



***(EXTRA)ORDINARY
CULTURAL HERITAGE(S)
- BRIDGING THE
EVERYDAY AND
THE ICONIC***

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Google search string:

What is the culture of Bangalore?

Top answers: Tech-hub, cosmopolitan, open mindedness

Google search string:

What is the culture of Mysore?

Top answers:

Rich heritage and culture, serene and peaceful

In general, I am not in favour of comparisons but it makes for a useful way to enter the theme I wish to address in this essay - two cultures and by extension, two heritages - one iconic and the other everyday. The opening remarks above are indicative of popular understanding that sees Mysore (Mysuru) as representing 'extraordinary culture' and Bangalore (Bengaluru) as representing 'ordinary or popular culture'. Such comparisons are not limited to the level of the city or region but operate across scales. For instance, a similar Google search string result on neighbourhoods of Bangalore notes the areas of Malleshwaram and Basavanagudi as cultural, historic and heritage areas, and Indiranagar and Koramangala as cosmopolitan areas. I have no problem with such labels per se but *only* when they are seen as useful as organising rather than defining or conceptual categories. I take issue with such labels when they are believed to completely describe or characterise a location. Yes, Mysuru is a heritage city (Figure 1) but it is so much more than that. Much as Bengaluru is more than IT (Figure 2), or Indiranagar is more than a 'happening location' and Basavanagudi has a lot more to offer than only iconic temples, masala dosa and filter coffee.

In this reflective essay, I attempt to explicate some of the (ethical) dilemmas foregrounded by decades of grounded professional practice and academic research. As a humanities-based, community-engaged conservation architect and heritage scholar, I work interdisciplinarily, through the lens of heritage and culture, to engage with the lived experiences of diverse groups and individuals. I draw on the learnings from my steady engagement with various residents of Bengaluru^[1] through various personal initiatives, including Neighbourhood Diaries, Nakshay, Anglo-Indian archives, Malleshwaram Accessibility Project, Bangalore City Project and other sporadic engagements, to present my insights. The key argument I make is that - yes, the city is a palimpsest of multiple spatio-temporal-material layers, but even if we scratch the surface, all the layers do not become visible. Nor do the visible layers constantly live in a state of harmonious coexistence.

Some of the city's many layers are either invisibilised or set aside as a result of our own lenses and



Figure 1. An iconic image of Mysuru - the Palace
(Source: Kashish Shishodia)



Figure 2. An iconic image of Bengaluru - Ascendas ITPB
(Source: Brochure cover of Ascendas International Tech Park)

standpoints. Their becoming visible depends on the nature of our engagements with them. By 'our' I mean the various individuals, groups, experts, enthusiasts, citizens and advocacy organisations of the city that are actively interested in and working with culture, history, heritage, place and identity. Secondly, which layer we each choose to foreground and when, where and how, impacts other layers, as the numerous layers are imbricated and not isolated entities. Besides bringing up vignettes and incidents from the field, I also draw on critical interpretive scholarship to discuss the complex realities foregrounded by long-standing engagements with cultural-place identity/ies of diverse locations.

Over a century ago, sociologist Emile Durkheim (2001[1912]), convincingly argued that all groups (people) tend to classify their culture into two categories, 'sacred' and 'profane'. The key point here is that each group has its own understanding of what constitutes both - what is sacred to one group may be profane to another and vice versa. Additionally, sacred in this context does not imply religious significance but more broadly, it means something special and extraordinary. Similarly, profane here does not mean irreligious or disrespectful but secular; something that is worldly, everyday, ordinary, routine, banal. For the purpose of the argument in this essay, I broadly correspond 'extraordinary' with 'sacred' and 'ordinary' with 'secular'. In an attempt to bridge these two extremes, heritage has sometimes been referred to as 'secular sacred' or common to everyone yet outstanding. Before getting deeper into the tendency of some groups and individuals, including myself, to



Figure 3. Shree Dandu Mariamma temple, Shivajinagar Circle, Bangalore (Source: Aliyeh Rizvi)

use binary comparisons as a way to: first, define or characterise the cultural-place identity of locations and second, exclusively tie-in such identities with extraordinary events or landmarks, I discuss the words 'culture' and 'heritage'. And by binary I mean framing two parts of something as absolute opposites, by exaggerating the differences between them, such that it is either seen as black or white with no room for any greys in between.

Culture is broadly understood as the ways of life of a particular group of individuals, certain characteristic ways they have of doing things and recurring patterns that are unique to that group. Culture contains meanings; it is a way for groups to make sense of the world around them (Inglis, 2005: 6). It is learned and transmitted from one generation to the next, but to the degree that it seems to be the natural order of things. This is to say that it is naturalised to such an extent that it seems to be the way certain things have been done forever; it no longer appears to be learned behaviour. Delving a bit deeper into culture, cultural theorist Raymond Williams (1980 [1961]: 66) argues that culture possesses three interrelated levels. One, the lived culture of a particular time and place that is fully accessible only to those living in that time and place. This does not mean the aspect cannot be represented or understood by others. Two, recorded culture, of every kind, from art to the most everyday facts defined as the culture of a period and three, the culture of the selective tradition. The last is typically seen as 'the factor connecting lived culture and period cultures' (Inglis, 2005: 12) and is popularly known as 'high culture'. It continues to be seen as a way to understand the 'best' of a particular group's lived culture (Inglis, 2005: 12).

Each of the three concepts related to culture, introduced above, have been further broken down and critiqued. But for the purpose of this essay their varied complex meanings are not so relevant as what these concepts do to people and places. For, it is observable that culture has an effect on day-to-day life much as day-

to-day life has an effect on culture. I have observed residents of Bengaluru's urbanised villages^[2] often describe or personify their *ooru devathas* (also known as *grama devathas*), say Mamma or Sapamma, to the city's urban residents as Durga (Figure 3). This is so that dominant (though I prefer the word hegemonic as defined by cultural theorist Stuart Hall) groups can relate to and understand such deities and not perceive them as either exotic or unknown. Such gradual adaptation of the socio-cultural identities of local deities is observable in other locations regionally, including in and around the Hampi and Pattadakal World Heritage Sites. Malaprabha valley residents would describe Konamma as Durga to visitors (Chittiraibalan, 2022) while Hampi region residents would simplify Eeranna as Shiva or Kamma as Durga to outsiders (Rajangam, 2020a). In effect, culture is a complex word that carries multiple meanings and interpretations, depending on who is describing it and in what context. Similarly, the word 'heritage' is



Figure 4. Janatha Bazaar, Majestic. (Source: Dinesh Rao)



Figure 5. Johnson Market, Hosur Road. (Source: Saliila Vanka)

equally complex as it too is a social construct. Both culture and heritage do not exist in and of themselves but are so-defined by people, groups, individuals. To emphasise, heritage and culture are made and not found. Popular understanding largely sees heritage as representative of a particular culture, whether in the form of a tangible structure or object or intangible values and meanings. Connecting such understanding to the three cultures noted above, iconic structures and sites, seemingly 'the best of a period' would represent 'high culture' whereas 'lived culture' would struggle to find an equivalent representation. This is because lived culture encompasses a whole range of cultures within it. For instance, the lived culture of Bengaluru or even lower-in scale-of-contemporary Whitefield suburb would not merely consist of the past cultural memories of the Anglo-Indian settlement that gave the area its name (Rajangam, 2011) but also the past and present cultural memories of Ramagondanahalli, Immadihalli, Nallurhalli and other such locations. These settlements were once administratively independent of Bengaluru but are now considered to be a part of Whitefield suburb, both popularly and to some extent, administratively (Rajangam, 2022). Additionally, the suburb's lived culture would encompass the collective and individual memories of the many layouts and labour colonies of the area, both old and new. So how can one seek to represent the layered cultural histories of contemporary Whitefield through a singular exceptional structure or ritual or tradition?

Where does the tendency to exceptionalise locations come from? Why do we get caught up with defining the essence of locations to such an extent that we are unable to see more to them beyond their popular label? Why do we continue to define the complex cultural identities of locations in terms of a simple binary? And most importantly why do these questions matter? In a different context but germane to the discussion in this essay, science historian Dhruv Raina argued that 'civilisational and national exceptionalisms oppose ever more radically the concept of a shared, common heritage' and that 'adherents of exceptionalist views reject some of those practices as less valuable or even irrelevant' (2016: 30). The latter argument is the key. In the process of defining the cultural place-identities of locations, whether that of Bengaluru or Malleshwaram or Indiranagar as exceptional, certain practices that also define the cultural place-identities tend to be discounted or remain unrecognised because they are seen to be ordinary, mundane, unexceptional.

But what if it is these ordinary practices that give that location its cultural-place identity in the eyes of its residents and some outsiders? For instance, long-term residents of Immadihalli resent their settlement's identity being subsumed within Whitefield's identity. They are emphatic over not being seen as part of



Figure 6. Doddamavalli Ooru Habba near Lalbagh (Source: Peevee)

Whitefield. They consider their cultural-historical trajectory to be different from that of Whitefield as their settlement traces its origins to the Kempegowda period, unlike the colonial period Anglo-Indian settlement. However, I question if this is the right path for us to traverse, as socially-responsible citizens and advocacy groups seeking to further democratise our engagement with the pluralistic cultural historic environment. How far back do we let exceptionalism take us? For instance, would we agree that maybe Immadihalli and other such settlements were once the grazing grounds of semi-nomadic sheep-herding tribes?

There is a flipside to the lens of exceptionalism. Much of the ordinary/everyday city or neighbourhood/region necessarily has to (re)define itself as an exceptional monument in order for it to be deemed worthy of restoration, conservation, legal protection or to even be legitimised by legal and administrative mechanisms. Effectively, then Janatha Bazaar in Majestic (Figure 4) is not considered worth saving unless concerned citizens and advocacy groups reframe it as exceptional in some way. Is it not a seemingly 'ordinary' bazaar used by so-called ordinary people worth saving? Why do we need to define it as the '1st Janatha Bazaar' (Bangalore Mirror Bureau, 2018) of the city to rescue it? What if it was the city's 2nd or 3rd Janatha Bazaar; would it not be worth rescuing? What arguments can engaged citizens and advocacy groups put forward to prevent Johnson Market (Figure 5) or Jayanagar Shopping Complex (Bora, 2012; Ravi, 2012) from being demolished if they can only use the criterion of exceptionalism? Would Johnson Market's stakeholders necessarily need to state that it is a historic colonial period structure, the *only* such market of Richmond Town much as Russell Market stakeholders would then need to state that it is the *only* such market of the Cantonment Bazaar (Shivajinagar)?

By marking moments in history rather than processes, the lens of exceptionalism tends to become a trap. For instance, the inevitable museumisation of such locations that follows from their being seen as exceptional or one-of-a-kind and therefore to be kept as-is. Moreover, the hierarchical ranking of such locations as locally or regionally significant inevitably influences resource allocation towards their upkeep and potentially their rescue. As custodians of the city's many layers, now is the time for us to question the type of cultural-place values and meanings we are trying to safeguard - for whom and why in the case of such apparently ordinary structures, sites, and locations? Is it exclusively their past historic, aesthetic and age value? Or is it also their present everyday value as socio-cultural economic hubs for certain sections of society who might find it difficult to enter the rarified atmosphere of malls that some of us tend to take for granted?

Continuing this line of argument, I am not concerned with just markets - although cultural-place binaries stand out more starkly in markets by virtue of the space attracting diverse users - but with the varied aspects of our everyday life that some of us care to designate as cultural heritage exclusively on the basis of exceptional value. Looking on the various *jathres* and *habbas* of the city's many urbanised villages (Figure 6) - whether Sarakki in the south or Ramagondanalli in the east or Diwanarapalya in the north - from the outside, we may consider them attractive because they seem to be picturesque and quaint events that hark back to 'good ole Bangalore'. The complex reality though is that such festivals are very much a part of the present-day fabric of the city. They are not exclusively cultural events that represent a bygone time, appealing though that line of reasoning may seem to some of us. An unforeseen outcome of such romanticisation is the tendency to imagine not just the events but also their participants and locations to represent past ways of life.

Such 'othering' is akin to the much critiqued tendency of the so-called West to romanticise the so-called East as representative of a distant past (Said, 1977). The *jathre* is as much a social gathering for today's inhabitants as it is a cultural gathering that represents seemingly unchanging tradition. The further reality is that such traditions do change, they are dynamic, and they morph. Take Basavanagudi's *Kadlekai Parishe*, for example. Would any of us be able to state that it is being conducted exactly how it was hundred or even fifty years ago? Has it not become more of a socio-cultural spectacle (The New Indian Express, 2018; Warrior, 2019) which somewhat retains aspects of its origin as a religious event that marked the offering of the first harvest to the deity Basavanna?

Marking moments or events in history is one method to engage with culture and heritage but not the only method. A similar divide marks the labels 'tangible' and 'intangible' heritage where the former is seen to be about products and/or locations and the latter about processes and/or people. One could make the counterargument that more individuals and groups now accept that heritage is not just about age value but also social and cultural values. However, the issue I raise is with exceptionalising all forms of heritage and socio-cultural values, whether they are labelled tangible or intangible or historical-architectural or cultural-social. 'Culture is ordinary' (Williams, 1957). Although Raymond Williams, one of the first cultural theorists, made this argument decades ago to highlight the reality that culture was not the exclusive preserve of the English social elite but also relevant to the working classes, the line of reasoning resonates.

Culture is not *just about objectifying* things, people, places of the past but also about *being habituated* to them in today's context. 'What makes these sites [and expressions] especially relevant is the fact that they are always present in people's everyday routine. Unlike other types of heritage, we do not have to go anywhere to see them (e.g., to a museum), for they are already there, shaping our quotidian experience' (Giombini, 2020: 54, discussing everyday heritage, Iyer, 2020). It might be useful at this point to note the potential trap of believing everyday heritage as a conceptual category that marks the 'other' of iconic heritage. In explicating the syncretic religious traditions of so-called ordinary people (in northern Karnataka), cultural critic Rahamat Tarikere^[3] states that such cultural-religious-social expressions defy labels but because they need to be called something he uses the label people's religion to serve as a placeholder (personal communication).

Victorian-era poet, Mathew Arnold^[4] believed in a high culture that was superior to everyday culture, 'the best of what has been thought and said'. I bring up the name as his idealistic vision of culture as something to strive for continues to influence how many of us see culture and its material representations today - as separate from and above everyday life. Here I qualify that though I believe in a high culture and its material representations as heritage, I do not believe in its intrinsic superiority or the supposed inferiority of so-called everyday culture. Each has relevance in a particular context. Bourdieu (1992) argues that the 'distinction between "high" and "low" culture is based on the distinction between classes, between dominant and dominated, rulers and ruled, people who are defined as being "refined" and those defined as being "crude"' (Inglis, 2005: 67). Such sharp distinctions would not only further the binaries I am

arguing against but would also be unfair. The various social actors who engage with culture, heritage and conservation in their own ways, whether through recording, documentation, interpretation or advocacy are well-intended; they proactively seek ways to bridge the gaps between (different forms of) heritage and (different groups of) society. I further qualify that I am not arguing for a bottom-up approach over a top-down one. For that would be another binary trap. On many occasions, I have observed seemingly top-down actors who are close to power centres, advocating for bottom-up approaches despite being constrained by the institutions they serve or represent (Rajangam, 2020b).

One way then to move forward beyond the lens of exceptionalism might be to look at our cities, neighbourhoods and regions as 'networks of inter-related systems' (Lamprakos, 2014: 10 drawing on Hewitt, 1994 and Matero & Teutonico, 2001) and question how we seek to protect such systems '... through legal instruments and institutions that had been developed for [individual] art objects and monuments' by 'drawing on archaeology' (Lamprakos, 2014: 21 drawing on Guido Zucconi). Cultural theorist Arjun Appadurai's work offers a reasonable explanation to the related question raised above on our tendency to fall into the trap of binary comparisons. In attempting to seek a productive relationship between culture and development, he argued that culture also has a future orientation; as the 'capacity to aspire'. In ignoring which, culture as the past has come to be seen in firm opposition to development as the future.

Consequently, things, locations, and people connected with culture are seen as exclusively to do with the past while things, locations, people connected with development, understood as economic progress, are seen exclusively to be part of the future. Therefore, culture (and by extension, heritage) continues to be seen as opposed to development and 'tradition opposed to newness' (Appadurai, 2013: 180). Referring back to the opening lines of the essay, the problematic with popular representation would be seeing Mysuru or Basavanagudi as exclusively representing past iconic culture, therefore to be frozen as-is and Bengaluru or Indiranagar as exclusively representing future (also iconic) development, therefore can be transformed willy-nilly. Besides such short-term consequences, the long-term cost of exclusively exceptionalising cultural-place identities would be that we either continue to negate certain ways of life that remain relevant to some groups and individuals *in the contemporary moment* or put them on a pedestal and treat them as tangible or intangible aspects of a *past that has happened*.

'A dying culture, and ignorant masses, are not what I have known and seen.' (Williams, 1957)

[1] Elsewhere, I have engaged with diverse resident groups and individuals of the Hampi region and of settlements along the upper reaches of the Tamirabarani river basin in southern Tamil Nadu.

[2] by which I mean the settlements that have been engulfed by the city's never-ending sprawl.

[3] See Indian Cultural Forum for some of his works: <https://indianculturalforum.in/author/rahmath-tarikere/>

[4] for more on his work see BRANCH: https://branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=peter-logan-on-culture-matthew-arnolds-culture-and-anarchy-1869

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Bengaluru Pete Karaga, April 2012 (Source: Aliyeh Rizvi)

The Karaga-bearer's visit to the shrine of Sufi saint Hazrat Tawakkal Mastan Saheb Sohrawardy in Cottonpete, on the ninth night of the Karagashaktiyotsava, an annual festival dedicated to the goddess Draupadi and celebrated across the Bengaluru Pete.