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Beyond Market Logics: Governing Cultural Capital in Tourism in France and India

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ABSTRACT

Tourism is often conceptualised as a market-driven sector centred on growth, branding, and consumption. Such approaches, however, tend to overlook the role of governance in shaping how cultural resources are transformed into tourism value. This article reconceptualises tourism as managed cultural capital, arguing that tourism outcomes are determined less by cultural abundance or market demand than by governance capacity and institutional coordination. Drawing on theories of cultural capital, heritage governance, and the political economy of tourism, the study offers a comparative analysis of tourism governance in France and India. Adopting a thematic and interpretive approach based on policy frameworks and secondary literature, the article examines how state power, decentralisation, heritage regulation, sustainability, and market mediation structure tourism development. The analysis shows that France represents a model of coordinated governance, where heritage is institutionalised as cultural capital, sustainability is embedded within regulatory systems, and market processes are aligned with public objectives. In contrast, tourism governance in India is characterised by fragmented institutional arrangements, dominant market logics, and limited regulatory enforcement, leading to extractive practices and uneven developmental outcomes. The article contributes to tourism and heritage scholarship by advancing a governance-centred framework for understanding tourism development and by reframing sustainability as a structural outcome of governance rather than an ethical or voluntary practice.

Keywords: tourism governance; cultural capital; heritage; sustainability; France; India

INTRODUCTION: TOURISM, GOVERNANCE, AND THE POLITICS OF CULTURAL VALUE

Tourism has emerged as one of the most powerful global industries, shaping not only national economies but also cultural identities, spatial practices, and modes of governance. Far from being a neutral activity of leisure and consumption, tourism operates as a complex social institution through which culture is curated, heritage is commodified, and power relations between states, markets, and local communities are negotiated (Zhang et al., 2025; Su et al., 2017; Smith & Robinson, 2006). In contemporary societies, tourism plays a central role in producing meanings of place, authenticity, and national identity, while simultaneously raising critical questions about sustainability, cultural preservation, and social equity (Cohen, 2002; Nursanty et al., 2023). It functions not merely as an economic activity but as a powerful cultural and political force shaping identities, spaces, and social relations. Countries such as France and India occupy prominent positions in global tourism circuits, attracting millions of visitors annually through their cultural heritage, landscapes, and symbolic capital. Despite these similarities, the governance and management of tourism in the two countries differ significantly. This article examines how tourism is conceptualised, regulated, and practiced in France and India, asking: How do different governance models shape the relationship between tourism, culture, and sustainability?

France and India occupy prominent yet distinct positions within the global tourism landscape (Reddy & Ranjani, 2025). France has consistently ranked among the world's most visited countries, attracting international tourists through its cultural heritage, historical monuments, gastronomy, and well-developed tourism infrastructure (Dikanbaeva et al., 2025; Wilson, 2020). India, on the other hand, represents one of the most culturally diverse destinations globally, offering a vast array of religious, historical, ecological, and cultural experiences. Despite these similarities in tourism potential, the two countries differ significantly in how tourism is conceptualised, governed, and managed (Dixit, 2020; Geary, 2013). These differences make France and India compelling cases for a comparative study of tourism governance.

This article argues that tourism management cannot be understood solely in terms of economic performance or visitor numbers. Instead, tourism must be analysed as a form of cultural capital, embedded within broader frameworks of state governance, heritage management, and sustainability politics. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital, the study conceptualises tourism as a process through which cultural assets, that is, monuments, traditions, landscapes, and practices, are transformed into symbolic and economic value. The extent to which this transformation is regulated, protected, or commodified depends largely on the governance structures within which tourism operates.

In France, tourism management reflects a long-standing state tradition of cultural regulation and decentralised governance. Tourism is institutionally embedded within national economic planning while simultaneously delegated to regional and local authorities. Cultural heritage in France is not merely promoted but carefully preserved through legal frameworks, quality controls, and sustainability-oriented policies. Institutions such as Atout France play a crucial role in coordinating international promotion while encouraging innovation, environmental responsibility, and regional balance. Tourism, in this context, is treated as a public and cultural good, and an extension of national identity that requires regulation and protection. India's tourism governance presents a contrasting picture. While tourism is recognised as a significant contributor to economic growth and employment, its management is marked by fragmentation and uneven coordination between central, state, and local authorities. Tourism development in India often follows a market-driven model, prioritising destination branding, infrastructure development, and private investment. Although India possesses a rich and diverse cultural heritage, tourism frequently leads to the over-commercialisation of heritage sites, environmental degradation, and the marginalisation of local communities. Sustainability and heritage protection are articulated in policy documents but remain weakly institutionalised in practice.

The comparative analysis undertaken in this article is situated within broader debates on heritage governance and sustainable tourism. Heritage scholars have emphasised that heritage is not a fixed or neutral category but a socially constructed and politically regulated domain (Winter, 2014; Waterton & Watson, 2015). Tourism plays a central role in this process by selecting, packaging, and circulating particular versions of culture for consumption. The question, therefore, is not whether tourism commodifies culture, but how such commodification is governed, regulated, and negotiated. France and India offer contrasting answers to this question, shaped by differing state capacities, historical trajectories, and governance models. From a political economy perspective, tourism also reflects global inequalities and power relations (Phillips, 2017). International tourism flows, global capital, and transnational branding shape local tourism practices, often privileging elite consumption over community well-being (Jamal & Higham, 2021; Speake & Kennedy, 2022). In this context, governance becomes a crucial mediating mechanism that can either exacerbate or mitigate the negative impacts of tourism. By comparing France and India, this article highlights how governance structures influence the distribution of tourism's benefits and burdens. Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative and comparative approach, drawing on policy documents, institutional reports, and existing scholarly literature on tourism governance, cultural heritage, and sustainability. Rather than offering an empirical case study based on fieldwork, the article provides a conceptual and policy-oriented analysis that contributes to theoretical debates and informs tourism governance practices.

The central objective of this study is threefold. First, it examines the institutional frameworks and governance mechanisms that shape tourism management in France and India. Second, it aims to analyse how cultural heritage and sustainability are integrated, or neglected, within these frameworks. Third, it contributes to theoretical discussions by framing tourism as cultural capital, governed through varying configurations of state power, market forces, and local participation. By bringing France and India into dialogue, this article demonstrates that tourism governance is not merely a technical or administrative concern but a deeply social and political process. Understanding tourism through the lens of cultural capital and governance offers valuable insights for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners seeking to develop tourism models that are economically viable, culturally sensitive, and environmentally sustainable.

The article is organized as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical framework, drawing on concepts of cultural capital, heritage governance, and the political economy of tourism to situate tourism as a regulated cultural practice rather than a purely economic activity. This is followed by a brief discussion of the methodological approach adopted in the study. The subsequent sections examine tourism governance in France and India respectively, focusing on institutional structures, decentralisation, and the integration of cultural heritage and sustainability within tourism policy. A comparative section then brings these two cases into dialogue, highlighting key convergences and divergences in governance models and their socio-cultural implications. The article concludes by reflecting on the broader significance of tourism governance for sustainable development and cultural preservation, and by outlining policy-relevant insights for countries seeking to balance economic growth with heritage protection.

CULTURAL CAPITAL, HERITAGE GOVERNANCE, AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF TOURISM

This study is anchored in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that brings together the concepts of cultural capital, heritage governance, and the political economy of tourism. These perspectives enable an understanding of tourism not simply as an economic sector but as a socially embedded and politically regulated practice through which culture, space, and identity are produced and managed.

The concept of cultural capital, developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1986), provides a critical lens for analysing tourism as a process through which cultural resources are transformed into symbolic and economic value. Cultural capital encompasses embodied practices, objectified forms such as monuments and artworks, and institutionalised recognition through state certification and regulation (Fyfe, 2015; Bennett & Silva, 2011; Hanquinet, L. (2016). Tourism functions as a key mechanism through which these forms of cultural capital are mobilised, circulated, and consumed on a global scale (Young & Markham, 2019). In the context of tourism, heritage sites, traditions, cuisine, and landscapes are not merely cultural expressions but assets that generate prestige, legitimacy, and economic returns (Zocchi, 2021; Bendix, 2018). However, the conversion of cultural capital into economic capital is neither automatic nor neutral. It depends on institutional frameworks that determine which cultural elements are preserved, promoted, or marginalised (Musoba & Baez, 2009; Pret et al., 2015). This framework allows for a comparative analysis of how France and India differ in their capacity to regulate the transformation of culture into tourism value. While France institutionalises this process through strong state intervention and quality control, India's tourism sector often reflects uneven and market-driven commodification.

Heritage governance literature emphasises that heritage is not an inherent or fixed entity but a socially constructed category shaped by state policies, expert knowledge, and public discourse (Pendlebury, 2015). The state plays a central role in defining what counts as heritage, how it is preserved, and how it is made accessible to tourists. Tourism is deeply entangled with this process, as it provides both the incentive and the infrastructure for heritage management. In countries like France, heritage governance is characterised by legal protection, decentralised administration, and long-term conservation planning. Tourism policy is closely aligned with heritage preservation, ensuring that cultural assets are not exhausted or degraded by excessive commercialisation. In contrast, heritage governance in India operates within a more fragmented institutional landscape, where multiple authorities and private actors shape tourism practices. This often leads to tensions between preservation and profit, particularly in heritage-rich but resource-constrained regions. By foregrounding heritage governance, this article highlights how tourism reflects broader state-society relations and cultural priorities.

The political economy approach situates tourism within global systems of power, capital, and inequality. Tourism development is influenced by international travel flows, global branding strategies, and transnational investment, which often privilege elite consumption over local needs. From this perspective, tourism is not merely a local or national phenomenon but part of a global economic order that shapes how destinations are developed and marketed. This framework is particularly useful for understanding disparities between the Global North and Global South. France's tourism model benefits from the historical accumulation of cultural capital, strong institutional capacity, and global symbolic dominance. India, despite its cultural richness, faces structural constraints, including infrastructure gaps, regulatory weaknesses, and socio-economic inequalities, that shape tourism outcomes. The political economy lens thus helps explain why similar cultural resources yield different tourism trajectories across national contexts.

Sustainability has become a central concern in contemporary tourism scholarship, addressing the long-term environmental, social, and cultural impacts of tourism development (Sharia & Sitchinava, 2023; Edgell, 2019). Sustainable tourism theory emphasises intergenerational equity, ecological responsibility, and community participation (Nyamboke, 2024; Maretti & Salvatore, 2012). However, sustainability is not merely a technical solution but a governance challenge that requires institutional commitment and regulatory enforcement. This study treats sustainability as an outcome of governance rather than individual ethical choice. The extent to which tourism is sustainable depends on how states regulate tourist flows, protect heritage, and integrate environmental concerns into planning processes. The comparison between France and India reveals how sustainability is institutionalised differently, with France embedding sustainability within governance frameworks, while India often addresses it at the level of policy rhetoric.

COMPARATIVE AND INTERPRETIVE ANALYSIS OF TOURISM GOVERNANCE

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative, and interpretive research design to examine tourism governance in France and India. The article is based on an in-depth analysis of secondary sources, enabling a macro-level and theoretically informed comparison of tourism management frameworks across two distinct national contexts. The primary sources for this study include national tourism policies, institutional reports, and official documents produced by government agencies and tourism bodies in both countries. In the case of France, these sources include policy statements and reports from national tourism institutions and heritage authorities, while for India, documents from the Ministry of Tourism and related state-level tourism agencies are examined. These materials are supplemented by academic literature from tourism studies, sociology, heritage studies, and political economy.

A comparative analytical approach is employed to identify similarities and differences in governance structures, decentralisation mechanisms, heritage management practices, and sustainability strategies. The comparison is not intended to evaluate one model as universally superior, but to highlight how differing historical trajectories, state capacities, and governance traditions shape tourism outcomes. The analysis is guided by the theoretical framework outlined earlier, particularly the concept of tourism as cultural capital and the role of the state in heritage governance. Textual analysis is used to interpret policy language, institutional priorities, and sustainability narratives, focusing on how tourism is framed and regulated within each context. This qualitative and policy-oriented methodology is appropriate for addressing the article’s objectives, as it allows for a nuanced understanding of tourism governance beyond quantitative indicators such as tourist arrivals or revenue generation. By foregrounding governance and cultural regulation, the study contributes to broader theoretical debates on sustainable tourism and heritage management.

Rather than presenting separate country case studies, this article adopts a thematic comparative approach. France and India are analysed relationally across key governance dimensions, allowing for a concept-driven comparison of how tourism functions as managed cultural capital under differing institutional conditions. This approach foregrounds governance mechanisms over national description, enabling stronger theoretical generalisation.

TOURISM GOVERNANCE IN FRANCE AND INDIA: AN OVERVIEW

Tourism governance in France and India reflects contrasting institutional traditions, political structures, and developmental priorities. While both countries recognise tourism as a significant contributor to economic growth and international visibility, the governance arrangements through which tourism is managed differ markedly. These differences shape how cultural resources are mobilised, how heritage is protected, and how sustainability is operationalised within tourism policy.

France represents one of the most institutionalised and coordinated models of tourism governance globally. Tourism is not treated merely as a commercial activity but as a strategic sector embedded within national economic planning, cultural policy, and territorial governance (Dissart et al., 2015). This approach reflects a long-standing tradition of state involvement in cultural regulation, supported by a decentralised administrative structure that enables regional and local participation in tourism development (Pastras & Bramwell, 2013). At the national level, tourism falls under the Ministry of Economy and Finance, underscoring its economic and symbolic importance. Tourism policy is integrated with broader concerns such as infrastructure development, international competitiveness, and crisis management, including responses to security threats, public health emergencies, and climate-related risks (Friel & Youssef, 2025).

A central institutional actor within this framework is Atout France, the national tourism development agency, which functions as an intermediary between the state, regional authorities, and private stakeholders. Beyond destination promotion, Atout France is responsible for quality certification, innovation support, and the promotion of sustainable tourism practices. Through these mechanisms, tourism development in France is subject to regulatory oversight that governs how cultural assets are transformed into tourism value. Authority is further distributed across regional, departmental, and municipal levels, allowing tourism to be embedded within local cultural and social contexts while remaining aligned with national objectives. This decentralised yet coordinated model enhances governance capacity and enables region-specific responses to challenges such as seasonality, environmental vulnerability, and visitor pressure.

Cultural heritage occupies a central position within French tourism governance. Historic monuments, museums, urban landscapes, culinary traditions, and rural heritage are subject to extensive legal protection and regulatory oversight (Fournier, 2013; Thi & Le Quyen, 2025). Heritage management is closely aligned with tourism policy, ensuring that tourism development does not undermine conservation objectives. Through classification systems, conservation laws, and expert oversight, heritage is curated as a form of institutionalised cultural capital, limiting excessive commercialisation while reinforcing symbolic value. Sustainability is similarly embedded within governance frameworks, with policies promoting eco-certified accommodations, sustainable transport, slow tourism, and the management of tourist flows in highly visited destinations. Sustainability in the French context is framed as a governance responsibility rather than an individual ethical choice.

India presents a contrasting governance context shaped by its federal political structure, vast cultural diversity, and development-oriented policy priorities. While tourism is recognised as an important contributor to economic growth, employment, and international visibility, its governance is characterised by fragmentation, uneven coordination, and a strong market orientation. Tourism is governed at the national level by the Ministry of Tourism, which is responsible for policy formulation and international promotion. However, implementation largely depends on state governments and local authorities, resulting in significant variation in tourism practices and regulatory capacity across regions. This multi-tiered structure often produces gaps in coordination, overlapping mandates, and inconsistencies in policy execution, reflecting broader challenges of federal governance.

Indian tourism policy has increasingly emphasised destination branding, private investment, and infrastructure expansion. Promotional campaigns foreground cultural diversity, spirituality, and heritage, yet frequently prioritise visibility and revenue generation over long-term sustainability. Private sector participation plays a central role in tourism development, particularly in hospitality and transport, contributing to rapid growth but also to uneven development and the commodification of cultural practices. In this context, tourism often functions in extractive ways, with cultural and natural resources mobilised for consumption without adequate regulatory oversight.

Despite possessing one of the richest and most diverse cultural heritages globally, heritage governance in India remains institutionally fragmented. Multiple agencies, including archaeological bodies, tourism departments, and local administrations, are involved in heritage management, often with competing priorities. As a result, heritage sites commonly face overcrowding, inadequate conservation, and excessive commercialisation. Tourism development around heritage sites tends to prioritise visitor numbers over preservation, leading to the erosion of cultural authenticity and local practices. Unlike the preventive and regulated heritage frameworks observed in France, heritage governance in India is often reactive.

Sustainability has emerged as a stated objective within Indian tourism policy, particularly through initiatives related to eco-tourism and rural tourism (Jeevishaa et al., 2023; Kumar et al., 2025; Cabral & Dhar, 2020). However, sustainability remains unevenly institutionalised and weakly enforced in practice. Environmental degradation, waste management challenges, and pressure on fragile ecosystems are prevalent in popular tourist destinations. Community participation in tourism planning is frequently limited, with local communities often excluded from decision-making processes. Consequently, sustainability is more often articulated as an aspirational goal than embedded as a regulatory requirement.

Taken together, the governance contexts of France and India reveal contrasting institutional conditions under which tourism operates. France demonstrates a model of coordinated governance in which tourism is embedded within cultural policy, heritage regulation, and sustainability frameworks. India, by contrast, illustrates the challenges of fragmented governance, market dominance, and uneven regulatory capacity in managing tourism development. Rather than presenting these cases as isolated national models, the following section adopts a thematic comparative approach to examine how differing governance arrangements shape the conversion of cultural capital into tourism value across both contexts.

GOVERNING THE TOURIST GAZE: TOURISM, STATE POWER, AND CULTURAL VALUE

Tourism governance in France illustrates a decisive shift from viewing tourism as a discrete economic sector to understanding it as a form of strategic cultural governance. Rather than treating tourism primarily as a market-driven industry oriented toward revenue generation and employment, the French state embeds tourism within broader frameworks of cultural policy, territorial governance, and national planning. Tourism thus functions as a tool for managing culture, space, and national identity, rather than merely facilitating consumption.

This framing aligns with critical tourism scholarship that challenges economistic approaches to tourism development (Urry, 1990; Smith & Robinson, 2006). As Urry's concept of the "tourist gaze" demonstrates, tourism is never a neutral activity; it involves selective representation, spatial ordering, and symbolic power. In the French context, this gaze is not left to market forces but is actively shaped by state institutions that regulate how places, heritage, and cultural practices are presented. Tourism therefore operates as an extension of state cultural authority rather than as a self-regulating economic domain.

The institutional positioning of tourism governance in France reflects this strategic orientation. Tourism is overseen by the Ministry of Economy and Finance, signalling its economic significance, yet its governance is closely integrated with cultural policy, heritage regulation, and territorial planning. This dual positioning allows tourism to be mobilised as a form of soft power, contributing to national image-building and cultural diplomacy while reinforcing internal territorial cohesion.

A central mechanism in this governance model is the role of intermediary institutions such as Atout France, which mediate between the state, regional authorities, and market actors. Beyond promotion and branding, Atout France oversees quality certification, innovation support, and sustainability initiatives. Through these functions, the agency regulates how cultural resources are converted into tourism value. This process reflects Bourdieu's (1986) insight that cultural capital acquires legitimacy through institutional recognition. Cultural assets like heritage sites, landscapes, or culinary traditions, do not automatically generate tourism value; their value is stabilised and sanctioned through regulatory frameworks.

This approach contrasts sharply with governance models in which tourism is treated primarily as an economic growth engine subject to market competition and private investment imperatives. In such contexts, tourism policy often prioritises visibility and visitor numbers, with cultural and environmental considerations treated as secondary. The French model, by contrast, integrates economic and cultural objectives from the outset, framing tourism as a public good that requires coordination, regulation, and long-term planning.

Territorial governance further reinforces tourism's strategic role. France's decentralised administrative structure enables regions and municipalities to develop tourism strategies grounded in local cultural identities and socio-spatial contexts, while remaining aligned with national objectives. This multi-level governance does not dilute state authority; rather, it redistributes it in ways that enhance regulatory capacity and responsiveness to region-specific challenges.

The framing of tourism as strategic cultural governance also reshapes sustainability. Sustainability is not treated as an individual ethical choice but as a governance responsibility embedded within planning frameworks, visitor management strategies, and regulatory mechanisms. This supports the argument that sustainability in tourism is an outcome of governance capacity rather than a moral add-on (Harrison, 2013).

Conceptualising tourism as strategic cultural governance thus has important comparative implications. It demonstrates that tourism outcomes depend less on cultural abundance or market demand than on the institutional capacity of the state to regulate cultural value. The French case illustrates how tourism can contribute to economic vitality while reinforcing cultural integrity and sustainability, offering a critical benchmark for understanding alternative governance trajectories in contexts where market-driven tourism risks eroding long-term cultural value.

GOVERNING SCALE: DECENTRALISATION, CAPACITY, AND FRAGMENTATION

Decentralisation occupies a central yet contested position in debates on tourism governance. While often presented as a mechanism for democratic participation and local empowerment, decentralisation can either enhance governance capacity or exacerbate fragmentation, depending on institutional coherence and regulatory coordination. A comparison of France and India demonstrates that decentralisation is not inherently beneficial; rather, its effects depend on how authority, responsibility, and resources are distributed across governance levels. In this regard, decentralisation functions as governance capacity in France, while operating as a structural constraint in India.

In the French context, decentralisation is embedded within a strong and coherent institutional framework that preserves strategic coordination at the national level while enabling meaningful autonomy at regional and local levels. Tourism governance operates through a multi-tiered system in which the central state defines strategic priorities, quality standards, and regulatory frameworks, while regions, departments, and municipalities adapt these priorities to local cultural, environmental, and territorial contexts (Pastras & Bramwell, 2013). This model exemplifies coordinated decentralisation, where authority is dispersed without undermining policy coherence.

Regions in France play a key role in formulating tourism strategies that reflect territorial identity and cultural specificity, including destination branding and regional development plans. Departments and municipalities manage infrastructure, tourist information centres, festivals, and heritage sites. This layered governance structure enables tourism to be embedded within local social and cultural contexts and allows for responsiveness to region-specific challenges such as seasonality, environmental vulnerability, and visitor pressure (Dissart et al., 2015).

Crucially, decentralisation in France enhances governance capacity rather than diluting state authority. National institutions retain oversight and coordination functions, ensuring that decentralised tourism development aligns with broader objectives of cultural preservation, sustainability, and territorial balance. Intermediary institutions such as Atout France further reinforce coherence by linking national strategy with regional implementation. Decentralisation thus expands the regulatory reach of the state by distributing governance functions across multiple levels.

From the perspective of cultural governance, this arrangement allows tourism to function as a locally grounded yet nationally coordinated practice. Local actors are not merely policy implementers but active participants in shaping tourism development, fostering legitimacy and a sense of ownership over cultural and natural resources. Decentralisation, in this sense, enables cultural capital to be managed at appropriate spatial scales while remaining institutionally recognised.

In contrast, decentralisation in India operates within a federal governance structure marked by uneven institutional capacity, fragmented authority, and inconsistent policy execution. Although states possess substantial autonomy over tourism development, this autonomy is not consistently supported by coordination mechanisms or regulatory oversight. Tourism governance involves multiple actors across central, state, and local levels, often with overlapping mandates and competing priorities. As a result, decentralisation frequently produces fragmentation rather than capacity.

The Ministry of Tourism provides national frameworks and promotional initiatives, but implementation largely depends on state governments and local bodies, whose capacity varies widely. This unevenness results in divergent tourism practices, regulatory gaps, and inconsistent heritage and sustainability outcomes across regions. From a political economy perspective, fragmented decentralisation weakens the state's ability to regulate market actors effectively, allowing private interests to dominate tourism development and prioritise short-term growth over cultural preservation and environmental sustainability.

The implications for heritage and sustainability governance are significant. In France, decentralised heritage management operates within nationally defined conservation frameworks, ensuring preventive and regulated protection. In India, fragmented authority often leads to reactive heritage management and weak enforcement, with sustainability initiatives remaining aspirational rather than institutionalised (Fournier, 2013; Harrison, 2013).

In sum, decentralisation emerges as a double-edged instrument in tourism governance. In France, it enhances governance capacity by enabling locally responsive yet nationally coordinated tourism development. In India, it frequently operates as a structural constraint, producing fragmentation that undermines regulation and exacerbates uneven tourism outcomes. This comparison reinforces the central argument of the article: tourism governance outcomes depend not on institutional form alone, but on the coherence and capacity of governance arrangements.

HERITAGE AS CULTURAL CAPITAL OR EXTRACTIVE RESOURCE: GOVERNANCE AND VALUE IN TOURISM

Heritage occupies a pivotal position in tourism governance, functioning simultaneously as a symbolic resource and a site of economic value creation. Yet heritage does not enter tourism circuits in a uniform way. This section argues that heritage operates as institutionalised cultural capital in the French context, while in India it is more frequently treated as an extractive resource, mobilised for tourism consumption without adequate regulatory protection. This contrast demonstrates how governance frameworks mediate the relationship between heritage, tourism, and sustainability.

Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital, heritage can be understood as symbolic value that requires institutional recognition to acquire legitimacy and durability. Cultural capital does not retain value autonomously; its conversion into economic capital depends on classification, expert authority, and regulatory frameworks. In tourism, heritage sites, practices, and landscapes become valuable not simply because they exist, but because they are recognised, curated, and protected through governance mechanisms. Tourism governance thus determines whether heritage is preserved as a renewable cultural resource or depleted through commodification.

In France, heritage governance is characterised by strong institutionalisation and legal protection, positioning heritage as a public good embedded within state cultural policy. Historic monuments, museums, urban landscapes, culinary traditions, and rural heritage are governed through classification systems, conservation laws, and professional oversight (Fournier, 2013). Tourism policy is closely aligned with heritage governance, allowing cultural assets to be made accessible to visitors without undermining conservation objectives. This alignment reflects a governance logic in which heritage is treated as institutionalised cultural capital, whose value is stabilised through state recognition and regulation.

The French state's curatorial role limits excessive commercialisation and regulates how heritage is accessed, interpreted, and used. Heritage sites are not opened indiscriminately to tourism markets; rather, tourism development is managed to reinforce symbolic value rather than erode it. Tourism thus functions as a mechanism for the reproduction and valorisation of heritage, rather than its exploitation. This governance model illustrates how cultural capital can be mobilised economically without being culturally exhausted.

Heritage governance in France also operates across multiple spatial scales. National institutions establish conservation standards and legal frameworks, while regional and local authorities manage heritage in ways that reflect territorial identity and cultural specificity. This multi-level arrangement embeds heritage within local social contexts while maintaining national oversight. As Harrison (2013) argues, such heritage regimes reveal that preservation is not merely technical but political, shaped by power relations and governance priorities.

In contrast, heritage governance in India is marked by institutional fragmentation and uneven regulatory enforcement. Despite possessing vast and diverse cultural heritage, India lacks cohesive mechanisms to integrate heritage preservation with tourism development. Multiple agencies like archaeological bodies, tourism departments, and local administrations—exercise overlapping authority, often with competing mandates. This fragmentation weakens accountability and limits the state's capacity to regulate tourism impacts effectively.

As a result, heritage in India is frequently mobilised as an extractive tourism resource, prioritised for visibility, branding, and visitor numbers over long-term preservation. Tourism development around heritage sites often produces overcrowding, infrastructural stress, and the erosion of cultural authenticity. Conservation measures tend to be reactive rather than preventive, introduced after degradation becomes visible. In this context, heritage functions less as institutionalised cultural capital and more as a consumable asset shaped by market demand.

From a political economy perspective, this extractive orientation reflects the dominance of market-led tourism in the absence of strong regulatory frameworks. Private actors shape tourism narratives and practices, while local communities, often custodians of living heritage, remain marginal to decision-making processes. This not only undermines heritage sustainability but also reproduces social inequalities associated with tourism development (Harrison, 2013).

The contrast between France and India underscores a crucial insight: heritage does not become cultural capital simply by being historic or culturally significant. Its capacity to generate sustainable tourism value depends on institutional mediation. Where heritage is governed as cultural capital, tourism can support preservation and symbolic reproduction. Where governance is fragmented, tourism risks eroding the very cultural foundations on which it depends. This finding reinforces Smith and Robinson's (2006) argument that cultural tourism is inherently political, shaped by decisions about representation, access, and value.

SUSTAINABILITY AS A GOVERNANCE OUTCOME, NOT AN ETHICAL CHOICE

Sustainability has become a central yet contested concept in contemporary tourism discourse. Commonly framed as an ethical responsibility of individual tourists or corporate actors, sustainability is often reduced to voluntary practices such as responsible consumption, eco-labelling, or corporate social responsibility. This section argues that such framings obscure a more fundamental reality: sustainability in tourism is not an ethical disposition but a governance outcome. A comparative analysis of France and India demonstrates that sustainable tourism emerges not from moral appeals or market incentives alone, but from the presence—or absence—of institutional capacity, regulatory enforcement, and coordinated governance.

Critical tourism scholarship has long questioned the effectiveness of market-led sustainability models. Harrison (2013) argues that sustainability narratives frequently depoliticise environmental and cultural degradation by shifting responsibility onto individual behaviour, thereby deflecting attention from structural causes. In tourism, sustainability is often mobilised as a branding strategy rather than a regulatory commitment. The French case challenges this tendency by embedding sustainability within governance frameworks, while the Indian case illustrates the limits of sustainability when it remains aspirational and weakly institutionalised.

In France, sustainability is treated as a collective governance responsibility integrated into tourism planning, heritage regulation, and territorial management. Environmental considerations are incorporated into tourism policy through enforceable mechanisms such as zoning regulations, eco-certification schemes, transport planning, and the management of tourist flows in high-density destinations. Initiatives promoting rural and slow tourism, protecting natural landscapes, and regulating access to UNESCO World Heritage Sites are institutionalised components of tourism governance rather than optional add-ons.

This approach reflects a governance ethos in which tourism is managed as a long-term public and cultural good rather than a short-term economic opportunity. Sustainability is operationalised through planning instruments, regulatory oversight, and inter-institutional coordination, ensuring that tourism development does not exceed ecological or cultural carrying capacities. Importantly, sustainability is not framed as a constraint on growth but as a condition for its durability. By regulating tourism practices, the French state seeks to stabilise both environmental resources and cultural capital, reinforcing tourism's long-term value.

From a theoretical perspective, this model aligns with governance-based approaches to sustainability that emphasise institutional design over individual ethics. Sustainability emerges as an outcome of state capacity and regulatory coherence rather than the aggregated effect of responsible consumer choices. As Smith and Robinson (2006) note, cultural tourism is inherently political, requiring decisions about access, representation, and limitation; decisions that cannot be left to market forces alone. The French case illustrates how sustainability is produced through state authority over space, time, and tourism intensity.

In contrast, sustainability in Indian tourism governance is largely articulated at the level of policy discourse rather than institutional practice. Although official policies promote eco-tourism, rural tourism, and responsible tourism, implementation remains uneven and weakly enforced. Sustainability initiatives often coexist with aggressive destination branding, infrastructure expansion, and market-driven development strategies that prioritise growth and visibility. Consequently, sustainability functions more as an aspirational ideal than a regulatory outcome.

Environmental degradation, waste management challenges, and pressure on fragile ecosystems are widespread in popular tourist destinations across India. Hill stations, coastal areas, religious sites, and heritage zones frequently experience overcrowding and infrastructural strain, while local authorities often lack the institutional capacity, financial resources, or political authority to regulate tourism impacts effectively. Community participation in tourism planning is frequently limited, further undermining sustainability by marginalising local knowledge and social needs (Harrison, 2013).

In sum, the comparison demonstrates that sustainability in tourism cannot be reduced to ethical intention or market logic. Where governance capacity is strong, as in France, sustainability is institutionalised and enforceable. Where governance is fragmented, as in India, sustainability remains symbolic and uneven. Understanding sustainability as a governance outcome rather than an ethical aspiration is therefore essential for advancing equitable and environmentally responsible tourism development.

GOVERNING MARKETS: CULTURAL CAPITAL AND THE REGULATION OF TOURISM VALUE

Tourism governance operates at the intersection of culture and markets, where cultural resources are converted into economic value through commodification, branding, and consumption. This conversion, however, is neither uniform nor neutral. This section argues that market logics shape tourism outcomes unevenly depending on the presence of regulatory mediation, producing divergent trajectories in the conversion of cultural capital into economic capital. The comparison between France and India demonstrates how markets can be governed to stabilise cultural value or left relatively unchecked, resulting in extractive and uneven tourism development.

Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital provides a critical lens for understanding these dynamics. Cultural capital acquires value through institutional recognition and legitimacy; it does not circulate autonomously within markets. In tourism, heritage sites, landscapes, culinary traditions, and cultural practices become economically valuable only when they are rendered legible, desirable, and governable. The central analytical question, therefore, is not whether markets operate in tourism, but how market activity is mediated by governance structures.

In the French case, market participation in tourism is significant but institutionally constrained. Private actors play an important role in hospitality, transport, and tourism services, yet their activities operate within regulatory frameworks governing quality, sustainability, and heritage protection. Market logics are subordinated to public objectives defined by the state, including cultural preservation, territorial balance, and environmental sustainability. Tourism markets thus function not as autonomous engines of development, but as instruments embedded within strategic governance.

Institutions such as Atout France exemplify this mediated market model. Through quality standards, certification schemes, and branding norms, the state shapes how market actors participate in tourism value creation. Cultural capital is converted into economic capital through controlled valorisation rather than unrestricted commodification, ensuring that tourism growth does not erode symbolic value. As a result, cultural capital retains legitimacy and distinction over time.

From a political economy perspective, regulated markets in France prevent the over-concentration of tourism value in specific locations or among particular actors. Spatial planning, visitor management, and regional development strategies distribute tourism activity across territories, reducing pressure on iconic destinations while supporting lesser-known regions (Dissart et al., 2015). Market activity is thus aligned with broader social and cultural objectives through governance mechanisms.

In contrast, tourism markets in India operate within a governance context marked by fragmented oversight and weak regulatory mediation. Market logics dominate tourism development, with private investment, destination branding, and infrastructure expansion prioritised as drivers of growth. Cultural capital is rapidly mobilised for tourism consumption without adequate institutional safeguards to prevent over-extraction.

This market-dominated environment produces an uneven and unstable conversion of cultural capital into economic capital. Iconic heritage sites and religious destinations attract concentrated investment and visitor flows, while less visible regions remain marginalised. In the absence of effective regulation, market demand dictates tourism practices, leading to overcrowding, environmental degradation, and the dilution of cultural meaning. Cultural assets are consumed intensively but insufficiently replenished, resulting in symbolic depletion.

Uneven institutional capacity across states and local governments further exacerbates this process. Where regulation is weak, private actors exercise disproportionate influence over tourism narratives, shaping cultural representation to suit market demand rather than cultural continuity. Tourism experiences become standardised and spectacle-driven, reflecting what Smith and Robinson (2006) describe as the politicisation of cultural tourism, where value and representation are shaped by power relations.

The comparison highlights a critical distinction between regulated markets and market dominance. In France, governance stabilises cultural capital and distributes value across space and time. In India, market dominance accelerates the conversion of cultural capital into short-term economic gain, often at the expense of long-term sustainability. The difference lies not in the presence of markets, but in the capacity of the state to regulate them.

In sum, the uneven conversion of cultural capital under market logics reveals the limits of growth-centric tourism paradigms. Recognising markets as mediated rather than autonomous forces reinforces the article's central claim: sustainable and equitable tourism depends not on market expansion alone, but on the governance of value conversion itself.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: TOURISM GOVERNANCE IN FRANCE AND INDIA

A comparative analysis of tourism governance in France and India reveals how differing configurations of state capacity, institutional coordination, and cultural regulation shape tourism outcomes. While both countries possess significant cultural and symbolic capital, the mechanisms through which tourism is governed differ fundamentally. This section compares the two models across key dimensions of governance, heritage management, and sustainability, situating the comparison within the theoretical framework of cultural capital and political economy.

France exhibits a coordinated and multi-level governance structure, where tourism policy is integrated into national economic planning while being decentralised to regional and local authorities. This allows for consistency in national vision alongside flexibility in local implementation. India, by contrast, operates within a federal but fragmented governance system, where responsibilities are dispersed across central, state, and local bodies with limited coordination. From a governance perspective, France demonstrates high institutional capacity to regulate tourism, whereas India's tourism governance reflects broader challenges of administrative fragmentation and uneven state capacity.

Table 1: Comparative Dimensions of Tourism Governance

Dimension	France	India
Governance Model	Coordinated, decentralised	Federal, fragmented
Role of the State	Strong regulator and curator	Facilitator and promoter
Institutional Capacity	High and stable	Uneven across states
Heritage Management	Regulated and legally protected	Commercialised, weak enforcement

Sustainability	Institutionalised and enforced	Policy-driven, weak implementation
Local Participation	Embedded in governance	Often marginalised
Tourism Orientation	Public and cultural good	Economic commodity

Applying Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital highlights a critical divergence between the two cases. In France, cultural assets are institutionally curated, transforming heritage into symbolic capital that reinforces national identity and global prestige. This transformation is mediated by regulatory frameworks that limit excessive commodification and ensure long-term preservation.

In India, cultural capital is abundant but weakly institutionalised. Tourism frequently converts cultural assets directly into economic capital without sufficient regulatory mediation. This results in the dilution of symbolic value and contributes to cultural exhaustion. The comparative lens reveals that the value of cultural capital in tourism depends not merely on cultural richness, but on governance capacity.

Heritage governance in France reflects a preventive and long-term approach, where tourism is aligned with conservation objectives. Sustainability is embedded within planning frameworks and enforced through regulation. In India, heritage governance is reactive, with conservation efforts often introduced after degradation has occurred. Sustainability initiatives exist but lack enforcement and community integration. This contrast illustrates how sustainability functions not as a universal norm, but as a governance outcome shaped by institutional priorities and regulatory strength.

From a political economy perspective, France benefits from historical accumulation of cultural capital, strong institutional frameworks, and global symbolic dominance. India's tourism sector, despite its cultural wealth, operates within a development-driven political economy that prioritises growth and visibility. As a result, tourism development in India often reproduces inequalities, privileging private capital and elite consumption over community well-being. The comparison underscores how tourism governance mediates the relationship between global tourism markets and local socio-cultural realities.

The French and Indian cases demonstrate that tourism governance is a deeply political process that shapes how culture is valued, protected, and consumed. France's model illustrates the advantages of treating tourism as a regulated form of cultural capital, while India's experience highlights the risks of market-led tourism development in the absence of strong governance. Rather than positioning one model as universally applicable, this comparison suggests that sustainable and culturally sensitive tourism requires context-specific governance frameworks that balance economic, cultural, and environmental objectives.

WEAVING THE THEMES: TOWARDS A GOVERNANCE-CENTRED UNDERSTANDING OF TOURISM

This section synthesises the comparative analysis developed in the preceding sections by bringing together key analytical themes through which tourism governance in France and India can be understood. Rather than reiterating descriptive findings, the discussion focuses on how governance structures mediate the relationship between tourism, cultural capital, heritage, sustainability, and market forces.

Table 2: Thematic Synthesis of Tourism Governance in France and India

Analytical Theme	France	India	Analytical Implication
1. From Economic Sector to Strategic Cultural Governance	Tourism embedded within national economic planning, cultural policy, and territorial governance	Tourism largely framed as a growth-oriented economic sector	Tourism outcomes depend on whether tourism is governed as cultural strategy or market activity
2. State Power and the Regulation of Tourism Value	Strong state mediation regulates quality, heritage value, and symbolic capital	Limited regulatory mediation; value largely shaped by market forces	Cultural value is stabilised through institutional authority, not market demand alone

3. Decentralisation as Capacity vs Fragmentation as Constraint	Decentralisation enhances governance capacity through coordinated multi-level control	Federal decentralisation produces fragmentation and uneven implementation	Decentralisation strengthens governance only when supported by coordination and capacity
4. Heritage as Institutionalised Cultural Capital vs Extractive Resource	Heritage legally protected and curated as institutionalised cultural capital	Heritage mobilised extractively for tourism consumption	Heritage sustainability depends on institutional mediation, not cultural abundance
5. Sustainability as Governance Outcome, Not Ethical Aspiration	Sustainability embedded in regulation, planning, and enforcement	Sustainability articulated in policy but weakly enforced	Sustainability is produced through governance, not individual ethics
6. Market Logics and the Uneven Conversion of Cultural Capital	Market activity regulated to balance economic, cultural, and environmental objectives	Market dominance leads to uneven and extractive value conversion	Ungoverned markets accelerate cultural depletion and inequality

Table 2 synthesises the core analytical themes that structure the comparative discussion of tourism governance in France and India. Rather than presenting empirical findings, the table consolidates the governance dimensions through which tourism is conceptualised as a form of managed cultural capital. The comparison demonstrates that differences in tourism outcomes are not primarily a function of cultural richness or market demand, but of governance capacity—specifically, the ability of the state to regulate markets, institutionalise heritage, coordinate decentralisation, and embed sustainability within policy frameworks. Read together, these themes reinforce the central argument of the article: tourism becomes sustainable and culturally productive only when its economic logics are mediated through strong and coherent governance structures.

Read together, the six analytical themes outlined in Table 2 demonstrate that tourism governance operates as an integrated and mutually reinforcing system rather than a set of isolated policy domains. The shift from tourism as an economic sector to tourism as strategic cultural governance establishes the foundational logic through which tourism is positioned within state priorities. This repositioning enables state power to regulate tourism value, ensuring that cultural resources are not merely exposed to market demand but are institutionally mediated and legitimised. In this framework, tourism value is not produced autonomously by markets; it is stabilised through governance arrangements that determine how, where, and under what conditions cultural capital is mobilised.

Decentralisation further conditions this governance logic by shaping the scale at which tourism is managed. Where decentralisation operates as capacity, as in the French case, it enhances the state's ability to align national objectives with local cultural and environmental contexts. Where it operates as fragmentation, as in the Indian case, it weakens regulatory coherence and amplifies market dominance. This divergence directly affects how heritage is governed. When embedded within coordinated governance structures, heritage functions as institutionalised cultural capital, protected and reproduced through regulation. In fragmented governance contexts, heritage is more likely to be treated as an extractive resource, consumed for tourism without adequate mechanisms for long-term preservation.

Sustainability emerges within this configuration not as an independent ethical goal, but as an outcome of governance capacity. The ability to regulate tourist flows, enforce environmental standards, and integrate sustainability into planning depends on the same institutional coherence that governs heritage and decentralisation. Finally, market logics cut across all preceding themes, revealing how the conversion of cultural capital into economic capital is either regulated or left uneven and extractive. Where markets are mediated by governance, tourism value is distributed and sustained; where markets dominate, cultural capital is rapidly depleted and unevenly appropriated.

Taken together, these themes substantiate the central argument of the paper: tourism outcomes are shaped less by cultural abundance or market potential than by the quality of governance arrangements that regulate the conversion of cultural capital into economic value. Tourism becomes sustainable, culturally productive, and socially embedded only when state capacity, institutional coordination, and regulatory authority converge. By weaving governance, heritage, sustainability, decentralisation, and markets into a single analytical framework, this study demonstrates that tourism must be understood as a form of managed cultural capital; one whose trajectories are fundamentally political and institutional in nature.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that tourism outcomes are shaped less by cultural abundance or market demand than by the quality of governance arrangements through which tourism is organised. By conceptualising tourism as managed cultural capital, the study demonstrates that the conversion of cultural resources into economic value is neither automatic nor neutral, but mediated by state capacity, institutional coordination, and regulatory authority. Through a comparative analysis of France and India, the article shows how governance structures condition whether tourism operates as a sustainable cultural practice or an extractive economic activity.

The French case illustrates how tourism can be governed as a strategic domain of cultural policy. Strong institutional coordination, decentralised yet coherent governance, regulated heritage regimes, and enforceable sustainability frameworks enable the state to stabilise cultural value while generating economic returns. Markets in this context are not displaced, but mediated to align with public objectives such as cultural preservation, territorial balance, and long-term sustainability. In contrast, the Indian case reveals the limits of market-led tourism development in the absence of cohesive governance. Fragmented decentralisation, weak regulatory enforcement, and market dominance produce uneven tourism outcomes, extractive use of heritage, and sustainability initiatives that remain largely aspirational.

Theoretically, the article extends Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital by demonstrating that its conversion into tourism value depends on governance capacity rather than market exposure alone. It also reframes sustainability as a governance outcome, not an ethical aspiration or individual responsibility. Future research could build on this framework through ethnographic and longitudinal studies examining how governance arrangements are enacted at local levels, as well as comparative analyses across additional national and digital tourism contexts. Such work would further illuminate how regulatory capacity, community participation, and emerging platform economies shape the long-term sustainability of tourism systems.

In sum, understanding tourism as managed cultural capital offers a governance-centred framework for rethinking tourism development, particularly in heritage-rich contexts facing intensifying market pressures.

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