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with economic benefits
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Oachira Panthrandu Vilakku
A study of a culturally embedded festival aligned with economic benefits

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate how Oachira Panthrandu Vilakku (twelve-lamp) festival in Oachira helps in providing economic benefits to local residents of the town during the pilgrimage season.

Design/methodology/approach – Stakeholder interviews and focus-group roundtable discussions with multiple stakeholders were conducted.

Findings – Policy changes have been studied and recommended for enhancing the economic value of the culturally embedded Panthrandu Vilakku festival celebrated in Oachira, Kerala, India.

Practical implications – There is huge untapped potential for India's festivals in India. While efforts are made to leverage these for economic gains, the negative impacts also need to be recognized and mitigated.

Originality/value – The study is significant in the context of arresting economic leakage and promoting an ecosystem of decision-making at community level by the local residents.

Keywords Culture, Social, Challenges, Festival, Policies, Economic

Paper type Research paper

The role of cultural tourism

In modern times, cultural tourism has attained a very significant place from the perspective of business and commercialization around the world. Every culture has its own unique features, and so culture holds a lot of attraction and curiosity for the unfamiliar and from other parts of the region, state, nation or any corner of the world. In fact, cultural tourism has become a market where innovative businesses and creative industries may explore numerous business opportunities. Cultural tourism is all about experiencing different cultural backgrounds, feelings, observations, landscapes, visuals, performing arts, lifestyles of the local people, rituals and traditions through regular travelling and recording of personal experiences.

To promote destinations, support from local culture has been observed as an effective marketing strategy. As a result, people are attracted to culturally rich places,

particularly when these cultures hold mythological significance and represent the whole community. Hence, if we closely observe different locations, it is possible to appreciate a holistic approach to developing cultural-centered destinations by improving tangible and intangible cultural assets. This in turn resulting in the creation of local distinctiveness – an attractive alternative to globalized tourist offerings.

The concept and definitions of culture

A number of people have sought to explain culture. According to Tylor (1871), "culture is all about a complex phenomenon that incorporates the belief of the person, his or morals, customs, traditions, rituals, habits while living as a member of a society" (Tylor, 1871).

From a more recent perspective, Hofstede (1997) offers the following definition:

Culture refers to the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving.

The concept of cultural tourism is very complex. Due to this, lengthy debates can be observed among scholars about its definition and conceptualization (Michalkó, 2004; Richards, 2005; Shackleford, 2001) resulting in the emergence of numerous definitions. Richards (2009) states that:

Culture and tourism were two of the major growth industries of the twentieth century, and toward the end of the century the combination of these two sectors into 'cultural tourism' had become one of the most desirable development options for countries and regions around the world.

Stebbins (1996) comes up with a very widely accepted definition. He states that "Cultural tourism is a genre of special interest tourism based on the search for and participation in new and deep cultural experiences, whether aesthetic, intellectual, emotional, or psychological."

Michalkó and Rátz (2011) state that the broad approach cannot be viewed solely from the perspective of product development and product management aspects, as the scope of cultural tourism relates to the new observations, experiences and knowledge the tourist will derive.

The significance of cultural tourism

As culture is blended with tourism, its significance is paramount in terms of social and economic impact. The most important aspect of cultural tourism is that it builds and promotes the identity of the local community. Here, the community secures an opportunity to be represented through the cultural identity of the location. Moreover, it builds the image along with restoring the historical and cultural heritage. When culture receives such superior treatment, it even unfolds by playing the role of an active instrument in promoting peace and harmony among the folks in the community. As a result, tourism can be viewed as part of a larger canvas that is of interest and importance to all community stakeholders.

It is important to mention that culture plays a significant role in uplifting the economic conditions of local businesses. As cultural tourism expands, many small businesses find ways to explore their market or attract even more potential customers.

It also helps to support local production, and this in turn helps local people to generate economic benefits for their families. The dimension of economic gains is strongly connected with the local environment and to the larger economy of the nation as a whole. Hence, the entire process of developing cultural tourism is not only rooted in local systems but also in the traditional ethos of a community. It plays a pivotal role in the wider interest of the nation, especially on the economic front.

The other important aspect of cultural tourism is that it generates local employment opportunities for the community. In today's era of modernization, the exodus of people to urban areas has become problematic. Restoring the faith and confidence of local people by convincing them to stay back without leaving their ancestral homes, villages and local communities has become a challenge for policymakers and government institutions. As a catalyst for change, cultural tourism fascinates and influences the people and enables them to engage with the local community and to lead a dignified and purposeful life. The promotion of cultural tourism also affords possibilities for engaging youth and their participation in the whole process of organizing cultural events and activities. Thus, the participation of youth improves the demographic situation of the region too.

Cultural tourism is attracting much attention due to its interrelationship with the preservation of historical heritage and legacy. It also provides different ways to keep the old traditions and rituals alive and encourages the restoration of historical sites and monuments. Moreover, cultural tourism also facilitates the protection of heritage sites via financial support, as they have the potential to attract a large number of visitors from distant places. Theme parks and burgeoning usage of the Internet all around have served to increase visibility and enhance the scope and presence of cultural tourism by government bodies and local authorities, alike. Thus, cultural tourism not only helps to protect historical monuments and sites, it also supports economic development led by local people, as they cater for large numbers of visitors during the cultural festival and events of historical significance. To realize these goals, sustainable thinking and implementation of policies by all stakeholders involved must be encouraged.

Cultural tourism promotes oneness and harmony. It diminishes the chances of conflict and ill-feeling in a world that is skewed by poverty and conflict on the one hand and materialism on the other. In today's fast-changing world, a growing number of tourists are looking for experiences that enable them to explore cultures that reflect peace of mind and tranquility. A destination that has been developed in a well-planned and structured manner, incorporating cultural elements, has more economic and cultural value than a destination without cultural artifacts. This is how, the new concept of "cultural tourism" is enabling business and economic development to align with culture.

Background and purpose

India as a nation is characterized by extreme diversity as represented by different religions, backgrounds, colour, demographics, castes, etc. Since time immemorial, diversity has been an integral part of a well-knitted, socio-cultural phenomenon rooted in Indian society. With the passage of time, this diverse culture became a strength of the nation. It promoted harmony and unity among one and all. On the other hand, due to global competition (fast-changing global economic landscapes such as economic slowdown in the USA, stalled growth in Europe, slowing gross domestic product [GDP]

growth in China, recession in Japan), the world all over is speculating and looking for solutions to volatile markets, stagnant financial investment, talent and skills shortages, scarcity of resources, high labour costs, absence of cost-effective innovations, etc. Thus, India, as an emerging super power has become more prominent due to the fast progress being observed and other factors like its new, more stable government, higher GDP growth, developing infrastructure, enhanced confidence among foreign investors, reformation in labour laws, emergence of successful technological start-ups and cost-effective innovation.

To expedite this economic progress on different fronts – re-visiting, re-designing, re-structuring – activities and processes must evolve from grassroots level and be initiated by all the stakeholders involved. At the same time, researchers need to be mindful of and willing to explore the key dimensions of growth and development of a nation like India. The so-called dimension of such an intended study is cultural tourism in one of the lesser known places called *Oachira*[1], a small town in Kollam district in Kerala, the southern tip of India. In essence, the study focuses on the famous Parabrahma temple[2] situated in Oachira town, in Kerala. Here researchers found that the location is rooted to its cultural heritage and this yields economic benefits, offering a wide array of opportunities to local people in Oachira town to earn their living and address mundane livelihood challenges without migrating to urban areas.

Historical context, organization and significance of *Panthrandu Vilakku* festival
Historical significance
The *Oachira Panthrandu*[3] *Vilakku festival* has a historical and mythological background in the context of cultural tourism in Kerala, India. Hence, it is important from a research perspective to explore and unravel the hidden beliefs and rituals ascribed to the long tradition and culture of the local people residing in Oachira. An examination of the background of cultural philosophy related to the Oachira *Panthrandu Vilakku* festival shows why it is important to understand the historical background and beliefs of the local residents. Oachira, the town where the Parabrahma temple is situated, was a small portion of land in *Onattukarapradesham*[4]. *Onattukarapradesham* refers to the combination of three land areas believed to be one common place for organizing different cultural festivals and events. These three large areas of land areas were known as Karunagapally, Karthikapally and Mavelikarra. In fact, in spite of hundreds of years, these places are still popularly known by these names only in Kollam district in Kerala.

Traditionally, there are many festivals and events organized in the premises of the Parabrahma temple in Oachira. But there are two particularly important festivals that are celebrated in a big way. They are *OachiraKaali*[5], organized in mid-June, and *Panthrandu Vilakku* festival, organized either in September or October, every year as per the Malayalam calendar. Malayalam is the local language spoken widely in Kerala state. *OachiraKaali* is the foremost festival organized at the Parabrahma temple in Oachira. On the other hand, *Panthrandu Vilakku* festival signifies the last festival of the calendar year of the Parabrahma temple in Oachira. There are various other small cultural events and festivals such as Karthika Vilakku, Shivarathri, etc., occurring between these two major festivals in a span of

10 months in every calendar year. Apart from *OachiraKaali*, the most important festival of the Parabrahma temple in Oachira is *Panthrandu Vilakku* or the twelve-lamp festival. The festival carries a special significance and is the most important celebration event organized every year. It encompasses the auspicious 12 days including two consecutive months of November and December wherein worshippers flock in lakhs and seek the blessings of *Parabrahma* (a formless and omnipotent ultimate divine power spread all over the Universe). The 12 lamps signify 12 important values of extraordinary people who were born under different social conditions and who faced different challenges.

The temple is a unique building, as it does not feature the structures, sanctum sanctorum, idol and priests normally associated with a temple. Worshippers can only find *Aaltharas*[6].

As per the mythological tradition, 12 extraordinary wise men were born some centuries back. These 12 wise men possessed 12 different personality traits, in spite of being born in families of different castes and classes in the community. As these 12 people represented 12 different values, they are celebrated in the form of the *Panthrandu Vilakku* (twelve-lamp) festival starting on the first day of *Vrishchikam*[7] falling in the middle of November every year.

The study has the following objectives:

- to better understand whether the cultural festival enhances economic and cultural well-being;
- to investigate the level of awareness of the cultural festival;
- to interpret the effectiveness of the tourism destination; and
- to identify the potential for investment and commercial activity in the region.

Approach/Methodology of the present study

Stakeholder interviews and focus-group roundtable discussions with multiple stakeholders – consumers (pilgrims), industry and local civic agencies – were conducted to obtain their perspective on economic opportunities within the ambit of cultural tourism. These opportunities arise due to the large number of pilgrims flocking to the holy place of the Parabrahma temple on a daily basis during the two months of the *Panthrandu Vilakku* festival every year. To collect relevant information related to the present study, the researchers set-up multiple personal and telephone interactions with the focus groups, viz., Parabrahma temple administrators and local bodies such as members of the gram panchayat, members of the block panchayat and members of the district panchayat. Additionally, some of the local residents were contacted to arrange meeting appointments. This target group shared valuable information about the cultural festival, the historic and mythological background of the Parabrahma temple, operational and administrative challenges, local issues, government initiatives towards cultural tourism, etc.

Secondary research via a review of relevant literature in the area of cultural tourism was also incorporated with specific reference to its relevance and economic benefit to the local community and the socio-economic-cultural development of a diverse nation like India.

Economic and social impact of the festival

Economic impact

The cultural festival of *Panthrandu Vilakku* is very much embedded in the belief systems of the local people of Oachira. In fact, the cultural festival has enabled a lot of local people to increase their income by putting up stalls and temporary shops during the festival season. Moreover, every business is allied with several other businesses, hence local people find themselves engaged full-time during the cultural festival, as far as their employment is concerned. Besides their normal source of income and employment, local people enjoy a higher standard of living because of the prominence of cultural tourism in local communities, such as in Oachira town.

But it does have another dimension related to economic value, as the Parabrahma temple is a famous destination for worshippers. People come in large numbers from various distant places to glimpse "Parabrahma". It is said that these premises of the temple, spread over 36 acres of land, were used for buying and selling traditional and agricultural-based products by local people over a long period. However, during the past 25-30 years, the buying and selling activities have been redefined. Now local sellers are much fewer in number and they have been replaced by outsiders who travel from distant places like Karnataka, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Delhi, etc. These people sell their commercial goods and offer heavy discounts to local people. Another development is the introduction of cheap Chinese products in the market. These products have captured the attention of local people because of the low prices. For all these reasons, traditionally made Indian products are less widely available.

As the outsiders selling their commercial products are willing to pay a relatively high stall fee to the temple administrators of the Parabrahma temple, local sellers find it extremely difficult to match the prevailing fees. Moreover, local sellers do not have the range of commercial products which are sought by the large crowds of visitors during cultural festivals. Hence, the local sellers have to bear losses every year and the economic benefits meant for local people do not reach the local people. Rather, the commercial opportunities are manipulated, exploited and captured by outside sellers. This is a serious lapse by the temple administrators and local bodies who are supposed to cease such overly exploitation of opportunities by external sellers.

Social impact

People from different religions come here to see around the Parabrahma temple, particularly during the *Panthrandu Vilakku* festival in Oachira. People from diverse backgrounds also come here as visitors to participate in the cultural festival. Every year, during the *Panthrandu Vilakku* festival, hundreds of worshippers come from far and reside in the premises of the temple in *Kudils*[8]. They stay away from family members and materialistic attractions so as to feel detached from mundane aspects of life and to concentrate on the spiritual purpose of their visit. The gathering in the form of a cultural festival enables brotherhood and harmony among the visitors coming from distant places. It facilitates communal harmony and enables everyone to feel a sense of oneness.

Major challenges

Thronging visitors in large numbers affecting genuine worshippers and their overall experience during their visit

Being a cultural destination, Oachira has been visited by large numbers of people every year from different parts of South India. Obviously, when there are lots of people coming to one place, the challenges relating to managing crowds of people intensify and this can be a daunting task. So the foremost challenge observed is crowd control and management – especially related to visiting the temple premises – during the peak festival season of November-December every year. Specifically, the challenges are greater when worshippers experience difficulty in attending the cultural festival of *Panthrandu Vilakku*. In general, those who come to worship are keen to offer prayers, to spend quality time with their families and to enjoy entertainment during their visit. Add to this mix, hundreds of local shopkeepers selling different types of goods and food items to those visiting the temple to enrich the experience. Over the past few years, it has been observed that visitors tend to visit the *Panthrandu Vilakku* festival in Oachira so as to buy different Chinese products that are widely and inexpensively available in the market. However, some argue that this is diluting the local culture. Furthermore, genuine worshippers face a lot of challenges in attending the festival, as it is difficult to offer prayers quietly and in an atmosphere of reflection. It is also difficult to find acceptable accommodation with basic amenities. In summary, those who come specifically to worship comment on the lack of reverence – they hope to experience tranquility and they often travel from distant places for this purpose, but they find that this is undermined by the sheer volume of people. In fact, the temple premises – spread over 36 acres of land – has become so crowded that it is almost impossible to manage temple activities in a systematic and organized manner.

Inadequate planning and development of infrastructure and lack of coordination

Another important challenge relates to the perceived absence of planning and organization of the festivals at the Parabrahma temple in Oachira – especially during the peak season of the festival. As a result, there is a great deal of ambiguity in relation to the roles and responsibilities of those concerned with overseeing the event on behalf of the Parabrahma temple. To understand the temple administration and allied system, it is necessary to understand how activities are planned and executed. The highest levels of authority are vested in the temple administrators, followed by local authorities such as members of the gram panchayat, block panchayat and district panchayat. It was observed that there are many differences of opinion among these local bodies related to the smooth running of the temple. Some of the issues are: inadequate sanitation arrangement for the devotees coming to attend the cultural festival of *Panthrandu Vilakku*, particularly during the 12 significant days. Inadequate transportation is another issue which is worsening every year. The state government is striving to solve the problem by arranging buses run by the Kerala State Road Transport Corporation (K.S.R.T.C.). However, the overall effect of the initiative is not as beneficial as hoped, as the problem is manifest every year in the form of dilapidated and poor public transport vehicles, presenting multiple challenges for the temple administrators. Moreover, there is no "Master Plan" to address the issues and challenges arising. Bad roads and lack of road cleanliness have also been cited as major issues by the authorities. Due to all these paralyzing issues, differences and conflicts, the administrative and operational

activities of the temple are badly affected. Ultimately, it is the worshippers who travel from far and wide who have to deal with unanticipated inconveniences and misappropriation during their visit.

High commercialization and conversion of the temple into a marketplace for buying and selling products – especially low-cost Chinese products
A third major challenge identified is the burgeoning number of vendors in the 36 acres of temple premises. Over the past few years, a significant change has been noticed in the type of sellers coming to participate in the cultural festival of Oachira. Historically, the majority of vendors during the cultural festivals in Oachira were selling agri-products and allied services such as household utensils and agricultural tools, besides serving local food to the visitors. For the past 25-30 years, it has been clearly observed that the composition of vendors has changed and those who now operate stalls mainly come from distant places like Rajasthan, Karnataka, Gujarat and even Delhi. As a result, these external vendors have found the cultural festival of *Panthrandu Vilakku* to be a great business opportunity, with visitors thronging the temple during the festive season of November and December every year. Besides, there is a large-scale market for cheap Chinese products – spanning a wide range of goods. The outcome is the development of a modern marketplace where buyers and sellers meet and generate economic benefits, though this is not the objective of the temple, which is to attract and cater for large numbers of visitors who attend primarily to worship. So, the commercialization of divine places like the Parabrahma temple has become a major obstacle and challenge for the temple administrators and local bodies alike.

Roles played by different stakeholders
Evolving roles
The primary stakeholders of the Parabrahma temple play a significant role in realizing the true potential of the *Panthrandu Vilakku* festival. They have the ability to decide the most appropriate ways to plan and execute policies in the interest of the large numbers of worshippers coming from distant places to offer prayers. The temple administrators are the most important decision-makers, as their role is to plan and act in the interest of the Parabrahma temple in Oachira.

Next, are the local bodies such as gram panchayat, block panchayat and district panchayat. These representatives of government facilitate the coordination of various works together with temple administrators. But the fact of the matter is, not all of them comply with the main objectives related to the temple's desire to serve those who visit to worship and internal politics, disagreements and conflicts regularly occur. Hence to strengthen the current administration, the primary stakeholders must promote harmony and togetherness and seek to make decisions pertaining to festivals and cultural events that cater to the larger section of the community, without allowing exploitation by a few powerful people who are more concerned with self-interest. The state government is also supposed to play a key role, as the system is ultimately guided by the authority of state government. It therefore follows that the state government should be involved in the smooth conduct of cultural festivals and events of the state, so as to promote oneness and brotherhood.

Retaining cultural originality: substantiated by Butler's model and Doxey's irridex "Irritation" index

As noted earlier, local residents of Oachira are keen to be the beneficiaries of economic activity during festival seasons. In fact, the twelve-lamp festival has always enabled them to derive economic value from the agricultural and household products they sell to visitors. This opportunity enabled them to become involved in the festival process. But, as stated by Butler (1980), every destination passes through various stages. Hence, exploration, involvement and development have been a natural process witnessed by local residents in the past – but much less so in the present. As the volume of visitors increased, local sellers were affected. This became more tangible in terms of their diminishing participation in the community decision-making process in recent years. The situation today is that they are largely deprived of the opportunities that they enjoyed in the past.

Thus, at the consolidation stage of Butler's model as shown in Figure 1, obstructions such as irritation by local residents, over-crowding, less involvement by local residents and crime take the centre stage, leading to a topsy-turvy situation and stagnation of the whole activity, and finally, curbing the economic value creation arising from cultural events at the community level.

To rejuvenate the status quo and arrest a declining situation at Oachira, policymakers and temple administrators must ensure more participation by local residents so as to balance participation by outsiders vendors, especially in the context of selling products during festival seasons.

As stated earlier, due to the scale and scope of opportunities available for selling products during the twelve-lamp festival in Oachira, people from far and remote places come to do business. Hence, it becomes quite difficult for local residents to run their business due to various restrictions and challenges imposed on them by local authorities. As a result, local residents become irritated due to the large number of people arriving: both visitors and sellers from far afield. The outsiders do well during
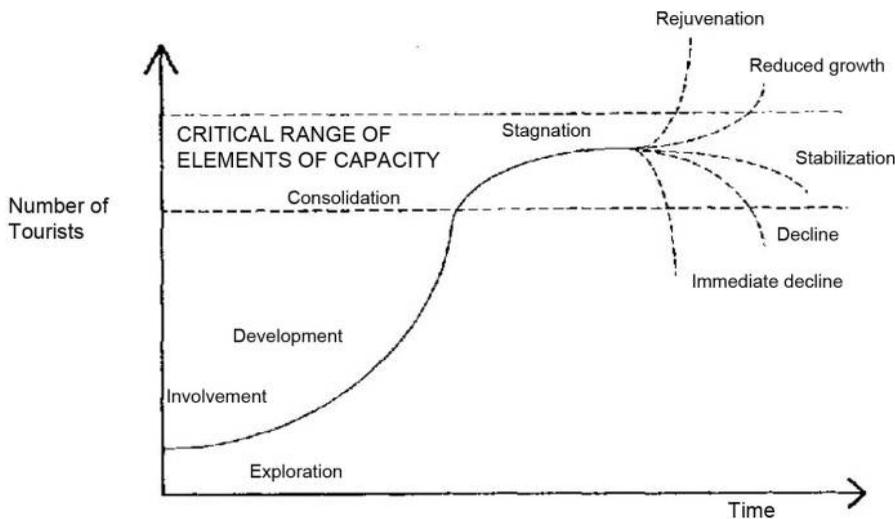
Figure 1.
Butler's destination lifecycle model

the festive season but local businesses have increasingly suffered and often now struggle to maintain their own livelihood.

The scenario is substantiated by Doxey's irridex or "Irritation" index (Doxey, 1976) in Figure 2.

The theory describes four stages. First, *Euphoria*, wherein local residents are curious and even excited about tourists coming to their local community. However, when the number of visitors increases, things become less harmonious, as local residents are taken for granted or even exploited. As the relationship between visitors and local residents becomes more formal, this causes a second stage, *Apathy* or indifference. When the volume of visitors increases – especially towards saturation level – local residents become concerned about price rises, the violation of cultural rules, reduced opportunities to earn a living and the growing prominence of outsiders who are ready to pay higher fees for stalls during festive seasons. All these factors combine to cause local residents to experience a third stage, *Irritation*. Local residents become increasingly irritated by the arrival of tourists, as they see no economic gain from receiving these visitors. This is due to the growing presence of outsiders who gain control of the best business opportunities and poor support from local authorities in terms of safeguarding the interest of local sellers. The scenario worsens when tourists are blamed for all kinds of wrongdoings in the local community. They are blamed for not having culturally sensitive values and so local residents become more hostile towards them. At this stage, the situation becomes complex and difficult to manage, as it is characterized by *Antagonism* or *Hostility*.

To an extent, the scenario with the Oachira twelve-lamp festival parallels Doxey's irridex or "Irritation" index (Doxey, 1976). As of now, the present situation is almost at the A*pathy* stage, wherein local residents are indifferent toward tourists because they do not feel that they have a fair chance of deriving economic benefits arising from the annual influx of visitors.
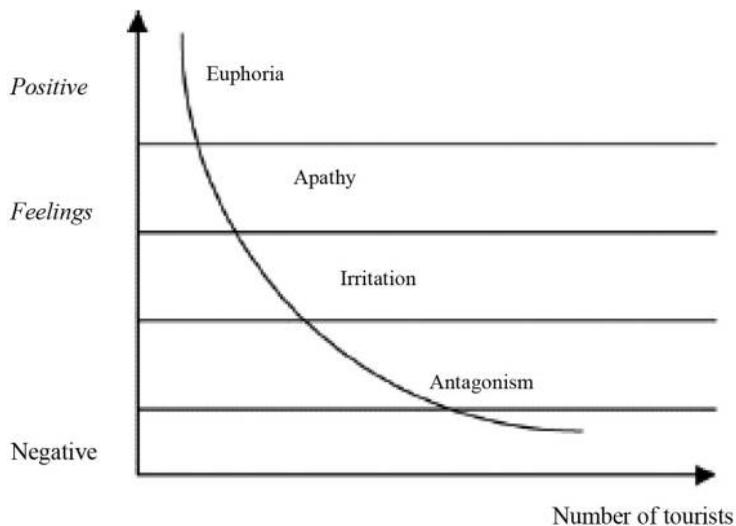

Figure 2.
Doxey's irridex
"irritation" index

Enhancing the economic value through policy-level changes – major recommendations

Safeguarding the interest of local sellers

Policy must be framed in the interest of local residents who are potential sellers. These sellers must be protected by formulating policies safeguarding their interest so as to facilitate equal or greater opportunities for them during festive seasons. They should not have to pay high fees levied by the temple administrators to set-up stalls during festive seasons. This priority must be addressed without external influence exerted by larger, more established vendors coming from far and remote states of the country.

State-level observation, monitoring and responsible control must be adopted

The state government has not clearly defined which department or division is responsible for the overall progress of cultural tourism of Kollam district in Kerala. There seems to be a degree of ambiguity related to the roles and responsibilities of those holding positions in temple administration and management. It is recommended that some re-definition takes place in the relevant department or division responsible for the overall cultural tourism in temples and holy places in Kollam district in Kerala state. Moreover, it is recommended that an inter-ministerial work group is established to coordinate issues pertaining to the advancement of cultural tourism in Kollam district. Furthermore, a new policy document relating to cultural tourism in the national tourism development programmes facilitated by the government is needed. The national tourism development programmes must be well-integrated with local tourism development programmes so as to address the changes that are needed and to ensure that planning is executed in a way that aligns top-level thinking with the needs of local communities.

Coordination between state, regional, local governmental offices, non-governmental organizations and travel and tourism companies

The lack of coordination between various important bodies is due to a work style that might be characterized as "operating in silos". It has been observed many times that state or regional-level departments or divisions function autonomously without seeking or accepting coordination and support. This approach results in inefficiencies and incomplete tasks that then affect the overall objectives related to the bigger vision and mission. Hence, it is strongly recommended to pay attention to effective coordination of these departments by formulating policies and implementation of the same. In this regard, appropriate plans and strategies would be helpful in streamlining the whole process of attaining better results.

Tough policies including law and its implementation

To preserve our cultural heritage such as the Parabrahma temple in Oachira, tough measures need to be taken to keep at bay self-interest groups that operate unethically and immorally by maligning the sanctity of the temple and its traditions. These measures would ensure the protection of monuments of historical significance. It will also diminish the possibilities of misappropriation of temple premises, such as the case of Parabrahma temple, wherein close to 1,000 small and big shopkeepers sell commercial products and arising from this, the temple premises are being utilized as a marketplace to generate huge profits. Hence, tough policies need to be framed and

implemented without biases so as to reflect the needs and interests of worshippers and other visitors coming from distant places.

Creation of corpus funds by the local bodies to address the emerging issues of Parabrahma temple

It was observed that the Parabrahma temple has its own corpus fund derived from regular offerings made by worshippers. The temple administrators are authorized to allocate the budget accordingly to the needs of the temple and its developmental activities. Due to the burgeoning number of visitors, the temple administrators are finding it difficult to manage the limited funds available to them, given the significant and on-going requirements of the temple and its related cultural events. Hence, it is strongly recommended that the corpus fund is expanded at the level of local bodies such as gram panchayat, block panchayat and district panchayat so that these local and administrative bodies can provide timely support to the temple and facilitate better overall management of cultural festivals and events.

Conclusion

Since childhood, Indians have enjoyed the period of cultural festivals: new and colourful clothing, different delicious sweets, small toys, balloons, merry-go-round, etc. But these experiences are rapidly fading away. Today, the entire approach towards planning, organizing, implementation and controlling cultural festivals has taken a different route. Now things are not only being seen from a spiritual perspective, but the commercial dimension too has been given prominence while framing policies. The defensive logic given is the sustainability of temple, attraction of more visitors and related activities in the long-term.

So too we see this aspect of cultural tourism in the *commercialization* of activities during the cultural festival of *Panthrandu Vilakku* in Oachira. To attract large number of visitors, shopkeepers have started displaying commercial products, both big and small, so as to sell them in large numbers. Even this development seems to be helping to draw more visitors year-on-year. To secure a stall space, a shopkeeper must seek permission and pay a relatively high fee to the temple administrators. Every year, the numbers of shops are increasing in the temple premises and as a result, the conditions have worsened due to shortage of space. Thus, the commercialization of events or cultural festivals is being seen as a serious threat to worshippers and other visitors – they are the ones who are experiencing worsening inconvenience and discomfort.

Economic leakage

Economic leakage is another prominent area where immediate attention is needed. Although temple administrators and other local bodies are planning and coordinating cultural festivals like *Panthrandu Vilakku* in Oachira, the problem needs to be examined afresh. The essence of the on-going challenge relates to the growing number of visitors coming to the temple premises specifically to buy goods sold by non-local shopkeepers. This large and growing segment does not visit primarily for the purpose of worshipping – their motivation is entertainment and retailing. Looking at the background of these shopkeepers, most of them come from very far and distant places. Some even come from out of Kerala state, such as shopkeepers from Rajasthan, Gujarat, Karnataka and Delhi, to sell their products. As they are ready to pay high shop fees, small-scale local vendors find it difficult to compete. This reflects a form of economic

leakage, as people from distant places take advantage of the commercial opportunities that these local temples offer and, in so doing, they displace the goods traditionally offered by local communities. To curb this threat, the temple administrators and the local bodies must join hands to frame a new master plan. Its purpose is to ensure the sustainability of local communities in the context of cultural festival retailing.

Participation of the local community in the decision-making process
The issues raised in this article are very important from the perspective of cultural tourism in India. Even for local residents, cultural festivals are a unique opportunity, as people take the time and occasion to meet and interact with others in their community. Cultural festivals like *Panthrandu Vilakku* in Oachira are a great occasion and by retaining the focus on cultural tourism, people representing local cultures need to be supported and encouraged in the face of wider international interests in their culture. Festivals facilitate the promotion of local culture by preserving what is unique and different. Needless to say, it enhances the overall feel for residents too. All in all, the entire concept of cultural tourism is an appropriate way to support the development of local communities and this needs safeguarding for the future so that it is not lost to external influences and pressures driven by commercial gain.

Notes

1. *Oachira*: a small town in Kollam district of Kerala state, India.

2. *Parabrahma*: universal consciousness, i.e. formless and omnipotent ultimate divine power spread all over the Universe.

3. *Panthrandu Vilakku*: twelve-lamp festival.

4. *Onattukarapradesham*: combination of three land areas believed to be one common place for organizing different cultural festivals and events.

5. *OachiraKaali*: celebration in commemoration of battle of Kayamkulam, fought between Marthanda Varma, the King of Kings of Travancore and the King of Kayamkulam, on the plains of Oachira.

6. *Aalthara*: a peepal tree (*Ficus religiosa*) with a base foundation.

7. *Vrishchikam*: Malayalam era.

8. *Kudil*: small huts built to stay near the temple.

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