

## **To Excel or To Survive**

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Today is the 52<sup>nd</sup> day of the nationwide lockdown. Many of us haven't stepped out of our houses since day 1. We have been surviving this unprecedented lockdown engaging in various activities. Many of us have finally got time to pick that half, unread book, while many of us are watching movies; online film festivals are being organized, people are painting to pass their time, cooking, listening to music and are indulging in an artistic experience. Most of us have turned to artists in this pandemic. But how are the artists surviving this lockdown?

“Shakespeare Wrote His Best Works During a Plague” – read a quote gone viral on various social media platform indicating this pandemic as an opportunity for artists to work on their craft or better, excel at it. There are several categories of artists reading that quote. One includes the artists who are creating new art, utilizing this time to collaborate with other artists, using all the resources, connections they have – famous singers, musicians, painters, actors etc. and are trying to excel in their field. On the other unfortunate side, we have artists who are barely able to make their ends meet. The class-caste divide of our society seeps equally into the artistic world.



*This lockdown has further marginalized artists working in wedding bands*

“Artists struggling to make a name in their field were finding it difficult to survive even before the pandemic. But today, the imposed lockdown has killed their meagre source of income,” says Ishu, a professional theatre artist and musician from Haryana. “A large number of artists belong to the category who work first and then get paid. They have to wait for several months and sometimes even a year to receive payment. This lockdown has not just snatched away the work opportunities from such artists but also the prospect of receiving the payment for their previous work,” he added. Folk artists, street performers, instrumentalists, artists working in wedding bands, story tellers, theatre artists and groups have been further marginalized by this lockdown.

Ben Okri, a Nigerian poet and novelist, in his article titled ‘We need art more than ever’ published in The Financial Times, says that, “this is a time when we need art more than ever. We need art to remind us why life is worth living. We need art to reawaken our sense of the wonder of being, to remind us of our freedom, and to highlight the things in our cultures that enable us to withstand the dreaded visage of death.” Certainly, we need art, but we also need mechanisms to take care of artists especially the ones who do not make it to the mainstream.

“I had to make some very difficult decisions while choosing theatre as my career. After spending 6 years in the field, receiving meagre scholarships, I somehow survived. In January, I received an offer to teach theatre in a school in Delhi. I had finally gained some confidence but before I could benefit from it, the lockdown was imposed,” shared 22-year-old Umesh Joshi, a young theatre artist from Sahibabad, Uttar Pradesh.

Art is a collective activity – the artist and the audience share the same physical space to make the ‘art’ successful. Even if the lockdown is lifted in the coming week, it will take a while for the audience and the performers to gather in one place. Let us hope that art and culture organizations extend help to artists who are helping us to survive this pandemic.