Cultural Labour in Crisis: A Sociological Study of Folk Artists in Maharashtra during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the way societies functioned across the globe but its effects were far from equal. In India, one of the most profoundly affected yet least discussed communities were the folk artists who carry forward the country's diverse oral and performative traditions. This paper explores the experiences of folk artists in Maharashtra through a sociological lens, examining how state-imposed lockdowns and social distancing disrupted not only their livelihoods but also their social identities and emotional well-being. Drawing on qualitative interviews from the districts of Osmanabad, Latur, Parbhani, and Nanded, this study reveals how structural inequalities, intersectional disadvantages, and lack of institutional recognition made these cultural workers particularly vulnerable during the pandemic.

The analysis is informed by theoretical frameworks from Karl Marx's theory of labour and alienation, Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, Pierre Bourdieu's ideas on habitus and cultural capital, and feminist theories of intersectionality. Together, these perspectives illuminate how cultural labourers navigated a crisis that simultaneously silenced their art and questioned their value within the social hierarchy. The paper argues that the pandemic was not only a public health emergency but also a sociological event that exposed the fragility of cultural economies and the invisibility of the informal creative sector. It concludes by proposing academic policy implications for inclusive cultural governance that recognizes folk artists as vital contributors to India's social, economic, and symbolic life.

Introduction

When the first COVID-19 lockdown was announced in India on 24 March 2020, millions of lives were abruptly disrupted. The policy of complete social shutdown, though medically necessary, quickly revealed the deep fissures within India's social structure. While the middle and upper classes managed to shift work and education into digital spaces, those in informal sectors—especially cultural workers—found their livelihoods vanish overnight. Among these were the folk artists of Maharashtra, whose art forms such as *Tamasha*, *Lavani*, *Powada*, and *Gondhal* have historically shaped the cultural imagination of the region (Rege, 2002; Naregal, 2008).

The performances of these artists are not just a source of entertainment but also a living archive of Maharashtra's social history and oral traditions. However, despite their importance, folk artists have long existed at the margins of India's cultural economy, often surviving without job security, state support, or institutional recognition (Prakash, 2019). The pandemic intensified this precarity, leaving thousands of artists unemployed, socially isolated, and anxious about the future. In many cases, entire families dependent on cultural performance faced destitution.

The crisis also redefined the meaning of labour and value in society. The state's classification of "essential" versus "non-essential" work rendered artistic and cultural practices invisible within the framework of survival. As Gramsci (1971) reminds us, hegemony operates not only through political control but through the shaping of cultural common sense—determining what types of labour are seen as legitimate or valuable. In this sense, the pandemic became a site of struggle over visibility, worth, and recognition for India's cultural labourers.

Furthermore, the pandemic must be understood not merely as a biological crisis but as a social and structural phenomenon. The lockdown polici, while uniform in their legal enforcement, were experienced differently depending on one's position in the social hierarchy. For women folk artists, who already faced intersectional marginalization due to gender, caste and class the effects were particularly severe. Feminist sociologists such as Crenshaw (1989) and Rege (2002) have emphasized that crises often deepen pre-existing inequalities, revealing how systems of patriarchy and economic exploitation operate simultaneously.

This paper therefore asks three interrelated questions:

1.   How did the pandemic affect the economic, social, and psychological well-being of folk artists in Maharashtra?

2.   In what ways did state policy and cultural hierarchies contribute to their marginalization?

3.   What does this crisis reveal about the broader sociology of cultural labour in India?

By addressing these questions, the study seeks to situate the experiences of folk artists within larger sociological debates about structure, agency, and inequality. It argues that the folk artists' struggles are emblematic of a larger issue in India's cultural and policy frameworks: the systematic undervaluation of artistic labour and the invisibility of those who sustain the country's living traditions. Understanding their experiences offers insights not only into the pandemic's human cost but also into how societies assign worth, dignity and meaning to different forms of work.

Literature Review

The study of folk culture and performance in India has long occupied an important place in the sociology of culture. Early anthropological and cultural studies framed folk performances as expressions of collective

identity, while later critical scholarship began to interrogate the power structures embedded within them (Williams, 2016; Storey, 2018). Maharashtra, in particular, has been a vibrant site for such analysis, given its rich traditions of *Tamasha*, *Lavani*, and *Powada* — performance forms that have historically blended entertainment with political commentary (Rege, 2002; Abrams, 1975).

Raymond Williams (1981) conceptualized culture as a "whole way of life," suggesting that popular forms of art are not mere entertainment but reflections of the values, struggles, and contradictions of everyday existence. In the context of Maharashtra, scholars such as Naregal (2008) and Rege (2002) have argued that folk performances often mirror the state's social hierarchies while simultaneously offering a space for subversion and resistance. For instance, Lavani performances, though often commodified as erotic spectacle, have also served as vehicles for women artists to express agency within patriarchal structures (Rege, 2002).

The notion of "cultural labour" (Prakash, 2019) is central to contemporary sociological analysis. Cultural labour refers to the work performed by individuals who create, sustain, and transmit artistic or cultural products, often outside the realm of formal employment or labour protection. This concept highlights how art is simultaneously a form of work and identity, one that exists at the intersection of creativity, economy, and social inequality. The pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities of this sector globally. UNESCO's *Culture and COVID-19* tracker (2020) reported that artists across 90% of member states lost income, while informal and traditional artists were among the worst affected.

Recent studies have also shown how the pandemic has deepened inequalities in the cultural economy. Hearn and Bridgstock (2021) examined how creative workers faced "structural precarity" due to the gig-based nature of their professions. Similarly, Banks and O'Connor (2021) argued that the cultural and creative industries, often celebrated for innovation, are in fact built upon fragile networks of informal labour. In India, this fragility is compounded by caste and class stratification. Many folk artists belong to historically marginalized communities and lack access to institutional patronage (Naregal, 2008; Dutt, 2022).

Gender is another crucial perspective in the literature. Feminist scholars like Sunder Rajan (2020) and Chakravarty (2021) have underscored how crises disproportionately affect women artists, who face not only income loss but also an increase in unpaid domestic work and restricted mobility. The intersectional nature of these disadvantages—combining gender, caste, class, and region—illustrates how crises reinforce long-standing inequalities (Crenshaw, 1989).

In summary, the literature underscores that the cultural field is a space where economic structures, symbolic hierarchies, and social identities intersect. Yet, despite this recognition, the experiences of folk artists during the COVID-19 pandemic remain understudied. Most existing analyses focus on formal creative industries, leaving out those who operate at the periphery of cultural economies—like the folk artists of Maharashtra.

This study seeks to fill that gap by connecting the macro-structural analysis of culture with the lived experiences of performers who inhabit its margins.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the complex realities faced by folk artists during the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper draws upon four interrelated theoretical frameworks—Marxist, Gramscian, Bourdieusian, and feminist intersectional approaches. Each contributes a lens through which to interpret how structure and agency interact in the cultural field.

1. Marxist Theory of Labour and Alienation

Karl Marx's (1867/1976) theory of labour provides the foundational lens for this analysis. Marx argued that under capitalism, labour becomes commodified—workers are alienated from the products of their labour, from one another, and from their own creative potential. For folk artists, their art is both livelihood and identity. However, when their labour is unrecognized or unremunerated, they experience profound alienation—not only economic but existential. The lockdown exacerbated this alienation, as artists were cut off from both audiences and performance spaces, effectively stripping them of their creative agency (Banks & O'Connor, 2021).

2. Gramsci and Cultural Hegemony

Antonio Gramsci's (1971) concept of cultural hegemony helps to explain why certain forms of cultural labour are valued more than others. Hegemony operates through consent, shaping the "common sense" of society about what constitutes legitimate work or high culture. During the pandemic, state and media discourses prioritized medical, industrial, and digital labour while rendering artistic labour "non-essential." This reinforced existing hierarchies that place folk and popular culture below classical or elite forms. Folk artists, therefore, were not only economically marginalized but symbolically devalued within national narratives of crisis and recovery (Srivastava, 2021).

3. Bourdieu and Cultural Capital

Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) theory of cultural capital and habitus provides another layer of understanding. In Bourdieu's framework, cultural production is shaped by access to symbolic and institutional resources. Folk artists often lack the institutional cultural capital that legitimizes certain art forms. The lockdown, by pushing cultural consumption online, further entrenched these divides—those with digital and financial capital adapted, while rural artists were excluded (Hearn & Bridgstock, 2021). Thus, the pandemic reinforced structural inequalities within the "field" of cultural production.

4. Feminist and Intersectional Theory

Finally, feminist and intersectional perspectives are crucial to understanding how the pandemic's effects were differentiated across gender, caste, and class lines. As Crenshaw (1989) introduced, intersectionality emphasizes how systems of oppression interlock, producing unique experiences of disadvantage. Women folk artists in Maharashtra experienced multiple forms of marginalization: economic precarity, social stigma, and gender-based violence. Feminist scholars such as Rege (2002) and Chakravarty (2021) highlight that in times of crisis, patriarchal structures intensify, limiting women's agency both within households and performance spaces.

Together, these frameworks reveal that the pandemic was not merely an interruption but an amplification of existing inequalities. It exposed the fragility of the cultural labour system while demonstrating how resilience and resistance can also emerge from marginalized spaces.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and ethnographic approach, as the primary goal is to understand the lived experiences and subjective meanings attached to the pandemic by folk artists in Maharashtra. For a population like folk artists, whose work involves emotional, symbolic, and performative dimensions, qualitative research allows for richer insights than purely quantitative measures.

Research Design and Data Collection

Fieldwork was conducted across four districts—Osmanabad, Latur, Parbhani, and Nanded—chosen for their rich folk traditions and significant populations of performing artists. These districts represent the Marathwada region, a socio-economically vulnerable area that has long been affected by agrarian distress and limited industrialization (Deshmukh, 2020). Within this context, folk performance often provides not only cultural continuity but also an important means of livelihood.

Data were collected through semi-structured ethnographic interviews conducted with 20 respondents between 2021 and 2022. Participants included women performers, supporting musicians, middlemen, organizers, and service providers such as costume tailors and instrument makers. Interviews were conducted in Marathi and later translated into English. The interview guide explored several broad themes:

1.   Economic consequences of the lockdown.

2.   Social and psychological impacts.

3.   Perceptions of government relief measures.

4.   Gendered experiences of vulnerability and resilience.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Field notes and transcripts were organized into major categories corresponding to structural and experiential dimensions: loss of livelihood, mental distress, gender and family dynamics, and perceptions of state neglect. Each theme was then interpreted through the theoretical frameworks of Marx, Gramsci, Bourdieu, and intersectional feminism. The process of "iterative interpretation" (Charmaz, 2014) allowed for a dialogue between empirical data and sociological theory.

This methodology aims not only to document suffering but to understand how structural inequalities are reproduced in times of crisis—and how individuals exercise agency even within constraint.

Findings

The narratives collected from respondents reveal a multi-layered crisis that extended beyond the loss of income. The pandemic disrupted economic stability, social belonging, and emotional well-being simultaneously. Five interrelated themes emerged from the analysis: loss of livelihood, psychosocial distress, gendered vulnerabilities, depletion of savings and inadequate state response.

1. Loss of Livelihood

For most respondents, the lockdown translated into an immediate and total halt in income. Folk performances are typically seasonal, tied to festivals, fairs, and wedding ceremonies. As one respondent from Latur explained,

"From March 2020 everything stopped. We could not perform, travel, or even meet people. Our art feeds our stomach, but suddenly it was treated like it doesn't matter."

This quote reflects the intersection of economic and symbolic deprivation. The loss of performance opportunities not only cut off income but also the sense of purpose and recognition associated with performing (Prakash, 2019). With limited or no savings, many artists resorted to agricultural labour or small roadside vending. However, these forms of work often paid less and carried social stigma, highlighting the precarious nature of informal cultural labour (Banks & O'Connor, 2021).

2. Psychosocial Distress

Beyond the material impact, the pandemic profoundly affected the mental health and social identity of artists. The performance space is more than an economic arena—it is also a site of emotional exchange and social validation. The inability to perform created what respondents described as a "void" in their daily lives.

"Lai avaghad zalay sagala kutha halata bolata pan yeyina," one performer shared. ("Everything became so difficult; I couldn't talk or move freely anymore.")

This sense of paralysis is sociologically significant. As Durkheim (1912/1995) argued, collective rituals bind communities together. The disappearance of these rituals during lockdowns led to feelings of isolation, shame, and anomie. Some artists reported symptoms of anxiety and depression but had no access to psychological support systems.

3. Gendered Vulnerabilities

The gendered impact of the crisis was especially severe. Women performers, who often balance domestic responsibilities with performance work, faced compounded hardships. Many lost both income and autonomy. As one Lavani dancer from Parbhani stated,

"My husband said there is no need to go out; performance is not real work. But how will we live if we don't perform?"

This highlights the intersectional oppression described by Crenshaw (1989)—a combination of gender, class, and caste disadvantages. Several women artists reported increased domestic violence and unpaid household labour during lockdowns (Chakravarty, 2021). Moreover, digital exclusion—lack of access to smartphones or stable internet—prevented them from participating in online cultural initiatives that urban artists used to stay visible (UNESCO, 2021).

4. Breaking the Life Savings

Most artists had minimal savings, and the pandemic quickly depleted whatever reserves existed. For families dependent entirely on seasonal performances, the lockdown forced them to sell jewelry, instruments, or livestock. This process was accompanied by deep psychological distress, as savings represented not just financial security but pride and social dignity. "We used to save a little from every show for our daughter's school," one respondent explained, "but now everything is gone."

The erosion of savings also reflected a broader structural issue—the absence of social safety nets for informal cultural workers. Without state-sponsored insurance, pensions, or relief packages, cultural labourers were left to absorb the shock individually (Srivastava, 2021).

5. Inadequate State Response

Government measures for artists during COVID-19 were limited and fragmented. While the Ministry of Culture announced minor relief schemes for registered artists, the majority of folk performers are unregistered

and therefore excluded. Respondents expressed frustration at the bureaucratic barriers to access. "They asked for online forms—we don't even have smartphones," said one musician from Osmanabad.

This exclusion underscores Bourdieu's (1984) concept of symbolic capital: those recognized by institutions are deemed legitimate, while others remain invisible. Some NGOs and private groups offered temporary aid, but assistance was inconsistent and insufficient. As a result, many artists felt abandoned by both the state and society.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight how the COVID-19 pandemic functioned as a *social magnifier*—amplifying pre-existing inequalities within the cultural economy of Maharashtra. The crisis was not simply an interruption of cultural life but a revelation of how deeply entrenched hierarchies of class, caste, gender, and artistic legitimacy structure the lives of folk artists.

From a Marxist perspective, the pandemic intensified the alienation of cultural workers. Folk artists, whose labour produces social and symbolic value, found themselves estranged from the means of their production—performance spaces, audiences, and networks of patronage. As Marx (1867/1976) theorized, alienation is both economic and existential. For many artists, the loss of the stage meant the loss of identity. Their creative labour—central to community life—was rendered economically "non-essential," a classification that reflects how capitalist systems privilege material productivity over cultural reproduction (Banks & O'Connor, 2021).

The Gramscian lens of cultural hegemony further explains how this devaluation of artistic work is maintained through ideology. During the pandemic, the state and media propagated narratives of "essential work" centered on industrial, medical, and digital sectors (Srivastava, 2021). Such discourse naturalized the marginalization of cultural labour by framing art as leisure rather than livelihood. This ideological construction shaped social perceptions: folk artists were not just unemployed—they were made invisible within the moral economy of crisis.

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital also resonates strongly with these findings. The shift to online cultural consumption during lockdowns privileged artists with access to technology and institutional support (Hearn & Bridgstock, 2021). In contrast, rural folk performers lacked digital resources, language fluency, and audience networks. This digital divide reinforced existing hierarchies within the cultural field, where "high art" and urban cultural production are institutionally recognized, while "folk art" remains marginalized (Bourdieu, 1984).

The feminist and intersectional dimensions of the crisis reveal further depth. For women folk artists, the lockdown re-inscribed patriarchal control. Economic dependence, domestic workload, and restricted mobility curtailed women's agency. Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality helps unpack this experience:

multiple axes of oppression—gender, caste, class, and rural location—intersected to produce unique vulnerabilities. Feminist scholars have shown that crises often retraditionalize gender roles (Chakravarty, 2021), and this research confirms that pattern in Maharashtra's folk artist communities.

Beyond theory, the findings also speak to broader sociological debates about structure and agency. While structural constraints—economic collapse, lack of policy support, gender hierarchies—dominated, artists were not merely passive victims. Many displayed resilience by informally networking, performing in small village events, or even composing songs about the pandemic and survival. This aligns with Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, which emphasizes that even within structural constraints, individuals retain the capacity for reflexive action. Such acts of creativity and adaptation represent a form of *cultural resistance*—a reclaiming of agency within systems of domination.

Ultimately, this discussion underscores that the pandemic was not an isolated crisis but a lens through which the sociology of cultural labour becomes visible. It compels us to rethink how society values creative work and who gets to be recognized as a cultural contributor.

Policy Implications: Towards an Inclusive Cultural Framework

While the pandemic exposed the vulnerability of folk artists, it also opened up an opportunity to reimagine cultural policy through an academic and sociological lens. The recommendations below are not mere administrative fixes but structural and epistemic shifts aimed at acknowledging cultural labour as central to social life.

1. Recognizing Cultural Labour as Work

The first step is to formally recognize folk performance as labour, not leisure. This requires the state to adopt a *labour rights* perspective rather than a *heritage preservation* approach. As Prakash (2019) argues, cultural workers perform essential social functions of meaning-making and community cohesion. By legally acknowledging their work under labour and social welfare frameworks, artists can gain access to insurance, pensions, and emergency relief in times of crisis.

2. Building Institutional Visibility and Registration

A significant barrier during COVID-19 was the exclusion of unregistered artists from relief schemes. Governments should create accessible, multilingual digital and offline registration systems that account for informal networks. Registration must not become a bureaucratic burden but a tool of empowerment, allowing artists to claim state support and representation in policymaking bodies (UNESCO, 2021).

3. Gender-Sensitive Cultural Policy

A feminist sociological lens highlights the need for gender-inclusive policies. This includes targeted grants for women performers, childcare support during tours, and protection against harassment. Policy must also address digital inequality by providing training and access to technology for rural women artists. This aligns with recent global recommendations for gender-responsive cultural recovery (UNESCO, 2023).

4. Decentralized Cultural Governance

Cultural policy in India remains highly centralized, privileging classical and urban forms. A sociological approach calls for *decentralization*—strengthening local cultural councils and district-level funding mechanisms that can respond to the unique needs of folk communities (Naregal, 2008; Dutt, 2022). Decentralization also aligns with Amartya Sen's (1999) *capability approach*, emphasizing freedom and agency in cultural participation.

5. Integration of Cultural Economy and Development Planning

Development policies often treat culture as peripheral. Yet, as Williams (1981) and Bourdieu (1984) remind us, culture is not separate from economy—it shapes and reflects social relations. Integrating cultural labour into rural employment schemes, tourism development, and educational curricula can create sustainable livelihoods while preserving heritage. Collaborative models involving NGOs, cooperatives, and state departments can enhance resilience.

6. Crisis Preparedness and Social Security for Artists

Finally, the pandemic underscores the need for institutional preparedness. Establishing a *Cultural Workers' Welfare Fund* and including artists in emergency relief frameworks can prevent future crises from repeating the same patterns of exclusion. Such mechanisms would move from charity-based aid to rights-based protection, aligning with global frameworks for the creative economy (UNCTAD, 2022).

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the fragility of cultural livelihoods and the systemic neglect of folk artists in Maharashtra. Through a sociological lens, the crisis revealed how structural hierarchies—economic, gendered, and symbolic—shape who gets to survive and whose art is seen as expendable. Yet, amid this crisis, folk artists demonstrated resilience and creativity, reaffirming their central role in the cultural life of the region.

The findings invite a rethinking of policy and theory alike. Sociologically, the pandemic challenges us to broaden our conception of "essential work" to include the emotional and cultural labour that sustains

communities. Theoretically, it reaffirms the value of combining Marxist, feminist, and Bourdieusian perspectives to understand how power operates across economy, culture, and everyday life.

Ultimately, safeguarding the lives and dignity of folk artists is not only a matter of economic survival but also a question of cultural justice. Recognizing cultural labour as legitimate, valuable, and protected is essential to ensuring that the songs, stories, and performances that define Maharashtra's identity continue to thrive in a post-pandemic world.

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