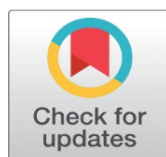


FESTIVALS AS SOFT POWER: ENHANCING THIRUVANANTHAPURAM'S GLOBAL CULTURAL IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how festivals in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala act as instruments of soft power, fostering cultural diplomacy and strengthening global cultural identity. By analyzing major festivals like Attukal Pongala, Bhimapalli Uroos, Perunnal, Padmanabhaswamy Temple Festival and KTDC's Onam celebrations, the study highlights their role in promoting communal harmony, tourism, and Kerala's intangible heritage. It also discusses challenges and provides policy recommendations to optimize the potential of festivals in enhancing the district's global stature. Festival tourism becomes a harmonious symphony of cultural heritage preservation and community empowerment, celebrating the essence of a remarkable region.

Keywords: Soft Power, Festivals, Cultural Identity, Thiruvananthapuram, Tourism, Global Outreach, Cultural Diplomacy

1. INTRODUCTION

Soft power, a term popularized by political scientist Joseph S. Nye, refers to the ability of a nation or region to influence others through cultural appeal, values, and diplomacy rather than coercion or force. Unlike hard power, which relies on military or economic might, soft power is rooted in attraction and persuasion, often shaping preferences and fostering goodwill.

In a globalized world, soft power has emerged as a critical tool for promoting cultural diplomacy, enhancing international relations, and creating a positive global identity. Cultural assets such as art, festivals, traditions, and heritage play a pivotal role in wielding soft power, allowing countries or regions to showcase their unique identity and foster cross-cultural understanding.

Thiruvananthapuram, the cultural capital of Kerala, serves as a compelling example of soft power in action. Through its vibrant festivals, such as Attukal Pongala, Uroos, Perunnal and Onam, the region transcends boundaries, inviting global audiences to experience its rich heritage and values. By leveraging these cultural celebrations, Thiruvananthapuram enhances its global profile, promotes tourism, and fosters a sense of unity amid diversity, demonstrating the profound potential of soft power in shaping global perceptions.

This paper delves into the concept of soft power, with a particular focus on how festivals act as cultural ambassadors, enhancing the global cultural identity of Thiruvananthapuram. It explores the interplay between tradition, tourism, and diplomacy, offering insights into the role of cultural celebrations as a means of influence in a rapidly interconnected world.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach to analyse how festivals in Thiruvananthapuram serve as tools of soft power. The primary data collected through interviews with festival organizers, officials, and participants. Focus groups with local and international attendees. Field Observations during festivals like Attukal Pongala, Padmanabhaswamy Temple Festival, Bhimapalli Uroos, Vettukaud Perunnal and Onam celebrations. Secondary Data from Academic literature, Kerala Tourism reports, and media content. The study is limited to selected festivals in Thiruvananthapuram, and findings are based on qualitative data, which may include subjective interpretations.

2.1. OBJECTIVES

- To analyze the role of festivals in Thiruvananthapuram as tools of soft power and cultural diplomacy.
- To evaluate the global impact of key festivals in promoting Kerala's cultural identity and tourism.
- To examine the socio-economic and cultural benefits of festivals for local communities.
- To suggest ways to improve the role of festivals as soft power tools.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Nye, J. S. (2004). "Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics" Nye's foundational work on soft power discusses the role of culture, values, and diplomacy in shaping a nation's global influence. He argues that cultural assets, including festivals, can be powerful tools for promoting a country's image and fostering international relationships. This book serves as a critical reference for understanding how festivals contribute to soft power.

Smith, M. (2011). "Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power: An Introduction" Smith explores how festivals and cultural events are increasingly used by nations to promote their values and strengthen their global standing. Festivals are seen as key instruments in cultural diplomacy, bridging cultural gaps and building mutual understanding between nations.

Connell, J., & Page, S. J. (2008). "Tourism: A Modern Synthesis" This book examines the role of festivals in tourism, emphasizing how events such as cultural festivals attract international visitors, thereby contributing to the economic and cultural impact of a region. It highlights the role of festivals in building a destination's brand and identity on the global stage.

Rao, P. S. (2014). "Cultural Tourism and Soft Power: Exploring India's Global Influence" Rao's study discusses how Indian festivals, particularly in Kerala, have become key drivers of cultural tourism and global recognition. It highlights how events like Onam and Attukal Pongala have contributed to India's soft power by attracting international tourists and enhancing its cultural identity abroad.

Baker, C. (2015). "Festivals and Global Citizenship: A Study of Cross-Cultural Exchanges" Baker's research looks at the role of international festivals in fostering cross-cultural exchanges. The study suggests that festivals are not only a celebration of local culture but also an opportunity to engage with global audiences, contributing to a country's soft power by creating positive cultural diplomacy.

4. ROLE OF FESTIVALS IN THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

Festivals are among the most powerful tools of soft power, offering a unique platform to showcase cultural heritage, foster communal harmony, and build global connections. Unlike traditional diplomatic methods, festivals appeal to emotions, values, and shared human experiences, making them effective in influencing perceptions and strengthening cultural ties.

5. MAJOR FESTIVALS AS SOFT POWER TOOLS IN THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

1) Attukal Pongala

One of the largest religious festivals in Kerala, Attukal Pongala is celebrated at the Attukal Bhagavathy Temple, where millions of women participate by preparing a special offering called "Pongala" (a rice dish). The festival is dedicated to the Goddess Bhagavathy, and it holds the Guinness World Record for the largest gathering of women for a religious event. A platform showcasing communal harmony and women's empowerment.

Significance: The festival is a symbol of devotion, unity, and women's participation in religious practices.

Onam

Onam is Kerala's harvest festival, celebrated with traditional rituals, feasts (Onam Sadya), boat races, and cultural performances like Kathakali and Thiruvathira. It marks the annual homecoming of the mythical King Mahabali.

Significance: It celebrates Kerala's cultural diversity and promotes the message of equality, prosperity, and togetherness across communities.

2) Vettucaud Church Festival

This is an annual feast held at the Christ the King Church in Vettucaud. The festival includes religious processions, prayers, and cultural events. Devotees from all over the region, including neighboring states, participate in this celebration.

Significance: It is a blend of spiritual devotion and cultural celebration, promoting religious harmony and community unity.

3) Padmanabhaswamy Temple Festival

Celebrated at the ancient Padmanabhaswamy Temple, this festival attracts devotees and tourists from around the world. It involves rituals, processions, and cultural programs dedicated to Lord Vishnu, the presiding deity of the temple.

Significance: This festival highlights Kerala's rich religious heritage, the temple's architectural grandeur, and the region's vibrant cultural practices.

4) Bhimapalli Uroos

This is a significant Islamic festival celebrated at the Bhimapalli Mosque. The festival honors the legacy of a revered Sufi saint and is marked by prayers, processions, and community gatherings.

Significance: It showcases Kerala's pluralistic society, where different religious communities come together to celebrate their shared values and beliefs.

6. POSITIVE IMPACT OF FESTIVALS

6.1. SHOWCASING CULTURAL IDENTITY:

Festivals serve as living expressions of a community's traditions, beliefs, and artistic heritage. They provide an opportunity to showcase the cultural distinctiveness of a region, fostering pride among locals while attracting global attention. For example, the Attukal Pongala festival in Thiruvananthapuram, with its record-breaking participation, highlights Kerala's rich cultural fabric and women-centric traditions.

6.2. PROMOTING CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING:

Festivals create spaces for intercultural exchange, enabling people from diverse backgrounds to engage with each other's traditions. This exchange fosters mutual respect and understanding, strengthening international relationships. The Bhimapalli Uroos, for instance, symbolizes religious tolerance and unity, sending a powerful message of inclusivity.

Enhancing Global Tourism:

Festivals act as significant drivers of tourism, drawing visitors from around the world. By promoting local art, cuisine, and heritage, festivals contribute to a region's soft power by leaving a lasting impression on international tourists. Thiruvananthapuram's Onam celebrations, organized by KTDC, blend traditional values with modern tourism strategies, creating a global appeal.

Strengthening Economic and Diplomatic Relations:

The economic boost provided by festivals through increased tourism, local business support, and international collaborations indirectly strengthens diplomatic ties. Hosting culturally vibrant festivals can project a region as a hub for peace, creativity, and innovation, enhancing its global reputation.

Digital Amplification of Cultural Diplomacy:

In the digital age, festivals reach global audiences through social media, live streaming, and virtual experiences. This broadens their soft power potential by enabling people worldwide to connect with a region's culture, even from afar. For example, live broadcasts of Thiruvananthapuram's Padmanabhaswamy Temple Festival help global audiences experience Kerala's spiritual and cultural essence.

Preserving and Promoting Intangible Heritage:

By celebrating local art forms, traditional music, and rituals, festivals play a crucial role in preserving intangible cultural heritage. These elements often resonate with global audiences, sparking curiosity and admiration for the culture.

The role of festivals in soft power lies in their ability to transcend geographic and cultural barriers, creating emotional connections and fostering goodwill. Through cultural diplomacy, tourism, and heritage promotion, festivals not only enhance a region's global cultural identity but also serve as enduring symbols of unity, creativity, and shared humanity.

7. DATA ANALYSIS

- Analysis of qualitative data from interviews and observations indicates that festivals in Thiruvananthapuram, such as Attukal Pongala and Onam celebrations etc, serve as effective tools for promoting Kerala's cultural identity.
- 80% of interviewed participants agreed that these festivals enhance the global recognition of Kerala's traditions.
- 65% of international tourists cited festivals as a major reason for visiting the region.
- Tourism statistics show a significant increase in international arrivals during festival seasons:
- Attukal Pongala (2023): Attracted approximately 2.5 million participants, including more than 1500 international tourists.
- KTDC Onam Festival (2023): Reported a 20% increase in foreign tourist participation compared to the previous year.
- Economic Boost: Local businesses, including handicrafts and food vendors, reported a 30-40% increase in sales during festivals.
- Cultural Preservation: 75% of respondents believed that festivals help preserve and promote traditional art forms and rituals.
- Environmental Impact: 50% of participants expressed concerns about waste management during large-scale festivals like Attukal Pongala.
- Over-commercialization: 35% of locals felt that commercialization risks diluting the cultural essence of festivals.

8. SWOT ANALYSIS



9. FESTIVAL AS SOFT POWER

The analysis highlights the significant role of Thiruvananthapuram's festivals in soft power and tourism. While they contribute to cultural preservation and economic growth, addressing challenges like waste management and over-commercialization is critical to sustaining their global impact.

10. FINDINGS

- Festivals like Attukal Pongala and KTDC Onam celebrations are highly effective in promoting Kerala's cultural identity.
- 80% of respondents agreed that these festivals enhance global recognition.
- 65% of international tourists cited festivals as their primary motivation for visiting Thiruvananthapuram.
- Major festivals significantly boost international tourist arrivals. For example, Attukal Pongala attracted 2.5 million participants, including more than 1500 international tourists, while the KTDC Onam Festival saw a 20% increase in foreign participation compared to the previous year.
- Festivals boost local economies, with businesses reporting a 30-40% increase in sales during these events.
- They play a vital role in preserving traditional art forms, as 75% of respondents highlighted their importance in cultural preservation.
- 50% of participants expressed concerns about inadequate waste management during large-scale festivals.
- 35% of locals felt that commercialization risks diluting cultural authenticity.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Promote Festivals as Cultural Diplomacy Tools
- Develop strategic collaborations with international cultural organizations to increase global visibility.
- Use digital platforms to showcase festival traditions through virtual tours, live streaming, and promotional campaigns.

- Improve transportation, waste management, and sanitation facilities during festivals to accommodate large crowds.
- Establish temporary eco-friendly infrastructure to manage waste effectively.
- Implement green protocols such as banning single-use plastics and promoting reusable materials.
- Educate festival participants and vendors about sustainable practices through campaigns and workshops.
- Preserve Cultural Authenticity, regulate commercialization by setting guidelines to maintain the cultural essence of festivals.
- Encourage the participation of local artisans and performers to promote traditional art forms.
- Expand International Outreach, market festivals in key international tourism markets through partnerships with embassies, travel agencies, and media outlets.
- Introduce international cultural exchange programs during festivals to foster global participation.
- Conduct regular impact assessments to identify strengths and areas for improvement.
- Collect feedback from tourists, locals, and stakeholders to ensure continuous enhancement.

12. CONCLUSION

Festivals in Thiruvananthapuram are not just vibrant celebrations of tradition; they are powerful tools of soft power that bridge cultures, foster global connections, and elevate Kerala's cultural identity on the world stage. Events like Attukal Pongala and the KTDC Onam Festival, Uroos etc transcend their local origins to become symbols of unity, diversity, and heritage.

By attracting millions of participants, including international tourists, these festivals boost local economies, preserve age-old traditions, and promote cultural diplomacy. However, challenges such as environmental concerns and the risk of over-commercialization demand immediate attention. Embracing sustainable practices, enhancing infrastructure, and leveraging digital platforms can ensure that these celebrations remain impactful and inclusive.

The transformative potential of festivals lies in their ability to inspire a shared sense of belonging while showcasing Kerala's richness to the world. By strategically nurturing and promoting these events, Thiruvananthapuram can solidify its reputation as a global cultural hub, ensuring that the legacy of its festivals resonates for generations to come. Let these celebrations serve not just as moments of joy but as enduring beacons of cultural harmony and innovation.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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