LIMORIES: Expanding Access to Local Histories and Memories with Computational Aids in the Indian Context

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Introduction

"It is memory that makes your identity. If your memory be lost, how will you be the same man?"
   – Voltaire

India is well-known for its diversity of culture. Like its languages, its localities too have evolved through the ages, each abounding in markers that talk of its past - externalized, at times, in monuments or historical artefacts, but captured even more eloquently, perhaps, in the customs, rituals, traditions, songs, arts and crafts, language and the daily life of its people.

Yet, as India modernizes, this very diversity that has been a hallmark of the civilization is under threat. The homogenizing effects of globalization are all too visible as one traverses the country today; as cities and towns, that look more and more alike, expand to swallow up rural suburbs, and people give up traditional vocations and lifestyles to join the global workforce (Varghese, 2013). While this is reported positively in economic circles, and is counted as a welcoming sign of the increasing prosperity of vast majorities of the Indian populace, an unfortunate side-effect, concurrently felt, is the loss of the sense of uniqueness, traditionally associated with each Indian locality. This has led to growing pangs, across significant cross-sections of the society, about a gnawing loss of cultural identity – a concern not restricted to India or Indians (Khair, 2016).

Limories (www.limories.in) is a work-in-progress system that attempts to capture the distinctiveness and uniqueness of a locality from its people. Limories believes that the sense of past of a locality, unique to each locality, inheres in each and every individual

associated with it, and is special and key to understanding and appreciating that locality wholly and in full. Limories attempts to do this by sourcing the externalized memories from the people themselves; collating, curating and presenting them - using open-source technologies. Goals include coming up with a curation framework, tools, standards and best practices, practical and relevant to the Indian context, which can be applied across localities. The generalization is a particular challenge, given the emphasis on the 'vaiseshik' – the 'distinctive' of each locality, aimed to be captured. And indeed, how one applies the general to the particular, remains a key differentiator between sciences and humanities (Singh, 2003).

This short paper will describe the pilot site where Limories was attempted, and the results thereof. It will also outline challenges being worked out, and the overall roadmap.

The pilot site

Kodungallur is a quiet town in Kerala, situated near the mouth of where one of the two arms of the perennial Periyar River empties itself into the Arabian Sea.
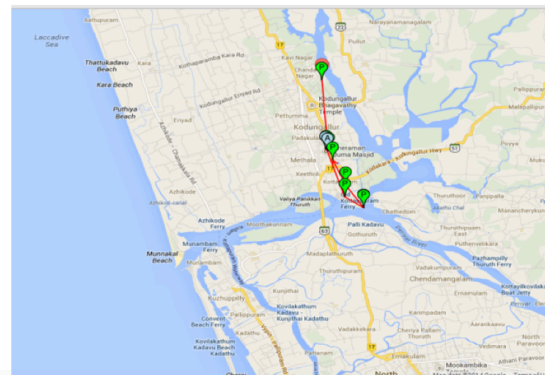
Source: Google Maps

Known during the colonial period as Cranganore, Kodungallur was earlier famous as capital to the Perumals of Kerala during the formative 9th-12th centuries CE of Kerala history and culture (Narayanan, 1972).

Until recently, Kodungallur was considered to be the ancient port of Muziris, described in Greco-Roman texts, such as the 'Periplus of the Erythrean Sea' (Casson, 1989), and referred to as Muchiri, in Tamil Sangam poetry. While recent research points towards Pattanam, a place about 9 km upstream from Kodungallur, as a probable contender for the exact location of the ancient port (Cherian et al., 2014), even today, the reputation of Kodungallur as the entry point of multiple religions – Christianity, Judaism and Islam, into the Indian sub-continent from across the seas, is proudly cherished by the people of the locality.

The Cheraman Perumal Mosque in Kodungallur, probably the earliest in India, its architecture providing testimony to the region's syncretic past (Picture: Own)

Among the various temples that dot the town, the one that attracts the most devotees today, almost eponymous with the town, is the Kodungallur Amma temple – dedicated to the Mother Goddess – the Mother of Kodungallur.

The Kodungallur Bhagavathy Temple or Sree Kurumba Kaavu (Picture: Own)

The temple, or 'kaavu' (sacred grove), has, in public perception, a kind of notoriety associated with its annual 'Bharani' festival – gained from the festival's rather peculiar rituals. During the Bharani period, devotees in large numbers throng to the temple from distant areas, clad in vivid red, clanging sickles in their hands, singing profane songs. The culminating 'Kaavu theendal' ritual of the festival is widely commented on and studied.

The Kaavu Theendal (Source: Wikipedia)

It was this site that the noted local historian, late Dr.N.M. Nampoothiri, former Dean of the Centre for Heritage Studies, Kerala, suggested to this researcher as a pilot. Over the years of 2014/2015, as I started gathering the history and lore related to Kodungallur and the temple from various sources, it was the Bharani rituals that stood out and piqued one's curiosity the most - with its peculiarity, and yet, its unquestionable popularity that drew faithful crowds.

'Who' were the people who came for this festival? What drew them? As I went through the articles written about the festival, I saw that theorizations ranged from it having been a practice instituted to drive out Buddhist monks, to the shrine being the memorial of the Silappathikaram protagonist Kannaki. But none of those served to explain the relevance of the festival today - why it continued to thrive and attract people. What also struck one was the contrast between the general perceptions about the festival, and the attitude of those intimately associated with the locality and the festival.

In Limories, I have presented the Kodungallur Bharani, as I saw and experienced it, during 2014 and 2015. My emphasis has not so much been on the past, as on the present, as I tried to capture what had

fascinated me - the continuities and connections the locale and the festival had nurtured and preserved, across time and place.

The presentation – as a photo-narrative

A photo-narrative was decided on as the best approach to convey the richness of the festival, chosen after abandoning other text-based approaches.
The photo-narrative had the advantage of being more accessible – both to the people I had sourced the content from, and to wider audiences.

Most Bharani participants speak Malayalam or Tamil. The crowd is mixed – literate and illiterate. While youngsters are familiar with English, the older people are not.

As I tried out various approaches to present my content, I realized that the photographs were the most evocative of all, and that weaving the narrative around those would help bridge literacy and language barriers, reaching out to young and old, local and global.

Excerpts

Signboard on the platform of one of the numerous trees that surround the temple, indicating the locality of the group to assemble at this site, (Picture: Own)
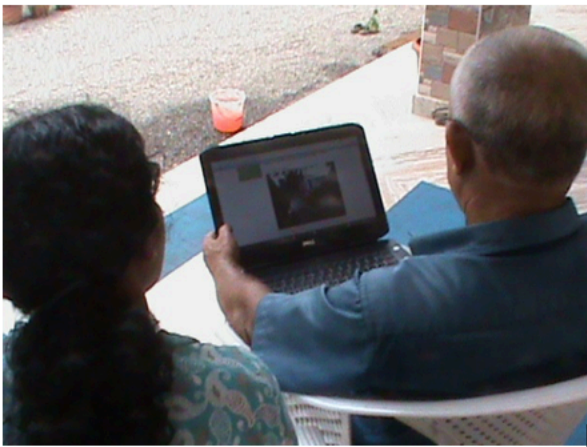

One of the groups assembled in 2014 (Picture: Own)

Validation

Once the presentation had reached a logical point, in 2016, I returned to the various persons I had obtained information from, for their validation and feedback. I also had independent knowledgeable individuals review the content, to ensure I had captured key terms in the narrative correctly.

The snapshots of the Bepur group viewing the site, are below. One of the youngsters of this group had asked me, when I was gathering my content – "What will be the result of your research? Will we get to see it, or will it sit in some library that we cannot access?"

site has been chosen. The prospect of using local volunteers is also being explored.

4. **Social media as a source?**
   As Limories scales out, it 'might', in due course, use appropriate and relevant social media content. However, a primary consideration, if so, would be appropriateness of content. A key intent of Limories is to reach out to all audiences, including children, for the younger generation to know the localities around them, and the associated memories they hold, better. Content would need to be accordingly appropriate.

Note: Chart to be read bottom-up

Although such an in-person validation was possible for the pilot site, as the system scales to multiple locations and contributors, as is the eventual goal, quantifiable and less resource-intensive methods of validation, using computational tools and systems as appropriate, will need to be implemented.

Future work

1. **Multi-Lingual Captions**
   The photo-narrative approach needs to be explored further, to include multi-lingual capability, especially in the narrative captions that will further increase accessibility.

2. **Semantics**
   Working out the conceptual categories and a suitable meta-data taxonomy to describe the content, will be crucial to make Limories a 'living' site. The diagram below depicts the overall process flow currently envisaged for the system.
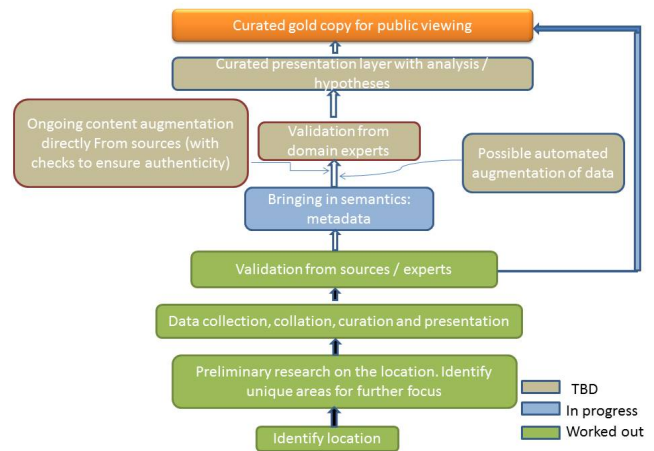
3. **Scaling out**
   In parallel, strategies to scale out to other sites also need to be worked out. A second

Working out the conceptual categories and meta-data, is the next major stage in the Limories journey, as the chart illustrates. This, and scaling out to other sites, with controlled crowd-sourcing, are crucial next steps for Limories, seminal to realizing its vision, to help answer: **What is it that makes a place unique and special, to all the people in whose memories the place resides?**

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