

Development of a Culture-Based Design Framework with Reference to Cultural Tourism in India

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ABSTRACT

The onset of globalisation has brought several critical themes like connectivity, accessibility and inclusivity to the forefront. This has also induced mass uniformity and the loss of cultural identity. Culture governs several aspects of design, systems and policies. Understanding culture entails comprehension of people, their social behaviours and their underlying beliefs. As a diverse country with rich heritage, the knowledge system of India is a corpus of cultural artefacts, historical monuments, artistic expressions, philosophies among many others. Due to its exhaustive character, studying Indian culture can be very challenging. Conventional research methodologies portray a significant WEIRD bias i.e., their structures are aligned with western values, much of which don't necessarily apply to Indian paradigms. In the constantly evolving world, culture also transforms itself. Designing for India requires an in-depth understanding of the changing cultural contexts in India. To decode the changes in India culture, a field study was conducted at Sringeri, a tourist site of immense cultural significance. Based on the findings from the field study, a culture-based design framework was formulated keeping academicians and industry experts in mind. To enhance the spirit of Atma Nirbhar Bharat, it is necessary to strengthen the pillars of Indian education and research practices. Relevant frameworks would facilitate India-centric design in Indian institutions and business ecosystems.

Keywords: Culture, Design, Tourism, Research, Framework

I INTRODUCTION

Culture is a composite of artefacts, emotions and values based on history. There are several definitions of culture, the most popular of among them is the one proposed by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952):

‘Culture consists of pattern, explicit and implicit, of and for, behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, and on the other as conditioning elements of further action’.

Culture enjoys a very influential position in the design of products and services. Firstly, culture is a major determiner of the aesthetic aspirations of a populace. Secondly, culture defines the parameters in which a product or service can thrive. Thirdly, culture is a reliable source of understanding people's nuances, behaviour, and preferences. Given its sensitive nature, the lack of cultural awareness can prove to be detrimental. Multinational organisations and policymakers take special efforts to avoid cultural conflicts at workplaces (Frances Brew 2004). One of the major concerns of the global scholastic fraternity is the overpowering bias towards the Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, and Democratic i.e., WEIRD samples in academia (Michael Muthukrishna 2020). Indian contexts significantly vary from their western counterparts, which leads to widespread disparity in research content and its allied outcomes. This calls for the

systemic incorporation of cultural aspects into academia as well as industrial practice.

II TOWARDS A NON-WEIRD FRAMEWORK

Due to the vastness of Indian topography, there is a remarkably large cultural corpus of art forms, languages, beliefs and histories. This makes creating a design framework for studying Indian culture a monumental task. This exercise is challenging but can prove to be rewarding on multiple fronts. Firstly, the global fraternity can be benefitted from rich knowledge systems of the substantive Indian culture. Due to this very reason, designing for India has even been dubbed equivalent to designing for the world (John Xavier 2021). Secondly, frameworks based on ancient civilisations can help propagate universal humanistic values which are deeply embedded in Indian traditions. For instance, through his iconic speech at the World's Parliament of Religions, Swami Vivekananda introduced the Indic spirit of inclusivity to the world (Math 1893). A design framework can make more such knowledge transfers feasible. Finally, emerging technology and globalisation have led to dynamic shifts in public preferences. As per UN's +Rio 20 studies, integrated global societies have realised the widespread fear of uniformity and loss of indigenous identity (UNESCO 2017). This makes evaluative cultural studies an essential practice for commercial and academic activities. Cultural ethnography can identify large-scale trends, and arrive at appropriate design directions. In order to identify cultural changes, the preferences of different generations were deemed necessary.

III FIELD STUDY

To decipher the cultural changes occurring within a population, studying a tourist site having cultural significance is highly suitable. Given the grandeur of Indian culture, there is no dearth of cultural tourist sites in any of the Indian states and territories. Therefore, a site with additional factors like mythological, historical and spiritual significance was regarded ideal for conducting a field study. With these criteria in mind, Sringeri, the stronghold of Adi Shankaracharya's philosophy was chosen as the site for field study. Located in the Western Ghats section in the Indian state of Karnataka, Sringeri is a temple town with a rich cultural narrative. Sringeri is a portmanteau of two words - Rishi Sringa and Giri. As per the glorious Indian epic Ramayana, Rishi Sringa was a learned sage who administered the holy sacrifice fire or Yagna for King Dasharatha to beget his son Rama, the legendary icon of Indian morals and his three brothers. While Giri means mountain in Sanskrit, making Sringeri mean the above of Rishi Sringa. Blessed with this mythological significance, Sringeri found appeal for the second time during the life of Adi Shankaracharya who established a Peetham or Math at the place. The Sringeri Math is officially called Sri Jagadguru Shankaracharya Mahasamsthanam, Dakshinamnaya Sri Sharada Peetham, Sringeri. Adi Shankaracharya established four Maths to propagate Advaita Vedanta. The four Maths or monasteries are located in the four different directions of India, one for each of four Vedas. This dispersed presence of Maths was believed to be Adi Shankaracharya's 8th-century strategy to unite the four corners of Bharatavarsha (Pattanaik 2016). This attempt towards national integration thrives till date. The Maa Sharada Temple at Maihar in the Satna district of Madhya Pradesh is one such example (Sengar 2018). Despite being located over a thousand kilometres away from Sringeri, the rituals at the Maa Sharada Temple of Maihar are directly governed by the protocols of the Sringeri Math (Maihar n.d.). This attributes Sringeri a position of high stature in Hinduism and Indian philosophy at large.

Through the Advaita philosophy, Adi Shankaracharya is believed to have pioneered the cultural and spiritual renaissance in 8th Century India. As a thought leader, Adi Shankaracharya influenced the likes of Swami Vivekananda, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Mahatma Gandhi and many others. Former President of India Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan had further popularised the Advaita thought during his tenure as a professor at Oxford University (Radhakrishnan 1908). Today, the Advaita

school of thought thrives as the spiritual underlining of several Indian beliefs, and these have in turn influenced many western and eastern ideologies. The origin of the distinguished Advaita philosophy is traced to Sringeri. The heritage of Sringeri can be divided into the built heritage and intangible heritage. Built heritage refers to the archaeological monuments, sculptures and other man-made artefacts of social or historical importance. The Sringeri Math houses an array of temples, monasteries, towers, halls and offices which qualify as built heritage. Built heritage are symbols of public good, invite expenditure and their functioning is condition to supply demands, investments for maintenance and the overall state of economic affairs. On the other hand, intangible heritage refers to the rituals, cultural practices, traditional handicrafts, oral traditions and performing arts. In Sringeri, intangible heritage like millennium-old Vedic rituals, traditional nine-yard sarees, nature reverence, mythological narratives were celebrated with full fervour. A field study was carried out at Sringeri to assess the changes in Indian culture and design relevant frameworks accordingly.

- (a) **Case Study: The Akshara Abhyasa Ceremony -** The Akshara Abhyasa Ceremony, aka Vidyarambham ceremony, is a ritual that marks the commencement of a child's education. As per ancient Indian texts, the ceremony is one of the 16 samskaras i.e., 16 rites of passage in a person's life, and has been practised in India for generations (Pandey 1987). Sringeri is a popular destination for performing the Akshara abhyasa ceremony (as seen in Figure 1). The stages involved in the ritual are as follows:
- (i) Children under 5 years are seated on the ground with their parents. They may be accompanied by grandparents and the larger joint family.
 - (ii) Parents hold the fingers of their children and trace holy mantras & letters in rice contained in a brass plate.
 - (iii) Parents then make the child write Om Ganeshaya Namaha and the first four letters of the alphabet on a slate. Lord Ganesha is the god of auspicious beginnings, and seeking his blessings is necessary to ward off obstacles in learning.
 - (iv) The entire ceremony is done in the presence of a Goddess Sharada idol. The priest administering the ceremony chants holy mantras and walks around guiding the parents in doing the rituals.

It is interesting to note that parents performing the ceremony speak different languages and use distinct scripts. Each of them conducts the hand-held tracing

rituals in their respective language scripts i.e., the same practice is expressed differently.



Fig. 1: Akshara Abhyasa Ceremony

Viewing the ceremony from a design perspective can help deduce the nuances of the Indian cultural psyche. There are three levels of cultural transmission here – an instructional authority (the priest), the sender (the parents) and the receiver (the child). There is a direct generational relationship between the sender-receiver and a separate lineage for the instructional authority. The fact that this cultural practise is not merely surviving, but thriving in contemporary times was the subject of this case study.

- In the ceremony, parents teach children the alphabet of their language. By being transmitters of their mother tongue, parents are reaffirming the sacred status according to one's native language. This also reiterates the divine parental status evident in Sanskrit verses Matru Deva Bhava (mother is equal to God) or Pitru Devo Bhava (Father is equal to God).
- The ceremony marks the beginning of a child's education with auspicious blessings. Its reverence to the practice indicates the reverence for education in India. The desire for quality and

Generation 1 was the most senior of all, aged 55 years and above. Generation 2 consisted of tourists who aged between 40 and 54 years. All younger adults were considered as generation 3.



Fig. 2: Field Study being conducted

hassle-free education is a major aspiration of most Indian parents (London 2018).

- (b) Mapping the Cultural Identity of Sringeri** - In an attempt to map the cultural identity of Sringeri, around 33 participants of varying age groups were interviewed. These visitors had come to the Math for pilgrimage and tourism. The visitors spoken to were aged between 14 to 60 years, and included first-time visitors as well those who visited previously on one or more occasions. A vast majority of visitors had come with their families. The families were mostly of two generations i.e., parents & children of varying ages. Very few families included grandparents. Married couples and friend groups were also seen at Sringeri. However, solo visitors were uncommon. Each tourist was requested to assign suitable attributes to their experience and perception of Sringeri (as seen in Figure 2). For the purpose of this field study, the surveyed participants were categorised into three groups or generations.

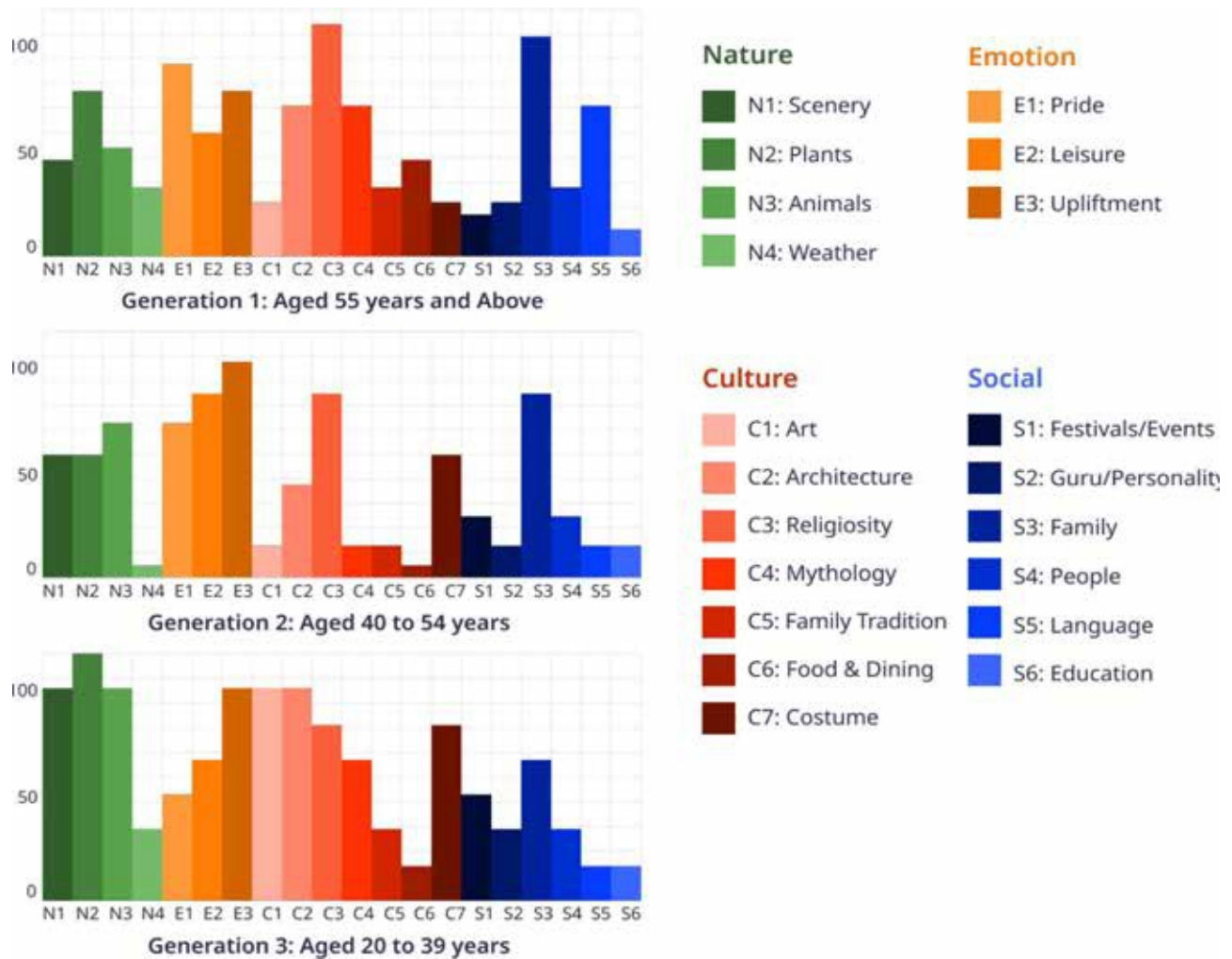


Fig. 3: Attributes of Three generations of tourists

Religious values, family, experience and plant life were the most commonly associated traits of the place. The perception of fauna varied from person to person. The animals that were associated with the place ranged from domesticated cows (in gaushala or cow shelters), elephants, horses to undomesticated deer and the fish in the Tungabhadra River. The concept of pride had facets of peace, fulfilment, community, memory and satisfaction.

According to Plogs Tourist Typology (Pavelka 2013), tourists are of three types. One, Allocentric or wanderers who seek new experiences. Two, psychocentric or repeaters who prefer familiar experiences with little to no adventure. And three, mid-centric which is a combination of the three. It was interesting to note that generation 2 i.e., the middle-aged population showed considerable allocentric traits. Emotional aspects were greatly attributed by generation 2. The allocentric character of tourists received further impetus from generation 3.

Table 1
Change of attributes along generations

Attributes that saw a rise over three generations	Attributes that saw no change over three generations	Attributes that saw a drop over three generations
Art	Mythology	Food
Architecture	Tradition	Language
Scenery	Weather	Pride
Plants	Personality	Family
Animals	Education	Religiosity
Festival/Events	Leisure	
Costume	People	
Emotional Upliftment		

Viewing the change in attribution (as seen in Figure 2) over three generations sheds light on the transitional nature of cultural identities. Based on Table no 1, the following insights were deduced:

- The rise in people assigning nature-based elements (plants, animals and scenery) to their experience could be caused by the concerning air quality index in urban India (IQ Air n.d.)
- The pandemic had set ripples for self-introspection, making upliftment a highly desired experience that people tried to seek in places of spiritual and cultural significance. (Ducharme 2020) (Neha Sahgal 2021)
- The growth in the attribution of costume & art could be linked to the social media-induced drive to express one's self-identity. (Gil 2018)

- Preference for mythology has remained constant. This could be due to the ubiquity of mythological narratives in mainstream media. (Anthony 2021)
- Drop-in attribution of family & food hints at the rising quest for individuality over social collectivism. (Hofstede n.d.) (Sahija 2017)

IV DESIGN OF FRAMEWORK

Based on the study findings, a culture-based design framework was ideated upon. The developed framework must aid in effective identification of cultural elements, and be applicable to Indian requirements i.e., not have an overwhelming WEIRD bias. With these constraints in mind, the paper proposes the following framework (Figure 4):

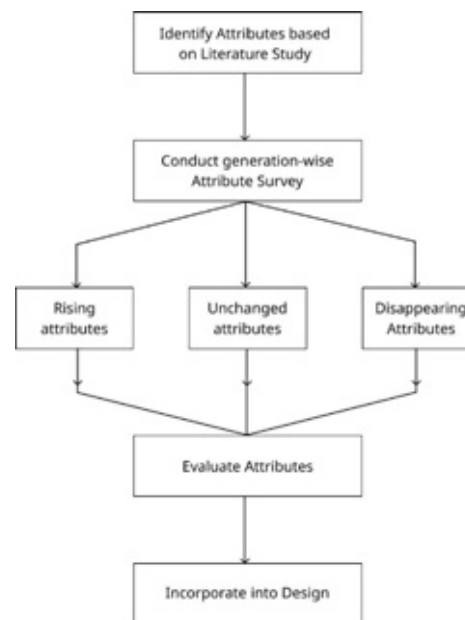


Fig. 4: Culture-based Design Framework

The first stage in the proposed framework would be carry out a literature study on the chosen subject of cultural interest. The literature study must be conducted with the aim to identify the many factors the subject can be associated with. For instance, the famous Temple city of Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh can be associated with natural factors like rivers, trees and social factors like prayers, rituals so on and so forth. Once the list of attributes has been decided upon, the second step i.e., the generation-wise attribute survey must be carried out. The difference between two generations can range from 20 to 30 years. (Berger 1960). Based on the survey results, the attributes must be classified into types – rising attributes, unchanged attributes and disappearing attributes. The change in cultural attributes must be analysed to see if they align with humanistic values, and appropriate interventions can be designed.

V APPLICATION OF THE FRAMEWORK TO TOURISM

The tourist experience is one of the key goals of Tourism policy. Special efforts are taken by the Government of India to realise world-class infrastructure, tourist safety, sustainability and business viability. Tourism Analytics and data repositories have been envisioned by the Indian government for the upcoming years (MoT 2020). The proposed framework can be used to interpret the massive amount of data gathered. Additionally, similar the world economic forum has also proposed a travel and tourism competitiveness index. The TTCI (Ringer 2011) is the measure of tourism-related infrastructure, hygiene, safety, pricing and other factors in comparison to other sites in the global marketplace. However, this index does not

incorporate generational change that occurs in dynamically diverse societies like India. Additionally, Tourists, are not a monolithic group. Taking an overall average of tourist ratings without age considerations can lead to skewed outcomes. Many attempts have been made to classify tourists based on their psychological disposition and related criteria. Considering the vastness of the Indian population, classifying people based on their personality can be a formidable challenge. Classifying tourists based on their numbers comes across as a more plausible alternative. The Global Research Study conducted by Travelport (Brown 2019) typifies tourists based on their numbers, as follows:

- (a) Solo tourists tend to have long trips, often as long as 19 days. Largely dominated by millennials, solo travellers reportedly prefer on-the-go accommodation. These tourists are receptive to experimenting with new tourist destinations, and many opt for personalised suggestions via social media.
- (b) Couple tourists are one of the largest markets for the tourism industry. Couple travellers are reported to prefer anywhere between weekend getaways to 14-day vacations. The majority of couple travellers reportedly used more than 2 websites to plan their vacations. One of the key priorities for couple travellers is early arrival – late departure.
- (c) Family tourists prioritise entertainment, convenience, and highly prefer one-stop websites for planning their trips. Pre-planning is a highly essential attribute of family tourists, followed by car rentals. Themed parks and child-friendly group activities are highly desired by the group. Package tours are viewed favourably and this category of tourists are deemed to be the fastest-growing of all.
- (d) Group tourists are averaged to be around 14 people, who take trips as long as 6 days. Group tourists highly value flexible modes of payments, all-inclusive packages and love to experience activity-related authenticity. Group tourists are also more likely to prefer online chatbots on desktops.

It is evident that Tourists and travellers are a diverse group. The ‘one-size-for-all’ style of tourism policy can prove to be disadvantageous. In such cases, the proposed framework can aid in conducting user-centred study and formulating inclusive strategies accordingly. Based on the field work findings and the framework created, the following strategic directions can be implemented at different heritage sites of India.

- Guided Architecture tours and books. This would ensure the growing interest in the architecture of heritage continues to thrive. At the same time, this would open up new avenues for students of architecture, history and engineering to explore and revive ancient heritage.

- Curated art content for social media. With emerging technologies in virtual reality and augmented reality, artists and various art forms have resurged. By expanding into physical reality, Indian heritage monuments can stay in tune with the developments of the world.
- Projecting Heritage sites as an all-around destination for families. Several ancient sites were constructed along rivers, near greenery. While the core identity of heritage sites is indeed their cultural attributes, incorporating scenic beauty into their identity can boost the experiences of tourists, particularly family tourists. Such actions would help counter the dropping attribution of family and other social aspects.
- Thought leaders and ecological changes. Centres of cultural and spiritual importance hold an immense sway on tourists and pilgrims alike. Several tourists attribute them to social aspects like events and festivals. All over the world, festivals are viewed as expressions of cultural practices. Festivals have been received as a safety valve of the society, or a temporary getaway from the humdrum of quotidian routines. Celebrations at many holy centres have occasionally strayed into counter-cultural practices like increased carbon footprint and strong commercialisation (Beth Perry 2019). By capitalising on their social and cultural affluence, heritage sites can organise ecology-driven campaigns. The benefits of this can be far and wide. One, the universal goals of sustainability can be realised. Two, tourist experiences can be enhanced via meaningful participatory activities. Three, Indian sites can position themselves as epitomes of culture and ecological sensitivity. This would also bolster ancient nature-centric Hindu and Buddhist practises (Shaw 2017).

VI CONCLUSION

In contemporary times, data enjoys a crucial space. Have surpassed the period of poor information access, the modern era faces a new set of challenges. One of the gravest concerns of the modern world is data deluge (Kourtit 2020). With the fourth industrial revolution making its way, there is a significant drive to ensure human interests are not compromised. By conducting generation-wise data surveys and subsequent qualitative analysis, major obstacles can be tackled. First, viewing evolutionary change can help identify need areas. Second, in cases where the social thought across generations is deviating from cultural values, appropriate steps can be taken. There are several think tanks and policy centres which specialize in the research, study and management

of work practise and systems to bring about institutional change. The IBM Centre for the Business of Governments is one such global institution. In India, the NITI Aayog functions as the premium think tank which provides relevant strategic directions to different central and state bodies (Aayog 2021). The designed framework is in line with the following objectives of the NITI Aayog:

- To design strategic and long-term policy and programme frameworks and initiatives, and monitor their progress and their efficacy. The lessons learnt through monitoring and feedback will be used for making innovative improvements, including necessary mid-course corrections.
- To provide advice and encourage partnerships between key stakeholders and national and international like-minded think tanks, as well as educational and policy research institutions.
- To create a knowledge, innovation and entrepreneurial support system through a collaborative community of national and international experts, practitioners and other partners.

Through the proposed framework, it would be possible to assess the needs of the various age groups, carry out comparative analysis and suggest systemic strategies for various industries. Media houses can study the changing tastes of the population, and create content that can boost fading themes. For instance, the high levels of viewership of Ramayana and Mahabharat serial during the pandemic indicated the rampant interest in mythology in India (Dsouza 2020). This further reflects in the rising mythology-themed literature, self-help books and ideas. Using mythology, several relevant awareness like cleanliness, anti-corruption, civic discipline and related messages can be disseminated. Likewise, the education sector can map the tastes of students of varying age groups and identify potential areas for strategic intervention. The National Education Policy (NEP 2020) has been an outcome of considerable study and deliberation. The proposed framework can only take this and provide a more inclusive curriculum for all Indians.

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