

MATERIAL, CULTURE AND COGNITION **COURSE**



Date

15th April, 2025 - 25th April, 2025

DESIGNING WITH CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE: A CROSS-CULTURAL PEDAGOGY IN MATERIAL, CULTURE, AND COGNITION

The Material, Culture and Cognition module, designed as a cornerstone interdisciplinary project within the B.Des program at the School of Arts and Design, Woxsen University, engaged 170 students from four distinct design disciplines: Communication Design, Fashion Design, Industrial Design, and Interior Design. This comprehensive module was strategically developed to cultivate critical cultural awareness among emerging designers, recognizing that contemporary design practice demands a nuanced understanding of the intricate relationships between materiality, cultural context, and cognitive processes.

FACTUAL INFORMATION

Participants	170 B.Des. Hons. 2nd Semester students (Batch 2024-2028)
Disciplines Involved	Communication Design, Fashion Design, Industrial Design, Interior Design
School	School of Arts and Design, Woxsen University



MODULE COORDINATOR



Dr. Divya Gauri (Key Faculty)



Prof. Joan Marie Kelly



Prof. B Ashwinikumar Sharma



Dr. Murali V. Kesaboina



GUEST RESEARCHERS



Dr. Ajanta Das
(ICSSR Senior Researcher)



Yaso Bodh Malloi
(ICSSR Assistant Researcher)



Iranggumle Hemang
(PhD Scholar, Queen Mary's College, TN)

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MODULE:

Module Overview: Purpose and Approach

This module introduced students to **research-led design** practice grounded in cultural awareness and ethical engagement. Using online resources—including museum collections, digital archives, and state and central government platforms—students conducted in-depth cultural investigations without field visits. The module emphasized the role of **material culture research** in developing meaningful, inclusive, and socially responsible design.

Its core objective was to help students **recognize and engage with communities and narratives beyond their immediate surroundings**, fostering sensitivity to cultural plurality. By embedding design thinking in rigorous cultural inquiry, the module encouraged students to approach their work with greater ethical consideration and contextual understanding.

WHY NORTHEAST INDIA? REGIONAL FOCUS

The module deliberately focused on **Northeast India** comprising eight culturally rich states—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. This region is home to diverse ethnic communities and holds a vast wealth of **tangible and intangible cultural heritage**, including textiles, architecture, craftsmanship, and symbolic visual traditions.

Despite its richness, Northeast India remains **underrepresented in mainstream design education and discourse**. Exploring this region allowed students to engage with alternative cultural perspectives, challenging dominant narratives and enriching their understanding of India's broader cultural landscape. Through digital research, students discovered how these cultures' express identity, values, and memory through material forms—shaping their capacity for **context-aware and inclusive design**.

PRIMARY RESEARCH PHASE

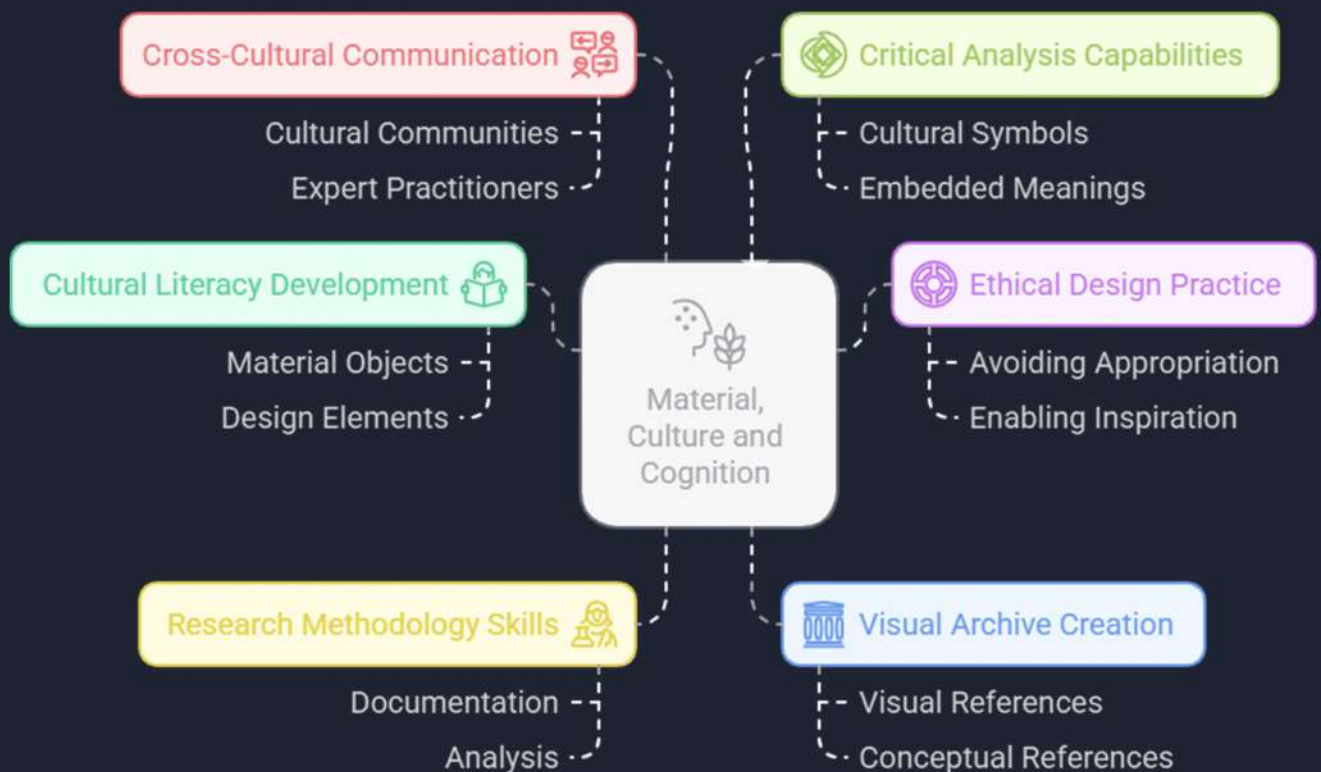
15th April, 2025 - 25th April, 2025

PEDAGOGICAL FOUNDATION AND JUSTIFICATION

The module addressed a critical gap in design education: the lack of **cultural literacy** among emerging designers. Students were encouraged to understand that design materials are never culturally neutral—**each object, colour, form, or texture carries embedded meaning**, social significance, and historical narratives.

By focusing on **material culture as a dynamic system**—where practices, objects, and meanings intersect—students were trained to build **conceptual and visual archives** that inform thoughtful and respectful design decisions. In a globalized design environment, where issues of **cultural appropriation, authenticity, and representation** are increasingly scrutinized, this module equipped students to act as **cultural mediators**.

Key Pedagogical Objectives



Made with Napkin

ADDRESSING THE KNOWLEDGE GAP

A significant pedagogical challenge emerged: the majority of students possessed limited knowledge about Northeast India, with most having never visited the region. This challenge was transformed into an opportunity for authentic discovery learning. To ensure comprehensive coverage and deep engagement, the entire cohort was strategically divided into eight groups, each assigned to one of the eight Northeastern states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura.

MODULE OVERVIEW:

To explore the cultural diversity of Northeast India, 170 students were divided into eight groups, with each group assigned one state from the region. The structure enabled focused, in-depth research and collaborative learning, encouraging students to investigate cultural identity through the lens of material practices.



>> TEAM ASSAM



>> Assam State installation



>> TEAM **ARUNACHAL PRADESH**



>> Arunachal Pradesh State installation



>> TEAM MANIPUR



>> Manipur State installation



>> TEAM MEGHALAYA



>> Meghalaya State installation



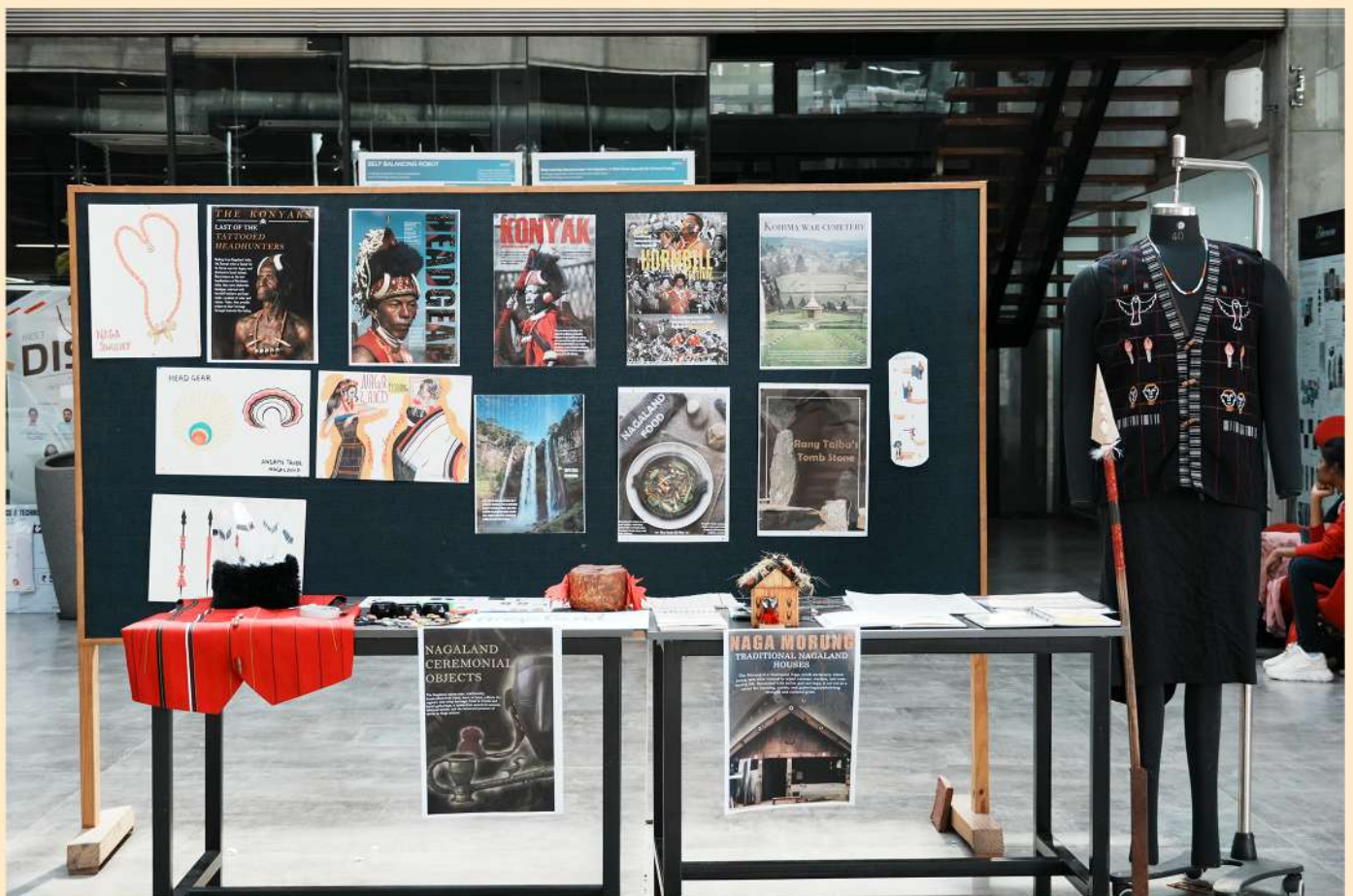
>> TEAM MIZORAM



>> Mizoram State installation



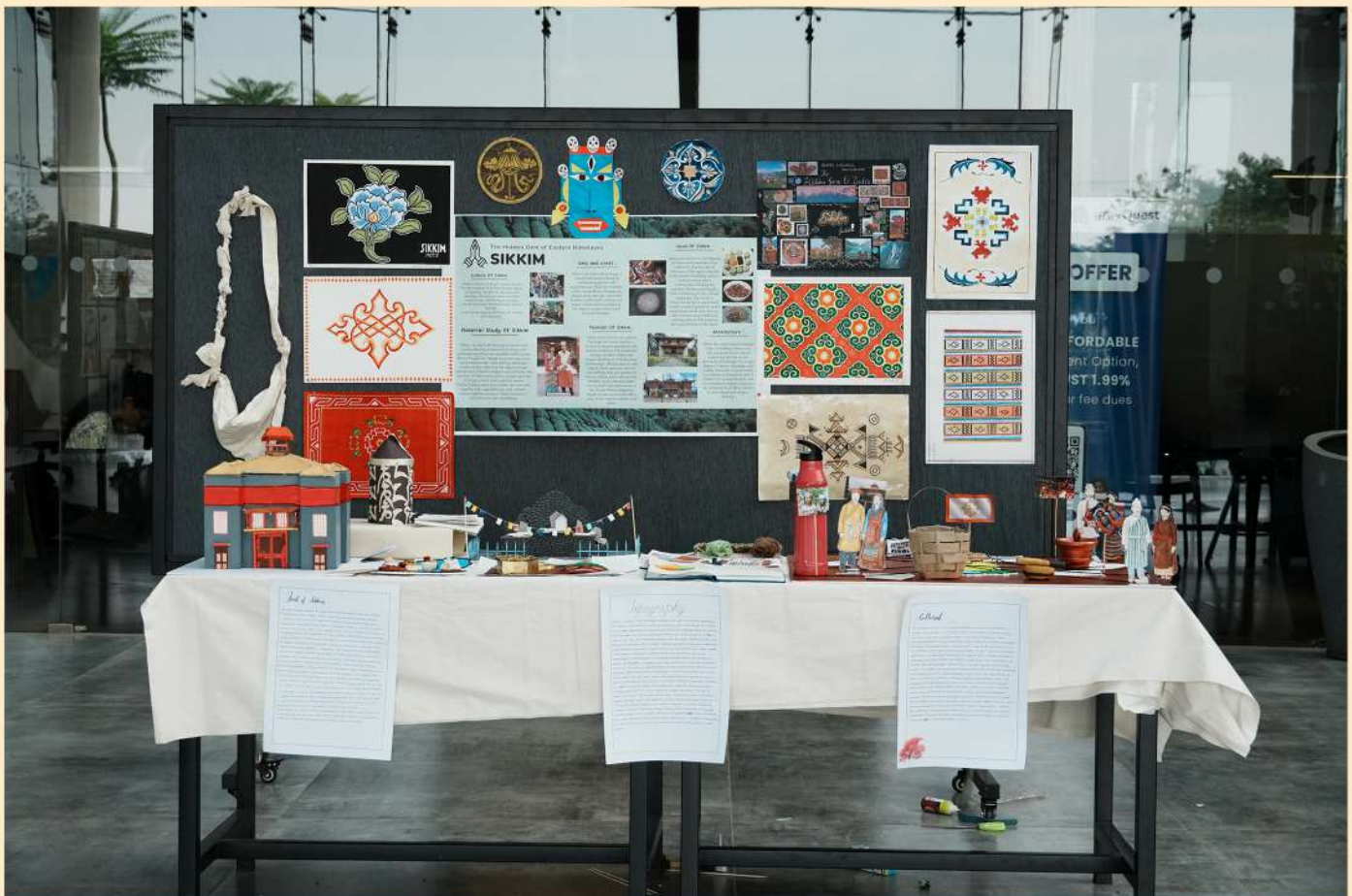
>> TEAM **NAGALAND**



>> Nagaland State installation



>> TEAM SIKKIM



>> Sikkim State installation



>> TEAM TRIPURA



>> Tripura State installation



MULTI-PHASE LEARNING APPROACH

Phase 1: Theoretical Foundation

Understanding Material Culture

- Lecture-based sessions on material culture as an academic discipline
- Explored how objects carry cultural, historical, and social meanings

Phase 2: Expert Engagement







GUEST TALK

DR. AJANTA DAS

SENIOR RESEARCHER

INDIAN COUNCIL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH
INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL STUDIES

22ND APRIL 2025 | 02:30 PM
ONLINE SESSION





WITH

YASO BODH MALLOI

RESEARCHER & PROJECT ASSISTANT

TITLE OF THE TALK
MATERIAL CULTURE OF NORTHEAST INDIA
(FOCUS: ASSAM AND ARUNACHAL PRADESH)

22ND APRIL 2025 | 02:30 PM
ONLINE SESSION



Learning from Field Researchers

- Online lectures by scholars specializing in Northeast India
- Students conducted interviews and gained real-world insights

Phase 3: Personal Cultural Reflection

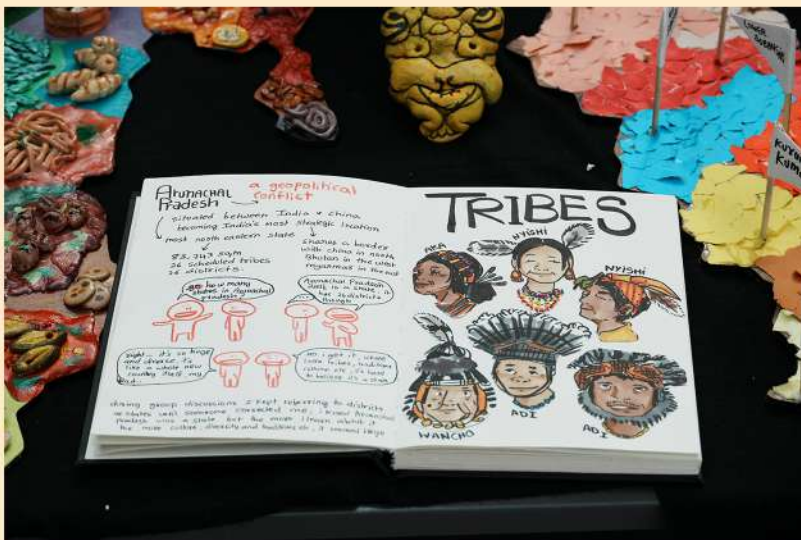
Connecting with One's Own Culture

- Storytelling workshops and guided memory drawing
- Students reflected on their own cultural identities through objects and memories

Phase 4: Research & Documentation

Visual Research Journals

- Students documented both personal and regional research
- Explored their assigned Northeast state through creative and scholarly lenses

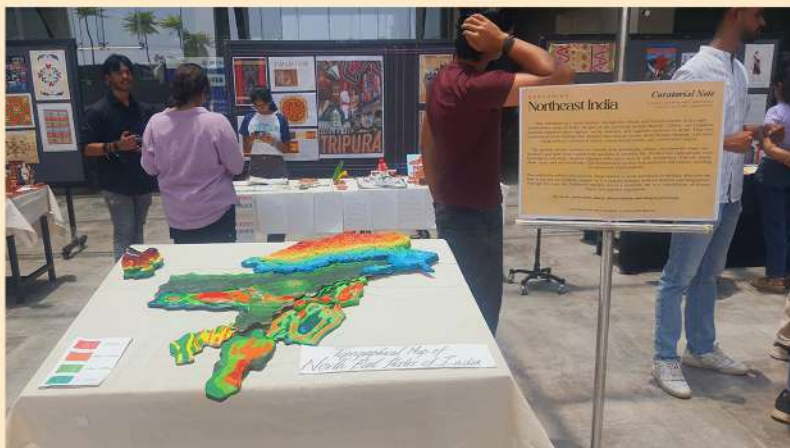




OUTCOMES: DELIVERABLES AND RESULTS ACHIEVED

The module's learning approach culminated in diverse creative outputs that demonstrated students' deep engagement with Northeastern material culture

THREE-DIMENSIONAL MAPPING: Each group collaborated to construct physical representations including typographic maps highlighting architectural diversity, cultural maps illustrating traditional practices and beliefs, and culinary maps showcasing regional food traditions and their cultural significance



OUTCOMES: DELIVERABLES AND RESULTS ACHIEVED

TEXTILE AND VISUAL DESIGN ANALYSIS:

Students conducted comprehensive two-dimensional studies examining regional textile motifs, analyzing colour palettes derived from local materials and environments, and identifying visual design motifs that embody each culture's unique aesthetic identity.



OUTCOMES: DELIVERABLES AND RESULTS ACHIEVED

INDIVIDUAL RESEARCH PROJECTS: Each student selected a specific object or material from their assigned state, producing analytical research papers that examined the chosen item's cultural significance, production methods, and contemporary relevance. These scholarly investigations were complemented by creative visual presentations in the form of research posters or zines, demonstrating the integration of academic rigor with design thinking.



OUTCOMES: DELIVERABLES AND RESULTS ACHIEVED

VISUAL JOURNAL: Students maintained a visual journal from day one of the module, documenting their research, class activities, and notes. All learning from the 10-day module was recorded visually in their journals.



Individual Deliverables:

- ✦ Personal cultural reflection portraits and memory drawings
- ✦ Comprehensive visual research journals documenting assigned state exploration
- ✦ Individual analytical research papers on selected cultural objects/materials
- ✦ Creative visual presentations (research posters or zines)



Group Deliverables:

- ✦ Three-dimensional typographic maps of assigned states
- ✦ Cultural practice and belief system maps
- ✦ Culinary tradition maps with cultural significance analysis
- ✦ Two-dimensional textile pattern studies and color palette documentation
- ✦ Visual design motif analysis representing cultural identity



Collective Outcome:

- ✦ Comprehensive exhibition showcasing Northeast India's cultural diversity
- ✦ Digital archive of student research and visual documentation
- ✦ Cultural awareness enhancement across the entire student cohort
- ✦ Establishment of ongoing relationships with Northeast cultural researchers

PROCESS:

Detailed Documentation of Module Development

Phase 1: Foundation Building (Day 1-2)

- Introductory lectures on material culture theories and methodologies
- Personal cultural reflection workshops and storytelling sessions
- Group formation and state assignment process
- Beginning of individual visual journal documentation

Phase 2: Expert Engagement and Primary Research (Day 3-4)

- Series of online lectures by guest researchers specializing in Northeastern cultures
- Student-led interview sessions with cultural experts
- Initial research guidance and resource identification
- Development of research questions

Phase 3: Deep Research and Analysis (Day 4-5)

- Intensive individual research on assigned states using multiple source materials
- Government digital archive exploration and museum collection analysis
- Cultural object selection and detailed analysis for individual papers
- Collaborative work on group mapping projects

Phase 4: Creative Synthesis and Production (Day 5-10)

- Construction of three-dimensional maps (typographic, cultural, culinary)
- Textile and visual design analysis completion
- Research paper writing and visual presentation creation
- Exhibition planning and content curation

Phase 5: Presentation and Reflection (Post Module- 6th May 2025)

- Final exhibition setup and public presentation
- Peer review and feedback sessions
- Module reflection and learning assessment
- Documentation of outcomes and future implications

TESTIMONIALS: STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK

Student Testimonials:

Priya R.

"The architectural elements we explored across the Northeastern states—especially the bamboo structures and stilt houses—completely changed how I think about sustainable design. Studying the balance between nature, tradition, and functionality opened my eyes to a whole new way of building. Our brainstorming sessions were so collaborative; it was exciting to see wild, creative ideas not just accepted but celebrated!"

Ananya M.

"This module was honestly eye-opening. I had heard of the Northeastern region but never truly engaged with its depth and diversity. From the vibrant Wangala and Hornbill festivals to unique matrilineal societies and textile traditions, every discovery added a new dimension to how I view culture. The group discussions helped me understand how deeply design is connected to lived experience."

Raghav S.

"The most inspiring part of this module was how deeply involved we got in researching the cultures of the Northeast. We weren't just scratching the surface—we explored music, fashion, language, food, and rituals. Reinterpreting indigenous styles through design thinking really sharpened both my research and visual storytelling skills."

Meher T.

"The storytelling potential in this module was incredible! Each Northeastern state has such a rich and layered narrative culture and turning that into our final project was challenging but so fulfilling. I learned not only about history and tradition but also how to translate cultural sensitivity into design practice."

Aarav D.

"Working with students from different specializations was one of the best parts of this module. The way everyone came together to explore and represent the Northeast was inspiring. I've seen myself and others grow more confident, curious, and empathetic. This project pushed us beyond our comfort zones and helped us become better designers and thinkers."



TESTIMONIALS: STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK

Guest Faculty (Online) Feedback

Yaso Bodh Malloi (ICSSR Assistant Researcher)

"What stood out to me most was the genuine curiosity of the students. Even though many were unfamiliar with the Northeastern states, their eagerness to learn was infectious. As a guest lecturer, engaging with such inquisitive minds made the experience incredibly rewarding. The quality of their questions reflected deep thinking, and seeing their research evolve into a thoughtful exhibition was truly inspiring."

Dr. Ajanta Das (ICSSR Senior Researcher)

"It was heartening to witness the students' dedication to a region often overlooked in mainstream curricula. Their ability to connect cultural context with design thinking, and the way they translated research into creative outputs, made this module a memorable teaching experience. I later saw the exhibition updates on LinkedIn and was impressed by how meaningfully the project concluded."

Institutional Leadership Feedback

"It's commendable to see students engaging with a lesser-known region of India with such depth and creativity. The exhibition was a wonderful demonstration of learning through research, empathy, and design."

Other Department Faculty (Community Representatives) Feedback

Dr. T Seikhotinthang Haokip (Faculty, School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, Woxsen University)

"As faculty members from the Northeast, we truly appreciated the respectful and well-informed approach the students took. The module was thoughtfully structured, and the student efforts reflected a sincere engagement with our cultures."

IMPLICATIONS:

POTENTIAL IMPACT AND APPLICATIONS



NOTE: PROJECT BRIEF INTEGRATION

In the **Material, Culture, and Cognition module**, students explored how material objects shape cultural meaning and human thought. They maintained daily visual journal documenting class activities, research, and reflections. The module culminated in a dynamic exhibition showcasing diverse creative outputs rooted in Northeastern material culture. These included three-dimensional maps reflecting architecture, traditions, and cuisine, as well as two-dimensional analyses of regional textiles and visual design. Students also completed individual research projects on culturally significant objects, blending academic inquiry with visual storytelling through posters or zines. The module emphasized research depth, cultural sensitivity, and the integration of creative and critical thinking.

CULMINATING EXHIBITION: EXPLORING NORTHEAST INDIA



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The module's diverse learning experiences and creative outputs culminated in an extensive exhibition that highlighted Northeast India's visual diversity via the narrative lens of the B.Des. 2024-2028 cohort. The exhibition was not just a celebration of student achievement, but also a platform for cultural education, introducing audiences to the incredible range and complexity of Northeastern material cultures.

The Material, Culture, and Cognition module used a multifaceted approach that supported students develop critical cultural awareness, ethical design practices, and a sophisticated understanding of how material objects serve as carriers of cultural meaning, preparing them to be culturally informed design practitioners capable of respectful and meaningful cultural engagement in their professional careers.

**To learn more about Woxsen University
and the School of Arts and Design**

<https://woxsen.edu.in/>

School of Arts & Design Blog:
<https://woxsendesign.art>

Digital Archival Platform to access the best projects:
<https://portfolio.soad.co.in/>