

# Impact of COVID-19 on Folksinger: A Qualitative Study

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**ABSTRACT;** COVID-19 has affected the world severely, people across professions are facing challenges in this new normal situation. Industries are shut down, almost every economic sector is struggling to survive and common people are facing severe financial problems. Folksingers are also affected by this pandemic and this study was focused to bring out the challenges faced by the folk singers. Folk singers are the bearer and preserver of the culture; they are very important for any cultural traditions. The findings of this study reveal that the folksingers are also suffering various financial problems due to the pandemic. It has pushed them to do the work they never did before but now they are helpless. They are also emotionally affected by the COVID-19 because it has forced them to stay away from the programme that they love to do most.

**Key Words:** COVID-19, Folksinger, Manasamangal song

## INTRODUCTION

Manasamangal is a form of the folk song performed in West Bengal and some parts of Jharkhand, Assam, and Tripura. This folk song is based on the Bengali Epic Manasamangal. The epic has beautifully described the story of snake goddess Manasa's struggle to get puja from the well-established businessman ChandradharBanik and getting recognition as Devi or Goddess in Devlok and Martalok .

Folk artists took the central theme from this epic and added many things to it according to their own time, place, and experiences. They add contemporary political and social issues; they also add stories or songs of popular movies or TV soap according to their convenience. They narrate the story of Manasamangal to the audience as music or musical drama. The team of Manasamangal singers varies from places to places depending upon the form of the song, in some area, the group consist the lead singer, chorus singer, and musicians and in some places, the group is formed by 30 to 40 artists, some of them play musical instruments, chorus singers and rest of them play different

characters of the story. Manasamangal group is formed by only male artists; they also represent the female character role by dressing as a female.

Manasamangal generally performed at the time of puja of the Snake Goddess Manasa. This puja is very common in the southern and south-western parts of Bengal. It is held throughout the year but is more frequent from July to August. Manasamangal can be performed in one night to one-month duration but it depends on the budgets of the organizers. Most commonly it is organized for three nights and seven nights (Dhivar, 2019). The artists' remuneration dependence on the financial conditions of the organizers. It is a huge burden for a family to bear the puja expense, song expense, food, and travel expenses of the artists. Therefore, the artists have to consider all this thing at the time of fixing the charge. Often develop an informal relationship with the organizer due to their long association and because of this, they perform with negligible fees. During the performance, one or two artists reach out to the audience with a dish or bowl to collect money and ask them to donate. During this time everybody donates something according to their ability and they feel it is very auspicious to do. Some audiences also give money to the artists if they are pleased with the performance. In all this way the Manasamangal artists get some money at the end of the programme which may be negligible to others but marginal people like them it is enough. The artists are mainly from an agricultural background, they are mainly small farmers and they also work as labourers in the various unorganized sectors such as agriculture, construction, transport, and so on, some of them having a small business like grocery shop or vendor. Manasamangal programme gives a sense of pride and honour to the artists, they are highly respected in the community because they play the role of God and Goddess.

The Prime Minister of India requested citizens to observe JantaCarfwe on March 22 and they responded to it very generously. Then the prime minister announced a Nationwide lockdown from 29th March to control the Covid-19. The

government stopped all kinds of public transports, closed markets, and prohibited mass gatherings. Initially, everything was okay, people were trying to cope with the new situation and adjusted with it. But gradually the problems started to show up. It was evident by the time that people living on day to day earning are affected the most by the lockdown. Small vendors, daily wage labourers, small business owners lost their jobs and livelihood. Through national news channels, we show migrant labourers returning to their home with their small children, wife, and parents walking on roads thousands and thousands of kilometers. Sometimes we show the news of mass gatherings of migrant labourers at railway stations and bus terminals, police, and administrative persons are helpless to control them. The government tried to assure them and repeatedly requested them to stay wherever they were staying but nothing worked for them. They continue to return to their own places in different modes. The opposition party raised this issue and criticised the Government for doing nothing for the migrants and needy people. Then the Central Government made some changes in lockdown and took the decision to run a Shramik Special train for the migrants.

In due course, people living in various means of livelihood faced worse situations. They lost their jobs and experienced a severe financial crisis. Folk artists are not exceptional in this situation. They also suffered a lot due to the nationwide lockdown.

COVID-19 pandemic originated from the Chinese city Wuhan and gradually spread all over the world. In the initial phase, Italy was the worst affected country after China. Countries all over the world experience a severe medical crisis in terms of infrastructure, supplies, equipment, gear, and manpower. The World Health Organization (WHO) issued technical guidelines to control the spread of COVID-19 (WHO, 2020). On 11th March 2020 WHO declared COVID-19 as a pandemic. In the beginning, India asked its citizens to return from abroad, especially severely affected countries, to remain in the home quarantine for a minimum of fourteen days. Indian Government issued an advisory to maintain personal hygiene and other preventive measures like use of mask, use of hand wash or hand sanitizers, not touching the face, maintain at least a one-meter gap in public places, etc.

The government has lifted the total lockdown but time to time issued various regulations to control the virus spread out. Mass gathering for the religious or social programme is prohibited by the Government. Due to this

prohibition and the fear of COVID-19 infection people have stopped organizing the year-old tradition in their conventional way. Now they are just minimally completing the rituals and avoiding all kinds of gathering.

The COVID-19 has changed the whole world and forced people to live in a new normal situation. This study was conducted to understand the issues faced by folk singers in the COVID-19 situation. It is qualitative in nature and an in-depth interview method was used to collect the data. Data was collected from singers of a particular Manasamangal team. Social distancing and other norms were followed during the data collection.

Following responses had given by the respondents during the interview-

1. First Respondents: "From my childhood, I am fascinated by music. I wanted to perform with the Manasamangal team, so I got attached to them, learned the song, and started to perform. Then I decided to form my team with my villagers, they supported me immensely, I trained them and successfully performed a programme. Gradually my co-singers gained confidence, they performed well, we got popularity and started getting programmes from different places. With the grace of Goddess Manasa, I never faced a financial crisis in my life but due to the ongoing situation, I am facing difficulties. To manage the crisis I am forced to take the kind of work I have never done before."
2. Second Respondents: "During this season we never get a chance to stay at home at night. We used to get sufficient money from the programme but this year everything has changed. People are afraid to organize programmes, administrations also will not give permission for gathering."
3. Third Respondent: "In normal situations, we all get sufficient money from the programme. Usually, I help people with money when they face any financial crisis but now the situation has come in a way that I have to ask for money from others. Experiencing a severe financial problem in day to day life to run the family."
4. Fourth Respondent: "In absence of the Manasamangal programme I was forced to sell my cow and calf at a very low cost to manage the financial crisis I was suffering. This coronavirus has affected people like us very severely. It would have been very helpful if the Government had given some relief to us."
5. Fifth Respondent: "Generally this time of the year we used to be very busy with the programme, almost every night we used to

perform at various places. But this year we are forced to do various odd jobs which we have never done before.”

6. Sixth Respondent: “The Manasamangal song has given us a respectful and honorable life. Like others, we are also suffering from this coronavirus and lockdown. Don’t know when everything will be back to normal again and we will get a chance to perform.”

Similar responses were given by the other singers of the team. From their responses, it was clear that the COVID-19 has strike them very hard and they are helpless in this situation. Most of them have expressed that they are facing severe financial problems and to meet the means they are forced to do the jobs which they have never done before. Folksingers are very common people, they live in villages, their main occupation is agriculture and they are the people carrying the century-old tradition. Lemieux, et al. (2020) in their study they have revealed that 14 percent of jobs have been declined and the total work hours also have been lost drastically due to the COVID-19. Another study was done by Parnell, et al. (2020) in their study they have tried to explore the impact of COVID-19 on leisure and sports and they have predicted that the future of sports operation will be changed. T. Webb, (2020) has done a study on the impact of COVID-19 on world football referees and he has concluded that the pandemic has created challenges as well as opportunities for the referees as sports administrators. He also predicted that the impact of COVID-19 will be long-lasting.

Folksingers are the people who tell us who we are, what is our culture, our traditions, and what is our identity. Once upon a time folksingers were the only source of entertainment for the marginal people and they are still relevant for a large number of rural populations. But the COVID-19 pandemic has affected them severely, it has taken away one of their source of income and their performance what they like the most. In this situation, they need support from the governmental and voluntary organizations to cope with it. Folksingers and their wellbeing are very important to our culture and tradition.

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