

Performance Goes Online: Usage of Social Media Platforms by Classical Dance Practitioners of Kerala at the Time of Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: *It was an unexpected encounter for people around the world, being indoor, not able to move out either for personal or professional activities during the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic disease. A major shift noticed in the art arena in India during the Corona lockdown days is that the social media platforms had turned to performance stages. All the pre-scheduled cultural fests and dance and music concerts started to cancel even before the official declaration of lockdown by the government, which made the professional practitioners panic. It was then a quick action that many of the artistic communities and individual performers turned very active in social media and opened spaces to perform and communicate through talk series and online classes via social media. In a pandemic situation, it was their need to find alternative measures to continue performing and teaching, not only to make the artistes carry on with their work but also to save the tradition from laxity. This article discusses the effects of the pandemic time on the classical dance field of Kerala- an Indian state with a rich cultural sphere, and the role of social media and its competency to keep a particular section of society active and hopeful during an unfair set of circumstances.*

Keywords: *Classical dance practitioners, online performance, Social media, Virtual space.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Social media has emerged as a major tool for different types of communication with a high possibility for getting connected with society. It opens up a platform to share information and shapes public opinion as a strong means of social participation. They are a group of internet-based applications built on the ideological and technological foundations that allow the creation and exchange of user-created ideas (Kaplan, Haenlein, 2010: 61). Social media open a world of interaction that manipulates emotions, intimacy, feelings of nostalgia and belongingness of people towards a language, community, culture, and a nation. Unlike other media, social media provides two-way communication, highly interactive with a sudden feedback system. It contains visual, auditory, and textual elements with the opportunity to watch, enjoy, and respond. Social networking is a highly used facility of social media by a huge number of people to share information with a peer group.

Social media has brought a notable change in the communication pattern of society in terms of different types of communication like interpersonal, intrapersonal, group, and mass communication (Bala, 2014). It caused a change in the way one communicates with him/herself, as the medium gives scopes to present themselves as the way they want. Either they can project the reality or hide the reality and expose fantasy. Social media serves with its major purpose- social interaction. It helps in creating friends, to be with communities, and to be updated with information from the areas of interest. As a medium for interpersonal communication, social media has changed the quality of information and also the concept of formal and informal communication. People contextualize the type and way of language usage according to the platform, content and type of message. There are platforms like Twitter where users usually use formal language, but on Instagram or WhatsApp they become very informal in their posts and language.

When it comes to the matter of authenticity and ethics, social media is not considered as an appropriate medium to access authentic information, as it is an open platform and anybody can present a fact differently. Hence, people use social media mainly for marketing, publicity, and entertainment. Another factor that makes social media a favorite is its high scope of getting connected with people from far places and to express ourselves without taking permission from anybody. Now it has become an addiction for many.

1.1 ARTISTES IN SOCIAL MEDIA DURING LOCKDOWN

Artistes are entities of a cultural field, which has now turned as a cultural industry. Stephen Wilson points out about the kind of preparation artistes do, as some would emphasize cultivating personal vision and creativity, emotional self, and spiritual knowledge. Others strengthen their technical skills of working with media, finding powerful ways of communication to get exposure for their works, and a strong grounding in art history. At the same time, there are artistes stress on skills of socio-political analysis, sensitivity to one's own cultural identity, and awareness of critical themes in understanding culture and media (2008). These foregrounds tell us the requirements of an artiste to be updated according to the need of the time. In the current context artistes are not a group of persons who are trained in and perform a form of art. They must have to socialize themselves, they should be good in communication, knowledgeable in different social, scientific, technical, and cultural fields, to make their presence in the world. Harmoy Bench finds, the integration of video into social media platforms has enabled performers to create an internet presence for their performances which has bowled up online since 2005 (2010). For performers, it is not a new dais to showcase them. Classical dances (a traditional medium) and social media have already converged to produce a different area of artistic experimentations.

In social media platforms, social networking sites are popular among people in all the classes. Social networking sites are web spaces that allow users to construct their public/semipublic profile. Individuals can articulate a list of other users with whom they share the connection and they can view posts shares of others within the system (Boyd, Ellison, 2008). Social networking sites are usually used by artistes to inform about available merchandise and promote upcoming concerts or events. Their news updates usually include links for official websites, other related sites, YouTube links, program notices, performance photos/videos and short appreciations (Salo, Lankinen, 2013). Social media platforms and their wide scopes serve the artiste community to satisfy their needs and to grow with time in this fast-moving world. Another impact of this open platform is that the Digital platforms have fragmented or collapsed the hierarchies in art and entertainment (Bolter, 2019). Because of the open and participatory nature, it provides space for all, irrespective of age, class, race, or cultural background.

By the end of the year 2019, the whole world was notified with a novel disease named Covid-19, caused by a previously unknown virus- Corona, which turned the entire world pandemic within a few weeks. The disease spread from an affected person to another through the droplets generated by sneeze, cough, or saliva. The only solution to keep the virus away seems to keep social distance and take standard hygiene measures. People who are suspected to be affected were asked to go in quarantine and others were forced to sit at home keeping social distance. Though it was indeed action to keep the citizens healthy and safe, many of the trades and vocations turned jam since the first day of lockdown. As a result, many of the professions turned digital and continued to be active. The classical art field was not an exception. Social media, especially social networking sites like Facebook and Instagram were used tremendously by the dance community for several purposes and also to be engaged in. Performances appeared in different channels of social media in varied ways.

This study investigates how classical dance practitioners used social media platforms during the Corona outbreak by examining the major activities, they were involved in popular social networking sites- Instagram and Facebook. Looking over to the enhancement of spectatorship for classical dance forms during the lockdown, the researcher evaluates the effectiveness of online performances as an alternative stage (performance space). The paper also enquires how much this alternative space could provide to the enrichment of artistic activities by analyzing the online dance space from different perspectives.

II. VIRTUAL PERFORMANCE PATTERNS

The major types of virtual performances appeared on Instagram and Facebook were live streaming, random video posting, and special video production for YouTube channels. Dancers also engaged in online classes and talk series. The initial efforts by cultural organizations around the globe were as posting performance contents from their archives (Dutt), which instantaneously turned to the concept of online live performances. Live streaming is the ability to broadcast videos to the audience in the instant it is captured. It has become a common phenomenon recently though not a new venture on the internet. A major provision of live streaming is the viewer can communicate with the performer lively through chat. These streams function as virtual or online third place, which helps in buildup communities with a shared identity (Hamilton et al, 2014). The online live streaming through Facebook and Instagram appeared as a customized virtual performance platform. Rather than individual performances by artistes on their pages, it took shape as a dance festival via the official pages/groups of the concerned team. The major organizers of live performance streaming/ online dance festivals were- Cultural societies, dance institutions, temples (temple festival organizers), and Artistes' special

groups. Cultural societies and programme organizers offer a complete festival through live streaming including concerts and forums and managed to gather several artiste personalities. These have turned up as different theme-based, concept-based, or style based festivals.

Live classical dance streaming appeared in different patterns and styles. Some of the organizing groups conducted it as a festival with popular artiste, with prior publicity. Some other groups came up with a concept of presenting choreography by different dancers on a particular theme or for the same song. Another team focused on giving performance pieces related to the current social conditions either as awareness or as a motivation for viewers to fight against the pandemic. However, the viewership for each festival depended on a variety of factors such as the circulation of the programme notice in social networking sites, the popularity of the artiste, performer's engagements in social media, and the level of marketing. It was not surprising that performances appeared online got new audiences who were not a regular audience for classical dances before. There were many sessions not only with performances but with talks and discussions on dance/ style of dance-related topics.

Random video posting was another virtual practice by performers, which helped to blur the lines of hierarchy among performers. Facebook and Instagram walls were flooded with performance videos during the lockdown, since dancers took it as mandatory, to record and post their video. Varied types of videos appeared in Facebook and Instagram during the lockdown, such as random performance clippings, challenges in choreographing for a particular piece of audio, compilation of different performer's pieces for a popular song, dancing for prayer songs as a part of favoring the campaigns to fight against the pandemic disease etc. It is noticeable that the younger generation shows more interest to show performance pieces. There was no unique way of doing this exercise, as anybody could post different qualities of videos, recorded casually, with an intention only to show society that they are dancers. Any kind of video was welcomed by social media consumers, however, it never tackled any serious discussions or special notice by scholars.

Unlike the casual video posts in social networking sites, a few productions by established performers express the social concerns of the dancers towards society, as they were meant to spread awareness. However, the wide circulation and viewership from the general public help performers to be identified among others, especially for mediocre dancers. It is noticed that the hike in the number of views was depended on the performer's celebrity value and the endorsement by others, mostly by celebrities. Dancers continue to perform in social media, come up with new productions and concepts, and spread their art. They record the time, exhibit an era, and turn into monuments of the epidemic period.

III. READING ONLINE DANCE

Classical dances as forms of performing arts are specially meant for performing on stage in front of the audience. While adopting a different space that is completely different from the mother space, it significantly needs to be edited in favor of the technology. Dances are more about visuals so that photos or videos have the power to attract more audiences rather than sharing words or texts (Meller). There are possibilities for several modes of communication barriers while performing online like the way of capturing and other associated attributes of video production like framing, lighting, angles etc. The overall aesthetics of a visual piece lies in the complementarity of the art as well as the final visual output. It was common in live streaming that the artistes were moving out of the frame, improper lightings, and issues with audio clarity. Some of the artistes performed in front of the selfie camera, so that the audience got the mirror-imaged visuals. The major missing component is the ambiance or the vibe of being with other audiences in front of the stage.

Since the performances were capturing through phone, camera shaking, different qualities of smart phones, difficulties in setting the background and space etc. affected the performances and resulted in zero uniformity for performances even in one series of the show. It is noted that some of the artistes applied different techniques to overcome the barriers. For example, they presented the *abhinaya* (expression) pieces, sitting in front of the cameras, without moving and set the background to make them visually attractive. However, some performers who didn't take special care on these factors appeared ill-favored to the medium. Enabling audience comments during the performances was another fence that prevented the proper flow of the performance.

In the case of pre-recorded videos, there is scope for editing which makes the video attractive for the screen. In random posts of casual videos, many of the artistes were conscious enough about the visuals but a few were not. In short, these online practices were more focused on producing and publicizing visuals rather than producing a good visual. Popular dancer's video productions are exceptions, which were produced by paying attention to visual clarity.

An observation of the online performances from an artiste's perspective shows that it was the most demanded activity among performers during the lockdown period. Those who were not very active in social media platforms also became active in posting, sharing their performances. Artistes took this opportunity to market themselves also to help their friends by promoting them. Artistes are very much curious to get viewership and feedbacks in the form of likes and comments. A study by Xinh Karg, Wengen, and Jian Kang on the interaction between artiste and followers on Instagram reveals that likes and comments are reasons to engage. Artistes' interaction with followers has a positive influence on the most liked artworks. Though this interaction has no much impact on artistic creations, artiste always likes more 'likes' (2019). It has become a matter of existence for dancers to go digital especially as the time demands virtual platforms. Artistes opined that they could be active, and keep connected with their fellow members through online, and to get recharged.

One of the major outcomes of the online dancing trend is that more number of the audience got attracted to classical dances. The freely available performances, accessibility, enough time to spend, and free flow of videos through the most familiar medium multiplied the number of audiences for classical dances. In one way, it helped the dance form, to be identified by many, and also for artistes to get noticed by a new group of audience. But, the question that arises here is regarding the sustainability of viewership for classical dance pieces after the lockdown period. Whether they will keep on giving attention to dances, or ignore them once they are back to their busy schedules is still unclear.

It has been noticed that the feedback in the form of comments from the people was mostly superlative, rather than authentic appreciations. Deep discussions always happened only among the core groups of artistes, scholars and audiences. In another way, for art lovers, it gives a chance to connect with their favorite medium of art, though they were no scope for social gatherings.

The burning situation of the pandemic disease caused in a paradigm shift from thinking arts purely in aesthetic terms to accepting it as a part of the social life. Now the field of arts has been recognized as a responsible sector which grows with society and has to give something back to society. However classical dances still cannot communicate to the common public, with its highly sophisticated aesthetic language. Art forms are identified as integral to the contemporary cultural, emotional, and political situations of an individual as well as the society as a whole. However, thinking from the society's perspective, art forms never served to cure the hazardous risks in the society, other than spreading a form of awareness and providing emotional support only for a particular class of people. The contemporary online performances out of the whole, only a few appeared as a kind of awareness spread, while others were only meant to satisfy the performers and the core dance lovers. For the general public, these were nothing more than a mere time pass.

Pointing out this context a few connoisseurs and dance critics have mentioned the need of being socially responsible rather than promoting themselves. Bharathanatyam and contemporary dancer, art writer, and cultural activist Ms. Anita Ratnam described the poor quality online performance as 'polluting the digital space with bad dancing from home', and expressed her view on the importance of serving the needful people the way they can through art, which opened up a lengthy discussion in Instagram (Anita Ratnam). Art critics and performers also expressed their views that dancers should have to come up with helping hands to serve the poor, instead of exhibiting themselves online during the lockdown and they highlighted the need of paying the artiste even for online performances. Several posts of the artistes and art lovers show dissatisfaction with the online exhibition of performance, as the number of shows was increasing every day. Artistes also express their worries about their existence in terms of financial and professional growth. According to them serving the poor is possible for only for a small class of artiste those who are already well established and financially fit. So the majorities of the dancers in Kerala are focused on using the modern medium to mark their presence, in order to be in the field and to seek more opportunities in the future.

IV. CONCLUSION

Human beings are social entities, possessed the nature of observing, imitating or taking others as models. In other words, they easily get motivated with others. Interaction through social media platforms is highly influencing in motivating people to think high or imitate those who have achieved something in life or profession. This is a strong reason for a high rate of social media usage by professionals from a particular domain. It is quite unsurprising that creative artistes or dancers engaging themselves in social networking sites. Going digital media doesn't mean just to know how to use gadgets and techniques. It must be an interlinked activity of using the technology based on the time, space, need, socio-political and environmental situation. So, in the current situation, artistes find it is difficult to be idle indoors, and the search for a solution reached the

much popular social media platforms which helps them to realize that even at home there is more to explore, experiment, and be active.

Individual performers and communities in social networking groups came up with the idea of presenting their dance online. The openness and participatory nature of social networking sites and the possibilities such as live streams, video posts, public shares etc. helped performers to fulfill their emotional need of being in touch with the community through dance. Though it was inherently gratifying the performers the study shows that artistes especially the younger generation showed quite restless and overwhelmingly used the online platforms which ultimately help only to seek publicity for a short period. Many of such efforts were failed in producing the aesthetically perfect productions, it never helped any performers to satisfy their financial needs, didn't offer any scope for a deep appreciation for the art, and those who exhibited themselves online regularly, could not provide serious concern towards the society. It was more like a self-campaign. Though the performances could reach a huge audience, a core discussion and appreciation happened only from the same industry people. Since the online platforms are open to all it was sometimes confusing to identify good and bad performance for the general audience. At the same time, digital platforms serve as an extension for the traditional space, not fully as an alternative.

A close examination of these exercises shows that who were more actively promoting themselves could obtain more popularity in social media. It didn't result in bringing up new talent to the mainstream, as all such efforts were applauded by a small group for a short period. Through online performances, the dancer's community could serve themselves virtually by giving emotional support, however, sometimes it undermined the aesthetic quality of the art.

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