

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CARNATIC MUSICIANS

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic was a period when mankind across the globe suffered invariably. Performing arts was not very accommodating of the work-from-home culture and continuity of work and rewards during this period. Alarming, a lot of Carnatic musicians suffered from loss of concerts, classes and practices as quarantine was imposed for major parts of the years 2020 and 2021. This study was conducted during the early stages of the pandemic outbreak during April - June 2020. It was found that though it seemed to be manageable during the first three months, it was getting tougher with each day passing. Many artists lost paid concerts and jobs and had to find alternate ways for livelihood. Beyond financial downfall, not being able to devote exclusive time to the art form in the form of practice, teaching and performances did affect them.

Key Words: Carnatic musicians, Pandemic Outbreak, Performances, Pandemic performances

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19, also known as Corona Virus Disease, brought the world to a standstill during 2020-2021. The disease outbreak was first identified in December 2019 and was declared a pandemic on 11 March 2020. Everyone was forced to stay indoors to protect themselves. A lot of people lost jobs, daily wage workers, the oppressed and the homeless died of hunger. For many, the change in the routine way of life caused physical and mental difficulties. Every breadwinner was not fortunate enough to make money by working from home. And one of the most suffered working classes was the artists. Performing arts, as a profession is beyond just a work for earning money. It is a way of life, involving enormous practice, commitment, creativity, spontaneity, audience rapport, live experiments, on-the-job learning and novelty. By nature, performing arts is a very dynamic job with no constant paybacks at regular intervals. This study lays out the impact that Covid-19 had on Carnatic musicians at a time when practice, performance and teaching were not possible.

METHODOLOGY

A self-reporting questionnaire was circulated to Carnatic musicians through WhatsApp. A total of 62 entries were received and out of this, only 39 entries pertaining to carnatic musicians who are performers are taken for this study. This study covers a period of 3 months during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown in India i.e., April - June 2020. Primary results obtained quantitatively are explained through qualitative interactions and secondary data.

OBJECTIVES

- To understand the attitude of performers during the unexpected absence of their stage performances for more than a month.
- To study the contribution that the artists made to the society during Covid-19 pandemic through the art form that they have been practicing.
- To study if online performances helped them cope with the loss of live performances.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

DEMOGRAPHICS

Table 1. Demographic Details of the Sample

Demographics (N=39)	
Age	
20-30 yrs	16 (41.03)
30-40 yrs	8 (20.51)
40-50 yrs	6 (15.38)
50 yrs & above	9 (23.08)
Gender	
Male	29 (74.36)
Female	10 (25.64)
Marital Status	
Unmarried	9 (23.08)
Married	28 (71.79)
Married & Single	2 (5.13)
Category	
Main artist	18 (46.15)
Accompanist	15 (38.46)
Both	6 (15.38)
Instrument	
Vocal	9 (23.07)
Violin	3 (7.69)
Veena	1 (2.56)
Mridangam	7 (17.94)
Nadaswaram	7 (17.94)
Tavil	2 (5.12)
Saxaphone	2 (5.12)
Multiple instruments	8 (20.51)

Note: Numbers within parentheses in Table 1 and text denote percentage values

From the above table it is found that majority of the sample (41.03) belong to the age group 20-30 years. Most of them (74.36) were Men. And majority (71.79) were married. Almost equally the sample consisted of main artists (46.15) and accompanists (38.46). Artists who took part in the study practiced varied instruments like Voice, Violin, Veena, Flute, Mridangam, Saxaphone, Nadaswaram, Tavil, Ghatam, Kanjira and Morsing in the Carnatic music genre.

STATUS OF THE ARTISTS

Majority of artists (82.1) had been giving at least 10 concerts a month followed by a small set of artists who gave 10-20 concerts during the pre-pandemic time. On average, at least 10 concerts a month could even amount to considerable earnings for an artist which was lost completely during the pandemic lockdown. Nadaswaram and Tavil players reported to have lost an average of 10-20 marriage concerts on an average per month. Apart from this, performers have reported that their concerts have been either cancelled or postponed invariably for the next 6 months' time frame ie, Apr-Sep 2020. This had put them in non-performance anxiety and an urgent need to find alternate sources of income for sustainability.

Apart from this, a small set of people (23.1), had their abroad travel scheduled during this period and had to cancel them at the last moment.



The highest number of the total respondents (28.2) reported that they relied on their savings, while an equal set of musicians (28.2) had reported of having no source at all. The next highest respondent group (17.9) reported relying on other sources of income, and closely some of them (15.4) reported to have gotten loans from known sources. Very less people (7.7) relied on bank loans and the least alternative reported was help from Spouse/Children (2.6). It is seen that financially, artists had already hit their lowest in the first 3 months of lockdown. The pandemic lasted till almost August 2021 in India and performing artists were one of the many professionals who suffered the most.

With the above alternative sources of income, a majority (53.8) of the artists reported that they would be able to run their families only for a period of 3 months i.e., approximately till Aug 2020. While a smaller group (17.9) reported to be able to sustain till 3-6months, another smaller group (20.5) reported that they can sustain for a year and not more than that. Artists who had other sources of income from assets or day jobs (full-time/part-time) that paid out monthly were better suited to face the situation in comparison to artists who pursued the art form full-time.

Almost equal number of people had reported to be hopeful (51.28) vs. stressed and anxious (48.72) despite their financial situation. The state of mind of the artist is a reflection of a lot of factors except just the monthly earnings by self like the number of dependents in the family, existent health conditions, urgent financial commitments, children's education, support from primary kin and/or extended family, the mental health of self and family members, love and attachment towards performances and travel etc.

ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS

In the fast-paced world, no performance period was relatively new to artists across the globe. Performing art is a way of life rather than a particular job that is done at specific time intervals. Often, an artist dedicates his/her whole life to the art form. One's everyday routine is filled with art-related activities such as – practice, performance, learning, collaborating and networking. Hence when a time came when a progressive cycle of such actions did not take place, it was only natural that the artists knew not to relax, detach and work on something else. Even if they were ready to, there was an anxious part of them waiting to perform and enjoy the thrill of being on stage. This was devoid of the other benefits associated with performances.

Considerably lesser number of artists (43.6) have reported to have used their art form for the benefit of the society without expecting any monetary returns. They have participated/conducted group prayers, entertainment programs, educational content for improving the mental status of the general public and fundraising through art for fellow artists and others. While others (56.4) have reported to have not used their art form for such causes, due to various reasons such as absence of opportunity, need for a break, family / personal health issues, no motivation due to no monetary returns and not being good with technology.

Majority of musicians (87.2) considered the break a boon to revisit their skills, practice and innovate. Out of this, only a meagre set of musicians (28.2) have reported training under teachers to enhance their skills.

While musicians have reported to have been accepting of the pause in performances which could be put into use for practice, a lot of them (56.4) have reported that they feel relaxed, calm and okay with the pause. Relatively a smaller set of artists (43.6) have reported to have been stressed and missing of the joy of being on stage and performing. It is to be noted that a considerable number of artists were not okay with the pause at the very beginning of the pandemic lockdown phase itself.

A lot of artists (53.8) doubted to be receiving enough performance opportunities post-pandemic break, while closely (46.2) reported believing normalcy. This was because most performers like many other professionals had to turn to alternate methods of earning and doubted the ability to be full-time performers later on.



Despite the lack of performances, collaborations with other artists, financial constraints, health issues and family issues, artists' self-esteem did not waver. A high majority (84.6) of artists reported that they are not threatened of falling behind in their artistic capabilities post-pandemic due to a break from performances and the training/practice/preparations that come with it. A very meagre set (15.4) of people have reported having lower confidence in themselves and their abilities.

Most artists reported to have had trouble practicing, performing and recording at their homes. Certainly, loud instruments could not be played at all. Since the entire world was in quarantine, there was disapproval from the neighbors to tolerate music practices at artists' homes. And, external noises did affect their recording/online sessions causing discomfort and extra hours of work.

ONLINE PERFORMANCES

Majority of artists (87.2) have voted that live performances are definitely more engaging than online performances. And almost as many of them (82.1) have reported that they were ready and willing to move to digital platforms for artistic expression and even pursue them in the future (79.5). It is to be noted that the majority of artists who were ready to move to online platforms to express their art form were mostly younger generation who were keen in experimenting.

But, a fair majority (69.2) of artists only feel that online platforms do provide a fitting replacement in terms of continuity of performances. This was due to the fact that most artists felt left out from not being able to do what they are good at. As the survey was conducted during the early stages of the quarantine period, most of the artists did want to try out new pathways to continue their profession and were really enthusiastic at it. But, various factors such as owning good technological devices, knowledge to use them, absence of co-artists and audience, and performing in confined spaces without feedback affecting the sense of satisfaction an artist receives from performing a normal, live concert was undeniable.

It is found that artists are only moderately creative (Mean = 2.21) during home-recorded online concerts without co-artists. However, a fair majority (61.5) of artists have reported finding not having co-artists during their online performances as a "new experience" (neutral). They were okay with the set-up as they anticipated it to be a one-time experience during the pandemic. A fair minority (35.9) have reported not liking it and only one artist reported liking the experience of not having to perform with co-artists.

Certain artists felt that consumption and reach for carnatic music amongst audience through digital platforms will certainly be less and even lesser than that of in-person concerts due to the availability of other attractive genres and entertainment options. And, a fair majority (69.2) felt that percussion only online concerts were not well received by the audience.

FINDINGS

Most artists did not have a stable income and were not equipped enough with savings and other sources of income to sustain the "no work" period. Yet there was an eagerness to perform and engage with the audience. This led to an inclination toward online performances and teaching which however did not fetch them considerable monetary benefits. It was because of the fear of missing out on the performance space and their self-identity as musicians and performers. The missed performances did bring down their performing spirit, satisfaction and pleasure derived from performances and the joy of being in the lime light beyond money. Most artists have said not to have engaged with the society for the benefit of them and this was due to the fact that they responded to the questions during early days as of the pandemic. Moreover, some of them considered the no work period a true time off of as well as because there was already an artistic expression overload on the internet. This is in addition to artists who were not equipped with necessary technological devices and those who had to tend to themselves or their sick family members.

CONCLUSION

The need for the government to recognize Carnatic musicians based on their expertise and provide monetary benefits during adverse situations like the pandemic is warranted. Though patronages took place to support artists during this time, most benefitted artists were from urban areas. A lot of artists from rural and semi-urban suffered during the pandemic as well as after it to climb back up on the financial ladder. Practicing art forms full time - freelancing has become questionable post-pandemic as payouts and savings. :

1. had to be started from scratch
2. no guarantee of stability in case of another adversity like this.

A need for secondary, multiple income streams is called for. Artists have to be educated in finance and investments to better manage their income & expenditure, savings and create secondary income. This will help them to be prepared to tackle such similar situations in the future. Because, beyond the need and inclination to perform and practice the art form at any cost, money does play a vital role in keeping an artist in the art form till the very end. It is also directly linked to their mental health which is very crucial to deliver outstanding performances.

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