

Designing with Vernacular Intelligence: Embedding Cultural Narratives into the Digital World

SRINIVAS. S.

School of Design and Innovation, RV University, Bengaluru, India
shreya.srinivas04@gmail.com

Abstract – Vernacular communication systems in India have long functioned as intuitive and inclusive design practices, using simple visual imagery and locally resonant symbols to bridge the divides of language, literacy, and class. The textile industry, matchbox labels, cinema posters, political icons, and street art exemplify how everyday communication relied on cultural familiarity and visual immediacy. However, in the digital era, such vernacular presence has become increasingly absent. Web applications and online platforms often prioritize standardized and neutral design languages, resulting in interfaces that lack cultural specificity. While minimalism and modernist aesthetics offer clarity, they also dilute the inclusive richness of vernacular expression. This paper situates Indian vernacular communication as a critical model of creative intelligence. Rooted in intuition, insight, and innovation, the paper engages with the concept of Critical Regionalism to argue for the reintroduction of vernacular presence into digital environments. The paper also explores how its lessons can inform digital design futures, by tracing the continuity from analogue vernacular systems, such as the matchboxes, folk art, symbolic icons, etc. to imperative digital practices, thereby imbibing the “vernacular-ness” among the masses and shaping their digital design attitudes. The study highlights the need to reinsert vernacular presence into digital environments to create more accessible, inclusive, and culturally meaningful design.

Keywords: Vernacular communication, Digital Era, Creative Intelligence, Cultural Specificity, Critical Regionalism, Inclusive digital design, Indian visual culture, Digital vernaculars, Design attitude

I. Introduction

“Vernacular” refers to everyday, locally rooted, and culturally specific practices of expression that arise organically from communities rather than formal institutions. In India, vernacular communication has historically thrived in contexts of linguistic diversity and widespread illiteracy, where text-heavy communication could not holistically ensure inclusivity. Instead, symbolic and intuitive imagery, seen in matchbox labels, cinema posters, wall paintings, political icons, and even in the interwoven threads of textiles, bridged social divides, allowing recognition and recall across linguistic, cultural, and economic boundaries.

This vernacular intelligence parallels the concept of Critical Regionalism, which argues for design approaches that balance global modernity with local specificity. Critical Regionalism can be understood as an approach that integrates the distinctive physical and cultural attributes of a region with contemporary technological practices.. Vernacular communication systems in India resisted exclusionary modes of literacy-dependent communication. Instead, they embedded local symbols and cultural idioms into mass design, creating an inclusive design ecology that was both accessible and meaningful.

In contrast, the digital world, particularly web and app interfaces, largely lacks such vernacular presence. Most digital platforms today rely on uniform and neutral design languages shaped by global minimalist trends, producing environments that feel detached from cultural specificity. While such approaches streamline usability, they neglect the potential of vernacular rootedness to create deeper cultural resonance and inclusivity.

By situating vernacular communication within the framework of Creative Intelligence, intuition, insight, and innovation, this paper argues that reintroducing vernacular presence into digital environments can shape not only the inclusivity of communication but also the design attitude of digital platforms. Such an attitude, imbibed from vernacular roots, recognizes everyday cultural practices of Indian communities, such as festivals, folk motifs, symbolic icons, and community rituals, as valuable design knowledge that can inform the future of inclusive digital engagement.

II. Research Problem

Digital platforms have adopted globally standardized aesthetics that prioritize clarity and usability but neglect communication through the lens of cultural specificity. In India, this absence of vernacular presence limits the exploration and inclusion of cultural inclusivity, erasing the visual and symbolic strategies that historically enabled communication across literacy and language divides. The challenge lies in understanding how vernacular communication systems, when reframed through the lens of Creative Intelligence and Critical Regionalism, can inform digital design practices that shape culturally rooted, inclusive digital engagements.

*Contact: Phone +91-9740755404

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III. Research Design and Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research design grounded in secondary analysis of vernacular artefacts and digital interfaces. Sources were selected from publicly available archives such as Google Arts & Culture's "New India in a Matchbox" and the Victoria and Albert Museum's Indian textile collection, chosen for their representation of Indian visual vernaculars. The analysis follows a thematic review approach, identifying patterns in color, form, and symbol that convey cultural specificity and inclusivity. These were then compared with digital interfaces to reveal how vernacular cues translate (or fail to translate) in online spaces. The challenge lies in understanding how vernacular communication systems, when reframed through the lens of Creative Intelligence and Critical Regionalism, can inform digital design practices that shape culturally rooted, inclusive digital engagements.

The analytical framework integrates Critical Regionalism (Frampton, 1983) and Creative Intelligence, framing vernacular artefacts as design knowledge systems. Critical Regionalism helps interpret how local expression resists homogenized aesthetics, while Creative Intelligence contextualizes this within adaptive, evolving digital practices. This dual framework guided both source selection and interpretive analysis.

IV. Literature Review

A. Vernacular within the Design Discourse and Digital Context

In India, vernacular communication has long been regarded as an inclusive and intuitive design language that evolved organically within communities, enabling communication to transcend linguistic and literacy barriers. Everyday artefacts, such as matchbox labels, cinema posters, and street art acted as visual systems of cultural knowledge, accessible to audiences beyond formal education (Appadurai, 1996; Jain, 2018). These practices show that inclusivity in Indian design was not imported from global discourse but embedded within lived cultural realities where local expression naturally shaped visual meaning and public engagement.

The theoretical lens of Critical Regionalism (Frampton, 1983) offers an interpretive lens to connect these vernacular practices to contemporary design challenges. While originally situated in architecture, its principles—balancing global modernity with local specificity—translate effectively to digital communication design. Applied to digital interfaces, this perspective advocates resisting aesthetic homogenization and embedding regional identity within user experience. Through such an approach, digital design can maintain modern usability while preserving cultural depth and diversity.

Yet, much of today's digital ecosystem continues to reflect standardized global aesthetics that prioritize uniformity and efficiency over cultural nuance. Research on web localization (Singh, Furrer, & Massimiliano, 2004) demonstrates that global design templates often fail to capture regional context, resulting in user experiences that feel detached from local culture. Contemporary

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scholars like Sharma (2022) and Sinha (2021) similarly argue for culturally informed UX practices that integrate local idioms, regional typefaces, and festival-driven design systems, key strategies for improving relevance and inclusivity.

1. Vernacular communications
2. Critical Regionalism
3. Digital absence and web platforms
4. Digital Vernaculars in Practice

The concept of vernacular communication in design is not new, but its relevance has evolved in response to the growing dominance of digital platforms and the homogenizing pressures of global aesthetics.

1. Vernacular communications

Everyday cultural artefacts such as matchbox labels and cinema posters acted as visual literacy systems that very much enabled inclusive communication across diverse populations (Appadurai, 1996; Jain, 2018).

2. Critical Regionalism

Originally articulated by Frampton, Critical Regionalism emphasizes reconciling modern technological practices with local cultural identity. Applied to digital design, it offers a framework for resisting cultural homogenization by embedding vernacular visual forms into contemporary platforms.

3. Digital absence and web platforms

Web platforms often adopt standardized aesthetics, emphasizing clarity and efficiency. But in doing so, they overlook cultural richness and produce experiences that feel disconnected from local contexts. Studies on web localization show that global templates frequently fail to reflect regional nuances, reducing their ability to resonate with diverse users (Singh, Furrer, & Massimiliano, 2004).

4. Digital Vernaculars in Practice

Empirical evidence of secondary interpretation of this approach can be observed in the comparison between *Google Pay India* and *Paytm*. While *Google Pay* follows a globally minimalist aesthetic with neutral tones, *Paytm* integrates regional language options, festive themes, and culturally familiar icons such as diyas and coins. This contrast demonstrates that vernacular design strategies strengthen emotional connection, intuitive recognition, and a sense of belonging without compromising usability. These examples underscore the relevance of *Critical Regionalism* in digital design, suggesting that local cultural depth can coexist with modern usability, leading to more inclusive and meaningful user experiences.

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Figure 1

Digital Vernaculars in Practice: Paytm and Google Pay Indian's Digital Interfaces' of Cultural relevance and association

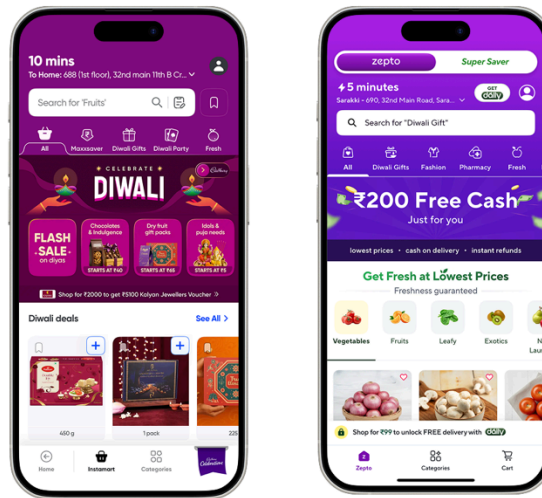


Digital Payment Interface - Paytm, Google Pay

Note. A comparison between Paytm and Google Pay India demonstrates how vernacular design strategies operate in practice. Google Pay employs a global minimalist interface, while Paytm integrates regional associations, festival-based iconography, and familiar visual metaphors (e.g., diyas, colors and interactive CTA's for indicating the festival, Diwali). <https://paytm.com/> | https://pay.google.com/int/en_in/about/

Figure 2

Digital Vernaculars in q-Commerce: Swiggy Instamart and Zepto Interfaces' of Cultural relevance and association



Digital Quick-Commerce Interface - Swiggy Instamart, Zepto

Note. A comparison between Swiggy Instamart and Zepto highlights vernacular cues in quick-commerce interfaces. While Zepto maintains a sleek, global minimalism, Swiggy Instamart incorporates festive color palettes, localized illustrations, and culturally familiar visuals that evoke Indian domestic life. <https://www.swiggy.com/instamart?entryId=1234&entryName=mainTileEntry4&v=1> | <https://www.zeptonow.com/>

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Figure 3
Archive of Matchbox Labels Illustrating Cultural Diversity



Note. A collection of matchbox labels capturing a variety of rich cultural motifs reflecting Indian visual vernacular, displayed by Google Arts & Culture's "New India in a Matchbox" exhibition.
<https://artsandculture.google.com/story/new-india-in-a-matchbox-tasveer-ghar/nAVxk6SORHLICg?hl=en>

Figure 4
Vernacular Artefacts from India: Skirt Length (c.1850), Baluchar Sari (c.1855), and Talismanic Shirt (15th–16th century)



Note. Selection of Indian vernacular textiles and garments from the Victoria and Albert Museum. Includes a satin-woven embroidered skirt length from Kutch (Museum no. 791A-1852), a Baluchar sari from Bahadarpur in red silk with patterned motifs (Museum no. 6102(IS)), and a talismanic shirt inscribed with Quranic verses in ink and gold paint (Museum no. T.59-1935). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
<https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/indian-textiles?>

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Figure 5

The Bystander Anthology by Kadak Collective



Note. A multimedia collection of South Asian graphic narratives—print and web—exploring themes of geography, gender,



identity, boundaries, and exclusion through the lens of the bystander. Led by the Kadak Collective with 50+ contributors, it combines comics, illustrations, animations, and sound design.

<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/bystander/the-bystander-anthology?>

Table 1

User Preferences Toward Vernacular Design Elements in Digital Platforms

Vernacular Element	Consideration	Description	Actions/Strategies for Designers
1. Use of culturally relevant and familiar colours (e.g., saffron, green)	Cultural Resonance	Colours act as emotional anchors, fostering trust and familiarity.	Develop UI palettes rooted in local festivals and craft traditions.
2. Incorporation of local motifs/pattern (e.g., folk art, symbols)	Inclusivity and Accessibility	Visual motifs bridge literacy/language divides.	Introduce subtle folklore-inspired patterns or backgrounds.
3. Regional festival or event-based interface variations	Community Belonging	Adapting to cultural cycles enhances relevance and inclusivity.	Launch festive skins tied to local celebrations and rituals.

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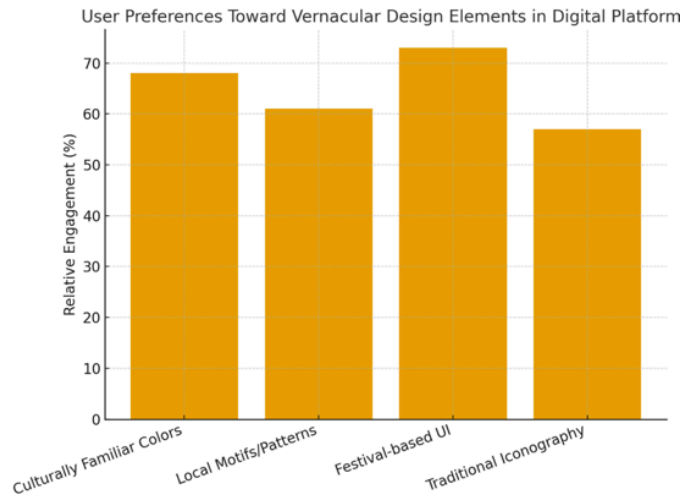
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4. Integration of traditional iconography (e.g., lamp, lotus, etc.)	Intuitive Communication	Icons offer instant vernacular recall	Use culturally resonant icons that respect simplicity and clarity.
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Note. This table is adapted from RedSeer Consulting (2024), *Exploring Bharat: How Regional Content Drives Platform Growth in India*, which highlights how vernacular design strategies—colors, motifs, cultural calendars, and symbols—play a crucial role in driving engagement and inclusivity in Indian digital platforms.
<https://redseer.com/articles/exploring-bharat-how-regional-content-drives-sfv-platforms-growth-in-india/>

Graph 1

User Preferences Toward Vernacular Design Elements in Digital Platforms



Note. This descriptive chart visualizes relative user engagement with vernacular design strategies—colors, motifs, festival-based UI, and traditional iconography—adapted from RedSeer Consulting (2024), *Exploring Bharat: How Regional Content Drives Platform Growth in India*.
<https://redseer.com/articles/exploring-bharat-how-regional-content-drives-sfv-platforms-growth-in-india/>

Discussion and Findings

The analysis reveals that vernacular communication systems in India provide essential insights for rethinking the foundations of digital design. By drawing from secondary visual archives and interpretive analysis, this study identifies recurring thematic patterns rather than quantitative outcomes. These patterns demonstrate how intuitive visual cues such as colours, motifs, festival rhythms, and symbolic iconography foster cultural trust and inclusivity. Unlike standardized global design approaches that often prioritize neutrality, vernacular forms create warmth, recognition, and a sense of belonging, positioning design as a mediator of cultural experience.

From a design perspective, the findings signal a shift in attitude: digital platforms can balance clarity and usability with culturally rooted expressions that speak authentically to diverse communities. This balance reflects the essence of Critical Regionalism, which encourages the reintroduction of local depth and context as a counterpoint to placeless uniformity. In digital design, this means integrating vernacular aesthetics as active design strategies, transforming

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them from decorative motifs into frameworks for accessible, inclusive, and meaningful user experiences.

The study also positions vernacular intelligence as an adaptive design philosophy where local context itself becomes the interface material. Incorporating vernacular sensibilities into UI design not only enhances emotional engagement but also strengthens user identity and cultural continuity. Such approaches contribute to a larger movement of decolonizing digital design by ensuring that technology reflects lived cultural realities rather than abstract universality.

Although Kenneth Frampton's Critical Regionalism originated in architecture, its foundational principle of resisting cultural homogenization translates effectively into digital interface design. Much like buildings shape physical interaction, interfaces shape digital experience through layout, hierarchy, and visual rhythm. In the Indian context, this relationship can be observed in platforms that integrate local languages, symbolic imagery, and cultural cycles into their visual and interaction systems.

Collectively, these insights reaffirm that vernacular intelligence can guide designers toward creating digital spaces that are not only efficient but also emotionally and culturally engaging. By embracing local nuances as design intelligence, digital systems can evolve into inclusive, resonant platforms that embody the adaptive spirit of India's living vernacular traditions.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Findings from this thematic and comparative analysis suggest that re-embedding vernacular principles into digital systems can enhance inclusivity and cultural resonance. And the absence of vernacular presence in digital platforms will only limit their ability to connect meaningfully with diverse Indian users. While global minimalism and standardized design have advanced usability, they often result in environments that feel culturally detached. Re-introducing vernacular aesthetics offers a pathway to balance usability with resonance, enabling platforms to become not only functional but also socially inclusive.

For designers, the recommendation is to view vernacular elements as adaptable design intelligence rather than static tradition. Embedding local colours, motifs, symbols, and cultural rhythms into digital systems can create experiences that are intuitive, accessible, and regionally grounded. Future work could explore participatory design or prototype testing to measure user responses to vernacular elements in interfaces.

Reimagining Critical Regionalism within the digital domain allows designers to create platforms that are not only globally functional but also locally meaningful, reflecting the living, adaptive intelligence of vernacular design in the digital age, thus presenting a scope for further exploration, transforming this inquiry into actionable projects that shape culturally meaningful digital design futures.

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