

Economic Crisis of Folk Performing Art in the Rural Economy of West Bengal

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Abstract

Folk arts in West Bengal have evolved to become indicators of a nation's tradition, identity and uniqueness. Folk art form creates cultural identity and also creates integrity of individuals and equipping them to meet social challenges. There are great variations in the performing folk art and culture in West Bengal which is directly linked with socio economic position of rural people. In recent the sudden and radical effect of COVID-19 on the lives of freelance performing artists is compounding dangerous levels of precocity in these occupations and, as a result, there are swifter, deeper and more serious consequences to policy inaction in the coming years. The effect of the crisis of an artist is not only in the form of less public show but it is in their inability to earn as much as before with secondary job.

Key Words: Folk, Performing Art, Covid, Rural, West Bengal

Introduction

Culture has been identified as a “driver for sustainable development” (UN 2010, UNESCO 2012). Cultural heritage is a group of resources inherited from the past which people identify, independently of ownership, as a reflection and expression of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, knowledge and tradition”. India is a land of rich culture and heritage. We know that performing art is one of the most important intangible cultural heritages. From the Vedic era to the medieval period, the performing arts remained an important source of educating the masses. Now, these Indian art forms have become means of entertainment and knowledge for people all over the world.

Folk performing art forms in India are traditional way of Communication and enriched cultural heritage. It constitutes a potential source for conveying messages for Social, Economic and Cultural Development which ultimately helps in overall National Development. Folk arts in West Bengal have evolved to become indicators of a nation’s tradition, identity and uniqueness. Folklore arts, beliefs, rites and rituals, myths, rural handicrafts etc. are factors that enrich our folk tradition. The different folk art forms maintain their ethnic nature through which they make socialization possible; they regulate them and harmonize them with other communities. Folk art forms cultural identity and also creates integrity of individuals and equipping them to meet social challenges. Folk artistes

were struggling to keep their art forms alive even before, no thanks to how rapidly the meaning of entertainment and art was changing due to globalization and now with the COVID-19 hit, everything has come to a standstill during the epidemic, work, weddings, music and dance concerts, theaters, and while some of them could somehow survive this pandemic, largely it will take some time for the indigenous art forms to get back on their feet.

Significance of this study

The Government of India as well as the Government of West Bengal has increasingly recognized the importance of the creative art sector to compete in the global market place. A number of factors underscore the connection between economic competitiveness and creativity. Arts and culture can play a major role in community development and redevelopment by creating new jobs as well as fostering an environment and amenities that attract talented young workers; and tourism centered on arts and culture can contribute to state and local economic growth by providing a diversified and sustainable means for creating jobs and attracting revenue. Performing folk art is one of the most important powerful traditional media by which everyone can send messages to the people.

Performing artists are the bulwarks of the cultural history of any country and integral to the national, economic and social fabric of a nation. In recent months, countries such as Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland have

announced funds and aid packages for their cultural sector, which is being equated with national heritage. In India, so far, there has been no concentrated effort in the same direction. While the zonal offices of Sangeet Natak Akademies have reached out to some folk and tribal artistes who are registered with them, the situation is particularly grim for artistes who are not government employees or affiliated to Sangeet Natak Akademies of the various states — many of them include instrument makers, sound and light technicians, instrument tuners, music teachers who teach from home, accompanying artistes, theatre artistes, dancers, costume designers, make-up artists among others.

Working populations across the world are seeing their livelihoods and careers collapse or transform overnight as a result of the global pandemic COVID-19 and the responses of individual governments. Performing art is affected more than any other occupation. Even in the best of times, a vast majority of India's artists have struggled to earn decent wages as they are largely in unorganized sectors of the economy. Their predicament is exacerbated by the fact that many of them don't have regular jobs and their livelihood is dependent on regular performances. Since the sector is completely unorganised, various efforts in various directions are the need of the hour.

In recent decades, as evidenced by the UNESCO report, culture is increasingly discussed in the context of economics. This change is the result of a number of factors, including the

cultural policies of government and economic changes brought about by globalization (Obuljen,2006). Several studies (Jensen, 1999; Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Ellmeier, 2003; Howkins, 2001; Florida, 2002; Conference Board of Canada, 2008; UNDP, 2010; Rikalovic and Mikic, 2011; Dey, 2012; Das, 2013; Mukherjee and Bhattacharya, 2015; Boris Gershman, 2016; Sen, 2018) have studied the concepts of art and culture in different regional literature angles. Scant attention has been made to study the economics of performing folk art industries in the Indian context. There are great variations in the performing folk art and culture in West Bengal which is directly linked with socio economic position of rural people. Keeping this in view, this research work is an attempt to examine those vital issues in the existing research work. The specific objectives of this paper are to study the challenges faced by the performing art sector in the current pandemic situation.

Data Set & Methodology

In west Bengal, the performing arts are controlled by individuals and Government aided institutions/groups. However, there are established and successful artists and art institutions that have made meaningful strides in the development of the performing arts. Geographically there are 5 divisions in West Bengal – Jalpaiguri division, Burdwan divisions, Presidency divisions, Maldah divisions and Medinipur divisions. My study is on the economic analysis of folk performing art in Medinipur division. Medinipur Division

consists of five districts – Paschim Medinipur, Purba Medinipur, Jhargram, Bankura and Purulia.

Primary data has been collected from the professional artists of performing art in different districts of Medinipur Division. The sampling design followed in this study is a simple random sampling design. From each district we take 30 professional artists of folk performing art so total numbers of respondents are 150.

The research methodology used in this study included web site searches, literature searches, face-to-face, telephone or email interviews, and short questionnaires. In order to study the different aspects of the stated objectives, simple tabular analysis, which presents absolute numerical values, percentage change, simple proportion, descriptive statistics and test of significance, will be used in this research work. The methodology used to achieve the stated objectives of this study is in the following lines:

1. Estimate the values of performing art and influence of folk performing art on Socio economic conditions

The concept of total economic value, which is widely used in the valuation of the environment (Tietenberg and Lewis 2009), can be applied to the valuation of culture, albeit with some slight modifications.

A) Impact analysis

Impact analysis seeks to estimate the economic benefits from providing a cultural good or hosting a cultural event to the local economy, in terms of additional spending, visitor numbers or jobs provided (Taonga, 2013). This includes any direct spending as a result of the event (ticket sales, purchases from local suppliers) and any indirect spending by out of town visitors in local businesses (e.g. hotels and restaurants). The non-marketable economic contribution of cultural industries can also be estimated.

To measure impact of cultural industries CSA analysis, production function analysis etc have been used. Cultural Satellite Accounts (CSA) is a statistical framework for measuring the economic contribution of culture (UNESCO, 2012).

B) Estimating the non-market values of performing art

As an environmental valuation, non-market benefits can be estimated by mainly two techniques:

i) Revealed Preference Techniques

These techniques rely on observed behavior in a related market to infer the value placed on a particular non-market good. Hedonic Pricing models and travel cost method has been used to estimate individuals' willingness to pay for a particular non-market good.

Hedonic pricing uses market prices to extract the value that people attribute to being located near a performing art area. It

is based on market prices and hence on revealed values associated with a bundle of cultural and non-cultural characteristics.

Travel Costs measures the value people place on cultural events or goods based on the time and cost they are willing to incur in traveling to enjoy the cultural events. It is based on actual travel times and costs that directly reveal people's valuation of a cultural event.

ii) Stated Preference Techniques

These techniques have found support within government funding bodies for the valuation of non-market benefits. Two commonly applied stated preference techniques, contingent valuation (CV) and choice modeling (CM), use carefully designed surveys to elicit the respondents' preferences for the non-market cultural goods (Navrud & Ready (eds.), 2002 and O'Brien, 2010).

Important Findings

Around the world, responses to the first and second waves of the COVID-19 pandemic are understandably focused on reducing infections and fatalities. There are also redoubled efforts to avoid the negative economic consequences of the outbreak, especially in relation to jobs, productivity and growth. But the pandemic is an economic wrecking ball, with intergenerational consequences. Global growth has plummeted. Economic inequality increases day by day due to different reasons. Higher-paid workers are working from home

while lower-paid workers typically do not have this option. The pandemic is increasing poverty and inequality between organized sector workers and unorganized sector workers.

In India, the world's one of the most powerful developing economies, a massive number of job losses have been reported due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to the fall in demand and production level the market is uncertain in the overall scenario. Adding to the worries is a steep demand shock that experts say classified as a long-term worry, citing uncertainty in the post-pandemic landscape. The impact of the pandemic had not only brought the global economy to a standstill but set the clock backwards on the developmental progress of several nations. The coronavirus crisis is going to produce unprecedented levels of effects on the economy of performing art.

An unlimited supply of labour may be said to exist in India due to the large population relative to capital and natural resources. There are large sectors of the economy where the marginal productivity of labour is negligible, zero or negative. In the performing art it is very difficult to measure the Marginal productivity of an individual artist.

After a detailed investigation on folk performing art of Paschim Medinipur District of West Bengal, it can be said that the originality of this traditional culture is reserved by the native rural illiterate people who are agrarian in economy, backward socially and rustic culturally. They have been performing this form of arts ancestrally parallel with marginal works in

agricultural fields and other activities which enforce them not being thoroughly professional artists. As a matter of fact, new generation artists are not coming up and even not showing willingness to join in the near future which poses a serious question mark on the future survival of these art forms. In recent years the sudden and radical effect of COVID-19 on the lives of freelance performing artists is compounding dangerous levels of precocity in these occupations and, as a result, there are swifter, deeper and more serious consequences to policy inaction in the coming years. The effect of the crisis of an artist is not only in the form of less public shows but it is in their inability to earn as much as before with a secondary job.

Values provided by folk performing art to the producers (Artists):

Different techniques have been used to estimate the value of cultural activities of folk performing art in the study area. Total value of performing art derives both from market transaction and from non-market sources. It includes value that accrues to producers of folk performing art, audiences/consumers of folk performing art and society as a whole. In this paper we are mainly interested about the value that accrues to producers of folk performing art. Producers or artists of folk performing art derive both monetary and non-monetary benefits from their productive activities.

Among the monetary benefits most important is the income generation. It can be measured by the divergence between

what an artist can earn in a non-cultural occupation and their willingness to provide artistic output. In the study area before Covid 19 situation it was found that the average monthly income in the non-cultural occupation is Rs. 6428 but average income of a folk artist who is an artist of any registered cultural organization, is Rs. 5625 per month. Among Rs.4625, Rs. 1000 coming from artist's subsidy by the State government and Rs. 4625 coming from different public shows. Therefore an artist is willing to accept a lower wage to work in an artistic occupation, relative to non-artistic occupation. The average standard of living of the folk artists is at a marginal level. Therefore an artist is willing to accept a lower wage to work in an artistic occupation, relative to non-artistic occupation. It was also found that there exists uncertainty in the folk art market. During Covid situation the average monthly income as a folk artist has been reduced to Rs. 2000 which is not stable. To maintain the minimum needs they are forced to migrate to another job like vegetable seller, agricultural labour etc.

Among non-monetary returns, employment generation is most important. Of The total working population in the study area (except migratory workers) only 14% are engaged as folk artists in primary occupation and 48% are engaged as folk artists in secondary or tertiary occupation. Due to lower wages to work in a folk artistic occupation, next generations are less interested in carrying on the traditional folk form and a large number of the working population are going here and there as migratory workers. Another

non-monetary return to producers of folk art is the feeling of self-satisfaction from producing art form which is the main key return for engaging as a folk artist in primary or secondary occupation.

Short term and long term remedy

India should consider a public-private effort to sustain its artists, many of whom are currently jobless and struggling. Such an initiative should take into account both the current needs of the artists and their long-term sustenance. In the short term, it is important to put money in their pockets right away. The long-term goal should be to create infrastructure that will continue to nurture their creativity and offer lifelong support. It is very important to set up the regional based cultural organization under Government control to sustain the folk art and also to secure the regular flow of income for the artist.

Short term solution may be to give some subsidy in this sector but it is not a permanent solution. If the Government takes some initiative to increase the number of public shows in different festivals after Covid situation, they can continue their occupation with performing art. Otherwise just like different local languages, different valuable intangible heritages, mainly folk form may be abolished from our earth. In India, a few prominent artists have already launched a modest initiative to support struggling artists. The Assistance for Disaster Affected Artistes, or ADAA, has been initiated by a group of independent artists.

Commercialization of folk art and culture for their profitable running is one of the instrumental ways to survive the folk forms; People are required to be informed with the values, styles, forms of different folk performing arts. Special allowance may be arranged as a scheme under rural development planning for economically weaker sections of folk performers and artisans. However the tribal/ folk artists and cultural practitioners themselves should also upgrade their skill and acclimatize with the current socio-economic and socio-cultural trend of the broader society.

Conclusion

On the basis of the above discussion it can be said that, from a livelihood and cultural perspective, the role of folk performing art in the study area is most important. Totally natural resource based eco-friendly folk art are very much important for our society and culture. Though the performing art includes value that accrues to producers of folk performing art, audiences/consumers of folk performing art and society as a whole, the sudden and radical effect of COVID-19 on the lives of freelance performing artists is compounding dangerous levels of precocity in these occupations and, as a result, there are swifter, deeper and more serious consequences to policy inaction in the coming years. Henceforth, it is our sole duty of Researchers, Policy Makers, Government and the participants to preserve and propagating the forms of Folk culture.

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