

# **CULTURAL CREATIVITY AND PARTICIPATION IN INDIA: THE IMPACT OF THE ROYAL OPERA HOUSE, MUMBAI**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Royal Opera House, Mumbai, reopened in 2016 after a 26-year hiatus, re-establishing itself as a premier cultural venue and a prime example of restored city heritage. This study aims to explore the contemporary cultural impact of this renovated heritage structure in a developing country like India, focusing on three dimensions: (i) its role in preserving, increasing, and diversifying the cultural supply, especially in performing arts; (ii) its impact on boosting cultural consumption and long-term training; and (iii) its role as a driver of economic development and urban change. Through a case study approach, the research evaluates the dynamic scope of the Royal Opera House's cultural supply, analyzes its impact on cultural consumption, and estimates its spillover effects on artistic creation, cultural industries, tourism, and urban well-being.

**Keywords:** culture, creativity, consumption, industries, heritage

## **Introduction**

The term "creative industry" encompasses companies and individuals designing, manufacturing, and offering innovative products and services (British Council et al., 2022). The dynamic concept of the creative economy intersects human creativity, intellectual property, information, and technology, as defined by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). From advertising to software, the creative industry spans various sectors, playing a pivotal role in shaping cultural landscapes.

Around 20 years ago, the term 'creative industries' started being used to describe a diverse range of activities. Many of these creative pursuits had deep cultural roots, leading to the prior use of the term 'cultural industries' for sectors like theatre, dance, visual arts, and heritage preservation. In 1997, after winning the elections, the UK's Labour government aimed to define and evaluate the economic contributions of these creative fields. Inspired by Australia's 1994 Creative Nation report, the government's Department for Culture, Media, and Sport published a mapping document in 1998 (British Council et al., 2022). This listed 13 sectors – advertising, architecture, arts/antiques, crafts, design, fashion, film, interactive software, music, performing arts, publishing, software, TV/radio – that shared origins in individual creativity and skills, with potential for wealth generation through intellectual property rights like copyrights and patents. Protecting these intellectual property rights was viewed as crucial for the creative industries' understanding and growth.

Various attempts have been made to define the creative economy, each with a different emphasis. Some studies prioritize the economic aspects, highlighting its potential for driving economic growth and generating value from intellectual property. Others take a more sociological perspective, focusing

on the cultural and heritage aspects that nurture creativity (Kukreja et al., 2022). It is an evolving idea that arises from the interplay between human creativity, intellectual property rights, knowledge, and technology.

### India's Creative Economy

The creative economy is essential to India's cultural legacy and economic development. Millions of people have employment prospects in the traditional arts and crafts industries, and the products they produce are highly sought-after both in India and abroad. For instance, the handicrafts business in India, which employs over six million craftspeople and has an estimated USD 3.5 billion export market in 2019–2020, employs a sizeable proportion of women and people from underrepresented social groups (India Brand Equity Foundation, 2021). Table 1 below shows some key statistics related to the cultural and creative sectors in India.

Table 1

**Cultural and Creative Sector Statistics in India** (British Council et al., 2022)

Indicator	Value (Year)
Overall Market Size	US\$ 37 billion (2020-21)
Contribution to GDP	1.5% (2020-21)
Share of total employment	8.3% (2019-20)
Share of total exports	US\$ 20.7 billion (2019-20)

India's creative economy stands at the crossroads of cultural richness and economic development. Traditional arts and crafts employ millions, with their products gaining global acclaim. For instance, the handicrafts sector, with over six million craftspeople, contributed significantly to India's export market. The media and entertainment sector, including gaming, music, television, and film, is rapidly expanding, projected to reach INR 2.83 trillion by 2025 (India Brand Equity Foundation, 2021).

One distinctive feature is the youthfulness of India's creative workforce (Kukreja et al., 2022). To navigate technological advancements, there's a critical need to enhance the country's education system, ensuring that the youth acquires digital skills essential for the evolving creative sector. Despite a focus on technical skills, there's a growing interest in visual arts, driven by cultural events and art markets (EY & FICCI, 2022).

In recent years, India's interest in visual arts has grown, largely as a result of cultural efforts including city-based art festivals, gallery exhibitions, and art biennales. A 2018 FICCI and KPMG survey estimates the Indian art market to be valued at USD14.6 billion (KPMG & FICCI, 2018). This burgeoning scene demands dedicated spaces that can serve as creative hubs, fostering dialogue and innovation.

This paper examines The Royal Opera House as a case study of how constructed heritage revitalizes the arts, dissolves boundaries, and gives both global and local artists a voice. To preserve the arts and give a platform to varied viewpoints, it will look at how the restoration of this cultural asset affects the neighborhood and the city's greater art ecology. It acts as a reminder of Mumbai's rich cultural heritage and the value of protecting and fostering it for present and future generations.

### Mumbai, Media, and Movies

Mumbai is home to Bollywood, one of the largest film industries in the world and the largest in India.

Mumbai has a lengthy history of filmmaking, having produced the first Indian motion picture there in 1913. Mumbai's current reputation is built on its cultural allure as India's most cosmopolitan metropolis and its economic vitality as a city that fosters a wide range of artistic endeavors, including theatre, literature, music, and cinema. Today, the film industry in Mumbai, which includes acting, directing, production, post-production, and special effects, is a significant contributor to India's media and entertainment sector. Mumbai's film industry employs about 4,000,000 people and contributes over \$15.6 billion to India's media and entertainment industry (EY and FICCI, 2022).

Apart from the domestic production that the city has attracted, major international production companies like Fox Star and Walt Disney have established a presence in Mumbai. This has benefited the local economy and the city's position as a major center for the entertainment and film industries. Overall, the media and entertainment business in the nation, as well as the economy and employment of the city of Mumbai, are significantly influenced by the film industry in Mumbai.

Mumbai has a diverse range of cultural enterprises outside of Bollywood that adds to its attraction and energy. As you indicated, the Maharashtra state government has assisted these firms by offering services at reduced costs. This has made it easier for local music, film, and other cultural businesses to flourish by leveling the playing field.

A great illustration of how the city's administration works with various organizations to promote culture is the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival. This yearly event features a wide variety of artistic mediums and draws guests from all across Mumbai and beyond. The Mumbai Gallery Weekend is another event that highlights the city's thriving art scene. Every year, this festival brings together art lovers and collectors from all across the city to peruse and buy creations by regional and worldwide artists.

In recent years, Mumbai has seen an increase in the presence of street and public art. Numerous initiatives to promote art in public spaces and increase accessibility have been implemented in the city. One such initiative is the *Hamara Station Hamari Shaan* project, which involves beautifying suburban railway stations with colorful murals and installations. This project has transformed several railway stations in Mumbai, making them more vibrant and visually appealing. Pablo Ramirez, an Argentinian artist who painted a sizable mural at Mumbai Central, is one famous example. This mural is a great illustration of how public art can change a public space and is now a well-liked attraction for both locals and tourists.

Mumbai has recently held many street art festivals in addition to these projects. One such instance is the St+Art India festival, a non-profit organization devoted to promoting public art. Artists from all over the world have come together for this festival to create massive murals and installations in public places like Sassoon Dock. Overall, Mumbai's expanding street art and public art scene is a testament to the metropolis's thriving cultural scene and dedication to fostering art and creativity. These initiatives have improved Mumbai's aesthetic appeal while also making art more approachable for a larger audience.

The usage of the moniker *Aamchi Mumbai* as a branding strategy has been effective in giving the city a unique character and portraying it as a thriving, international metropolis. Mumbai has cemented its position as India's financial, economic, and entertainment hub because of its ability to entice tourists, investors, and talent from around the globe.

### **The Royal Opera House, Mumbai**

The Royal Opera House, Mumbai is widely touted as the city's cultural crown jewel and India's only surviving Opera House. The original idea for the space was conceived in 1908, inaugurated in 1911 by King George V, and eventually completed in 1916. The design incorporated a blend of European and Indian detailing. The space became a cinema in later years before falling into disrepair and shutting by the 1990s. Fittingly, the space has been owned by the Royal Family of Gondal since 1952 and was eventually restored by Conservation Architect, Abha Narain Lambah under the leadership of His Highness, Maharaja Shri Jyotendrasinhji of Gondal. While talking about the process, Abha said,

“The mammoth restoration of this particular project was three-pronged: restoring the structural integrity of the building; bringing back the original design intent of the baroque theatre; and introducing state-of-the-art acoustics, sound design, air conditioning, electrical works, and fire-fighting systems to upgrade it to a 21st-century performance space. Over the last few years, Opera House has positioned itself as a sought-after cultural location in Mumbai which draws people from all walks of life to engage with culture and heritage.”

The Royal Opera House Mumbai, now one of the last remaining baroque structures in the city, reopened after 23 years in October 2016. The *2012 World Monuments Watch* included the building to raise awareness about its history and significance and support preservation efforts. The building has since been recognized with an Award of Merit in the 2017 UNESCO Asia-Pacific Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation. The restored facilities feature a 575-seater 3-level auditorium with an orchestra pit and state-of-the-art technological upgradations, including acoustics, stagecraft, lighting, and air-conditioning, alongside retaining the old-world charm of the proscenium stage, the royal boxes, and the magnificent regal chandeliers. Today, it stands as a key performance and creative hub in the city’s cultural landscape, while being a premier heritage landmark.

The Royal Opera House in Mumbai was built with the efforts of two men - Jehangir Framji Karaka, a Parsi businessman and philanthropist, and Maurice Bandmann, an American entertainer. The two raised funds of approximately \$9,182 at the time and supervised its design to create a venue that could rival any in England or Europe. The city of Mumbai had no world-class theatres before the opening of the Royal Opera House in 1916. The building's baroque architecture, specialized acoustics, and stylish interiors were a monumental addition to Mumbai's built heritage.

Since its reopening in 2016, it has grown in popularity and established itself as a center for Mumbai's artistic and cultural community. The Royal Opera House is a cultural center that supports artists and promotes a variety of art genres, including design, art, and literature, in addition to being a place for performing arts. The structure has contributed significantly to Mumbai's support of the arts and has come to represent the city's thriving cultural scene.

### **Programming at The Royal Opera House, Mumbai**

Royal Opera House, Mumbai reopened on 21st October 2016 after 25 years. As the CEO of Avid Learning, co-author, Asad Lalljee was formally invited to curate the cultural programming at the space. Our team has developed a robust curatorial philosophy that positions it as not just a spectacular location and venue but as a proactive partner and catalyst in the propagation and revival of arts and culture in the city and for the city’s youth. Avid Learning has leveraged the Royal Opera House Mumbai to engage more deeply with the arts and cultural community, business communities, and the diplomatic community in Mumbai. We are committed to hosting quality performances and events through meaningful collaborations spanning the breadth of the arts. Giving Mumbai residents a space for dialogue, debate, discourse, and dance, slowly carving our niche and becoming a creative hub in the city’s cultural fabric.

Programming at the Royal Opera House, Mumbai is a diverse mix of corporate and remunerative events, broad-based support for the arts, eclectic performances, cultural diplomacy, and socially conscious ventures. While the building is much lauded, we present this edifice primarily as a space to re-energize and revitalize the city, a democratic cultural and performance venue. The curatorial vision of the Royal Opera House, Mumbai aims to be inclusive of all forms of culture and performance.

To this end, we are committed to hosting quality performances and events through meaningful collaborations spanning the breadth of culture and the performing arts. We are keen to invite regional & international operatic performers, solo artists, dance troops, music ensembles, musicians, literary figures, theatre troops, symphonies, artists, and galleries. Since its reopening in 2016 to March 2024, The Royal Opera House has hosted 871 programs across genres. Honorary Director of The Royal Opera House, Ashish Doshi said:

“Restoration and reopening of the Royal Opera House in 2016 after a 25-year closure was a significant milestone for heritage conservation in Mumbai. Over the years it has played a crucial role in the growth of the creative economy in Mumbai by providing a platform for performing arts and cultural events. It has become a hub for a wide range of cultural activities such as opera, music concerts, and theatre performances and will continue to play a vital role in shaping the city's cultural landscape in the years to come.”

As The Royal Opera House played host to Vogue India’s first edition of Forces of Fashion in November 2022, Communications Director of Conde Nast India - Vogue GQ AD and Conde Nast Traveller, Swati Katakam said:

“The event was a celebration of fashion in India and the fashion community in India that had the entire fashion fraternity in attendance to witness Anna Wintour, Chief Content Officer of Condé Nast talk about the country’s meticulous craftsmanship, the inclusion of intersectionality in fashion and culture and much more.”

### **Celebrating Opera**

The 2018 Opera Season (July-August 2018) featured a robust line-up of events that included a harp and aria recital, an Opera Appreciation workshop, a historic walkthrough of the venue, and a contemporary production of the Opera *La Fedelta Premiata*.

In collaboration with the Australian Consulate-General and Furtados, we presented *Songs of Belonging*, a special operatic performance led by critically acclaimed Soprano, Deborah Cheetham and featuring Australian and Indian artists.

In collaboration with the Italian Embassy Cultural Centre, Mumbai presented ‘Gioacchino Rossini and Isabella Colbran: Celebrates 2018’ as a tribute to the 150th death anniversary of the renowned operatic composer. The event was dedicated to Rossini and his wife, Isabella Colbran. The arias, originally composed for accompaniment by piano or harp between 1805 and 1809, were sung in Italian.

In collaboration with The Neemrana Music Foundation, The Embassy of Spain in India, and Instituto Cervantes, New Delhi, presented *Syndicate of Seducers* by legendary Spanish Composer Jose Serrano, a unique form of Opera – known as a Zarzuela.

*A Musical Extravaganza: A Tribute Concert To Celia Lobo* celebrated one of India’s greatest living Opera Divas – Opera Singer, Vocal Coach, Mentor, and Stage Director Celia Lobo.

After performing at the Opera House and facilitating a workshop, American Operatic Tenor, Educator and Composer, Sandeep Gurrupadi said:

“The Opera House is committed to open form and structure that allows for new explorations and expressions that have both global and local perspectives. It is one of the few organizations in India that are not only engaged in promoting and platforming various art forms but also actively invested in transforming the local cultural landscape and community.”

### **Celebrating Theatre**

The Royal Opera House, Mumbai has been a cornerstone of the city's vibrant theatre scene since its inception, hosting the first dramatic production in 1910. From its early days, this iconic landmark has served as a dynamic hub, welcoming luminaries and stalwarts from India's rich theatre community. This historic venue has birthed a tremendous theatrical legacy, with legendary musicians and actors gracing its stage, including Bal Gandharva, Krishna Master, Bapu Pendharkar, Master Dinanath, Jyotsna Bhole, Londhe, Patwardhan Buwa, and the iconic Prithviraj Kapoor, who launched his illustrious career here before founding the esteemed Prithvi Theatre and the renowned Kapoor acting dynasty.

Transcending language barriers, the Royal Opera House has embraced its multilingual heritage, hosting festivals that celebrate regional theatre groups and inviting audiences to experience the grandeur of this iconic venue. Through a unique lineup of performances spanning diverse genres in Marathi, Gujarati, and Hindi, the theatre honours both traditional and contemporary theatrical practices, showcasing the richness and diversity of India's cultural tapestry.

Founder, Astitva, and Co-director, of Natya Velhal: Marathi Theatre Festival, Ravi Mishra while talking about his recent experience remarked:

“The first edition of *Natya Velhal: Marathi Theatre Festival* at Royal Opera House Mumbai was the stepping stone to experiment with regional theatre at the venue through a 4-day festival inviting 10 different plays from various cities of Maharashtra received a tremendous response from every theatre lover, media houses and the general public. The feedback, response, and reactions shared by the performers, audience, and partners were overwhelming and exhilarating experiences.”

### **Celebrating Children’s Theatre**

The Royal Opera House has emerged as a captivating destination for young audiences, staging a vibrant array of internationally acclaimed children's productions. From the enchanting tales of Disney to beloved classics, we have presented successful staging of renowned productions like *Beauty and the Beast*, *Madagascar*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and *The Jungle Book* to name a few. This fall, we await the arrival of the beloved *Shrek*, promising yet another unforgettable theatrical experience.

Recognizing the immense popularity of this genre, we have taken a proactive step in nurturing the next generation of theatre enthusiasts. In collaboration with the prestigious Guildhall School of Music & Drama in London, the Opera House conducted an enriching children's musical theatre workshop. Led by American Operatic Tenor, Educator, and Composer Sandeep Gurrupadi and Director of Vishaal Asrani's Institute of Performing Arts, Vishaal Asrani.

Children's theatre has undoubtedly become one of the most successful programming genres at the Royal Opera House, igniting the imaginations of countless young minds.

In Vishaal’s words, “The re-opening of the Royal Opera House has been a groundbreaking development in the Mumbai Theatre scene. It has brought with it, the emergence of old-world opulence and charm with a neoteric approach. It has proven how live theatre helps promote social discourse, dialogue, and potential social change. This venue is a cultural phenomenon, where the artists and the audience members are not just sharing the space but sharing an experience.”

### **Celebrating Dance**

An evening of poetry and dance, which brought together the exuberant legacy of Nawab Jaan’s lyrical dance and the profound poetry of Mirza Ghalib. Dancer and Choreographer Manjari Chaturvedi portrayed the erstwhile courtesan, Nawab Jaan, and Actor Ekant Kaul played the role of the legendary poet, Mirza Ghalib.

*In the Shadow of the Gods*, an interpretive solo Bharatanatyam Performance by dancer and choreographer Revanta Sarabhai reinvented the traditional art form and tackled diverse themes relevant to the society and times we live in.

After touring twenty-five countries worldwide, The Russian National Show, *Miracle - A Performance by St Petersburg State Theatre Of Song And Dance* was performed for the first time in India. The traditional concert in collaboration with the Government of St.Petersburg, the Consulate General of the Russian Federation in Mumbai, the Russian House in Mumbai, and Moroshka Theatre witnessed twenty-five artists accompanied by a live orchestra.

*Same Same But Different*, a unique Indo-Korean collaboration that brought together and showcased music and dance traditions from both countries. This celebrated concert series, produced by Korean

New Wave Music Group Noreum Machi featured world-renowned Contemporary Dancer and Choreographer Astad Deboo and the ensemble, Trayam comprising three critically acclaimed Indian musicians.

Founder of Sufi Kathak Foundation and Trustee, Ganga Jamuna Culture Foundation, Manjari Chaturvedi said: “The Royal Opera House and Avid Learning are distinguished as premier partners. Their exceptional work ethic and profound understanding of performance art are commendable. Their teams demonstrate a nuanced grasp of the intricacies essential for a successful performance, extending beyond ticket sales. They play an integral role in supporting artists and preserving cultural traditions with humility and a deep love for the arts.”

### **Celebrating Literature**

In association with Akshara Centre and One Billion Rising, we presented an evening of book readings and conversation around the global launch of the best-selling author of *The Vagina Monologues* and award-winning playwright Eve Ensler’s latest book *The Apology*.

Presented the official Mumbai launch of Milind Soman’s memoir *Made in India* and a comedy roast of the book by comedian Cyrus Broacha to celebrate the milestone.

In association with Literature Live! and Penguin Random House, we launched author Amitav Ghosh’s novel, *Gun Island*. The evening included a discussion on the book and its main themes between the author and filmmaker Shekhar Kapur. Amitav Ghosh returned to the Opera House after four years in 2023 for the launch of his non-fiction book *Smoke and Ashes: A Writer’s Journey Through Opium’s Hidden Histories*.

Continuing Opera House’s literary and theatrical legacy, we did the Mumbai book launch of *Ebrahim Alkazi: Holding Time Captive*, the first full-length, carefully researched account of the life, work, and times of the father of modern Indian theatre written by his daughter, Author and Theatre Director Amal Allana.

After a book launch event at the Opera House, CEO of HarperCollins Publishers India, Anantha Padmanabhan described his experience as a “grand evening, marrying the old with the new, traditional with the modern, and a host of direct conversations across a broad spectrum of communities in a holistic exchange of ideas.”

### **Celebrating Music**

World-renowned Sitar Maestro, Ustad Nishat Khan dazzled audiences with a rare selection of ragas, that were inspired by Khan’s fascination with the moon and its reflection in the Arabian Sea.

A magical evening filled with Sufi music celebrating the musical launch of *Ek hi Rang*, by the band Sounds of the Sufis. The band performed songs from the album which included original music, spoken word, personal episodes, and poetry. The evening also featured collaborating artists who worked with the band to create unique, eclectic, soulful, and expressive music.

*UnCommon*, an evening where contemporary World and Jazz music collided with Indian Classical sounds comprising three of the world’s leading contemporary musicians – Ranjit Barot on Percussions, Etienne Mbappé on Vocals and Bass, and Christophe Cravero on Violin and Keys. Special guest appearances were made by Singers Hariharan and Vijay Prakash.

*Khushboo*, an evening of Indo-French music and dance featuring a medley of talented artists from France and India who came together for a multidisciplinary performance that showcased the best of both cultures and uncovered synergies between them while celebrating unique aspects of each.

An evening celebrating the four-decades-long musical journey of the renowned Ghazal Singer Talat Aziz, bringing together his unique blend of powerful vocals, poetic verses, and soothing melodies.

*Mridangamela*, a fusion of Carnatic and Contemporary music performance showcasing a unique representation of Mridangam, the ancient sound of gathering in both traditional and contemporary treatments.

We orchestrated mesmerizing Jazz evenings throughout 2023. While *Jugalbandi: The Crossing* saw the melodies of Indian Classical and Mediterranean jazz converging, crafting soul-stirring symphonies, *Chingari* offered a unique contemporary twist to the classic East Meets West spectacle. Our admiration for jazz rhythms and melodies continued with *An Ode to Jazz Divas*, a fitting tribute to the legendary vocalists who continue to shape the genre even today. *Sanjay Divecha and Secret* fused on stage the rich traditions of Hindustani and Carnatic music with the jazz and blues of Brazil, Africa, and the Americas, showcasing the power of music to bridge diverse traditions and cultures.

Director of Furtados Music India Pvt Ltd., Joseph Gomes while talking about the enduring association said: “The programming has been very inclusive and supportive of local talent and instrumental in bringing to audiences diverse and world-class productions that entertain and educate.”

### **Celebrating Cinema**

In collaboration with UN Women and HeForShe, we hosted the Mumbai Premiere and exclusive screening of *SON RISE*, a powerful gender-rights documentary directed and produced by National award-winning filmmaker Vibha Bakshi. *SON RISE* is inspired by UN Women’s HeForShe mandate for men and women to stand in solidarity - to make a bold, visible, and united force for gender equality. The film screening was followed by a conversation between the filmmaker and Under-Secretary General of the United Nations Madam Phumzile Mlambo-Nguka on the importance of boys and men being part of the struggle for equality.

The screening of BBC's *Seven Worlds, One Planet* narrated by Sir David Attenborough, and accompanied by the music of Hans Zimmer was followed by a live satellite link-up connecting Mumbai's Royal Opera House in India with South Africa's Cradle of Humankind heritage site, enabling 400 schoolchildren to watch the inaugural episode, simulcasting it across 4 countries.

Presented an exclusive screening of filmmaker Kaarthikeyan Kirubhakaran’s *His Father’s Voice*. Produced by Kaarthikeyan, Ashwini Pratap Pawar, and Shankar Kiru, the film narrated the poignant tale of a talented male dancer who, after enduring childhood separation from his musician father, embarks on a journey to reunite with him to rekindle his passion for dance. The screening was followed by an interactive session with the filmmaker, producers, and select cast and crew members.

Sharing her experience about Opera House’s cinema programming, Film Journalist, Scroll.in, Nandini Ramnath said:

“The Opera House is a spectacular venue for music, plays, and films – its grand exterior, plush interiors, and jewel box-like design make it the perfect space to watch movies, particularly the classics. The venue was where a previous edition of the Mumbai Film Festival was held, and the setting was most apt.”

### **Celebrating Heritage**

We partnered with The U.S. Consulate General in Mumbai to present *Why Old Places Matter*, an exclusive roundtable discussion with Chief Legal Officer and General Counsel, of National Trust for Historic Preservation Tom Mayes.

In collaboration with the Consulate General of Switzerland in Mumbai, we presented, *Architecture Speaks*, where internationally celebrated Swiss Architect and Pritzker Laureate Peter Zumthor was in conversation with Conservation Architect Abha Narain Lambah. The illustrious Royal Opera



House, a poignant emblem of architectural heritage served as the perfect venue for an evening celebrating the universal beauty of architecture.

In the words of Conservation Architect, Abha Narain Lambah: “The Opera House has reclaimed its position as Bombay's favorite cultural venue since it reopened after the restoration. A vibrant cultural calendar keeps it at the center of the city's cultural space.”

### **Celebrating Inclusion**

In collaboration with the British Council, presented Antardrishti - Inner Vision, music, dance, and audio-visual extravaganza, produced by a London-based organization, the Baluji Music Foundation. Led by visually impaired multi-instrumentalist Baluji Shrivastav OBE, the performance featured Inner Vision Orchestra, UK's only blind orchestra. To enhance the evening's experience and highlight initiatives for and by the visually impaired, a pop-up of Braille tactile artworks, was featured. Additionally, White Print, a monthly lifestyle magazine in Braille, displayed a selection of Braille-tactile alphabet books in Hindi and English, known as ‘Tactabet’.

In collaboration with the Australian Consulate-General, Mumbai we presented *Mallakhamb Mumbai*, a unique evening of rope and pole Mallakhamb accompanied by the rhythmic melodies of electro-fusion music, featuring acts performed by visually challenged artists from the Kamla Mehta School for the Blind and by contortionists from the *Mallakhamb India Ensemble*.

Driven by the philosophy of arts for social change, support a wide range of issues and causes including gender rights, diversity, parity, and inclusivity, we presented Special Women’s Festival showcasing two captivating plays, *Bitter Chocolate* and *Untitled*, starring internationally acclaimed actor, Lushin Dubey.

Solicitor and Committee Member of The Happy Home and School for the Blind, The Education Audiology & Research Society, and the Bal Jeevan Trust, Arti Vakil said: “Children and adults of underserved communities and people with special needs get regularly invited to attend the most wonderful performances and events at the iconic Royal Opera House. The graciousness of our wonderful hosts makes these a lifetime opportunity not only for providing this kind of exposure but for making the invitees so very comfortable in these grand surroundings.”

### **Celebrating Young Minds (Children’s Programming)**

Children are the architects of our country’s future, and we are committed to the cultural growth of our youngest audience members. We understand the importance and significance of arts and culture as a playground for young and impressionable minds. The impact of the arts in shaping our future generations into creative thinkers and better-informed citizens is priceless. In this light, we strive to present and support robust and intelligent children’s education programming at our venue.

Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler’s *The Gruffalo* turned 20 and the celebration included an energetic morning of singing, dancing, storytelling, and photo ops with the much-adored monster. We collaborated with the German Book Office, New Delhi for the second successive year to present the 10th edition of *Jumpstart: Beyond the Book*.

Launch of the children’s book, *The Dot that Went for a Walk - 51 short stories* by authors Lakshmi Nambiar, Reema Gupta, and Sarada Akkineni. This book reflects the diverse journeys of 51 pioneering women from India who drew their unique paths and left an impact in their respective fields. A curated exhibition of artworks from the book by women artists and illustrators was also on display at the venue.

For the second year running, we presented the popular Peek-A-Book Children’s Literature and Storytelling Festival. We collaborated with the Prithvi Theatre for the second year running to present the Prithvi Festival 2019.

Children's Author and Founder of Peek A Book Literature Festival for Kids, Lubaina Bandukwala, had this to say after the successful curation of the children's literature festival: "The venue, so closely woven into the city's fabric, lent the much-needed weight to children's literature in the city, providing a platform for the city's best children's authors and illustrators to showcase their work. Parents and children discovered new and contemporary voices and works and yet remained connected to the great cultural traditions of the city through the beautifully restored historically rich space."

### **Celebrating Multidisciplinary Festivals**

In 2018, we brought the popular Prithvi Theatre Festival to the Royal Opera House, Mumbai, and also hosted the first-ever children's literature festival, Peek-A-Book, which featured some leading personalities in Indian Children's Literature. We also continued our long-standing collaboration with the Zee Jaipur Literature Festival by hosting their Mumbai Preview on our stage for the second year running and also hosted the Curtain Raiser for the Serendipity Arts Festival 2018, which featured a combined dance and theatre performance. In the coming year, we are strategizing how to develop the Royal Opera House Mumbai as a preferred venue for festivals like these.

We continued our long-standing association with 'The Greatest Literary Festival on Earth' - the Jaipur Literature Festival - by collaborating with them for the seventh successive year and presenting their Mumbai Curtain Raiser. This was also the third successive year that the Royal Opera House, Mumbai hosted the Mumbai Preview of this iconic festival.

Online festivals during COVID-19 included, *Lights Camera Music* was a screening of four selected films that captured the essence of music through powerful storytelling. *Children's Film Festival* showcased six short animated films inspiring kids and a unique edutaining experience. *Sustainability NOW: Wildlife and Environment Mini Film Festival* included six documentary films around nature, wildlife conservation, and sustainability.

We partnered with the grand Mumbai Festival 2024, presenting a delectable blend of performances, embracing the festival theme, 'Everyone's Invited.' Continuing our enduring collaboration with the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival (KGAF 2024), the cultural spectacles celebrated the diverse and inclusive spirit of the maximum city, Mumbai.

Author, Journalist, Film Critic, and Director of Jio MAMI Mumbai Film Festival, Anupama Chopra said: "The refurbished Opera House was relaunched with the Jio MAMI Mumbai festival in 2016 and it was a spectacular evening - filled with great artists, the many decades of history that the institution brings with it, and the promise of a new era."

### **Celebrating Cultural Diplomacy**

We believe in the power of cultural diplomacy to widen horizons and broaden minds. In this spirit, we have leveraged our local and international relationships to bring the best of international art, culture, and design to Mumbai to treat our city's audiences to the best of global culture and talent. The Royal Opera House has consistently been the epicenter of strengthened partnerships with many consulates including The United States, Canada, Israel, France, Switzerland, Turkey, Hungary, Poland, Italy, Sri Lanka, Australia, Spain, and The Netherlands over the years. We also work closely with The British Council, Alliance Francaise de Bombay as well as the French High Commission, and The Goethe Institut who regularly bring in visiting scholars, filmmakers, artists, and authors.

In the words of the Consul General Of Spain in Mumbai, Fernando Heredia Noguera: "The Royal Opera House in Mumbai has been contributing significantly to the promotion of Indo-Spanish collaboration by hosting cultural events and artistic performances that showcase the rich heritage and artistic traditions of both countries namely Syndicate of Seducers, a Spanish musical comedy operetta; 2 Indias Ensemble, a concert re-imagining 150-year-old scores of Spain's greatest Composer Isaac Albéniz to Indian classical music; Flamenco Fiesta, a Flamenco concert by Latin

Grammy awarded all-women quartet Las Migas among others programs. These events along with regular delegate visits have made the Royal Opera House, Mumbai a symbol of strengthened cultural diplomacy.”

Celebrating 75 years of friendship between Switzerland and India, a never-before-seen joint concert, between the Swiss and Indian Armed Forces by the Indian Navy Band and the Swiss Armed Forced Brass Band, brought on stage the grandeur of musical talent, cultural exchange, camaraderie, and incredible friendship between the two nations.

The Consul General Of Switzerland in Mumbai, Martin Maier while talking about the show *Continuum: An Evening Of Opera, Chamber Music And Sculptures* said:

“It was a wonderful experience to collaborate with the highly professional and hardworking team of the Royal Opera House Mumbai for this show. The event management and coordination with all partners and artists involved was very smooth and seamless. The Consulate General of Switzerland looks forward to its continued association with the Royal Opera House Mumbai for more such high-quality events in the future as well.”

The Royal Opera House in Mumbai has fostered a strong and enduring partnership with the Consulate General of Italy in Mumbai and the Italian Cultural Centre. This collaboration has facilitated a rich cultural exchange between the two nations, showcasing the best of Italian art, design, and creativity while interweaving it with India's vibrant artistic traditions.

The partnership has resulted in the presentation of over sixteen events in collaboration, with eight of them taking place on the prestigious opera stage itself. These immersive and inventive experiences have not only promoted dialogues and discourses between creative industry practitioners from both countries but have also underscored the poignancy of cultural diplomacy.

Furthermore, at the India Art, Architecture and Design Biennale 2023, Ambassador of Italy to India H.E. Vincenzo De Luca, echoed the sentiment of fostering such artistic amalgamations, emphasizing the significance of cultural exchanges facilitated through collaborative artistic endeavors.

### Summary

This diverse cultural strategy as shown in Table 2 aims not only to preserve and promote traditional art forms but also to nurture innovative, boundary-pushing expressions. By offering a platform for both established and emerging artists across genres, Royal Opera House, Mumbai has positioned itself as a catalyst for artistic growth and cultural exchange in the city. The data highlights our commitment to providing a dynamic, inclusive space that celebrates the richness of Mumbai's cultural tapestry while remaining responsive to evolving artistic landscapes.

**Table 2**

Showing the diverse cultural strategy of the Royal Opera House, Mumbai

Year	Opera	Theatre	Music	Dance	Children	Others	Total
2016 - 2017	4	8	10	-	-	18	40
2017 - 2018	5	25	32	4	3	75	144
2018 - 2019	6	79	22	9	1	74	191
2019 - 2020	-	98	31	10	2	39	180
2020 - 2021	-	-	-	-	-	3	3

2021 - 2022	-	3	-	1	1	23	28
2022 - 2023	1	25	10	15	26	44	121
2023 - 2024	-	53	33	8	28	42	164

### Pivoting to Online Programming during COVID-19

We curated a digital campaign to offer the patrons and followers of the Royal Opera House, an exclusive opportunity to watch performances and sessions by leading artists on the Opera House’s social media platforms. The objective of this campaign was to connect with members of the creative community by offering the best of the performing arts to the Royal Opera House, Mumbai’s patrons, and followers in the comfort of their homes. A series of pre-recorded programs – released on social media – across the genres by leveraging existing relationships with artists and practitioners – who have been a part of the venue’s journey since the reopening – as well as forming new collaborations with individuals and initiatives whom we have been unable to work within the past due to geographical restrictions.

In phase one of this campaign, we relaunched Avid Online’s performing arts episodes on the Royal Opera House, Mumbai’s social media channels. These quick, pre-recorded movies were released three times a week at 6:00 p.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. On our social media channels, we posted 30-minute pre-recorded videos of original content from artists, as well as previously unreleased archival material and carefully curated collections of performing arts, during the second phase. As shown in Table 3, the growth of the venue's database indicates an expanding interest in the Opera House's cultural offerings, indicating the venue’s success in attracting and engaging with audiences online.

**Table 3**  
Social Media Database of The Royal Opera House

Platform	Database/Followers (as of March 2024)
Email	30,000
Instagram	13,400
Facebook	11,174
Twitter	4,937

### Conclusion

The Royal Opera House in Mumbai has continued to flourish since its reopening in October 2016. In the period from Oct 2016 to Mar 2024, the venue hosted an impressive 871 programs as shown in Table 4, attracting 156,732 attendees, as shown in Table 5. These figures demonstrate the success of the Opera House in promoting artistic and cultural participation among Mumbai's community.

**Table 4**  
Evolution of Cultural Supply at The Royal Opera House, Mumbai

Year	Number of Events	Diversity Range
2016 - 2017	40	Medium

2017 - 2018	144	High
2018 - 2019	191	High
2019 - 2020	180	High
2020 - 2021	3	-
2021 - 2022	28	-
2022 - 2023	121	High
2023 - 2024	164	High

*Note.* From 9th March 2020 onward, the offline programming was restricted due to lockdown with fully resuming from 18th December 2021 onward.

**Table 5**

Evolution of Audience Demand at The Royal Opera House, Mumbai

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of Spectators</b>	<b>Occupancy Rate</b>
2016 - 2017	3987	57%
2017 - 2018	21054	64%
2018 - 2019	37449	74%
2019 - 2020	43717	81%
2020 - 2021	1548	77%
2021 - 2022	6574	79%
2022 - 2023	24763	82%
2023 - 2024	31879	88%

### **Advocacy Efforts**

As regular collaborators with the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI's) Art and Culture Committee, we have co-convened regular multistakeholder conferences, bringing together renowned scholars, policymakers, industry professionals, artists, curators, writers, and representatives from government bodies and corporate houses.

Celebrating India's G20 Presidency in 2023, two major cultural tracker symposiums were organized in Bengaluru and Mumbai, in collaboration with partners. These symposiums aligned with two of the four priority areas outlined promoting its rich cultural heritage and creative industries on the global stage. A comprehensive report documenting the insights, learnings, best practices, and next steps was prepared and presented to UNESCO, New Delhi, and launched by Ms. Lily Pandeya, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Culture, Government of India. This report, along with the forthcoming policy paper that the co-author, Asad Lalljee is contributing to, underscores the significance of protecting cultural heritage and supporting the arts for sustainable urban development.

Through such continued collaboration between government, industry bodies, cultural organizations, artists, and local communities, more architectural heritages can be revived as vibrant artistic hubs across the nation. This will safeguard our rich legacies, foster social cohesion, drive economic opportunities, and unleash incredible creative potential within our cities.

### **Transformative Impact on Neighbourhood**

The Royal Opera House's revitalization has had a profound impact that extends far beyond amplifying cultural offerings. Its success sparked a comprehensive revival of the surrounding neighbourhood, with buildings undergoing vibrant transformations and renovations. A thriving ecosystem of new restaurants, cafes, boutiques, galleries, and small businesses blossomed in the area. Beyond the culinary and retail sectors, the rejuvenation extended to other crucial infrastructure - residential properties received facelifts, public spaces were revamped with landscaping and artwork, and improvements were made to street lighting, sidewalks, and transportation amenities.

This cultural anchor did not merely create a wave of artistic activity but catalyzed the holistic rejuvenation of the entire neighbourhood ecosystem. The ripple effects of the Opera House's resurgence radiated outwards, invigorating the area with renewed vibrancy, economic opportunities, walkability, safety, and a palpable sense of community pride and identity.

### **Fostering Creativity and Innovation**

Notably, since its reopening eight years ago, the Royal Opera House has become a creative haven where artists continually return to present experimental and boundary-pushing pieces, having found a creative collaborator and partner that embraces artistic risks. This commitment to fostering an environment that encourages artistic growth and innovation has solidified the Opera House's position as a sought-after platform for the creative community.

Moreover, the Royal Opera House's revitalization has evolved into a globally recognized case study, showcasing how reinvigorating built heritage through increased cultural consumption can breathe new life into urban spaces, engage citizens, and catalyze broader neighbourhood rejuvenation.

### **Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power**

Royal Opera House, Mumbai has emerged as the premier cultural venue, serving as a vital soft power currency. Diplomatic missions in India are increasingly leveraging this iconic platform to display the best of their nation's cultural expertise through performances, exhibitions, and artistic collaborations. It has become the preferred stage for strengthening cultural ties and fostering deeper relationships between India and countries around the world. Through these multicultural events, the diplomatic core engages local audiences while promoting cross-cultural understanding, appreciation, and dialogue.

This cultural diplomacy facilitated by the Royal Opera House ultimately enhances tourism prospects, forges new business opportunities, and provides crucial support to both local and international artists. The Opera House's unique position at the intersection of art, diplomacy, and cultural exchange solidifies its role as a powerful ambassador for India on the global stage.

### **Way Forward and Call for Further Research**

The Royal Opera House has proven that prioritizing cultural assets empowers communities to participate actively and forge renewed pride in local identities. As India charts an ambitious cultural path, the Opera House's success can be replicated to energize urban spaces, engage citizens, and harness the unifying power of arts on a grander scale.

This paper is an initial exploration of the contemporary cultural impact stemming from the revitalization of the Royal Opera House in Mumbai. We welcome and encourage further research leveraging diverse methodologies to comprehensively measure the Opera House's profound influence on amplifying cultural offerings, stimulating arts consumption, and catalyzing economic progress within the city and across the nation.

Furthermore, we look forward to invaluable insights and best practices from leading scholarly voices and creative practitioners at the conference who have been at the forefront of the transformative integration of arts and culture into structured development initiatives in their respective nations. These efforts will help us garner a deeper understanding of how preserving and reinvigorating cultural cornerstones can impact society on multiple fronts - fortifying regional identity, inspiring creativity, fostering community engagement, and propelling human progress.

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