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REGIONAL COSMOPOLITANISM AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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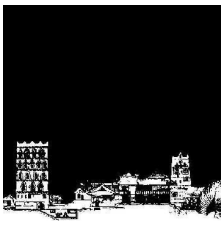

TRADITIONAL DWELLINGS AND SETTLEMENTS WORKING PAPER SERIES

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Traditional Dwellings and Settlements
Working Paper Series

BREAKING TRADITIONAL MOLDS: COSMOPOLITANISM OF THE HINDU TEMPLES IN GOA, INDIA

Nirmal Kulkarni, Parul Kiri Roy

BREAKING TRADITONAL MOLDS: COSMOPOLITANISM OF THE HINDU TEMPLES IN GOA, INDIA

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Hindu temples in Goa, India, underwent significant changes in their architecture during Portuguese colonization. The temples, belonging to the Gaud Saraswat Brahmin community, were demolished in the sixteenth century due to coercive Portuguese policies. However, in the late 18th century, liberalized policies allowed temple construction, leading to a unique blend of Hindu, Christian and Islamic elements. We argue that the new architectural language was an outcome of 'Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism', which sought freedom by breaking traditional Hindu temple building norms. The Goan temple, a testament to syncretic practices represents a unique language, transcending traditional forms, opening new avenues for future scholars to explore the concept of cosmopolitanism in relation to syncretism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Dramatic changes in the visual lexicon of the architecture of the Goan temples, occurred in the 18th and 19th centuries, during Portuguese colonization, in Goa, India. These temples belong to the elite Gaud Saraswat Brahmin community. In 1510, as the Portuguese conquered Goa, the laws mandated demolishing Hindu temples. After 1540s temple guardians, dispossessed of their land, relocated their deities safely across the rivers. The 18th century saw liberalized Portuguese religious policies, permitting temple construction. Surprisingly, the temple architecture which emerged, significantly deviated from traditional Hindu styles, uniquely blending Hindu, Christian[1] and Islamic elements. What kind of freedom were the Gaud Saraswat Brahmin Hindus trying to seek by breaking building traditions through the formal expression of their temples? We argue that it was 'aesthetic cosmopolitanism' that shaped its unique 'syncretic' architecture. However, since the mid-20th century, the phenomenon of the Goan temple has been an anathema to right-wing Hindu fundamentalists, because of its multicultural identity. In their attempt to erase its form, they demolished several of such temples, rebuilding in what appealed to their sensibility as 'Hindu temple architecture.' Some remain, valued as Indo-Portuguese heritage but nevertheless, the future of the Goan temple hangs in balance, and remains underrepresented in architectural debates, despite efforts by some scholars.

For centuries, cosmopolitanism has defied being trapped into categorical identities. From lay people who consider it to be a definition of an aspirational lifestyle, to scholars who carefully construct its meaning, historicity, understandability, and explore its varied theories, cosmopolitanism has become a 'many-splendored' idea. However, this essay reconceptualizes 'cosmopolitanism of aesthetic freedom' as a theoretical framework to examine architecture. It demonstrates through a mix of case studies, the architecture of the Goan temple, that multicultural building practices were undertaken vociferously, by the temple

builders, who seemed to have a free reign to construct political imaginaries. Religious cosmopolites in global diasporas have not been able to break the mold of traditional forms for temple architecture, as is evident from the several Hindu temples across the United Kingdom, USA, and Australia, even in contemporary times. The Goan temple achieved this feat in the 18th century! Through sketchy archival data, field visits, interviews, and visual analyses, this paper focuses on the exploration of this temple type, and argues that the elitism of the Gaud Saraswat Brahmin community created a space of 'freedom from all.' Defined in Sanskrit as *aseem* (without boundaries), it transcends 'geographies of freedom' going beyond nationalism, globalization, and multiculturalism. Here, this architecture played a role that epitomizes the utopian idea of a true cosmopolis in the expression of its physical and material manifestation.

We add new knowledge by analyzing these moments comprehensively, wherein syncretic architecture (the process) arrives at a new cosmopolitan language of temple buildings (the product). Does 'aesthetic cosmopolitanism' support coexistence and preservation of distinct identities within a broader society and its correlative architecture? Is it too onerous to view the architecture of the Goan temple as a composite of various elements that coexist, each maintaining its unique identity within the larger structure? These are questions that future scholars can engage with, to deepen the topic and accord the Goan temple its scholastic due.

2. BEYOND BORDERS: THE CANVAS OF COSMOPOLITANISM

Cosmopolitanism is a philosophical and ethical concept that reflects the idea of the world and one's position within it. It encompasses the thought of being a global citizen, at once belonging to the entire world breaking boundaries of community, society or nationhood. Beck's succinct definition of cosmopolitanism as a condition in which the 'otherness of the other is included in one's own self- identity and self-definition'[2] is a useful one to consider. In the broadest sense possible, cosmopolitanism is about the extension of the moral and political horizons of people, societies, organizations and institutions. The descriptive explanation of cosmopolitanism, "to address certain socio-political processes or individual behaviors, values or dispositions manifesting a capacity to engage cultural multiplicity"[3] is apt with respect to this research. It can be argued that cosmopolitanism is never an absolute or fixed category that resides simply within some individuals more than others, but a dimension of social life that must be actively constructed through practices of meaning-making in social situations. It is essential to locate the cosmopolitan imaginary as an orientation or self-understanding that exists within all world cultures and while taking a diversity of historical forms as always, a response to the widening of human experience and the broadening of political community. This course leads to identification of alternative conceptions of what constitutes community as co-existence and as a broadening of horizons. In such situations a process of hybridization is initiated, in which cultures merge in a

continuous creation of new forms. This is often taken to be a case for cosmopolitanism. However, cosmopolitanism properly defined is not a condition of hybridization, but one of the creative interaction of cultures and the exploration of shared worlds. As such it, suggests heightened reflexivity.

While it can be argued that all cultures are in some way the product of cultural mixing, a point is generally reached whereby the cultural form ceases to be conscious of its hybridity and with the passage of time it takes on a more solidified character. At this point, the cultural entity in question will take on another character and the result may be surrender to a global culture, or itself become a global culture, or a process of polarization sets in. Distinct from the aforementioned processes, another scenario is thus possible and can be termed as unified diversity. In this case the distinctive development is less a mixing of cultures and the production of new hybrid forms, than a reflexive interrelation of cultures whereby the cultures undergo some change as a result of exchange. So, instead of a single culture emerging, the cultures co-exist through the creation of frameworks of solidarity and integration. This is essentially what cosmopolitanism seeks to identify[4]. At this juncture, we can question whether the Gaud Saraswat Brahmins [GSBs] who claim to be, and are, deeply rooted in their traditional culture as a community, truly have a sense of commitment to belonging to the world; are cosmopolitan alongside? The architectural expressions of their temples convey this story through its very form.

Cosmopolitanism is a multifaceted concept that encompasses various subfields, each exploring different dimensions of global interconnectedness and cultural exchange. Critical Cosmopolitanism views cosmopolitanism as socially situated and integral to the self-constituting nature of the social world. It emphasizes internal developmental processes rather than globalization as the primary mechanism of change, focusing on cultural models of world openness and transformation[5]. Radical Cosmopolitanism critiques traditional nation-state structures and modernist social and political thought, proposing a cosmopolitan order that transcends these limitations[6]. Cosmopolitan architecture seeks to transcend national and international symbols, focusing instead on creating spaces that embody modernity without relying on traditional symbolic representations. This approach allows for a more inclusive and universal architectural language[7]. Architectural cosmopolitanism involves the creation of transnational alliances and solidarities, reordering international structures of unequal integration and racial hierarchy, and rethinking the role of architects within these networks[8]. The Goan temple builders thought themselves to be so free in their selection of their architectural repertoire, that they were unrestrained in the use of the available palette of Portuguese Goa, Deccani hybrid architecture between Islamic and Hindu forms, but maintained the ritualistic sanctity of prescribed Hindu rituals in terms of worshiper movement. What did the GSB patrons and the temple builders aspire to represent through the unique temples that they were building?

For studying the Goan temple, we use the theoretical framework of 'aesthetic cosmopolitanism' that refers to a cultural condition where global and local cultural forms intersect, creating a unique blend of cultural expressions. The general claim about 'aesthetic cosmopolitanism' is that it generates dialogue between global issues and local experiences and is subsequently developed through a reframing of the debates over the function of the imagination within aesthetics and politics[9]. The philosophical roots of 'aesthetic cosmopolitanism' can be traced back to Kant, who linked cosmopolitanism with the interdependence of technical civilization and aesthetics. This relationship is challenged by Leroi-Gourhan's theories on human progress and evolution, which emphasize the importance of aesthetics and sensoriality in integrating individuals into technological and interconnected experiences[10]. This negotiation between different aesthetic philosophies is crucial for promoting cosmopolitan sensibilities. The concept of aesthetic cosmopolitanism has been used to refer to the now normal cultural condition in which locally situated modes of cultural production and consumption are in dialogue with globally hegemonic forms[11]. It does not simply refer to the aesthetic representations of cosmopolitanism, but to a cosmopolitan worldview that is produced through aesthetics[12]. Aesthetic cosmopolitanism is shaped by real aesthetic experiences and symbolic relationships with the world, objects, and cultural representations, and is a new generational standard of good taste[13]. A number of studies have suggested that a refined relationship to culture can, more or less implicitly, produce a standard of preference for the exotic and faraway, accompanied by effects of rarity and difference: the high value placed on cultural eclecticism thus becoming a new form of legitimate culture. Goan temples have been referred to as exuding a cosmopolitan culture[14], however there is no elaboration of the same, leaving a gap that our paper attempts to fill.

We concentrate on the subfield of 'aesthetic cosmopolitanism' that examines the intersection of global art fields and national cultures, highlighting how contemporary cultural forms contribute to a unique cultural condition within contexts. Aesthetic cosmopolitanism can be theorized as a cultural condition. Regev quotes many authors in his attempt to further elaborate, 'cultural disposition involving an intellectual and aesthetic stance of "openness" towards peoples, places and experiences from different cultures, especially those from different "nations"', or as having taste for 'the wider shores of cultural experience'. When individuals, as members of one national or ethnic culture, have taste for cultural products or art works that unequivocally 'belong' to a nation or ethnicity other than their own, they display aesthetic cosmopolitanism. If, on the other hand, individuals have taste exclusively for cultural products and art works that conventionally 'belong' to the ethno-national entity of which they are members, they do not count as aesthetic cosmopolitans[15].

Aesthetic cosmopolitanism is the condition in which the representation and performance of ethno-national cultural uniqueness are largely based on art forms that are created by contemporary technologies of expression, and whose expressive forms include stylistic elements knowingly drawn from sources exterior to

indigenous traditions. How is aesthetic cosmopolitanism produced? Aesthetic cosmopolitanism emerges from a willingness to forgo cultural uniqueness in favor of new expressions. It involves adopting diverse forms and elements to create innovative aesthetics, reflecting shifts in cultural and social values. This aesthetic arises from the convergence of local, colonial, and ethno-communal influences. Aesthetic cosmopolitanism is described as a cultural disposition promoted by the new world (culture) system, flows or 'scapes.' Ensuing, aesthetic cosmopolitans are versed in recognizing and appreciating cultural diversity, a mode of managing meaning that allows them at the same time a certain indifference towards their own cultural norms and a cross-cultural omnivorousness[16]. Rancière lays claim to aesthetics as a regime of thought that can challenge the established order of politics[17]. We propose that the cosmopolitan imaginary can be decoded through a critical analysis of the Goan temple, the core of the GSBs' world making and re-examining the act of imagination and process of building. This study of the Goan temple is not only concerned with the visualization of cross-cultural interactions, or even the building processes, but is also connected with "the proposition that the process of world making is a radical act of the cosmopolitan imaginary"[18]. On the other hand, the logic underlying the social production of aesthetic cosmopolitanism is analyzed to generate the unique Goan temple as a cultural practice, making the critical enquiry multidimensional in nature. The orthodox commitment to a rigid temple form of Hindu culture has been replaced by a fluid conception of ethno-communal uniqueness, one that is constantly and consciously willing to implement stylistic innovations in architecture from different parts of the world.

This paper compares the cultural specificity of a typical Hindu temple with that of the Goan temple, and the capacity of architecture to transcend cultural differences. The imaginative turn in the temple building practice in Goa, with its 'natural' embrace of hybrid identities and its dedicated efforts to create socio-political impact, was also aligned with a desire to build a new aesthetic imaginary. "… aesthetic imaginary is built inside the borders of a nation, a culture, a society, a tradition, or an inheritance; but it disaggregates and reconstructs itself when exposed to the callings and constraints of cross-border epistemic and cultural circulations."[19]. The 19th century Hindu temples built by the GSBs in Goa stand as a testimony of the acceptance of other cultures, and their motifs. The dynamic of this new politics expresses itself in the social relations between the Gaud Saraswat Brahmin community and the locational powerful others; the Portuguese colonizers and the Islamic state. Art [*or architecture*] is thus not just a reflection of the process of cosmopolitanization, but also an active partner in articulation of cosmopolitan ethical agency and spatial habituation [our italics]. The concept of aesthetic cosmopolitanism overcomes and addresses the transformation that occurs through the interplay between the creative imagination and inter-subjective relations. The everyday mobilization of differences in social encounters of the GSBs with the Portuguese and the Muslims, materialize through the articulation of differences in the perceptual by creating a radical form for the Hindu temple in Goa. Architecture transcends beyond physicality to serve as a means of 'heightened reflexivity' through its newly formed aesthetic language.

3. COLONIAL SHADOWS: IMPACT OF PORTUGUESE RULE ON HINDU GOA

In 1510 the Portuguese conquered Goa, concentrating on the three islands bordering the Arabian sea, namely Tiswadi, Bardez and Salcete, and which later came to be known as the Old Conquests[20]. From 1541, Portuguese colonial policies in Goa involved laws and decrees that authorized physical and moral violence against Hindus, including coercive conversions, property confiscation, and temple destruction. The goal was to eradicate Hinduism by using Christianisation as a means of gaining control over the populace[21]. The first decree, dated June 30, 1541, ordered the demolition of all Hindu temples in Ilhas (Tiswadi), which was promptly executed under the supervision of the Vicar General, Miguel Vaz[22]. Subsequent laws, such as the 'Carta Regia' of March 8, 1546, further prohibited Hindu festivals and punished idol-making. By 1557, non-Christians were barred from public offices, and by 1559, possessing idols in private homes was penalized, with confiscated property divided between informants and the Church[23]. In 1567 after the first Provincial Council of Goa was held, a law was enacted which stated that all non-Christian places of worship be demolished and their holy men be expelled, their holy books be destroyed[24]. Due to fear of annihilation or Christianization[25], temple *Mahajans* (high folks) resorted to transporting their deities overnight into territories not under Portuguese dominance, and across the rivers, largely concentrated in what was called Antruz Mahal at that time and now known as Ponda.

These regions were nominally under the jurisdiction of the Bijapur sultans at the time. Initially, makeshift structures were erected to house these deities in secluded enclaves near the border with Portuguese Goa. In the late 17th and early 18th centuries, as these inland areas came under the control of the Hindu Marathas and their vassals, many of these temporary temples underwent significant rebuilding. Older, fragile structures were replaced with new significantly upscaled ones, reflecting a shift towards permanence. The firmer Hindu control over these regions provided both the security and fervor necessary for refurbishing the makeshift homes of coastal Goa's displaced deities[26]. The places to where these temples moved are known as *Novas Conquistas* which came under Portuguese rule by ceding of the lands by negotiating treaties, between the Marathas, the Portuguese and the Islamic states more than 250 years after the Portuguese first occupied the three islands of Goa[27].

The GSBs trace their origins to the banks of the Saraswati River, from where they migrated to Goa between the 10th and 13th centuries[28]. Settling in the lush coastal region, they established themselves across three territorial divisions: Tiswadi (later Ilhas, comprising 30 villages), Bardesh (later Bardez, with 12 villages), and Shahasashti (later Salcete, spanning 66 villages). These divisions formed the cultural and administrative bedrock of their community, shaping their socio-religious identity[29]. Initially, the GSBs were predominantly Shaivites, worshippers of Shiva, but over time, they assimilated Vaishnavism, reflecting a pragmatic compromise that allowed harmonious coexistence of dual sectarian traditions. This syncretism extended to their temple-centric social organization, and ultimately to the architectural expression of their temples as well[30]. A pivotal moment in their religious evolution was the appropriation of the indigenous deity *Santeri*, a mother goddess venerated by Goa's

pre-Brahmanical communities. The GSBs recast *Santeri* as Shantadurga, the Brahmanical form of Durga, thereby symbolizing their synthesis of local traditions with Sanskritic orthodoxy[31]. This strategic integration allowed them to assert dominance over Goa's spiritual landscape while co-opting indigenous practices. The late 18th century marked a turning point as Portuguese colonial policies liberalized, permitting Hindus limited participation in governance. The GSBs, leveraging their literacy, administrative acumen, and political adaptability, seized this opportunity to reintegrate into the colonial framework. Though they collaborated with the Portuguese, their reinvention was marked by calculated pragmatism. They ascended Goa's social hierarchy by reinforcing Brahmanical exclusivity, maintaining caste boundaries even as they relied on marginalized groups for labor, such as transporting deities during temple relocations.

Educated in Marathi and Portuguese, the GSBs emerged as cultural intermediaries. They secured temple lands through colonial legal systems, converting communal assets into private holdings under their control. Simultaneously, they championed Marathi as a secondary administrative language alongside Portuguese, a move that entrenched their influence over Goa's Marathi-speaking majority. This linguistic strategy mirrored broader Brahminical tactics across India, where control over knowledge systems perpetuated social hierarchies. By the 19th century, their dual mastery of colonial bureaucracy and Hindu orthodoxy positioned them as gatekeepers of both spiritual and secular power[32]. However, their ascendancy was not without paradox. While they preserved Hindu traditions against colonial erasure, their collaboration with the Portuguese and rigid caste practices alienated lower castes. The GSBs' legacy thus embodies a complex duality: custodians of Goa's Hindu heritage, yet architects of a stratified social order that mirrored the very colonial structures they navigated. Their history remains a testament to adaptation, survival, and the contested interplay of power, faith, and identity in a colonized landscape[33].

4. GOAN TEMPLES: THE LANGUAGE OF AESTHETIC COSMOPOLITANISM

Note: All photographs by Nirmal Kulkarni.

Through the lens of 'aesthetic cosmopolitanism' this section will examine the stylistic and iconographic characteristics of the Goan temples, focusing on how they preserved traditional Hindu temple typology in the plans, while intentionally incorporating spatial and ornamental elements from Christian and Islamic architectural traditions in the façade and other volumes. Temples were allowed to be built in the later part of the 18th century, in a politically lenient period during the history of Portuguese occupation in Goa. This brought with it the opportunity of experimentation with building typology and technology. By this time the temples had also gained enough finances due to royal patronages, and personal donations from wealthy devotees and *mahajans*[34]. Seeking fresh design opportunities, and with intent to build at a lavish scale, they turned for inspiration to the buildings of the Deccan which were at their peak in terms of design development. Upon

reconstruction of the temples in the late 18th century, the emergent Hindu landscape appeared to be a variegated confluence brought together perchance, as it is largely, even today. The interesting point here is that had the historical rupture of colonization not occurred, these temples would have remained where they were. In a way, colonial intervention was responsible for providing innovative opportunities for architectural design within contested spaces. The architectural expression of the Goan temple, as a space for unification of the cosmic and material world is not limited to the spaces within the building only, but spreads out into the landscape[35].

These mix of case studies examine the cultural historiography of the designated period and region through an analytical lens focused on the spatial and material manifestations of its architecture. A central aim of this inquiry is to frame the Goan temple not merely as a static relic but as a dynamic, evolving entity, actively embedded within historical and contemporary socioreligious practices and contributing new dimensions to the under-researched corpus of Hindu temple architecture in India. To advance a substantiated argument for its architectural singularity, this study employs a comparative methodology, juxtaposing its functional and symbolic attributes against the normative frameworks of traditional Hindu temple design. Parallelly, the ritual practices of the GSB community, rooted in Brahmanical prescriptions codified in ancient Hindu texts, directly inform the temple's operational and spatial logic, reflected in its architectural plan. By situating the temple within this continuum, the analysis underscores its role as both a preservation of orthodoxy and an adaptive response to shifting cultural cosmopolitanism during the 19th century.

As is evidenced, Hindu temples in Goa began to incorporate syncretic elements from the hybrid Islamic architectural traditions from the Deccan, such as pavilions, minarets and domes, and Portuguese architectural language from the churches of Old Goa, such as the use of arches, pilasters, cornices, and domes, alongside structuring the functional ritualistic elements of the building plan to that of traditional Hindu temple architecture. This blending of styles resulted in a unique syncretic architecture. The research investigates how dispossession of their original lands shaped the social and architectural landscapes of these religious sites. Employing a theoretical framework that incorporates cosmopolitanism at its core, the study examines how these temples, while maintaining their ritualistic functions, have adapted to new environments, creating unique socio-spatial dynamics and is conceptualized in the framework of 'aesthetic cosmopolitanism.' Selection for these representative temples was based on taking a broad geographical spread within Ponda where most of the deities fled, as detailed in Rui Gomez Pereira's book, "Hindu Temples and Deities," which provides an exhaustive list of temples in Goa[36].

4.1. The Hindu Temple Plan

Traditional Hindu temple architecture is based on ancient Hindu texts which lay down the norms for appropriate temple construction[37]. The texts specify the placement of the deity and the sanctum, the geometric parameters which govern its architecture which flows axially in the XX, YY and ZZ directions from the *Vastu Purusha Mandala*[38]. The main components of the temple begin with the *garbhagriha* (the sanctum) for the primary deity, built with a geometrically proportioned grid of 64 squares[39], around which is a regulated pathway for ritualistic circumambulation called *pradakshinapath*. Centered on the sanctum and rising high above is the *shikhara* (a spire), the defining feature of the temple, meant to be noticed from afar, due to its monumental height[40]. Immediately outside the entrance to the sanctum is the *ardha mandapa* (a vestibule) which is mostly used by the priest to perform the *puja* (ritualistic veneration) for the devotee. Beyond this lies the *sabha mandapa*, or a set of *sabha mandapas* in the case of larger temples. This space is the devotees gathering space and is also used for *kirtans* (devotional singing) and performances in the praise of the deity[41]. The temple is entered from the *mukha mandapa* which leads the worshipers to the *sabha mandapa* and beyond (Fig. 1). In terms of their relative typology, scholars have categorized them generally in three styles. First, as the *Nagara* style which is prevalent in North India, with a distinctive *shikhara* which is tall with a pronounced curve as it reaches the *kalasha*. Second, the *Dravida* style, which is largely found in South India, with a tall pyramidical shape with pronounced straight lines. Third, the *Vesara* style, a hybrid between the *Nagara* and the *Dravida* styles of temples[42]. All three types are vested with intricate carvings that represent narratives from the Hindu religious epics.

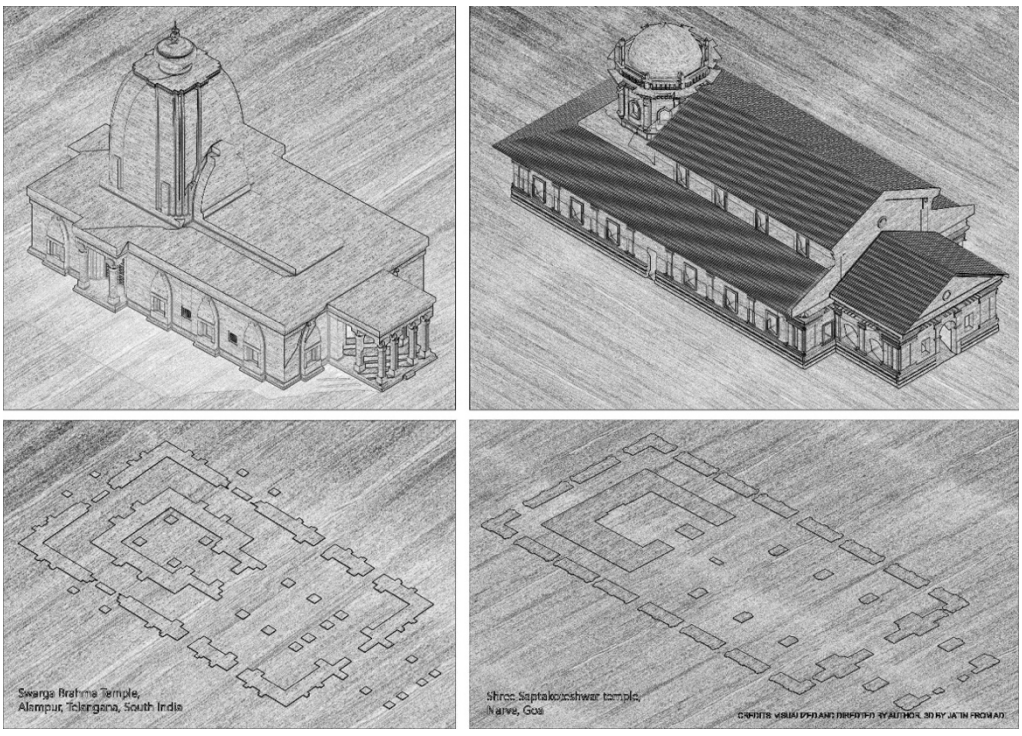

Fig. 1: Left, traditional Hindu temple. Right, Goan temple. Source: Nirmal Kulkarni's archives.

The Goan temple adheres to the traditional Hindu temple in its plan and hierarchy of spaces as mentioned above (Fig. 1). However, it differs radically in its spatial volume of the *sabha mandapa*, roof styles, the *shikhara* which is modelled on the Islamic pavilion crowned by domes. The *ardhamandapa* (entrance porch) evolved into a pillared, tiled-roof structure elevated on a high plinth, mirroring the *balcao* (veranda) of Portuguese colonial mansions. Moreover, the façade features European style pilasters, columns and cornices and entablatures inspired by the Portuguese churches from Old Goa[43].

Fig. 2: Naguesh temple, Ponda, Goa. Side view.

4.2. Architectural Elements on External Façade

The exterior articulation of the Naguesh temple at Bandivada, Ponda, (Fig. 2) exemplifies a deliberate synthesis of architectural idioms drawn from syncretic traditions. The mandapa's central aisle is elevated above its lateral counterparts, creating a vertical cross-sectional profile that evokes the tripartite nave configuration of a basilican church. This spatial strategy is further accentuated by a pedimented entrance portal, marked by an arched aperture flanked by pilasters. The perimeter laterite walls are extra ordinarily thick, mirroring the church walls and are rhythmically articulated by a system of pilasters, which support a duplicated entablature encircling the structure on the level of the higher roof as well as the lean-to roof on the lower level of the basilican section. Some scholars believe that the *mandapa* (pillared hall) was elongated to resemble a church nave, however that myth is disproven when one sees the plan of the Hindu temple. The *sabha mandapa* has accentuated flanking aisles separated from the main hall via arched colonnades. The lower height of these aisles permitted the addition of clerestory windows, enhancing the resemblance to Christian ecclesiastical architecture. Although pilasters and moldings are conventional features in Hindu temple architecture, their application in this context diverges from traditional

precedents, instead reflecting a Western-influenced emphasis on proportional spatial division. This approach aligns with the architectural vocabulary of Old Goa's cathedral, particularly the articulation of facades through classical orders. Similarly, the Mhalsa Devi temple showcases a stylized inverted lotus atop a pronounced ogee dome, although its multifaceted shape diverges from typical Islamic forms. Additionally, cusped arches and arabesque floral patterns reflect Islamic influences likely derived from Bijapur, given the region's historical ties to Adil Shahi rule. The interior decor resembles European church opulence through stuccoed ceilings, gilded accents, and imported European chandeliers, however, we argue that this was the outcome of the deep-rooted syncretism that led to assimilate disparate elements, which begs the question, is syncretism an outcome of cosmopolitanism?

4.3. Goan Temple Shikhara and Domes

Fig. 3: Left, Manguesh temple, Priol. Right, Shantadurga temple, Kavle.

Compared to the traditional Hindu temple which has a tall pyramidal *sikhara* (tower) composed of multiple tiers, above the *garbhagriha* (sanctum), typical of Dravidian and Nagara styles, the Goan temple has a single-storied, two-storied or three-storied octagonal pavilion type drums above the sanctum. It is supported by a trabeated, post-and-lintel system, while the dome, borrowed from European architectural traditions, features a lantern structure crowned by a finial (Fig. 3). The domes in other prominent Goan temples sport a slightly depressed onion profile, reminiscent of domed tombs and mosques built in the Deccan region from the 16th century. The temple's hybridized treatment of pilasters and entablature, retaining Hindu decorative motifs (e.g., cobra head ornamentation around dome bottom) while adopting Western proportional logic—reflects a conscious negotiation of cross-cultural aesthetics. The *sikhara* symbolizes a mountain and connects to sacred geography and mythology, while the dome represents a period of cultural exchange and architectural innovation, incorporating foreign influences into traditional Hindu designs.

The lavish use of domes in the Manguesh temple at Priol presents an intriguing architectural feature, especially considering that Catholic churches in Goa are generally not known for their domes. Domes therefore seem to be a feature consistent with the variety of domes experimented with in the Deccan in the hybrid architecture of the Vijaynagara dynasty and would have likely flowed in from Hampi. The only exception with a dome on church architecture is that of the Saint Catejan's Church, which features a dome supported by pendentives. This interpretation reflects a unique and free adaptation of a blend of Islamic and European architectural idioms, like what is seen at the Mahalaxmi temple in Bandora, where the lower half of the dome is ribbed. The various dome types in Goan temples, whether influenced by Islamic or Catholic building traditions, are harmoniously unified by a recurring balustrade that serves as a rhythmic theme.

4.4. Deepa Sthamba

The Gol Gumbaz, constructed between 1626 and 1656, stands as an exemplar of architectural ingenuity, serving as the mausoleum of Adil Shah II of the Deccan Sultanate, which operated within a shared geopolitical sphere as Portuguese Goa. Scholarly analysis posits that Bijapuri Mughal architecture, which synthesizes Indo-Islamic design principles with residual elements of ancient Hindu architectural traditions, exhibits discernible traces of preexisting Hindu motifs within its ornamental and structural lexicon. The *deepa stambha* (lamp tower) of Goan temples manifests a striking formal parallel to the Bijapuri corner minarets of the Gol Gumbaz. Transposed from their original Islamic liturgical context, the minaret motif emerges as a prominent architectural feature in temples such as the Manguesh Temple (Fig. 4) and others across Goa. However, this stylistic adaptation involves significant proportional reinterpretation. Whereas the Islamic minaret emphasizes a slender, vertical profile, the *deepa stambha* adopts a comparatively squat, robust form with heightened loftiness. This formal synthesis likely derives from adherence to indigenous proportional systems, observable in the columns and pilasters of Goan temples, which attenuate pronounced verticality to

achieve a harmonious visual equilibrium reflective of regional aesthetic sensibilities, as seen in the proportions of temple columns of Hampi, and other places in South India. Intriguingly, both typologies share a seven-story elevation, culminating in a domed finial; a convergence that underscores their hybridized design logic.

Fig. 4: Left, Manguesh temple *deepa sthamba*. Right, detail of same.

The *deepa stambhas* of the 18th-century Ponda temples are positioned near temple entrances, evolved from the simpler early Maratha *deepa stambhas* to more elaborate cosmic pillars, such as the Manguesh temple (Fig. 4). Upon entering the temple precinct, the *deepa sthambha*, immediately captures attention, strategically positioned to frame the main entrance in an axial view. The structure is adorned with rounded pilasters, semi-circular arches, and trefoil cusped ogee arches, creating a visually elegant and balanced form. Each level is marked by a base cornice, with arched openings that enhance the tower's gracefulness. Featuring segmented arched bays framed by robust columns with prominent capitals. Topped with cupolas and adorned with pinnacles and balustrades, these *deepa stambhas* stand out as independent architectural entities, paralleling the temple's *sikhara* in form and visual prominence. They also serve a dual purpose: it is both a practical ceremonial element and a symbolic marker of Hindu identity. Its architectural significance is akin to the towers of Christian churches and Islamic minarets, which also function as visual signposts for their respective faiths. During festivals, the tower is illuminated with numerous oil lamps, creating an ethereal spiritual experience that underscores its

role as a symbol of cultural fusion and religious devotion. Each layer of the tower is compressed to provide a maximum number of niches for lamps, creating a massed effect while maintaining an overall elegance. By integrating elements from Islamic and Christian traditions, the *deepa stambhas* in Goan temples illustrates a complex cultural exchange, showcasing how architectural forms can convey religious identity and cultural significance, suggesting an 'aesthetic cosmopolitanism.' This synthesis highlights the *deepa stambha's* role as a key component of the temple complex, reinforcing its status as a symbol of Hinduism within the broader context of Goa's diverse religious landscape.

4.5. Talai (Holy Water Tank)

Fig. 5: Talai of Lakshmi-Narsimha temple, Veling.

One of the most intriguing features of the Goan temples is the presence of a freshwater spring that supplies the temple tank (*talai*), a structure notable for its architectural distinction. The *talai* is usually accessed via a ceremonial gateway and could be located at the front of the temple, or its rear, or even to its side, depending on the site conditions. Particularly with the Lakshmi Narasimha temple at Veling, the *talai* boundary is one of the most exquisite in terms of its architecture (Fig. 5). On the northeast side of the tank, opposite the gateway, are elaborately constructed gateways, with the central one being two stories high and featuring a balcony. This central structure is flanked by two semicircular arched gateways. Three domed chapel-like rooms, each housing deities, are positioned on either side of the arched gateways and one in the center. The ornamentation of this composite structure includes decorative cornices and pilasters, which impart a Catholic aesthetic to the landscaped *talai*, and is encircled by thick laterite walls adorned with niches featuring ogee arches, finished in plaster and paint. A series of ten steps leads down to the water level of the talai. The synthesis of Hindu, Islamic, and European elements—such as arched colonnades, octagonal towers, and

hybrid ornamentation—created a distinct Goan architectural idiom. While the adaptation of European styles demonstrated remarkable technical assimilation, the exuberant ornamentation occasionally clashed with traditional aesthetics, underscoring the tension between preservation and innovation in colonial-era temple design. This fusion remains a testament to Goa's unique socio-cultural crossroads, where indigenous traditions dynamically engaged with global influences.

5. FROM CONFLICT TO COHESION: INTERPRETING SYNCRETIC ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICES IN GOAN TEMPLES

Principal finding: It appears that the aesthetic cosmopolitanism of the GSBs knew no boundaries when it came to building the temples, however, they were very traditional. The Goan temple consumed all available visual references, including transcultural paradigms from Catholic architecture of the Portuguese to the architectural artifacts from the Deccan to create a blend, a synthesis of disparate styles. They even retained the carved wooden columns for the *sabha mandapa*. Such adaptations underscore the broader sociopolitical context of 17th–18th century Goa, where architectural forms served as contested symbols of cultural authority amidst Hindu-Maratha resurgence and Portuguese colonial hegemony.

6. CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of transcultural influences evidenced in the architecture of the Goan temples, exemplifies a cosmopolitan influence that arises from the unique cultural and historical context of the region. This architectural freedom allows designers to transcend the constraints imposed by rigid formalism characteristic of European architecture from the 16th and 17th centuries, and the prescriptive norms adopted for temple architecture from ancient Hindu *Shastric* canons. In this environment, despite the strict religious affiliation and practices of strict adherence to ancient religious rites and rituals of the GSBs as a society, the architects and artisans were able to draw inspiration from a diverse array of sources, leading to innovative designs that reflect a synthesis of various cultural influences. Therefore, we argue, that even though the religious rites and rituals of the GSBs strictly adhered to traditional Hindu religious practices, the temple layout facilitated the functioning of such traditional practices, however, the spatial and external architecture of their temples manifested a creative dialogue between indigenous practices and external styles, resulting in structures that embody a rich tapestry of transcultural syncretism. This extraordinary freedom is the premise of the conceptual frame of 'aesthetic cosmopolitanism' that we adopt to interpret the architectural syncretism. For instance, the incorporation of domes and arches—features typically associated with Islamic and European architecture—into Hindu temple designs illustrates the approach of 'aesthetic cosmopolitanism'. Designers were not confined to a singular architectural language; instead, they could experiment with forms and motifs

that resonated with local traditions while simultaneously embracing foreign influences. This blending of styles fostered an architectural lexicon that was both unique and representative of Goa's multicultural heritage.

Moreover, the social dynamics of Goa during the colonial period played a significant role in this architectural evolution. As a melting pot of cultures due to Portuguese colonialism, local artisans interacted with European architects, exchanging ideas and techniques. This cross-pollination of knowledge enabled the development of hybrid forms that retained their functional and spiritual significance while also appealing to the aesthetic sensibilities of those times. The result is an architectural landscape where structures reflected not only religious devotion but also the complexities of identity formation within a cosmopolitan milieu. The temples became spaces where diverse cultural narratives converged, allowing for a fluid interpretation of sacred architecture that resonated with both local devotees and GSB patrons influenced by colonial aesthetics. In essence, this freedom of architectural choice—unencumbered by rigid formalism or prescriptive traditions—has led to the emergence of a distinctive Goan architectural identity, that we now interpret as 'aesthetic cosmopolitanism'. The transformation, therefore, of the Hindu temple in Goa from being a traditional Dravidian type from Southern India, into a multicultural edifice is evidence of the interexchange between the creative imagination of the patrons GSBs, and the temple builders and the intersubjective relations they have with the Portuguese and the Muslims. The unique aesthetic language of these temples is emblematic of creative interaction of cultures and exploration of shared worlds, going beyond mere hybridization. The intervention of aesthetics is always political because the principle behind an art's formal revolution is at the same time the principle behind the political redistribution of shared experience. It underscores how cosmopolitan influences can shape built environments, fostering innovation while honoring local traditions. This adaptability is not merely a stylistic choice; it is indicative of a broader cultural ethos that values inclusivity, creativity, and the harmonious coexistence of diverse influences. As such, these temples stand as testaments to the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, reflecting the rich historical narrative of Goa as a site of cultural convergence. Since there is evidence of syncretism in the architecture of the Deccan Sultanate, future scholars can add while exploring the question; is architectural syncretism an expression of aesthetic cosmopolitanism?

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Traditional Dwellings and Settlements

Working Paper Series

CRAFTS AND THE LANDSCAPE OF CULTURAL TOURISM AT SANTINIKETAN, INDIA

Amita Sinha, Deepanjan Saha, Tanima Bhattacharya

CRAFTS AND THE LANDSCAPE OF CULTURAL TOURISM AT SANTINIKETAN, INDIA

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Santiniketan in West Bengal, India was declared as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2023. This new status merits examination of existing patterns of tourism to manage its growth and plan for the future. The exclusive focus on historic buildings and landscapes of Visva-Bharati University campus in the nomination dossier implies the state's preoccupation with tangible heritage of the core area. Cultural tourism in Santiniketan, however, is a broader phenomenon drawing upon its rural environs, crafts and fairs, baul (minstrel) music, and ethnic cuisine. Our paper is an overview of the landscape of craft making, tracing its historic roots to its growth into a major draw for cultural tourism today. The traditional rural crafts of Birbhum district (where Santiniketan is located) were reinvigorated by the establishment of Sriniketan, part of Visva-bharati campus, by the poet laureate Rabindranath Tagore a century ago to promote rural development in the surrounding region. Rabindranath's son, Rathindranath and daughter-in-law, Pratima Devi, introduced craft techniques from Europe, East and Southeast Asia in leather, textiles, and wood. Local artisans were trained in workshops to develop their skills by experimenting with new materials and trying different techniques of craft production. The Tagores' frequent travels abroad were instrumental in developing a cosmopolitan worldview within which creative experimentation was encouraged in all spheres including craft making.

Ethnographic fieldwork in Santiniketan shows that this legacy has flourished and has shaped the unique 'Santiniketan aesthetic' inspiring artists and artisans alike which has meant a blurring of the boundary between art and craft. The vibrant tourism economy generated and supported by crafts rests upon local entrepreneurship and has been largely self-organized. The paper focuses on the process of place-making meaning the transformation that occurs in left over spaces and wasteland where crafts are sold in outdoor markets known as haats. These impromptu haats are sites of place-making occurring as a spatio-temporal event. Cosmopolitanism in the development of rural craft traditions meant innovative techniques and diversification in the variety of craft products A cosmopolitan worldview can thus contribute towards cultural heritage which has been always constructed as being indigenous and local. The paper concludes with a reminder that all cultural assets—tangible and intangible—need to be promoted and the scope of heritage preservation and management ought to extend beyond the preservation of historic monuments to the landscape of cultural tourism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Santiniketan in West Bengal, India was declared as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2023. This new status merits examination of existing patterns of tourism to manage its growth and plan for the future. The exclusive focus on historic buildings and landscapes of Visva-Bharati University campus in the nomination dossier implies the state's preoccupation with tangible heritage of the core area. Cultural tourism in Santiniketan is however a broader phenomenon drawing upon its rural environs, including picturesque villages, groves, farms, ponds, murals, temporary outdoor markets, and folk singers. This scenic landscape is a product of traditional ways of building, craft making, and celebrating in music and dance, comprising intangible heritage in cultural practices. Among these practices, craft making has had an integral relationship with the cultural landscape, in reflecting the Santiniketan aesthetic. This paper is an overview of the landscape of craft making, tracing its historic roots to its growth into a major draw for cultural tourism today. The traditional rural crafts of Birbhum district (where Santiniketan is located) were reinvigorated by the establishment of Sriniketan, part of Visva-Bharati campus, by the poet laureate Rabindranath Tagore a

century ago to promote rural development in the surrounding region. This legacy has flourished and has influenced the cultural landscape as it evolved in the past century. The paper describes the process of place-making, in particular the transformation that occurs in left over spaces and wasteland where crafts are sold in outdoor temporary markets known as haats.

Figure 1. Location of Santiniketan

Figure 2. Silpa Sadan, Sriniketan (source: Amita Sinha)

We explore the history of craft making and the place of craft in the contemporary landscape to understand the intangible heritage dimension of this World Heritage Site. Specifically, how has the institution of Visva-bharati University been a catalyst in craft development and in what ways are the local crafts contributing to the cultural landscape of Santiniketan? To answer these questions, archival research in Rabindra Bhavan, Visva-bharati University was combined with literature review of published sources. Data collected from ethnographic interviews with artisans and artists and from participant observation in markets was analysed to understand the variety in crafts and their modes of production, networks of distribution, and the spatial attributes of craft sales. The findings contribute to our understanding of how Santinketan has become a hub for handicrafts production and sale thus contributing to cultural tourism.

2. CRAFTS IN SANTINIKETAN

With industrialization handmade objects came to be labeled as crafts, a term defined by UNESCO in 1997 as 'artisanal products, produced by hand or hand tools.' [1] The term is elastic enough to include objects in the making of which manual takes precedence over the mechanical. Birbhum district is home to many traditional crafts including *khes* weaving using recycled cloth. Bamboo products are made in Ballavpurdanga and the adjoining Burdwan district is well known for its *dokra* (ancient metal craft using the lost wax casting process) art. Kantha embroidery by women is widespread and handloom weaving is being done by a small number of

craftsmen in many villages. These traditional crafts, presumably practiced since generations, were innovated and diversified over time with the arrival of Tagores and the setting up of Shilpa Sadana in Sriniketan. The crafts were influenced by the emergence of a unique Santiniketan aesthetic representing the merging of arts and crafts. The story of crafts in Santiniketan can be traced back to Bengal Renaissance that profoundly influenced the art scene in the late nineteenth century colonial India. Nationalist art in Government College of Arts in Calcutta evolved into modern art as it was practiced by Santiniketan artists including Rabindranath, Nandlal Bose, Ramkinkar Baij and Binodebihari Mukherjee. Contextual modernism, as coined by the art historian Siva Kumar, drew upon historic motifs and vernacular traditions.[2] In that way it was different from Bauhaus modernism although both were influenced by the Arts and Crafts Movement in Europe that in turn was inspired by crafts of India.

Contextual modernism as a movement integrated the schism between arts and crafts that the Industrial Revolution in Europe had accelerated. It fashioned the Santiniketan aesthetic in particular the built environment in which design was conceived as a unity, extending to decorative arts and building ornamentation and covering all aspects of the built environment. Ornamentation was anathema to modern architecture in the West that took 'ornamentation is crime' as a guiding principle and relied on honest expression of building materials and construction techniques. Architecture in the hands of Santiniketan artists became a craft, drawing upon traditional construction techniques of mud housing as in Tagore's cottage 'Shyamali' and the student dormitory 'Kalo Bari'. Sculptural murals on the walls dissolved the distinction between art and architecture. Rathindranath, Rabindranth's son worked with Japanese artisan Kasahara, to design beautiful modern furniture for Udayan, the largest house in Uttarayan. The design of this unusual building was a product of the cosmopolitan outlook of the Tagores and their travels to East and South-east Asia. Rathindranath, although trained as an agricultural scientist was a polymath with considerable design talent; among his many skills included excellent craftsmanship in wood.

The history of craft development is closely tied with Sriniketan, the other half of Visva-bharati campus set up in the 1920s as an Institute for Rural Reconstruction.[3] Rabindranath's years managing Tagore estates in East Bengal had brought home to him the dire need for rural upliftment. He understood that new agricultural techniques had to be introduced to cultivate in small landholdings, rural co-operative banks had to be established for advancing loans at low interest rates, health clinic had to be set up to combat diseases, and income from farming had to be supplemented. Craft development in rural communities was part of rural reconstruction programs initiated in the 1930s and 1940s. In 1928 Bichitra Studio for craft making was moved to Sriniketan as Industries Department that became Shilpa Bhavan in 1938 (later renamed as Shilpa Sadana in 1951). Leather inlay and leather batik, pottery, weaving, bookbinding among other crafts were taught to villagers as part of extension service. Power looms were obtained from Japan and Sweden and

certificate courses on weaving were offered until 1960. Shilpa Sadan provided, and still does, a retail outlet for crafts. Rati

Rathindranath and his wife Pratima Devi experimented with new materials and techniques, in particular in leather, following their visits to Italy, France, and England. Batik was introduced by Protima Devi who had learnt it on her visit to Java in 1927. Today various design programs in textiles, pottery and ceramics, furniture and interiors are offered to young students. Crafts were the focus of educational pedagogy in Shilpa Sadan and were important in Kala Bhavan teaching as well. Children in Patho Bhavan and Siksha Satra engage in craft activities although learning crafts is no longer the focus of curriculum in Siksha Satra as it was during its inception.

Santiniketan was established as an experimental school with an educational philosophy of learning from nature, its forms and rhythms. Rabindranath wrote poems and songs celebrating the beauty of seasons. Nature, deified and a sentient presence, is a recurring theme in his poetry and to celebrate joyously its rhythms is participating in its creative force. *Vanavani* (Voice of the forest) a collection of poems on trees, shrubs, and flowers and seasons when they thrived, epitomizes this theme. He translated this into his pedagogy in Santiniketan by introducing festivals celebrating the changing seasons through music, dance, and songs.[4] These festivals became occasions for craft *melas* (fairs) held in *maath* or *maidan* (community open ground) close to the ashram in which students and local artisans exhibited and sold their work. Santiniketan aesthetics reflects harmony with the natural world, therefore craft making using natural materials have always been encouraged. Local craft making in the nearby villages has been profoundly impacted by it in many ways, not least through diversification of product types, materials and techniques of making.

Besides Sriniketan, there are other players including local societies for the promotion of rural crafts. The most successful among them is Amar Kutir Society for Rural Development, a co-operative tracing its beginnings to pre-independent India in the 1930s. Its founders Sushant Mukherjee and Pannalal Dasgupta played an active role in the freedom movement. Today its retail outlet on the banks of the River Kopai is a big tourist draw. In its leather workshop, leather dyeing, cutting and stitching are done in teams of five as a streamline operation. The Central government set up a Craft development center in 1992 and the Society conducts many training programs in the nearby villages. Ram Shyam Handicrafts, a local entrepreneur with shops in Santiniketan and Bolpur, are conducting batik training workshops in which rural women are trained in using the technique on textiles.

3. SELF-ORGANIZED HAATS

In the pre-industrial society where all items of use were handmade, the weekly open air temporary markets known as haats in Northern and eastern India, were places for getting objects of daily necessity. Haats have been around for a long time in the Indian subcontinent, likely going back to the Harappan civilization. The term used widely throughout eastern and northern India refers to a temporary market held on a weekly basis. Its temporality implies that it does not require any permanent infrastructure, only an empty ground where temporary shelters can be put up if needed. Typically held in a *maidan* on the village outskirts or at the cross-roads accessed easily, haats can be big or small depending upon how many villages participate. Goods are bought and sold using money or the barter system.[5] The haat is ubiquitous in rural India. There are said to be 47,000 of them found in all parts of the subcontinent except in sparsely populated regions such as Western Rajasthan or those that have poor connectivity as in some northeastern states. As places where local goods are bought and sold, they are the mainstay of the rural economy in India, collectively generating around Rs. 50, 000 crores every year.[6]

At Santiniketan, haats have an important role in the economy generated by homestays, hotels, restaurants and cafes. Haats as temporary markets can be set up on any open public ground, and at Santiniketan they tend to spring up wherever there are tourists. In our fieldwork in 2018-2019 and in 2024 we conducted interviews with artisans in five haats and made detailed observations of craft displays, and activities including performances. Artisans responded to open-ended questions about where and how crafts are made, raw materials used, time taken to make them, patterns in sales and tourist footfall and preferences, and their requirements. A total of 83 artisans were interviewed at Sonajhuri Haat, Shilpi Bithi Haat on the road connecting Bolpur Railway Station to Visva-bharati University campus, Srijani Shilpagram, Chattim Tala, Kopai Riverfront, and Poush Mela. Two thirds of the respondents were men; more than three quarters were in the age range of 26-55 years; half were educated up to 10th class; and 15% earned less than Rs. 5000 per month.

Sonajhuri Haat: Khoai, meaning a denuded landscape of ravines and gullies, falls within a conservation zone, protected by the Forestry Department of West Bengal. Although planted with eucalyptus and Sonajhuri trees, it is a *maidan* like space and the site of the largest haat in Saantiniketan. The haat began in 2003 when local artists under the leadership of Shyamali Khastagir organized weekly haats on Saturday afternoons. The haat expanded over time from a handful of artists and craftsmen to numbering now in hundreds who have spread over a large area to sell their wares. With estimates ranging from 300—1000 artisans, the weekly haat has become a daily one beginning in the morning and wrapping up at sunset. The peak tourist season is between October and March drawing tourists from Kolkata and other towns and cities of Eastern India. Vendors sit

on the ground in rows with wares spread on the raised mud plinth. Tourists arrive usually in three -wheeler *totos* on the road parallel to Shyambati Canal and move on foot in aisles made informally by the arrangement of displayed wares. The haat is a commercial, performative, and social space--eateries and seating pavilions dot the landscape; *baul* singers and Santhal folk dancers attract tourists who photograph and videotape their performances with some participating in the dancing as well.

In our interviews with 44 artisans, we found that saris and cloth furnishings make up the biggest segment of products sold in this haat. The process of making is a chain extending from suppliers of the cotton and silk fabric from different parts of India to work done at home commissioned by those who then bring it to the haat for sale. Mostly the maker and the seller are not the same person. Craft making is a family affair--women do the kantha embroidery while men do the cutting and stitching. Products are also sold wholesale and at other retail outlets. Bags are made from cloth, jute, leather, *khes*; batik work on leather is popular. Calf, goat, and cow leather comes from Canning Street in Kolkata; it is cut, design applied using dice and then colored. Leather goods with batik patterns are unique to Santiniketan and have the G.I. (geographical indication) tag indicating their heritage value.

Family members work together to make jewelry from cloth, beads, wood and terracotta. Jewelry from natural materials such as seeds and bena grass is made by the local tribal Santhals. Mud is obtained from local ponds for making terracotta jewelry; it is sieved, washed and dried, hand pinched or set in molds, and burnt in a furnace. Musical instruments—flutes and *ektara*—made from bamboo are popular. Mr. H whose main occupation is whitewashing buildings and vegetable gardening—makes bows and arrows, bamboo baskets, brooms with coconut coir, and toy birds with coconut shells. Ms R. hand stitches lamp shades using silk and uses cane and mahogany wood. It takes her about 15-20 days to make a lamp, and she only sells in the haat. Mr. D. makes small curios—Tagore heads, monkeys, dolls, etc—from clays using his hands or moulds. He also keeps machine made items, especially toys. Ms B makes bamboo cane furniture, mostly modha and chairs. She learnt this skill from her father-in-law. She also makes hats, table mats, and tea trays from palm leaves.

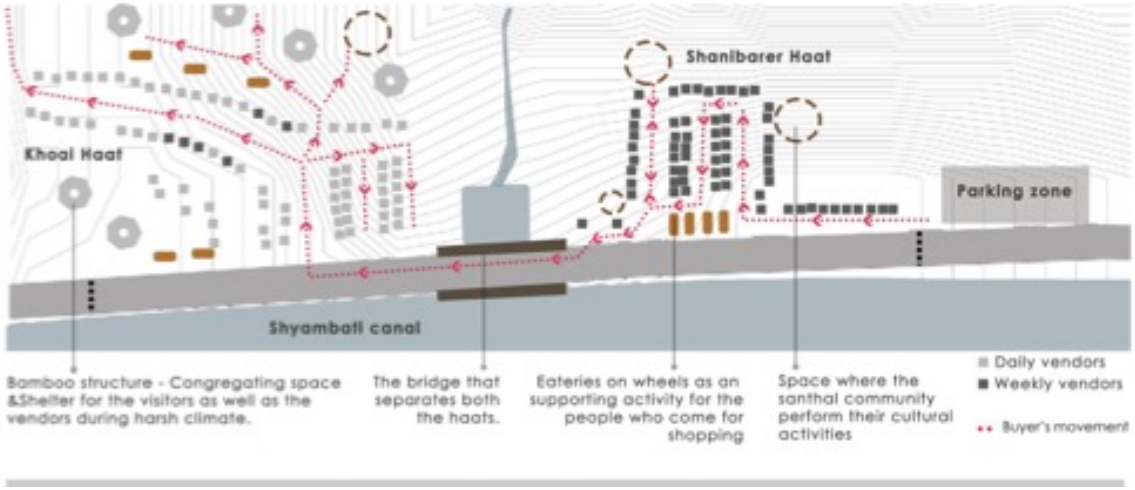

Figure 3. Sonajhuri Haat (drawn by Sowmya Murugan)

Figure 4. Sonajhuri Haat (source: Sowmya Murugan)

Interviews with 11 tourists and 2 locals revealed that ambience of the place, greenery, scenery, presence of baul singers and Santhal dancers, and low-cost crafts was what attracted them to the haat. They liked the look and feel of craft products, appreciated that they were made by hand, and agreed that they reflected the Santiniketan aesthetic. They wanted to buy clothing, kantha embroidered textiles, leathergoods, *dokra* artwork, and terracotta items. They felt that the prices were just right and with the exception of one, were willing to pay more to support craft products. They wanted to see more handicrafts and tribal art in the haat. Two

tourists were from Barackpore and Mednipur; the rest were from Kolkata and majority had a monthly income was more than Rs. 1,00,000.

Shilpi Bithi Haat: The approach road from Bolpur Railway Station to Santiniketaan is lined with shops; this stretch of the road known as Shilpi Bithi, houses the oldest haat in Shantiniketan. As one comes closer Visva-bharati campus, mid-rise buildings give way to make-shift shops built with bamboo poles and G.I. sheets on the street shoulders. The unauthorized shops extending into the road to display their wares have electric connections and shutters; their signboards advertise their goods as handicrafts. We interviewed 16 shopkeepers; half of them have been selling in this haat 25 years or more; one shop was erected in 1941 by the current owner's father. Ninety percent of the crafts are sold to tourist and only 10% to locals. Tourist footfall is more in winter, especially during the Poush Mela, and reduces in summer between April and August. Items sold included clothings with ajrak and batik prints, and kantha embroidery, leather and cloth handbags, terracotta, cloth, and oxidized metal jewelry, *dokra* artwork, and bamboo crafts. The shops are open every day of the week except Wednesday; two owners take online orders; one sells in Sonajhuri Haat while another supplies to Ram Shyam Handicraft store on Bolpur-Santinketan Road. The owner of Huts and Crafts, Mr. E, gets the handloom fabric from 4-5 villages and employs around 20 women to do *kantha* embroidery and 10 male tailors. Only 20% of handicrafts are sold in this shop and 80% go to shops in Kolkata and other cities; he also displays them in the Sonajhuri Haat. Mr. Y works with wood and makes figurines of famous people--Tagore, Ambedkar, Gandhi. Vivekananda--and of tribals; he also sculpts animals. However, these do not sell as much, and he has to keep other items such as handbags that are popular among tourists.

Figure 4. Shilpi Bithi (source: Amita Sinha)

Chattim Tala Haat: The entry to the main heritage sites of Santiniketan—Chattim Tala, Upasana Griha, and Rabindra Bhavan, where tourist footfall is huge--is another venue for an impromptu haat. The craft items are sold on push carts that appear to be re-purposed rickshaws. Most items are made at home by families and include jewelry, photo frames, cloth bags, and terracotta objects. About 10% of the items are manufactured. All four vendors we interviewed mentioned that they arrived when Rabindra Bhavan Museum opened in the morning and left at 5.30 pm in the evening when it closed, keeping their carts in the nearby Post Office. They described being harassed by security guards to vacate the area especially when VIPs come.

Figure 5. Chattim Tala Haat (source: Amita Sinha)

Kopai Riverfront Haat: Kopai Riverfront with its scenic views is a tourist spot. Although the number of tourists is not large, yet sufficient enough for another impromptu haat to spring up. No rent is paid, and no overheads are required. Wares are spread on the ground and items are also hung on rope strings stretched between bamboo poles. They are mostly clothing, saris, and bedcovers and sheets with batik and ajrak prints and hand embroidered with kantha stitch. The three artisans we interviewed have been selling for about 7-8 years and are here every day of the week during the peak tourist season and only three days (Friday, Saturday, and Sunday) during the off-season. The clothing items are made mostly at home, with the fabric obtained from Bolpur and Labpur.

Figure 6. Kopai Riverfront Haat (source: Amita Sinha)

4. SPONSORED HAATS

Poush Mela Haat: Mela or fairs held to coincide with festivals are occasions for large scale haats with a regional draw. Poush Mela attracts thousands of visitors and is a big income generator. It was begun by Debendranath Tagore, Rabindranath's father, in 1894 to mark the anniversary of his initiation into Brahmo Samaj. It has been organized by Visva-bharati since 1922 (except for a brief hiatus when it was organized by Bolpur Municipality and Birbhum District in 2022-24) and has now become a six-day event beginning with a ceremony at Chattim Tala on December 23rd. The Mela held on the *maidan* in Purba Palli is a combination of cultural performances, food festival, book fair, state emporia, art and craft exhibits and the traditional haat. Handloom products, apparel, furniture, decorative items, and jewelry, among other handicrafts are sold in stalls, many from out of the state. There are food stalls and food carts selling delicacies, especially from Bengal. Amusement rides on the giant wheel and pirate ship have always part of the mela as seen in historic photos of *nagordola* (timber wheels). Cultural performances by Visva-bharati students, *bauls*, and Ranapa dancers performing on stilts in large tents enliven the atmosphere. Stalls and elaborate pavilions erected by 'decorators' are laid out in a grid iron pattern not unlike a small temporary settlement built with low-cost materials. In between rows of pavilions, unregistered artisans had spread their wares on the ground and stayed at the venue throughout the mela duration. Among the 10 artisans interviewed was a Madhubhani

artist who has been visiting the mela for the past 25 years and belongs to a women's self-help group in her native village in Bihar. Mr. D. who owns a shop in Sriniketan, has set up a stall of kantha embroidered saris and has hired 5-6; his sales are around R. 1,50,000.

Figure 7. Poush Mela (source: Amita Sinha)

Srijani Shilpagram Haat: Srijani Shilpagram is an outdoor museum of vernacular houses from Eastern India. Full scale models of houses from Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, the north-eastern states, and Andaman and Nicobar Islands are displayed here. The complex has been built by Eastern Zonal Cultural Center, an autonomous organization under the Ministry of Culture, Government of India to promote local arts and crafts. Puppets and folk-art paintings and dioramas of tribal freedom fighters are also exhibited. The heavy tourist footfall attracted artisans who sat under the trees with their wares. A craft market has been built in the last five years consisting of rows and clusters of pavilions with tiled roofs. The cost of renting a pavilion is Rs 600 per month and goods can be stored in large trunks. Out of six respondents in our survey, four were women among whom two are working with women's self-help groups. The male artisan who sells *dokra* artwork has a workshop in Daryapur with five employees; others work with family members or hired help. Ms. M sells terracotta crafts, photo frames, *ektaras*, and handbags. She also participates in festivals organized by Shilpagram where she sings Rabindra Sangeet and folk songs. She lives in Bhuvandanga in the same house where the famous sculptor Ramkinkar Baij resided and was taken care by her mother-in-law in his old age.

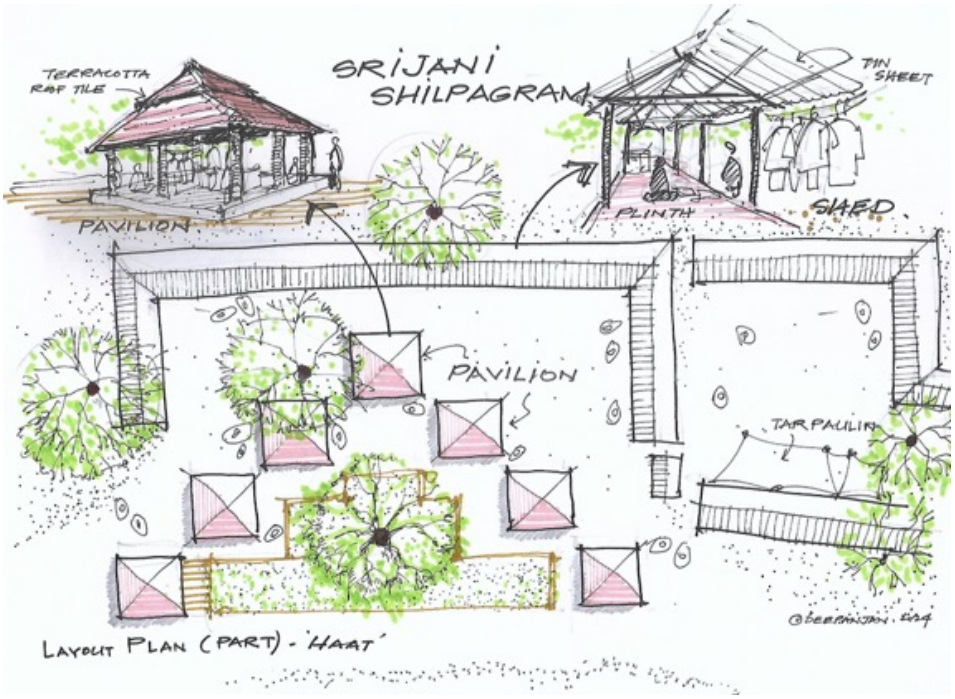

Figure 8a: Shilpagram Haat layout (source: Deepanjan Saha); Figure 8b: View of Pavilions (source: Amita Sinha)

Bisva-Bangla Shilpi Haat: The Department of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises and Textiles in West Bengal State Government has sponsored the Visva-bangla Shilpi Haat near the Prantik Railway Station in Bolpur. The initiative aims to revive traditional arts--Pattachitra or Patua—of storytelling through a visual

medium and the nearly forgotten art of dollmaking such as Bonga elephants of Bankura, animal dolls from Media in West Midnapur, and Shiva head masks of Nabadwip. This haat spreads over 3.72 acres and consists of permanent built structures including 77 stalls, hostels, office and display space, auditorium, food court, rest rooms and parking. Subsidies such as daily remuneration and food are given while also receiving training and support for exporting and developing marketing strategies. The five artisans interviewed reported high earnings, ranging from Rs. 80,000-Rs 400,000, from sale of leathergoods. They reported a high volume of sales only during Poush Mela and Basant Utsav when tourist footfall is high and find it more profitable to participate in haats and fairs held in Kolkata.

Figure 9. Biswa-Bangla Haat (source: Deepanjan Saha)

5. CONCLUSION

The landscape of craft making can be analyzed in terms of dimensions of scale, organization, and spatial attributes. The spatial unit is the haat whose scale varies from large (as in Poush Mela and Sonajhuri Haat) to small (Shilpi Bithi, Chattim Tala, Kopai Riverfront). The big haats are in *maidan* or *maidan* like spaces but the smaller ones are held wherever the tourists are. The infrastructure ranges from the simple mud plinth with an umbrella (Sonajhuri and Kopa haats), pushciart in Chattim Tala, built pavilions in Shilpagram, and arcade in Biswa-Bangla. The organizational complexity varies from ad hoc as in Kopai Riverfront and Chattim Tala; self-organized as in Sonajhuri Haat where large numbers of artisans and a few artists sell their products in land owned by the Forestry Department and in Shilpi Bithi where artisans are squatting on Public Works Department land; to organized by the Central and State governments as in Shilpagram and Biswa-Bangla haats and Poush Mela organized by Visva-bharati University.

The variety of craft goods increases with the size of the haat. Sonajhuri Haat and Poush Mela Haat have the largest variety while ad hoc haats such as the ones at Chattim Tala and Kopai Riverfront have not more 3-4 items. The crafts sold at Shilpi Bithi and Shilpagram are in between this range. Sonajhuri haat began as an initiative of artists. Some craft products are unique expressions of creative skills of artisans, with a blurred boundary between arts and crafts. Handicrafts are what the tourists want and think they are buying, but in reality, as much as a fifth of items sold in haats are machine made. Yarns and cloth are product of power looms and machines are used for cutting and polishing. Thus, a hybrid mode of production results from the use of both hand and machine.

What is the role of haats in the creative economy generated by arts and crafts in Santiniketan? Within Santiniketan the haat supports an informal economy requiring minimal resources. It is the low end of the creative economy whose high end is represented by boutiques, galleries and artist studios. The unregulated open air haats are widely perceived as catering to popular taste of the Kolkata tourists who bargain and do not really appreciate art. Those who sell are not those who make, thus cutting into the profit margin. And that objects are neither handmade nor local. Our survey found this perception to be only partially true. The presence of artists and of artisans selling their own craft products, although in small numbers, means that the haat continues to provide a venue for those who contribute or have the potential to contribute to the creative economy of Santiniketan. The ceramic artist Annapurna Mondal who has a studio in Rathindrapalli had begun at the Sonajhuri haat and now her customers come to her studio or find her products online. Another example is Lipi's Studio in Boner Pukur Danga, a favored destination among tourists.

Haats are venues for selling crafts mostly produced in villages within 2-3 hours driving distance. Kantha work is done in Lohagarh, Labpur, Debagram, Bishnukhanda in Birbhum District, and also in villages of the adjoining Bardhman district; *dokra* art in Dwariapur in Bardhaman District, and Manoharpur and Makrampur in Birbhum District, and Kacharipatty in Bolpur; and leather inlay and leather batik in Bolpur, Ballavpur, Sriniketan, Bhuvandanga, and Lohagarh. The raw materials may be local (Bolpur) or from nearby villages (Labpur and Tantipara), nearby districts (Murshidabad, Nadia, and Bankura) and Kolkata, as well as other states of India—Rajasthan, Assam, Gujarat, and Karnataka. In the distributed network of production and sales, Santiniketan is a node and will become an increasingly important one with growth in cultural tourism that is happening with UNESCO WHS designation. Although the sites of production, distribution, and consumption of crafts are connected in wide ranging networks across India, the prevalent image is of all being local and hand- made in Santiniketan and therefore a bonus for cultural tourism. The state has sought to capitalize on this and is promoting haats through subsidies and infrastructural support, in an attempt to create synergy. Urban versions of the rural haat are being built by the state requiring capital investment and infrastructure. The self-organization, flexibility in use, and low resource investment of rural haats are no

longer evident in state sponsored efforts to co-opt an organic and grass root cultural phenomenon. While the urban haat is a permanent marketplace with amenities, profits are seasonal and location dependent. The same investment could potentially have greater impact when directed towards upgrading the existing self-organized haats.

The self-organized haat takes place in left over and interstitial spaces within and close to the heritage core of Santiniketan. Since it supports the 'informal' or unorganized and unregulated sector of this economy, it is assumed that it is inconsequential in planning for heritage conservation. The focus in current conservation efforts has been on the material heritage represented by monuments of Visva-Bharati University. The intangible heritage embodied in the skills and entrepreneurship of rural artisans which the Tagores did much to develop and promote and which made Santiniketan such an important destination for cultural tourism deserves to be given its due place in future planning efforts. All cultural assets—tangible and intangible—need to be promoted and the scope of heritage preservation and management ought to extend beyond the preservation of historic monuments to the landscape of cultural tourism. Our study shows that cosmopolitanism in the development of rural craft traditions meant innovative techniques and diversification in the variety of craft products A cosmopolitan worldview can thus contribute towards cultural heritage which has been always constructed as being indigenous and local.

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Traditional Dwellings and Settlements
Working Paper Series

TIRUVANNAMALAI: HARMONIZING ANCIENT TRADITIONS AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

Fátima Barahona da Fonseca

TIRUVANNAMALAI: HARMONIZING ANCIENT TRADITIONS AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

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Situated in Tamil Nadu, India, Tiruvannamalai embodies millennia of Shaiva and Advaita traditions, from Vedic times to today. As Hinduism expanded globally, the city gained prominence as the home of Arunachala, and as a sacred site for Shaivites and Advaita's, attracting pilgrims, ascetics, and meditators. This study, drawing on historical, ethnographic, and textual sources, explores Tiruvannamalai's during the Karthigai Deepam celebrations. During this period the city faces pressing challenges in preserving its sacred heritage amid modernization and global influences, raising critical questions about balancing tradition with contemporary change.

1. INTRODUCTION

Everything is nature![1] Not just the mountains and flowers but also humans and all their creations. However, many ask: Is nature an element separate from humankind? Throughout history, many writers and artists have explored the dichotomy between cities and countryside, nature and the built environment, natural landscape, and cityscapes. However, it is only those who perceive the city as inherently unnatural who can idealise *nature* as a distinct, external realm - detached from their lived environment - and thereby conceive of *nature* solely as that which remains untouched by human intervention. A peasant does not suffer from this malice because everything around him is natural. There is no division between the cork oaks, stone houses, rivers, and streams and the animals that provide warmth, companionship, and later food and sustenance. There is no need to sustain this thought because everything is intuitively part of the same imagery, a constant and self-sustaining circle from birth to death, from the use to the reuse of resources, ideals, and dreams provided.

Through the lens of unity, we explore the intricate setting of mythology, Hinduism, and the rich cultural heritage of India. The research presented in this paper brings us to the eclectic state of Tamil Nadu, the sacred town of Tiruvannamalai, and, ultimately, to the revered mountain of Arunachala.

In Hindu mythology, unity is a central theme, often depicted through the interconnectedness of gods, nature, and humanity. The stories are replete with anthropomorphic and anthropometric[2] symbols and metaphors that emphasize the oneness of all existence. This perspective encourages the understanding that the divine and the mortal realms are not separate but part of a unified whole. India, with its diverse cultures and traditions, is a living example of unity in diversity. Tamil Nadu, a state in southern India, is particularly renowned for its deep-rooted art, music, and religious traditions[3] and it is home to some of the country's oldest and most revered Shiva temples, each symbolizing a facet of this unity[4].

Tiruvannamalai, a town in Tamil Nadu state, holds a central place in South Indian religious and cultural life as a major Shaivite pilgrimage site. Situated at the base of the sacred Arunachala Hill - venerated as a manifestation of Lord Shiva[5] - Tiruvannamalai is renowned for the Arunachaleswarar Temple and the annual *Karthigai Deepam* festival, during which a beacon lit atop the hill symbolizes the divine presence. This town exemplifies the intersection of the sacred and the worldly, where spiritual traditions continue to thrive amidst the pressures of modernization. Tiruvannamalai's social fabric is shaped by the constant flow of pilgrims, ascetics, and spiritual seekers, which sustains a dynamic religious economy. At the same time, the town faces complex challenges associated with globalization, environmental degradation, and urban development, all of which test its capacity to preserve its intangible heritage while adapting to contemporary demands.

Viewed through the lens of unity, the pilgrims' journey - from the intangible mythological accounts to the physical presence of *Arunachala* - reflects a profound understanding of interconnectedness within traditional, popular, contemporary, religious and cultural practices.

This paper begins with a brief historiographical context of Tiruvannamalai district based on the first English language descriptive regional documents published in Tamil Nadu, the *Gazzeters*. These publications have been vital for understanding the historical trajectory of the district, including its role as a key pilgrimage site, its economic transformations, and the socio-political dynamics of the region. The second section of the paper examines the current cultural practices and representations of cultural heritage displayed during the *Karthigai Deepam* festival in Tiruvannamalai. The fieldwork[6], conducted between 2023 and 2024, and the ethnographic database derived from these visits is based on a comprehensive methodology including interviews, participatory observation, documentation in fieldwork notebooks, photographs, audio recordings, and videos. The third part delves into the behavior and experiences of the pilgrims participating in this religious celebration. This essay tries to observe how Tiruvannamalai balances its ancient practices with the need to harmonize with contemporary challenges, forming a lively framework that respects its past while meeting future needs and hopes.

In looking at the complex connection between old customs and current issues in Tiruvannamalai, the paper reflects on how the cultural history of Tiruvannamalai shapes today's societal behaviours and reacts to modern problems like globalization and social change. As Tiruvannamalai deals with the impacts of modern life, sticking to old rituals helps keep community and identity strong, creating a link between the past and now. Moreover, the paper suggests that these customs are not unchanging; they adjust to fit today's situations, showing a flexible cultural environment[7].

2. BRIEF HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF TIRUVANNAMALAI

Tiruvannamalai, one of Tamil Nadu most ancient and revered *Shaiva* sacred spaces, is centered around the sacred *Arunachala* Hill (*Annamalaiyar* in Tamil), the Arunachaleshwara temple, and the surrounding sacred landscape, which includes the revered fourteen-kilometer *Giri Pradakshina* path. This pilgrimage route, lined with ancient *Ashta Lingams*, temples, shrines, and sacred tanks, marks the confluence of spiritual and historical significance in the region. The preeminence of Tiruvannamalai, particularly its status as the *Agni* (fire) *Sthala* in the *Shaiva* tradition, is rooted in the belief that it is at this site that Lord Shiva manifested as an unfathomable column of fire, representing the very embodiment of the divine. This unique cosmic event establishes the region's centrality to the spiritual landscape of Tamil Nadu and underscores its profound religious and cultural importance.

Moreover, the historical significance of Tiruvannamalai is accentuated by the extensive body of devotional literature left by sages, saints, and *siddhars* who lived or visited the region, further solidifying its status as a sacred site. These literary, archaeological, and epigraphical sources provide a framework for reconstructing much of the region's history and its deep ties to Shaiva religious practices[8].

The origins of community and religious life in Tiruvannamalai can be traced back to the early *Saivite* culture (vedic and non-vedic[9]), with the sacrality of the Arunachala hill playing a central role. However, the earliest traces of human habitation in the region are found not directly at Arunachala, but in neighboring areas such as the Kalrayan hills, Thirukoviloor, and Gingee, which date back to the Paleolithic period[10]. The development of the town, as a center of settled community life and religious practices, is intertwined with the growing reverence for the Arunachala hill and its surrounding sacred geography. The practice of ritual circumambulation of the hill, beginning and ending at the Arunachaleshwara temple, marks the embryonic beginnings of the town, which expanded over time due to its strategic location at the crossroads of important rivers and trade routes.

The political and administrative history of Tiruvannamalai takes shape more distinctly during the Pallava period in the 6th century CE. While there are no direct Pallava inscriptions found in the Arunachaleshwara temple, the architectural style of the temple reveals the distinct influence of Pallava architecture[11]. The region later came under the rule of several prominent dynasties, including the Pallavas, the imperial Cholas, the Samburayars, the Hoysalas, the Vijayanagara Empire, and the Nayaks of Tanjavur. Each of these dynasties left a significant mark on the region's religious, architectural, and cultural landscape, particularly through the construction of temples, water tanks, and sacred monuments, contributing to Tiruvannamalai's transformation into a major pilgrimage center.

The Chola dynasty played a pivotal role in consolidating the importance of the Arunachaleshwara temple, while subsequent dynasties, such as the Vijayanagara Empire, further expanded and enriched the sacred landscape. During the 17th century, the region came under the control of the Nawabs of the Carnatic, and later, it fell to the Nawabs and the British East India Company. Under British colonial rule, Tiruvannamalai was part of the North Arcot district[12].

Tiruvannamalai's economy, historically based on agriculture, benefited from fertile lands that supported crops like rice and millets. The Chola dynasty's development of an extensive irrigation system through tanks laid the foundation for the region's agrarian economy, which was further expanded under the Vijayanagara Empire. In modern times, agriculture remains a core aspect of the local economy, but tourism has become a significant industry due to the district's religious significance. Pilgrims and tourists from across India and the world visit Tiruvannamalai, particularly during festivals such as Mahasivarathiri and Karthikai Deepam. The latter, in recent years, has drawn millions of visitors, showcasing the growing importance of the region as a global spiritual hub.

Administratively, Tiruvannamalai underwent various transformations[13]. During British colonial rule, the region was part of the North Arcot district and was administered under British policies, including a revenue system that often led to hardships for local farmers. Following India's independence in 1947, Tiruvannamalai remained part of North Arcot until it became a separate district in 1989[14]. Today, Tiruvannamalai is a thriving district comprising twelve subdistricts (*taluks*)[15]. The town itself serves as the administrative headquarters of the district and is the central hub for both spiritual and administrative activities.

The city's prominence as a pilgrimage center was significantly boosted in the early 20th century by the arrival of Ramana Maharshi, whose influence attracted global attention, especially from Western devotees. His teachings and the writings of his followers helped Tiruvannamalai gain international recognition as a spiritual destination. Today, Tiruvannamalai continues to draw thousands of pilgrims annually, both from within India and abroad, contributing to its reputation as one of the most significant spiritual centers in the world.

Following India's independence, the district of Tiruvannamalai saw continued demographic and infrastructural changes, culminating in its recognition as a separate district in 1989. The city, which was established as a municipality in 1896, has grown significantly in terms of population and infrastructure. By the 2011 Census[16], the population of the town had reached over 24,000, and the region continues to develop both spiritually and economically.

In conclusion, the political and administrative history of Tiruvannamalai reflects a complex interplay of religious, political, and economic developments. From its ancient roots as a sacred site, through its role in

various dynastic and colonial contexts, to its modern status as a major pilgrimage center, Tiruvannamalai remains an enduring symbol of spiritual and cultural continuity in Tamil Nadu and beyond.

3. ANCIENT TRADITIONS AND PRACTICES: THE KARTHIGAI DEEPAM CELEBRATION

As we drive past Gingee and travel another ten kilometers towards Tiruvannamalai throughout Nachipattu village, the Arunachala hill looms into view. The entire hill presents itself in a sweep, an incredible sight. Less than forty-five minutes later, we are at Tiruvannamalai town. As we enter, the busy, bustling town strikes us away with her burning energy. Pilgrims and devotees enter the town area by foot, car, train, or bus at all speed.

Tiruvannamalai, a bustling district headquarters, is a spiritual and cultural epicenter and an economic hub. Its densely populated urban area of approximately 145,27[17] people covers a 13.00 square km expanse. Predominantly Hindu, the city also embraces Islamic and Jain minority communities, evident in mosques and Jain temples scattered on its outskirts. Over the latter half of the 20th century, Tiruvannamalai experienced a surge in tourism, prompting urban infrastructure expansion to accommodate the influx of visitors.

At the heart of Tiruvannamalai lies the iconic Arunachalesvara Temple (Fig.1), one of the most prominent temples in honor of Shiva in Tamil Nadu. Though its significance predates the 9th-century Chola period, the temple traces its roots back to that era and is a testament to the city's enduring spiritual legacy. However, it has witnessed centuries of religious and historical transitions, including shifts in rulership between Muslim, French, British, and Hindu reigns.

This 25-acre temple complex is intertwined with the city's labyrinthine streets and bustling markets, creating a unique atmosphere, and drawing pilgrims and tourists alike to seek Lord Shiva's divine blessings[18]. The temple, accessible from all sides with four tower entrances, is a pivotal junction interconnecting different parts of the city, amplifying the city's spiritual vibrancy and the pilgrim's mobility.

Standing sentinel over Tiruvannamalai is Arunachala (Fig.2), an 860m mountain steeped in geological significance and mythological lore. Its reddish hue, derived from the Earth's minerals, earns the moniker "*Arun*," meaning fire in Sanskrit. Once lush with vegetation, Arunachala's ecosystem underwent degradation due to human intervention, though efforts towards reforestation and preservation have been underway[19].

Fig.1. *Aditta Bhagavan*, the Lord Sun, had his chariot driven to the summit of the mountain whose heart is light (*jyotis*). This light struck his chariot and burned it, upon which *Aditta* circumambulated the mountain to the right [in the auspicious direction, and *Paramasiva* (and *Parvati*), mounted on the bull, appeared to him, revealing themselves in their glory. (*Arunācala Puraṇam*, Chennai 1933, p. 373).[20]

References to Arunachala abound in ancient Sanskrit texts and contemporary Tamil literature, underscoring its spiritual and cultural importance. The Arunachala Mahatmya and Arunachala Puranam delve into its mythical origins and societal significance, weaving narratives that span millennia and reflect Hindu society's evolving sensibilities.

The legend of Arunachala, wherein Lord Shiva manifests as a fiery mountain, encapsulates profound philosophical teachings within Hinduism. Pilgrims circumambulate Arunachala (a ceremony generally known as *girivalam*), symbolizing spiritual realization and cosmic equilibrium. This practice is particularly revered during full moon nights when thousands gather to walk around the mountain in the moonlight.

Dotted with shrines and lingams, the pilgrimage route around the mountain holds deep spiritual significance for devotees. It culminates at the Arunachalesvara Temple, where blessings from Lord Shiva are sought in unison by an enormous human mass of devotees.

As Tiruvannamalai contends with the challenges of urbanization and modernization, Arunachala endures as a powerful symbol of spiritual devotion, cultural continuity, and ecological significance. Transcending its physical form, the mountain casts a pervasive spiritual aura across the region, imbuing the landscape with sacred presence. Irrespective of religious affiliation—or even belief—pilgrims and visitors alike are drawn to the tranquil energy of Arunachala, often encountering profound moments of introspection, transformation, and transcendence in its shadow. The mountain thus functions not only as a geographical landmark but also as a site of affective and metaphysical engagement, linking the temporal and the eternal.

Fig. 2: Arunachala. View from the Tamarai Kolam Park. Photo credit: Fátima Barahona, 2023

Since 1950, the Ramana Maharshi Ashram in Tiruvannamalai has maintained its significance as a spiritual sanctuary and a beacon of the teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi, one of the most revered sages in Tamil Nadu. Founded in the early 20th century by devotees of Sri Ramana Maharshi, the ashram has served as a hub for spiritual seekers from around the world, drawn to the tranquil ambiance and the teachings of self-inquiry propagated by Sri Ramana Maharshi.

The story of the *ashram* traces back to the life and teachings of this Guru. Born in 1879 in Tiruchuli, Tamil Nadu, as Venkataraman Iyer, he experienced a profound spiritual awakening at the age of six-teen[21]. Renouncing worldly pursuits, he journeyed to the sacred Arunachala Hill in Tiruvannamalai and settled in the

surrounding caves. His silent presence and unwavering focus on self-inquiry attracted disciples and devotees, laying the foundation for what would later become the Sri Ramana Maharshi Ashram.

Following Sri Ramana Maharshi's *Maha Samadhi* (the term for a realized yogi's final conscious exit from the body) in 1950, the ashram continued to thrive under the stewardship of his devotees and disciples. It became a center for preserving and disseminating his teachings, emphasizing self-realization through self-inquiry, meditation, and devotion to the inner Self.

Throughout the decades, the ashram has welcomed countless seekers, scholars, and spiritual enthusiasts, offering them a serene environment for introspection and spiritual growth. The ashram's library houses a vast collection of texts related to spirituality, philosophy, and the teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi, attracting researchers and scholars from various disciplines.

In addition to its role as a spiritual retreat, the Sri Ramana Maharshi Ashram has also been actively involved in charitable activities, including providing food, education, and healthcare to the local community. Its outreach programs reflect the ashram's commitment to embodying the compassionate teachings of Ramana Maharshi in practical ways[22].

Today, the Sri Ramana Maharshi Ashram is a legacy of one of Tamil Nadu most revered spiritual luminaries. Its tranquil surroundings, profound teachings, and compassionate outreach inspire and uplift spiritual seekers from all walks of life, ensuring that the light of Sri Ramana Maharshi's wisdom shines brightly into the present and future[23].

In Tiruvannamalai, the Sri Ramana Maharshi *Ashram* holds a unique position among the various *ashrams* in the city, each contributing to the spiritual fabric of the region in its way. While the Ramana Maharshi *Ashram* is renowned for its focus on self-inquiry and the teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi, other *ashrams* in Tiruvannamalai offer diverse spiritual paths and practices, enriching the spiritual landscape of the city (Fig.3).

One notable *ashram* in Tiruvannamalai is the Seshadri Swamigal *Ashram*, dedicated to the revered saint Seshadri Swamigal, a contemporary of Sri Ramana Maharshi. This *ashram*, situated near the Arunachalesvara Temple, participates actively on the city and temple calendar festivities, offering food and shelter to their devotees and attracting meditators who seek blessings and guidance from Seshadri Swamigal's teachings.

Another prominent *ashram* in Tiruvannamalai is the Yogi Ramsuratkumar *Ashram*, which is dedicated to the mystic saint Yogi Ramsuratkumar. This *ashram* is known for its emphasis on devotion and service to humanity (seva, the act of serving), reflecting the teachings and compassionate spirit of Yogi Ramsuratkumar. Additionally, several minor ashrams and spiritual centers are scattered throughout Tiruvannamalai, each

offering its unique approach to spirituality, meditation, and self-realization. Despite their differences in focus and practices, the various *ashrams* in Tiruvannamalai share a common goal of facilitating spiritual growth and inner transformation among seekers. Many pilgrims and visitors to Tiruvannamalai explore multiple *ashrams* during their stay, seeking inspiration, guidance, and spiritual nourishment from the diverse array of teachings and traditions available in the city.

Fig 3: Ramana Maharshi Ashram. Devotees waiting for the light to be lit at 6:0 P.M. on top of Arunachala. (on the right a symbolic fire is keep lit at the ashram 24/7, during the 10 days of the Karthigai Deepam) Photo credit: Fátima Barahona, 2023

Multiple ashrams in Tiruvannamalai create a vibrant spiritual ecosystem where seekers can explore different paths, connect with like-minded individuals, and deepen their understanding of the divine. Each *ashram* contributes to Tiruvannamalai's rich legacy of spiritual heritage, fostering a sense of unity, diversity, and reverence for the eternal truths that transcend individual traditions.

Karthigai Deepam, a festival deeply rooted in the vibrant religious-cultural history of Tamil culture and stands as a testament to the enduring spirit of devotion and illumination of the *Shaiva* devotees. On the tenth day, as the sun sets on the horizon and twilight envelops the land, homes, and temples become beacons of light, casting a dazzling spectacle across the landscape. This grand celebration, in the sacred month of *Karthigai*,

nestled within the embrace of November or December, marks the pinnacle of reverence towards Lord Shiva and his revered son Murugan. Legend intertwines with tradition, weaving tales of divine intervention and celestial splendor. *Karthigai Pournami*, the full moon, serves as the celestial stage upon which the divine light manifests in all its resplendent glory. Stories echo Lord Shiva's transcendence into a towering column of fire, quelling cosmic disputes and illuminating the universe with his majestic radiance.

The heartbeat of *Karthigai Deepam* resonates through the ages, echoing the ancient rituals and timeless customs passed down through generations. Oil lamps, meticulously crafted with reverence and devotion, radiate their gentle luminescence, symbolizing the eternal triumph of light over darkness. Prayers ascend like fragrant incense within the sanctity of homes and temples, seeking blessings and solace from the divine.

Temples adorned with ornate decorations and devotees' throngs become sanctuaries of celestial communion. Flowers, offered with devotion and humility, adorn the sacred shrines while chants and hymns reverberate through the hallowed halls. Atop the revered hill of Arunachala, in the ancient city of Tiruvannamalai, the sacred flame becomes a beacon of hope, guiding souls on their spiritual journey.

As the festival reaches its crescendo, bonfires blaze in public squares, casting their warm glow upon jubilant faces. These towering infernos, symbolic of the eternal flame within, unite communities in a symphony of joy and camaraderie. Traditional delicacies, steeped in centuries of culinary heritage, tantalize the senses, and nourish the soul, fostering familial and communal harmony bonds.

Though its origins lie deep within the heartland of Tamil Nadu[24] the essence of *Karthigai Deepam* transcends geographical boundaries. From the misty hills of Kerala to the sun-drenched shores of Karnataka, devotees converge, their hearts ablaze with devotion, to pay homage to the eternal light that illuminates the cosmos.

Karthigai Deepam is more than a festival; it is an eclectic display of devotion, an ode to the divine, and a celebration of life's eternal illumination. It serves as a poignant reminder that within the depths of the human soul, a sacred flame flickers, guiding humanity toward the shores of spiritual enlightenment.

The Tamils' religious calendar is vast (Fig. 5), and the *Deepam* festival is celebrated in the month of Karthigai (Gregorian November/December). During the ten days of festivities, participants witness unique events and experiences both in the temple and Arunachala.

There are distinct ways to visit the city and experience the *Karthigai Deepam* festival. You can embark on a traditional pilgrimage journey, immersing yourself in the festival's spiritual fervor and cultural richness. Join thousands of devotees as you circumambulate the sacred mountain of Arunachala (*girivalam*) during the full moon nights. Visit *ashrams*, temples, and holy sites along the route to pay homage to Lord Shiva and soak in

the atmosphere of devotion and reverence. Participate in rituals, witness cultural performances, such as the traditional dance festival, or participate in communal feasting and festivities.

Fig 4. Entries for the temple November 2023

Fig 5. Karthigai Deepam 2023 daily program

Alternatively, one can opt for a more observational approach, taking in the sights and sounds of the festival as a spectator. Wander through the bustling streets adorned with vibrant decorations, stalls selling traditional wares, and colorful processions. Observe the rituals and ceremonies in temples and ashrams and engage with locals to learn about the significance of each tradition and custom. Capture the essence of the festival through photography, storytelling, and personal reflection.

One can also fully immerse oneself in the festival's cultural environment by participating in various rituals and activities. Volunteer at temples or *ashrams* to assist with preparations, serve devotees or participate in community service initiatives. Engage in spiritual practices such as meditation, chanting, or *yoga* to deepen the connection with the divine. By embracing the customs and traditions of *Karthigai Deepam,* one can enrich the cultural experience and forge meaningful connections with the community.

During the festival, the city undergoes a complete transformation. The urban landscape becomes a vibrant circus two weeks before the festivities begin. People from all over start arriving and setting up makeshift camps in the surrounding areas. Tents made of cloth or blue tarps sprawl out into large encampments, as

families often travel in large numbers, sometimes bringing carts with cows for milk and minimal cooking utensils. Water, essential for life, is collected and transported in small metal containers by the women. A huge cattle market comes is organized just across the main road. The feeling is akin to traveling to a distant time, where time seems to have changed or even stopped upon reaching Tiruvannamalai. The contrast between Europe and Asia is evident in this setting, but the event's magnitude is striking even for visitors familiar with India or Tamil Nadu. The festival leads participants to extreme experiences, with abstract planes and sensations oscillating between faith, mysticism, and mythology. The sonic landscape, the silences, and the physical and emotional spaces transform over time, challenging the visitor's perception.

In the streets, not just the dirt roads and traditional attire make an appearance, but also the food, rituals, and even the language – the century's old, untouched Dravidian language.

Fig 6. Arunachala. Shiva fire is lit on top for 10 days, from the 26.11.23 - 04.12.23. Photo credit: Fátima Barahona

The circumambulation (*girivalam*) around Arunachala spans approximately 14 kilometres and typically takes between five to seven hours to complete. As devotees traverse the sacred path encircling the mountain, they find themselves immersed in a tranquil atmosphere marked by natural beauty and an unmistakable spiritual resonance. This meditative pilgrimage draws countless participants who, while offering prayers, experience the profound energy that emanates from the sacred landscape.

Alternatively, pilgrims may ascend Arunachala, reaching its summit around 6 p.m. to witness the *Kārttikai Deepam* celebration from above - a moment of profound visual and spiritual impact. The lighting of the *mahā dīpam* (great flame) at the mountain's peak (Fig. 6) symbolizes the manifestation of Śiva as a column of fire.

From this elevated vantage point, one can behold a sweeping panorama of the region and the luminous radiance of the festivities below, offering a unique perspective on the deep spiritual significance of the event.

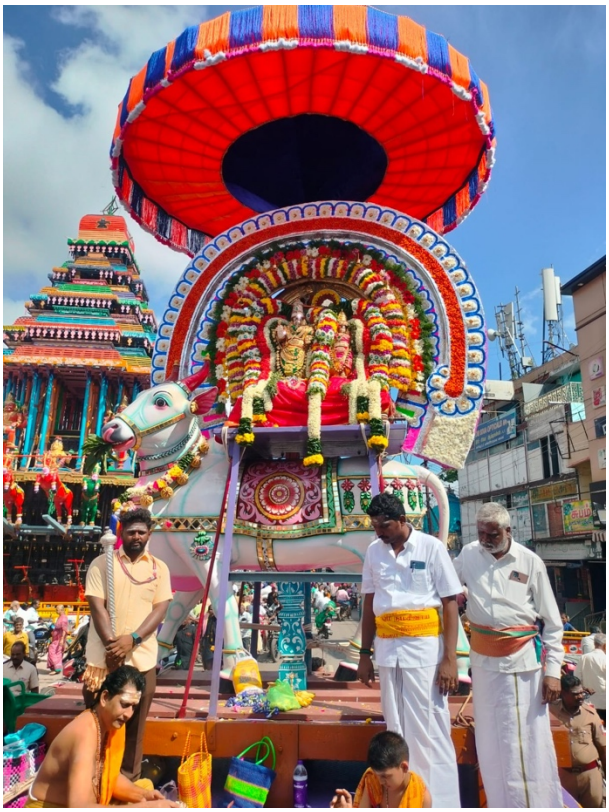
Another meaningful way to engage with the festival is by participating in the rituals and ceremonies that take place in the temples and shrines surrounding the mountain (Fig. 4). Within these sacred precincts, pilgrims pray, meditate, and absorb the centuries-old traditions that continue to animate the site. By joining in ritual offerings, observing elaborate temple ceremonies, and engaging with fellow devotees, pilgrims encounter the divine essence that permeates Tiruvannamalai, reinforcing its enduring role as a centre of devotional intensity and collective sacred experience.

Whether one circumambulates the mountain, ascends to its summit, or immerses oneself in temple rituals, each pathway offers a profound and transformative experience during the auspicious occasion of *Karthigai Deepam*. All three experiences allow pilgrims to extend and immerse themselves within the essence of Shiva, rejoicing in His divine presence. These options are not mutually exclusive; many pilgrims undertake all three in one visit. In their quest to connect with the spiritual essence of *Karthigai Deepam*, pilgrims embrace the challenges of their journey with unwavering devotion. Despite the physical discomforts and uncertainties of accommodation, their spirits remain undaunted as they seek solace and communion with the divine. Through their shared pilgrimage experiences, these devotees forge bonds of camaraderie and resilience, united by their reverence for Shiva and the sacred traditions of *Karthigai Deepam*.

Figs. 7. Arunachala fire preparations 2023. Photo credits: Fátima Barahona

Every morning and evening, wooden cars circle the main temple at sunrise and sunset for ten days before the fire is lit on top of Arunachala. Each day, a different deity is honored, and a different group of families adorns the *deity* (saint) with dress and flower ornaments (Fig. 8).

During the *Karthigai Deepam*, the pilgrimage journey often begins with pilgrims entering the Arunachalesvara temple to seek blessings before embarking on the circumambulation circuit around the sacred mountain. Along the 14 kilometers, the path is dotted with numerous temples and ashrams where pilgrims pause to seek further blessings, including revered sites like the Ramana Maharshi *ashram*. After completing the circumambulation and offering prayers at various sacred sites, pilgrims typically rest during the afternoon, rejuvenating their spirits for the next phase of their journey. Around 3 p.m., they begin the ascent of the mountain, a trek that typically takes 2 to 3 hours to reach the summit. Arriving at the mountaintop just before 6 p.m., pilgrims eagerly anticipate the lighting of the sacred fire. As the sun sets and darkness descends, the illumination of the fire atop the mountain marks the culmination of their pilgrimage, a divine spectacle that fills their hearts with reverence and awe (Figs. 7). This sacred moment, witnessing the radiant glow of the fire against the backdrop of the night sky serves as a powerful reminder of the divine presence that permeates the entire pilgrimage experience.



Figs. 8 Festivities around Arunachalesvara temple 2023. Photo credits: Fátima Barahon

4. HARMONIZING TRADITIONS AND MODERNITY

A pilgrim[25] has no flag or group of closed cultural values; we can risk saying that a pilgrim is moved by faith and that this movement is open to anyone who wants to join. Although it may seem like an ancient idealistic or romanticized vision, we find this in the group of pilgrims around Arunachala. There is no religious pre-selection here, and given the polytheistic character, all the saints are acclaimed.

But what does a devotee consume during a pilgrimage?[26] Does the participant want to be consumed during a pilgrimage by the experience itself?[27] During the observation of this religious experience in Tiruvannamalai we are taken into a world of consumption and exacerbated transactional economic exchanges. Contrary to what one would expect from a traditional meditative space characterized by quietness, cleanness, and isolation, the city of Tiruvannamalai presents a chaotic, bustling town with millions of people seeking to unite their presence with *Lord Shiva*, using fire as a means of a vehicle. Despite this apparent contradiction, the concept that fire consumes and burns all analogies, and that life emerges from ashes holds profound significance. In this context, it raises an intriguing question: Is the pilgrim consuming the pilgrimage, or vice versa? The truth, in this case, is that the pilgrimage consumes the pilgrim. Amid the chaos and activity, the pilgrim is transformed. The journey to Tiruvannamalai, with its intense spiritual energy and the act of engaging in fire rituals, profoundly affects the ascetics and devotes. The pilgrimage is not merely a physical journey but a transformative process that consumes the ego and personal identity of the pilgrim, allowing a rebirth from the ashes of their former self. Far from detracting from the spiritual experience, the bustling environment seams to allow the pilgrim to surrender entirely to the divine.

The influx of visitors and the growing popularity of its *ashrams* have also introduced several challenges, such as pollution and mobility issues. Addressing these problems is now crucial to maintaining the sanctity and livability of this revered town. The rise in vehicle traffic due to the influx of pilgrims and tourists has increased air pollution. The emission from cars, buses, and motorcycles contributes to deteriorating air quality, which can affect the health of residents and visitors. Additionally, with more people comes more waste. Improper disposal of plastic bottles, food wrappers, and other non-biodegradable items has become a significant issue. Despite efforts to keep the town clean, the sheer volume of waste can overwhelm local waste management systems. The sacred tank in the Arunachaleswarar Temple and other water bodies in the area can suffer from pollution due to inadequate sewage treatment and waste dumping[28].

The narrow streets of Tiruvannamalai can become heavily congested, especially during festival times and important spiritual gatherings, making it difficult for residents and visitors to move around efficiently. While there are some public transport options, they often need to be improved to meet the needs of the growing number of visitors. This situation increases reliance on private vehicles and auto-rickshaws, exacerbating

traffic problems. The large number of pilgrims walking around the town, particularly those undertaking the g*irivalam* (circumambulation of Arunachala Hill), creates safety issues as the roads are not equipped to handle the mix of pedestrians and vehicles safely.

The Tiruvannamalai district collector and the local authorities intend to implement various solutions and mitigation strategies to tackle these challenges[29]. Some of these ideas were already in place during the last *Kartigai Deepam* celebration of 2023, but some were shown to be insufficient. Here is a summed account of the local mayor's significant proposed areas of action: sustainable waste management practices such as comprehensive waste segregation, recycling programs, and increasing the number of waste bins, particularly around the popular tourist and pilgrimage routes, with the intent of managing the increasing tones of littering register at every occasion. Educational campaigns to raise awareness among visitors and residents about keeping the town clean and enforcing stricter regulations on single-use plastics. Significantly reduce plastic waste and ban plastic disposable items, which can be substituted by other biodegradable materials such as banana leaves. Other measures implemented are related to the safety and hygiene of the visitors, but the number of toilets, water points, and police forces on the ground needs to be increased.

Promoting electric vehicles (EVs) has already been done in several Indian cities like Mumbai and Delhi, and the intention is to do it here as well. However, there needs to be more adherence to the program for the moment. Dedicated pedestrian zones, especially around critical areas like the ashrams and the temple, are being created to enhance mobility and safety. Dedicated pedestrian pathways and improvements, especially along the girivalam route, have also been constructed to enhance safety and encourage more people to walk rather than use vehicles.

Developing better traffic management systems, such as one-way routes, designated parking areas, and shuttle services for pilgrims, alleviates traffic congestion. However, due to the large number of pilgrims, even without cars, there is not enough space for the constant influx of pilgrims. During the full moon, many visitors do not even touch the ground around Arunachala, instead they are carried away by each other, resembling a river stream. Moreover, for all these reasons, and due to the annual increase of visitors[30], local authorities are considering closing a city after a certain number of visitors, as it is already being done in some European cities like Venezia and Barcelona.

More robust local governance and collaboration between municipal authorities, ashrams, and community groups are essential for addressing these challenges. Regular stakeholder meetings and feedback sessions can help in creating effective strategies. Encouraging volunteer programs[31] where visitors and locals can participate in cleanup drives, awareness campaigns, and environmental conservation projects can foster a sense of collective responsibility.

While Tiruvannamalai's spiritual ecosystem continues to thrive, it is crucial to address the environmental and infrastructural challenges that come with its popularity. By implementing sustainable practices, improving infrastructure, and fostering community engagement, Tiruvannamalai could balance its spiritual significance with the need for a clean, safe, and accessible environment for all.

In Hindu philosophy, the unity of all existence transcends physical forms, manifesting in collective consciousness and sacred geography, as seen in Tiruvannamalai and Arunachala. This oneness invites devotees to experience the divine not as distant, but as intimately embedded in their lives. The intricate connection between pilgrims, circumambulation (*pradakshina*), and religious celebrations reflects profound spiritual principles central to Hindu practice. *Pradakshina*, a symbolic act of devotion and purification, mirrors the cyclical nature of existence and deepens the devotee's connection with the divine. Festivals and rituals—marked by ceremonies, chanting, and communal gatherings—foster spiritual engagement and collective devotion. Within Hinduism's diverse traditions, pilgrimage and ritual become pathways toward transcendence, illustrating the enduring human quest for meaning, liberation, and union with the sacred.

In the 20th century, pilgrimage in Tamil Nadu underwent significant transformations due to various socio-cultural and technological advancements. Before this period, pilgrimages were often arduous journeys undertaken primarily by devout individuals seeking spiritual solace and blessings from sacred sites.

However, with improved transportation infrastructure such as railways, roads, and later air travel, pilgrimages became more accessible to a more significant population segment.

Additionally, the 20th century witnessed the revival and reinvigoration of religious practices and festivals, spurred by cultural and political[32] movements with a renewed interest in Tamil Nadu's rich religious heritage. Festivals like Pongal, Thaipusam, and Arudra Darshan gained prominence and attracted pilgrims nationwide and beyond. The proliferation of mass media, including newspapers, radio, and later television, played a crucial role in disseminating information about pilgrimage sites and facilitating pilgrim experiences. Pilgrimage tourism also emerged as a significant industry, with tour operators organizing package tours to popular destinations in Tamil Nadu (Fig.9). Furthermore, advancements in communication technology in recent years, such as the internet and mobile phones, revolutionized how pilgrims planned and experienced their journeys. Contemporary online resources provide detailed information to pilgrims about temple timings, accommodation options, and transportation routes, empowering pilgrims to make informed decisions and streamline travel arrangements.

Figs 9. Festivities inside Arunachalesvara temple 26.11.2023. Photo credits: Fátima Barahona

5. CONCLUSION

Tiruvannamalai presents a unique case study of how cultural heritage, the local population, and the landscape work symbiotically. However, the impact of mass tourism, economic development programs, and global heritage policies to the detriment of local heritage is problematic. The exponential increase in mass tourism creates profound changes in the way social, cultural, and economic interactions develop in these environments, challenging the authenticity of lived experiences and heritage. The study and observation of how inhabitants of Tiruvannamalai and the retreat spaces around Arunachala and Arunachalesvara temple have integrated tourist and commercial investments is fundamental for understanding the systems of mutual interconnection between tangible and intangible heritage. Regardless, as Laurajane Smith has shown us, in historic environments, the relationship between tourism and heritage is often complex, and spaces can be used in a counterproductive way for various purposes and by the most diverse stakeholders. Conservation and preservation, side by side, with the development and management of visitors, are constant problems that cultural heritage tourism faces.

The cultural heritage undergoes rapid and unifying processes of transformation, while the chain of transmission between tangible and intangible values maintains its authenticity. However, the impact of climate

change, economic development programs, and global heritage policies to the detriment of local heritage is problematic.

Since the 1960s and more significantly since 1980, mass tourism has dominated the cultural circuits around the city. Its previous rural character contrasts with the urban dimension that is established around the mountain, the *ashrams*, and the Arunachalesvara temple in the center of the historic city and next to the small terminal on the train line. In this scenario, contrasts in scale (and temporality) between global, local, and personal heritage are evident.

The exponential increase in mass tourism contributes to the expansion of the building landscape, the construction of various infrastructures, support for various leisure activities, accommodation, and support for cultural heritage, as well as to increase local commerce. These changes create profound tensions in the way social, cultural, and economic interactions develop in these environments. The authenticity of lived experiences and consequently heritage is challenged. While it can be argued that most places are wise in assimilating such changes and that places reinvent themselves as these changes occur, several dangers persist and threaten the sustainability of local communities[33].

The main challenge currently faced in Tiruvannamalai concerns the growing number of visitors and the ways in which they behave during their stay in the city. Regardless of their origin, the contemporary pilgrim does not necessarily correspond to the traditional image of the ascetic devoid of possessions and material desires. On the contrary, the modern pilgrim is often an active consumer, seeking not only spiritual experiences but also goods, services, and forms of entertainment. The festive dimension of religious celebrations is now closely linked to acts of consumption which, from the perspective of participants, do not diminish or desacralize the sacred space—instead, they appear to enhance its potency. The sacred and the commercial coexist, often reinforcing one another. This phenomenon is not new: as early as the nineteenth century, colonial gazetteers reported the annual holding of a cattle market in Tiruvannamalai during the Kārttikai Deepam festival, highlighting the longstanding interconnection between religious pilgrimage and economic activity.

The discussion on Tiruvannamalai highlights the delicate balance between preserving ancient traditions and adapting to contemporary challenges. For example, the evolving nature of the *matams* (shelter houses for pilgrims), are institutions central to community and spiritual life, that exemplify this dynamic by evolving over time to meet societal needs. These institutions serve not only as sites of religious instruction but also as mediators between ascetics, devotees, and the broader community. Furthermore, the increasing role of media in disseminating and shaping the public perception of gurus reflects significant transformations in religious authority and devotion. The ability of religious institutions to engage with digital platforms underscores the

ongoing interplay between tradition and modernity, revealing the extent to which contemporary communication methods influence spiritual life.

In sum, the relationship between tradition and modernity in Tiruvannamalai is not a dichotomy but a complex and fluid synthesis. Local traditions in the town represent a dynamic interplay between historical continuity and contemporary adaptation, offering valuable insights into the resilience of cultural identity in an era of rapid change. As globalization and urbanization introduce new pressures, the ways in which local communities navigate these influences become crucial to understanding the sustainability of sacred heritage. The coexistence of ancient pilgrimage practices, evolving modes of religious instruction, and modern urban development reflects a broader pattern of cultural negotiation. Ultimately, Tiruvannamalai serves as a compelling case study in how religious and cultural landscapes try to remain vibrant while accommodating the demands of an evolving world.

Examining the *Karthigai Deepam* festival offers valuable insights that transcend its specific cultural context and have broader implications for studying cultural heritage. By analyzing the intricate rituals, traditions, and community participation associated with the festival, researchers can draw parallels and extrapolate findings that apply to understanding diverse cultural heritages worldwide. The festival's emphasis on spiritual devotion, communal harmony, and celebrating enlightenment provides a universal framework for exploring and comparing cultural practices across different societies and regions. This study prompts a deeper exploration of the underlying principles and values shared among various cultural heritages, fostering a more profound understanding of the human experience and how communities express their collective identities.

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5. See Barahona, Fátima. *Narratives of a Sacred Mountain. Arunachala, Tamil Nadu, South of India.* Working Paper Series IASTE. Vol 338 Urban Design and Planning, 2024.
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13. In terms of administrative history, Tiruvannamalai has been referenced in several district publications, such as the District Manual of the South Arcot District (Garstin, 1878), the South Arcot Gazetteer (Francis, 1906), and the Imperial Gazetteers of India. These documents provide detailed accounts of the district's history, population, social structures, and economy during the colonial era. The 1915 edition of the North Arcot District Gazetteer provides a statistical appendix that includes data on the region's population, land use, revenue, and other socio-economic indicators.

14. Racine, J. Milieux, histoire et paysages au South Arcot. Fondements et formes traditionnelles de l'occupation de l'espace rural en pays tamoul (Inde du Sud), doctoral thesis (third cycle), University of Paris Sorbonne, 1982.
15. Census Handbook, North Arcot District 1951, Superintendent Government Press, Madras, 1953.
16. https://www.census2011.co.in/census/district/26-tiruvannamalai.html
17. https://www.census2011.co.in/census/district/26-tiruvannamalai.html.

    What is the population of Tiruvannamalai district in 2023? The question, though important, has no correct answer. The last census of Tiruvannamalai was done in 2011, and the next census of 2021 has been postponed or canceled. The next seams to schedule for 2031.
18. Butler, Robert. *Arunachala Puranam. The Tamil Sthala Purana of Tiruvannamalai. Original in Tamil by Saiva.* 2021.
19. Much of this work has been managed by The Forest Way, a Charitable Trust based in Tiruvannamalai, in the state of Tamil Nadu, South India. For more on this: https://theforestway.org

    Paul Albert translation form a official text written in 1901 in occasion of the *Kumbhabhiseka* intitled: *Tiruvannamalai Astabantana Mahakumbabiseka Pattirikai. Śiva Peruman*, the indivisible, eternal, omnipresent, and omnipotent Being—the Absolute and Perfect One, the Supreme Lord of the Universe—out of compassion and in his desire to become visible to the multitude of souls who, by honoring him, may attain liberation from worldly bondage and ultimate bliss, has graciously manifested himself in the form of *Sambamūrti*. In this form, he is united in one body with his energy, his worthy consort *Umā*, the Mother of the world, and appears in countless sanctuaries across the land, where they are enthroned alongside their sons *Skanda* and *Ganeśa*, surrounded by the gods and their divine retinues. Among the innumerable temples dedicated to this divine couple, sixty-eight are considered particularly famous, though four stand out with exceptional significance: *Tiruvarūr*, *Cidambaram*, *Kāśī*, and *Tiruvannamalai* . In the first three sanctuaries mentioned, attaining liberation is said to be a difficult task. However, in *Tiruvannamalai*, grace may be granted to anyone effortlessly. Regardless of where one is, or how one chooses to worship, it is sufficient merely to think of Śiva. For this reason, all the sacred scriptures concur in acknowledging *Tiruvannamalai* as the foremost of Śiva's sanctuaries. It was here that *Śiva Peruman*, in order to demonstrate his absolute supremacy in a tangible form, manifested himself as an infinite column of fire and light—a form beyond comprehension—in response to the arrogant challenge posed by *Brahmā* and *Visnu*, who vainly sought its beginning and end.
    Only in *Tiruvannamalai* can one witness the most extraordinary manifestation of Śiva: the mountain itself, which he became, assuming its form so as to be seen easily by all around. Here*, Śiva Perumāṉ* reveals his total impartiality, granting access to his grace to all people, regardless of caste, birth, religious background, moral conduct, or spiritual attainment. All, without exception, may honour him—whether from near or afar, without restriction and in full equality. At this site, the mountain itself takes the form of a *linga***.** It is the *linga*. In the *Kṛta Yuga*, it was made of fire; in the *Tretā Yuga*, of ruby; in the *Dvāpara Yuga*, of gold; and in our current *Kali Yuga*, it is of stone. The mountain is variously known as the City of Tejas (Light), *Gaurī, Vāyu***,** the City of Bliss, of Knowledge**,** of Purity, the Kingdom of *Śiva*, the Holy City, the Red Mountain, and the Southern *Kailāsa*. Whereas *Kailāsa* is renowned solely as the dwelling place of *Śiva Peruman*, *Tiruvannamalai* , the "Southern *Kailāsa*", is further distinguished by the pilgrimage around its sacred mountain. It is thus fitting that this mountain—being both sanctuary and divine form—possesses greater prestige and spiritual allure than *Kailāsa* itself. From this indestructible mountain emanates, at the time of cosmic dissolution, the ineffable essence of Śiva: his flower-crowned head rises into the infinite, while his garlanded feet descend through the seven netherworlds. From every direction and at vast distances, the pure of heart perceive shining *lingas* like stars. Along the circumambulation path, the mountain reveals itself in numerous divine forms: as the *Pañcamūrti*, the *Trimūrti*, and above all, the divine quartet of *Ambikā* and *Annamalaiyār*, flanked by *Vināyakar* and *Subrahmanya*. It was at *Kailāsa* that *Pārvatī* veiled the eyes of the Lord, and at *Kāñcipuram* that she performed worship, but it

was in *Tiruvannamalai* that her prayer to dwell on his left side was finally fulfilled. Innumerable beings have received divine grace by coming to this place for contemplation—not only Pārvatī, but also *Gaṇeśa*, *Skanda*, *Viṣnu, Brahma, Lakṣmi,* Sarasvatī, Indra, the guardians of the directions, the *Vasu*, the *Rsi*, the *Muni, Sūrya, Candra*, *Vaccirankata Pantiyan*, *Pradattan, Vallala,* and even animals: a horse, a civet, wild beasts, birds, reptiles, aquatic beings, and plants. Were the gods themselves to be reborn on this earth, they would choose to live in *Tiruvannamalai* , even if only in the form of a blade of grass. The mere wind that blows from this mountain carries divine grace, and even from leagues away, to breathe it is to be blessed. All those who perform the *giripradakṣiṇā* - the sacred circumambulation of *Tiruvannamalai* - are assured of the remission of their sins, the fulfilment of their vows, and, at death, the attainment of eternal bliss. Each year, during the full moon of *Kārttikai*, the great Festival of the Infinite Light is held, commemorating the supreme theophany of Śiva as a boundless pillar of flame.

20. Much of this work has been managed by The Forest Way, a Charitable Trust based in Tiruvannamalai, in the state of Tamil Nadu, South India. For more on this: https://theforestway.org
21. *The Hindu*, 24 December 1939.
22. One of the many initiatives is the journal Mountain Path, founded in 1964 by Arthur Osborne. For consulting any volume from 1964 to 2021 access here: https://www.gururamana.org/Resources/mountain-path
23. For more on Sri Ramana Maharashi use this link: https://www.gururamana.org
24. Nabokov, Isabelle. *Religion Against the Self. An Ethnography of Tamil Rituals*. Oxford University Press, 2000.
25. The term pilgrim (from Latin: peregrinus) has various meanings and associations. For example, in the Roman Empire, from 30 BC to 212 AD, it was used to distinguish a free provincial man, a resident of the empire who did not have the status of a Roman citizen. We can idealize the pilgrim as someone with no country of departure or destination.
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30. For the year 2023 the official number launch by the local administrative authorities and after by local newspapers is of 4 million visitors around Arunachala on the moment when the fire was lit on top of the mountain (26.11.23 at 6:00 p.m.) on the Kartighai Deppam 10th day.

31. See more for example on friends of Arunachala, an informal group that pick up the litter of mountain after the celebrations.
32. Anderson, Benedict. Comunidades Imaginadas. Edições 70. 2021.
33. The management entity of Arunachala Sacred Mountain is currently putting together a dossier for the Mountain's nomination as a World Heritage Site.

Traditional Dwellings and Settlements
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WAYS OF BEING AND MAKING LANDSCAPE: THE FAVELAS IN RIO DE JANEIRO'S CITYSCAPE

Mônica Bahia Schlee

WAYS OF BEING AND MAKING LANDSCAPE: THE FAVELAS IN RIO DE JANEIRO'S CITYSCAPE

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This paper addresses the right to "be landscape" through the narratives of four favelas located in the buffer zone of the UNESCO World Heritage Site "Paisagens Cariocas entre a Montanha e o Mar". located in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Drawing on an action research and dialogical methods, it highlights how marginalized communities articulate heritage values rooted in memory, identity, and collective struggle. By foregrounding local perspectives, the study critiques exclusionary preservation policies and proposes inclusive, community-based strategies for heritage equity. It argues for biocultural approaches that recognize favelas as dynamic, living landscapes integral to Rio de Janeiro's cultural fabric.

1. INTRODUCTION

The metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro consists of 22 municipalities with a population of over 13 million. There is a stark contrast between the wealthy coastal areas and the more deprived periphery, presenting significant challenges for heritage management. The region boasts a rich natural and cultural heritage, including Guanabara Bay and the rugged foothills of the Serra do Mar, covered by the Atlantic Forest. It features historic urban ensembles along its shores and mountainous areas, archaeological sites, historical parks and squares, and a wealth of tangible and intangible heritage, including religious and institutional buildings, factories, indigenous villages, quilombos (settlements founded by ancient escaped enslaved people as a form of resistance against slavery), artisanal fishing structures in Guanabara Bay, as well as traditional festivals, dances, and cultural manifestations such as capoeira and samba schools. However, there is a pronounced imbalance in heritage recognition between the metropolis of Rio de Janeiro and its surrounding municipalities. This imbalance does not just occur between the more highly valued coastal area and the outskirts inhabited by the poor and marginalized. This inequality also occurs between the UNESCO World Heritage sites located at Rio de Janeiro city and the slums located in and around their buffer zones.

The metropolis of Rio de Janeiro is located in the Southeast region of Brazil, along the Atlantic Ocean shoreline in between two huge bays – the Guanabara and the Sepetiba Bays. Distinct patches with sharp edges, green corridors widespread, and a heterogeneous background matrix are the results of ecological and social processes in time. A dialogue among crowed sandy beaches, densely occupied plains, clusters of skyscrapers, huge, protected forests side by side with favelas hanging from the steep slopes, together with still existing mangroves and wetlands characterize Rio's urban environment. Three independent mountain ranges with several prominent hills along the coast, the two huge bays and the sinuosity of the seashore shape its natural landscape.

This city holds most of the region's heritage sites, with three out of four World Heritage sites located at the State of Rio de Janeiro, numerous conservation units, and over 300 cataloged properties. In contrast, the peripheral areas, including the favelas, receive little official acknowledgment for their heritage.

Looking more carefully we notice a difference in social and urban patterns in between the main regions of the city reflected in this landscape: the Southern region along the Atlantic Ocean, the more valued one, where the wealthy people live, and the North, which shelters the poverty, still the less assisted area of the city. The Eastern region, along the Guanabara Bay, shelters the historical and the financial core of the city, combining the oldest buildings and some of the newer ones. The West – the sprawl area – continues to follow the North region social pattern, towards a transition to an incipient rural environment mixed with scattered large industry complexes.

The recognition of Rio de Janeiro's landscape as a World Heritage site as a cultural landscape by UNESCO in July 2012 brought new challenges and responsibilities regarding the process of urban planning and the protection of cultural heritage in the city. Among the numerous demands and needs for improving the management of world heritage sites in light of contemporary challenges – such as globalization, neoliberalism, the restructuring of production models, is essential to promote awareness, mobilization, and collaboration among the various segments of society to ensure the protection and conservation of these assets, thereby strengthening their role as cultural identity elements.

The world heritage asset "Paisagens Cariocas entre a Montanha e o Mar" (Carioca landscapes between the Mountain and the Sea) recognized by UNESCO[1] encompasses key open space shape Rio's urban landscape, including the Tijuca National Park; the Botanical Gardens; the designed landscapes along Copacabana Beach and Flamengo Park and the hills and fortresses that guard the entrance of Guanabara Bay (Fig.1). However, one of the most controversial sources of conflict is the presence of favelas within the boundaries or in the surroundings of the buffer zone of the World Heritage property and within sight of the landscape elements selected as icons of Rio's cultural landscape. Rio's favelas are undoubtedly part of its urban heritage. Yet, they are not considered as such by the society in general and, consequently, by local heritage managers.

Fig. 1. The UNESCO World Heritage site "*Paisagens Cariocas entre a Montanha e o Mar*" (Carioca landscapes between the Mountain and the Sea). (Source: Marcelo Nacinovik, 2015).

This article problematizes the right to be part of the landscape, bringing the narratives and experiences of four favelas located in the buffer zone of the UNESCO World Heritage site "Paisagens Cariocas entre a Montanha e o Mar" (Carioca landscapes between the Mountain and the Sea) and reflect on the ways in which Rio's lower classes – black people, women household heads, migrants and, more recently, refugees - have fought for their rights or contributed the local heritage.

By giving voice to people usually left on the margins on local landscape and heritage conservation policies, this article aims to record different viewpoints on the relationship between the main Rio de Janeiro's world heritage site and the favelas located at its surroundings, bringing into light the favelas invisibility in local preservation policies.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION: THE BASIS OF DISCUSSION

The theoretical basis of the article is grounded in concepts such as landscape, cultural landscape and living heritage, and in the correlation between international heritage charters and the legal documents that organize the protection of heritage at the national and local levels.

As noted by Schlee et al (2024)[2], Rafael Winter Ribeiro (2020)[3] and Vanessa Figueiredo (2014)[4] "landscape" embodies multiple layers of meaning accumulated over time, reflecting shifts in values, ways of life, forms and visions of how human societies perceive, represent and appropriate it. Varied interpretations of landscape, shaped by distinct cultural contexts, have evolved from an initial emphasis on its visual and aesthetic dimensions, to the consideration of its morphological aspects – shaped by the interplay between nature and culture – and to the recognition of its symbolic, philosophical, mythical, experiential and multisensory attributes. A collective work lived, produced and inhabited by societies; the landscape is a hybrid, relational

and articulated system, since it encompasses both the natural and cultural dimensions, whose countless combinations constitute it (BESSE, 2009)[5].

Initially centered on aesthetic value, as per the UNESCO Recommendation on the Safeguarding of the Beauty and Character of Landscapes and Sites (1962), the definition expanded to include cultural landscapes, classified as a category of cultural heritage by UNESCO (UNESCO 1992)[6].

The World Heritage Convention (1972)[7] established two types of World Heritage sites, the cultural and the natural ones. Only in 1978, UNESCO recognized the need to incorporate mixed sites, referring to refer to locations that present natural and cultural values and attributes, which may or may not be intertwined. The outstanding universal value as the criterion for recognizing properties whose importance as references and identities of nations qualifies them as heritage of all humanity was also adopted for landscapes. The adoption of Cultural Landscape as a cultural protection category in 1992 altered the inscription criteria and sections of the Operational Guidelines to include: 1) designed landscapes, 2) organically evolved landscapes, and 3) associative landscapes.

Furthermore, the Nara Document on Authenticity (ICOMOS, 1994)[8] established authenticity as an essential factor in the qualification of values of properties protected globally. Gonçalves (1996, p. 1)[9] argues that "the meaning of 'authenticity' is closely related to the notion of 'truth,' referring to something genuine and legitimate" for the dominant group that has the power to exercise value judgment.

Subsequent documents, such as the Recommendation R(95) 9 (Council of Europe, 1995)[10], the European Landscape Convention (Council of Europe, 2000)[11] and the launch of the Recommendation on Historic Urban Landscape in 2011 by UNESCO (UNESCO, 2011)[12] broadened the concept of landscape, recognizing it as the result of social interactions with territories, highlighting its cultural, ecological, and social importance. These advancements were followed by the creation of continental charters, such as the Americas Landscape Charter (IFLA 2018)[13], which defined landscape as a common good and an instrument of collective well-being.

These protection instruments innovated by combining the protection of territories with cultural and natural attributes and socio-spatial characteristics that are relevant to the memory of Brazilian cities and to maintaining the diversity of urban occupation. However, the clashes over what should be recognized as "legitimate cultural heritage" remain fierce and far from a consensus. They bring with them contending forces, prejudices and the underlying political content in the valorization of the collective heritage.

In Brazil, Decree-Law No. 25, dated November 30, 1937 (Brazil, 1937)[14], which organized the protection of national historical and artistic heritage in Brazil, also defined in Article 1 its connection to "memorable events in Brazilian history, whether due to their exceptional archaeological, ethnographic, bibliographic, or artistic value" within the context of nationalist movements and the formation of nation-states (Brazil 1937, Article 1). Regarding landscapes, the decree recognized both natural and cultural landscapes as eligible for protection but limited the designation of assets to those characterized by their "remarkable features."

The concept of cultural heritage expanded significantly with the enactment of the Federal Constitution of 1988 (Brazil 1988)[15], which, in Article 216, introduced a broader, more democratic, and diffuse notion of heritage, encompassing both "material and immaterial assets, individually or collectively, bearing reference to the identity, actions, and memory of the different groups that form Brazilian society" (Brazil 1988, Article 216). Although the change in the notion of heritage shifted from something with exceptional value to a reference value for society, many of the prevailing practices in the field are still permeated by strong ideological influences that prioritize the safeguarding of objects and forms that express and carry values accepted by the elites of society. From this common foundation arise the discriminatory criteria for protection actions that continue to prevail in the country (Schlee 2015)[16].

As argued by Lia Motta (2017)[17], the criteria established for selecting what and how to preserve in Brazilian cities prioritized the stylistic uniformity of colonial ensembles and/or the exceptional nature of monuments in cities that had already lost their integrity. The standard produced based on aesthetic-stylistic criteria, and of uniformity and/or exceptionalism, led to the treatment of cities as works of art, to the detriment of recognizing traces and records of memory, traditions, collective identities, and the symbolic value of urban structures. Over time, these criteria were adopted by guardianship bodies, politicians, and even ordinary citizens, solidifying a particular image of historical and cultural heritage that remains ingrained in the collective imagination.

Since the turn of the millennium, the notions of unity, universality, and exceptionality have been questioned based on movements of critical interculturality and multivocality, giving way to multiple histories instead of a single History. What we consider "heritage" today is different from what it was in the past and involves many other aspects (Schlee, in Rampim, Castriota and Schlee 2023)[18]. In this process, the notion of cultural significance ceases to be solely related to aesthetic exceptionalism or association with a memorable event in history, and begins to include a broader range of cultural elements that play a significant role in the identity of a community, region, or country, incorporating also artistic manifestations, popular practices, and expressions in landscapes (Castriota, in Rampim, Castriota and Schlee 2023)[19].

Critical interculturality challenges the assumption of cultural universality, positing instead that cultural diversity constitutes the true richness of human experience. Each culture possesses its own aesthetics, social relations, cognitive systems, artistic expressions, and epistemologies, all subject to historical change. Aesthetics, while central to cultural identity and belonging, often reinforces boundaries between "us" and "them," thereby obstructing intercultural engagement (Heidegger, 1979)[20].

The concept of multivocality emphasizes the coexistence of diverse narratives and interpretations of the past. Recognized across different disciplines, it promotes methodological pluralism and enhances social and cultural inclusion (Schlee, 2022)[21]. The alienation of marginalized groups from collective heritage is frequently rooted in their exclusion from heritage-making processes and the denial of their right to "be landscape" (Barbosa, 2018)[22].

Biocultural heritage, as conceptualized through Latin American epistemologies of the Global South, challenges the conventional Nature-Culture dichotomy. It encompasses ancestral knowledge systems and sustainable practices embedded in traditional lifeways, emphasizing the continuity of sociocultural and ecological interrelations (Barbosa, 2020) [23]. This perspective aligns with the pluriversal vision advanced by decolonial and Indigenous thought, which reimagines heritage as a dynamic interplay of tangible and intangible elements operating across multiple territorial scales.

The biocultural framework supports a pluralistic understanding of landscape – not only as heritage but also as a complex, evolving system. It highlights the interdependence of cultural and ecological dimensions and their ongoing interactions, which collectively shape the tangible and intangible dimensions of place. In the context of Rio de Janeiro, this perspective is essential to grasp the city's landscape dynamics, defined by a continuous negotiation between diverse social practices and the environmental support.

Within this framework, as pinpointed by Pereira (2023) [24], living heritage emerges as a key concept, developed by ICCROM in 2003 through the Integrated Territorial and Urban Conservation program, stressing the relevance of connecting heritage sites to the communities that sustain them. While sharing features with the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach – such as the acceptance of transformation – living heritage emphasizes autonomous community participation and collective-responsibility for heritage conservation and management. Complementing this idea, Wijesuriya (2015) [25] grounds the notion of living heritage on the idea of "continuity", preserving a site's original function, as well as the connections with the community associated with it, expressed through tangible and intangible elements.

It is through the articulation of multiple perspectives and experiences that heritage remains a dynamic, living process. This multivocal engagement legitimizes heritage practices, enhances site interpretation, and broadens

the scope of heritage management. Dialogues grounded in intercultural understanding allow for democratic negotiation of meanings and aspirations, aligning heritage conservation with principles of social justice. As Fonseca (2001)[26] argues, heritage value is not intrinsic but ascribed by subjects with culturally and historically specific interests. The Nara Document on Authenticity (1994) similarly highlights the importance of cultural context in determining significance. However, the exclusion of favelas from the boundaries and buffer zones of World Heritage Sites in Rio de Janeiro reveals the persistent institutional biases that hinder truly inclusive conservation.

Menezes (2009)[27] brings the core issue into focus: "If value is always an attribution, who attributes it? Who creates value?" The Nara Document (1994, item 13) affirms that value attribution is a cultural judgment and must respect the contexts from which heritage emerges. This calls for a critical rethinking of normative frameworks in heritage management, enabling recognition of cultural systems that diverge from dominant paradigms.

3. THE PROBLEMATIC

The site Carioca Landscapes between the Mountain and the Sea faces management challenges that underscore the need for consensus on the conceptual definitions supporting its nomination as World Heritage as a Cultural Landscape, as well as the strengthening of intersectoral coordination with territorial planning, particularly regarding issues related to the definition of value criteria, regulation, and territorial management.

For the Carioca Landscapes, recognized as a cultural landscape, despite institutional discourse suggesting that its management should foster engagement between public authorities and society through the creation of communication channels, social participation has been quite limited. Although IPHAN established a management committee for the Carioca Landscapes site in 2014, this committee has been under representative in terms of social participation and has not functioned fully since 2019.

The Carioca Landscapes site recognized as exceptional universal values (part of) the landscape of the city, shaped by a creative fusion between nature, consisting of various ecosystems associated with the Atlantic Forest, and culture, expressed in cultural and artistic manifestations and the social uses of public open spaces, which led to innovative landscape creations and a mutual influence on Rio's urban identity. The site also recognized the value of the landscape shaped by unique historical and social processes, based on values produced and shared by various cultures, which have inspired many forms of art, literature, poetry, and music (UNESCO 2012).

The set of public open spaces that constitute the UNESCO-protected property includes the Tijuca National Park, the Botanical Garden, the Sugarloaf Mountain Natural Monument, Morro da Urca and Morro do Leme, the historical fortifications at the entrance to Guanabara Bay, and the planned landscapes of Copacabana Beach and Flamengo Park, all connected by a buffer zone (UNESCO 2012). However, the favelas, one of the most striking elements of the city's landscape (Fig.2), were excluded as a cultural reference. The nomination dossier did not mention the location of the favelas within the limits of the site's buffer zone, nor did it provide a list of their names. This omission reflects the structural stigma and prejudice entrenched in Brazilian society against Black and poor communities.

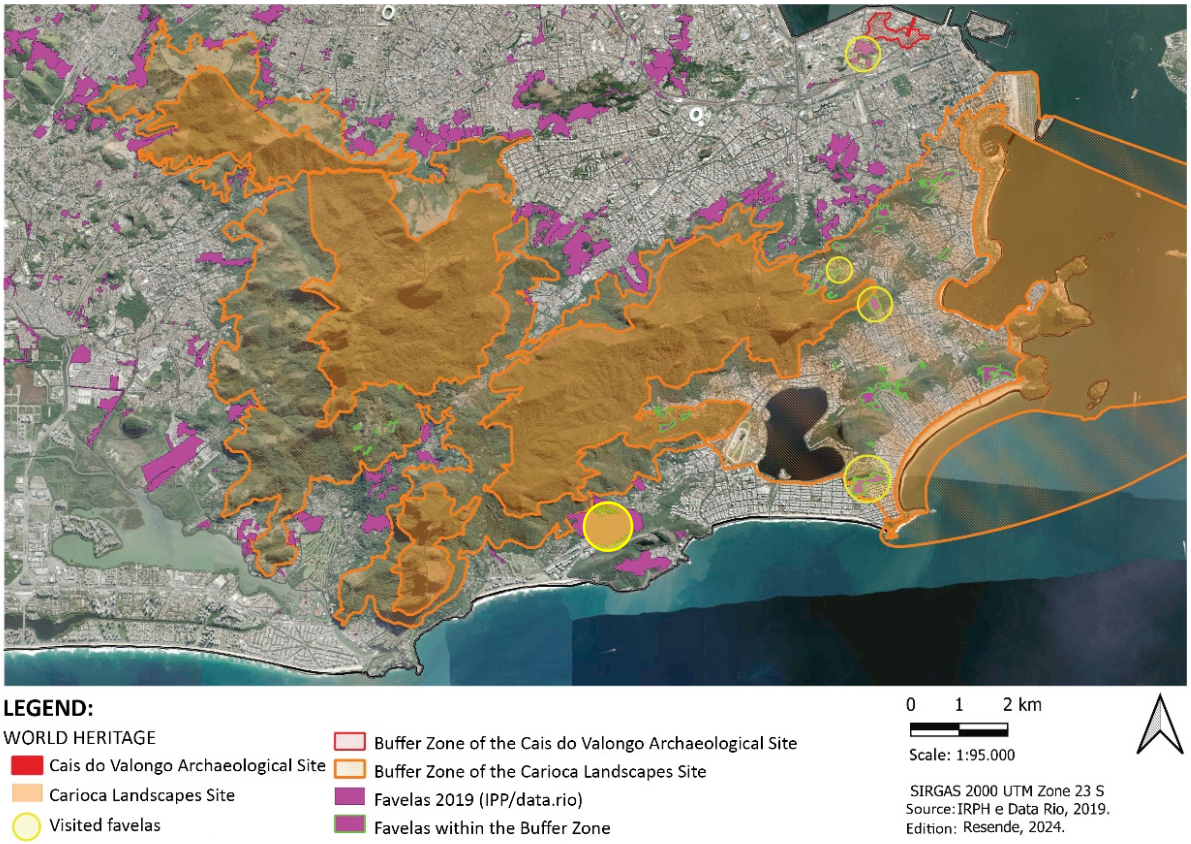

Fig. 2. Location of the favelas in relation to the World Heritage sites and their buffer zones in Rio de Janeiro. (Source: Schlee, Santos and Resende, 2024).

Cultural references originating from or associated with the favelas, such as samba, carnival, and other popular artistic expressions like Jongo, Folia de Reis, and Capoeira, among others, are described as intrinsic to the city but without any connection to the favelas, which gave birth to many of these traditions and continue to host them. Furthermore, the favelas were identified in the nomination dossier as one of the main urban pressures affecting the site – along with radio transmission towers that disturb the view of the mountains from the city,

untreated sewage polluting rivers, lagoons, and the Guanabara Bay, wildlife hunting, items left outdoors during religious rituals in the forests, and deforestation and garbage accumulation on the slopes.

The relationship between the favelas and the UNESCO World Heritage sites located in the city of Rio de Janeiro is practically non-existent. The favelas are neither recognized as part of the landscape nor as places of residence and belonging for a significant portion of the Carioca population. On the contrary, from the institutional perspective, they are viewed as threats to the sites. The invisibility of the favelas in this "idealized" landscape of the city is remarkable.

In the nomination dossier of the site "Carioca Landscapes Between Mountain and Sea" (UNESCO 2012), for example, the favelas are identified as one of the urban pressures affecting the site – they are pointed out as illegal occupations located in its buffer zone – in the same way as the broadcasting antennas that disrupt the view of the mountains for those looking from the city towards them; the pollution of the rivers, lagoons, and Guanabara Bay waters due to raw sewage discharge; the hunting of wild animals; the candles, utensils, and food left outdoors during religious rituals; deforestation; and the accumulated waste on the slopes.

The management plan for the "Carioca Landscapes" site (UNESCO 2014, p. 9)[28] mentioned that "the management of a cultural landscape in an urban area requires the creation of a pact and the establishment of a landscape management forum capable of giving voice to different agents and finding consensual solutions for actions in the area. Furthermore, it requires the incorporation of a collective discussion about its values and how to preserve them... considering the dynamics of a living megalopolis in constant construction." However, despite pointing out these directions as a discursive narrative, at no point are the favelas recognized as part of the landscape that is meant to be protected, despite their evident presence on the city's hills, much less as the place of residence for more than 20% of Rio de Janeiro's population.

The mention of important cultural references such as Samba, Carnival, Samba schools, and other popular artistic expressions, like Jongo, Folia de Reis, and Capoeira, is made as if they were intrinsic cultural manifestations of the city, with no connection to the favelas that gave birth to some of them and continue to host them. There is no mention of funk, one of the most characteristic popular manifestations of the city. Nevertheless, the management plan states that one of its objectives is the identification, registration, and safeguarding of cultural heritage in a democratic manner, ensuring the inclusion of holders of traditional knowledge in the development and execution of safeguarding actions defined through debate to create public policies that value the city's cultural assets.

4. THE METHODOLOGY

The dialogical methodology in this action research involves favela leaders and residents in visits and in-site round conversations on three other favelas – 1. Cerro-Corá, Guararapes and Vila Cândido; 2. Pavão, Pavãozinho, and Cantagalo; 3. Santa Marta; 4. Rocinha. The first three favelas were studied through field visits and discussion circles conducted as part of a continuing education course on Living Landscapes and Heritage coordinated by the author, Renata Santos and Lorena Maia Resende in 2024 within the scope of the Vera Hazan Continuing Education Program, promoted by the Brazilian Association of Landscape Architects (ABAP-RJ) in a joining initiative with the Council of Architecture and Urbanism of the State of Rio de Janeiro (CAU-RJ), which are discussed in more depth in Schlee, Santos and Resende (2024)[29]. The dialogue with Rocinha residents takes place in monthly meetings at the Rocinha Ecological Park.

The continuing education course on Living Landscapes and Heritage focused on the relationship between UNESCO World Heritage sites and the favelas situated within their buffer zones. In Rocinha, monthly meetings are held since the beginning of 2022, as part of a community-based initiative to revitalize the use of an ecological park located within the neighborhood (Schlee, 2023)[30]. The Rocinha case will be analyzed in further depth, given that the recurring meetings facilitate more in-depth discussions.

Through listening and by giving voice to people often marginalized from the heritage processes, this paper records different viewpoints on the relationship between heritage sites and favelas, cultural references, coexistence, belonging, and identity and understand different perspectives beyond those institutionally established.

The main guiding issues of this research include:
(a) What do favela residents consider as their heritage?
(b) What values of the favelas would they like to see preserved for future generations?
(c) What to preserve in a living structure that is in constant transformation? How to preserve the movement, dynamics, vitality, use value, and essence of the identity of the favela landscape?
(d) What has been done by residents to protect their heritage?

Based on the guiding issues, the debates were held to encourage dialogue about the heritage values of the favelas, key problems, vulnerabilities and opportunities identified and the strategies envisioned for heritage equity.

5. ACTIVE LISTENING

Engaging with favela residents provided valuable insights into their critical perspectives on landscape, heritage, public policies and urban planning, and their own territorial realities. In contrast to the institutional view marked by prejudice, Sheila Maria de Souza, tourism specialist, resident of Favela Santa Marta, one of the favelas located within the buffer zone of this site (Schlee, Santos and Resende 2024), argues that "the favela is part of the landscape. Only when we recognize this will the city be able to be woven together. The favelas are the product and living expression of an ancestral resistance process by the Black population."

"We belong to the city. Favela is the city. Only when we recognize this will the city be stitched together." "The favelas are seen as a place of lack." "The favelas are the product and living expression of an ancestral resistance process of the black population. Of quilombola origin or inspiration." Regarding the favelas as risk areas: "What perspective is being perpetuated? It's all a matter of interest." (Schlee, Santos and Resende 2024)

"The favelas are not the same, they have specificities, they have particularities that form the identity of each favela. They are not even homogeneous internally, because the cultural origins of the residents are different." (Antônio Firmino, co-founder of the Sankofa Museum, master's student in Social Memory, resident of Favela Rocinha)

"The urbanization projects made by architects in the favelas aimed to adapt the favela to the current aesthetic, to replicate the 'asphalt' (the formal city landscape)." (Antônia Soares, co-founder of the Museum of the Favela, resident of the Pavão, Pavãozinho, and Cantagalo complex)

"It's a museum (referring to the Museum of Favela in the Pavão, Pavãozinho, and Cantagalo complex) where people open the window and speak from inside the frame." (Wolney Lopes, social mobilizer, resident of Favela Santa Marta, referring to the fact that in this museum, the residents and their homes are the works of art on display for the public's appreciation)

To think about the heritage of the favelas, we need to add the element of conviviality and protection through use…Decolonize from the ground up." (Itamar Silva, community leader, resident of Favela Santa Marta).

These voices echo the extent of favela residents' dissatisfaction with public policies. The following account of the collaborative action carried out in Rocinha may point to other possible paths.

6. COLLABORATIVE ACTION

A grassroots community pilot project, in which the author is actively involved, has been underway since January 2022 with the aim of reactivating and restoring the Parque Ecológico da Rocinha (Ecological Park of Rocinha). This public park is situated at the interface between the Atlantic Forest—protected by the Tijuca National Park—and Rocinha, one of the largest favelas in Latin America.

The idea of establishing the Parque Ecológico da Rocinha emerged from a proposal put forward by Rocinha residents as an alternative to the Rio de Janeiro State government's plan to build a wall around the community to contain its expansion toward the Tijuca National Park. The ecological park was envisioned as a natural buffer zone between the favela and the protected forest, while also promoting environmental awareness, forest conservation, and providing a space for community leisure. The park was partially completed in 2012, incorporating multi-level gathering and contemplation areas, a tennis court, a soccer field, outdoor fitness equipment, an amphitheater with excellent acoustics for cultural events, a children's playground, hammock areas, and public restrooms.

However, a series of legal and bureaucratic obstacles, including unresolved land tenure issues, jurisdictional conflicts between state and municipal authorities over park management, and limited financial support for its upkeep, significantly hindered the park's development. Additionally, the unresolved case of Amarildo Dias de Souza—a local resident who disappeared in the park in 2013 shortly after its inauguration—contributed to the deterioration of the area. As a result, the park gradually fell into neglect, with many of its facilities vandalized, invaded, or left in disrepair. Lacking institutional support and effective social oversight, the park has since undergone a process of abandonment, compromising its original function as a shared public space.

To address the prevailing scenario of abandonment, fear and degradation of the park, residents of Rocinha—alongside allies, local leaders, and activists engaged in social, cultural, and environmental causes—have joined efforts with two academic institutions (UFRJ and PUC-Rio) and non-profit organizations to establish the collective Amigos do Parque Ecológico da Rocinha (APER – Friends of the Ecological Park of Rocinha).

Together, the group of activists have developed a collaborative activation agenda for the park, characterized by monthly cultural occupations featuring a wide array of activities. These include dance and poetry exhibitions, storytelling by residents, thematic discussion circles on topics such as culture, heritage, science, literature, music, sports, solidarity, gender-based violence, ecosystem preservation, recycling, green roofs in favelas, seedling planting, and the medicinal use of native plants. Local speakers from Rocinha and other favela communities lead these sessions. The initiative also includes graffiti workshops, monthly park clean-ups, and community-shared meals prepared voluntarily by participants (Fig. 3).

The meetings are entitled Superação (Superaction, which in Portuguese means both a great action and the annulment of a trauma). The Amigos do Parque Ecológico da Rocinha (APER) is jointly coordinated/organized by eight volunteers, responsible for organizing the meetings, social media (https://www.instagram.com/aper.rocinha/) and local demands, and a larger group of volunteers including local artists, local leaders, local digital influencers, and friends of the park and of Rocinha[31].

Fig. 3. APER Activities in Parque Ecológico da Rocinha, 2023. (Source: Marta Gil Riesco collection).

In Rocinha, the community leaders engaged in collective struggles for the right to water and land tenure (Fig. 4) – alongside natural elements such as springs, fountains, and water reservoirs, as well as the oral records of collective memories – are regarded as valuable assets. The cultural expressions of the principal social groups that comprise the favela population form an integral part of the community's cultural heritage. These include capoeira, a practice developed in Brazil by descendants of African slaves that combines martial arts, dance, and music; graffiti bearing social and environmental protest messages; and the *cordel* literature and dances originating from Brazil's Northeast region.

Fig. 4. Community-led construction of the sewage system in the 1980s. (Source: Photo by Father Thierry Linard de Guertechin. João Guilherme de Oliveira collection)

Fig. 5. Children and youth from Rocinha participating in APER activities. In the background, one of the graffiti artworks created within the park. (Source: Nicholas Simões collection)

The graffiti created in the Rocinha Ecological Park focused primarily on themes such as social critique, nature and urban life. Local artists involved in the initiative described the experience of painting in the park as a moment of connection – with nature, with their ancestors, and with the community participating in the gatherings. Through their artwork, these artists seek to convey messages of freedom, environmental preservation, peace, and interfaith and ideological tolerance. They believe that graffiti can contribute to revitalizing the park by serving as a cultural attraction, transforming the site into an open-air art exhibition that draws residents to the space (Fig. 5).

7. MAIN ISSUES AND PROPOSALS

Favelas' heritage values

Engagements with favela communities revealed that local narratives of heritage prioritize intangible and lived dimensions, contrasting with institutionalized heritage frameworks. The discussion circles identified the following values underpinning the heritage of favelas:

- The Relationship with Water – The connection to natural springs as an identity-forming element, despite pollution threats from sewage and waste dumping, and its preservation through continued use.
- People as Living Heritage – The residents themselves—elders, resilient women ("warriors"), and youth—as one of the most significant embodiments of intangible heritage.
- Memory of Collective Struggles – The historical narratives of communal resistance for land tenure rights and improved living conditions.
- The Cityscape as Heritage – The rooftops as spaces for contemplation and engagement with the urban landscape.
- Cultural and Architectural Significance – The role of favelas as the birthplace of influential cultural movements and exemplars of vernacular architecture

Key Problems and Vulnerabilities Identified

The analysis revealed several critical challenges and systemic vulnerabilities:

- Spatial and Symbolic Erasure - Marginalization of favelas of both the city landscape and of the official heritage policy.
- Exclusionary Discourses - Dominant institutional narratives in heritage conservation that perpetuate the socio-spatial exclusion of favela communities.
- Deficient Participatory Processes - Lack of comprehensive social participation prior to the World Heritage site nomination and in the management process. Limited community engagement in both the development and critical evaluation of new projects affecting the site.

- Dialogue Disregard - Insufficient communication channels between the favela residents and the World Heritage site management.
- Elitist Policy Frameworks - Policy frameworks that disregard community-based cultural values and vernacular heritage practices in the institutional agendas.
- Governance Gap - Absence of an inclusive management committee with meaningful community representation.

Key Opportunities Identified

- Rootedness in Ancestral Legacies – Presence of ancestral connections and collective memories that act as foundations for territorial belonging.
- Grassroots Organizational Capacity – Existing community networks that may support for heritage stewardship.
- Counter-Hegemonic Narratives – Emergent discourses reframing favelas as sites of living heritage and innovation rather than marginal and lack territories.

Proposed Strategies for Heritage Equity

- Local Critical Debates – Stimulate discussions within favelas' residents about heritage and sustainable development.
- Inclusive Heritage Policy Making – Direct community involvement in heritage protection policies.
- Territorial Integration – Planning approaches that connect the World Heritage site with surrounding favelas, ensuring socio-spatial equity.
- Community-based Tourism – Create locally-operated tourism models ensuring equitable benefit distribution.
- Knowledge Co-Production – Partnerships with universities for heritage knowledge exchange, empowering residents to reclaim ancestral narratives.
- Participatory Documentation – Collaborative inventories of the cultural expressions and of vernacular building knowledge.
- Integrated Landscape Planning – Elaboration of a landscape-based management plan that incorporate the favelas in heritage conservation.

Revisiting the concept of biocultural heritage, this action research illustrates how societal engagement in heritage discourses and the participatory use and management of open spaces can function as a mediating force between fragmented urban territories. Dialogues with favela communities contribute to the articulation of a pluralistic vision – "a world where many worlds fit" – facilitating forms of mediation that respond to ongoing and intersecting social, environmental, and climatic crises.

Collective socio-environmental mobilizations play a pivotal role in the preservation and safeguarding of landscapes and cultural heritage. The recognition of shared territorialities and collective heritage serves as a countermeasure to processes of authoritarian planning disconnected from the ground.

As Katherine Hayles (1994)[32] has argued, perspectives and representations originating from marginalized positions are critical to the construction of knowledge, offering essential insights that contribute to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of reality. In this context, open spaces possess the potential unify segregated metropolitan areas and to nurture a sense of collective identity. Realizing this potential requires the recognition of living heritage—embodied in the people who continually shape their environments through dynamic and evolving cultural practices.

8. CONCLUSION

This article underscores the imperative need of integrating favelas into the broader urban and heritage landscape of Rio de Janeiro, particularly within the context of the Carioca Landscapes World Heritage site and its buffer zones. Recognizing the contributions of favela residents to the city's identity and collective memory is vital to fostering inclusive heritage policies that reflect the social and cultural diversity of all communities. Such recognition supports the formulation of more integrated and equitable public policies, including the establishment of participatory and more representative World Heritage site management committees.

These experiences demonstrate the need to acknowledge the diversity of contexts and social actors involved in heritage conservation. Ensuring the rights and responsibilities of all stakeholders requires a landscape-based and people-centered approach that functions as both a structuring and integrative element across territorial policies. This calls for shared and collaborative governance models that empower local actors and emphasize the crucial role of buffer zones—spaces where everyday life unfolds and where social, cultural, and environmental pressures intersect.

Despite institutional advancements, legacy models of heritage conservation based on hierarchical and fragmented paradigms remain insufficient. A shift toward socially grounded, landscape-based, and rights-oriented approaches is essential. Such a transformation provides a more robust framework for safeguarding both globally recognized and locally valued heritage assets, while advancing sustainable urban development and the democratization of decision-making processes.

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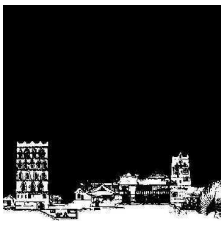

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