
CULTURAL CATALYST: ASSESSING THE MULTIFACETED IMPACT OF THE NITA MUKESH AMBANI CULTURAL CENTRE ON THE TRADITIONAL CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS OF INDIA

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ABSTRACT

All the communities have their own sets of music, dance, art, designs, names, signs and symbols, performances, ceremonies, rituals, customs, handicrafts and narratives, etc. All these may include to be Traditional Cultural Expressions (herein referred to as TCEs). TCEs are the integral part of Traditional Knowledge (herein referred to as TK) and are passed down from generation to generation forming a part of their identity and heritage. Nita Mukesh Ambani, the founder and Chairperson of Reliance Foundation, has come up with the initiative of one of its own kinds Cultural Centre, “Nita Mukesh Ambani Cultural Centre” (herein after referred to as NMACC) in Mumbai, which aims to preserve and promote the rich and diverse TCEs of India along with safeguarding and celebrating them. Furthermore, it will even serve as a dynamic hub for those interested in appreciating, learning and showcasing TCEs of various communities of India. The main objective of this article is to focus on the positive as well as negative impacts of the NMACC on the TCEs of India.

Keywords: TCEs, NMACC, Documentation, Preservation, Misrepresentation.

Introduction

“An ode to our Nation, the Cultural Centre aims to preserve and promote Indian Arts. I hope our spaces nurture and inspire talent, bringing together communities from across India and the globe.”

-Nita M Ambani

Founder & Chairperson

In India, there are many cultural centres established by the Government of India and even privately. In accordance to the report of the Press Information Bureau, seven zonal cultural centres have been established by the Government of India for the conservation and development of TCEs, with their headquarters in Patiala, Nagpur, Udaipur, Prayagraj, Kolkata, Dimapur and Thanjavur.¹ There are many private cultural centres but NMACC is said to be a first of its kind in India which is a multi-disciplinary space for TCEs having a aim to promote and preserve the rich TCEs of India. It advocates to promote and preserve the rich Indian TCEs for the betterment of the Nation framing a path for harmonious co-existence of tradition and modernity. It can be regarded as a place where aged-old customs and traditions thrive in a contemporary world, making them known to the world and the people of India. It has always been said that diversity is one of the features of India, but there had not been a place which would express it open to the world and India its diverse nature, a home to the cultural diversity of India.

TCEs gained popularity at the beginning of twenty first century as its use in the international forums was wide spread. Till date there is no such definition which is legally accepted internationally. But two instruments, i.e., the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (herein after referred to as CCD) and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (herein after referred to as UNDRIP) have provided legal concept to the expression of TCEs. TCEs has been referred in the preamble of CCD twice.

¹ Aditi Suryavanshi, *What Makes Nita Mukesh Ambani Cultural Centre a First-of-its-Kind in India?*, April 5, 2023, available at: <https://www.thequint.com/entertainment/indian-cinema/what-makes-nita-mukesh-ambani-cultural-centre-a-first-of-its-kind-in-india#read-more> (Last visited on September 2, 2023).

In the first occurrence TCEs are presented as a subset of cultural expressions:

“Recognising that the diversity of cultural expressions, including traditional cultural expressions, is an important factor that allows individuals and peoples to express and to share with others their ideas and values.”²

In the second occurrence, TCEs is connected with minorities and indigenous people:

“Taking into account the importance of the vitality of cultures, including for persons belonging to minorities and indigenous peoples, as manifested in their freedom to create, disseminate and distribute their traditional cultural expressions and to have access thereto, so as to benefit them for their own development.”³

Another instrument UNDRIP in its Article 31.1 has linked TCEs with cultural heritage and TK: “Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, TK and TCEs, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures, including human and genetics resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs, sports and traditional games and visual and performing arts. They also have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, TK and TCEs.”⁴

According to WIPO, “TCEs, also called ‘expressions of folklore’, may include music, dance, art, designs, names, signs and symbols, performances, ceremonies, architectural forms, handicrafts and narratives, or many other artistic or cultural expressions. It may be considered as the forms in which traditional culture is expressed; form part of the identity and heritage of a traditional or indigenous community; and are passed down from generation to generation.”⁵

TCEs can be regarded as the lifeblood of any nation, it works as a reservoir of the identity of the community and legacy as well. India is a country who is very rich in TCEs.

² CCD, Preamble, recital 13.

³ *Ibid.*, recital 15.

⁴ Lily Martinet, *Traditional Cultural Expressions and International Intellectual Property Law*, 7 IJLI 47 (2019).

⁵ WIPO, *Traditional Cultural Expressions*, available at: [https://www.wipo.int/tk/en/folklore/#:~:text=Traditional%20cultural%20expressions%20\(TCEs\)%2C,other%20artistic%20or%20cultural%20expressions.](https://www.wipo.int/tk/en/folklore/#:~:text=Traditional%20cultural%20expressions%20(TCEs)%2C,other%20artistic%20or%20cultural%20expressions.) (Last visited on September 2, 2023).

Impact Assessment

The impact of the NMACC upon the TCEs can be regarded as subjective. It will mostly depend upon the management of the NMACC and its goals. There are both positive as well as negative impact of Cultural Centres upon TCEs and NMACC is not an exception.

Positive Impact

- a) **Preserving, Documenting and Promoting the TCEs:** India has in a way through Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (herein after referred to as TKDL) documented and preserved the TK with regards to Ayurveda, Unani, Siddha and Yoga. In the same way, if the NMACC works dedicatedly towards preserving and documenting the TCEs of India, then it will be a great contribution towards their continuous existence and value in the contemporary world. So much of TCEs of communities living in various regions of India have been lost due to no work towards preserving and documenting them. The 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguard of the Intangible Cultural Heritage had professed to document TCEs which in a way can be a means to safeguard cultural heritage.⁶ The main agenda behind the preservation through documentation should be to maintain, use and develop TCEs for the future and the present generations of people and communities in a context related to tradition.

TCEs in most countries fall under public domain which make them a means to create new designs or arts for free. They do not even need to get consent or permission from the source communities or pay any kind of compensation or share any benefits.⁷ With the documentation of TCEs, the benefit will arise to the Communities holding the TCEs, as it will become evident that the said TCE belonged to them and can even prove the origin and belongingness in the event of misappropriation. There are IPRs like Trademarks, Copyright and Geographical Indications (here in after referred to as GI) which is said to protect some of the aspects of TCEs but they do not provide full protection to the TCEs of Communities.⁸ To preserve and promote the TCEs, digital

⁶Documentation of Traditional Knowledge and Traditional Cultural Expressions, *available at:* https://www.wipo.int/edocs/pubdocs/en/wipo_pub_tk_9.pdf (Last visited on September 2, 2023).

⁷ Template Traditional Textile Design Database: Securing Cultural Intellectual Property Rights for Ethnic Groups in Laos, *available at:* <https://www.taec Laos.org/tools-for-artisans/> (Last visited on September 3, 2023).

⁸ *Ibid.*

documentation of information related to TCEs in the form of databases can prove to be effective. Database protection can be provided either by copyright protection or sui generis database rights, and the content of the database by way of texts, photographs, audio-visual materials.⁹

So much of TCEs have been lost due to not being able to document them. There is an old African proverb, “when an old man dies, a library burns to the ground”. This is the same with the TCEs if they are not documented.

b) Education and Awareness regarding TCEs: NMACC has the potential to serve as an educational centre to spread awareness and importance regarding the TCEs. One of its purposes is to present educational projects with regards to TCEs.¹⁰ It can be performed by ways of workshops, exhibitions and programs.

- **Workshops:** Most of the Cultural Centres believe in the concept of ‘hands-on learning’. They believe that the best way to learn is by participating. Workshops are being conducted in the NMACC regarding certain arts, crafts, folk music, classical dances, etc. All these workshops help people to connect and get to know how rich of a traditionally cultural country India is. There are so much of heritage, identity, tradition hidden within these TCEs. People do know folk music and dances, arts and crafts but most of them do not know the stories behind it, the meaning, the message as well as the history. Workshops are hands-on experiences that indulge people in participating and truly appreciate the rich heritage of TCEs. Workshops, in a way, make every individual an active participant and contributor which create awareness within them to preserve the TCEs. It is known and realised that TCEs are transmitted from generations to generations and workshops is the best way of passing down those knowledges of TCEs from the older generations to the younger generations.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ All About the Nita Mukesh Ambani Cultural Centre (NMACC): The New Landmark of Mumbai, available at: <https://www.nativeplanet.com/travel-guide/what-is-nmacc-nita-mukesh-ambani-cultural-centre-mumbai-its-purpose-location-how-to-reach-007948.html> (Last visited on September 3, 2023).

- **Exhibitions:** NMACC has launched arts exhibitions as well as shows, national as well as international. What is good about this Cultural Centre is that the TCEs of various indigenous and local communities and peoples of India have found a platform to showcase their culture and in a way benefit from them. All the artifacts, artworks, musical instruments, etc. provided are of world class and with the cultural expressions, the performance or arts will surely engage the senses and intellects of the audiences and visitors. Exhibitions held by NMACC with regards to TCEs will express the diversity of India and cultural richness. It will add new meaning to the TK and TCEs all around the world. Visitors will get the opportunities to explore the stories, meanings, and significance to various rituals, customs, arts, folk dance, etc. which will further more create a sense of respect and cultural empathy.
- **Programs:** NMACC is a centre for creative expression and hosts a range of events and programs that celebrate art, music, dance, and theatre.¹¹ To encourage, promote and spread awareness regarding the TCEs of India, programs relating to TCEs like lectures, seminars, discussions led by experts, scholars and the holding communities, has to be held by the NMACC. The aim of these programs should be to encourage deeper understanding for the need to preserve and promote the cultural treasures of India. Programs relating to music, dances, arts, and such are being conducted in the NMACC which has brought to life the TCEs of India.

NMACC has the potential to become an educational power house which in various ways can ignite awareness and foster a profound appreciation for TCEs. Through its workshops, exhibitions and programs, it can involve the TCEs holders of India to showcase their rich cultural traditions. It can act as a hub for all the communities to express their TCEs to the diverse people of India and in this way, the TCEs are kept alive and shared with all the people of India and the world.

c) **Networking:** India Habitat Centre is regarded as country's foremost cultural hub. In this centre, cultural performances and presentations, language festivals, theatre

¹¹ Nita Ambani Cultural Centre (NMACC): Celebrating Art and Culture in Mumbai, *available at*: <https://www.transcontinentaltimes.com/nita-ambani-cultural-centre-nmacc/> (Last visited on September 6, 2023).

performances, exhibitions, etc. take place. Cultural Centres are those epicentres where intellectual stimulation take place. Cultural Centres can also be the contemporary platform for the TCEs holders to showcase and connect to wider audiences and even to seek for financial assistance. India, a country, very rich in art and culture, where every community in their day to day life use their TCEs for living, can come together with their culture and art in NMACC serving as a meeting point. People of different regions, communities can come together in this cultural centre and exchange their experiences, ideas, techniques and even showcase them. This will enable them to learn from each other, know the TCEs of other communities and regions, adapt to the changing times to help preserve and promote them. The holders of TCEs, in most of the cases, do not get access to platforms like galleries, theaters, etc. where in cultural centre like NMACC comes into picture to showcase their TCEs in contemporary settings. This way, the TCEs holders can connect to wider audiences and provide value to their TCEs. NMACC is one of its own kinds which has its aim in showcasing international cultures as well, which furthermore provides potential in cross border international collaborations. This will facilitate the TCEs holders of various different countries to come together and can create a unique art fusion, furthermore enabling them to participate in global cultural exchange programs. Networking will in a way promote TCEs globally and prevent from being misappropriated.

- d) Cultural Exchange:** One of the aims of the NMACC is to provide platform to national and international cultures and arts and promote them globally. This will create lots of opportunities regarding cultural exchange and bring to light various different cultures and arts of small communities of India and the rest of the world. The benefit from this will be that there will less chances of misappropriations. Before all this so-called development, the TK of all the communities were the ways of life and necessary for the survival. NMACC, in the future, has the potential to play a vital role in bringing together different communities from all over India and different countries as well and provide a platform to them in sharing their knowledge regarding their TCEs.

Negative Impact

- a) Commercialization:** One of the major and the most vital concerns with TCEs is their commercialization. There are no national or international instruments which advocates

against the commercialization of TCEs. If IPRs are taken into consideration, it was framed in such a way, that those rights can be commercially used. And on top of that, TCEs are put under public domain making them publicly available with a higher chance of misappropriation and misrepresentation. If the cultural centre aims towards commercialization of TCEs then it will create more damage to the TCEs holders than the Multi-National Companies (MNCs) can. The objective of the Cultural Centre should be to preserve the authenticity of the TCEs and not to harness TCEs for commercial purposes. In the official website of NMACC, the main aim is stated to preserve and promote India's rich art, culture and heritage through varied art forms.¹² To do so, financial assistance plays a pivotal role and to provide this assistance there needs to be a source of income. Generation of revenue is also important for the Centre as the Centre needs to operate, maintain and look after its functionality. Though, as of now, the main objective of NMACC is to promote and preserve the TCEs of India but in pursuing financial stability for its functionality, the Cultural Centre may face the temptation to prioritize profit generation. What happens when, profit generation is prioritized is that, the authenticity of the TCEs will get diluted by presenting them in such a commercial way to entertain the audiences (just like the biography movies in Bollywood). The purity and authenticity of the TCEs will get diluted hampering the aged old cultures and arts. It is not advisable to modify or simplify TCEs in such ways to entertain the market.¹³ TCEs are valued and respected due to their authenticity and purity. TCEs have religious, cultural and historical significance to the holders.¹⁴ Commercialization of TCEs will reduce the value to just some mere commodities. One of the major issues with commercialization of TCEs is the access of benefit sharing. TCEs mostly belong to indigenous or local communities and the question of benefit sharing has not been answered by any legislation or instruments clearly.

TCEs are generally owned by indigenous or local communities and peoples. When TCEs are commercialized in mass, it will hamper the quality and will exploit the TCEs

¹² Nita Mukesh Ambani Cultural Centre, available at: <https://nmacc.com/> (Last visited on September 7, 2023).

¹³ Safeguarding Traditional Cultures: A Global Assessment, available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000132327> (last visited on May 22, 2025).

¹⁴ WIPO's Proposed Treatment of Sacred Traditional Cultural Expressions as a Distinct Form of Intellectual Property, available at: <https://cjl.uchicago.edu/print-archive/wipos-proposed-treatment-sacred-traditional-cultural-expressions-distinct-form> (last visited on May 23, 2025).

holders. And soon duplication of such starts to take place. The example of duplication of Banarsi saree (which has been awarded Geographical Indication) is one of the best.¹⁵

Even the use of indigenous culture in movies like Pocahontas and the Lion King is commercialization of TCEs by Disney.¹⁶ The use of TCEs in such movies drew criticism for using TCEs for profit. Though these movies promoted aspects of indigenous culture globally but commercialized and misrepresented the TCEs of certain communities. Yoga has been practiced in India since time immemorial and is one of the TCEs of India. It is one of the most commercialized TCEs globally. One can witness various yoga studios, yoga learning centres, yoga teachers, brands who are benefitting from this TCE globally. Yoga has spiritual as well as cultural roots to India and is regarded as a form of cultural practice which makes an individual mentally, physically and spiritually strong, but the commercialization of Yoga has stripped it off from its spiritual and cultural roots turning it into a fitness trend.¹⁷ Some even argue that Yoga is similar to Physiotherapy. There are high chances of cultural appropriation as well when cultural centres collaborate with fashion brands. So many fashion brands have faced backlash and criticism for appropriating traditional clothing styles without the prior consent of the Holders.

- b) Homogenization of TCEs:** Most of the Cultural centres face challenge of cultural preservation over commercial interests and it might become same with NMACC in times to come. There are significant risks associated with the challenge and one such risk is the potential homogenization of TCEs. Homogenization, with regards to TCEs, is a process by which the TCEs are altered, simplified, or adapted so that they are widely accepted and can be commercially used.¹⁸ NMACC is a privately owned cultural centre and along with its aims there will always be a desire to generate revenue and to reach

¹⁵ *The Role of Geographical Indication in Preserving Traditional Crafts: The Case of the Banarasi Sarees Industry*, available at: <https://www.khuranaandkhurana.com/2024/09/30/the-role-of-geographical-indication-in-preserving-traditional-crafts-the-case-of-the-banarasi-sarees-industry/> (last visited on May 23, 2025).

¹⁶ *Indigenously Doing Disney*, available at <http://doi.org/10.54754/incontext.v3i2.68> (last visited on May 23, 2025).

¹⁷ *That's a Stretch: Reconstructing, Rearticulating, and Commodifying Yoga*, available at: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2018.00047> (last visited on May 25, 2025).

¹⁸ *Cultural Homogenization: Causes, Effects, and Solutions*, available at: <https://shallowinsan.com/cultural-homogenization-causes-effects-and-solutions/> (last visited on May 25, 2025).

more audiences which may lead to dilute the unique cultural aspects of TCEs by compromising their authenticity.

If we take into consideration the Indian Classical Dance, the use in the film industry has somehow altered, modified and simplified it so that it looks more appealing to the masses and people can also perform it with less of a practice. Bollywood has influenced the classical dance forms in such ways that they are visually appealing and entertaining to large audiences, ripping them off their values and making them just some form of dance.¹⁹

Another instance is of Traditional Indian Cuisine, which has gained popularity worldwide with Indian restaurants being established globally. Every country has its own preferences towards the taste of the food. To match the diversity in the taste, many Indian restaurants have altered the traditional recipes of the Indian food which has in a way lead towards homogenization of Indian traditional food.²⁰

Considering the traditional folk music genres, they have been tampered since the time music industry came into existence. Without the consent of the folk music holders, it is fused with contemporary music genres to create a music which can be commercialized.²¹ This might make the folk music popular but will truly dilute the traditional essence of it and will not be liked if it is played in its original folk music form.

Traditional weaving and clothing often get cultural appropriation in the fashion industry.²² Though the fashion industry has been criticized multiple times for copying and using traditional clothing to generate revenue, they still have not learned any lesson at all. Without respecting their cultural significance, the traditional cultural clothing

¹⁹ Exploring Bollywood's Impact on Indian Dance Culture, *available at*: <https://socialstudieshelp.com/exploring-bollywoods-impact-on-indian-dance-culture/> (last visited on May 25, 2025).

²⁰ Vishnu Antani & Santosh Mahapatra, "Evolution of Indian Cuisine: A Socio-Historical Review" 9:15 *JEF* 10 (2022).

²¹ Unpacking the appropriation of regional music in Bollywood, *available at*: <https://www.5xfest.com/5xpress/unpacking-the-appropriation-of-regional-music-in-bollywood> (last visited on May 30, 2025).

²² Cultural Appropriation in Fashion Industry, *available at*: <https://fashionlawjournal.com/cultural-appropriation-in-fashion-industry/> (last visited on May 27, 2025).

styles from various cultures are showcased in fashion show with alteration. The unique cultural narratives that the clothes carry is nowhere to be found in the fashion industry and are used in commercial manner.²³

- c) **Marginalization:** Marginalization of the TCEs of the various Communities of India by the Cultural Centres with the aim to preserve, promote and protect those, may have negative impacts on them. Taking into consideration the folk music and dance, the marginalization of folk music and dance will somehow in a way strip them of their originality (content & ritualistic significance).²⁴ People pay to witness the forms of TCEs in the Cultural Centres and to entertain the crowd, the TCEs might in a way be presented in a diluted manner. The Cultural Centres may in a way present the TCEs as commodities ripping them off their spiritual and TK based purposes. Those parts of TCEs are only given significance which are liked by the audiences and others are ignored and left behind.

Another negative impact of Marginalization can be 'hindrance in the transmission to the younger generations'.²⁵ When certain art forms are presented some might get highlighted and some don't get that much importance, leading to which the younger generations may lose interest in learning those TCEs which do not get that much of importance. Those forms of TCEs can be perceived as outdated or unimportant and the younger generations may not see any value in carrying them forward which may lead to disconnection from the roots and loss of those TCEs.²⁶

When TCEs of a community is marginalized, the TCEs holder community does not have full ownership and control over those TCEs within the Cultural Centres. There is lack of ownership and the holder community does not have full right to decide how their culture is to be presented in the Cultural Centre. The TCEs are to be presented in the way it appeals the crowd.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ The Problems of Marginalized Groups in India, *available at*: <https://www.lawctopus.com/academike/problems-marginalized-groups-india/> (last visited on May 27, 2025).

²⁵ Negative Effects and Challenges of Globalization on Cultural Diversity, *available at*: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/negative-effects-challenges-globalization-cultural-dr-6w4kc> (last visited on May 29, 2025).

²⁶ *Ibid.*

d) Dependency: When TCEs become dependent of Cultural Centres, there can be various negative impacts. When a Cultural Centre becomes the preserver and the exhibitor of TCEs, the TCEs holder community does not have full ownership over the TCEs which will hamper the evolution and presentation of the TCEs.²⁷ The authenticity of the TCEs also gets jeopardized. As the time changes, so does the nature of the TCEs. The Cultural Centre may present the TCEs in a fixed manner which will affect the growth and adaptation of the TCEs within the community leading to stagnant or irrelevant to contemporary life.

Another negative impact can be the exploitation in the benefit sharing of the profit from the presentation of the TCEs. If there is no proper analysis of the benefit sharing between the Cultural Centre and the Knowledge Holder Community then it will lead to exploitation making the TCEs just a mere product for consumption rather than the identity of the community.²⁸ And furthermore, presenting it on a daily basis in the Cultural Centre may lead to losing of its significance to the Knowledge Holder Community and the sacred rituals aligned with it.

When the Cultural Centre becomes the Caretaker of the TCEs, then can be a shift in the Community with regards to the preservation and practice of those TCEs.²⁹ The Community might start to see their TCEs as a source to connect with the Cultural Centre and are to be provided to the Cultural Centres for the protection and preservation leading to which the Community might become dependent on the Cultural Centre and lack interest in growing, preserving, practicing and protecting their set of TCEs.³⁰

²⁷ Intellectual Property and the Safeguarding of Traditional Cultures, *available at:* https://www.wipo.int/edocs/pubdocs/en/tk/1023/wipo_pub_1023.pdf (last visited on June 1, 2025).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Cultural Exploitation or Cultural Exchange? The roles of perceived group status and others' psychological investment on reactions to consumption of traditional cultural products, *available at:* https://www.researchgate.net/publication/363740098_Cultural_exploitation_or_cultural_Exchange_The_roles_of_perceived_group_status_and_others'_psychological_investment_on_reactions_to_consumption_of_traditional_cultural_products (last visited on May, 31, 2025).

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

NMACC is a multi-disciplinary space for TCEs which aims to promote and preserve the rich TCEs of India. There are many Cultural Centres in India but NMACC is said to be one of its own kind which is the future of tradition arts of India showcasing them in the vibrant manner to the world. It is the fortune of India to have such a marvelous Cultural Centre which will boost the TCEs of India and will provide platform and encouragement to the Communities practicing different types of TCEs. It will in a way, promote the TCEs, even leading to documentations of the TCEs (which has become the need of the time). There might come a time, when the TCEs of different communities of India are displayed in the NMACC and even the commercial aspect of TCEs are taken into consideration by the NMACC. It is the time which will show how much benefit the NMACC will be to the TCEs holder Communities or how will its negative impact hamper the TCEs of India. India is a country, where in every corner, there is practice of rituals, customs, folk songs, folk music, etc. In such a country, where day to day lives are filled with the practice of TCEs, such a magnificent Cultural Centre is needed but what needs to be taken into consideration is the proper analysis of benefit sharing, cultural misrepresentation, cultural appropriation, exploitation and such.