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Cultural heritage and its enjoyment in pandemic times: comparison of cultural approaches in India and Italy

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Abstract

The restraints due to the Covid-19 pandemic have not only deeply changed our daily habits but have also affected the world of culture, as gatherings of people and visits to places have been banned. This situation has highlighted strengths and weaknesses of cultural systems and tools supporting the public 'use' of heritage, as well as the need for innovation for the safeguarding and 'production' of heritage. Indeed, the response of the various cultural actors disclosed their real priorities revealing sometimes inadequacies or, vice versa, creative capacities. The health emergency, confirming the socio-economic role of culture, affected the bond between people and cultural heritage. This paper aims to explore what happened in two very different geographical and cultural contexts, India and Italy, and to identify impacts and actions undertaken to support the cultural sector, and to maintain communication with audiences. There is an increasing recognition among all stakeholders of the role of information technology for providing 'virtual access' to cultural heritage, and for supporting initiatives for ensuring resilient, sustainable livelihoods for artisans and workers, as custodians of traditional knowledge. The comparison shows how heritage represents a fundamental factor of community resilience, and how different approaches offer opportunities for contamination, containment, recovery, and resilience. Broader reflections can be considered for the future role of Cultural Heritage in the real life of citizens.

Keywords: Communication for Cultural Heritage, Digitisation for Inclusion, Virtual Accessibility, India, Italy.

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has had not only profound social and economic impacts on people's daily habits but also on the cultural and creative sector, both considering the production and consumption perspectives, across the globe. Since gatherings and visits to cultural places have been forbidden, the sector had to adapt to the emergency, whose containment measures and successive 'lockdowns' highlighted the central role of 'people', such as the workers in the sector, the audience, remained physically separated from the cultural places, but also generally the local communities, such as those belonging to living and historic city centres as Shahjahanabad in New Delhi, which have showed undervalued capacities and traditional building and planning morphologies that imparted considerable resilience. Further, the pandemic pinpointed the necessity for targeted initiatives to support artisanal communities through improved access to the public and the market, and the importance of equitable cultural and community centred development efforts that improve the sanitary working and living conditions within the historic city centres in India.

The sanitary crisis has confirmed the socio-economic role of culture, stressing the relationship between people – workers, local communities and audiences - and the cultural world. Indeed, the enjoyment of cultural heritage has to be seen as a whole, not limited to the final "consumption" of art and culture, but also considering the creation and production phases, with the work of small craftsmen and handicrafts workshops, for instance.

2. Measures and constraints: effects of the pandemic on the cultural sector

Following national guidelines, both countries faced a complete lockdown, whose restrictions to protect the public health surely had a huge impact on the cultural and creative sector.

Due to an increasing spread of the Covid-19 virus around Italy and rising cases in the population, on 08th March 2020 a Prime Ministerial Decree ordered the interruption of any public events, shows, and performances of any kind, and the closure of cinemas, theatres, museums, libraries and archives, archaeological and other cultural sites and institutes, both public and private [1]. For nearly two months Italy faced a total lockdown, which required the population to stay home. In the following months different measures were applied to the cultural sector, considering from one side museums and cultural places, and on the other side theatres, concert halls and cinemas. From May 2020 to March 2021 cultural activities and places were able to be partially open with several interruptions depending on the local, regional and general evolution of the epidemiological situation in the country. When possible, the gradual process of reopening required meticulous measures to guarantee the safety of visitors and workers, such as restricted access, the use of face masks and hand sanitizers, keeping a physical distance, and ensure a proper natural ventilation of indoor spaces. Many museums and cultural places, especially the smaller ones, had to adapt their collections and routes, in order to avoid gatherings and close contacts among visitors. Despite some difficulties, it was also an opportunity to stimulate a reflection on new actions to be experimented, to make museums more inclusive and accessible, confirming the role they play in the social life of the communities. Further, performances in theatres, concert halls and cinemas shows were resumed for a while, performing with pre-assigned and distanced seating.

In India, a complete lockdown was imposed by the Central Government on 23rd March 2020 – largely as a preventive measure, though the number of confirmed cases of Covid-19 was relatively small. Similar to the approach adopted by Italy, all archaeological and other cultural sites, institutes, museums, libraries, archives, cinemas, theatres, auditoria, both public and private, were closed. Some iconic cultural sites under the Archaeological Survey of India, such as the Taj Mahal in Agra, were closed to the public on 17th March, even before the first lockdown of 21 days. On 30th May 2020 steps were announced regarding exiting from the total lockdown, but it was only in June, as part of the phased opening of activities being allowed at places of worship, that 820 of the more than 3000 monuments protected by the Archaeological Survey of India where religious worship takes place were opened to the public. From 6th July with the compliance of the state and district administration, a decision was taken to reopen all 3691 monuments and archaeological sites to the public, ensuring that all Covid-19 protocols were followed, and utilizing digital technology for visitor management. Some states, notably Maharashtra, Odhisha and Tamilnadu, did not open monuments to the public even after this, due to the widespread prevalence of Covid-19, while others such as Rajasthan, heavily dependent on cultural tourism had already opened some monuments to the public at reduced entry rates. The decision to reopen museums, art galleries and exhibition spaces under the Ministry of Culture was taken in November 2020, after adequate preparation for social distancing and all safety protocols. An unusual aspect of the reliance on cultural heritage during the pandemic in India was the widespread encouragement of traditional herbal remedies, part of ethno-medicinal traditions, as well as the practice of Yoga, using digital outreach by the Ministry of Ayush, or alternative and holistic health service of the Government of India. However, in India, the unprecedented first lockdown had some unanticipated consequences - the mass movement of millions of migrant workers back to the villages and small towns from where they had moved to larger towns and cities in search of employment, despite all entreaties and efforts to ensure compliance to the lockdown [2]. The sometimes-desperate efforts of skilled and unskilled migrants to return to their culturally connected places of origin – rural areas and small towns – resulted in recognition of existing vulnerabilities regarding regional imbalances and also the need to provide humane, low-income rental housing for migrant workers and social support systems in urban areas [3]. Another consequence was the quick response on the part of the Government to address the vulnerabilities exposed by the mass migration due to the pandemic – new government policies with great potential significance for regeneration and adaptive reuse in historic city centres such as Shahjahanabad have been formulated, to ensure an adequate supply of low-income affordable housing for migrant workers [4].

3. Actions and initiatives: responsiveness and resilience of the Cultural Heritage

After the closure of Archaeological sites and National Monuments in India to the public for almost three months, there was a calibrated reopening with upgradation of sites with essential facilities for digital ticketing, social distancing measures and security provided for from June 2020 onwards. There

were numerous initiatives of important National museums, State Departments of Archaeology and Museums and the Archaeological Survey of India at the Centre for digital outreach, and also an increased emphasis on improvement of local sites in each town or rural area, rather than a focus on more prominent sites [5]. However, large complexes such as the World Heritage Site of Humayun's Tomb with the Sundar Nursery also became increasingly popular, due to the perception of increased safety during the pandemic associated with the vast, sensitively designed open spaces of the public parks within the historic complex.



Fig. 1: View of the 90-acre Sundar Nursery garden, recently restored. (Author: Niveditaa Gupta)

Engaging and meaningful ways of encouraging interaction of the public with heritage resources included more than 300 virtual exhibitions and galleries being accessible digitally on a specially developed virtual museums platform [6]. Interesting approaches addressed a concern for visually impaired and people with special needs, with efforts made to enable an understanding of art by involving a range of senses in some museums [7].

Significant initiatives were taken by both state and central governments in India to record the specific skills of returning migrant workers in order to provide opportunities for gainful employment in the local areas of origin, so that they do not migrate elsewhere due to lack of sustainable livelihood options at the local level [8]. There was also increased support and promotion of traditional creative industries – an example of this was in the state of Uttar Pradesh that emphasized on identification of traditional products of creative industries (some on the verge of oblivion) associated with each district within the state and provided financial support and stimulus for marketing of these products. The ODOP (One District One Product) scheme was later supported by the World Bank [9]. Support for innovation and entrepreneurship was provided by collaborations between confederations of industries with educational institutions and custodians of traditional skills. The shock and economic disruption of the pandemic highlighted the necessity for stimulus for equipping small craftsmen, MSME (Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises) and handicrafts workshops for innovation and providing entrepreneurship skills. During the disruption of the lockdown, there was an increased emphasis on upskilling and skill upgradation, including in the conservation and heritage management, as well as the heritage education sectors, and recognition of the necessity for different types of online and blended methods in the holistic New Education Policy announced in July 2020, with a greater focus on vocational studies, including traditional crafts.

Another aspect of significance in India, as elsewhere, has been the recognition of suitability and resilience of architectural typologies such as the institutions and social infrastructure (hospitals, schools, community halls) constructed in the late 19th century. The initial lockdowns promoted the enjoyment and appreciation of buildings with traditional features such as deep arcades, shaded verandas, projected balconies, private open-to-sky spaces, terraces, and courtyards, not just as being climate responsive, but also suitable in the time of the pandemic. An increased interest in learning from the planning and building typologies has emerged in the wake of unexpected conclusions of statistical studies that indicate that some historic centres, despite their high densities, have managed to contain the spread of Covid-19 because of their introverted, courtyard-centred morphology and their strong community networks. Initial results of an ongoing study of the Covid-19 spread in

Shahjahanabad by students of architectural conservation in Delhi, based on data released by the Government of Delhi has identified some interesting and counter-intuitive aspects regarding the spread of the contagion in historic areas. Shahjahanabad, despite having the highest exposure to Covid-19 in May 2020 demonstrated a remarkable turnaround after 3 months, and the central district within which Shahjahanabad is located was ninth among the eleven districts of Delhi in terms of number of Covid infections – a substantial improvement over a short period. This was partially attributable to the rate of spread of the contagion not being as quick due to the traditional courtyard structures, compact neighbourhoods and low rise, high density structure of the traditional residential neighbourhoods – kuchas and katras [10].

Guidelines for the various phases of reopening in India have been framed by the Ministry of Home Affairs, and in October 2020, the Ministry of Culture, after consultation with various stakeholders issued detailed SOPs for cultural functions, activities and programs outside containment zones. The rationale given for this was “Covid-19 pandemic has hit the cultural and creative economy all over the world. However, cultural activities are slowly being resumed. In order to encourage those persons and agencies providing cultural services, as well as consumers of such services, it is important to lay down comprehensive guidelines for resumption of these cultural activities in India” [11]. The organisation of important religious gatherings and festivals has gradually been more efficiently managed, so that large gatherings on the occasion of festivals have changed from being considered as ‘super-spreader’ events to more efficient management associated with the ‘New Normal’.

Eventually, the pandemic with associated lockdowns and containment zones have provided a stimulus for acceleration of digitalization – both for access to cultural content, as well as sale of artisanal products. In India, there has been an interesting link between global and local with the Amazon and Ebay digital marketing initiatives for local artisanal products, and the creation of the ‘India Artisan Crafts Store’ intended for online sales of artisanal products from various parts of the country.

Similar initiatives, actions and ‘digital shifts’ in the cultural sectors have been made in Italy as well. While the Government started adopting a series of financial measures to support the Italian economy, and help tourism and culture sectors, significantly hit by this emergency, many artists and cultural professionals, using the hashtag #iorestoacasa (#stayhome), launched several digital contents and online initiatives on their social accounts, in order to sensitize the population to stay home and enjoy the rich and diverse Italian cultural heritage. In the wake of these first events, the Ministry of Culture created a webpage called “Culture never stops!” to collect all the virtual initiatives organised by the national cultural institutions. Through six sections - Museums, Books, Cinema, Music, Education and Theatre - the platform offers a wide range of videos, web contents and social initiatives, giving the population the opportunity to ‘keep in touch’ with art and culture during the closure of cultural places [12]. Further, using its social media, such as the YouTube channel, the Ministry of Culture continued to share and promote cultural actions, displaying online collections, virtual tours, and streaming shows and performances.

Cultural institutions and places made an effort to find ways and forms to make the art and culture world closer to the citizens, using the digital communication and online contents to bring art and culture within the people’s homes. For this reason, the Ministry of Culture promoted the campaign “L’arte ti somiglia” (“Art looks like you”), inviting the population to explore cultural places and sites online and scrolling through the social media accounts of museums, archives, and libraries, in order to look for similarities between artworks and real life, such as people, rooms, pets, etc. Stressing the value of maintaining the relationship, even from home, between the cultural heritage and citizens, everyone could share the comparisons on social media.

In the last decades cultural institutions have often used digital communication and social media mostly for launching and promoting activities and live events, but during the Covid-19 emergency many museums and cultural institutions increasingly used the online platforms to keep in touch with their visitors and expand their audience, having the chance to reach people from all over the world. Not all cultural entities and places were already registered on the most famous social media, and their recent online debut also made some record figures.

An interesting case regards one of the most famous Italian museums, Le Gallerie degli Uffizi [13], which appeared on Facebook on 10th March 2020, at the very beginning of the first lockdown, reaching over 100,000 followers in just one year [14]. The Florentine museum also joined TikTok – a social media mostly used by the youngest – and continued its online activities and campaigns on Twitter and Instagram too, hitting more than 800 thousand followers on the various profiles. The digital boom of the museum complex – that today is the most followed Italian museum on Instagram with over 600 thousand followers – showed a progressive growth of the younger public engagement and a significant female prevalence in the audience. Many virtual initiatives were able to bring the cultural heritage online and share the museum’s treasures, albeit remotely, to thousands of people worldwide. Additionally, important efforts in the expansion of the cultural offer on the museum’s official website were made, and relevant figures were achieved, with over 18 million views, meaning a 40% growth compared to the previous year.

Among the numerous virtual initiatives available free of charge, the display of fifteen virtual exhibitions, including the 360° virtual tour of the Uffizi's new Venetian rooms, was particularly successful with more than 110 thousand people already virtually visited it, over 4,000 per day. As the Figure 2 shows, virtual tours were created through a faithful 3D reproduction of the rooms and a high-definition digitisation of the artworks. An immersive experience through some of the most beautiful and interesting spaces of the museum gives visitors from home the chance to admire the artworks as in a live tour, moving around the museum. They can follow the suggested route, or choose their own path, getting closer to each artwork and read the captions with the relevant information, while the main masterpieces are also accompanied by in-depth information and details for enthusiasts and scholars.



Fig. 2: View of the virtual tour inside Le Gallerie degli Uffizi.

Another special event is the Uffizi On Air project, organised every Friday and streamed on Facebook, with tours led by curators and specialists from the Galleries that, at the end of the virtual visit, and take time to answer questions and curiosities by followers connected in real time from their homes. Further, the digital offer of the Uffizi is also enriched by live conferences, seminars, and round tables, where everyone can participate not just as auditor, but making comments and asking questions, so that culture does not remain an exclusive domain of specialists and experts but opens to a wider public. Eventually all the digital contents produced last year and displayed on the various social media has been collected and published on the museum's website, so that everyone can easily access them, even those who are not registered on social media. Using digital technologies, the museum was able also to strengthen and renew its remote educational offer: a new programme called Digital Ambassadors of Art was launched, with the participation of nearly fifty schools throughout the country. This first edition aimed at educating young people about cultural heritage, while also reflecting on its potential role for the future of Italy, as an engine for restarting, not just economically but also socially. The massive production and sharing of digital contents over the last year brings to the attention an important reflection for the next stages of the museums' reopening: even if created for a very specific need and situation, they might play a relevant role for the future of cultural places. Indeed, the access to art and culture through videos, cards, descriptions, and high-definition images directly from a smartphone can be a way to provide a plurality of accesses and multiple levels of information. Indeed, all the digital materials can be explored during the live visits, or before at home, to prepare the tour, or even after, for those who want to know further about the collections and the museum. Therefore, the experience of a cultural place would not be confined to the physical building or site, but it would allow to easily 'bring' it at home.

Another interesting Italian case is the Pinacoteca di Brera [15], one of most important Italian art galleries that even during the war and in the worst years of terrorism had always remained open, but then due to the Covid-19 emergency had to shut its doors as well. Despite the closure, it was one of the first museums able to display and share its artworks online, reaching thousands of users

worldwide. The art gallery had carried out numerous initiatives in the last year and widely contributed to cultural life during lockdown. Indeed, thanks to an external collaboration, almost seven hundred masterpieces have been digitalised in high-quality images and can be admired remotely just accessing on their website, including artworks on loan to the Pinacoteca from other museums and pieces not on display. The online collections are enriched with detailed captions and multimedia materials and references, such as restoration work or 'dialogues' with other artists, thus satisfying the interests of the most passionate visitors. During the lockdown, the Brera Listens project was launched to enhance the dialogue with the public, making it a protagonist. Through an open call for writings, videos, photos and drawings, the Pinacoteca virtually collected material created from the audience and shared on social media. The project included the campaign "Un Museo a Casa Tua" ("A Museum at Your Home"), aiming at sharing some beloved objects, with their stories, and virtually bringing them into the museum, considered as a large house that collects and safeguards the community's treasures. The result is a virtual gallery, available on the website, made of a series of cards, with all the objects that the participants have considered to be the most significant of their lives. For some years now the museum has presented "Appunti per una resistenza culturale" ("Notes for a cultural resistance"), an initiative in the *myBrera* section where the museum's employees, critics and curators talk about their favourite paintings. Today the initiative *yourBrera* completes the narrative allowing visitors to choose and comment on their favourite artworks of the Brera collection, turning the audience to 'authors' of the museum.

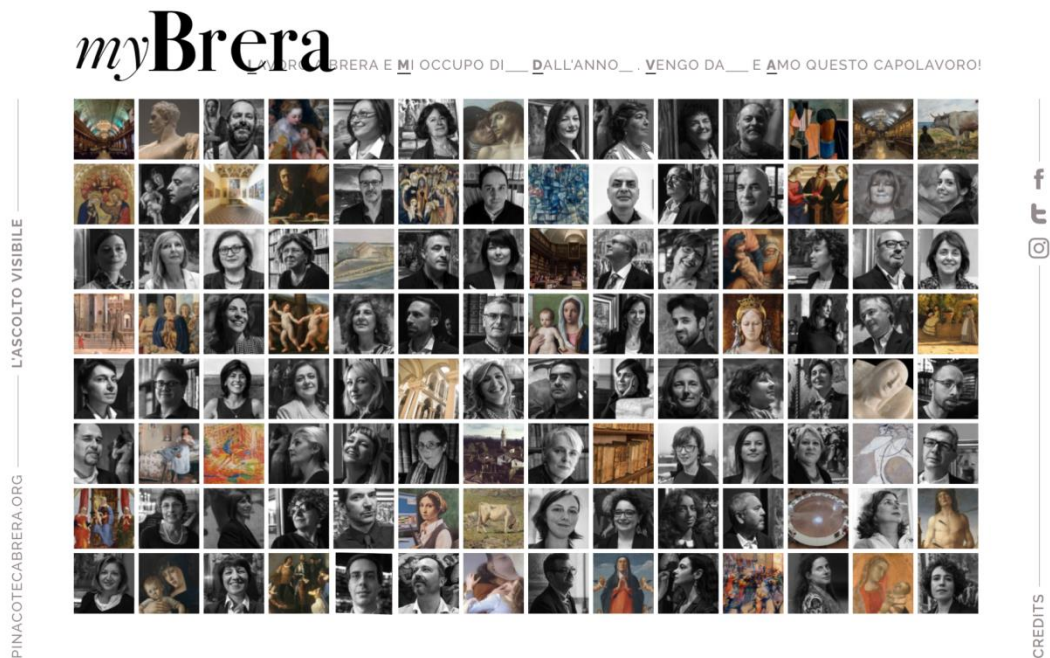


Fig. 3: Image from *myBrera* section on the official website.

In mid-September 2020, the Pinacoteca presented *BreraPlus+*, the new online platform that expands the visitor experience with multimedia contents, special programmes, interviews, reports, guided tours and virtual meetings with specialists, actors, writers, live streaming events, concerts, visits to the storerooms and the online restoration workshops, and much more. Requiring a subscription, free for the moment, it allows the user to participate in the life of the museum in an innovative way, to explore, discover, learn and, above all, to get excited and share the cultural heritage. The experimental initiative was born out of the need to overcome distances through digital communication, but at the same time setting the objective for the next future, after the pandemic emergency: expanding the museum's offer by allowing both physical access to the Pinacoteca and, at the same time, a multimedia offer of exclusive contents.

After several months of cancelled events and closure, the world's oldest opera house, the Teatro di San Carlo [16], opened its season with Mascagni's "Cavalleria Rusticana" for the first time without a live audience. The challenge of broadcasting the performance virtually, on Facebook, was highly acknowledged, with over 40,000 online tickets sold worldwide. As highlighted by Emanuela Spedaliere, San Carlo's chief executive manager: "The possibility that everyone could access the world of opera with this ticket gives us a sense of equality" [17]. This initiative is just one of plenty of

actions and projects organized in the last year, showing the potentiality of the web for the cultural sector, broadening cultural places and institutions' appeal to a potentially limitless audience. Indeed, despite being the only alternative solution to perform over these times of emergency, the streaming events and virtual events could become an interesting opportunity for the future of the sector, creating a virtual stage to see from home, from each corner of the globe.

4. Conclusions

The Covid-19 emergency has exposed many socio-economic inequalities, weak spots and pre-existing vulnerabilities of the cultural sector, such as precarious working conditions, the lack of long-term planning in the heritage management, strict budgets of many cultural institutions, etc. Further, the crisis has deeply tested the resilience of our societies and affected the fundamental right to access to culture [18]. However, the situation also gives new opportunities and chances to improve. For instance, the last year has generally accelerated the process of digital communication and digitisation of the cultural heritage, creating new forms of access to museums and cultural places. The crisis has surely demonstrated how relevant and fragile the bond between cultural heritage and people is, including all those categories involved, from workers to local communities and audiences.

In India and Italy, due to the pandemic, the opportunity to enjoy the beneficial effects of cultural activities on individuals and communities has been threatened in many ways, and as stated by WHO in a report published at the end of 2019: "Engaging with the arts can be beneficial for both mental and physical health" [19], with several positive effects on the well-being of individuals.

However, the comparison between the two countries highlights different aspects, resulting from diverse political, economic, social and cultural conditions, but the sudden lockdowns and following closure of museums and cultural places has found both countries quite unprepared. Italy, following the motto "#fiorestoacasa" ("I stay home") has seen itself 'locked' at home for many months, without the chance of sharing cultural and creative experiences live. Virtual visits, digital contents and online events were the only possibility of 'escape', and thanks to the use of digital technologies, many cultural institutions were able to keep in touch with their audiences, even if not always in a planned and strategic way. In India, where the pandemic has taken a different course, the Government and community organisations have, unusually and quite effectively, supported the use of ethno-medicinal preventive measures and practices such as ayurvedic formulations and yoga to avoid the widespread of the disease. The pandemic and associated lockdown has resulted in the creation of synergies and a culture of collaboration between different stakeholders for numerous efforts to implement new forms of cultural sharing with the digitisation of exhibitions, museums and virtual galleries. In addition, as a response to the vulnerabilities highlighted by the pandemic, responsive, equitable and forward-looking policies have been put into place, that may have an implication in the future for upgradation of the historic and traditional building stock in historic cities and historic urban villages, that has been used by low-income migrant workers to urban areas. Skill mapping including mapping of traditional artisanal skills, support for the creative industries in many states has been initiated, digital platforms created to link potential global markets with local, small scale cultural artisanal enterprises, and skill development initiatives taken supported by digital technology.

In both countries, a process of digitisation of cultural resources and experiences might be part of a long-term strategy for the future of the cultural and creative sectors. At the same time digital communication should be considered in the process, since the virtual access is surely an important form of experiencing culture, and even if the digital contents cannot replace physical visits, they can potentially be used for many purposes, such as enlarging the kind of experiences, making them more interactive, more inclusive, useful for in-depth analyses, etc.

Eventually, the creation and promotion of digital contents through websites and social media in recent times has highlighted the role of art and cultural places in relation to the communities, in a very broad sense, including from the local people and territory to a global and limitless audience from all over the world. The chance of getting close and having access, at least virtually, to museums, theatres, etc. from home has surely been an important experience in the cultural sector, opening to new directions for the future.

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