



COVID–19 Pandemic and its Impact on the Folk Musicians and Dancers: A Qualitative Empirical Study in Sambalpur District, Odisha

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Abstract: COVID–19 pandemics affected all spheres of life of every section of population. It negatively affected not only the health and livelihood but also the education and social life of the people. The livelihood of almost all sections of people were negatively shaken by the lock down, shut down and rules related to social distancing. The folk musicians and dancers were not an exception to it. The government of India and Odisha put restrictions on the social gathering and functions. It also put restrictions on the number of people to be gathered in all such occasions. The institutions remained either closed or operated on virtual mode. All modes of entertainment were closed to avoid gathering and maintain social distancing. Since the folk musicians and dancers earn their livelihood by performing in social functions of families and communities and stage performances at different institutions on different occasions, they suffered a lot during the whole pandemic period for almost two years. Against this backdrop the objective of the present paper is to explore the impact of COVID – 19 pandemics on the life and livelihood of the musicians and dancers. This qualitative and exploratory study was conducted in different rural and urban areas of Sambalpur district. Samples for the present study were collected through snowball sampling method. Primary data were collected through personal interview, FGDs and key informant interviews. Data collected were analysed through the content analysis by making tables of code, theme, and sub theme. Direct quotes from the interviews of the samples and one sample FGD has been described in the content of the paper for deeper understanding and comprehension of the readers. The study concludes that pandemic not only affected the livelihoods of the musicians but also shaken their psychology and social life.

Keywords: COVID – 19, pandemic, social distancing, dancer, musician, livelihood, social life,

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Introduction

The world has been witnessing pandemics in every century. Spanish flu in the 20th century and COVID –19 in the 21st century are the two major pandemics in recent centuries which have affected people of all categories, all ages, and all corners of the world. COVID – 19 was caused by a member of the family of corona viruses, finally named Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Corona Virus-2 (SARS-CoV-2). The disease spread primarily through air passing from person to person through small droplets from the nose or mouth, which are expelled when a person infected with COVID-19 coughs, sneezes, or speaks (WHO, 2020). Global concerns about the virus have risen due to its high transmission capability, which may be coupled with morbidity and mortality (Huang, et al, 2020). As the disease is a new and emerging viral disease, no proven treatment is yet available; the main option available in the whole world is to prevent/control the spread of the disease by strictly implementing physical distancing, personal hygiene and wearing face mask while stepping out of house. Strong infection control measures are the primary intervention to minimize the spread of the virus in both health care settings and the community (Li et al, 2020).

The first confirmed positive case of novel corona virus in India was reported on 30th January 2020 in Kerala. Odisha reported the first positive case in Bhubaneswar on 16th March 2020 (www.indiatoday). Many important measures were taken by the Government of India and Odisha to control the spread of COVID-19 in India and Odisha. The most important step taken by the Govt. of India is the complete lockdown of the entire country in the first phase for 21 days (from 25th March to 14th April 2020), in the second phase for 19 days (from 15th April to 3rd May 2020), the third phase for 14 days (from 4th May 2020 to 17th May 2020) and now the on-going fourth phase for 13 days (from 18th May to 31st May, 2020). The steps taken to stop the rapid spread in the lockdown were the suspension of public transport (bus, train and flight), the closing of public spaces, offices, educational institutions etc. Isolation and care for infected people and suspected cases were also done.

Cross all sectors, the pandemic disrupted working conditions: by April 2020, around 81% of the world's workforce was reported to be affected by full or partial lockdown measures (International Labour Organization, 2020). Such pandemics affect the health, economy, education, and socio-cultural life of people. The lockdowns imposed due to COVID-19 have led to a global increase in remote working, rising rates of unemployment, and anxieties and uncertainties among the workers.

The COVID-19 pandemic delivered a critical blow to the world's economies in 2020. The performing arts industry experienced severe hit. The pandemic has brought

major disruption to the performing arts industry – an industry known for already precarious, often freelance as a form of employment even prior to the pandemic (Comunian & England, 2020; Hancock, Tyler, & Godiva, 2021). As per a study in USA the workers in the dance industry are extremely vulnerable to the slightest change in the environmental, social, or economic landscape. Most responses come from individuals (349) who expressed panic about losing their primary source of income and uncertainty on whether the artform that they had dedicated their lives to would survive the pandemic. Of the dance organizations that responded, 85 percent reported they were prepared to make difficult decisions about cancellations and operations to weather the pandemic. The dance field was crippled at the onset of the pandemic in March 2020 (www.danceusa.org). To maintain social distancing the government also put restrictions on social gathering and functions on different occasions of rite de passages like birth, thread ceremony, marriage, death and so on. The government put restriction on the number of people to be gathered at a time on all such occasions.

Objectives

The objectives of the study were

- To find out the impact of COVID – 19 pandemics on the livelihood of the musicians and dancers
- To find out the psychological and social impact of the pandemic on them
- To explore the alternative livelihood options availed by the musicians and dancers.

Methodology

The present study on Impact COVID – 19 Pandemic on the Folk Musicians and Dancers is a purely qualitative study. It followed the exploratory and descriptive approach. The study is based on both primary and secondary data. Secondary data were collected from different books, journals, and websites. Primary data was collected from musicians and dancers selected through snowball sampling method from different parts (both rural and urban) areas/villages of the Sambalpur district. Methods like personal interview, case study and focused group methods (FGDs) were adopted for collection of primary data from the musicians and dancers. Semi structured open ended interview schedules were used for collection of primary data. Different dance institutes and villages were visited for the collection of varieties of data on music, musical instruments, costumes, and types of dances. Data were collected from different category of people like the

musicians (10), the dancers (10), famous singers and dancers (2), owner of chitralayas (2). In depth interviews were done to collect qualitative data from the musicians and dancers. FGDs were also conducted among the musicians and dancers. Case studies of famous dancers and musicians were taken. Key informant interviews of owners of chitralayas were taken to analyze the impact of COVID – 19 on their livelihood.

Result and Discussion

Impact on Livelihood

Due to the restrictions imposed by the government all the social functions were performed without any pomp and ceremony for almost two years. The stage performances were completely stopped as restrictions were also put on functions and organisation of cultural programmes by different educational institutions, offices, and organisations. This hampered the livelihood, and possibly threatening the very existence of the musicians and dancers who earn their bread butter from such occasions like thread ceremony, *barat* in marriages, death ceremony, different annual festivals/pujas and stage performances in different functions by different educational institutions and organisations. This also affected the livelihood of all the persons and institutions associated with dance and music. The worst sufferer are the musicians among the three kinds of people (musicians, dancers, gurus and owners of chitralayas).

The *bajnias/dhulias* (musicians), the *nachnias* (dancers), professional stage performers and the *chitralayas* (shops that provide costumes of dances on rent) were fully dependent on the calls/bookings for performances for their livelihood. Further, they are the people who lead, so to say a subsistence life. Whatever they earn is spent for their day-to-day expenses. Some of the samples told that they could not arrange food for their family members during pandemic. Few days they could manage with whatever little saving they had. But after that they had to struggle for even getting two square meals a day. They had to borrow money relatives and other persons. But that was not a solution for all days. Moreover, it was not possible to survive by depending upon borrowing from others. They found no other option to manage their family, some other went to their villages with family where at least they got something to eat from kitchen garden or forest. Some dropped their families at villages and they themselves back stayed at town searching one option or the other to earn money to run family. Few started selling vegetables. Few started working as gardener or sweeper and whatever option was coming to the forefront to earn money. For many it was a herculean task to manage

the family during the pandemic who could not do anything to earn money. Few sold and mortgaged their properties to get money to run family. They became burdened and over stressed due to increasing indebtedness. They expressed their gratitude to government and non-government organisations and the kind-hearted person who were distributing food items to poor people like them. They suffered the brunt of the lockdowns and further restrictions on functions and cultural programme.

One musician told that.

“We eagerly wait for a call of badu (thread ceremony) or barati (marriage procession). From that we get some money to run our family. Me and my family initially did not get two meals a day due to Corona. I can never forget those days till the end of my life.... when I was unable to provide food to my children.”

Another musician told.

“Do not ask about those days (pandemic period). Corona tied out hands.....snatched away our livelihood. We are low caste people. We have no other option of livelihood. I could not think what to do. How to earn money to buy food to survive. I borrowed money from few people. But how many days you will run family by borrowing money? It is only after two years, now the situation has improved. I pray God, let those days not come again in my life.”

One of the owners of a Chitralaya in Sambalpur told.

“I have my chitralaya. I run my family out of the profit I get from the chitralaya. In normal days...I am unable to supply costumes in certain period of year....when there are more cultural programmes in schools, colleges and other organisations and mahostavs. But Corona made me poor and handicap. Initially, I did not open the shop due to lock down and all. But later, also till one year...or so to say for two years, I was going to shop and waiting for someone to come and take costumes etc. on rent. So that I can get some money. I run my family from the surplus money which I had saved for future.... for education of my children. I was going to the shop...I was cleaning all the costumes etc. What to do? How many days you will sit? Now again I have started getting some return since almost one year”.

Besides personal interviews few FGDs were conducted both among the dancers and musicians.

A FGD was conducted among five musicians the detail discussion of which is given below:

Q. 1. Researcher - What is your primary and secondary source of earning livelihood?

Respondent 1 – What primary, what secondary? I beat drums and earn my livelihood. That is my primary, that is my secondary.

Respondent 2 – Same as him. We are *bajnias*. By beating (playing) we get some money.

Respondent 3 – I have only one source of earning money.

Respondent 4 – Me too.

Respondent 5 – We are low caste people. This is our only occupation. We do not have much option of livelihood.

Q. 2. Researcher – How did you do during the COVID -19 pandemic?

Respondent 1 – What to do? Nothing. It was an unforgettable period of life.

Respondent 2 – Doing nothing. Nobody was calling us as government put restriction on number of people to be gathered in function.

Respondent 3 – For social distancing and all.

Respondent 4 – A smaller number of social functions were happening during COVID. That too people were doing in very simple manner just for the sake of finishing the scheduled function.

Respondent 5 – The stage performances were also totally stopped. Nowhere it was happening. Neither in school, college, nor by any other organisations.

Respondent 3 – We are at home. Just practising at home if ever mood was coming.

Q. 3. Researcher – How did you earn your livelihood then?

Respondent 1 – Doing nothing. What to do? No options available for us.

Respondent 2 – That was a completely different situation. What to do suddenly. What can one do?

Respondent 3 – We do not have land at village to cultivate. May be one or two persons may have. But very rare. It was a very helpless time.

Respondent 4 – We are low caste people. Neither we are educated, nor we are trained or have any other skill. This is the only skill that we have learnt. That gives us food to live.

Respondent 5 – There was no social function, no stage performances. So, who will call us? nobody called. We were just counting the days....that when this COVID will go and we will be able to go somewhere for performances

Respondent 2 – Some people cooked and uploaded on you tube and got money. Some people danced and uploaded and got money. But we could not do anything.

Q. 4. Researcher – Then, how did you manage to maintain your family?

Respondent 1 – Just passed the bad time with so much difficulty. Do not want to remember those bad days.

Respondent 2 – By borrowing money from here and there.

Respondent 3 – I started selling vegetables.

Respondent 4 – I left my family at village.

Respondent 5 – We had to sell and mortgage certain things. There was no alternative with me. Yet I am not able to bring the things I mortgaged back. I can't also now.

Respondent 1 – Thanks to government and few good people who supplied food materials during covid.

Q. 5. Researcher – How much do you earn by your performances?

Respondent 1 – It is not fixed. Depends on how many calls or programmes we get.

Respondent 2 – The party pays a total amount to the group. We divide it among ourselves.

Respondent 3 – Different rate for different function. For *badu* (thread ceremony) for one day...for whole day it is Rs.5000/- or Rs.7000/-. Depends on party and depends on bargaining. Also, it varies as per whether we will put on one uniform...like Sambalpuri jacket or any shirt. According to that also cost varies.

Respondent 4 – Sometimes people say that they want only two persons on pre-wedding day or pre-thread ceremony day. That rate varies depending upon the person. Normally, we go in groups. Because they may need one or two musicians on pre-wedding day as *sagun*. But who among us will go if they need one or two. So, we prefer to go in groups so that everyone can get a share.

Respondent 5 – For *barat* we charge Rs. 10,000/- to Rs. 15,000/- depending on the party and our costume they want. Sometimes it may be Rs. 20,000/-, if the party is big or they need more musician or new and good costume and make up.

Respondent 1 – If it is at far off place, the party makes transportation arrangements or gives us money to go to that place. The party gives us expenses of food and “cha panikharcha” (expense for tea and snacks).

Q. 7. Researcher – Still how much do you earn individually per month?

Respondent 1 – It is not fixed madam.

Respondent 2 – It depends upon how many calls we get per month.

Respondent 3 – In all months and all seasons, we do not get same number of calls. It varies depending on the month and season.

Respondent 4 – In marriage season, we get many calls. Sometimes on the same day we get two to three calls. But unfortunately, we have to take only one call.

Respondent 5 – In December, no....no....in January and February....also in March...we get more calls. In May..June...July month also we get calls. But less. Now a days....not more functions in summer. Mostly more functions in winter.

Respondent 1 – That’s why I told, it’s not fixed madam. It depends upon the season. In one season we do not get any call. In some season we are unable to attend calls due to more than one call in a day.

Respondent 2 – Normally, one person gets Rs. 500 per day from one programme like *badu* or *barat*. But less in case of stage performances. Because there we have to perform less for one.....two or three songs. So, it varies from Rs. 200/-..Rs.300/-.. RS.500/-

Q. 8. Researcher – Do you see any difference in your income or people’s choices between pre-pandemic period and post-pandemic period?

Respondent 1 – Not getting as much call as we were getting before corona.

Respondent 2 – I do not know.....can’t say.

Respondent 3 – No answer

Respondent 4 – I think, yes, we are getting less offers after corona. The pre- corona situation has not returned. Of course, we have increased our per programme cost.

Respondent 5 – people are now more interested in recorded songs and DJ. Not everyone likes *gandabaja* or *duldulibaja*. Sometimes they are preferring both DJ and *Dulduliin barats*. They bargain much with us. They cannot bargain with band party. That is a must they want in *barats*. So, we have to go down during bargaining. As they may cancel *Dulduli*, if they can’t afford both. If we get an offer, at least we will earn something. But if we do not do a programme, we will lose the whole income.

Impact on Socio-psychological Life

COVID – 19 not only affected the livelihood of the folk musicians and dancers, but also it influenced their socio-psychological aspects of their life. Normally, music and dance are a way of life of the musicians and dancers besides being a source of earning livelihood. They are fond of music and dance. They are the people who are fond of entertainment and live life happily singing, dancing, and beating the musical instruments. They attend functions and programmes both familial and institutional very frequently. Their life is full of tours and travels as they move from one place to another for different programmes/calls. Due to lock downs/shutdowns they were forced to stay within the four walls of house or colony/basti. Due to restrictions on social functions and stage performances, they had to go nowhere as they had no calls/bookings. They had to pass the days without any dance and music performances. Whenever they wished, they used to beat musical instruments or dance on their own for the sake of psychological satisfaction. But overall, everyone told that they were very much depressed during the whole period of pandemic and waiting only when the situation will be normal, and they can start their work again.

One of the respondents told that

“Music and dance are like our life. We can live without food but not without music and dance. We were feeling so lonely and depressed during covid that I can’t express in words. The days were not passing easily. We were missing our performances so badly”.

Another respondent told that

“We are like nomadic people as we go from wherever place we get a call/booking. We are praying Samalai maa when this corona will finish and will again resume our dance and music. Thanks to you tube which helped us to stay connected with our passion somehow”.

Conclusion

Among the dancers, musicians, gurus and owners chitralays, the musicians are the worst sufferers during pandemic. Normally the *bajnia*s (musicians) belong to the lowest ladder of caste system of our Indian society. Earning livelihood from *gandabaja* is their primary occupation. Rather for many it is the only one way of earning livelihood. During the COVID– 19 pandemic these groups of people lost their livelihood totally. They could not change their livelihood or adopt something to earn money as they are neither educated nor otherwise skilled. These groups of people normally lead a subsistence economy. Thus, the musicians and their family suffered a lot due to the sudden outbreak of pandemic. The free supply by government and NGOs and few people were of great help to these people during pandemic. Besides economic problem, the folk musicians and dancers undergone psychological and social adjustment problems during pandemic being confined to a place and leading a life without music and dance which is not only a source of livelihood but also a way of life for them.

Still, they are facing the problem of managing the family as things have changed in the post COVID period. The young generation are more inclined towards modern music rather than to traditional *dulduli* or *gandabaja*. They live amid uncertainty due to the seasonal nature of livelihood opportunities. Low bargaining power with the affluent section is another reason of their poverty or low income. Due to uncertainty in income and low income, many are now switching over to other livelihood options given the chance. However, certain wages should be fixed for these musicians. As this is not only a way of livelihood. Rather they are protectors of the rich traditional heritage of Western Odisha.

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