Research Article

From Hope to Reality: A Global South Perspective on The Issues of Performing Artists During The Covid-19 Pandemic in India

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Abstract

This article explores how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted artists and practitioners in the performing arts, particularly in Kerala, which declared a medical emergency upon becoming the first state in India to confirm an active case of COVID-19. The results show that online platforms and going digital were essential to keeping Kerala's theatre activities alive during the year and a half of the pandemic starting from March 2020. Government protocols primarily affected seasonal performing artists and crews, whose economic and creative engagements were most heavily impacted, along with their freedom as artists caught in limbo under circumstances determined by politicians and bureaucracy. The protocols, though sharply restricting live performances, contained no emergency relief for artists with sorely limited sources of income as a result. Recognizing the state's neglect, Kerala's performing arts community continues to remain uncertain about its future.

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Introduction

Though the Indian monsoon may seem exotic to tourists, five decades ago it was a difficult time for native Malayalees. For centuries, during the peak of the southwest monsoon, called panja karkidakam in Malayalam, people did not leave their homes due to torrential rain, and survived on grains stored in the previous months and whatever greens they could forage. It was a time of waiting for the next month-month of new year, or Chingam, and of the Onam festival, an event symbolising prosperity that is traditionally full of eating and joy.

For many performing artists in the state of Kerala, India, the first year and a half of the COVID-19 pandemic seemed like a prolonged panja karkidakam. In the early months of 2020, Kerala's government declared a medical emergency when it became the first state in India to confirm a case of COVID-19 infection (Andrews et al., 2020). In March, it also declared a lockdown following the central government's protocols for the pandemic. Although the precaution was initially received with optimism and as an inevitable measure to prevent the spread (World Health Organization, 2020), the lockdown eventually became a source of depression. Following a brief respite, in May 2021, when the second wave of COVID-19 became active in Kerala, the state declared another lockdown and soon became one of the states where the wave lasted the longest (Department of Health & Family Welfare, 2021).

During the first year and a half of the pandemic, artists and practitioners in the arts-theatre, the performing arts, commercial arts, and cinema-were especially affected by such precautions and regulations on public gatherings and protocols imposed by the government. However, it is clear that the protocols did not consider the various interests or needs of the performing arts community, whether at the local, state, or national level. After all, because the structure of India's performing arts, since gaining momentum in the 1990s, has come to blend traditional, social, political, amateur, competition, melodramatic, indigenous, and academic practices, the community's interests and needs have also become heterogeneous.

Despite such uncertainty, Kerala's performing arts community awaited the return of prosperity that had vanished in March 2020 with certain hope. In that light, this article considers new perspectives in the theory on hope, from academia as well as practice, and the many discussions in recent decades about hope's role in the state, market, and society-even in policies and government propaganda aimed at monitoring and controlling citizens.

Objective

The objective of the research conducted for this article was to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted artists and practitioners in the performing arts in Kerala, India.

Method

In the qualitative research project reported in this article, data were collected from March to September 2021 using qualitative methods, including the analysis of related documents, participant observation, and semi-structured in-depth interviews with members of the performing arts community in Kerala, hereafter referred to as "artists". Artists were recruited via purposive and snowball sampling and with reference to the researchers' judgement of their representativeness of Kerala's performing arts community. Thus, all participating artists were experts known well in that community. The semi-structured interviews, addressed the impacts and challenges imposed by COVID-19 restrictions in India, the artists' evaluation of the policies, and their recommendations. This article focuses specifically on three parts of Kerala's performing arts community: traditional theatre, contemporary theatre, and commercial theatre. The research project was awarded Certificate of Research Approval no.058/64 from the Office of the Research Ethics Review Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects: The Second Allied Academic Group in Social Science, Humanities and Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand.

Performing artists in Kerala

Performing artists, though a group, do not demonstrate any monolithic performing or economic practice in Kerala, nor are performing artists in India classified in any systematic way. Nevertheless, and perhaps for that reason, arguments regarding their classification vary widely. This article understands the performing artists according to their significant, long-term involvement with performance spaces and

structures in Kerala and groups them as traditional, contemporary, or commercial. Albeit involved in folk, classical, commercial, amateur, and academic traditions in the arts, they also engage in art competitions in schools, universities, public institutions (e.g. Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Akademi), and festivals. Those competitions are well-established events marked by the energetic engagement of members of Kerala's theatre and performing arts community. In Kerala, traditional performing arts institutions practise a structured performing arts pedagogy, while contemporary institutions such as the University of Calicut's School of Drama and Fine Arts, Kerala Kalamandalam (i.e. University of Art and Culture), Folklore Academy, the mentioned Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Akademi have nurtured several practitioners and scholars. Most artists have even started their own schools and institutions in Kerala and/or abroad. However, apart from government-funded activities, most of the artists are not financially stable due to a lack of production management. Even though one such government-funded programme, the Diamond Jubilee Fellowship for Aspiring Artists, supports art and culture in Kerala awards approximately 1000 artists a monthly fellowship, the lack of coordination and proper cultural policies has made Kerala's performing arts community largely unsustainable. Indeed, that trend became critical during the first year and a half of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Kerala's performing arts economy
Of all performing artists in Kerala, seasonal ones were the most adversely affected during the COVID-19 lockdowns due to not being regularly paid artists. Owing to restrictions on public gatherings, their primary sources of income-seasonal activities in the commercial theatre, drama competitions, and traditional and folk performances at religious spaces-were cut off, while their work in theatre workshops and contract performances for government and non-government agencies were paused indefinitely. To manage financially even before the pandemic, they would take out loans from local banks and private agencies and pay back the principal along with the interest upon receiving advances prior to rehearsals or programmes, in a process lasting until the end of the season. However, that economic structure in Kerala collapsed following the COVID-19 lockdowns (Shan, 2020). Thus, whereas artists in government institutions such as universities, schools, and performing arts academies continued to be paid given the permanent nature of their jobs, seasonal performing artists, lacking the knowledge and skills required by other jobs, could not manage both their creative and financial sustainability.

Traditional theatre
The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic affected traditional performing arts and artists in Kerala dramatically. A representative case is kutiyattam, a traditional theatre art form in Kerala performed in a kuthambalam, an intimate theatre space on the premises of temples. The pandemic, however, has changed traditional performers' everyday performance spaces such as temples, chowks, and public squares due to travel restrictions and social distancing requirements. Most ritualistic performances known as adiyanthiram, for instance, were cancelled in many temples, and the artists who relied on them suffered as a result. In an interview, young kutiyattam actor Sooraj Nambiar admitted expecting the pandemic to be over in 2020, not to persist with no end in sight. Although Nambiar found work with online festivals and webinars during the pandemic's first and second waves, which eliminated travel and lodging expenses, he was highly critical of teaching and performing online, mostly because of its isolation and temporal aspects of binge-watching. He clarified that virtual platforms do not allow art to be intimately experienced and largely preclude bodily performer–audience interaction. Indeed, the performance and teaching of kutiyattam require interacting with the audience and/or students in a full-bodied way that is impossible online. Moreover, problems with internet coverage, data packages, and device availability risk interrupting performances and instruction, which compromises the entire practice of performance. Nambiar also mentioned now needing to pay camera operators and production teams for online broadcasting more than the performing artists. As an artist, he used to receive a small grant from the Ministry of Culture, but it was discontinued in March 2021. Finding fault with that decision, Nambiar argued that kutiyattam practitioners are students for life, because the art form demands rigorous study with every performance, and that such studentship, with a ritualistic approach combining artistic practice, in fact creates the art form. Without any support for that professional practice, he described confronting an uncertain future in which artists need to act differently and with new strategies. Since the pandemic began, students seeking to study to become kutiyattam practitioners have been far fewer than

before, and most teaching opportunities have been reduced to short-term acting courses and workshops as refreshers for theatre actors. In the long run, the situation will not support the traditional theatre of kutiyattam, and, on that count, Nambiar stressed a lack of cultural policies implemented at the root level for the performing arts in India. There is an especially urgent need to safeguard the practice of kutiyattam, recognised by UNESCO as intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2006).

Young kutiyattam percussionist and entrepreneur Kalamandalam Sivaprasad used the circumstances of the pandemic to launch a start-up venture. Sivaprasad is now CEO and founder of the app and website Natya, under the banner of Living Theatre Pvt Ltd, that teaches traditional performing arts in live and recorded classes (Nātya Arts Learning App, n.d.). Indian classical dances such as Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, Mohiniyattam, and Kathakali are taught on Natya, along with classical Carnatic and Hindustani music, instruments such as the chenda and guitar, and even yoga. Natya uses YouTube and Zoom for classes with payment gateways, and Sivaprasad plans to open video conferencing platforms soon. Sivaprasad reported that though many traditional artists and teachers were worried about digital learning in the first year of the pandemic, the world has shifted to digital learning nevertheless, and artists have made money from it. Indeed, Natya employs 12 performing arts teachers and 15 technical staff. The primary groups of students are housewives, professionals, children, and performing art lovers who previously stopped their practice due to work and/or marriage. Sivaprasad expressed hopes that Natya can also incorporate other languages spoken in India next year, as well as increase membership and the use of advanced technology. He emphasised, however, that performing artists in India need to sustain more than only their artistic practice and should pursue new ventures along with their current practices. In Sivaprasad's case, though he conducted research for the app before the pandemic, the pandemic presented him with an opportunity, and he applied for a government loan to create his start-up, which he called "the world's first traditional art learning app and website". He also recognised the limitations of short videos and front-facing cameras used on Natya but hoped that alternatives will become available with new technological applications and devices in the future.

Contemporary theatre

At the time of her interview, theatre practitioner and children's theatre artist Nidhi S. Sasthri had homebound for the past year and a half. Employed by the Theatre in Education Department within the National School of Drama at the Ministry of Culture in New Delhi, India's capital, Sasthri earned her bachelor's and graduate degrees in theatre, the latter with a specialisation in children's theatre. When the pandemic began, she left the capital and returned to her home state Kerala, where she has since sought another job and, in the meantime, offered online theatre classes for children. For her, it is difficult to teach online because internet connectivity in her village is spotty, and she often ventures to the city to access the network for teaching theatre online. Regarding children's adaptation to online teaching, Nidhi said that it would take several months to re-acclimate them to physical theatre environments and practices. Sasthri also pointed out that online performances and teaching are other forms of communication that differ from theatre practice and pedagogy. Theatre requires direct contact in the form of collective gathering and physical sharing, and though online spaces cannot accommodate the physicality of such performances, they can offer another medium for artistic practice. She also stressed how the physical-to-online transformation spawned fatigue, a lack of focus, and a loss of individuality in children's life. Sasthri has used the period of the pandemic to engage in independent study for a better future. Last, she added that the pandemic has affected women artists' freedom of movement in artistic spaces because most are now in their homes, which, along with society in general, are not friendly spaces for women theatre activists in Kerala. She said that beyond gender, however, every performing artist in India needs space to work and rest in order to hone their craft.

Meanwhile, actor, director, and academic Sreejith Ramanan has been trying to manage his theatre practice during the pandemic. Ramanan is a faculty member and campus director at the School of Drama and Fine Arts, John Mathai Centre affiliated with the University of Calicut. Worried about the future of his students and the theatre community, he observed that the imposition of the lockdowns primarily affected performing arts education because of its collective nature. Therein, students mostly learn from group activities, not books and classes, and, apart from the syllabus, he believes an art institution is a place where students can learn and practice in front of their friends and other audiences. After the first lockdown, the school began teaching online to help students to know more about theoretical knowledge and interact with artists and scholars from around

the globe. However, he has since found that such online classes are not viable for every student due to lack of equipment, internet, and/or weather. Most theatre students come from backgrounds marked by financial hardship, and, for them, a mobile phone and internet access are not affordable. During the first and second lockdowns, many performances were held on social media and videoconferencing platforms, but most became showcase performances that did not use the platforms as a new medium.

Ramanan also reported fundraising efforts for theatre practitioners as individuals and groups but that financial and technical support is needed from the government. With theatre festivals and renovations stopped during the pandemic that will take months to reopen to the public, he criticised cultural policies enacted for their lack of management. For some, the situation has been especially dire, and even though artists and technical workers have committed suicide in Kerala during the pandemic, their families have not received financial support from the state. Theatre cannot survive exclusively in academies because it needs collective activity with actors, designers, directors, technicians, writers, and audiences. Ramanan thus concluded that as the pandemic continues to affect theatre practice in Kerala in profound ways, the missing interaction between audiences and artists will create a new crisis in performance culture.

Commercial theatre

The commercial theatre, or "professional theatre", is the largest active theatre community in Kerala, one with rehearsal, tour, and performance structures established over the course of the past five decades. The pandemic has affected commercial theatre immensely because it primarily depends on performances at religious institutions, festivals in public spaces, and celebrations at societies for the fine arts. Most commercial theatre practitioners thus structure their lives around performance season, which runs from December to May, while the period from June to November is for rehearsal and personal time. For the first six months, they live on advances and loans from private banks; for the last six, they repay the loan with interest.

In one interview, Malayalam theatre designer Artist Sujathan shared how he envisions the future of commercial theatre in Kerala following the COVID-19 pandemic. Having worked with popular (commercial) and amateur theatre groups in Kerala and abroad since 1967, Sujathan stated that unemployed artists, including in commercial theatre, will need to find new jobs because theatre in Kerala will no longer provide a livelihood. After the pandemic, theatre will take years to return to normal or else target an audience chiefly of mediated performance lovers, not fans of live performance. Indeed, as the former structure collapses, artist need to be alert to and monitor such trends and how they affect practical measures.

The other artists interviewed underscored their basic need for economic and creative engagement in public spaces in Kerala. Although cultural movements have contributed to the secular Indian concept of diversity in theatre, songs, and cinema in public places, such spaces now lie dormant due to the government's pandemic policies. The social system during the COVID-19 pandemic has differed from the system during the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918 due to globalisation in the past century and, in particular, digitalisation. The development of information technology such as the internet and smartphones now allows rapid social communication via over-the-top platforms, including of news, as well as activities such as online classes. However, it is also true that a digital divide exists in India. On that count, the engagement in theatre activities by individuals and theatre groups during the pandemic in Kerala are relevant because they kept the activity alive. Some performances have adopted innovative hybrid forms that blend the real and the digital, whereas other entities have resorted to solo shows, melodramatic performances before the camera, and even their archives of past shows. To be sure, the structure of those performances has not contributed a new language to the medium. Moreover, many nomadic performances and street performances not captured in academic research or news reports are nevertheless part of the invisible spectrum of the performing arts.

In Kerala, though public gatherings such as marriages, funerals, and protest marches with limited numbers of participants and social distancing have been permitted during the pandemic, the return of theatre performances in COVID-19 protocols has not been discussed. At the same time, cinema and web series productions have been allowed by the protocols. It is therefore necessary to rethink theatre practices amid the current health crisis. The protocols prohibit performing artists from engaging in their practice on even a small scale, which restricts their economic and creative viability. For the past year and a half, performing artists such as actors, dancers, musicians, technical experts, and organisers in traditional, commercial, contemporary,

and amateur arts have endured a truly debilitating situation, with their freedom as artists caught in limbo under circumstances determined by politicians and bureaucracy.
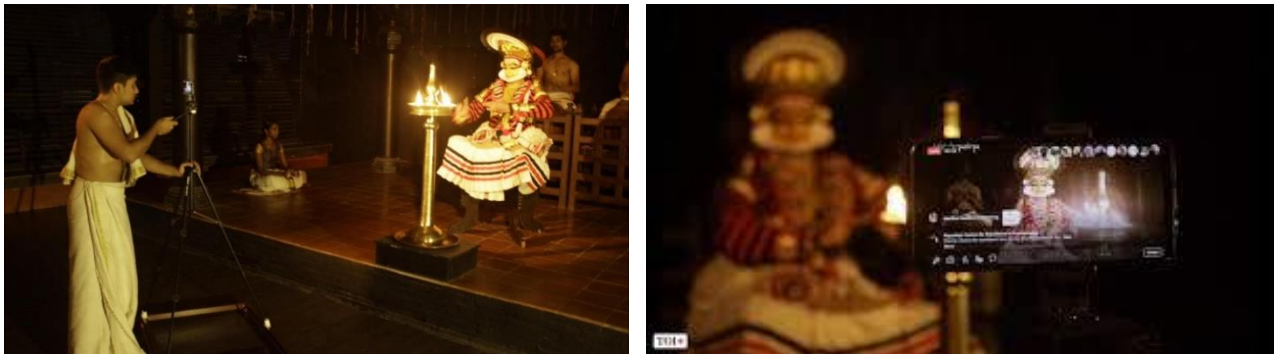

Figure 1 COVID-19 has forced kutiyattam, a traditional theatre art form in Kerala to go live and reinvent itself.
source: Times of India ("Covid forces a centuries-old art form to reinvent itself," 2020)

Discussion and Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on the performing art community in India, as it has in other countries around the world. Government protocols with social distancing measures and lockdowns in place primarily affected seasonal performing artists and crews, whose economic and creative engagements were most heavily impacted, along with their freedom as artists caught in limbo under circumstances determined by politicians and bureaucracy. The protocols, though sharply restricting live performances, contained no emergency relief for artists with sorely limited sources of income as a result. Recognising the state's neglect, Kerala's performing arts community continues to remain uncertain about its future.

Online performances, such as live streaming, have become more prevalent. The results show that online platforms and going digital were essential to keeping Kerala's theatre activities alive during the year and a half of the pandemic starting from March 2020. Traditional theatre and local art performances have turned to digital platforms and reinvented themselves to continue to share their work with audiences. However, the experience of watching a live performance online is not the same as being in a theatre. The revenue generated from online performances may not be enough to sustain their livelihoods.

The death of young artists due to complications of COVID-19 during the pandemic has slowly stoked fears in Kerala's performing arts community. Facing great uncertainty about the future, performing artists now constantly ask themselves what the situation for them as professionals following the crisis will be. In that context, hope has become an emotional tool for agencies and persons with money. For a year, artists waited in good faith for opportunities to perform to return, but such promises eventually became emotional propaganda, not realities, and hope without support even for daily necessities is crossing the limits in Kerala. Artists need emotional support as well as economic stability, especially at times such as the present when they lose their audiences. For institutions and governments, however, considering the creative and financial stability of performing artists is not an imperative. The stable, market-oriented economy has become more valuable for the state than creative labour because it directly engages with the economy, whereas creative labour is always immaterial (Bhan, Srinivas, & Watson, 2017). In developed countries, however, the entertainment sector and performing arts communities work with support from not only the public but also the government.

Countries in the Global North have the capital and sustainable government-based methods needed to support cultural activities, largely because the Global North has long conceptualised the performing arts as capital, specifically cultural capital, a Eurocentric idea based on elitism. The performance culture in the Global South, by contrast, is part of the activity of daily life, not a showpiece in a museum (Appadurai, 1996). Even so, globalisation and tourism have increasingly driven the showcasing of culture in the Global South, where tourists increasingly approach traditional performance as a cultural product. However, because theatre and other art forms continually question power and the market, they have not become elite cultural capital in India,

where they have long been outcast art forms. Instead, they have been used as tools in propaganda for the state as well as the opposition.

Any performing art is a medium in which cultural exchange happens in creative, profound ways. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected such exchanges via cultural productions, conceived as immaterial productions involving labour, materials, and bodies. The chief corporal aspect is the active presence of the bodies of performers and spectators, whose chemistry very much creates the experience of the performance. Likewise, the performing arts need the performer-audience relationship because it creates a culture of performance in society. In Kerala's early days, a business system in local markets called pankuvekkal, meaning the exchange of materials-something like a barter system-thrived. It was not under market contracts or stock exchange controls, and it never created profit for one group in particular but instead involved the equal distribution of materials and services to everyone. Such a cooperative system directly opposes the general corporate strategy. The state's currently unsure policy can be changed due to the market hierarchy.

South Asian concepts such as pankuvekkal can be adapted for the practice of performing arts following the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, they will be sustainable due to native cooperation and values not based on the market economy. Indeed, Mahatma Gandhi also applied such native conceptual practices in the economy, including cooperative societies of weavers, as European countries increasingly sought to buy products from India. Because the post-COVID-19 era will be under new economic contracts and powers, the models of the Global North will not sustain native economic and cultural practices in South Asia. Thus, for economic stability and creative engagements, performing artists in Kerala and across India need to find sustainable native models from South Asia. South Asian intellectuals, artists, and policymakers could make the performing arts sustainable, for example, by implementing the pankuvekkal model in cultural exchange and, in turn, improve South Asian civilisation. In any case, government and non-government institutions alike need to consider artists' pandemic-related concerns in order to make future policies sustainable.

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