70 crore on Vadnagar, boosting amenities, conservation, and tourism infrastructure. Visitor numbers to Dholavira rose from ~1.41 lakh in 2022–23 to over 2.32 lakh in 2023–24. These investments reflect recognition of heritage tourism's potential as an economic engine.

6. Mechanisms of Influence: Cinema → Heritage Tourism → Economy

6.1 Branding & Destination Creation

Cinematic representation helps brand Gujarat's heritage places by embedding them in narratives. Films create mental maps: viewers associate Junagadh with Lalo, Garba villages with Hellaro, river ghats with Reva, and the White Rann with desert mystique. This brand recall contributes to tourist decision-making.

6.2 Cultural Revival and Participation

Films encourage local communities to revalue their traditions. After Hellaro, there was a renewed interest in Garba-style performances, especially among young women. Bhavai reminded communities and audiences about the folk theatre form's historical significance, possibly inspiring revival initiatives or folk-theatre tourism circuits.

6.3 Economic Spillovers and Artisan Spending

Tourists drawn by heritage-friendly films often engage in spending beyond site admission: they purchase handicrafts (bandhani, woodwork, embroidery), stay in tent cities (Rann), and attend cultural performances. The income of artisans and local vendors in Kutch demonstrates a tangible economic impact linked to cultural tourism.

6.4 Infrastructure and Sustainability Investment

Film-driven interest can justify public-private investment. As tourists increase, governments invest in visitor infrastructure (roads, amenities, accommodation) and conservation (heritage site restoration). For example, Dholavira and Vadnagar received large-scale funding aligned with heritage tourism growth.

7. Discussion

The evidence suggests a synergetic relationship between Gujarati cinema and heritage tourism. Cinematic narratives not only preserve and project cultural identity but also act as catalysts for tourism growth and local economic development. While films like Lalo and Reva are essential in shaping local narratives, larger-scale events like Rann Utsav benefit from cinematic imagery of the White Rann, converting media exposure into tourism growth.

However, this relationship is not linear. Film-induced tourism is mediated by infrastructure, state policy, community capacity, and festivalization. For instance, as Gujarat's government invests in heritage site development (e.g., Dholavira), it creates conditions for films to have economic effects. Simultaneously, as festivals like Rann Utsav grow, they provide venues for artisans, performers, and heritage entrepreneurs to benefit from tourist flows.

Nevertheless, challenges remain. Over-tourism, environmental stress in fragile ecosystems like the White Rann, and commercialization of folk practices pose sustainability risks. Ensuring that economic benefits are equitably distributed among local communities — artisans, villagers, and small hospitality providers — requires deliberate policy frameworks.

8. Policy & Pedagogical Implications

8.1 Heritage-Film Collaboration Strategy

Gujarat Tourism should partner with filmmakers to encourage heritage-oriented cinema. Incentives such as shooting subsidies, local hiring quotas, and co-branded tourism-film promotions could amplify cultural branding.

8.2 Sustainable Tourism Planning

Festival planners (Rann Utsav) must continue promoting eco-friendly tourism, waste management, sustainable tent cities, capacity limits to balance visitor growth with heritage conservation.

8.3 Educational Integration

Cinematic portrayals of heritage can be integrated into school and university curricula. Films like Hellaro, Bhavai, and Reva can become part of heritage education, enabling students to critically engage with culture through Movie-Based Learning (MBL).

8.4 Community-Based Economic Models

Local artisans and cultural practitioners should be offered micro-loan support, business training, and marketplace access via tourism-festival collaboration. This ensures heritage preservation aligns with livelihoods.

9. Conclusion

Gujarati cinema — both regional and Bollywood — is instrumental in representing and promoting Gujarat’s cultural heritage. Films such as *Lalo*, *Reva*, *Hellaro*, and *Bhavai* visualize the architectural, ritualistic, and folk traditions of Gujarat, contributing to a richer cultural identity. This cinematic representation correlates strongly with heritage tourism growth, evidenced by tourism data, festival attendance, and economic spillovers in artisan sectors. While cinema is not the sole driver of tourism, it complements infrastructure, policy, and community action to make heritage a living, economically sustainable resource. Strategic partnerships, sustainable planning, and educational use of film can deepen this impact going forward.

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