



# "Soft Power from the East Coast : A Thoughtful Glance Towards Odisha's Cultural Engagement Worldwide and the Role of Global Media Platforms for its Widespread Recognition"

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## Article info

Received: 6 September 2025

Accepted: 23 November 2025

Published: 30 December 2025

## Keywords:

East Coast, Odisha's Cultural, Global Media, policymakers.

## How to cite this article:

Priyanka Mohapatra, "Soft Power from the East Coast: A Thoughtful Glance Towards Odisha's Cultural Engagement Worldwide and the Role of Global Media Platforms for its Widespread Recognition", *International Journal of Politics and Media*, vol. 4, Issue. 2, pp. 41-49, Dec. 2025. Retrieved from <https://ijmonline.com/index.php/ojs/article/view/87>

## Abstract

Odisha, a state located on India's Eastern Coast, being viewed as 'India's Best Kept Secret' has garnered global attention in recent years due to its unique cultural dynamism. Often overshadowed by the "East Coast" narratives of other nations, Odisha's rich cultural heritage encompasses a diverse range of traditions including the ancient traditions of Odissi dance, the architectural marvels of its temples, the Jagannath culture, the traditional popular indigenous cuisine, the rich Sambalpuri handloom textile arts and handicrafts and Sambalpuri music beats. These traditional cultural assets collectively present a unique and potent form of cultural diplomacy. This study aims to explore how these traditional cultural assets, combined with a strategic leveraging of global media platforms, are positioning Odisha as a significant contributor to India's overall soft power. Key issues to be addressed include the challenges of translating a localised, regional culture into a universally appealing global narrative, the impact of digitalization on traditional art forms, and the potential for both cultural appreciation and appropriation in a globalised media landscape. The research will employ a mixed methods approach, utilising qualitative content analysis of media coverage and social media campaigns including case studies of cultural events, diaspora-led initiatives across other online social media platforms that are accessible to the general public. Additionally, a quantitative analysis of online engagement metrics will be conducted to gauge global recognition and perception. The expected outcome is to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the dynamics of cultural soft power from a sub national perspective. The research aims to offer recommendations for policymakers, cultural practitioners and media professionals to enhance Odisha's cultural outreach and recognition globally. The findings of this study will contribute to the growing body of research on cultural diplomacy, soft power and digital cultural promotion, providing valuable insights for other regions seeking to leverage their cultural assets for global engagement.

## 1. Introduction

The contemporary architecture of international relations has witnessed a significant departure from the traditional dominance of military and economic coercion, shifting instead toward an emphasis on attraction, persuasion, and the cultivation of legitimate influence. This transition is encapsulated in the concept of soft power, first articulated by Joseph Nye in the late 20th century as the capacity of a nation to achieve its objectives through the inherent appeal of its culture, political values, and diplomatic policies. While soft power was originally framed as a national endeavor, the forces of globalization and the decentralization of state

functions have elevated sub-national entities regions, states, and cities as vital actors in the international arena. In the Indian context, the state of Odisha presents a paradigmatic case of sub-national cultural diplomacy, leveraging a diverse array of traditional assets and modern digital platforms to project a unique regional identity that both supplements and reinforces India's broader soft power objectives.

The historical marginalization of regional narratives in favor of a homogenized "Indian culture" has increasingly given way to a recognition of the "local authenticity" found within individual states. Odisha, situated on India's eastern coast and long marketed as "India's Best Kept Secret," has



begun to strategically translate its localized traditions ranging from the ancient Odissi dance and architectural precision of the Kalinga style to the inclusive Jagannath consciousness into a universally appealing global narrative. This transformation occurs within a broader diplomatic framework in India characterized by the five pillars of Samman (dignity), Samvaad (dialogue), Samriddhi (shared prosperity), Suraksha (security), and Sanskriti (culture). As this analysis will demonstrate, Odisha's sub-national engagement not only fosters regional development through tourism and investment but also provides the civilizational depth required for India to "punch above its weight" in a multi-polar global order.

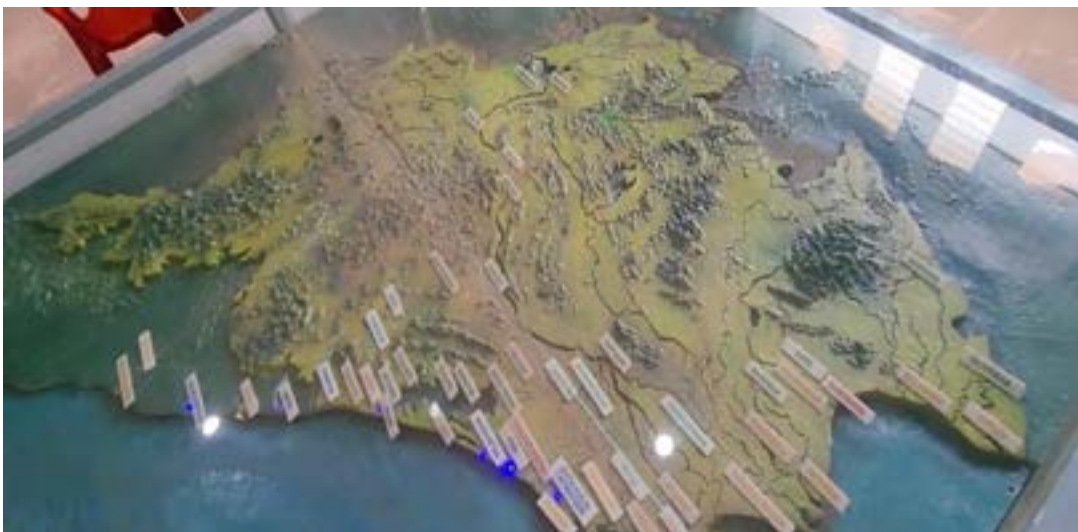
### **Theoretical Foundations: Paradiplomacy and the Decentralization of Influence**

To comprehend the global trajectory of Odisha's cultural outreach, it is essential to ground the analysis in the theoretical evolution of paradiplomacy. Various referred to as constituent diplomacy, sub-national diplomacy, or state diplomacy, paradiplomacy pertains to the foreign policy capacity of sub state entities independent of their metropolitan state. The concept gained prominence in the 1990s as the world economy became increasingly integrated, forcing sub-national units to seek international partnerships to promote regional interests and prerogatives. In India,

the adoption of economic liberalization, privatization, and globalization (LPG) reforms in 1991 served as the primary catalyst for this shift, empowering states to bypass the "License Raj" and engage directly with global markets.

The participation of Indian states in international relations facilitates a climate of "cooperative and competitive federalism," where regions compete for foreign direct investment (FDI) while simultaneously cooperating with the central government to align with national priorities. While early paradiplomatic efforts were primarily economic, characterized by high-profile investment summits like "Vibrant Gujarat," there has been a notable shift toward cultural paradiplomacy. This form of diplomacy recognizes that cultural appeal is often a prerequisite for economic engagement, as a positive state image influences international audiences in their decisions regarding trade, tourism, and cooperation.

Odisha's strategic positioning within this framework is particularly sophisticated. Unlike states like West Bengal or Tamil Nadu, whose paradiplomacy is often driven by cross-border proximity to Bangladesh or Sri Lanka, Odisha has leveraged its historical maritime ties and civilizational links to Southeast Asia to carve out a distinct diplomatic niche. This "maritime paradiplomacy" aligns with India's "Act East" policy, providing a tangible historical and cultural basis for deepening ties with the ASEAN region.



( Image Source : Image of Odisha Map Captured in Maritime Museum in Cuttack , Odisha )

### **The Digital Turn: Cultural Diplomacy in the Information Age**

The digital revolution has fundamentally altered the mechanisms through which soft power is projected and consumed. Digital diplomacy defined as the use of digital technologies, particularly social media, to achieve foreign policy goals has become an indispensable component of 21st-century statecraft. For sub-national actors like Odisha, digital platforms provide a "giant stage" for cultural exchange, allowing regional traditions to reach global audiences without the mediation of traditional state diplomatic channels. This shift marks a transition

from a "one-way propagation" of ideas to a "relational and networked" approach, where engagement and transparency are the primary currencies of influence.

However, the digitalization of diplomacy also introduces complexities regarding credibility and perception. In the Information Age, Nye argues that "the best propaganda is not propaganda," and that "credibility is the scarcest resource". When sub-national governments engage in digital cultural promotion, they must navigate the tension between "standing out" (branding) and "reaching out" (genuine engagement). Successful digital engagement requires moving beyond "vanity metrics" such as raw follower counts



or likes toward an analysis of the quality of conversations and the depth of emotional connection established with the target audience.

Odisha's digital strategy focuses on creating immersive cultural experiences through platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, often at a lower cost than traditional marketing. The state utilizes "influencer marketing" and viral travelogues to construct a narrative that resonates with the tastes and preferences of modern digital consumers. This strategic leveraging of media is essential for translating localized, regional cultures into a universally appealing global story, while simultaneously addressing the challenges of cultural appropriation and the digital divide.

### **Odisha's Cultural Assets as Soft Power: A Comprehensive Analysis**

#### ***Odissi Dance: Deterritorialization and Global Pedagogical Hubs***

Odissi dance serves as Odisha's premier cultural ambassador, embodying the transition of traditional temple rituals into a globalized artistic performance. As one of the eight classical dance forms of India, its visual language defined by the signature Tribhanga (three-bend) and Chauka (square) poses creates a distinctive aesthetic appeal that transcends linguistic and national boundaries. The analytical significance of Odissi lies in its "deterritorialization," where the practice and celebration of the art form are no longer confined to the geographical borders of Odisha.

The proliferation of Odissi schools across Japan, the United States, and Western Europe indicates the successful "pedagogical diplomacy" of the state. Institutions like Nriyagram, established near Bengaluru as a modern-day Gurukul, provide intensive training that attracts international students, effectively turning them into unofficial cultural ambassadors. Master choreographers and performers such as Saswat Joshi and Guru Gangadhar Pradhan have leveraged international tours and social media platforms specifically live streaming on Facebook and YouTube to maintain global connections with critics and practitioners.

The fact that dancers from diverse backgrounds, such as Polish dancer Zofia Lichota, achieve mastery in Odissi represents the ultimate form of soft power attraction: the "acculturation" of a foreign public. When international performers present Odissi to their home audiences, they are not merely performing a dance; they are communicating the spiritual and mythological essence of Odia civilization. This "relatable universalism" allows the tradition to evolve while maintaining its core authenticity, provided that the engagement is rooted in respect rather than appropriation.

Furthermore, massive-scale events such as the Guinness World Record performance involving 555 dancers serve a dual purpose. Beyond the aesthetic spectacle, such events act as a "signal of capacity" to the international community, demonstrating Odisha's ability to organize complex, large-scale cultural gatherings that attract significant media attention and bolster national prestige.

### **Architectural Heritage and Intellectual Soft Power: The Konark Paradigm**

Odisha's temple architecture, particularly the Kalinga style, represents a convergence of artistic brilliance and engineering precision that functions as a source of "intellectual soft power". The 13th-century Sun Temple at Konark, a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1984, is the most prominent example of this legacy. Designed as a monumental chariot for the Sun God Surya, the temple's intricate stone carvings and astronomical accuracy continue to draw international visitors and scholarly attention.

Konark's appeal extends beyond religion into the realms of science and engineering. The spokes of the Konark Wheel, which act as sundials indicating the exact time of day based on light and shadow reflections, provide a narrative of historical scientific excellence that enhances India's image as a civilizational power in art and science. This "science-spirituality nexus" is a powerful diplomatic tool, as it positions Odisha as a site of historical innovation.<sup>1</sup> The temple's global visibility was significantly heightened when the Konark Wheel was used as a backdrop for the G20 Summit in 2023, signaling its status as a core symbol of Indian identity to world leaders.

The broader "Temple Circuit," including the Lingaraj Temple in Bhubaneswar and the Jagannath Temple in Puri, further contributes to this soft power matrix. The preservation of these sites is not only a matter of domestic pride but also a strategic diplomatic exercise. The restoration of ancient temples, both within India and across Southeast Asia, has emerged as a key instrument of cultural diplomacy, reinforcing shared cultural heritage and fostering stable international relationships. The analytical transformation of these sites from "tourist destinations" to "diplomatic assets" occurs when they are integrated into international narratives of peace and scientific history. For instance, promoting the Dhauli Shanti Stupa as a monument to peace following the Kalinga War provides a normative framework for "Suraksha" (security) and dialogue, particularly in engagement with the Buddhist world.

Architectural Site	Strategic Significance	Soft Power Attribute
Konark Sun Temple	UNESCO World Heritage; G20 Symbolism	Intellectual and Scientific Legitimacy.
Jagannath Temple	Central node of Nagara/Kalinga architecture	Spiritual Grandeur and Tradition.
Lingaraj Temple	Historic preservation and scholarly interest	Historical Continuity.
Dhuli Stupa	Peace monument associated with the Kalinga War	Normative Power (Peace Diplomacy).

### Jagannath Consciousness: Analyzing Inclusivity as Normative Power

The cult of Lord Jagannath in Puri represents one of Odisha's most unique and potent cultural gifts, functioning as a form of "normative soft power" through its inherent inclusivity. Jagannathism, or Jagannath Consciousness, is characterized by its ability to blend diverse belief systems integrating Aryan, Dravidian, and Adivasi traditions alongside elements of Vaishnavism, Buddhism, and Jainism. This ideology identifies Lord Jagannath as "Ganadevta" (God of the common people) and the cult as "Ganadharmā" (religion of the common people), emphasizing equality, harmony, and secular integration.

In the realm of cultural diplomacy, this openness is a significant asset. Unlike many regional traditions that require extensive translation for global audiences, Jagannath culture's focus on peace and blending makes it universally accessible. The Rath Yatra festival serves as the primary vehicle for this dissemination, attracting millions of international pilgrims and cultural fans annually. The global spread of Rath Yatra facilitated by organizations like ISKCON in cities such as London, New York, and Sydney demonstrates how diaspora and non-state actors can take a localized ritual and transform it into a global phenomenon.

Digitalization has further amplified this reach. Live-streaming of Rath Yatra ceremonies on social media platforms reaches millions of viewers worldwide, creating a sense of shared participation that transcends physical borders. Furthermore, the inclusion of Rath Yatra in India's National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2025 is a strategic step toward global UNESCO recognition, which would significantly enhance the international fame of Odia culture.

The "spiritual soft power" of Jagannath Consciousness also manifests in temple cuisine (Maha Prasada), which emphasizes purity, equality, and the use of local ingredients. This culinary dimension adds a layer of "gastrodiplomacy"

that appeals to global cravings for authentic, soulful food with a spiritual context. By framing Jagannath culture as a model of religious tolerance and peace, Odisha contributes to India's image as a pluralistic and harmonious society in a world often marked by division.

### Material Culture: Handlooms and Sustainable Fashion in Global Markets

The material culture of Odisha, specifically its Sambalpuri handlooms and handicrafts, plays a vital role in economic paradiplomacy and the sustainable fashion movement. Sambalpuri textiles, characterized by the "Bandha" tie-dye (Ikat) technique, represent a fusion of ancient artistic traditions with modern market demands. The state received Geographical Indication (GI) status for Sambalpuri sarees in 2010, a crucial step in protecting authentic craftsmanship and enhancing its global appeal.

Sambalpuri handlooms have been exported globally since the 1980s, appearing in international fashion runways and being embraced by sustainable fashion practitioners for their eco-friendly, handmade value. This engagement is not merely commercial; it is a form of cultural representation that symbolizes national pride during international summits. For sub-national actors, protecting the intellectual property of traditional weavers through GI tags and training provided by institutions like IIM Sambalpur is essential for remaining competitive in a globalized market.

Additionally, Cuttack's silver filigree (Tarakasi), often showcased during Durga Puja, adds another layer to Odisha's "Silver City" brand. The use of pure silver to decorate massive festival pandals (Chandi Medha) demonstrates a unique convergence of craftsmanship and spiritual devotion that attracts thousands of international visitors. These material assets function as "tangible markers" of soft power, providing a physical link between Odisha's heritage and the global consumer.





( Image captured during the Durga Puja )



**Gastrodiplomacy: Tacit Knowledge and Culinary Storytelling**

Gastrodiplomacy the use of cuisine as a tool for cultural engagement and nation-branding has emerged as a significant component of Odisha’s global outreach. Odia food, defined by its "sattvic" purity, subtle flavors, and use of local ingredients, provides a narrative of health and spiritual well-being that resonates with global wellness trends. Dishes like Pakhala Bhata (fermented rice), once a localized staple, are now appearing on international menus and food-travel

vlogs, praised for their "soulful and subtle" character by celebrity chefs like Kunal Kapur and Vikas Khanna.

The analytical significance of gastrodiplomacy lies in the transfer of "tacit knowledge" the cultural values and wisdom embedded in cooking practices that are difficult to replicate through anonymous data. The focus on "forgotten delicacies" like Ruguda Chhati (wild mushrooms picked by tribal women) highlights Odisha as a convergence point for Adivasi, Dravidian, and Aryan cultures, offering an authentic experience that modern travelers increasingly seek.

Culinary Soft Power Asset	Remarks
Pakhala Bhata	Promoted as healthy "comfort food" through digital campaigns
Temple Cuisine (Abadha)	Linking culinary arts to Jagannath spirituality.
MasterChef Recognition	Highlighting street foods like Dahi Bara Aloo Dum as "genius" dishes.
Tribal Delicacies	Showcasing indigenous wisdom and biodiversity through food.

The promotion of Odia cuisine through international food festivals and record-breaking events such as Abinas Nayak’s presentation of 190 variations of pakhala . This form of diplomacy fosters mutual understanding by sharing the "soul" of the region through its flavors.

**Maritime Legacies and "Act East" Strategic Continuity**

Odisha’s ancient maritime history provides the necessary "historical legitimacy" for modern diplomatic and economic engagement, particularly with Southeast Asian nations. The ancient Kalinga empire was a dominant

maritime power from as early as the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE, controlling trade routes across the Bay of Bengal historically known as the "Kalinga Sea". The Sadhabas (mariner-merchants) acted as cultural ambassadors, spreading Indian civilization, language, and Hindu-Buddhist traditions to places like Java, Bali, Sumatra, and Borneo.

This maritime legacy is reenacted today through festivals like Baliyatra ("Voyage to Bali") and the ritual of Boita Bandana (Boat Worship). Baliyatra, recognized as one of Asia's largest open trade fairs, is held in Cuttack to commemorate the ancient voyages to the Indonesian archipelago. Recently, the participation of eight Southeast Asian countries in these celebrations highlights the enduring

relevance of these historical ties and provides a platform for modern "Samridhi" (shared prosperity).

The analytical significance of these maritime connections lies in their ability to foster regional integration and tourism. The 1992 expedition led by Chief Minister Biju Patnaik, where the INS V-Samudra sailed from Odisha to Bali along ancient trade routes, served as a "modern-day makeover" for these ties, demonstrating the state's proactive commitment to maritime diplomacy. Strategically, the promotion of the "Diamond Triangle" Buddhist Circuit (Ratnagiri, Lalitgiri, and Udayagiri) links Odisha to the broader Buddhist world, reinforcing its role as a hub for peace and "Samvaad".



( Image captured at Maritime Museum showcasing the craft art of the Kartika Purnima Celebration )



( Image Captured in the Maritime Museum represents the craft highlighting about the rituals and practices of Khudurukuni puja festival being observed by women related to storytelling and folklore culture associated with the maritime domain in this area )



( Image captured at maritime museum )

Maritime Connectivity Ritual	Southeast Asian Parallel
<b>Boita Bandana (Odisha)</b>	Masakapan Ke Tukad (Bali) - floating toy boats.
<b>Kartika Purnima Rituals</b>	Loy Krathong (Thailand) - floating candlelit rafts.
<b>Kalinga Ports (Palura/Manikpatna)</b>	Settlements in Java (established ~75 CE).
<b>Ancient Engineering (Boitas)</b>	Shipbuilding techniques in the Yuktikalpataru text

### Non-state Actors and the Odia Diaspora: Bridges Between Worlds

The success of Odisha's cultural outreach is significantly dependent on the efforts of non-state actors and a diaspora estimated at over a million people globally. Non-state actors, including artists, students, and professional organizations, often fill the gaps left by traditional government bodies, acting as decentralized nodes of influence. Organizations like the World Odisha Society (WOS) and the Odisha Society of the Americas act as independent cultural advocates, promoting the state's art, food, and traditions to the global community.

The Odia diaspora serves as a vital bridge between the region and the world, facilitating "Samvaad" (dialogue) through events like cultural camps and "Utkal Divas" celebrations. These initiatives have been increasingly

digitalized, with performances streamed on Zoom and Facebook Live to create global communal spaces. The 18th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD), held in Bhubaneswar in 2025, served as a strategic platform for the diaspora to engage in both cultural and business exchange, reinforcing Odisha's soft power.

Government policy has increasingly institutionalized this engagement through the "O-Sampark Policy" and the construction of "Asmita Bhawans" in major world cities to support diaspora networks. Furthermore, the state has launched "scholarship diplomacy" initiatives, such as the "Videsh Siksha Bruti" scheme, which provides financial support for SC/ST students to study at top global universities. These educational investments build a cadre of "India-friendly professionals" whose long-term networks deepen international people-to-people relations.

### Sports Paradiplomacy: Signaling Organizational Maturity

In recent years, Odisha has pioneered a new dimension of assertive foreign policy by emerging as a global hub for sports, particularly field hockey. By hosting the Men's Hockey World Cup in both 2018 and 2023, Odisha leveraged a high-profile international stage to showcase its infrastructure, governance capacity, and hospitality to a worldwide audience. This form of "sports tourism and paradiplomacy" demonstrates that sub-national governments can create their own templates for economic prosperity and international recognition.

The analytical significance of this trend lies in its contribution to "Smart Power" the strategic integration of hard infrastructure and soft cultural attraction. The success of these events required harmony between state and central government stakeholders, positioning Odisha as a pivotal node for mobilizing global networks. This proactive engagement helps reshape the national image as a reliable and inventive partner, while simultaneously boosting the regional economy through sports-driven tourism.

### Contemporary Challenges and Theoretical Limits

Despite its success, Odisha's cultural soft power strategy faces several operational and contextual challenges. Language barriers remain a significant hurdle in translating regional literature and folk music for a global audience. Furthermore, the "digital divide" poses a risk to rural artisans and temple practitioners, who may lack the necessary skills or connectivity to access global e-commerce platforms.

There is also the recurring threat of cultural appropriation, where traditional art forms like Odissi or Sambalpuri motifs are utilized by international actors without proper context or benefit to the original practitioners. As sacred festivals like Rath Yatra become increasingly commercialized and digitalized, there is a risk of eroding their spiritual heart in favor of superficial branding. To maintain credibility, cultural diplomacy must remain authentic; branding efforts that are perceived as too superficial or manipulative can destroy trust.

Addressing these challenges requires a sophisticated policy framework that balances preservation with promotion. The state's recent investments including Rs. 1,000 crore dedicated to heritage and Rs. 100 crore for the Odia language demonstrate a serious commitment to this goal. However, sustainable success will depend on creating "cultural safeguards" that protect intellectual property and ensure the benefits of international outreach return to the local communities that sustain these traditions.

### Synthesis and Strategic Directions for Sub-national Soft Power

The analysis of Odisha's international engagement underscores the growing importance of sub-national actors in the architecture of global soft power. By leveraging its unique traditional assets Odissi dance, Kalinga architecture, maritime legacies, and inclusive spirituality through modern digital stages, Odisha has transitioned from a localized secret to an emerging global cultural sensation. This sub-national

outreach provides the necessary "local authenticity" that enriches India's national diplomatic narrative while fostering regional development.

The "Odisha Model" of cultural diplomacy offers valuable lessons for other regions seeking to utilize their heritage for sustainable development. Key components of this model include:

**Networked Engagement:** Utilizing social media not just for dissemination but for building online relationships with the global public.

**Institutional Continuity:** Aligning regional festivals (Bali Yatra, Rath Yatra) with national inventories and UNESCO recognition goals.

**Smart Power Integration:** Combining cultural appeal with infrastructure signals through sports and intellectual site promotion.

**Diaspora as Intermediaries:** Policies like "O-Sampark" that turn a million-strong diaspora into a decentralized diplomatic force.

**Pedagogical Hubs:** Creating learning centers that encourage acculturation rather than just observation.

Ultimately, the goal of sub-national soft power is not merely to "stand out" but to "reach out," fostering mutual understanding and collaboration in an interconnected world. Odisha's journey illustrates that when historical traditions are treated as living, evolving assets and supported by robust digital and policy frameworks, they become powerful tools for bridge-building across cultures. The state's future success will be measured by its ability to maintain its unique heart while contributing to a richer, more diverse global cultural tapestry.

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