



Research Article

From Village Square to Virtual Screen: OTT Platforms and the Future of Folk Arts and Theatre in India

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly disrupted global economies, industries, and culture, with the performing arts sector being among the most affected. In India, theatre, especially folk theatre, experienced unprecedented challenges as nationwide lockdowns halted live performances, closed auditoriums, and cut off income for thousands of artists. While cinema and urban theatre found partial respite through the rapid adoption of over-the-top (OTT) platforms, folk theatre faced significant barriers, including technological inaccessibility, digital illiteracy, and economic constraints of rural audiences. This paper examines the multifaceted impact of the pandemic on India's performing arts, with a particular focus on folk theatre, and critically analyzes the promises and perils of OTT adoption. It highlights the structural inequalities between organized and unorganized sectors, explores socio-economic and generational changes within artist communities, and discusses the potential transformation of thematic concerns due to commercialization pressures. Integrating over-the-top platforms into theatre, especially traditional forms, presents difficulties, despite the reach and ease they provide for movies. The study concludes that while theatre in India has historically survived invasions, neglect, and changing societal tastes, its post-pandemic survival depends on adaptive strategies that preserve its essence while navigating technological change.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; Performing arts; Folk theatre; Over the Top Platforms (OTT); Digital divide; Cultural sustainability; Theatre economics.

Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic brought the world to an abrupt standstill, altering the way societies' function, economies operate, and cultures express themselves. Among the many sectors profoundly affected, the

performing arts, particularly theatre and folk theatre in India, faced unparalleled challenges (Caust, 2021). Nationwide lockdowns shuttered cinema halls, theatres, and public gatherings, depriving artists and technical crews of their livelihoods (Caust, 2021). For cinema and urban

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theatre, the proliferation of OTT platforms provides an alternative means of distribution, enabling access to audiences through digital screens (Jithendran & Aiswarya, 2023). However, for the largely unorganized and community-rooted folk theatre sector, this shift proved far more complex.

Folk theatre in India has historically endured challenges ranging from foreign invasions to socio-economic neglect, relying on the passion and resilience of its artists rather than strong institutional support. The pandemic has interrupted performances and worsened imbalances in tech access, finances, and audience reach (Zanatta & Roy, 2021). This study examined the two-sided story of OTT platforms. They could change how performances are shared, but they also carry risks such as turning art into a business, weakening culture, and pushing traditional art to the side, as digital contact can paradoxically reorient the authentic identity and jeopardize the ritualistic practices considered essential to the performance (Mahato and Doreswamy, 2024).

The researchers examined economic disruption and livelihood losses in the performing arts sector, interpreted the technological shifts to OTT platforms and their feasibility for theatre versus cinema, and investigated digital accessibility challenges in rural and marginalized communities. The study also reflects on cultural and thematic transformations in performance content and generational shifts within artist communities that affect folk theatre continuity. This qualitative approach allows a nuanced understanding of how the pandemic intersects with structural inequalities, market forces, and shifting audience habits in India's performing arts.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and interpretative approach grounded in secondary research, textual analysis, and socio-cultural observation. The secondary sources include academic articles, research media reports, industry analyses, and government data on performing arts during and after the pandemic in print. The analysis draws on interpretive methods to understand the economic, technological, and socio-cultural dimensions of OTT's impact. The interpretation of the secondary sources available in digital and print form are analyzed to reach out to the conclusions of the research. The research papers, articles published in newspapers, data collected and published by the government and non-government organizations on the performing arts, the impact of digitization on the various forms of art and its impact on viewers of these arts are analyzed critically.

Review of Literature

Scholarly engagement with OTT platforms and theatre in India has expanded since the pandemic. Ravande and

Shaikh examine the existential challenge of theatre in the post-COVID world, observing that "live performances satisfy the stage's requirements and are the lifeblood of the theatrical industry" while cautioning that digital adaptations may never replicate the "aesthetic worth of any creative form" (Ravande and Shaikh, 2023). Their work reflects anxiety about the theatre's survival in a digitally dominated world. The research paper titled *OTT Platform and Dynamics for Contemporary Indian Theatre* situates OTT as both a threat and an opportunity. It argues that OTT "alters the theatrical dimensions" by offering convenience, accessibility, and affordability but warns that it risks undermining theatre's communal essence (Ravande and Shaikh, 2023). Similarly, Baisya reported that theatre is more than performance; it is the community, ritual, and interaction—dimensions that cannot be replicated digitally (Baisya, 2020).

Other scholars have been optimistic. It is mentioned that OTT platforms "emerged as the savior for the entertainment industry during the pandemic," enabling films and shows to bypass theatres and reach audiences directly ("Impact of OTT"). The study recognizes OTT's capacity for cultural preservation but simultaneously highlights its economic implications, particularly the loss of traditional distributor networks.

Commercial perspectives are also abundant. According to Broadcast and CableSat, OTT has proven to be "a win-win for all," not only providing audiences with choice and affordability but also giving producers direct access to consumers without reliance on intermediaries ("OTT: A Win-Win for All" 2022). The Tata Elxsi design case study shows how platforms are developing specialized live-streaming solutions for performing arts; yet, these solutions remain largely urban and elite in orientation (<https://www.tataelxsi.com/insights/case-study/ai-powered-ott-platform-solution-for-sports-and-entertainment>, 2021).

Statistical analyses have further illuminated this field. A report published on Mountain.com indicated that by 2024, India's OTT user base had grown to over 547 million, with more than 99 million active paid subscribers. However, despite these numbers, research shows that less than one in five users actually pay for subscriptions, demonstrating a strong preference for ad-supported video-on-demand models (Mountain). An *Economic Times* report (2025) confirms that engagement dropped by 16% from 2023 to 2024, signaling possible "streaming fatigue" (Table 1).

Overall, the literature converges on a key theme: OTT is transformative but incomplete. It provides access, reach, and affordability, but at the potential cost of authenticity, community, and cultural sustainability.

Results and Discussions

The cruel pandemic of the lethal virus, Corona 2020 not only curbed the business and economy of the world but also affected art and entertainment like never before. Theatre, cinema, and other performing arts were marred by the pandemic, and live performances and cinema shows were shut down due to the nationwide lockdowns across the globe. This situation of lockdown invited fresh problems to the various performing arts such as live performances of festivals and theatre both urban and folk. The theatre in India survived with great difficulties, as it was only swaggering on the passion of folk artists due to the lack of patronage. These artists altruistically serve various performing arts mostly in rural and tribal parts of India. The economy of the folk arts and theatre crumbled due to the sudden lockdown of months, and actors and other dependents on the folk theatre were ruined.

The pandemic was instrumental in curbing the performing arts and exposed the vulnerabilities of artists dependent on community patronage. As Ravande and Shaikh remind us, “performance is the soul of a play. The audience is the core of the theatrical world, and live performance fulfils the requirement of the stage” (Ravande and Shaikh 2023). With physical gatherings prohibited, the lifeblood of the theatre was jeopardized.

Yet, the pandemic also gave the performing arts an opportunity to adopt the “new normal” by moving online. Cinema, festivals, and shows shifted more easily, but theatre, particularly folk theatre, encountered obstacles. The OTT service disrupted the established business chains. It has been reported that, “the traditional distributor and exhibitor system faced collapse as films went direct-to-digital, wiping out decades of trade practice” (Impact of OTT, 2022). Thousands who had labored in this chain found themselves unemployed.

The rise of over-the-top (OTT) platforms has significantly transformed Indian entertainment, challenging traditional cinema and theatre consumption patterns. Pathak observes that “OTT platforms have redefined how audiences consume content, offering convenience and personalized viewing that theaters cannot match” (Pathak, 2020). Similarly, the OTT industry “poses a disruptive threat to

conventional movie theaters but also offers new avenues for revenue and audience engagement” (Varghese and Chinnaiah, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this transformation. As Baisya observes, “cinema attendance plummeted during lockdowns, pushing even traditional moviegoers towards digital platforms” (Baisya, 2020), while Thakur highlights that “India witnessed a remarkable evolution in OTT platforms during this period, both in terms of business strategies and regulatory frameworks” (Thakur, 2021). These observations indicate that the pandemic acted as a catalyst, pushing even loyal theater audiences toward digital consumption, while prompting the OTT sector to innovate in delivery and regulation.

Despite these disruptions, the OTT gained remarkable momentum. The *Broadcast and CableSat* analysis calls OTT “a win-win” since it offers producers direct-to-consumer reach and audiences “unparalleled convenience and affordability” (OTT: A Win-Win for All). This appeal is evident in subscription statistics: by 2024 India had over 547 million OTT users, but fewer than 20 percent paid for subscriptions (<https://mountain.com/blog/ott-statistics/2024, January 11>). The affordability of OTT subscriptions compared to theatre tickets explains this rise. A study noted that “an average user holds a minimum of two OTT platforms and spends one or two hours a day” (Ravande and Shaikh, 2023). By contrast, theatre-goers spend INR 150–200 for a single show, whereas a month’s OTT subscription offers unlimited content.

The momentum has accelerated by 2025. The merger of Disney and Hotstar with JioCinema created JioHotstar, which now has over 280 million subscribers, nearly rivaling Netflix globally (Financial Times, 2025, May 22). IPL 2025 final alone registered 57.8 crore streams—578 million views—on JioHotstar, setting a record for the most-viewed cricket event online (<https://indiatimes.com/trending/rcb-vs-pbks-ipl-2025-jio-hotstar-crosses-578-crore-views-during-final-showdown-becomes-most-viewed-match-of-the-season-660265.html>). Such figures underscore the dominance of OTT in mass entertainment. Yet they also reflect why theatre, especially folk theatre, is struggling to maintain relevance.

Table 1: Growth of OTT Platforms in India (2020–2025)

Year	Total Users (Millions)	Paid Subscribers (Millions)	Key Development
2020	~300	~40	Pandemic accelerates OTT shift
2022	420	~80	Rapid rise in subscriptions
2023	480	95	Multiple platforms competing
2024	547	99	OTT universe grew 14% (Economic Times, 2024)
2025	580+	280 (JioHotstar after merger)	JioHotstar sets IPL streaming record with 578M views (IndiaTimes, 2025)

Source: Economic Times (2024, 2025), Mountain (2024), Financial Times (2025), IndiaTimes (2025).

Cinema and theatre differ in their adaptability to OTT services. Cinema, which is already reliant on recorded media, can shift to OTT without losing its essence. Theatre, however, depends on liveness, immediacy, and audience interaction, as it is pointed out, “the theatrical dimensions have entirely altered with OTT since one can now watch digital performances conveniently on a laptop or mobile device” (Ravande and Shaikh, 2023). This shift undermines the theatre’s communal ethos.

Folk theatres face harsher challenges. Its audiences, largely from underprivileged and rural communities, lack access to stable Internet. Johnson and Nayeem observe that the “digital inaccessibility and economic disparity remain the biggest hurdles for folk artists to enter the OTT ecosystem” (Johnson and Nayeem, 2022). Many villages do not have an affordable Internet. For such communities, OTT subscriptions are luxury. Thus, while urban audiences embrace OTT, rural audiences and, the lifeblood of folk theatre, remain excluded.

Moreover, folk artists experience generational transition. Younger members of performing families are increasingly disinclined to pursue traditional theatre, preferring urban lifestyles, and modern professions. This social shift further undermines the continuity of folk tradition. The risk is that OTT, by privileging market-driven content, may hasten generational exit by failing to provide meaningful platforms for folk theatre.

Another concern is the thematic dilution. The OTT thrives through mass entertainment. As Ravande and Shaikh warn, “sooner or later socially conscious narratives may be replaced by masala entertainment” (Ravande and Shaikh, 2023). Theatre, especially folk theatre, has historically addressed pressing social issues—from caste oppression to gender inequality. If OTT adaptation reduces these narratives to niche content akin to “art films,” it could erode theatre’s role as the “fifth Veda.”

The statistics also indicate a growing saturation. A Sensor Tower report (2025) found that streaming fatigue has begun to set in, with engagement dropping 16 percent from 25.9 billion hours in 2023 to 21.7 billion hours in 2024 (Exchange4Media, 2025, January 9). This suggests that while OTT dominates, its growth may not be infinite. Theatres could capitalize on this fatigue by reasserting the irreplaceable value of the live experience.

At the same time, practitioners insist that theatre will survive. Director Shilajit Mitra asserts that “streaming cannot match the theatrical business. I am sure once the lockdown is lifted, the industry will be with us” (Ravande and Shaikh, 2023). Actress Anushka Sharma similarly recognizes OTT’s wide reach but affirms that both digital and theatre will coexist (Ravande and Shaikh, 2023). Dedhia emphasizes that “actors, filmmakers, and trade

experts agree that both OTT services and cinema will coexist and grow, rather than one replacing the other” (Dedhia, 2020). These voices echo resilient optimism rooted in the theatre’s historical survival through wars, invasions, and neglect.

Resilience from theatre lies in rootedness. It is community performance and, not merely entertainment. Its survival will require hybrid strategies: digitally archiving performance, leveraging OTT for visibility, and simultaneously preserving live engagement. The Tata Elxsi project for the “Live Streaming OTT Platform for Performing Arts” offers one model, but these kinds of projects must place importance on being inclusive and accessible.

Ultimately, the audience will determine the theatre’s fate. If OTT continues its dominance unchecked, folk theatre risks marginalization. However, if audiences and institutions recognize the theatre’s unique cultural value, space will remain for coexistence. The story of Indian theatre is one of resilience. It is emphasized that theatre has survived in the upheavals, and its survival depends on adaptation without losing its original essence.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic was both a disruptor and catalyst for India’s performing arts. It accelerated the rise of OTT services, expanded audiences, and reshaped distribution models. However, for folk theatre, the challenges remain steep: digital divide, economic exclusion, and thematic dilution threaten its essence. While OTT data for 2025 demonstrate cultural dominance, with JioHotstar logging record-breaking IPL streams and India’s OTT universe expanding to over 547 million users, these statistics also point to some problems. Streaming fatigue and declining engagement indicate that the digital platform is not invincible. This provides an opportunity for theatre, especially folk theatre, to reassert its irreplaceable value.

The future lies in balance. Theatre must embrace technology without surrendering its essence. Policymakers, cultural institutions, and OTT platforms must collaborate to ensure that the folk artists receive visibility and fair remuneration. If this balance can be achieved, then theatre ‘From the village square to the virtual screen’ will not only survive but flourish in the digital age. Despite these challenges, history offers grounds for optimism; Indian theatre has survived centuries of upheaval, from foreign invasions to societal shifts. Its resilience lies in the dedication of its artists and deep roots in community life. The forward path must balance technological integration with cultural traditions, ensuring that digital innovation does not come at the cost of authenticity. Only by addressing infrastructural inequalities and promoting all-encompassing models of audience engagement can theatre, both urban and folk, emerge from this crisis not diminished, but renewed.

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