

# Indofuturism - a cultural zeitgeist staying in its infancy. A critical look at the maturity of the cultural movement driven by contemporary creators, artists and designers

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**Abstract**— When considering disciplines such as speculative design, future research, design fiction, and such, it is necessary to remember the role of past and present in future building. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in using futurism as a tool to imagine and re-imagine a collective past, present, and future as a response to environmental, social and political challenges. This has given rise to the popularity of indigenous futurism worldwide. An example is Afrofuturism which is now a well established movement in art, literature, film, and design. Afrofuturism builds a story of an alternate future that is non-west centric, based on ancient indigenous values, cultural identity, and is in response to local environmental concerns, while incorporating elements of black history and culture.

As a response to the past events of decolonization, and present challenges, and as a tool to celebrate their own cultures with agency, a visual language and literary tool has developed in the Indian Subcontinent. Similar to Afrofuturism, Indofuturism attempts to embody a synthesis of ancient wisdom and contemporary innovation, drawing inspiration from the profound spiritual heritage as well as artistic expressions, and technological symbols. Sometimes it manifests as a future where traditional values coexist harmoniously with cutting-edge technologies, other times a reflection of a preferred past into an alternative future. Although Indofuturism remains in its infancy compared to Afrofuturism, this study aims to understand its unique cultural foundation and examine the factors that could enable it to flourish as a recognized design language and enable designers and researchers to forecast its path in society.

**Keywords:** Indofuturism, indigenous futures, design fiction, cultural trends, social issues

## I. Introduction

**Indo** : belonging to, emerging from the Indian subcontinent

**Futurism** : initially a western art movement, now signifies a point of view that finds meaning or fulfilment in the future rather than in the past or present

"Who controls the past...controls the future: who controls the present controls the past."  
-George Orwell

The Indian subcontinent stands at a fascinating intersection of rapid technological advancement, expanding economies, complex environmental issues, and a deep pull from its traditions and symbolism. This intersection makes it a unique crucible for imagining alternative futures, nurturing the concept of indigenous futures. Indofuturism is emerging as a distinct design language, balancing tradition with futuristic aspirations. This tension between past and future is also fundamental to technological development and product design, where objects created today inherently serve future needs. Identifying alternative futures involves a dynamic interplay between past and present. In fact, futures have always gone hand-in-hand with design.

As Inayatullah (2008) suggests, understanding the future requires both recognizing the influence of the past and our agency in shaping what lies ahead, an act of momentary interaction between past and present. This duality is central to Indofuturism—a movement that is informed by the weight of history while embracing ambitious visions for the future. This perspective is especially valuable when examining how the Indian subcontinent envisions its future while maintaining a sense of cultural identity. Pakistani artist Omar Gilani, a pioneer of Indofuturism, encapsulates this sentiment, noting that "Pakistan is not a singular, but an aggregate of parts that are growing at varying rates. It's a soup, a melting pot of opposites, where tremendous good is offset by tremendous evil, and the latest tech and obscene wealth is offset by poverty and destitution... development and modernity is offset by clinging to the past" (Aijaz, 2017). These visions of Indofuturism also contribute to a broader understanding of pluriversality in future studies.

In recent years, Indigenous futurism has emerged as a powerful force in contemporary art, literature, music, and fashion, expanding beyond Western aesthetic frameworks to embrace diverse cultural perspectives. While Afrofuturism leads this movement by integrating African heritage with futuristic themes (Dery, 1994), other regional variations have developed, each offering unique cultural interpretations of the future. Mark Dery's seminal work "Black to the Future" established crucial connections between cyberpunk and Afrofuturism, highlighting their shared themes of dystopia, technology, and resistance to systemic oppression – addressing the impact of advanced technology on marginalised communities and exploring alternative, often rebellious, futures where protagonists navigate societal control and inequality. Afrofuturism integrates African heritage with futuristic themes to critique and reimagine an African values-centric society, moving away from the historical impact of colonisation.

Within this broader context of Indigenous futurism, Indofuturism presents a distinctive vision by weaving together the mytho-cultural symbols of the Indian subcontinent with contemporary technological narratives. Like Afrofuturism, it draws strength from rich cultural traditions while embracing rapid technological advancement. Similarly, an even lesser known movement of Gulf Futurism explores the unique tensions between tradition and

hyper-modernization in Middle Eastern societies. These movements share common ground in their exploration of how communities interact with advanced technology, yet each maintains its cultural specificity. Through this lens, Indofuturism doesn't merely imagine future scenarios – it reinterprets historical narratives and cultural symbols through a forward-looking perspective that is uniquely South Asian.

The emerging field of speculative design offers valuable insights into how futures can be imagined and explored through design practice. In their work "Speculative Everything," Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby reframe design's role beyond creating tangible products to generating conceptual possibilities. Their approach centres on "what if" inquiries – questions that provoke dialogue about potential futures rather than providing definitive answers. This methodology resonates with Indigenous futurisms, including Indofuturism, in the sense that similar speculative questioning drives the imagination of alternative futures. Both movements share a fundamental interest in challenging conventional narratives about progress and development, using speculative tools to envision futures that emerge from their own cultural contexts and values. Indo Futuristic expressions have emerged as a compelling cultural movement influencing art and culture with the rise of social media, Generative Artificial Intelligence, and democratisation of the access to worldwide contents. These expressions by individuals, groups and collectives while distributed across the sub-continent, is yet to espouse the cultural strength unlike what has been seen with similar movements around Afrofuturism. What is the stage of maturity at this moment for Indofuturism? How are practitioners utilising this? Has this trend departed from the impacts of colonisation that have historically marginalised and tokenized it, is it becoming a more representational, pluralistic, and liberating voice for the Indian subcontinent? These are some unanswered questions which this study aims to analyse.

## II. Research Problem

The study explores and analyses the artefacts of Indofuturism, the intentions and activism behind them, and their potential implications for future studies. Specifically, this research seeks to understand the current stage of maturity for the Indofuturism trend, how practitioners are engaging with it, and whether the movement has evolved beyond a nascent stage, to become a more representative, pluralistic, and liberating voice for the Indian subcontinent.

An initial study of the terms "Futurism", "Afrofuturism" and "Indofuturism" on google trends for the period of 20 years, shows the contrasting trend in curiosity about these terms. We observe that while 'Afrofuturism' and 'Indofuturism' trends both look feeble in comparison to 'Futurism', 'Afrofuturism' had a lift off during the years 2017-19. Surprisingly, 'Indofuturism' had some peaks during 2004 to 2010, it had stayed down even with so many more practitioners joining the movement. This piqued the interest of the authors to further dive deeper into the topic of this research. (Figure 1,2,3)

As the study explores the artefacts and intentions behind the Indofuturism movement, it also raises broader questions about the potential for design practices to catalyse cultural reorientation. As Escobar (2018) suggests in 'Design for the Pluriverse', 'Is it possible to reorient such a tradition and to redirect the journey into an altogether different direction?' This echoes the aspirations of Indofuturism to reimagine historical narratives and cultural symbols through a forward-looking, South Asian lens. In an era of pressing planetary and social crises, can Indofuturist design play a role in charting an alternative path that departs from Western-centric

conceptions of progress and development?

For the scope of this study, the researchers have narrowed down to analysing Indofuturist artefacts through the lenses of cultural identity, environmental and social response, and commercial profitability. Additionally, the usage of any theoretical frameworks or methodologies employed by Indofuturist practitioners in the creation process will be examined (Inayatullah, 2008). The authors wish to analyse the factors influencing this trend and understand the characteristics of the Indo Futuristic artefacts.

The study also aims to critique power dynamics in the movement, considering that whoever has power in the present has agency to rewrite the past and future. As Dos Santos, Mazzarotto, and Van Amstel (2023) discuss in their text, having a critical pedagogy in the process of learning design is not an option, but should be a healthy part of the process. The study intends to respond to speculation which confirms the status quo and does not question it, and also imagines a future with it.

### III. Methodology

To start our investigation on the topic, we followed a structured approach using the following methods :

1. **Online trend analysis:** We conducted an analysis using Google Trends and explored discussion threads on Twitch and Reddit related to Indofuturism. This provided insights into the global interest and engagement trends surrounding the term.
2. **Secondary research:** We sought out content that discussed or incorporated themes of Indofuturism, Indo futurism, or Indo-futurism in visual arts, literature, performance arts, music, news articles and academic journals, focusing on publicly available expressions across these mediums. This approach aimed to establish a balanced view considering various mediums and hoped to achieve parity between socio-economic representation. Some of the links for this have been shared below in the References section. A collage of selected artworks is provided in Figure 4.
3. **Data Collection and Tagging:** We collected and systematically categorised data from our research findings, focusing on key attributes:
  - a. The form factors of artefacts associated with Indofuturism.
  - b. The extent to which these artefacts intend to reflect cultural identity from the Indian subcontinent.
  - c. Temporal projections embedded within their futuristic narratives.
  - d. Assessment of their potential **commercial viability or popularity** (High/Medium/Low).
  - e. Understanding the intended **response to contemporary social or environmental concerns** (High/Medium/Low).
  - f. Identification of **using frameworks** or processes in their creation (High/Medium/Low).
4. **Social Network Analysis (SNA) Mapping:** Moving forward, using SNA techniques, we aim to map the interconnectedness and influence of Indofuturistic practitioners within the cultural discourse. This mapping process is useful in

visualising and analysing patterns and trends emerging from our dataset, facilitating a deeper understanding of the movement's evolution and impact.

This methodological framework provides a robust foundation for our ongoing study, aiming to illuminate the trajectory and significance of Indofuturism within global cultural and technological contexts.

For the final phase, we mapped the collected data onto the aforementioned dimensions and analysed the trends observed throughout the study. This study is a work-in-progress, as the authors plan to follow this trend over the upcoming years, till the signals mature.

#### IV. Findings

On analysing the worldwide google search trends report for the terms 'Futurism', 'Afro-futurism' and 'Indofuturism' in the last 20 year period as shown in Figure 1, it was observed that out of the two indigenous futurism, Afrofuturism had a remarkable jump post the year 2018, while indo-futurism barely has any increase within the trends. This sudden revival and sustained interest in 'Afro-futurism' is generally attributed to the release of Marvels' 'Black Panther' blockbuster movie, so the commercial and higher production factor is influencing trends here.

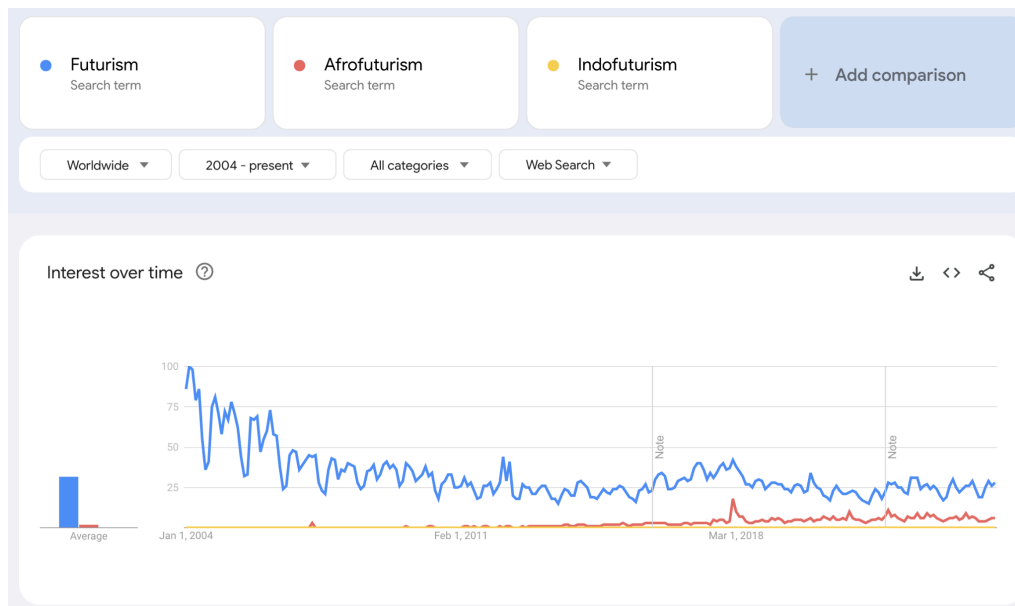


Fig. 1. Comparative Google search trends for the terms 'Futurism', 'Afrofuturism' and 'Indofuturism' (2004-2024)

Note: The trend can be observed on the link

<https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=Futurism.Afrofuturism.Indofuturism&hl=en>

Figure 2 illustrates that even without the comparative baseline of 'Futurism' trend, Indofuturism does not make a substantial impact in popular search.

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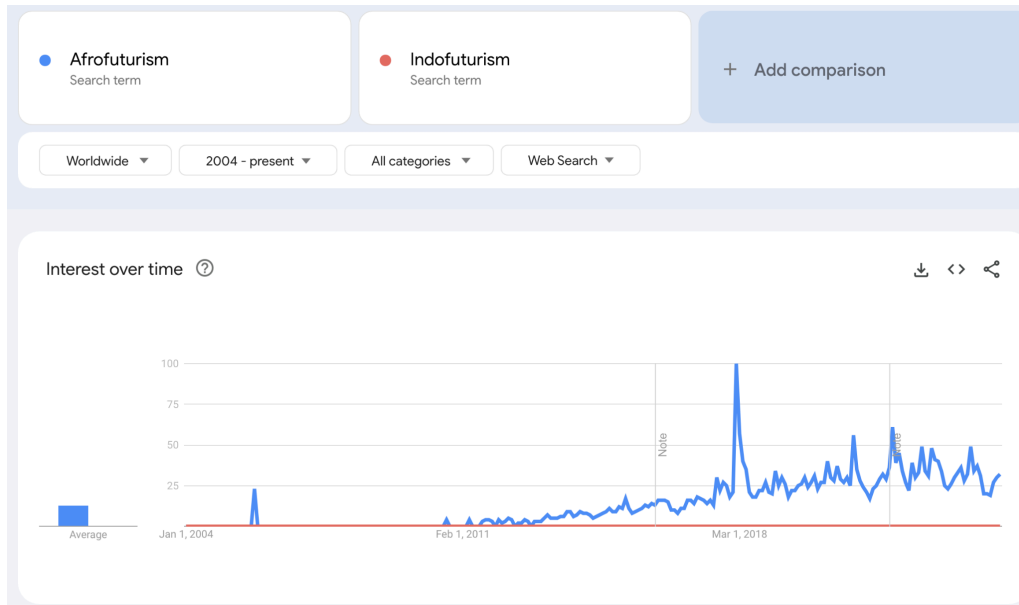


Fig. 2. Comparative Google search trends for the terms 'Afrofuturism' and 'Indofuturism' (2004–2024)

Note: The trend can be observed on the link

<https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=Afrofuturism,Indofuturism&hl=en>

On observing the 'Indofuturism' trend in Figure 3, there we see a couple of blips on a flat line, a very recent uptrend in 2024 and one low peak during 2010. The authors were not able to investigate the reason for the 2010 signal, and hypothesise that the recent movies like 'Kalki' and upsurge in the Generative Artificial intelligence technology might have provided the peak in the year 2024.

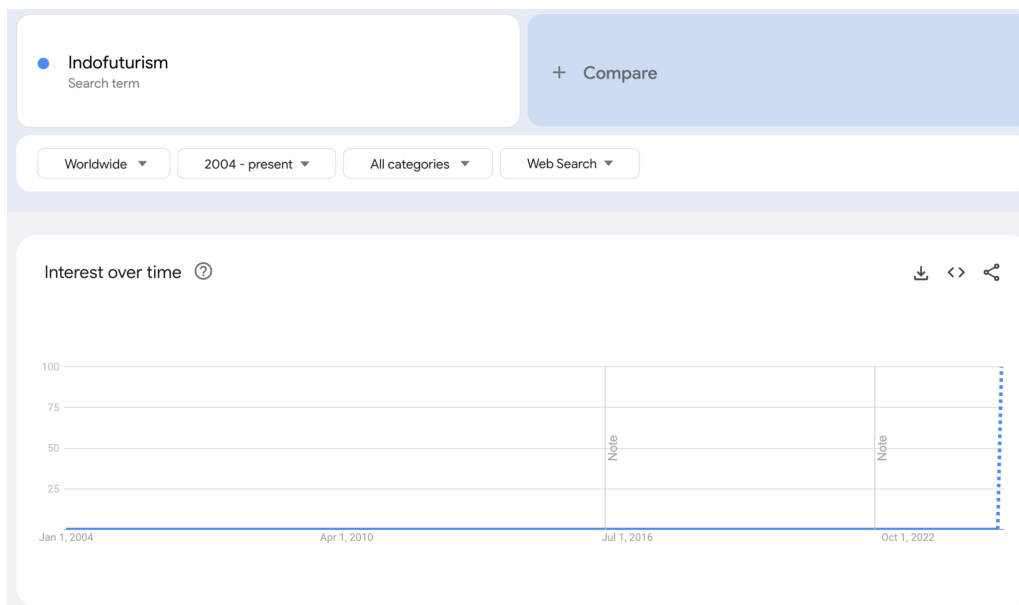


Fig. 3. Google search trend for the term 'Indofuturism' (2004–2024)

Note: The trend can be observed on the link

<https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=Indofuturism&hl=en>

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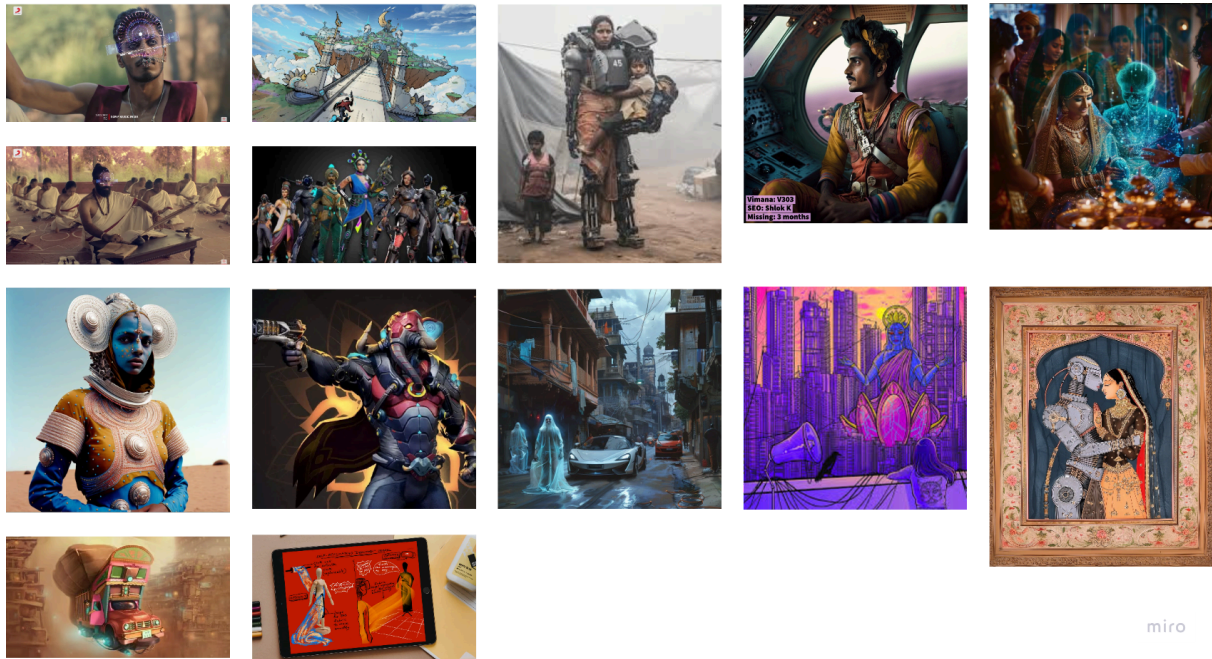


Fig. 4. Collage of visual artworks explored during secondary research.

From left to right, Row 1&2; Raja Kumari Bindis and Bangles, Indus Valley Game, Prateek Arora, unnamed from a Reddit thread, Busride Studios, Row 3; Prateek Arora, Indus Valley game, Prateek Arora, Sam Madhu, Prateek Arora, Row 4; Omar Gillani, Priya Bandodkar

As a second stage of signal collection, we identified and collected artefacts either self-attributed or attributed by third parties (online forums/ art curators and exhibitions/ magazines or news articles/ blogs) till the month of April,2024. We identified 39 unique artworks developed by various individuals, groups and collectives. Figure 5 shows the most common type of form factor was Visual (28) followed by Video, Textual & Audio in that order. Which is an expected format of expression in the current era of easily accessible digital platforms and tools for creation and consumption.

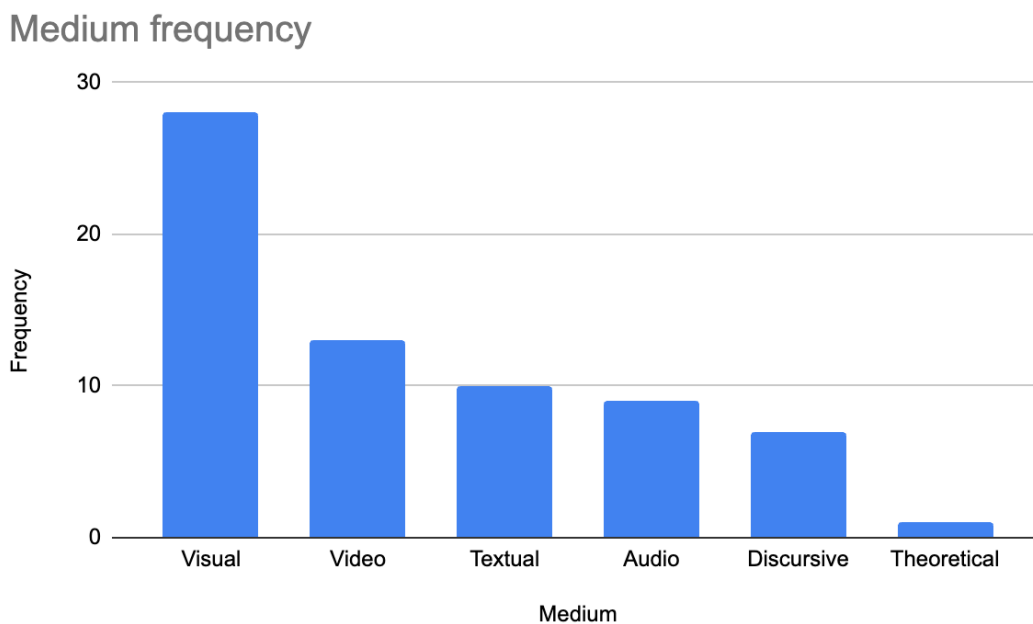


Fig. 5. Frequency of tags related to form factors of artefacts

These expressions were seeded most prominently around the idea of Class(25), followed by Religion (13), Gender (13) and Caste (6) as represented in Figure 6. Although the authors did not delve deeper into the background of the creators, it can be a topic of further study to find any correlations between the creators' socio-economic origins and its manifestation in their expressed artefacts.

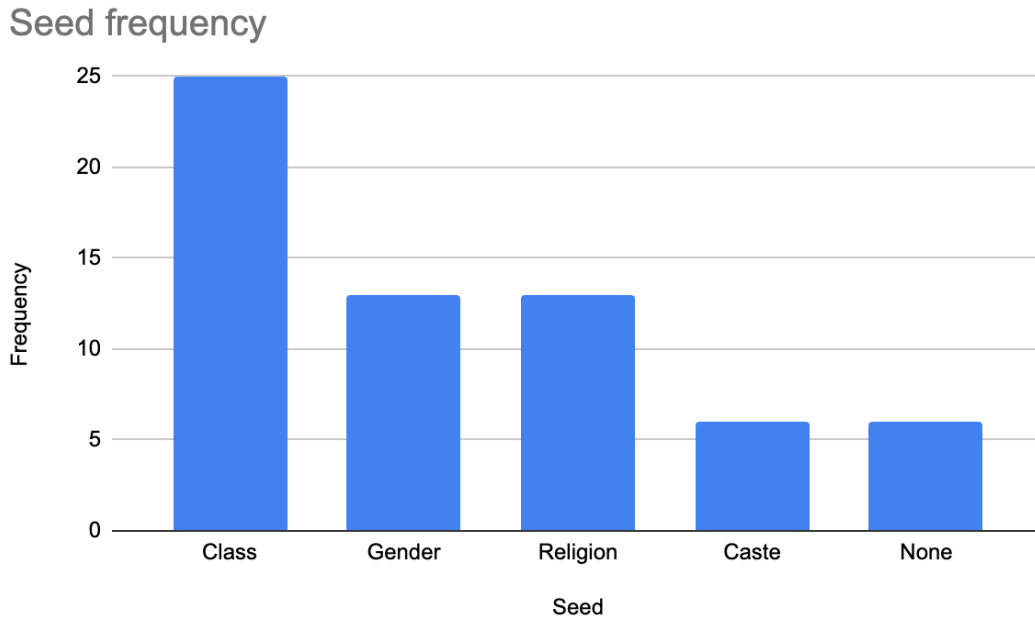


Fig. 6. Frequency of tags reflecting cultural identity from the Indian subcontinent

Based on the temporal projection of the artworks, Figure 7 shows that the major loci of timeline envisions contemporary world (19) and future worlds (16). This strengthens the signals around the growing interest in the practices of new futures, alternate futures.

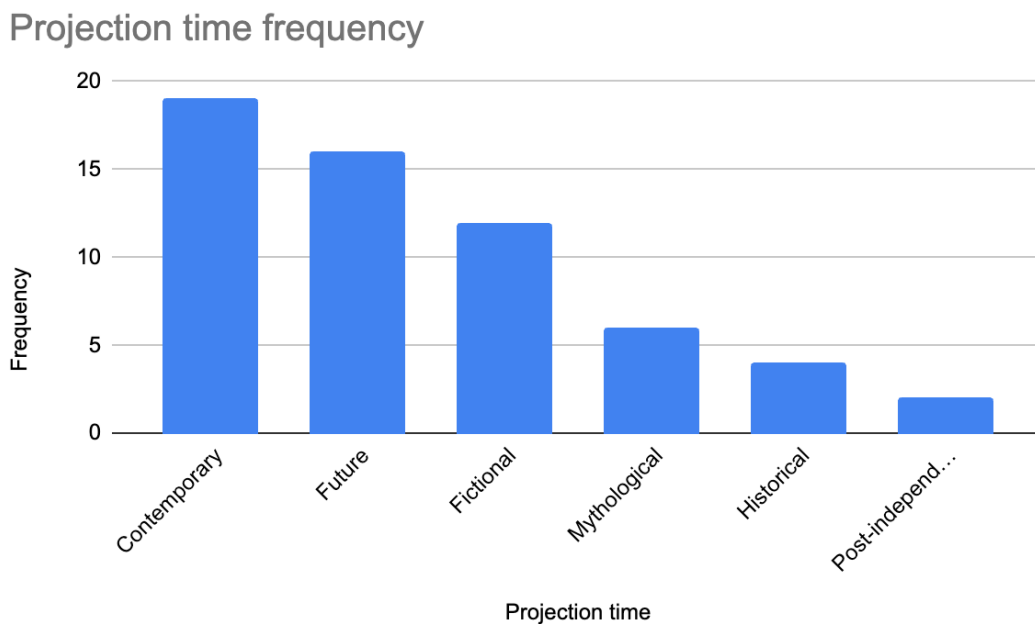


Fig. 7. Frequency of tags related to the temporal projections of the narratives.

Figure 8 reveals a visual representation of these factors in the form of a word cloud diagram.



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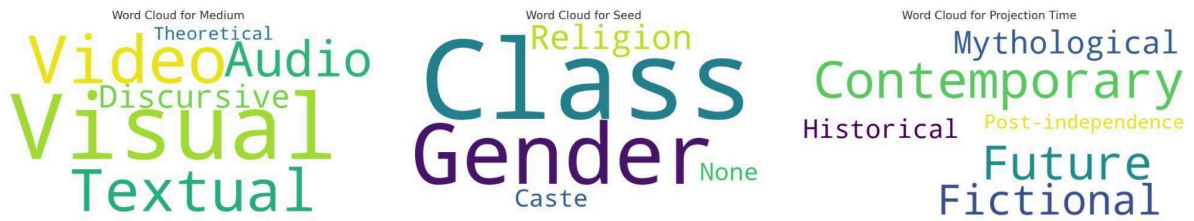


Fig. 8. Word cloud representation of the frequency density of the tags used for the sample collected.

Tagging each artwork by intent—commercial popularity, responsiveness to social concerns, and use of a framework—revealed a fairly balanced distribution across these categories (see Figure 9). However, some patterns emerged, with a few practitioners deeply engaged in futures frameworks and process-oriented approaches, while others use these less frequently. Overall, a strong emphasis on commercial appeal appears common among Indofuturism artworks, suggesting growing interest in this space.

### Intent scales

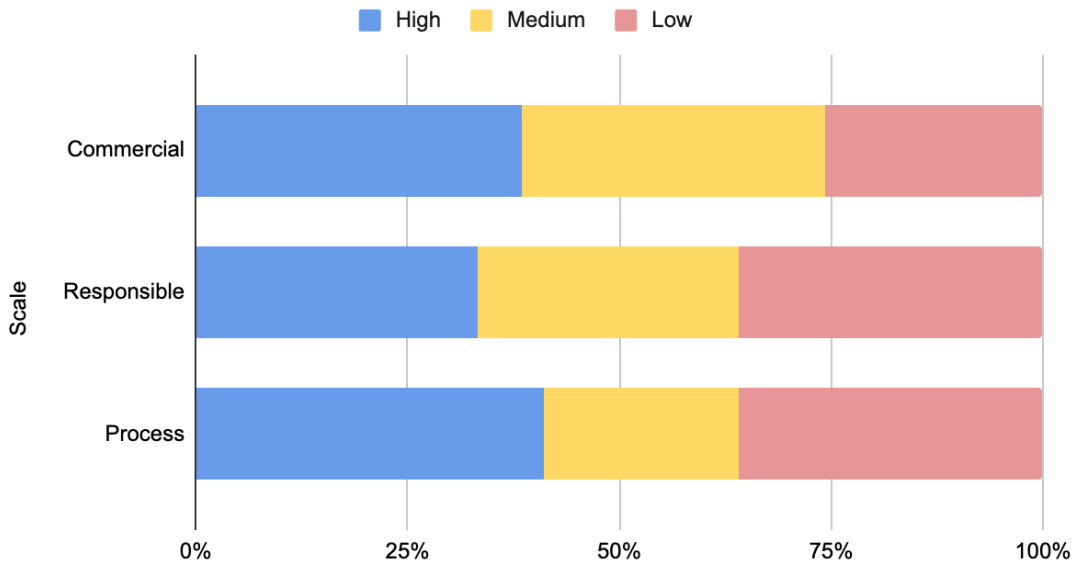


Fig. 9. Maps the three axes of commercial viability, response to contemporary social or environmental concerns and extent of framework used.

Note: the breakup of the three axes are done as % distribution over the total sample set.

Figures 10, 11, and 12 highlight patterns among artefacts with strong signals on one axis, comparing them with the other two. Artefacts rated high for commercial appeal tended to score lower on process and responsible intent. Conversely, those rated high on process often showed stronger alignment with responsible socio-economic intent. This suggests an emerging correlation between the use of structured processes and responding to socio-economic concerns. Additionally, Indofuturist artworks aimed at commercialization seem less likely to incorporate structured processes or address social and environmental concerns. One pattern that warrants further exploration—and which the authors believe could catalyse a new wave of Indofuturism—is the increasing use of video as a medium for these artworks, especially with the rise in Immersive Technology and Extended Reality.

### High Commercial scale breakup

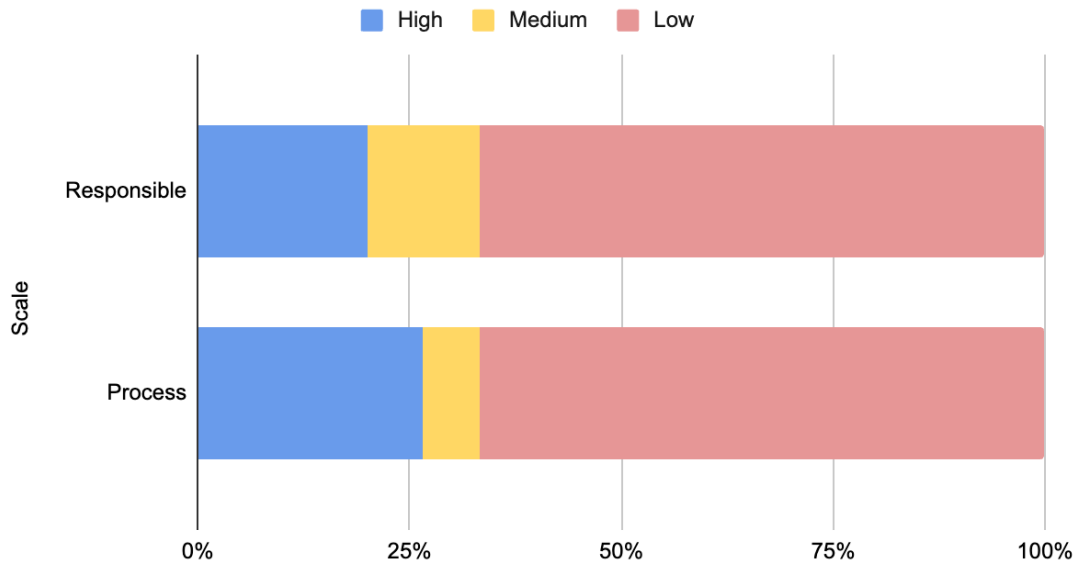


Fig. 10. Break up of the distribution of two axes(response to contemporary social or environmental concerns and extend of framework used) for the samples with high commercial intent

### High Responsible scale breakup

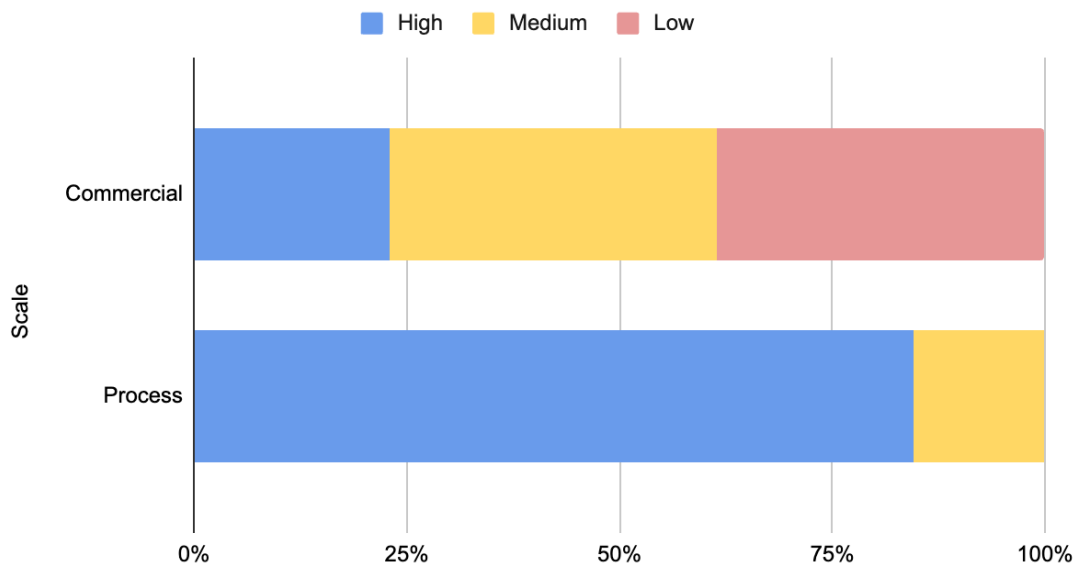


Fig. 11. Break up of the distribution of two axes(commercial viability and extend of framework used) for the samples with high intent towards social concerns

## High Process scale breakup

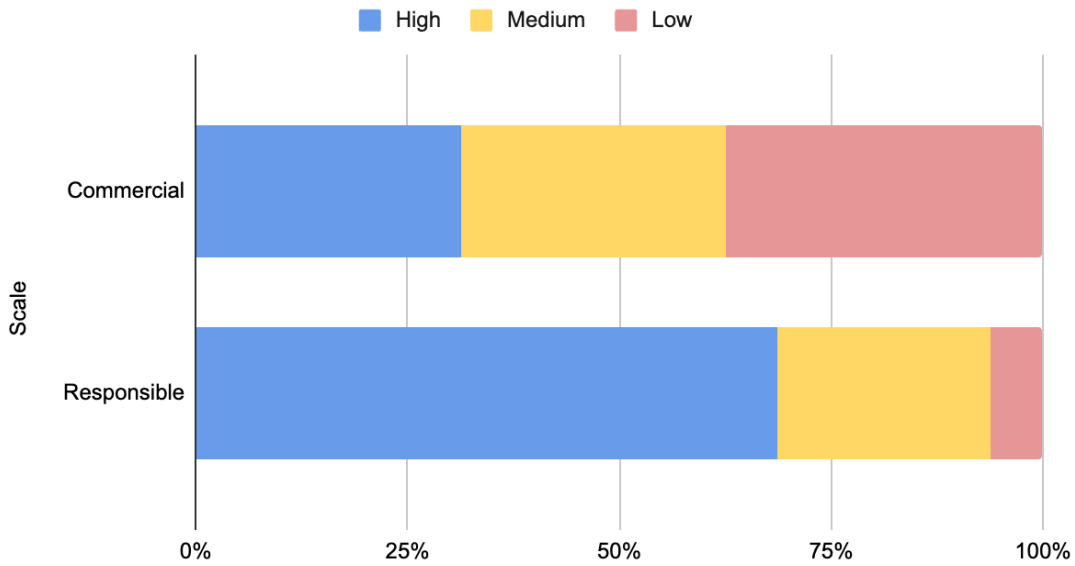


Fig. 12. Break up of the distribution of two axes (commercial viability and response to contemporary social or environmental concerns) for the samples with high framework usage

Figure 13 shows a network map of the samples collected (in blue), highlighting their connections with cultural identity themes (in yellow) and projected timelines (in red). A noticeable cluster of artworks centres around themes of class and gender identity, with a strong focus on contemporary and future perspectives.

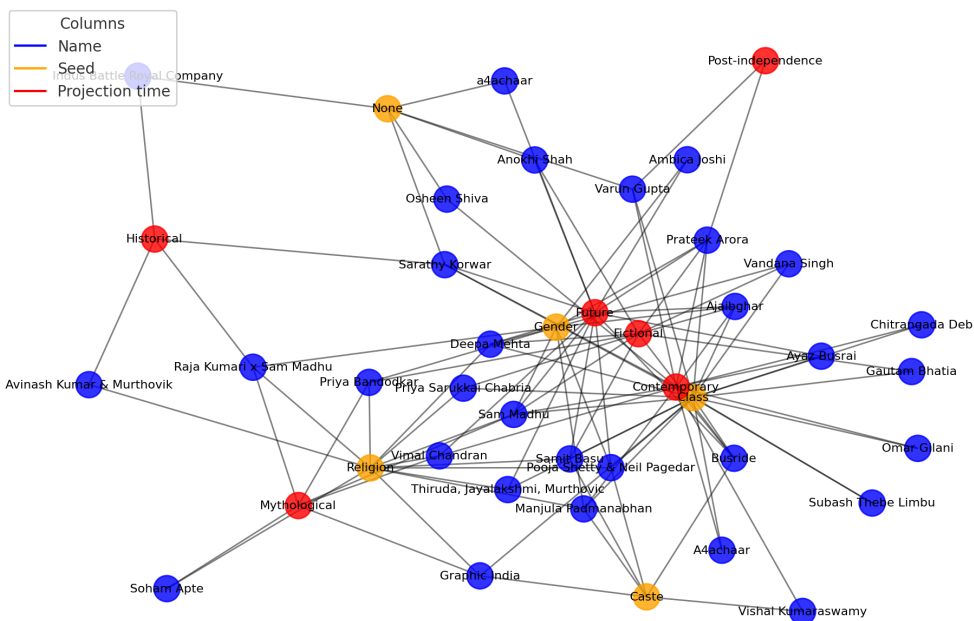


Fig. 13. Network diagram of data sample of unique artefacts connected around the seed of the world and projection timeline of their artwork

## Conclusions

In conclusion, the observations made from the collected data set clearly indicates a growing trend towards envisioning contemporary and futuristic narratives centred around the identity of class, gender and religion among the indofuturist practitioners. There is an inclination towards commercial viability of the practice, which can potentially encourage more artists, creators, and designers to join the trend. For creators looking to make an impact in the areas of social or environmental concerns, leveraging a visually engaging form factor and a commercially viable route may open a path to broader discourse. Although these patterns offer early insights, they should be seen as emerging trends rather than definitive solutions for expanding Indofuturism's societal influence. Indofuturism is still at an infant stage of evolving into a cultural phenomenon, as more practices and practitioners thrive, then only a state of inertia can be sustained.

As a work in progress, this study aims to contribute valuable insights into Indofuturism's evolution and impact, shedding light on its role in shaping alternative futures rooted in Indian cultural values and global technological advancements. By critically analysing the movement's current state and potential trajectories, the study seeks to inform future studies and speculative design practices with diverse, culturally embedded perspectives.

## Limitations

In this study, we focused on tags directly related to Indofuturism. This narrowed approach provides clarity but may limit the scope, as it may not fully encompass broader South Asian futurisms. Expanding the research with more diverse tags could uncover additional patterns. Moreover, the study relies heavily on online sources, potentially underrepresenting less popular or grassroots expressions. Finally, we used Inayatullah's futures triangle theory to structure our dimensions, which may limit exploration to predetermined areas, leaving out potentially influential cultural or socio-political factors not captured by this framework.

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