THE DIGITAL CHALLENGES OF CLASSICAL INDIAN ARTS

Classical Indian dance forms have existed and evolved over centuries facing each challenge to its very existence and structure. Dance is referred to as "Drishya-kavya" or visual poetry by the Natyashastra, an ancient treatise on the performing arts of India. But classical artists are often unrecognised entrepreneurs. Their art includes an initial funding crunch, location hunting, effective marketing and possible scale-up. While recognition continues to be their primary dream, creating a successful 'business' is often an elusive dream. And the year 2020-21 shut more doors for these entrepreneurs. With no other option but to go online, artists face innumerable obstacles due to the very nature of the art form.

As patrons and art enthusiasts walk into a performance hall and watch the swirl of dancers executing intricate choreography accompanied by brilliant music, the ambience elevates the overall experience. The ability to engage and interact with a wider audience remains unparalleled and both the artist and audience feed off and communicate with each other. This interaction was provided by organisations or '*sabhas*' who, to a large extent, did not place remuneration of artists as a priority. However, the sheer volume of artists applying, and an unending pool of young, aspiring artists promoted a slow but decadent culture of pay and perform. A donation by the artists ensured the *sabhas'* continued functioning and a secure spot amongst the multitude applying.

The spurt of artists also helped an entire ecosystem grow---increased employment in related sectors, growth of ancillary industries and a steady economic source for many artisans, make-up artists, stage and light designers, photographers and tailors.

And COVID 19 happened. The pandemic and the ensuing lockdown have shaken the performing arts world- more so in the Indian context where the performances mainly depended on small and fast spreading localized platforms to showcase their talent. With the pandemic, these organisations were no longer open for businesses which meant these artists no longer had a stage to perform. Faced with the risk of becoming invisible, artists started seeking alternate ways of staying relevant, showcasing their talent and being heard above the noise.

While the core aesthetic has not changed, the very basis of the presentation has deeply evolved. The digital revolution coupled with a pandemic has affected the Indian classical dance scene in India and abroad in many ways.

Attention deficit

Multiple platforms offer a variety of shows that showcase artists from different parts of the country as well as from abroad. The topics are varied and often reflect current situations. Facebook usage has steadily increased over the years and is predicted to increase to 444 million users by 2023. More artists joined the social media bandwagon and upskilled themselves towards reaching that elusive audience and staying visible.

Given social media has truly arrived in people's lives, the number of apps available as well as the choices of programmes offered often creates an 'impatient' viewer. Flicking between channels has now moved to flicking between social media content. Hence the deluge of events held on social media eventually ends in viewers briefly attending or 'shopping' events and moving on to the next platform. Also, viewers tend to sign into a social media event but spend more time away from the event while still staying signed in. This neither helps the artist nor the organizer as it is not a true representation of a successful event.

Number of Facebook users in India from 2015 to 2018 with a forecast until 2023 (in millions)
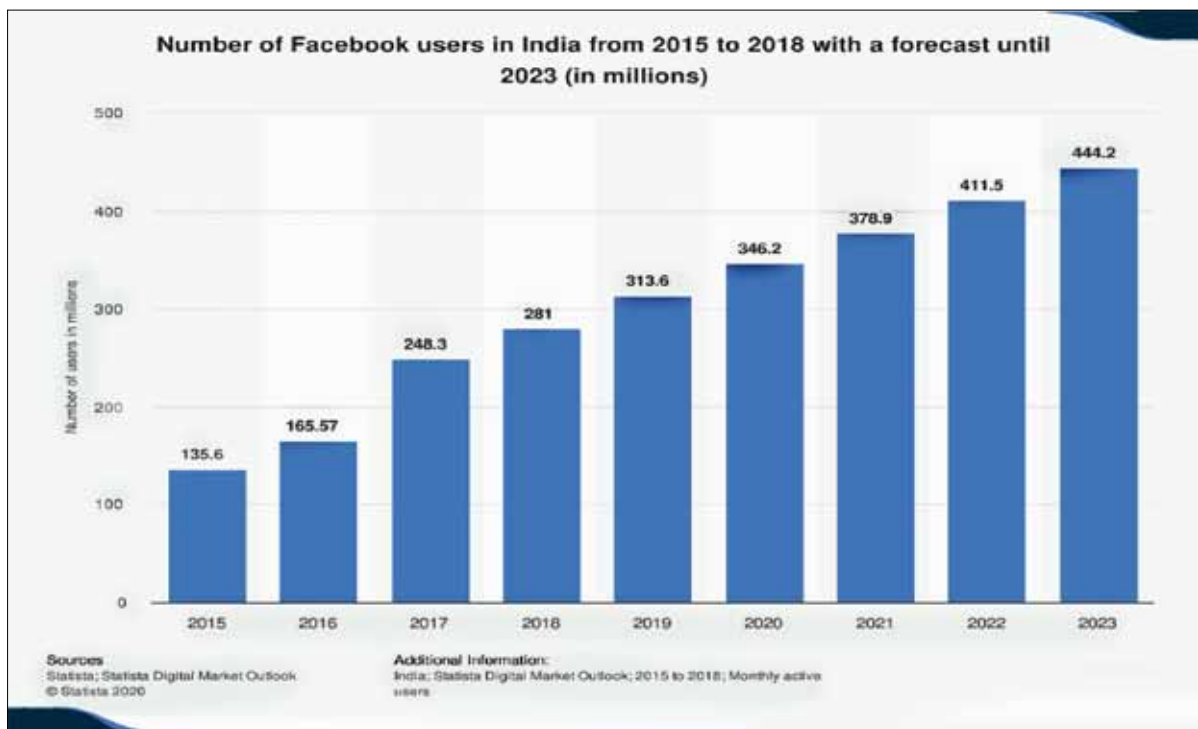
Source: Statista

> *Online festivals have mushroomed aplenty with curated content for specific audiences ranging from focused discussions from ancient texts to teasing out the specificities of the 'nayikas' or heroines through 'abhinaya' or emotive representation. Bare-it-all sessions and technique workshops are dime a dozen. This targets specific interest groups and hence manages to gather a limited but core audience.*

Lowered entry barriers

With social media, often the loudest get heard and having a social media account is a credential enough to perform online. Senior dancers have voiced their concern on not only the quality of the dancing but also the attention to aesthetics. Shabby screens, poor lighting, lack of colour and costume sense is often jarring. All that is required is a social media account, time to put together a show and an oftentimes poor audience.

Peter Brook articulated the importance of an audience in his book *The Empty Space*- 'The only thing that all forms of theatre have in common is the need for an audience'. And the irony is often any audience is a good enough audience!

Tailored Services

Organisations understand which customer base and demographics appreciates what is presented and come back for more thus creating a loyal base of subscribers. Online festivals have mushroomed aplenty with

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Remuneration

Often the least paid profession, artists are confronted with an even bleaker future. For most professionals, events and programmes provide the sustenance and with public gatherings prohibited, they see their livelihood drying up. Those who are in abject penury or who took their lives are merely a statistic. While crowdfunding and donations to art organisations are trickling in, it might require a deluge to sustain the struggling artists. Most are diffident to step out to ask for help and that makes them all the more vulnerable. Another cause of concern is the promised 'exposure' of artists in return for their performance, for no remuneration. This is definitely an individual preference, though the underlying apprehension is that an artist is willing to showcase their talent absolutely free in the name of visibility thus perhaps devaluing their expertise.

As artists deal with struggles of inadequacies and self-doubt, the need of the hour is coherent support networks to help them in need as well as better funding sources for the arts from firms and corporates. The pandemic has staked a major claim to most firm's CSRs and rightly so, but this has resulted in dwindling available funds for other activities. Individual crowdfunding, though laudable, goes only thus far in reaching toiling artists.

Can the entrepreneurial spirit be sustained till normalcy returns? Can performing arts be re-invented to embrace digital technology? Undoubtedly so though re-inventing might be too strong a word. With social distancing norms and wearing masks making it a physical challenge to dance in confined spaces, artists need to contend with the tools they have to persistently provide their expertise.

Policy

Given these multiple challenges and the pivots the industry has undertaken to meet them, greater government involvement might ensure the very sustenance of these multiple art forms. While the art industry has often been looked at as a "cultural industry" and "creative industry", a need for a discourse on arts funding to grow these 'industries' is missing. A subtle impact of the reduction in art funding and subsequently arts practice might reflect a market-driven agenda rather than an arts-driven agenda. The impact of all these issues needs to be considered by policy makers to ensure the reassertion of core cultural values in emerging economies.

The creative process is always a beacon, sometimes less bright in the fog but always there. In the immortal words of Julius Meier-Graefe- "All great works of art are trophies of victorious struggle". We shall overcome. ∎

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