Introduction

Technology will be the heart of the cultural experience from here on out. As we enter an era of digitally-raised youth, Indian arts must adapt to meet the needs of the audience in order to maintain its soft power.

Center for Soft Power's panel discussion on Technology & Culture (August 28, 2020, 6:30-8:30 pm IST) drew on the deep knowledge each speaker had in their respective fields--ranging from sound and music, to fine arts as a medium of expression, to graphics and animation as a medium to build awareness about the richness of Indic traditions. Looking within, they unanimously demonstrated the soft power of Indic arts and culture, and examined how technology could be harnessed to benefit Indian arts and handicrafts. They voiced the need for more work in the intersections of technology & culture in order to evolve/ grow India's soft power.

Special Guest: Shri. Gitesh Sharma, Indian High Commissioner to Australia
Chair: Shri. Mohandas Pai, Chairman, Manipal Global Education (India) – Fusing Culture with Technology

Panelists:

- Shri. Sharad Devarajan, Co-founder, Graphic India (USA) - Indian Epics and Superheroes in the Digital Forms
- Mr. Peter Nagy, Founder Nature Morte (USA) – Creative Art through Tech-Innovation
- Shri. Sanjay Anandaram, co-founder NICE (India) – Soft Power in the Age Technology
- Shri. Resul Pookutty, Sound Engineer (India) – India's advances in Sound Designing
- Shri. Tushar Jiwarajka, Founder and Director, Volte Art Projects (India) – Modern Art's Interface with Tradition

What does technology have to do with the Arts?

To the untrained, technology and culture might seem as two entities. But in the present day, arts and culture are enmeshed with technology. The panelists explained why technology would never replace the arts, and how it could only enhance Indian culture and tradition.

Sound

Technology can assist musicians in many ways. First, it can create a platform for collaboration for musicians around the world. This itself will build India's soft power. Another aspect is to promote Indian music and musicians globally . Further, music and sound can be enhanced through the use of technologies developed for sound engineering purposes. This allows it to reach larger audiences. Technology can be a tool to write sounds, songs, compositions, and provide a service to musicians.

While 99.99% of music can be recreated using Artificial Intelligence tools, it can never replace Indian music. Indian civilization believes in sound as energy and a path to emancipation. It is about musicians and the audience. Music is about the energy that the musician brings to the stage, their ability to create micro-ornamentations from deep within, hitting the chakras (where Sapta Swaras reside) of their own soul as well as the audience. The rendering of these brings the musician and the audience closer to God.

Storytelling

Indian stories of Mahabharat, Ramayan, and other mythologies have long been centre stage in India, and have associated with numerous art forms.

Decades ago, Amar Chitra Katha was the "new" form for youth to absorb such traditional stories. Then Western Superheroes appeared in India and youth had choices; western representations of Spiderman and the Hulk were animated and engaging.

Enter Japan. Japanese concepts of superheroes such as Pokemon quickly traversed the seas, becoming popular around the world.

Krishna, Arjun, and the Bhagavad Gita are beautiful stories brought to the world in a very serious, traditional mode. Indian epics have to compete with and learn from globalization. For this, we need to bring India to the next level in animation, and it needs to be done in a way that resonates with the true Indic cultures.

Western superheroes themes include technology gone wrong and fear of the “other”. The Japanese utilize superheroes to discuss Post-Industrial and Apocalyptic issues. Greek epics are available for consumption in animation for all ages.

India can build soft power through this fun, interactive, contemporary art. Animation should focus on the interaction of Science and Spirituality, showcasing Indic systems such as Yoga, Chakras, and stories of Krishna, Shiva, and Ganesha in a way that reaches a wide audience with grandeur.

Fine Arts

As opposed to other aspects of culture, the global Fine Arts community has moved away from technology in the last 15 years. An excess of technology in our lives creates craving for tactile experiences. Artists, curators, and collectors are looking for physical experiences.

Technology can still provide many benefits for this community. First, it helps Indian artists learn about art around the world and vice versa. It is an exceptional marketing tool. Photos and videos work well on digital spaces. Technology creates interest, making art become famous by going viral. People might say, “mechanical reproduction will destroy the aura of the original”. No! Even now, people are lining up to view the Mona Lisa! There are millions of visitors to the Taj Mahal every year. Actually, it makes art more valuable when it’s reproduced.

However, human beings still need to experience the works of art in real life to have an emotional and mental connect. Sculptures, installations, and paintings require us to interact in a contact-based method. Today, handicrafts are also part of the art world. It’s necessitates tactile experience.

India has phenomenal craft artists whose traditions need revival by collaborating with people around the world. Handmade items, whether weavings, ceramics, carved stone, or wood, are all part of the Indian tradition of customization, which resonates deeply with individuals.

Indian Art for the World

Hitherto, the cultural arts were primarily for the elite. Technology allows music and art to be accessed by all socio-economic groups. Indic philosophy has a huge impact on art: mindfulness, maya, advaita, yoga all showcased in the Fine Arts. Concepts from Hinduism, Buddhism, including sound incorporation in art installations, and some of it is Indic music.It’s been packaged and marketed in the West. However, there’s not been a lot of support for such artists in India, which lacks the spaces for proper showings.

Technology can enhance art and create multisensory immersive environments. Technology can push boundaries. But you really have to wow someone. Because we are bombarded with media.

The Future

15 years ago, India was not in this space to talk about this. Now, India is in a different mental space: more confident demographic. India is ready now, and we must create an environment for our Culture!

1. The ecosystem is the most important aspect: We must recognize that failures are part of learning which allow the ecosystem to grow. It helps to build together, rise together.
2. Technology is required: India must invest in technology and AI. Technology will create democratization and take Indian culture to the masses around the world.
3. Infrastructures: Don’t reinvent the wheel: Revive the spaces! We need to create and manage spaces for culture.
4. Develop the population: India is great at individual super stars, but we need to create more, especially with our population. We need mass production of people at the cutting edge. We need a Jugalbandhi. It’s not AI or nothing. It’s Tech + Tradition