

Folk Media and Religion: An Ethnosemiotic Study of Purulia Chhau

A Thesis submitted

To

Sikkim University



In partial fulfilment of the requirement for the

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

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July, 2022

Under the Supervision of

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DECLARATION

I, ARKAPRAVA CHATTOPADHYAY, hereby declare that the research work embodied in the thesis titled “Folk Media and Religion: An Ethnosemiotic Study of Purulia Chhau” submitted to the Sikkim University in the partial fulfilment of the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy is my original work. This thesis has not been submitted for any other degree of this University or any other University.

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This is to certify that the thesis titled “**Folk Media and Religion: An Ethnosemiotic Study of Purulia Chhau**” submitted to the Sikkim University in the partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy in Mass Communication** embodies the result of *bona fide* research carried out by **ARKAPRAVA CHATTOPADHYAY** under my guidance and supervision. No part of the thesis has been submitted for any other Degree, Diploma, Associateship or Fellowship.

He has duly acknowledged all the assistance and help received during the investigation.

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“Folk Media and Religion: AnEthnosemiotic Study of Purulia Chhau”

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Contents of the Thesis

Chapter 1 – Introduction (pp. 1 - 18).

- 1.1 – A Night in the Forest. (p. 1).
- 1.2 – Statement of the Problem. (p. 5).
- 1.3 – Research Questions. (p. 8).
- 1.4 – Objectives. (p. 10).
- 1.5 – Ethnosemiotic Approach. (p. 11).
- 1.6 – Study Location. (p. 12).
- 1.7 – Limitations and Scope (p. 14)
- 1.8 – Organization of the Thesis. (p. 16).
- 1.9 – Summary. (p. 18).

Chapter 2 – Locating Purulia Chhau in the Folk Media Landscape

of India (pp. 19 - 36).

- 2.1 – Folk Media and Religion in India. (p. 19).
- 2.2 – The Folk Expressions of Bengal. (p. 26).
- 2.3 – Purulia Chhau: A Cultural History. (p. 28).
- 2.4 – Reflections. (p. 35).
- 2.5 – Summary. (p. 36).

Chapter 3 – Folk Media and Religion: A Review of Literature

(pp. 37 - 84).

- 3.1 – Introduction. (p. 37).
 - 3.1.1 – Demystifying Religion. (p. 38).
- 3.2 – Media and Religion: A Historical Overview. (p. 40).
 - 3.2.1 – Strands in Media-Religion Studies. (p. 45).
- 3.3 – Research on Folk Media. (p. 49).
 - 3.3.1 – Folklore: Scholarly Works and Inter-disciplinary Derivations. (p. 51).
 - 3.3.2 – Media Anthropology: Emerging Directions. (p. 54).
 - 3.3.3 – Communication Studies: Folk Media for Social Development. (p. 57).
 - 3.3.4 – Semiotics in Media-Religion Studies. (p. 60).
- 3.4 – The Indian Theory of Communication. (p. 69).
- 3.5 – Folk and Classical Expressions of India: A Comparative Review. (p. 75).
- 3.6 – Scholarly Works on Purulia Chhau. (p. 80).
- 3.7 – Summary. (p. 83).

Chapter 4 – Methodology of Research (pp. 85 - 113).

- 4.1 – Overview. (p. 85).
- 4.2 – A Methodological Review on Ethnosemiotics. (p. 86).
- 4.3 – Method. (p. 87).
- 4.4 – Fieldwork. (p. 89).
- 4.5 – Selection for Study. (p. 95).
 - 4.5.1 – Selection of the Performance troupes. (p. 96).
 - 4.5.2 – Interaction with Audiences. (p. 102).
 - 4.5.3 – Key Respondents. (p. 103).
- 4.6 – Tools of Data Collection. (p. 109).
- 4.7 – Facilitators. (p. 109).
- 4.8 – Data Analysis. (p. 110).
- 4.9 – Reflections (p. 112).
- 4.10 – Summary. (p. 113).

Chapter 5 – An Ethnosemiotic Analysis of Purulia Chhau

(pp. 114 - 183).

- 5.1 – Introduction. (p. 114).
- 5.2 – The Origin of Purulia Chhau: The Shiv Gaajan. (p. 115).
- 5.3 – The Evolution of Purulia Chhau: A Paradigmatic Perspective.
(p. 124).
- 5.4 - Chhau Types and Genres. (p. 137).

- 5.5 - Purulia Chhau as a Composite Sign System: A Syntagmatic Perspective. (p. 138).
 - 5.5.1 – Narratives and Characters. (p. 139).
 - 5.5.2 – Masks, Costumes, Iconography and Color. (p. 153).
 - 5.5.3 – Kinesics, Choreography and Music. (p. 160).
- 5.6 – The Production Process. (p. 171).
- 5.7 – The Audience’s Interpretation. (p. 172).
- 5.8 – Summary. (p. 181).

Chapter 6 – Purulia Chhau in Contemporary Times: Negotiations and Under-Currents (pp. 184 - 239).

- 6.1 – Introduction. (p. 184).
- 6.2 – The Social Negotiations. (p. 186).
 - 6.2.1 - Case Study: Mitali Chhau Maldih Mahila Dal. (p. 187).
- 6.3 – The Economic and Technological Negotiations. (p. 215).
 - 6.3.1 - Case Study: Chhau YouTuber Debashis Das. (p. 219).
- 6.4 – The Religious, Cultural and Political Undercurrents. (p. 225).
- 6.5 – Summary. (p. 236).

Chapter 7 – The Manifestations of Religion in Purulia Chhau

(pp. 240 - 274).

- 7.1 – Introduction. (p. 240).
- 7.2 – Religion in Purulia: The Ritualistic Itinerary of Chhau. (p. 241).
- 7.3 – The Inter-Religious Negotiations. (p. 244).
 - 7.3.1 - Case Study: Palma Shakti Sangha Chhau Nritya Party. (p. 244).
 - 7.3.2 – Case Study: Late. Rasu Sahis Baligara Kisan Chhau Nritya Samiti. (p. 250).
- 7.4 – The Intra-Religious Negotiations. (p. 254).
- 7.5 – Purulia Chhau: A Hermeneutic Reading. (p. 259).
- 7.6 – Purulia Chhau and the Pangtoed Chham: A Comparison (p. 265).
- 7.7 – Summary (p. 274).

Chapter 8 – Conclusion (pp. 276 - 292).

References (pp. 293 - 318).

Annexure 1 – List of Purulia Chhau Troupes registered with the Dept. of

Information & Cultural Affairs (DICA), Govt. of West Bengal.

(pp. 319 - 328).

Annexure 2 – Guideline for IDIs and FGDs (pp. 329 - 347).

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1. A Night in the Forest

As the myriad hues of dusk set in over the evening sky of Purulia, a colourful decorated truck emerged from the horizon over the deserted highway. One would never expect to be invited onto its roof though. As I was helped up to be seated alongside eighteen other individuals, they acknowledged my spirit with a smile and welcomed me to be a fellow traveller, in their journey. As the interior of the truck was mostly occupied by costumes, props and musical instruments, the large masks of the Hindu Gods and Goddesses were strikingly visible, lined up at the back. The sign affixed at the side of the truck read ‘Palma Shakti Sangha Chhau Nritya Party’ (the name of the troupe). Seated in forefront with the warm wind brushing against our faces, there was a joyous sense of celebration amongst the group, sincerely excited about their performance later that night. We were enway to Kustaur village where the troupe was to perform throughout the night along with two other troupes, on the occasion of the ongoing holy month of *Shraavan* (Hindu calendar month between July 14th and August 12th), celebrating Shiva. Passing by long stretches of the rocky infertile land along the highway, soon we entered the winding off road through the forest and made our way across. Along the way, small clearings lined with clusters of *adivasi* homes were passed from time to time. These were villages typically surrounding small *Goram Thans* (sacred places beneath large trees) dedicated to *Goram Devtas* (local indigenous deities) – mostly avatars of Shiva or Kali. The

children at each of these villages loved to run alongwith the truck as it passed. The men and women smiled and waved to the performers. Icons, nonetheless. Intermittently, the truck slowed down as we approached low-lying trees so that we could either bow our heads to cross by or chop/ clear out the branches with a long and heavy sword held by Saifuddin, a performer seated to my right. The ten-kilometer journey took us one and a half hours.

Based in *Palma* village of the Barabazar block in Purulia, the Chhau troupe is led by President's Award winner Ustad Giasuddin Ansari. A Muslim. In fact, a majority of the troupe members were Muslim, engaged in performing the mythological narratives of Hinduism. Following the prescribed narratives of the *Puranas* with a devout sense of precision, these artists regularly enact the characters of Shiva, Durga, and Vishnu, amongst others, and have been doing so for generations. In fact, Ustad Giasuddin is famous for his rendition of Krishna. Re-enforcing the statement of communal harmony and universal brotherhood through Purulia Chhau, whereas most temples remain out of bounds for non-Hindus in the region, the Purulia Chhau renditions of this troupe are thronged by large numbers, on most occasions. Occasions perceived by the locals as 'divine' instances, when the Gods and Goddesses descend upon their village in the form of the masked performers.

As we entered Kustaur, the sun had already set and the surroundings were now pitch dark, apart from the gas lamps/ candles simmering from within the homes. On reaching the centre of the village, the troupe was welcomed by an entourage of people wearing *lungis* (wrapped cloths from waist to their knee) and women in *sarees* (*stretch of woven fabric draped around the entire body*). The truck was parked beside

the *akkhara*; a field looking over the central temple that the organizers had cordoned with bamboo rails. Lined by flaring kerosene *mashals* (fire torches) and tube lights powered by a diesel generator, a heterogenous audience (cutting across all religions, castes and tribes) of around five hundred people, had gathered for the the night. Given that there was an ongoing Shiv-puja (religious invocation) happening inside the adjoining temple, the sounds of the bells and chants drifted out into the *akkhara* accumulating a holy mystical ambience. The akkhara had become a sacred space where the Gods and Goddesses were soon expected to arrive.

Devoid of any enclosed room at hand, as the actors in the troupe put on their respective costumes shielded by the truck, the musicians readied their instruments. Unlike other such events, Giasuddin wasn't going to perform that night. He was there to direct/ guide the performance of his troupe as was practiced over the week before. His 21 year-old son Saifuddin was to enact Shiva on that day. The Shiv Puran-based *pala* (narrative) to be performed was 'Kirat Arjun' - a mythological depiction of Shiva as a tribal hunter (Kirat) accompanied by his wife Durga (Kiratin) in her tribal avatar and how he defeats Arjun (an Aryan prince/ *Pandava*). A depiction of the rhetoric that Shiva resides in all tribal beings. A lesson in humility for Arjun.

Kaifuddin was elated that he had transcended the stages of enacting lower Gods such as Kartik, Bhima, amongst others; female Gods such as Lakshmi and Saraswati and even *sakhis* (effeminate renditions of female anthropomorphic characters) to finally develop the technical prowess and personality required to manifest Shiva. A spiritual feat beyond religion. As he put on the large white mask of Shiva having the five-headed snake iconography on the top and picked up the *trishul* (holy trident prop), a

sense of dignity emanated from his poise. “Shiva is now within me”, he remarked. As the proceedings were initiated, he awaited for his turn patiently.

Starting the Chhau performance with a burst of energy, as the thunderous sounds of the *dhamsas* (large war drums made of steel and animal skin) and the high-pitched *shehnais* (wind instruments) announced the beginning of the show, Sunit Mahato; the narrator/ lead singer (*bhasyakar*), set the context with poetic intellect positing the title of the popular narrative to be performed drawing loud cheers from the crowd. He then went on to sing a beautiful *Jhumur* song (traditional folk music of Purulia) the lyrics of which were centered upon the virtue of Shiva as being immortal and omnipresent. The song described that despite being the God of Gods, Shiva doesn't sit on a throne like the other Gods. He resides amongst the people. He resides within the people. He is 'us' Sunit crooned.

Following the script, as the characters rushed into the *akkhara* to enact their turn, they were accompanied by specific rhythm patterns of the *dhamsa* and *dhol* (traditional rhythm instrument). Although the kinesics of the characters was meticulously choreographed beforehand, the energy being manifested was modulated as per the emotions (*bhavas* and *rasas*) being depicted, live. A symbiotic synergy between the musicians and actors influenced by the receptive energy of the audiences. Traditionally, women are not allowed to perform. A norm recently challenged by some. Men enacted all female characters, on this night. As the vibrant acrobatic displays, death defying stunts and vigorous actions drew loud cheers from all quarters; the effeminate actions drew leering catcalls. Whereas some in the audience presented a devout gaze emanating an evident sense of spiritual catharsis and

religious contentment, the children thoroughly enjoyed. In the peripheral part of the venue, some people also engaged in profane activities such as gambling, drinking and consuming marijuana. Some of them drunk beyond consciousness. But then, Shiva was their God too. Believed to be the God of all the demons as well. In fact, the demons/ antagonists in the narratives were respected and cheered too, from all quarters, rather than hated.

Halfway into the 'Kirat Arjun' narrative, as the sequential juncture arrived when the character wearing the mask depicting *Kirat* was to showcase his true identity as Shiva, the lights suddenly went out. As the crowd began shouting in ridicule of the organizers, an illusion was craftily created. In a thrustful moment, Kaifuddin rushed out in the darkness wearing the Shiva mask and costume and replaced the character enacting the tribal *Kirat*, who moved out from the space in the darkness. The lights then came on. There stood Shiva. At the centre of the *akkhara*. The illusion was swift and impactful. To my utter disbelief, a sense of spiritual silence prevailed. Not cheers. I even witnessed tears in the eyes of the audiences at this moment. The ambience was magical, as if time had stopped. Giasuddin was proud of his son.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The engagement of folk media with religious and mythological storytelling in the natives' own language have ensured their significance as potent communication systems. Possessing the capacity to ensure indigenous perspectives and localized contexts, these expressions have been handed down through generations as historical

chronicles, reflecting the evolution of the everyday life of the local communities. However, at another level, as in the case of Purulia Chhau, its relationship with (mainstream) religion is subtle and highly complex, accommodating negotiations that dwell far beyond informal observation and casual comprehension. As the effective use of evocative masks, costumes, mythological narratives, characters, etc., contribute to the presentation of this formidable cultural resource - the local community has devotedly drawn inspiration from it to interpret their everyday lives; its struggles and conflicts. Furthermore, accomodating various other folk expressions of the region into its composite fold, its flexibility to deviate, innovate, industrialize and digitize; amongst others, has genuinely ensued not just its revival, but also its growth beyond borders.

Stout (2006) observes that “communication is the sine qua non of religion; [as] it is the essence of prayer, sermons, ritual, and congregational fellowship” (p.8). Given that many folk media forms profusely exhibit these features, such expressions provide immense opportunities for scholars to inquire and explore. Rather than mere entertainment platforms, folk media are repositories of traditional knowledge, information and cultural motifs, characterized by their own indigenous communication systems. A primary mode of communication in pre-literate societies, folk media demonstrate not only an intimate, but also an inexplicable and complex relationship with religion and culture. But then, as the review of literature presented in Chapter – 3 elaborates, the mainstream discourse within the academic domain of ‘Media-Religion’ has largely neglected the folk media variant, from the perspective of this intricate association. The focus has largely been within the realms of ‘television’ (Goethals, 1980; Horsefield 1984; Fore, 1987; amongst others) and ‘digital/ online

media’ (Lovheim, 2004; Lee, 2009; Campbell, 2010; Hepp, 2020; amongst others). Despite the persevering relevance of indigenous expressions even in present times of electronic and digital media, the marginalization of communication research on ‘folk media’ in general and ‘folk media and religion’ in particular, yet continues to perpetuate and neglect the rich indigenous knowledge systems of the tribal, rural and other such disadvantaged communities in non-western societies for whom folk media assumes a central position in their everyday life (Spark, 2005).

Thus, attending to the academic dearth in this regard, a rational and wholesome effort toward studying the significant relationship between ‘media’ and ‘religion’ with emphasis upon ‘folk’ variants was genuinely required. It was important to acknowledge that ‘religion’ is a polysemic term though. Amidst the various interpretations - the present study was based on Clifford Geertz’s (1985) definition of religion as “a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, long lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (as cited in Campbell, 2010, p. 8). Focussing on Purulia Chhau as a representative case, apart from deconstructing the making and staging of such an extravagant masked dance theatre (Purulia Chhau) – this study deconstructs the phenomenon of framing Hindu meta-narratives in an indigenous context, the reasons thereof, the inter/ intra-religious negotiations maneuvering these, and the meanings derived. Also identifying the social, cultural, political, technological and economic undercurrents contributing to the art, the central role of religion as a catalyst and how these reflect the evolution of the everyday life of the people in the region, has genuinely been revealed.

1.3. Research Questions

The following research questions become pertinent in the study of Purulia Chhau from the perspective of religion –

- What is the context in which Purulia Chhau has evolved? Was there a conscious effort to popularize Hindu religious belief through this platform? What was the role of the Panchakot royals, in this effort? How has the changing socio-cultural milieu influenced Purulia Chhau? Have Panchayat based politics also influenced it? What economic activities revolve around it and what role does it play in the area? How much is Purulia Chhau central to the religious life of the people? What has ensured its sustenance despite the emergence of modern media technologies? Has religion played an important role in this? Which are the innovations, interpolations and adaptations, adopted in contemporary times? What are the factors that have influenced these? How far have the troupes deviated from the primordial form? How far does religion surface even in these secular forms of Purulia Chhau?
- How does the composition and performance of Purulia Chhau represent local religious contexts? What is the framework of its composite structure? How are the religious messages embedded into it through the effective use of narratives, characters, masks, costumes, iconography, color, kinesics, choreography and music? How does the combination of these signifiers contribute towards meaning? What are the relationships between these signifiers? For example - What is the significance of each mask representing

gods, demons and anthropomorphic characters? What is the representative role of each character? What colors are used to represent the demons, and why? How is the music used to convey emotions?

- Is there a sense of religious fulfillment after watching the performances? Do these performances answer the basic religious questions of the natives? How are the performances interpreted and understood by the natives? Do they experience a sense of catharsis from these performances? What influences their interpretation and understanding? What are the various connotations? What is the pattern of their understanding? How do they react to the performances at the venue? Which are the most popular characters and why? Which are the most popular narratives and why? How do they interpret these narratives and their meanings in their everyday life? How do they interpret their daily life and struggles from the resources drawn from Purulia Chhau? Does it effectuate their devoutness aligned to Hinduism? Does it influence their social life? Do these interpretations differ in terms of gender and sub-tribal communities? Do audiences connect more with the religious narratives other themes? How do the natives perceive commercialized innovations?
- Has Purulia Chhau influenced the tribal community to embrace Hinduism? How has the indigenous religion of the tribal community accommodated the grand narratives of the Hindu mythologies? Is there a significant difference between the grand narratives of Hindu mythologies and those of the tribals? If yes, how and why? Does the folk media form resist the grand narratives and thereby contribute to rescuing the religious beliefs and myths of the tribals?

Does Purulia Chhau resist the marginalization and demonization of the community? If yes, how? Which are the tertiary influences? What is the role of culture, politics, technology and socio-economic structure within the media-religion relationship? Which are the other inter/ intra-religious negotiations?

1.4. Objectives

The objectives of this study were to:

- trace the evolution of Purulia Chhau in the context of social, cultural, political, economic and religious life of the people.
- elicit the religious meanings latent in Purulia Chhau by examining the composite signification system (effective use of narratives, characters, masks, costumes, iconography, color, kinesics, choreography and music) as a combined communication process.
- examine the meanings that the local community draws from the Purulia Chhau performances and how they employ this resource to interpret their everyday life and struggles.
- examine the role of Purulia Chhau in the negotiations between native religion and mainstream Hinduism.

1.5. Ethnosemiotic Approach

To achieve the aforementioned objectives that have emerged from each set of research questions, the researcher has adopted an ethnosemiotic approach combining inductive methods of ethnography and semiotics. Given that Purulia Chhau is a performance text that portrays narratives drawn from Indian mythology, intertwined with localized contexts, the use of textual semiotics to deconstruct and analyze the performances was most appropriate for these dimensions. But then, ethnography was essential too. Apart from also studying the lives of the performers and the reasons behind them expressing the narratives in the way they do – the everyday life of the local communities (audiences) was also studied to identify how it is mirrored through the Chhau narratives. Furthermore to draw a historical reference based on social semiotics, the ethnographic data was analyzed using semiotic models.

Thus, combining the traditions of ethnography and semiotics, the ethnosemiotic approach of interpreting each observation with the objective of deciphering the underlying meanings, influences and signifiers, was particularly crucial. So, the acquired ethnographic materials were analyzed concurrently in an integrated manner, throughout the course of data collection. This allowed the researcher to immediately implement the necessary process upgrades, as insights emerged in the field itself. However, when deriving historical references based on social semiotics, formal interviews were also conducted to draw enforcing/ contradictory insights with key respondents and authorities in the field of art and culture. The oral history was also ascertained from the community elders for this purpose. Furthermore, in addition to cross-examining Chhau based literature, a considerable amount of Chhau based

archives have also been accessed. Apart from administrative data facilitated by the Dept. of Information and Cultural Affairs (DICA), Purulia, WB govt. - audiovisuals of performances featuring icons/ legends of earlier generations available at the 'National Cultural Audio-Visual Archives' (NCAA) have also been studied. Thus, a time-based comparative frame of reference was established, essential to trace its evolution. – All in all, an ethnosemiotic approach to study Purulia Chhau has not just revealed the syntagmatic and paradigmatic dimensions, but also the imponderabilia and minutiae of the everyday lives of the locals.

1.6. Study Location

Located in the western most area of West Bengal spread out over the Chhota Nagpur plateau, the Purulia district was integrated into West Bengal on 1st September 1956 under the State Reorganization Act 1956 - a transfer of territory from Bihar to West Bengal. Presently, the district has only 28 municipalities, but 170 gram panchayats covering 2667 villages (Daripa, 2018). Whereas Purulia district is outlined by the Bardhaman, Bankura and Paschim Mednipur districts of West Bengal on the north and the west, it is neighbored by the states of Jharkhand in the east and Odisha in the south, thus enabling a diverse cultural amalgamation.

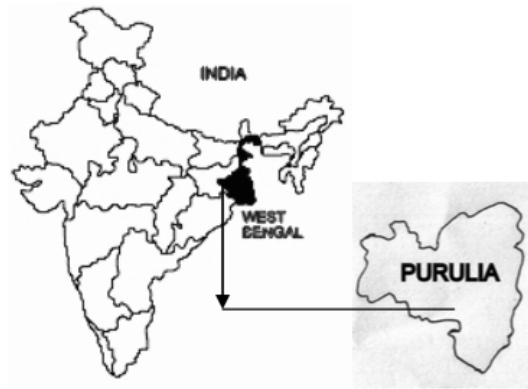


Fig. 1.1: Map showcasing the location of Purulia in India

Dey, A., Gupta, B. & De, J.N. (2012)

As per the (2011) Census figures of the entire district, whereas 18.45% of the 29,30,115 (overall population) falls within the category of Scheduled tribes (ST), arriving at a total of 5,40,652 people, this also amounts to 10.52% of the total population of West Bengal. Within the district, only 1.64% of the scheduled tribes reside in urban areas; the rest (98.36%) thrive in the rural region and can be categorized as ‘primitive tribal’ who rely on non-timber forest products (NTFP) for their survival.¹ The five major tribal communities are Santhal - 60%, Bhumij - 18% Sobor – 7%, Kurmi - Mura (also Munda) – 6%, and Bihor – 1% (Daripa, 2018). Originating from the Proto-Australoid race, the Purulia tribal are dark skinned, having lower foreheads and live as per the situation outlined as Nurkse’s (1953) ‘vicious circle of poverty’ and Nelson’s (1956) ‘low level equilibrium trap’ and (as cited in Daripa, 2018, p. 729). As the lack of rainfall in the region results in very low agricultural produce, the prolonged Maoist insurgency in the region has resulted in the dearth of investments/ industry. Furthermore in Purulia, 19.3% are scheduled castes

¹ Tribes that completely depend on nature for survival and are engaged in hunting, fishing, gathering, etc. They live in villages completely isolated from the modern civilized world (Daripa, 2018).

(SC) and 7.7% are Muslims. This indicates that more than 44% of the population (ST, SC and Muslims) fall within the minority/ marginalized category. Considerable deliberations upon the repercussions and negotiations due to this have thus been ensued in this study. 80.9% are Hindus (Census, 2011). The cultural/ religious ramifications arising out of this demographic and their dynamics has been elaborately described in section 6.2 and 6.4. The languages spoken are Bengali (80.5%), Santhali, Kurmali, Gond, Kheria and Hindi; amongst others (ibid.).

1.7. Limitations and Scope

An ethnosemiotic study as this was bound to have a number of challenges and limitations. It is therefore important to take these into account as one goes through the thesis. The first challenge was the one that had to do with the introvert nature of the indigenous population and their lack of openness when it came to interacting with an outsider. The researcher, being from the city with a different cultural background had to cope with these initial challenges during the fieldwork. Furthermore, challenges such as hostile encounters, unruly audiences and inaccessibility into the interiors also had to be overcome. Transport was also a challenge whenever venturing within the forests, off the highways.

Apart from these, like in most studies employing ethnographic methods, the research may be influenced by who we are as individuals and how we experience the world ourselves. An element of subjectivity. Although the researcher has been conscious of such trends and repeatedly reinvigorated an unbiased researcher's eye, but then, as

Karen O'Reilly (2012) has earlier described, the 'replicability' of ethnographic research can only be based on naïve realist assumptions about a single external reality (O'Reilly, 2012).

But then, despite these challenges, this research involved a direct and sustained contact with human agents who actually corrected the researcher when there is misinterpretation, misunderstanding and misrepresentation – an enhanced applicability is yet ensured. Furthermore consciously devoid of bias, the researcher's iterative-inductive approach oscillating between the research questions and the field data and refining the questions or line of enquiry in light of what was discovered, genuinely ensured consistency, subject to the criterion of fallibility.² The researcher incorporated all the measures prescribed for such ethnographic work to ensure a degree of 'replicability' whilst acknowledging that complete replicability and standardization is unrealistic.

In terms of scope, amongst the diverse universe of folk media forms in India, this study specifically focusses on Purulia Chhau of West Bengal, an indigenous expression unique in terms of a cultural and religious context. Given a dearth of such studies, this research now provides an insight into the relationship between folk media and religion in the form of a representative case (Purulia Chhau), and intends to stimulate/ encourage further such studies, exploring the various avenues and trajectories in regards to other similar folk media forms in the Indian sub-continent.

² Seale (1999) prescribes the criterion of fallibility, that the findings are true and reliable, as long as evidence to the contrary is not found (as cited in O' Reilly, 2012, p. 226).

1.8. Organization of the Thesis

The thesis is organized into eight chapters. In the first chapter, using an anecdote to elucidate and lead into the problem statement (encompassing the focus and rationale), the research questions and objectives of inquiry are outlined. The ethnosemiotic method used to achieve them, has also been described in brief leading to the limitations and scope of the study. The second chapter is an extension of the first chapter and apart from deliberating upon the significance of folk media and their intricate relationship with religion - Purulia Chhau is located within the folk media landscape of India, and described.

In the third chapter, a review of literature has been comprehensively presented. Apart from establishing a theoretical framework that has significantly buoyed this study - the various domains, inter-disciplinary perspectives and overall scholarly works on folk media have also been described. Identifying the divergent progress of relevant literature from a canonical perspective - the various strands, categories and direction of scholarship, have also been presented. Evaluating both western as well as Indian perspectives, the chapter reveals a dearth of studies in the present context, thus further enhancing its significance.

The fourth chapter outlines the methodology of the research. In this chapter, apart from describing the method, population, selection, tools of data collection and process of analysis - the researcher has justified the reasons for adopting a multi-methodology approach such as ethnosemiotics and its efficacy. Furthermore apart from an

introductory methodological review, the demographic listings, timeline and field map have also been provided.

In the fifth, sixth and seventh chapters, the findings in regards to the research objectives are presented. The fifth chapter showcases the findings not just in regards to the origin, development, evolution of Purulia Chhau, but also the audience's interpretations and its influence upon their daily lives. A paradigmatic overview. Furthermore, from a syntagmatic perspective, the effective use of narratives, characters, masks, costumes, iconography, color, kinesics, choreography and music coming together as a composite signification system has also been deconstructed into its elements and analyzed as a performance text, in this chapter. Based on specific case studies, the sixth chapter elaborately reflects upon the social, economic, technological, cultural, religious and political negotiations/ undercurrents that have maneuvered its development over the past decade. Furthering the reflections arrived at in the previous chapters; the critical premise of the relationship between 'Purulia Chhau' and 'religion', has been specifically attended to in the seventh chapter. Taking into account all the catalysts and variables previously described, the role of religion as a common factor/ catalyst in all other maneuverings of Purulia Chhau and its overall significance has been established here. An insight into the larger context of 'folk media- religion' relationship, a comparative case study contrasting another similar masked dance theatre form and its relationship with religion has also been provided.

The conclusion is presented in the eighth chapter. It outlines the overall findings, not just in terms of the evolution Purulia Chhau as a chronicle that reflects the evolution

of life in the region - but also from the perspective its meaning-making role, the mediatization of religion and the intrinsic relationship between folk media and religion as a whole. The various negotiations that emerge due to localized contexts, ensuring that each folk media form is distinct and unique, is also espoused. The reliability and validity of the study are also addressed here. Individually referring to each objective of this study, this chapter is a holistic overview that not just concludes the thesis, but also acts as a pre-cursor for future research in this area.

1.9. Summary

This chapter is an introduction to the thesis and is framed so as to set the context of the entire study. It begins with an anecdote (a night in the forest) derived from one of the researcher's experience where he travelled with a Purulia Chhau troupe to attend their performance at a village located in the interiors of a forest. A Hindu ritualistic rendition by a troupe whose members were mostly Muslims, the anecdote problematizes the situations as per the larger contexts of the thesis and leads to the 'Statement of the Problem', showcased in the next section. Problematizing the issue at hand in terms of folk media, Purulia Chhau and the nature of its association with religion from a localized context, this section is followed by sets of research questions that correspondingly culminate into the objectives of the study. An insight on ethnosemiotics as to why it was the most appropriate method to achieve the objectives was then briefly provided. This was followed by a description of the study location, the limitations and scope of study. The organization of the thesis and the summary of this introductory chapter then followed.

Chapter 2

Locating Purulia Chhau in the Folk Media Landscape of India

2.1. Folk Media and Religion in India

The association of folk media³ with religion is as old as human civilization and their origins can arguably be traced back to the time when primordial humans felt the urge to express their religious emotions through cave paintings (Thomas, 2005). Such communication media and expressions are a repository of indigenous knowledge and culture handed down from one generation to the other through the method of what celebrated historian Walter Ong would call, “primary orality” (2002, p.5). As Paulo Freire in his (1968/2000) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* observed, whatever be their hardships, poor people always keep silent. However, referring to the process as *humanization*, Friere posits that the marginalized sections somehow ensure to utilize their folk/ indigenous expressions to communicate and initiate change. As folk media empowers the indigenous communities to create knowledge together through the process of conscientization and thus rise from a state of silence to a state of activity, these are passed down through generations as indigenous knowledge systems or artifacts of culture (ibid.). Thus, although typically local and culture specific, they occupy a significant space in the social, cultural and religious landscape of societies.

³ “Folk media include visual, verbal, and aural forms accepted by a specific community and used to entertain, inform, or instruct” (Valbuena, 1988, p. 150).

As the advancements and innovations in terms of life skills, experiences, ethics and morality achieved by each evolving generation were consciously crafted into these performance traditions/ systems, the existence of folk media as prosperous conduits emanating the illustrious teachings of primordial predecessors, have thus been preserved. As the relevance and popularity of these folk expressions cannot be underestimated, it is striking to note that they continue to display remarkable resilience, even in this contemporary era of electronic media and digital culture.

Apart from the world-renowned classical expressions that conform to pre-determined treatments, institutionalized standards and philosophical directives, the Indian cultural landscape provides a plethora of folk expressions that have emerged from the daily life of the local communities. Given that majority of the people of India reside in rural areas, it can be argued that the extent and magnitude of these expressions considerably surpass the elite classical forms. Recognized by the ‘Sangeet Natak Academy’, there are eight classical dance forms in India - *Bharat Natyam, Kathak, Kuchipudi, Odissi, Kathakali, Sattriya, Manipuri and Mohiniyattam*. The *Natyashastra*; a philosophical treatise emerging from the ‘*Bharat Muni*’ *sampradaya*⁴ between 2nd century B.C and 1st century A.D., is said to be the guiding framework that has given birth to these expressions (both classical and folk). Contrary to this belief however, there are counter arguments upholding that its tenets (*rasas & abhinayas*; amongst others) already existed within the age-old expressions beforehand (Bhattacharya, 2018; amongst others). The framework was institutionalized much later as the *Natyashastra*, rather than emerging from it.

⁴ A tradition of knowledge emanating from a succession of philosophical masters and disciples.

But then in India, it is widely believed that the ancient art-forms were an ‘undiluted simplification’ (*sadharanikaran*) of the Vedas to facilitate mass consumption. The religious philosophies were thus imbued and composed as performance based expressions using units of emotion (*rasas*) and then disseminated as dance and drama. Consequently, a structured set of primarily non-verbal communication methods (*abhinayas*) to achieve this goal were prescribed. As all the classical dances and dramas strictly follow these tenets till date, subtle traces of these can also be found in many of the folk expressions, accommodated alongside their localized cultural contexts. Thus, the same mythological narratives can be experienced across India, but in diverse ways. Differences in rendition also exist within the same regions and states. Despite having similar motives, although both *Kirtan* and *Baul* are performed in Bengal, they are very different in context. The script of the *Ramayana* itself has various versions. Thus, the character *Raavan* who is considered an antagonist in the mainstream expressions of North India such as *Ramleela*, is respected as sacred in South India (*Ravan Mahotsav*) by the animist *Gonds*; and in Bengal (*Purulia Chhau*) by the *Shobors*. But then emerging from the Vedas, the central narratives of *dharma* such as; the victory of good over evil; respect towards elders; prevalence of truth; amongst others, are found to be the bedrock of these indigenous knowledge systems, nonetheless. This majorly contributes to a sense of unity, through diversity; *dharma* being the unifying focus.

As Pani (2000) elucidates, *dharma* refers to a way of life. Deriving from the Sanskrit verbal root *dhri*, which means to ‘hold’, it is in contrast to the word ‘religion’ which originates from Latin words ‘*re*’ and ‘*ligare*’ which means ‘again’ and ‘fasten’ respectively. Conceptually, whereas *dharma* refers to ‘holding’, religion amounts to

‘binding’. As per Indian thinking, a home ‘holds’ whereas a prison ‘binds’. Represented as one of the primary narratives of *dharma*, the eternal conflict between good and evil that ensues within our mind as a precedent to each of our actions - is represented by the gods (*devtas* and *devis* or *suras*) and the demons (*asuras*) (ibid.). A dictum in morality nonetheless, this ‘good & evil’ dichotomy is manifested through most folk expressions, metaphorically advocating that a person’s inner good must always triumph over his inner evil, in all actions of daily life.

Also represented through paintings, traditions in puppetry, weaving; amongst others, majority of the folk expressions exist in the form of theatre, music and dance. As *Alha* of Madhya Pradesh, *Baul* of West Bengal, *Bhagawati* of Karnataka, and *Bhajan* of Maharashtra are some of the world renowned folk-music forms dedicated to Hinduism, - the *Koodiyattam* of Kerela, *Yakshagana* of Karnataka, *Ankiya Naat* *Bhaona* of Assam, *Tamasha* of Maharashtra, *Therukoothu* of Tamil Nadu, and *Jatra* of Bengal are some of the major traditional folk-theatre forms. Amongst the folk variants, dance forms are most numerous and are spread across all the Indian states. Given the spirituality, natural processes and rhythmic way of tribal life in India, the spirit of the people is significantly manifested through these.

Categories	Forms of Folk Dances
Ritual Dances	<i>Lai Haroba; Popir Cheraw; Tendong-La-Rhum-Phat; Popir-Cheraw; Tirayattam; Ariba-Pala; Lakon-Phuza.</i>
Trance Dances	<i>Bhoota; Jagar; Kachani-Nritya; Kavadi; Bhaktas; Teyyam; Maibi; Teyyam.</i>
Ceremonial Dances	<i>Garba; Pata-da-Kunita; Guravayyalu; Chwanglaizuan; Dhangar; Pookkavadi; Kolam Tullal; Karma; Lahaw; Baredi; Chilori; Hiroria; Tarangmel; Chham-Chhank; Garadi; Rikhampada; Suggikunita; Kokali-kattai; Karadiyattam; Padayani; Poothamkali; Kahadia; Naati; Solakia; Danda-Gair; Thisham; Shad-Ronkla.</i>
Harvest Dances	<i>Bihu; Sarhul; Parab; Saila-Reena; Bhojali; Hazagiri; Dandia-Rasa; Lebang-Bomani; Bhangra; Jhumar; Karthi; Lam-Kut-Lam; Kud; Dhan-Naanch; Ponung; Domrua; Hero-Parab; Batauli-Nach; Nom-Jama; Mage-Parab; Tarpa; Hazong; Bijja-Pandu.</i>
Social Dances	<i>Laddakhi Marriage Dance; Gaja Naanch; Devarattam; Kolkali; Jhoria; Kachchi-Ghori; Nyida-Parik; Chari; Dafla; Dhobi; Kaksar; Hudo; Bhagoriya; Tushimig.</i>
Seasonal Dances	<i>Rayee; Bana; Phagnoi; Churkula; Baa-Parab; Jadur; Maring; Chaiti-Ghoda-Nata; Dandia-Gair; Loor & Phagun; Dalkhai; Hemant; Madai; Bilma; Jitia; Bhadap; Riju Dune; Namagen.</i>
Game and Martial Dances	<i>Thang-Ta; Kalaripatyu; Kolkali; Paricchamuttamkali; Velakali; Oachirakali; Yatrakali; Silabattam; Paika-Nacha & Paikali; Chholia; Teri-Chha; Lezim; Puchi; Kikli; Phugadi & Jimma.</i>
Drum Dances	<i>Pung Cholam; Ghumra; Dollu Kunita; Warli Dhol; Bhil Dhol; Dappu; Tappeta-Gullu; Tappettai; Tappumelakkali; Dhemali.</i>
Boy as Girl Dances	<i>Baccha Nagma; Gotipua; Sattriya; Tharuha; Lounda Naanch.</i>
Recreational Dances	<i>Rouf & Hikar; Jabro; Naati; Tharu; Sayna; Chaufla; Nak-Cheng-Rennie; Kar-gnok-lok; Gnela-Kipa; Bardo Chham; Wilang-Hem; Zemi; Kumpitlung; Dimsa; Solakia; Rasar-Kali; Koya; Gaur; Jhamta; Pinnal-Kolattam/ Goph Guntan / Goph; Morulem; Ghoomar; Kalbelia; Tera-Taali; Gidda; Poikkal Kuthirai; Keelu-Guralu; Songi-Mukhawate; Vaghya-Murali; Singhi-Chham; Puliyattam; Paos-Jagoi; Chhau.</i>

Table 2.1: Forms of Folk Dances in India under different categories

(Pani, 2000, p. 10-131)

Even as the folk dances have been categorized as recreational, seasonal, social, etc., it is striking to note that in many cases, there is an underlying religious context that

emerges as a common thread, somewhat coalescing them. Subtle conduits of religious mediation, the philosophical tenets of religion have been weaved in and intertwined. Also, apart from various other shamanistic and obscure tribal dances, there are various types and sub-categories of most of those mentioned in Table 2.1, varied as per indigenous, sub- cultural contexts.

As folk expressions have evolved over time, there have been several infusions and adaptations as well. Apart from *Lavani* and *Tamasha* of Maharashtra which combine folk song and dance and also *Nautanki* of North India infusing various forms of folk music along with dance and drama, - the *Purulia Chhau* ‘masked dance theatre’ of West Bengal, is one such phenomenal expression. Furthermore, intertextuality through dramatic expressions such as *Ramleela*, based on the *Ramayana* and secondary literature like the *Ramcharitramanas*⁵ have been seminal in propagating the Hindu meta-narratives amongst the masses. Celebrated across India during *Dusseera*; the conclusive ritual of the *Navratri* celebrations - the narrative portrays *Raavan*; the epitome of ‘evil’, as ‘defeated by *Ram*; the epitome of ‘good’.

Also, it is striking to note that the folk expressions of India have majorly emerged corresponding with rituals and festivals, as mediums to amplify the context. Given that historically the most significant issues pertaining to the tribal way of life revolved around religion, fertility, sustenance, procreation and victory in war - the primary objectives of their indigenous expressions somehow seem to oscillate between the philosophical gamut of *dharma* (spirituality), *artha* (wealth/ possessions) and *kama* (sex). Not just the folk, even the classical expressions of India abide by the same.

⁵ Epic poem composed by 16th century poet Tulsidas describing the great deeds of Lord Rama.

As the predominant socio-cultural ethos of India emerging out of the villages and tribal areas can be significantly discovered in its folk expressions, perhaps the reason for their reverence amongst the local communities resides in the fact that these constitute the traditional value systems, handed down by their forefathers. Also referred to as *lok kalah* or *paramparik madhyam*, their long-term deliverance is a reflection of the traditional way of life. Also contributing towards their sustained existence are their inherent spontaneity, simplicity, adaptability and humble setups. Furthermore the inter-personal / face-to-face 'live' format enhances their credibility manifold compared to other media variants. Given that even their previous generations were dedicated towards the same art, the artists are molded when young. Developing multiple skills, they can undertake various roles as per the requirements of the team such as instances when the 'actors' also contribute as 'musicians' as and when required. Talented and versatile; sometimes, even their spontaneous renditions can outdo professional artists from other domains, as has frequently been witnessed on prevalent talent shows such as *Indian Idol*, broadcast on national television.

Although some of the folk media forms have declined, some of these extinct heritage forms; festivals, rituals, fairs and performing arts - can still be viewed through previous recordings and their representation in other texts. In fact, some of these have been comprehensively represented and revived out of their precarious existence through recurrent adaptations in films, advertisements, television and radio (Baruah, 2017). Given the resilient popularity of folk expressions, from its ancient use for moral, religious and socio-political purposes, to them fuelling the present day culture industry, as some of them are frequently adopted by other mediums to strike a chord with the audiences, there is a lot of debate / criticism on the issue. As Prasad (2013)

suggests, mass media may not always have been suitable to convey, express and deliver these traditions as the essence is only achieved at grass-root settings. The ‘folk’ of India is its heritage ‘itself’ he observed (p.2). But then, from a religious context, as mythology made its way into Indian television, ninety two percent of the total television audience in India watched *Mahabharat* and *Ramayan*, thus becoming a ritual in itself. This is an indication of the commercial efficacy of traditional/religious expressions, amongst urban audiences. As folk motifs are often seen in advertisements - brightly colored local costumes, folk based themes, songs, dances, etc. – in contemporary times, rural customs have successfully settled into urban settings (Baruah, 2017).

2.2 The Folk Expressions of Bengal

Historically, the state of Bengal⁶ has always been a cauldron of folk expressions. In Eastern Bengal (presently Bangladesh) as the *Jari*, *Sari* and *Bhatiyali* music genre developed over time, in Western Bengal (earlier referred to as Gour Bangla) musical traditions such as *Bhadu*, *Tusu*, *Jhumur* and *Baul* emerged as a celebration of their indigenous deities. In the southern planes, as *Kirtan*, *Bonbibi*, *Pala gaan*, and *Rai Mangal* gained popularity - *Manashar Gaan*, *Bhawaiya*, and *Murshidi* were representative of the culture in the north. As the *Khon-Mukha* tradition of the Uttar-Dinajpur district encompassing song, dance and theatre, and the *Gambhira* performances of Malda are dedicated to Goddess *Kali*, the *Gajon* festival predominant

⁶ The region is presently referred to as the Indian state of ‘West Bengal’. Whenever approaching perspectives from the standpoint of cultural history and amalgamation in the overall region, the researcher has mentioned it as ‘Bengal’ to encompass the regions of Bangladesh that was earlier within its undivided whole, under the British.

in Bankura, Purulia and Nadia celebrates *Shiva* from an animistic standpoint of penance and folk expressions - consequently emerging as alternative religious traditions parallel to mainstream Hinduism. Thus, the overall folk culture of Bengal is itself diverse as per localized culture and sub-cultural settings. But then, there have been various infusions. Emerging out of such a genesis, '*Chhau*' of Purulia is a composite art representing the everyday life and living of the indigenous people. It combines not just *Jhumur* and *Bhadu* (folk music) with the *Nachni* and *Pata naanch* (folk dances), but also *Paikali* and *Parikhanda* (martial art forms) along with *Natya* and *Jatra* (folk theatre). A munificent conduit bearing a large magnitude of heritage, it has emerged beyond Bengal, as one of the most prominent expressions of India.

Although having common roots with Orissa and Bihar, the folk theatre of Bengal is primarily represented by both *Jatra* and the now predominant, *Purulia Chhau*. As Gargi (1966) had established, whereas *Jatra* has semi-religious political origins tracing back two hundred years, it is believed that *Chhau* has origins dating back to the declining Mughal empire and was performed for the entertainment of the troops. But then, there is a "shroud of uncertainty surrounding the origins of *Purulia Chhau* (*the Bengal based Chhau variant*) altogether" (as cited in Banerjee, 1991, p. 198). Given the conflicting arguments of scholars in this regard, perhaps the composite nature of *Purulia Chhau* encompassing various art forms, which have diverse origins of their own, has contributed to this. A typical 'masked dance theatre' in the region⁷ – as Ashutosh Bhattacharya (1972) aptly terms – it is one such folk media form that is both a popular communication media amongst the local tribal population, as well as a formidable religious space in the tribal regions of the Purulia district of the state. An

⁷ See Awasthi (1979); Banerjee (1991).

in-depth study of *Purulia Chhau* from the perspective of religion therefore cannot but be revealing. And given that the concept of religion itself has undergone creative shifts in media and religion studies in recent times (Campbell, 2007), such a possibility is further bolstered. However, in the context of ‘folk media and religion’, it must be noted that the relationship is not mutually exclusive. The influence of culture, politics, social structure, livelihood; amongst others - are not discrete, but overlapping. Thus, all of these ancillary relationships and tertiary influences were also accentuated in this study, with focus on *Purulia Chhau* as the representative case.

2.3. Purulia Chhau: A Cultural History

Chhau is a prominent folk media form in the *adivasi* areas of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Odisha, bordering each other. Though the origin of the tribal folk-dance form is yet debatable,⁸ and there are significant regional variations between the three forms corresponding to these three states (see Fig. 2.1), the common thread that binds them all are: (i) the preponderance of religious content inspired by Hindu mythological epics and (ii) their popularity and significant role in the communication environment in the region. Traced by some scholars as a martial dance of the *Santhal* and *Kurmi* tribes (Kaul & Pillai, 2005, as cited in Chatterjee, 2019), it was later patronized amongst tribal subjects and farmers in the region by the royal family residing at Kashipur. The contributions of these Panchakot Raj royals (the Singh Deos) of

⁸Though Awasthi (1979) has noted the problem of classification of the three folk forms (Purulia Chhau, Saraikella Chhau & Mayurbhanj Chhau) due to infusion and uncertain origin, there is a significant difference between Purulia Chhau and the other Chhau forms. Also see (Banerjee, 1991).

Purulia as well as the Zamindars of neighboring Burdwan (Chand Mahtabs) have majorly shaped the development of Purulia Chhau. Thus, as the tribal dance form was institutionalized, Hinduism was introduced to the tribal (*Santhals, Mura, Bhumij, Kurmi*; amongst others). Bringing in *sutradhars* (tribal carpenters and mask makers) from different parts of the princely state to reside at a central village called ‘Charida’ (presently in the Bagmundi block), the masks portraying the Hindu gods Shiva, Vishnu, Ganesha, Durga; amongst others, were thereby constructed and adopted. Thematically, even as one can observe the liberal employment of explicit Hindu mythological narratives in the dance theatre, the conspicuous presence of animal based movements and nature based phenomenon, is reminiscent of its deep rooted connection with their original animistic way of life.

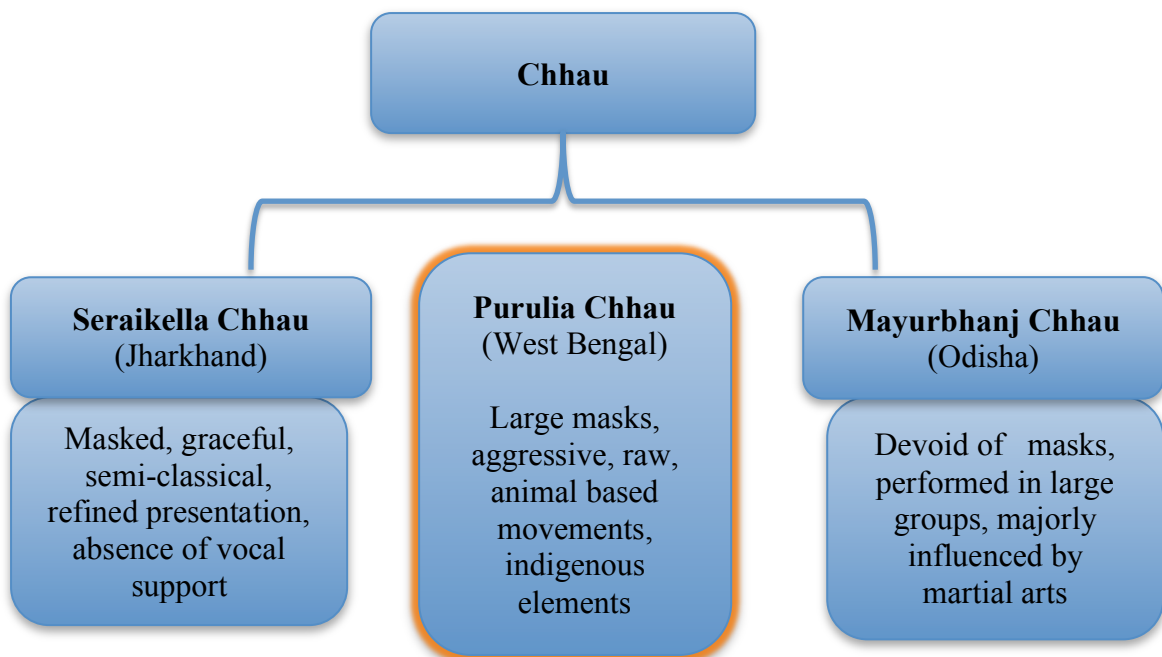


Fig. 2.1: Diagram showing the regional variations of ‘Chhau’ in three states

(Awasthi, 1979; Vatsyayan, 2016, p. 65-92; amongst others)

Ashutosh Bhattacharya's discovery of Purulia Chhau was recent to celebrated historian John Arden's visit to India and there were various unanswered questions that Arden stressed upon in regards to its origins and objectives. As Arden (1971) upheld, Bhattacharya discovered it in a very poor state. Found as a neglected remnant of what once flourished, Bhattacharya is credited as having revived Purulia Chhau by bringing together the best troupes and having them perform before specially invited audiences from all over the world. He also organized annual competitions and performances in urban settings, thus providing ample incentives for the peasant performers who had never traversed beyond their villages (Arden, 1971). In his (1972) seminal work *Chhau Dance of Purulia*, Bhattacharya established Purulia Chhau as a 'tribal war dance' (p. 46) to encompass its masculinity.



Image. 2.1: Photograph of a Purulia Chhau performance in Balarampur

(taleof2backpackers.com, 2019)

As can be seen in Image 2.1, amongst the three forms of Chhau in eastern India, Purulia Chhau stands out from the rest in its use of large evocative masks and elaborate costumes (Tsubaki & Richmond, 1990). In fact, the liberal use of masks of gods and demons; conversations between religious and anthropomorphic characters in the narrative; extensive use of imaginative colors; mythological overtones; extravagant imagery – all add to the preponderance of the religious and sacred nature of the folk dance theatre. Also, the royal patronage further had the effect of incorporating religious narratives from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* as well as other Hindu mythology based folktales into the raw tribal form and sketch-based scripts of Chhau (Chatterjee, 2019).⁹ Amongst the considerable number of religious narratives adopted in Purulia Chhau, as Chatterjee (2019) mentions, “the most common script is the *Mahisasur Mardini* showcasing Goddess Durga, Lord Shiva, and their children Ganesha, Kartik, Lakshmi and Saraswati; vanquishing the demon king Mahisasur” (p. 225). Similarly, there are various other Hindu mythology based scripts such as *Raja Harishchandra*, *Parashuramer Matrihatya ar Punarjiban*, *Arjuner Lakhyabhed*, *Draupadir Vastraharan*, *Sabitri*, *Eklabyer Gurudakshina*, *Shakuntala ar Dushyanta* and *Kaliya Daman* (ibid).

Although Purulia Chhau, as we have seen, played a key role in popularizing Hinduism among the tribal animists, it may however be simplistic to assume that the folk media form merely echoes the mainstream Hindu philosophy. In contrast, even as characters are drawn from Hindu mythological epics, the tribal have their own local versions of the characters and the narratives represent the life and world-view of the natives. These are often divergent from the mainstream religious meta-narratives. Apart from

⁹The scripts are constructed in the form of sketched storyboards and also sometimes mapped on the mud floor of the practice arear in the villages.

characters representing icons of animistic reverence, heroes, forefathers and saints, there are also, infused manifestations of local / regional conflicts, resolved by mainstream Gods. Whereas the scripts emerging from the meta-narratives of institutional Hinduism are referred to by locals as *pouranic palas*, these divergent scripts that are deviant from the mainstream narratives but yet religious, are also considered in the same category. The Vedas/ Puranas as per the people's belief and understanding, may thus also accommodate local beliefs, rather than just mainstream Hindu discourse. Also, it is interesting to note that in contemporary times, one finds the presence of a considerable number of non-religious scripts and generalized social narratives (*samajik palas*) that have emerged. Be it commercial narratives or religious conventional ones, the underlying message being communicated, has itself diversified (see Figure 2.2).

As Agniswaran (nd) observes, the vast repository of mythological characters encompassing gods and demons have provided opportunities to the different Chhau troupes to innovate and present an expression that is unique to their unit. Thus, productions based on contemporary nationalist issues like *Rakte Ranga Kargil* (on Kargil war); social issues like *Betar Bihai Bhatbhati Libo* (on dowry); political issues such as *Santhal Bidroho* (on the Santhal rebellion) and most recently; pandemics like *Coronasur Bodh* (about defeating the corona virus)¹⁰, are some of the modern innovations. Apart from the need for survivability in the present competitive market characterized by an increasing number of troupes, various other influences may have contributed to such innovations. It was therefore very meaningful to also map the innovations and negotiations that the art-form has traversed so far and the reasons

¹⁰A troupe from Balarampur, Purulia, depicted the coronavirus as a demon that is slayed by Goddess Durga. Masks resembling the corona virus were constructed and used. The performance took place during the lockdown period without local audiences and was uploaded on Youtube.

thereof. Studying the social, cultural and political influences from the perspective of tourism, urban culture and the emerging culture industry - a lure towards commercialization has considerably influenced some of the artists. Given the people's disenchantment from religion and prolonged poverty - these negotiations have also been revealed in this study.

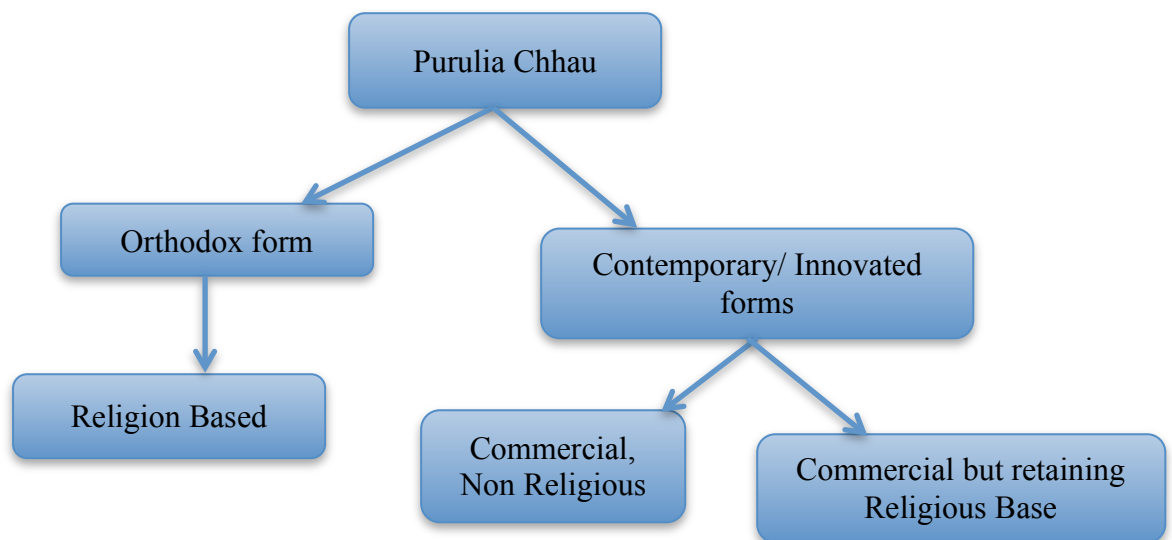


Fig. 2.2: Showing the typologies and shifts in Purulia Chhau in contemporary times
(Based on a preliminary field study by the researcher)

As shown in Figure 2.2, amongst the large number of Chhau troupes spread around the twenty block divisions in Purulia district – Bagmundi, Barabajar, Balarampur; amongst others – some have retained tradition preserving the religious narratives, whereas others have embraced innovations to remain relevant in contemporary times. Furthermore, amongst the troupes who have incorporated major innovations, some have retained an infused religious base whilst some have completely moved away

from it. As an initial formative study¹¹ by the researcher reveals, iconic Chhau artist and Padmashri recipient Gambhir Singh Mura's troupe (in Charida village of Bagmundi) which is presently lead by his sons Ganesh, Kartik and Parashuram, have retained the orthodox religion based format. On the other hand, President's award winner Giasuddin Ansari and his troupe from Barabajar have adopted innovations in the scripts, musical instruments and overall presentation, keeping intact a religious base unlike some troupes from Jhalda -1 and 2.

While even a casual observation of Chhau will convey that it is an overtly religious text, what is less obvious is how the local religious context is represented and how the composite¹² structure of such a communication format plays out. It was thus interesting to inquire into how masks, narratives, characters, iconography, kinesics, color, props, costumes, and music, all contribute to such a powerful religious communication conduit; individually and collectively, as signs that depict meaning. A sign system conceived in the local indigenous context, there was also an urgent need to identify as to how these aspects collaboratively contribute to religious meaning making. Thus, an ethno-semiotic study of Purulia Chhau which brings together two consolidated traditions of research by combining ethnographic methods with semiotics, has significantly addressed all the explicit and implicit issues, that were hereby earlier problematized.

¹¹ The researcher had visited Purulia in the June 2017 to construct a music video engaging the Purulia Chhau artists. Having spent two weeks in Palma, a village in the Barabazar sub-division, the researcher interacted with various Chhau artists. A second visit to Purulia in January 2020 was specific to this research and the interactions with the government officials, local NGO workers, Chhau troupe leaders, community elders and other key respondents in this regard, established a basic framework of the problem at hand and an understanding of the population to be studied.

¹² Something that is composed of several parts or elements that collaborately achieve the desired action.

2.4. Reflections

Although the mesmerizing folk media forms of India may appear as unique islands when perceived by western scholars, these vibrant expressions are significantly united by *dharma*; a way of life as prescribed by the Vedas. It is arduous to comprehend their complex connotations reflective of local culture and identity as the various negotiations are intertwined with every movement, every mask, every tune and every cheer. Many of these raw, indigenous monuments of heritage are however on decline. Given the obdurate commercialization, adulteration and overall industrialization of these resources, the originality and devotion that once exuberated from the expressions could eventually be obscured. An in-depth inquiry to gauge the antiquity of such a priceless depleting resource – the study of Purulia Chhau was perhaps vital for the resource itself, whilst exploring the larger media-religion relationship.

In this present study, the researcher has not just re-affirmed/ contradicted various viewpoints established by previous scholars, but also established several new assessments. Assigning separate sections for each sub-category, the findings in regards to each variable such as the masks, characters, etc., were separately presented from a syntagmatic as well as paradigmatic perspective simplified through qualitative graphs, charts and tables to indicate the trends and contributions. As has been described in the forthcoming chapters, from listing out multifarious negotiations, to identifying the trajectory of its evolution – from unearthing the underlying meanings within its composite structure, to appraising the sentiments of the devoted tribals; this research is a journey of discovery that demonstrates the immense cultural wealth which adorns the rural heartland of India.

2.5. Summary

In this chapter, apart from unfolding the significance of folk media as communication conduits and how they frequently serve a meaning-making role in the context of religion, the selection of Purulia Chhau as a representative case, especially in the context of India, was justified. This chapter not only set the context of the thesis in the broader context of folk media forms, it also acts as a bridge/ prelude to the content that follows. The chapter is an extension of the introductory chapter and apart from expounding the significance of folk media forms and their intricate relationship with religion – the infusions between folk expressions, leading to contemporary renditions such as the emergence of masked dance theatre forms, were highlighted. Thus, Purulia Chhau was located within the folk media landscape of India, and familiarized to the readers.

Chapter 3

Folk Media and Religion: A Review of Literature

3.1. Introduction

To identify a concrete framework of knowledge that can contribute to the present study, this chapter presents the diverse inter-disciplinaries, and academic strands. But then guided by the underlying context of this research, despite focusing on the most recent scholarly works - the contributions of eminent personalities across timelines and the development of relevant study areas have also been acknowledged. As the media variant in question has emerged from indigenous practices - concepts of religion, culture and society are also consistently intertwined. To understand the negotiations between these key contributors that have shaped the folk expression, a holistic approach towards the scholarship in this regard has been adopted and presented here.

James Carey's (1989/2009) 'ritual view' of communication' significantly widened the scope for communication studies by incorporating various cultural aspects within its sphere. Defining 'ritual' in terms of sharing, participating, association and fellowship, he broadened the term with various connotations. Projecting 'communication' as the construction of a symbolic reality that represents, maintains, adapts and shares the beliefs of a society in time, he acknowledged 'rituals' as processes that enable and enact social transformation. Resonating with Durkheim (1912/1995), as aspects such as commonness, communion and community were acknowledged by Carey to

correspond with religion, the concept of shared beliefs and ceremony were emphasized as fundamental (pp. 11-28). As communication scholars such as Carey, Carolyn Marvin, Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz have consistently applied the theory of 'magic' and 'religion' to mass communication, this research area has received further clarity due to the scholarly works of Eric Rothenbuhler (Osorio, 2005). Asserting the ritual view of communication from a functional perspective encompassing the anthropology of magic and religion, Rothenbuhler, (1998) significantly included concepts such as ritual, myth, liminality and the rites of passage within this perspective (as cited by Osorio, 2005, p. 39).

3.1.1. Demystifying Religion

As Rojek (2007) affirms, "anthropological studies of comparative religion and shamanism demonstrate that all cultures possess rites, myths, divine forms, sacred/venerated objects, symbols, consecrated men and sacred places." (as cited in Stout, 2012, p. 3). Influenced by Durkheim's (1912/1995) *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* that establishes 'collective consciousness' as the shared way of understanding the world, scholars have significantly adopted notions of communion, congregation, values, morals and beliefs, from a functionalist perspective. As Couldry's (2003) effort to segregate them as post Durkheimian and neo Durkheimian (as cited in Das, 2021, p. 34) gained significant momentum, Durkheim's concepts of - religion as a social phenomenon - emotional security attained through social life - collective conscience - value consensus; amongst others, were considerably deliberated upon further by scholars studying diverse media variants (Lynch, 2012;

Rothenbuhler, 2005; Lukes, 1975; Bellah, 1968; amongst others). As Lynch's (2012) *The Sacred in the Modern World* posited from a cultural and sociological standpoint - in contemporary times of online digital media, Hepp and Couldry's (2017) *The Mediated Construction of Reality* significantly established the role of the media in contributing towards the social construct, from the context of media-religion studies; a media-centric re-valuation of Berger & Luckmann's (1966) classic, *The Social Construction of Reality*.

Stout (2012) establishes religion as a broad analytical concept (numinous) amongst media researchers, rather than in terms of validating theology and advocating spiritual world-views. Analyzing media in regards to their rituals, beliefs, community, and feeling dimensions has brought it forth as a central research area. On the other hand, Campbell (2010) observes the study of religion in various ways – 'traditional religion', 'lived religion', 'official religion' and 'implicit religion'. Amongst these, as 'traditional religion' is based on the study of symbols, practices, traditions and meanings, Hall (1997) focuses on 'lived religion' evaluating how people perform their religious beliefs on a daily basis and how traditional religious rituals and their meanings are interpreted and lived out in everyday life (as cited in Campbell, 2010, p. 9). As 'official religion' is based on a specific community that is bound by a recognized structure or institutional hierarchy, 'implicit religion' refers to secular, daily religious practices (Campbell. 2010). As each of these perspectives have their implications not only on the methodological approach but also upon the way a polysemic term such as religion is defined and understood, Stout (2012) observes that the separate theological and academic contexts of the term 'religion', ensures that its meaning varies.

Amidst the various interpretations - adhering to the Campbell's (2010) perspective of 'traditional religion', the present study is based on Clifford Geertz (1985) definition of religion as "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, long lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (as cited in Campbell, 2010, p. 8).

Given that the present study focuses on a folk media form (Purulia Chhau) and its relationship with religion as a conduit of mediation, in this chapter, apart from examining major academic areas in which studies on folk media can be typically located (Folklore, Media Anthropology, Communication Studies and Semiotics), the researcher has focused on the emergence, growth, strands and categorical diversifications of these domains from a canonical perspective. Furthermore, also drawing inspiration in terms of the theoretical and methodological perspectives of these studies, this literature review has majorly examined – 'Media and Religion', as an integral area of scholarship contributing towards the context and framework of this present study.

3.2. Media and Religion: A Historical Overview

Over the decades, the literature on media-religion has emerged as a significant contributor towards understanding the underlying relationship and has diversified corresponding to emerging trends and technologies. Transcending the media variants as they emerged and developed, as Baumgartner's (1931) study on Catholic

journalism and Millers' (1935) study exploring the role of radio as a conduit for religion set a precedent in this domain, during the 1940s and 50s, scholars widened their perspective of inquiry. As Parker (1944) and White (1947) explored into the relationship from the perspective of radio, Powers (1945) and Boyd (1958) inquired upon it from the perspective of the print medium. As television started emerging as a popular medium, Parker; Barry and Smythe's (1955) study was a pioneer in regards to this medium and focused upon both television and radio audiences. During the 1960s and 70s, apart from various studies accommodating diverse media variants such as books (Baker, 1961; Throp, 1961; Moyer, 1963; Shea, 1968; amongst others), and music (Elinwood, 1961; Sizer, 1978) - studies on radio (Johnstone, 1971; Orbison, 1977; amongst others), print (Real, 1975; Holland, 1976; Hall, 1979; amongst others), television (Ellens, 1970; Gerbner, 1977; amongst others), films (Forshey, 1978; amongst others) and advertising (Paulson, 1977) emerged manifold. Studies from a broader ambit such as religious-broadcast communication (Sellers, 1961; Martin, 1964; White, 1969; amongst others) and mass media (Porter, 1974; amongst others) were also undertaken with focus upon their relationship and pluralistic contribution towards religion.

During this era, Marshall McLuhan's (1964) *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* revolutionized the consequent scholarly approach in media-religion as well as various domains. Establishing the theoretical approach of 'Technological Determinism', his concept of the world as a global village and the significance of the medium in shaping the message received major acclaim not just amongst scholars, but also amongst general audiences all over the world. Given the advancement of technology, the emergence of the new media of the time was in the form of

‘electronic media’ encompassing television and radio. Studies from this perspective (Lacey, 1978; Armstrong, 1979; Sholes, 1979; amongst others) based on the utilisation of the new technology for facilitating the objectives of the church thus gained considerable momentum.

But then, although the significance of media as a conduit for religious influence was majorly established based on the contributions of new media variants such as television and radio - folk media forms which existed much prior to these, were totally neglected. Compared to India and Africa, perhaps the dearth and unavailability of folk media forms in western countries and the indigenous/ animistic narratives not perceived as religion (eg. Christian faith) driven, emerged as major deterrents to generating academic interest. Furthermore, not considered as a mass dissemination tool in the western context, folk media was left out of the pluralistic identity of the media itself altogether.

The 1980s saw a considerable rise in interest amongst media-religion scholars, specifically towards television. As it emerged as a household commodity, it assumed the role of a major conduit for the dissemination of religious philosophy and occupied a sacred space in the homes of the people. Given the wave of televangelism that swept the western world during this era, the rising popularity of television ensured various studies. Whilst some established the role of television as a spiritual tool (Goethals, 1980; Diamond, 1981; amongst others), others majorly established the mediating role of television, as essential to religion (Horsefield 1984; Fore, 1987; amongst others). Apart from Frankl’s (1987) *Televangelism: The Marketing of Popular Religion* that was unique in its approach towards observing the emerging traits of popular culture

within religious realms as a result of the mediation of television, studies critical of the role of television in regards to religion also emerged (Schultze, 1988; Starker, 1989; amongst others).

Despite the major focus upon the television media variant, research from the perspective of radio (McChesney, 1987; Schultz, 1988; amongst others), books (Reynolds, 1981; Gilmore, 1989; amongst others), print media (Buddenbaum, 1986; amongst others), advertising (Montgomery, 1985; Jhally, 1989; amongst others) and even telecommunications (Hoover, 1982) were also carried out. Thus, even in this decade, all the pluralistic components of the media were acknowledged, apart from its folk alternative. Amidst this approach though, Weimann's (1985) *Mass-mediated Occultism: The Role of the Media in the Occult Revival* was distinct as for the first time the ambit of religion was widened beyond Christianity; the focus of all studies till then.

It was only in the 90s that media-religion studies experienced the emergence of culture as a major participant within the negotiations. Most of the studies in this phase were based on the cultural aspects that were under influence, or sometimes were key in the influencing process. As the works of Butler (1990), Fore (1990) and Goethals (1990) majorly focused on the role of the media in meaning making, the works of Stewart M Hoover (1995; 1997; amongst others) majorly established this mediation based strand of study. As Clark's (1996) conference paper *Media, meaning, and the lifecourse: Religious imagery in the music video "One of US" and its interpretation by Gen Xers* was a unique study of mediation through music videos as a media variant, Hoover and Lundby's (1997) edited book *Rethinking Media, Religion and*

Culture was a major work that established ‘mediation of meaning’ as a significant theoretical approach. Further enhancing the scope, the works of Lundby (1997) and Arthur (1997) in terms of analyzing media, religion and culture from an audience based standpoint, significantly contributed towards shaping this area of study.

Post the 2000s there was a major shift in the media variant that was in focus and the new media of this era emerged in the form of the internet and its digital platforms. As studies on internet based media garnered rising interest amongst scholars, (Lovheim, 2004; Lee, 2009; Hepp, 2020; amongst others), Campbell’s (2013) edited book *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practices in New Media Worlds* and (2010) *When Religion meets New Media*, established a new direction in media-religion studies. This led to the emergence of the theoretical approach – ‘Social Shaping of Technology’. As other canonical areas such as ‘Mediation of Sacred Forms’ (Lynch, 2012; Lundby, 2006) and ‘Mediatization of Religion’ (Hjavar, 2013; Lundby, 2009; amongst others) also emerged, these set the trend for the research that followed over the next decade. Concomitantly, the mediation based theoretical perspective continued to further flourish through various scholarly works (Hoover, 2002, 2005, 2006; Schultze, 2001; Horsefield, 2004; Hoover & Park, 2005; amongst others). Park and his (2005) scholarship in regards to ‘Korean shamanism’ and (2007) ‘religious symbolism’ further widened the ambit of mediation in regards to the religion in question. Thus over the decades, media-religion as an academic domain diversified into various theoretical approaches each of which have flourished due to the illustrious contributions of modern scholars.

3.2.1. Strands in Media-Religion Studies

Knut Lundby (2013) observes, within this larger domain encompassing various media forms, there are five major theoretical approaches: ‘Technological Determinism’; emphasized by Marshall McLuhan based on the definition of religion by G.K. Chesterton, – ‘Mediatization of Religion’; emphasized by Stig Hjavard, based on the definition by P. Boyer, - ‘Mediation of Meaning’; emphasized by S.M. Hoover, based on the definition by C. Geertz, - ‘Mediation of Sacred Forms’; emphasized by G. Lynch, based on the definition of E. Durkheim, - and the ‘Social Shaping of Society’; emphasized by H. Campbell, based on the definition by C. Geertz. (See Table 3.1).

Approach to the Study of Media and Religion	Selected Author	Definition of Religion	Methodology
Technological Determinism	M. McLuhan	G.K. Chesterton	Philosophical
Mediatization of Religion	S. Hjavard	P. Boyer	Survey
Mediation of Meaning	S.M. Hoover	C. Geertz	Ethnography
Mediation of Sacred Forms	G. Lynch	E. Durkheim	Cultural Sociology
Social Shaping of Technology	H. Campbell	C. Geertz	Case Studies

Fig. 3.1: Showcasing the various approaches to Media and Religion Studies

(Lundby, 2013)

In the first approach; ‘technological determinism’, the media is understood as an extension of the religious senses within the realm of religion in its philosophical sense. Also known as ‘medium theory’, it elucidates upon the influence of technologies in terms of the resultant value systems generated and also the content that is delivered (ibid.). But then from a critical perspective, Daniel Chandler in his (1995) *Technological or Media Determinism* outlines his disagreements in this regard by referring to this approach as reductionist, mechanistic and reifying. Furthermore, McLuhan’s standpoint of technological autonomy and imperative of inherent use has also been criticized by Chandler. As per the second approach, ‘mediatization of religion’ reveals how the media contributes as a major source of religious ideas, and transforms the religious practices as per its mediative identity. Religion is understood here in a canonical sense and elaborates upon how it is being subsumed under the logic of the media. A primary source of religious ideas, media as conduits of communication mold religious imaginations, thus providing a sense of community as well as moral and spiritual guidance, especially in media saturated societies (Hjavar, 2008, as cited in Lundby, 2013, p. 229).

The third approach; ‘mediation of meaning’ focuses on the study of media and religion from a cultural perspective. For Stewart Hoover who truly represents this strand, religious meaning is a particular kind of cultural meaning. It is a function of the cultural context and therefore the focus needs to be on the reception of the contents and their users’ meaning making of these – what and how they do it and potentially make use of it in their social and cultural life (Lundby, 2013). Naturally ethnographic methods are employed here to get insights into the personal experiences of the users. Considering cultural context to be the key aspect, he elaborates that

mediation takes place within the larger matrix of communication, culture and hegemony, thus resonating with Greetz's (1985) definition of religion (as cited in Campbell, 2010, p. 8).

The fourth approach; G Lynch's 'mediation of sacred forms' in media-religion studies relate to the Durkhemian (1912/1995) understanding of religion as a social phenomenon, "an unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things [...] which unite into one single moral community [...] all those who adhere to them" (as cited in Lundby, 2013, p. 44). Though the distinction between the sacred and the profane is strictly maintained in the original Durkhemian sense, scholars have argued that there is an overlapping between the two in contemporary mediatized societies. The last strand in the broad domain of media-religion studies that Lundy (2013) alludes to – 'social shaping of technology' (SST); approaches the field by asking how religion shapes media, rather than the other way around. As this role reversal dominates the present discourse on media-religion, the works of Campbell (2007, 2010, 2013; amongst others) on necessity based innovations to technology have majorly brought forth new concepts touching upon online applications, religious social networking and the emergence of neo-religious movements, in the digital domain.

Hoover (2005) describes that anthropological perspectives within media-religion studies to have spread out over different media variants, these have inspired various inter-disciplinary inquiries (Ginsberg, Abu-Lughod & Larkin, 2002; Appadurai, 1996; amongst others). But then, even though studies on the relationship between religion and the global media system have major contributions (De vries, 2001: amongst

others), unfortunately 'folk media' amongst the various media variants, have escaped the focus of such inquiries. Thus, these theoretical approaches, it must be noted, predominantly applies to technological mediation of religion, i.e., to the electronic and digital media forms, rather than to folk media. But then, one can majorly benefit from the mainstream discourse on media-religion, with reference to the meaning of religion, the mediation capacity of the media variant in question, its influence, cultural context and negotiations. As such inter-media based theoretical approaches have been adopted in various contexts over time, their efficacy is evident from some of Hoover's works on new forms of internet based digital communication; many of which were majorly influenced by James Carey's cultural approach towards television and press (Lundby, 2013). Thus, from a similar standpoint upholding the perspective of 'traditional religion', the definition of religion by Greetz has been fruitfully employed by the researcher to understand how religion plays out in a non-technological environment such as Purulia Chhau and how such a traditional communication platform is interpreted by the audiences. Apart from implementing certain aspects of the 'mediation of sacred forms' approach; emphasized by Gordon Lynch (2012) and the 'mediatization of religion' approach; emphasized by Stig Hjavard (2013) - the scholarly approach of S. M. Hoover (2005) which looks upon media as a conduit for the 'mediation on the meaning' has been majorly adopted.

Although Stig Hjavard is credited with popularizing the discourse on mediatization, Hoover (2009, as cited in Lundby, 2013) observes that the complexities of the mediating practices in religious cultures have lead to a metamorphosis of the nature of religion and spirituality itself; mediatization as an outcome of the mediation. As Hjavard (2013) establishes that the influence of media exists in its changing

relationship with other socio-cultural spheres, “the boundaries between what is ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ are constantly changing” (p.2). It is observed by the researcher that although a case of ritualistic folk media based communication, it is evident from the modern innovations and commercial initiatives within Purulia Chhau, that the negotiations between the ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ have various implications both positive and negative. Although constantly overlapping, this has brought forth the peripheral narratives of Hinduism to the forefront in the form of ‘banal religion’¹³. These are in the form of narratives that majorly allude to the local cultural setting and although peripheral compared to the meta-narratives, they effectively compliment the localized context in regards to religious sentiments. But then, although Hjarvard (2013) lays stress upon secularization of religion due to mediatization, his views in this regard may be limited to the European context taken into account and may not apply to countries in Asia and Africa. Stolow (2005) affirms this and not only questions secularization, but also establishes that media plays a major role in strengthening religion as an institution. So, whilst selectively disconnecting from his secularization perspective, the present study has adopted Hjarvard’s concepts of overlapping boundaries in regards to the sacred and profane, and the emergence of a banal form of Hinduism adopting an indigenous context.

3.3. Research on Folk Media

Although neglected within the illustrious sphere of media-religion, - ‘Folk Media’ has been a vibrant field of study for decades. As Ranganath (1981) described folk media

¹³ Peripheral religious concepts that are not institutionalized.

as living expressions representative of the lifestyle and culture of people, evolved through the years - Wang and Dissanayake (1984) defined it as “a communication system embedded in the culture which existed much before the arrival of mass media, and which still exists as a vital mode of communication in many parts of the world presenting a certain degree of continuity, despite changes” (p. 22). Given the unique trajectories of these expressions in regards to their regional influence based evolution, the scope for research in this regard has invoked global interests. But then due to cross-cultural limitations, the perspectives of western scholars in comparison to their regional counterparts are strikingly different. Furthermore, in pursuit of problematizing varied contexts, research on folk media has diversified across various domains and inter-disciplinary fields.

As ‘Folklorists’ have been studying the history, origin and development of folk media (Gabbert, 2018; Korom, 2017; Banerjee, 1991; Handoo, 1987; Awasthi, 1979; Dorson, 1976; amongst others), major studies emerged within the domain of ‘Media Anthropology’ with focus on their inter-cultural infusions/ innovations (Weatherford, 1990; Mushengyezi, 2003; Vatsyayan, 2016; Wang & Dissanayake, 1984; Bharucha, 1984; amongst others). Furthermore, as inquiries were initiated within ‘Communication Studies’ in regards to their employability in social development (Baruah, 2017; Das, 2013; Prasad, 2013; Sandgren, 2010; amongst others), there has been major contributions within the domain of ‘Semiotics’ in terms of understanding their role as social, cultural, political and religious significancation systems (Wilson, 2019; Pollock, 1995; Bapat, 1994; Yankah, 1985; Langlois, 1985; Bogatyrev, 1971; Bauman, 1968; Levi-Strauss, 1963; Barthes, 1968; amongst others) (See Fig. 2.2).

Amongst these, there have also been considerable inter-domain derivations as has been explained in the sub-sections.

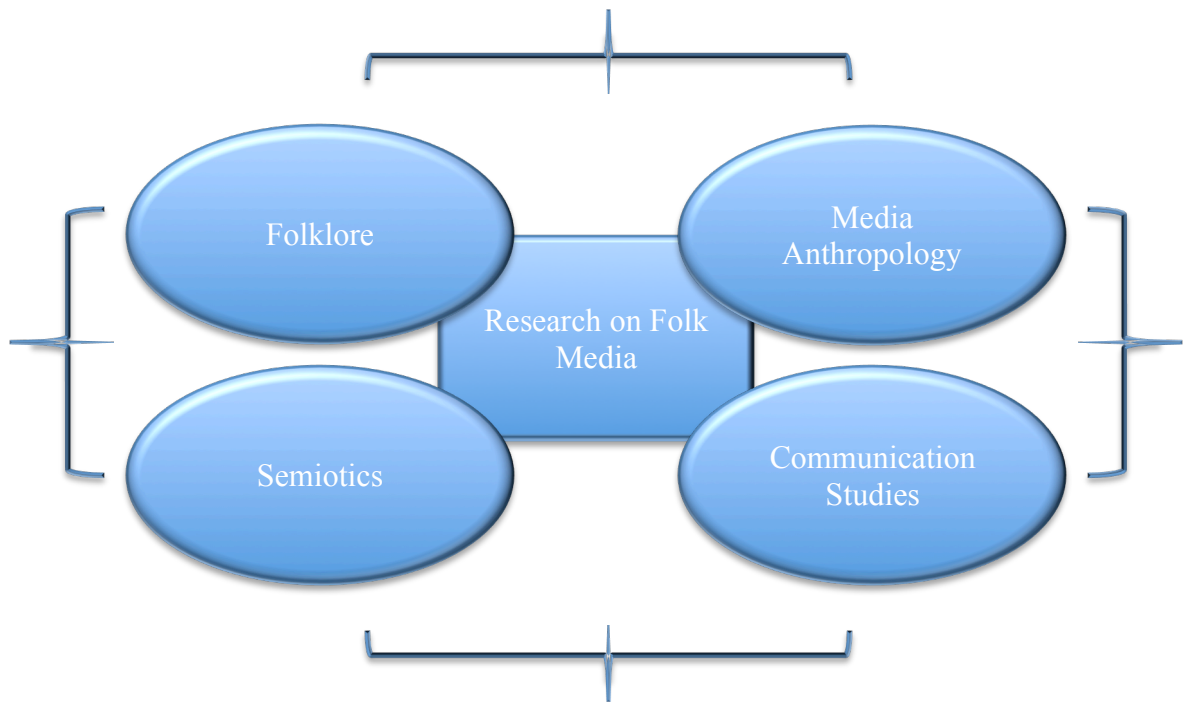


Fig. 3.2: Identifying the areas in which research on folk media can be located.

(Based on the literature review by the researcher)

3.3.1. Folklore: Scholarly Works and Inter-disciplinary Derivations

Studies on folk media can be largely found within the domain of 'Folklore'. Dorson (1976) groups 'Folklore' and 'Folklife' into four categories - oral literature, material culture, social folk customs and performing folk arts (pp. 2-5). A term suggested in 1846 by John William Thoms (Winick, 1914) to encapsulate the studies carried out under 'Popular Antiques' and 'Popular Literature', Handoo (1987) describes

‘Folklore’ as a generic term which designates customs, beliefs, traditions, tales, magical practices, proverbs and songs. As Stuart Blackburn and AK Ramanujan’s (1986) edited volume *Another Harmony: New Essays on the Folklore of India* introduced new performative dimensions to oral traditions, it revived the trend advocating the ethnography of communication and fieldwork in capturing the multifarious contexts in which texts are generated and performed (Korom, 2017). Inspired by the early ethnographic inquiries (Brown, 1906, Mallinowsky, 1922; amongst others), scholars from diverse with interests have been attending to folklore as a field of inquiry. Often their methodologies have been different depending on the traditions they come from.

Kelly (1992) observes that any cultural studies approach should insist upon terms such as ‘folk’, ‘traditional’ and ‘authentic’, even if they have been mass mediated in some other context. These are socially constructed categories that ensure the reproduction of race, class and gender hierarchies. The dynamic process by which culture is constructed involves mutually ‘constitutive’ and ‘constituting’ relationships between the ‘folk’ and the ‘modern’ (p. 1402). But then, as majority of the studies are from a western perspective, the term ‘folk’ has majorly emerged out of studies in the European context and refer to their pre-industrial existences. The contexts of the Africans, Latin Americans, Appalachians, Asians and Indians have not been adequately accommodated (ibid.).

As studies on the representation of folklore in films (Hearne, 2005; amongst others), indigenous art (Leuthold, 1998; Masayeswa, 2001; amongst others) and photographs (Mechling, 2004; amongst others) emerged, the scope of folklore as a domain further

diversified. Henkes & Johnson's (2002) *Silences across disciplines: Folklore studies, Cultural Studies and History* majorly outlines the interdisciplinary perspective of folklore studies and its isolation in certain parts of the world due to the dominance of other similar domains. But then the differences in the organization of cultural disciplines across the world and their trans-disciplinarity has helped create patterns of exchange, competition and silence (p. 129). Thus, although certain aspects of cultural studies and folklore studies overlap, there is genuine scope for complimentary scholarship.

Emphasizing the importance of globalization in terms of the history and future of the discipline of folklore and its focus upon the relationships of cultural production, diaspora, ethnicity and identity - amongst other works, Kimberly J Lau's (1999) *Folklore and Theories of Globalization* majorly outlines how studies upon the 'world' have progressed from this perspective. In fact, she has considerably elaborated on how these studies have been constructed, problematized and theorized interweaving perspectives of anthropology (Appadurai, 1996; Hannerz, 1996; amongst others), sociology (Wallerstein, 1974; Pieterse, 1995; Robertson, 1995; amongst others) and cultural studies (Hall, 1991; Freidman, 1990, 1995; amongst others) (p. 55). As Lau (1999) observes, Appadurai's (1996) theory of globalization is based on the idea of 'rupture' effectuated by the joint processes of mass media and migration and their relationship to "the work of the imagination". Although from an electronic media perspective, he acknowledges 'mass mediation' to be a major factor for the rupture and identifies the way it motivates imagination, on individual levels. But then, Appadurai's sense of 'imagination' in this regard, significantly derives from Benedict Anderson's (1983) philosophical approach in *Imagined Communities*, cutting across

focus and domain. Thus from an academic perspective, it is evident that inter-disciplinary derivations have consistently contributed towards the efficacy of social sciences at various levels. Also applicable to studies on ethnic minorities, during the course of the present study, the researcher has consistently observed instances of unity effectuated by a cultural communion that provokes a sense of imagined community, not just amongst each tribe of Purulia, but also as a human collective representing the region. This has been comprehensively deliberated upon in the forthcoming chapters.

Amidst a raging debate between American anthropologists and European ethnographers in regards to cultural studies, social history and folklore – cross-disciplinary methods of learning have emerged over the years. Whereas cultural studies have been enhanced by the empirical engagements provided by folklore and history, the latter has genuinely benefitted from the prescribed anthropology based theoretical frameworks. But then, differences in intellectual styles and levels of abstraction continue to arise nonetheless (Henkes & Johnson, 2002).

3.3.2. Media Anthropology: Emerging Directions

Emerging as a major area of inquiry in the later half of the nineteen hundreds, the seminal works of sociologists such as Emile Durkheim (1912/1995) and anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz (1973) have majorly contributed to this domain of study. But then, Geertz (as cited by Osorio, 2005, p. 36) argues against ‘universal’ structures in inter-disciplinary studies of the social sciences. The context is ever-changing and inter-dependent on the audience. Rituals outside their original

setting are very different when integrated into other cultures. Thus, the absence of ‘universals’. From a critical perspective, as Schechner (2002) acknowledges the changing meanings when a ritual is transplanted into another culture, he ignores the process of interpretation in light of his approach of ‘physical action’. Furthermore, spiritual contexts rooted in the host culture can only be relevant to local audiences from the same mold. Indigenous culture is individualistic and exists in clusters. As the contexts within these clusters are unique to each (Barucha, 1984), this gave rise to a host of inquiries that led to considerable scholarship in this regard.

As mass media became a part of the daily lives of the people thus influencing their cultural and social construct, the works of Appadurai, 1996; Weatherford, 1995; Ginsberg, Larkin & Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mushengyezi, 2003; Rothenbuhler, 2005; Osorio, 2005; Couldry, 2003; Leuthold, 2010; amongst others - considerably established this domain of study. As Osorio (2005) identifies, the overall inquiries within media anthropology have diverged into: ‘diffusion based research’ (Rogers, 1976; amongst others), ‘cultural imperialism’ (Schiller, 1973; amongst others) and ‘hermeneutics’ (Heidegger & Van Buren, 1999, Bauman, 1978; amongst others) - this present study has majorly adopted the works of M. Heidegger & J Van Buren (1999), as well as Z. Bauman (1978) in regards to hermeneutics, to identify the philosophical derivations contributing to the *Pouranic*¹⁴ narratives of Purulia Chhau.

As Mushengyezi (2003) elucidates, “since culture shapes the environment within which a message is decoded, indigenous media forms such as very specific performances - dance, music, drama, drums and horns, village criers, orators and

¹⁴ Emerging from the Hindu philosophy of the *Puranas*.

storytellers – continue to present themselves as effective channels for disseminating messages in predominantly rural societies where the population tends to be predominantly ‘orate’ or ‘oral-ate’ rather than ‘liter-ate’” (p. 108). Studies specific to each environment, each community, each tribe, each performance, each ritual and each expression are thus the basis of the emergence of the vast scope for folk media studies, within this domain. Over the decades, ‘hybridization’ and the ‘cross-fertilization’ of ideas have further triggered diverse inter-cultural infusions and innovations, thereby amplifying the scope for studies (Mushengyezi, 2003).

Furthermore, as Weatherford (1990) observes, there are various cultures in transition. In a long history of contact with Europeans and Americans, many a tribal’s first exposure to a camera as an item or object, established the cultural divide. Having transcended considerably, in the last twenty years, indigenous people from many parts of the world have already adopted film and photography, as a part of their lives. For example, “by the 1970s the urgency of the native American’s demands encouraged them to participate in media and become producers themselves” (Weatherford, 1990, p. 58). Leuthold (2010) affirms this and further describes what happens when an indigenous person turns on the camera on his own culture. Thus, although having semantic limitations, ‘cross cultural communication’ based literature has also emerged with significant observations (Barucha, 1984, Banerjee, 1991; amongst others).

As Barucha (1984) explains, in the cross cultural examination of traditional folk theatre, western terms such as ‘score’ and ‘flow’ are found quite often. Studies on the rise of ‘culture tourism’ show that it has led to the rise of fabricated rituals, within the

culture of these rituals. When there is exchanging of a ritual for money, cultural exchange becomes a pretext for economic exchange, a business transaction. The significance of the ritual is lost. The traditional folk art of India are thus no longer performed for the Gods, but for the western tourists armed with cameras. Money signifies power and the outsiders who provide it, control the cultural exchange (ibid.). As Gargi (1966) had established this instability of the cultural equilibrium as 'dynamism', there has been considerable stress upon the merger of mythology and actuality in all the folk theatre forms of India in terms of its *puranic*, historical, political and social themes (as cited in Banerjee, 1991, p. 199). As the emergence of cultural tourism and an enhanced western interest further amplified this instability, the scope for research on this account has considerably emerged. However cosmopolitan and altruistic the tourists may be, they yet emerge as the primary figures of authority who dominate just by their presence in rural India, where most of the traditional dances and dramas are performed (Barucha, 1984). This is also a deterrent for western scholars in their ethnographic efforts as they find it very difficult to actually blend in.

3.3.3. Communication Studies: Folk Media for Social Development

Bronislaw Malinowsky's (1922), '*Argonauts of the West Pacific*' about the Trobriand people of the Kiriwana island chain, northeast of the island of New Guinea brought forth not only their origins, characteristics and culture, but also their indigenous folk expressions, before the rest of the world. It also established the modern day ethnographic methods of research (Reilly, 2012). The cultural dialectics based communication that shapes society has been a key area of interest for various

ethnographers. Folk media and its development communication capacities have consistently been inquired upon, especially in Africa. In 'oralate' societies, where information transmission happens orally, from generation to generation, indigenous media is predominant. The messages are enhanced through song, dance, drama, drums and horns. Harnessing and utilizing these indigenous media forms have become an universal area of research to explore the possibilities of inter-cultural exchange of developmental messages (Mushengyezi, 2003). As Lent (1980) has established, there has been a considerable amount of research in regards to the use of folk media in their traditional rural settings or when adapted to mass media to bring about social awareness and national development. The debate about the positive and negative characteristics of folk media, in its transformational role is also very potent. Questions about the capacity of folk media to carry modern messages, whether it should and 'how'; has thus been recurrent.

In regards to the use of folk media as a vehicle for social development, their effectiveness and efficacy was majorly identified post the 60s leading to an influx of inquiries on its potential as an effective vehicle for evangelism, particularly in the context of social development in third world countries (Jayaweera 1991). But then, the thrust of such administrative inquiries has been on proselytization and development rather than on the communication aspects of these folk media forms. Earlier, the 'World Association for Christian Communication' (WACC) and its projects in third world countries relied heavily on mass media communication for evangelism and to bring about social change. The emphasis on mass media to achieve this received various contributions from Harold Laswell, Paul Lazarfeld, Daniel Lerner, Lucian Pye and Wilbur Schramm, who also stressed on individual attitudes

and values. But then, this approach was critically examined by Latin American scholars such as Romero Beltran, SR Parra, GD Cuellar, J Gutierrez and Diaz Bordenave, who comprehensively undermined the modernization and ‘diffusionist’ models proposed by US scholars (Jayaweera, 1991). The dominant paradigm of the US based scholars was thus tested by an alternative paradigm, in terms of communication for development. During the decade between 1950 and 1960, consistent research was carried out in India by WACC, to find out as to what extent and in what ways mass media produced social change. This led to findings that effective communication modes existed in third world societies that are capable of producing social change. It was observed that these communication modes were indigenous, low cost, acceptable, self managed, participatory, capable of influencing consciousness and raising awareness (ibid.).

Linje Manyozo in his (2012) book *Media, Communication and Development: Three Approaches* outlines three action-based approaches towards developmental communication. The ‘media for development’ approach in which media acts as a catalyst for development initiated by other agencies - the ‘media development’ approach in which the media initiates the development process and thus organizes strategies of using entertaining popular art forms for educating the people about social issues and thirdly - the ‘participatory communication’ approach in which the indigenous people are themselves stakeholders and facilitate the dissemination of social messages through their indigenous art forms as community engagement initiatives. From an Indian context, Bhattacharya (2011) identified that the ‘Domni’ and ‘Gambhira’ artists of West Bengal were using their drama to campaign for improved rural sanitation and to stop child marriages, thus establishing their role as

grass-root level communication partners for the local government and developmental organizations. Government initiatives using ‘Chhau’ for the nation-wide pulse polio vaccination campaigns have also been undertaken from time to time. As Baruah (2017) observes, social messages encoded into the indigenous expressions and disseminated effectively guided by the participatory actions of the rulers in India, was a general practice for centuries. Acknowledging their effectiveness even in modern times, the Government authorities, organizations and research groups have continued to uphold these traditional methods based on consistent administrative research. The folk performance arts have thus been identified as traditional communication vehicles ever since their inception, by present scholars (ibid.).

Given that the researchers in development communication were not just passive, but participant in approach adopting local case study modes that allow theories to emerge from data rather than prior establishment, their methodologies were predominantly ‘naturalist’ rather than ‘positivist’ (Jayaweera, 1991). As Prasad (2013) observes, folk media in itself is still one of the most active and effective media platforms for communication campaigns, in this digital era.

3.3.4. Semiotics in Media-Religion Studies

As Hoover (2005) observes, the role of the media is not just socio-structural or geographic, but also semiotic based. As research focus on the interaction between religion and media has developed in recent years, it is evident that these aspects of mediatization consistently interact and thus contribute towards the formation of the

religious-media landscape. Thus, a phenomenology of the negotiations between media and religion in present times would see media and religion in a number of different relationships. Within the domain of ‘Semiotics’, there are a significant number of inquiries that study masks, costumes, narratives, characters, music, etc; that have often been used in folk media to disseminate religious philosophy and cultural contexts. Scholars in this strand of inquiry have liberally employed semiotic models/ frameworks/ theories (Wilson, 2019; Pollock, 1995; Bapat, 1994; Yankah, 1985; Langlois, 1985; Bogatyrev, 1971; Bauman, 1968; Levi-Strauss, 1963; amongst others) as well as daily life interpretants emerging as performance theory (Kornhaber, 2015; Bouissac, 2010; Schechner, 2002; Goffman, 1956; amongst others) as methods to reveal the latent meanings embedded in these folk media forms. Employing perspectives of both social semiotics and textual semiotics, while this body of work may not always have been necessarily on religion per se, an examination of this strand is particularly significant, for the present study. To identify the origins and negotiations, given that the present research inquires in-depth into the symbolic meanings, metaphors, philosophical derivatives and other such underlying elements of Purulia Chhau, an in-depth understanding of the vast domain of Semiotics, is thus essential.

Bapat, (1994) describes, post the usage of the term by John Locke in 1689 in *An Essay on Human Understanding*, the field of semiotics was established by Ferdinand De Sussure and Charles Sanders Peirce (pp. 18-63). As the convergence of verbal folklore with linguistic signs considerably stemmed from Sussure’s (1916/1960) work on *Semiology*, Bauman (1982) observed that Sussurean concepts also inspired the use of semiotic models in the analysis of folk narrative structure laying stress upon the

expansion of structural linguistics into text analysis, using folk materials (as cited by Langlois, 1985, p. 80). In the scholarly pursuit of understanding the connections between folklore and semiotics, Langlois (1985) establishes ‘folk patterning’ and ‘sign making’ as distinct cultural phenomenon. He elucidates, “Peter Bogatyrev’s early work on Moravian folk costume as sign, Levi-Strauss’ on masks, music, table manners and cuisine as cultural codes, and Victor Turner’s on *Ndembu* ceremonies as metaphors¹⁵ are well-known examples of stretched language (semiotics in non-verbal communication) in the areas of folk custom, ritual and material culture” (p. 80).

Bogatyrev’s (1971/2008) *The Functions of Folk Costume in Moravian Slovakia* was a first of its kind semiotic study of a non-verbal sign in the form of a material object such as a costume. Apart from practical functions such as covering the human body, Bogatyrev observed how sex, religion, national, ethnic/ regional affiliation, professional categories and social categories are indicated through costumes. The study on folk costumes in terms of signification, rather than in terms of its material properties like the texture or color was a major advancement in regards to the concept of *functionalism* (functions achieved by signs) encompassed within semiotics (Bapat, 1994). Furthermore, inquiries across the timeline such as Pollock’s (1995) *Masks and the Semiotics of identity* as well as Jones’ (2020) *Meaning of Masks: A collective cry for justice*, were integral in revealing of the meaning and symbolism of masks in terms of social functions. Apart from studies on masks from anthropological perspectives (Chatterjee, 2019; Kothari, 1980; Tsubaki and Richmond, 1990; amongst others), such a semiotic perspective of masks as icons and indexes of identity, broadened the category to include other signaling systems such as dance (Blanariu,

¹⁵ Something that is representative or symbolic of something else.

established by literary semioticians to be common as a second-order sign system and a complex message, with all narrative structures (Langlois, 1985). Various structural studies have established the *code's* significance in folktale, myth and riddle. On these lines, as Vladimir Propp in his (1928) *Morphology of the Folktale* had established that plot structure was encoded in thirty one functions or actions or syntagms (as cited in Bapat, 1994, p. 34), similarly Claude Levi-Strauss (1963) saw mythic structure as the mediation between binary opposites through transformations or paradigms.

As Bapat (1994) observes, taking forward the Saussurean perspective (1916/1960), which established the relationship between the signifier and signified as the basis of all semiotic interpretations, semiotics had diversified into various schools of thought - *Russian Formalism* (Bhaktin, 1935; Propp, 1928; amongst others), *Prague School* (Bogatyrev, 1971; Jakobson, 1960; amongst others) and the *French School* (Foucault, 1976; Barthes, 1968; amongst others). Given that the objectives of this present research involves both syntagmatic as well as paradigmatic perspectives and that semiotics has been adopted to gain an insight into a verbal as well as non-verbal communication based signification system, the works of semioticians across all the aforementioned schools have been adopted.

From the perspective of the Russian formalists, Bhaktin's ethnographic approach and his concept of 'carnivalization' inspired Zygmunt Bauman to declare that "Bhaktin's approach to folk culture can be understood as a cultural system in which the situational context, social relations, genres and codes of imagery are all mutually inter-dependent" (as cited in Bapat, 1994, p. 37). As Propp (1928) had established, it was their actions or functions that were the basic elements rather than the characters

or the ‘dramatis personae’ themselves. This has provided the basis for the syntagmatic structural analysis for this present research. Furthermore, as the Russian formalists majorly stressed upon the synthesis of synchronic and diachronic perspectives to effectively study signification systems, the researcher has also adopted this approach.

As the Prague school applied the semiotic principles to different aspects of culture such as theatre, folklore and costume, the hierarchy of functions became an integral part of the studies. Apart from the study of costumes as earlier mentioned, as (Bapat, 1994) observes, Bogatyrev’s study of folk-songs majorly touched upon these hierarchical relationships in his (1938) *Semiotics in the Folk Theatre*. Bogatyrev emphasized on how the signifying power of certain real life objects, was amplified on stage. As these become theatrical signs, they are laden/ endowed with attributes that they do not actually possess in real life. This concept of ‘transformation’ majorly applies to the characters of Purulia Chhau, who transform into deities when performing at the *akkhara*¹⁶, which is then perceived as a temple. Their props are revered as symbols of power and the narrations; holy sermons.

As intellectuals from the French school such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Laquan and Claude Levis-Strauss adopted the linguistic perspectives in the context of literature, anthropology; amongst others - the emerging directions of the Russian and Prague school of thought were further established and popularized. Based on the premise that no text is ever original and originates from other texts, Julia Kristeva (1980) established the term ‘intertextuality’ to refer to ‘texts in the text’. Not discriminating between literary and non-literary texts, she was a major contributor to the ‘Tel Quel’

¹⁶ A part of a field that is cordoned using bamboos, into a central rectangular space at ground level. The Purulia Chhau performances happen at these makeshift venues.

(series of publications) group. She established that every author whilst generating literary text is influenced by his or her exposure to other texts (experiences, culture; amongst others). Apart from categorizing semiotic studies as social semiotics and textual semiotics, Mark Allen Peterson (2008) has also deliberated upon this issue of intertextuality. As Roland Barthes' (1977) essay *Death of the Author* (pp. 142-148) in the translated anthology *Image Music Text* further diminished the intentions and the bibliographical context of the author - asserting significant emphasis on its various interpretations, he established that text are not words releasing single theological meanings, but a multi-dimensional space for the merger of varied unoriginal writings (as cited in Bapat, 1994, pp. 52-53).

Barthes' contributions (1968, 1972; amongst others) majorly changed the perspectives of the study of cultural objects. In his (1968) *Elements of Semiology*, Barthes elucidates upon signs as entities endowed with signification and establishes that there can be no event or fact that can be termed as 'innocent' or without signification. As he posited two levels of signification – denotation and connotation (See Fig. 3.4); in which he considers the secondary/peripheral levels as parasitic signification, the primary meaning or denotation of the sign was considered to become the signifier for the consequent connotative signification (ibid.). Thus at various levels of connotation, the denotation may be completely transformed. To identify the original denotation or at least the earlier connotations of Purulia Chhau, the researcher has tracked the transformation at each connotative acquisition from one generation to the other, as secondary signs. The indicative trend emerging from this effort has been presented in the fifth chapter.

Secondary Sign:	Signifier		Signified	= Connotation
Primary Sign:	Signifier	Signified	= Denotation	

Fig 3.4: Showcasing the relationship between Connotation and Denotation

(Barthes, 1968, p. 64)

As Levi-Strauss' (1963) *Structural Anthropology* majorly influenced research in regards to cultural anthropology and contributed towards many of its epistemological questions such as oppositional negotiations and myths as meaningful entities, Eco's (1976) *A Theory of Semiotics* established an universal theory of signification through *Semiosis*; a manifestation of empirical subjects. His concept of 'sign function' instead of 'sign' leads to the assertion that everything can be taken as a sign, thus establishing the universal application of the concept of semiotics.

As semiotic scholars further diversified into various schools of thought, the scope for the application of semiotics transcended various genres. The influence of semiotics on folklore studies considerably led to the emergence of ethnography based, performance oriented approaches (Bapat, 1994). As classics such as Turner's (1988) *The Anthropology of Performance* and Goffman's (1956) *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, inquired upon the performative nature of societies - Schechner's (2002) *Performance Studies* and Boussac's concept of 'semiotic keying' of characters, in his (2010) *Semiotics at a Circus*, established this approach as integral to

the study of life events, not just in everyday life but also from perspectives involving multifarious communication platforms of expression. Schechner believed that meaning emerged, in doing. His pragmatism was based upon the “entire performance score”, shaped from “ordinary life” (Schechner, 1978, p. 93, as cited by Bharucha, 1984, p. 295). Schechner establishes the active involvement of ‘performance studies’ in social practices and advocacies. “Any action that is framed, enacted presented, highlighted or displayed is a performance” (Schechner, 2002, p. 2). During this present study, it was striking to note that a masked dance theatre such as Purulia Chhau incorporates all these elements in its representation of religious mythology. As the artists innovate, they depict religiosity from within the perceptions of daily life.

As Goffman (1956) had established, “a performance is all the activity of an individual which occurs over a period marked by his or her continuous presence before a particular set of observers, and which has some influence on the observers” (p. 22). From a socio-cultural standpoint, these activities eventually transcend into the theatrical stage as well as in other artistic renditions. As the relationships between theatre and performance were consistently been given importance in Turner’s works (1988; amongst others), the theatrical paradigm was applied to social life by both Turner and Goffman. Furthermore, Turner (1975, as cited in Graham, 2008, p. 2) in his concept of ‘cultural performance’ understood symbols, rituals and even religion as processes consistently engaging individuals. Thus, contradicting Durkheim’s socio-religious epiphenomenon standpoint, he prescribed rituals as ontological (ibid.). Therefore upholding the significant role of structural studies and semiotics in discovering the basic structures that generate narrative signs within cultures, as Yankah (1985) upheld, ‘ethnic-based semiotics’ as integral to all studies in

performance (p. 133). As the mimetic nature of ‘poetry’ had encouraged Plato to consider it dangerous and a threat to the truth - in the times of his culture, live performance was the norm and involved music and dance as well (Ferrari, 1982, p.92 as cited by Corby, 2015). Similarly, Socrates’ distinction of the two types of narration was based on his perception of performances during ‘his’ time and was typically either third person narrative or imitative narrative. These can be considered within the purview of the ‘diegesis’ and ‘mimesis’ structures of narratology; also a major direction within the domain of ‘Semiotics’ (ibid.). Drawing parallels to the imitative nature of the Chhau performances especially in the context of animal based movements, social structures and religion – in this study, the researcher has identified various instances of similarity with Greek theatre (see Chapter 5).

As the treatment of semiotics transcended into other domains, it was not just the theoretical tenets that were integrated, but also methodological approaches. Infusions such as ethno-semiotics (Voigt, 2014; Fiske, 1990; Greimas, 1987; amongst others) significantly emerged in contemporary times. Apart from the theoretical standpoints of mainstream semiotics (Eco, 1976; Barthes, 1968; Bauman, 1968; Levi-Strauss, 1963; amongst others), the researcher has adopted an ethno-semiotic approach in regards to the research methodology; deliberated upon further in Chapter 3.

3.4. The Indian Theory of Communication

Given that the narratives and messages being depicted through most art forms of India (both classical as well as folk) originate from the *Vedas*, *Puranas* and mythological

epics such as the *Ramayan* and *Mahabharata*, it is thus significant to gather a hermeneutical understanding of the religious/ philosophical directives that form the guiding light for most of these art forms. Although Indian philosophical texts are not considered academic by western thinkers, there are a large number of studies that have analyzed these and their various connotations. As N.M Adhikary's (2012) *Indigenous Theorization of Communication*, (2008) *The Sadharanikaran model and the Aristotalean Model of Communication: A Comparitive Study*, (2009) *An Introduction to the Sadharanikaran model of Communication* and (2010) *Communication and Moksha in Life*, have majorly established an Indian philosophy based trajectory of communication research, over the decades the theorization of communication adopted multi-disciplinary approaches; discourses alternative to the western school of thought. Earlier, as a departure from the mainstream understanding, apart from Kirkwoods's (1980) *Shiva's Dance at Sundown*, Gangal & Hosterman's (1982) *Towards an Examination of the Rhetoric of Ancient India*, - Dissanayake's (1981) *Towards Asian Theories of Communication* had majorly set the precedent in regards to an Indian context of communication studies. In regards to religion, the major shift was in terms of scholars focusing upon Hinduism rather than Christianity (SaraI, 1983; Kumar, 2005; amongst others). As MS Thirumala's (2001) *An Introduction to Natyashastra – Gesture in Aesthetic Arts* established the tenets of the philosophical book in regards to non-verbal communication and identified its contributions towards the art of India, IP Tewari's (1980) *Indian Theory of Communication* further established the concept of *sadharanikaran*¹⁷ amongst western audiences.

¹⁷ Also identified as the Indian theory of communication.

Criticizing the western approach towards communication studies as “reflective of the biases of western thought and culture” (Kumar, 2005, p. 25), the incompatibility of western models and theories towards Indian classical/ folk media forms have been upheld by various scholars (Reddi, 1988; Saral, 1983; Sitaram, 2004; amongst others). Dissanayake (1988) observes the western approach to be functionalist, mechanistic and positivist thus understanding communication to be an external/ superficial event. Thus, given the Hinduism based epistemology and metaphysics associated with Indian art forms, a deep-rooted hermeneutical approach is significant to this context. Moreover, certain western concepts also seem to resonate with Indian philosophical impressions that were conceived thousands of years ago, perhaps as a preceding premise. For example, McLuhan’s (1964) concept of the ‘global village’ corroborates to the Indian concept of ‘*Vasudeva Kuttumbakhm*’ which means the world is one; a single clan having mutual empathy. Furthermore, as Dance’s (1967) Helical model of communication based on group communication can be corroborated with the ‘*Akhanda Mandalakar Rachna*’, Patanjali’s *Yogsutra* (ancient knowledge system) has major contributions in regards to linguistics, semiotics and meaning making. Therefore, although diverse in methodology and approach, scholars from both the west and the east have arrived at similar conclusions on various issues at the core of communication studies despite not having considered each other’s efforts.

Dennis McQuail’s definition of communication as that which increases ‘commonality’ (as cited in Kumar, 2005, p. 3) corroborates to *sadharanikaran* - a term first popularized by Indian philosopher Abhinavagupta in *Abhinavabharati* (a philosophical commentary on the *Natyashastra*) and literally means to ‘make common’. Abhinavagupta mentions *sadharanikaran* as a phenomenon elucidated

upon by his guru Bhattanayaka whose philosophical text *Hridayadarpan* was lost over the centuries. But then as Bhattacharya (2018) mentions, the phenomenon existed even before this discourse took shape and encompasses all instances of ‘undiluted simplification’ including the simplification of the Vedas into the *Upanishads* and their further universalization into the *Puranas*.

The origins of majority of the dance forms and drama of India can be traced back to the ancient *Natyashastra*. Emerging from the ‘Bharat Muni’ *sampradaya* between the second century B.C and first century A.D (Yadava, 1987; Adhikary, 2010) with the objective to communicate the concept of *dharma* (a way of life; not to be confused with religion) to the people (Bhattacharya, 2018), it was a treatise analyzing the effect of live performances on the audiences which understood the hierarchies and asymmetries of communication and placed *Saharidaya* (compassion filled with affection) at the centre of all communication processes (Kundu, 2013, p. 3). Written at a time when the Vedas were disintegrating, the *Natyashastra* also referred to as the *Natya Veda*, provided a structured guideline towards the simplified dissemination of Vedic philosophy through the use of dance and drama (Bhattacharya, 2018). On similar lines, *Nandikesvara’s Abhinayadarpan* translated and critically edited by Manmohan Ghosh (1957) was also an illustrious insight into the gestures and postures used in Hindu dance and drama.

Given that the classical expressions of India comprehensively adhere to the prescribed non-verbal communication methods of the *Natyashastra*, traces of these can also be found within many of the folk dance and theatre forms subtly infused with indigenous accommodations as per their localized cultural setting. As Bhattacharya, (2018)

elucidates, four types of *Abhinaya* or expressions are mentioned in the *Natyashastra*. *Angika Abhinaya* referring to the use of the body; *Vachika Abhinaya* referring to the use of song and speech; *Aharya Abhinaya* referring to the use of costumes and adornments; and *Satvika Abhinaya* referring to the use of psychological aspects of moods and emotions, for communicative efficacy. Although research in regards to *Vachika Abhinaya* and *Aharya Abhinaya* is comparatively limited, there have been considerable inquiries on the ‘Bharat Muni’ based observations on *Angikabhinaya* which refers to the non-verbal/ kinesics aspects of communication (Ghosh, 1967; Bhattacharya, 2018; amongst others).

As Ghosh (1967) analyzed the *Natyashastra*, he observed that the eighth chapter is dedicated to *Upangavidhana* which encompasses gestures of the head and minor limbs such as the eyes, eyebrows, eyeballs, nose, cheeks, lower lip, chin and mouth. Western approaches to such intricate gestural communication can be widely found within the domain of ‘Occulesics’ (communication through eyes) and ‘Pupillometrics’ (communication through pupils). Whereas the ninth chapter is dedicated to *Hastabhinaya* that encompasses the singular and combined gestures of the hands, the tenth chapter is dedicated to *Sarirabhinaya* that encompasses the gestures of other parts of the body such as the breasts, sides, hips, thighs and feet. As the eleventh and twelfth chapters are dedicated to *Carividhana* and *Mandalavidhana* describing the earthly and aerial movements, the thirteenth chapter is dedicated to *Gatipracara* encompassing the gaits of various characters under different conditions (p. 17-18). On similar lines, as Bhattacharya (2018) observes, although western introspection on gestural communication can be traced back to the *Renaissance*, major scholarly efforts were revived in the twentieth century through the efforts of Wundt (1921), Sri

(1928), Efron (1941), Birdwhistell (1952, 1970), Bull (1987); amongst others. Furthermore, recent efforts by Rossini (2012), Gullberg (2014), Church et al. (2017); amongst others, have established the importance of gestural communication even in modern times (p. 228).

In regards to the *Satvika Abhinaya*, The *Natyashastra* elucidates that one of the pivotal functions of dance is to kindle the *Rasas* (emotions), by adopting certain *Bhavas* (facial expressions) or *Mudras* (gestures). It identifies nine primary emotions or *Navarasas*. As Bhattacharya (2018) elucidates, the nine emotions include *Shringara* (Love), *Hasya* (Happiness), *Roudra/Krodha* (Exasperation/Anger), *Bheebhatsa* (Abhorrence), *Bhayanaka* (Trepidation or Fear), *Shanta* (Tranquility), *Veera* (Valour), *Karuna* (Compassion or Sorrow), and *Adbhuta* (Awe). It is believed that the artistic expressions of India are somehow composed of these and stand meaningless without them. From a folk based standpoint, given the generic infusion of the *Natyadharmi* (theatre oriented upon larger than life) and the *Lokadharmi* (oriented upon everyday life) traditions in the dance and theatre forms at a local level, there is a significant need for inquiry upon the Indian folk media expressions from this Indian philosophy based communication perspective. Even as these concepts have been integral to research on Indian classical dance forms - although compatible and elucidating - apart from a few studies on folk media from the perspective of the *Natyashastra* (Kundu, 2013; amongst others), the application of the concept of the *Abhinayas* to understand the non-verbal communication processes of the indigenous communities, considerably falls short.

3.5. Folk and Classical Expressions of India: A Comparative Review

With focus upon the folk expressions of India, from a religious context, Bapat's (1994) semiotic study on *Yakshagana* is a magnificent effort that has provided in-depth insights, in regards to Hinduism. In recent times, as Buddhism has been the focus of various anthropological inquiries, apart from Wojkowitz's (2007) study on Tibetan religious dances in the Himalayan region, Erschbamer's (2019) study on the synthesis of Tibetan Buddhism and local shamanistic traditions in Sikkim is a showcase of how the political negotiations play out through rituals when there is a confluence of cultures. From a general context, Jiwan Pani's (2000) *Celebration of Life: Indian Folk Dances* is one of the most elaborate works on folk dances, amongst others. As the Indian sub-continent provides a tremendous kaliedoscope of folk theatre (Banerjee, 1991), an in-depth analysis of nine of these; Jatra, Nautanki, Bhavai, Tamasha, Ramlila, Raslila, Theerukoothu, Yakshagana and Chhau; - have been provided in Balwant Gargi's (1977/1966) *Folk Theatre of India*. As Banerjee (1991) has elucidated - the historical evolution, genesis, characteristics, origins, color and texture have been considerably described in Gargi's work.

In the context of political mediation, Vandenhelsken's (2011) study on the enactment of tribal unity through transforming rituals and Evershed & Fish's (2006) study on inter tribal conflict playing out through traditional rituals, have considerably showcased the various underpinnings that contribute towards the evolution of rituals, especially in the Himalayan region. Strikingly, both have observed that as political motivations restructure the constructs, the essence of these heritage expressions are essentially depreciated.

Amongst the few scholarly works in regards to folk music, as C S Reck and D B Reck's (1982) *Drums of India: A Pictorial Selection*, was integral in establishing the music based cultural heritage of India from a perspective other than classical, various studies from ethnomusicology based perspectives (Bor, 1988; amongst others) also emerged. In recent times, as research on folk music and religion such as the *Bhakti Cult* based Datta's (1978) study in regards to the *Baul* music of Bengal and also others such as the studies on the folk music of the Himalayas (Fiol, 2017; amongst others) have gained momentum, Burchett's (2019) *A Genealogy of Tradition: Bhakti, Tantra, Yoga and Sufism* has been a major work in regards to religious mediation through folk and esoteric expressions. On the other hand, the extinction and disappearances of 'folk items' has also emerged as a major area of study. As Baruah (2017) observes, studies charting the decline and destruction of folk items, endangered tribes and fast fading ways of life are gaining a lot of popularity. But then from an overall standpoint, despite also taking into account the India centric studies mentioned in section 2.3, the overall research in regards to the folk media expressions of India have been inadequate compared to the scope that exists. Perhaps as folk expressions are considered 'low culture' art forms performed by tribal, these have rampantly been considered to lack the aesthetic value that is required to qualify as artistic expressions, even amongst the academic circles of Indian scholars. Thus, research in regards to folk expressions, although greater in number/ similar in motivation; are far and few when equated with research on the classical heritage.

As Richmond (1975) observes, there is vast literature on classical Indian theatre due to the considerable amount of interest in India as well as abroad. Apart from books

analyzing classical plays written in the *Devanagari*¹⁸ script, ‘Sangeet Natak Academy’ periodicals about performing arts and interpretations of religious texts, there are considerable research contributions to this area of knowledge, altogether (ibid.). Indian scholarly works such as Hemendranath Dasgupta’s (1944) *The Indian Stage*; about the development of modern theatre in Bengal - Bhan Chandra Gupta’s (1954) *The Indian Theatre, its Origin and Development up to the Present Day*; outlining historical and factual details about Indian Theatre - Manmohan Ghosh’s (1958) *Contributions to the History of Hindu Drama; Its Origin Development and Diffusion*; about Indian and Southeast Asian traditional theatre - Anil Baran Ganguly’s (1962) *Sixty four Arts in Ancient India* about the technical aspects - and Balwant Gargi’s (1962) *Theatre in India*; a textual analysis of contemporary Indian theatre, have significantly set the precedent for a large number of publications that followed in regards to classical theatre, traditional dance and drama (as cited in Richmond, 1975, pp. 332-333). As Kay Ambrose’s (1957) *Classical Dances of India* provides clarity and brevity in terms of presentation concentrating on ‘Bharat Natyam’, ‘Kathakali’, ‘Kathak’ and ‘Manipuri’ - Enakshi Bhavnani’s (1972) *The Dance of India* provides a descriptive analysis of the Indian dances and dance dramas. On the similar lines of his later book (1970) *Classical Indian Dancing*, Mandrakanta Bose’s (1963) *Classical and Folk Dances of India* had presented itself as an outstanding set of articles compiled from earlier publications (as cited in Richmond, 1975, p. 334). There is also vast research that is specific to each dance form. For example in regards to ‘Bharat Natyam’, there are various scholarly works such as Govind Sadasiv Ghurye’s (1958) *Bharatnatya and its Costume*, Leela Dayal’s (1948) *Nritta Manjari: The 62 Fundamental Sequences of Bharat Natyam*, E Krishna Iyer’s

¹⁸ Ancient Indian alphasyllabary originating from the Brahmi script

(1957) *Bharat Natyam and other Dances of Tamil Nadu* and R Sathyanarayana's (1969) *Bharat Natya: A Critical Study* (ibid.).

Given that Ashutosh Bhattacharya's interpretation of Purulia Chhau was primarily in the form of a dance, certain interpretative literature towards the study of dance forms are of significant interest to the researcher and can genuinely be adopted towards Purulia Chhau. Scholarly works such as Minati Das' (1961) *A Study of Hand Gestures*, R M Hughes (1964) *The Gesture Language of the Hindu Dance* and Sri Ragini's (1928) *Nritanjali: An introduction to Hindu Dancing*, provide in-depth scholarly perspectives in regards to meaning making. These works are based on interpretations, representations and rhetoric. Such scholarly perspectives in the domain of indigenous, folk and tribal dances are rare; non-existent in Purulia Chhau.

It is striking to however note that from a western perspective, their interest towards folk and classical expressions of India, were often 'co-accommodative'. As there has been considerable research in terms of codification of the mudras, signs and facial expressions in regards to classical forms - the socio-cultural representation of folk-based sign systems have also been inquired into. Upon analysis of the works of Gordon Craig, Jerzy Grotowski and Richard Schechner, it is observed that they had varying conceptions of 'Indian Theatre' both folk and classical, corresponding to interpretations of Indian culture and life (Bharucha, 1984). Craig's theory of 'interculturism' and prediction to mythologize Indian theatre is in sharp contrast with Grotowski's pragmatic use of the Indian theatrical traditions. Craig's vision of the hypnotic effect of India can be further understood by his descriptions of the exquisite flute music of Krishna. His enormous humility, cultural subservience and concepts

about limited western knowledge were an apotheosis of self-depreciation, thus luring his colleagues to abandon their work in search of strange and esoteric mysteries (ibid.). Craig's acknowledgement of the superiority of artists of another culture is evident through his reference to Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe's statement; "Against the superiority of another there is no defense but love" (Craig 1918, as cited in Bharucha, 1984, p. 32).

Rather than the tenets of the *Natyashastra*, Grotowski was committed to the new forms, gestures, sounds and rhythm. The hieroglyphic signs of Indian theatre prevented western actors from understanding them. He realized that if signs were to be used in western theatre, they could never be codified like the timeless mudras; universal in understanding and acceptance (Barucha, 1984). Experimental in approach, Grotowski was disinterested in the 'bourgeoisie, 'classical Indian theatre'. He believed that a concentrating on the 'purely physical' aspects of Indian technique resulted in 'emotive hypocrisy' (Grotowsky, 1968, p. 253, as cited by Barucha, 1984, p. 10). As is observed by Richard Schechner, "the fixed structure of 'Kathakali' became the fluid process of Grotowski's training" (Schechner 1978, p. 94, as cited in Bharucha, 1984, p. 10). In continuance with his observations of 'Balinese Theatre' and 'Japanese 'Theatre', Schechner's reflections are based on his personal views of performance, ethology, kinesics, the rehearsal process, selective inattention and the use of ritual in theatre (Barucha, 1984). During his scholarly examination of the *Ramleela*, when Schechner asked the performer enacting the character *Rama* as to what he felt when the audiences touched his feet, the boy replied that the feeling of God was existent within him. Similarly the veteran actor who had enacted the character *Narad Muni* for over three decades, was *Narad Muni* in real life; his

spectators his devotees (Barucha, 1984). Thus, as the perspectives of Craig, Grotowsky and Schechner emerged most suited for implementation upon indigenous masked dance theatre forms - approaches adopted by Indian scholars such as Minati Das (1961), Govind Sadhasiv Ghurye (1958), amongst others; also provided proficient models to follow. Adopting such approaches at the grass-root level have considerably revealed the opulent primordial culture and ontological identity of India, represented through the poetic renditions and magnificent imagery of Purulia Chhau.

3.6. Scholarly Works on Purulia Chhau

In regards to scholarly literature on 'Chhau', Gargi (1966) elaborately acknowledged the 'Seraikella Chhau' variant of Jharkhand. But then, assigning only pre-functionary mention to 'Mayurbhanj Chhau' of Orissa, he totally omitted any mention to the Purulia Chhau variant of West Bengal (Banerjee, 1991), thus upholding its obscurity during the 60s. The late discovery of Purulia Chau however, attracted the interest of eminent western minds as well as Indian researchers leading to an immediate influx of scholarly inquiry. John Arden's (1971) *The Chhau Dancers of Purulia*, Ashutosh Bhattacharya's (1972) *Chhau Dance of Purulia*, and Farley Richmond's (1971) *Purulia Chhau: An Introduction*, established this folk media as an integral indigenous cultural expression of India, amongst the western world.

John Arden's (1971) comparisons of the *dhamsa* players of Purulia Chhau to kettle drummers creating a 'Prussian thunder' and the performer's melodramatic gestures with an old fashioned Neapolitan tenor, efficiently constructed the western

perspectives. The descriptions of the choreography and rhythm are exquisite. With comparisons to ‘Greek Tragedy’ in the days of ‘Thespis’, the immaculate description of Ganesha’s attire and the incarnate deity’s boyish toy soldier like representation of poise; the purpose of Purulia Chhau, was thereby established. As he proposed, “the purpose of theatre – a vague concept continually established in our professional western journals – was entirely clear in this context... [It] was to bring the Gods down to earth for the space of a few hours in order to secure the continuance of life for mankind” (Arden, 1971, p. 68). The Gods were there as called and their power satiated the villagers, as if. But being critical in review of his literary contributions, as the goal of his writing was western consumption, it was sometimes devoid of compassion towards Indian traditions and audiences. “The great Goddess Kali – mother and destroyer – wore a black jumper, a miniskirt, a necklace of human skulls, a long haired wig, and her red mouth was contorted into a wide snarl, her tongue stuck out between her teeth. She looked like a girl from a Harlem who had emigrated to the East Village and joined a revolutionary commune” (Arden, 1971, p. 69). The odd sexual-sociological questions comparing the sacred deity to twentieth century western sexuality (woman character represented by a man), was perhaps being subjective and diminishing of the art.

Post the UNESCO (2010) inclusion of Purulia Chhau in their representative list of the *Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity*, there was another influx of scholarly inquiry and government initiatives. The contributions of contemporary scholars in this regard (Chatterjee, 2019, Kishore, 2016; Munshi, 2012; Bhattacharya, 2011; amongst others) have been thorough in exploring various aspects such as origins, innovations and perspectives in regards to development communication, mask making, music and

livelihood. There is also a considerable amount of literature that is emerging in regards to innovations and infusions. As Bhattacharya (2011) observed, the mythological tales performed by the 'Chhau' dancers of Purulia, used to be performed for three to four hours in duration, in its traditional productions. The present productions last for twenty to thirty minutes, catering to the needs of the modern day audiences. As the *Patachitra* painters of Bengal are creating scrolls depicting the 'Tsunami' and 'nine eleven' incident, the Chhau dancers are also adopting the works of Shakespeare and Tagore (Bhattacharya, 2011). As Chatterjee (2019) observes, the musicians are now seated on one side of the playing area unlike earlier times, when the drummers used to accompany the dancers. The musical innovations of 'Purulia Chhau' have been of keen interest to scholars. The adoption of western and film-based music in the productions have also been researched upon. V Kishore's (2016) *Dance of the Hindu Gods to the Western Electronic Beats: The Bollywoodization of Purulia Style of Chhau Dance*, establishes the hybridization of 'Bollywood song and dance sequences' influenced by western culture; which in turn has influenced folk traditions.

As Kishore (2016) observes, the 'hybridization' of Purulia Chhau has led to its 'glocalization', ensuring that the theatre of the gods resonate with modern times. Furthermore as Bhattacharya (2011) observes, folk artists are building an enterprise of their art. Even though this is a major deviation from their traditional goals, it is enhancing their livelihood, thereby establishing the sustenance of their expression. Administrative research initiated by NGOs (banglanatok.com; amongst others) and govt. agencies (DICA, Purulia) analyzing these sustainable methods are now frequent.

3.7. Summary

In this chapter, Apart from establishing a theoretical framework that has significantly buoyed this study - the various domains, inter-disciplinary perspectives and overall scholarly works on folk media has also been described. Identifying the divergent progress of relevant literature from a canonical perspective - the various strands, categories and direction of scholarship, have also been presented. Evaluating both western as well as Indian perspectives, the chapter reveals a dearth of studies in the present context, thus further enhancing its significance.

Establishing a background that infuses the interpretative approach of ‘semiotics’, along with the perspectives of ‘media-religion’ scholars – an academic foundation has been laid based on Geertz’s definition of religion and Durkhiem’s concept of ‘collective consciousness’. Furthermore, the context of Carey’s ‘ritual view of communication’ and Barthes’ structuralist approach, have provided a strong underlying core. In this chapter, although a considerable number of studies on folk media and their inter-disciplinary derivations have been identified/ examined, it has been convincingly argued that inquiries upon their role as traditional conduits for religious mediation, are far and few across all domains. Thus reiterating the ‘missing link’ between media, religion and culture (Hoover and Lundby, 1997, as cited in Das, 2015, p.24), given the absence of ‘universals’ due to localized cultural settings (Geertz as cited in Osorio, 2005, p. 37) - our restricted understanding of this intimate and complex relationship has further been revealed. As has emerged from this chapter, there are various aspects/ negotiations maneuvering this relationship in an

ancient civilization such as India. Thus, there are ample opportunities for research on this issue, as this present study has initiated upon.

In this chapter, a balanced outreach attending to conventional research approaches as well as modern innovations, have considerably optimized the scope of the researcher to diversify. Furthermore, apart from implementing innovative perspectives adopted towards Indian classical theatre and dance expressions - measuring 'Indian' folk expressions as per 'Indian' communication theories have significantly helped discover various hermeneutic influences, especially in regards to their role in Hinduism. Further revealing in-depth insights on kinesics, narratives and music, the blend of western perspectives with Indian philosophical tenets has considerably enhanced the gamut of this study. All in all, inspired by various scholars across disciplines (Wilson, 2019; Bouissac, 2010; Carey, 2009/ 1989; Hoover, 2005; Schechner, 2002; Heidegger & Van Buren, 1999; Hall, 1997; Durkheim, 1995/ 1912; Pollock, 1995; Bapat, 1994; Geertz, 1973; Bauman, 1978; Eco, 1976; Bogatyrev, 1971; Levi-Strauss, 1963; Barthes, 1968; Goffman, 1956; Propp, 1928; Malinowski, 1922; amongst others), the researcher has ensured an in-depth inquiry of Purulia Chhau; and its relationship with religion.

Chapter 4

Methodology of Research

4.1. Overview

Studying social life as it happened, the researcher immersed himself amongst the people of Purulia and as recommended by Reilly (2004) – experienced, absorbed, lived, breathed and inquired into the culture, lifestyle, religion and other phenomenon in the context of Purulia Chhau. As the objectives have emerged from separate sets of research questions, they could best be achieved by separately studying samples of performance troupes, eminent Chhau artists, community elders, young generation artists, audiences, government officials, NGO workers and other key respondents associated with the culture of Bengal. From a multi-methodological standpoint, the method of studying each sample category was thus guided by the respective research questions. But then, although categorical in approach, the overall perspective was wholesome. The multiple methodologies were inter-connected and complimentary, bringing together qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. After identifying the samples representing the performers, audiences, etc., as well as the performance text - apart from adopting methods of observation, in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) – a symbiotic approach combining ethnography along with social semiotics, textual semiotics and rhetorical analysis, was aptly embraced.

4.2. A Methodological Review on Ethnosemiotics

Yankah (1985) observes, “the discovery of ethnic-based semiotics should form an integral part of all studies in performance, for it brings into focus the cultural base upon which audiences encode and decode messages, size up performances and produce aesthetic judgment” (p.133). As Greimas’ (1987) *On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory* furthered the works of Vladimir Propp and Levi Strauss in regards to structural semantics, various other approaches in semiotics also emerged such as ‘performance theory’ and ‘ethnosemiotics’. Upheld by John Fiske (1990) as a significant emerging methodology, the use of ethnosemiotics to study folk culture as signs and sign systems led to the advent of various paradigms infusing ethnology¹⁹ that majorly employs ethnographic research designs, with semiotics (Voigt, 2014). The term was independantly used by A.J Greimas, Y.S Stepanov, M Hoppal and V Voigt. For Geimas, it was in regards to traditional culture ‘contrasting’ socio-semiotics, whereas for Stepanov it was used as a form of ethno-linguistics. As Hoppal arrived at this term from the perspective of anthropology, communication models and the semiotics of culture - Vilmos Voigt used the term from the perspective of interpreting ‘ethno’ sign systems (ibid).

Greimas (1982) significantly described ethnosemiotics as an area of curiosities and methodological exercises, upholding the syntagmatic negotiations of rituals and ceremonies. He thus identified ethnosemiotics to exist at the center of constructing general models of signifying behavior. Focused on folklore, rituals, daily life;

¹⁹Ethnology is a social science that deals with people. Apart from studying cultural structures, ethnology involved studies on the members of a culture and their relationship to their culture (Flemming, 2010).

amongst others - ethnosemiotics as a discipline bifurcated into the Urbin school; primarily based on the works of Maurizio Del Ninno (1994; amongst others) - and on the other hand the Bologna-Sienna school; based on the works of Lancioni (2009; amongst others) and Marciani (2007, 2020; amongst others). Whereas the Urbin school reflected upon the anthropological theorizations of Levi Strauss (1963), the deliberations of the Bologna-Sienna school were based on the analysis of social phenomenon from both theoretical and methodological perspectives. Given that Purulia Chhau is a ritualistic masked dance theatre that has emerged from not just a cultural amalgamation of the region, but majorly from the religion driven practices significant to the daily life of the tribal folk, such a methodology was the ideal choice to achieve the objectives of this research, as an in-depth effort.

4.3. Method

The researcher had adopted an ethnosemiotic approach combining inductive methods of ethnography and semiotics. Apart from acquiring a historical account (oral history) of Purulia Chhau from community elders and veteran artists traditionally involved with the art form – in-depth interviews (IDIs) with key respondents associated with the culture of Bengal were also undertaken. In addition to focus group discussions (FGDs) with members of each selected troupe (5 nos.), IDIs with the troupe leader, script-writers, actors, musicians, narrators; amongst others, were also held. FGDs of the audiences were carried out to capture their understanding, contextualization and interpretation, on the days following the performances.

Apart from personally participating as an audience and observing the overnight performances, the researcher also inquired into the earlier practice sessions of each selected troupe. As the performances and rehearsals of each troupe were recorded (audiovisuals/ photos), a subsequent semiotic analysis precisely revealed the layers of religious content embedded into the text. A notebook was maintained for on-field observations. The ethnosemiotic approach of interpreting each observation as an ethnographer, but with the objective of deciphering the underlying meanings, influences and signifiers, was particularly essential (social semiotics). So, the ethnographic materials were analyzed concurrently in an integrated manner, parallel to data collection. This allowed the researcher to implement the necessary process upgrades, as insights emerged in the field itself. Upon identifying the major influence of Hinduism and animistic beliefs maneuvering the performances, a hermeneutic approach was also consequently adopted. Thus, tempered by heuristic rhetorical premises, both social semiotics as well as textual semiotics was extensively implemented in this ethnosemiotic exercise.

In addition to the IDIs and FGDs being conducted adhering to the guidelines of a specific schedule of questions (see Annexure – 2), audiovisual/ audio recordings of these were initiated with the consent of the respondents, for transcription, translation and analysis. A considerable amount of Chhau based archives have also been accessed. Apart from administrative data facilitated by the Dept. of Information and Cultural Affairs (DICA), Purulia, WB govt. - audiovisuals of performances featuring icons/ legends of earlier generations available at the National Cultural Audio-Visual Archives (NCCA) have also been studied to develop a paradigmatic, time-based, comparative frame of reference.

4.4. Fieldwork

Spending 141 days amongst the indigenous people in the villages of Purulia, the researcher has considerably lived, breathed and inquired into their way of life as an accepted member of their community. During the course of the five phases of fieldwork, whereas the initial few days were phatic and spent in building trust, the eventual trust validated by the community elders ensured that the researcher received all the required help and support to conduct this research. Each phase was planned to correspond to the ritualistic timeline of Purulia adhering to the religious, cultural and agricultural cycle throughout the year. Apart from the 15 day formative study phase undertaken in January 2020, the following timeline for fieldwork was followed:

Phase 1 – (7th January – 27th January, 2021) Corresponding to the auspicious *Makar Sankranti*²⁰, *Tusu Parbo* (a ritual dedicated to the indigenous deity *Tusu* considered to be a folk avatar of Durga). Rigorous practice sessions of the Chhau troupes and overnight performances at village *akharas*²¹ were frequent during this time.

Phase 2 – (2nd February – 26th February, 2021) Corresponding to the Chhau workshops organized by Banglanatok.com and the ‘*Jhumur Utsav*’.²² As during the earlier phase, practice sessions of the Chhau troupes, overnight performances at village *akharas*, were frequent.

²⁰ A festival dedicated to Surya; the sun God.

²¹ A part of a field that is cordoned using bamboos, into a central rectangular space at ground level.

²² A festival to celebrate the culture of Purulia, organized by Banglanatok.com

Phase 3 – (12th April – 24th April, 2021) Corresponding to the *Chaitra* festival encompassing the *Shiv Gaajan* rituals, *Ram Navami* and tribal festivals such as *Disum Sendra* and *Baha*. The end of the festivities were marked by the *Rohin Din* which initiates the sowing of seeds; the beginning of the agricultural cycle. Post the *Rohin Din*, during the short but vigorous farming season, cultural expressions such as Chhau are rarely performed as the artists focus all their effort towards their farming duties.

Phase 4 - (15th July – 16th August, 2021) Corresponding to the holy month of *Shravan*, dedicated to Shiva. An ideal period to observe the determined religious practices of the people. The indigenous *Manasha Puja* (dedicated to the local snake goddess; considered as a daughter of Shiva), *Erokh Sim* and the *Karam Parab* is also held during this phase. Apart from observing the performances, interviews of government officials and NGO workers in Purulia, re-affirmations and corrections in regards to the previous engagements, were conducted during this time.

Phase 5 – (4th October – 10th November, 2021) Corresponding to the autumn harvest, Durga Puja, Vijay Dashami, *Raavan Shokh*, *Bhadu Parbo*²³, Kali puja, Diwali and the tribal festival *Jathela*. Regular overnight performances at village *akharas* ensued during this time.

In between the phases – Apart from compiling/ organizing the ethnographic materials (notes, audiovisuals, photos, audio recordings), thesis writing and revisiting relevant literature - the interviews of key respondents in Kolkata were conducted in

²³ Indigenous festivals of Purulia.

between the field phases. Chhau performances in the urban settings of Kolkata were also attended and studied by the researcher during these times.

During fieldwork, the researcher primarily resided at the centrally located Purulia town and travelled to the villages spread across 6259 square kms of region (approx. 45 km radius around Purulia town) located in the various block divisions of the district. As the villages were located in the interiors, and the Chhau performances held overnight, most of the expeditions were of two days & one night each. Accessed by travelling either north-east along NH 18 (towards Jamshedpur); north-west along NH 314 (towards Bardhaman) or south along NH 218 (towards Dhanbad), and then several kilometers on narrow paths surrounded by forest laden interiors - the villages emerged as small hamlets amidst clearings, usually near to water sources such as lakes or rivers (Damodar, Kumari, Kangsabati, amongst others). As marked in Fig 4.2, making use of a motorcycle, the researcher accessed the following villages (block-wise) for the study:

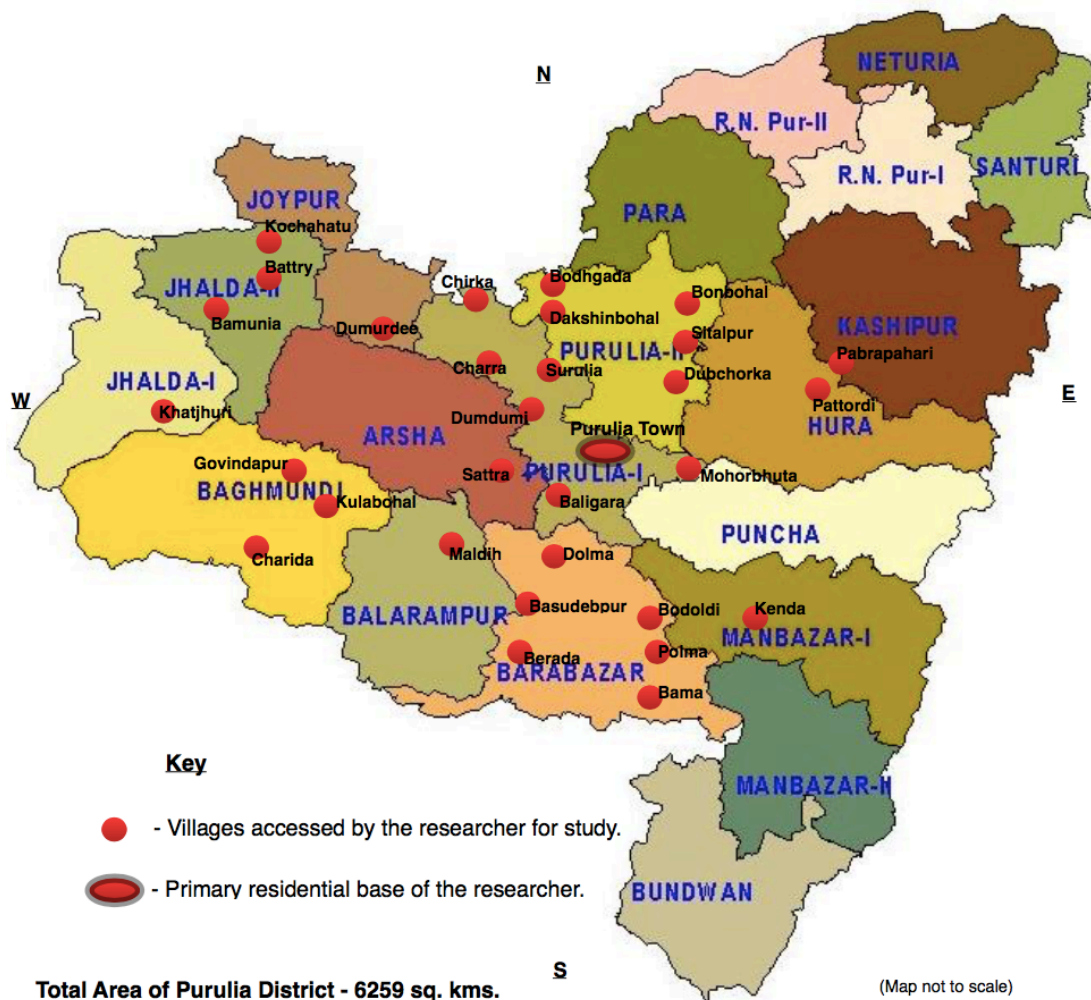


Fig 1.2: Showing the villages accessed by the researcher and their blocks.

(purulia.nic.in, 2021)

The following Table 4.1 is the population demographic based on the Census (2011) of the villages (Block-wise) visited in the Purulia district, indicating the percentage of Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) –

Block	Villages	Total Population	SC (%)	ST (%)
Purulia - 1	Baligara	2458	6.02	0.61
	Chirka	2398	20.2	2.07
	Charra	2347	40.03	14.08
	Mohorbhuta	2138	17.18	1.7
Purulia - 2	Bonbohal	596	11.7	26.6
	Sitalpur	1496	40.03	14.8
	Dubchorka	1406	28.8	0.3
	Dakshinbohal	1109	5.05	0
	Dumdumi	3768	27.3	0
	Bodhgada	1196	16.03	0.8
	Surulia	2451	73.8	4.4
Balarampur	Maldih	746	15.2	5.4
Barabazar	Palma	1174	12.7	0
	Bama	620	4.2	0.8
	Bodoldi	706	0	3.4
	Dolma	1274	11.7	4.4
	Berada	2706	12.6	3.3
	Basudebpur	813	3.4	8.5
Arsha	Sattra	5857	11.5	0.1
Kashipur	Pabrapahari	1752	32.4	31.5
Manbajar	Kenda	3803	4.2	6.3
Bagmudi	Kulabohal	1356	1.9	31.7
	Charida	2568	13.6	18.5

	Govindapur	1174	12.7	6.4
Jhalda - 1	Khatjhuri	1400	25.8	0
Jhalda - 2	Kochahatu	3057	4.4	0.7
	Battry	1134	2.7	5.4
	Bamunia	2785	4.9	0.3
Hura	Pattordi	705	0	3.1
Joypur	Dumurdee	548	0	100

Table 4.1: Tribal/ Caste-based demography of the villages visited by the researcher
(Census, 2011)

Although the inter caste dynamics and those between tribal and non-tribal Hindus have implications in their process of worship, habitation and social institutions (marriage, etc.), the audiences at Purulia Chhau performances cut across all sections of the village. Purulia Chhau is overarching and all-encompassing. However, the narratives performed in the rituals at villages such as Dumurdee (100% ST), Kulabohal (31.7%), Pabrapahari (32.4 SC and 31.5% ST) are more inclined towards issues of marginalization, featuring tribal anthropomorphic characters and indigenous gods. Narratives such as *Manasha Mangal*, rather than mainstream ones. Thus, given Purulia Chhau's flexibility, to accommodative and represent all sections of society as per need, the narratives selected for study were not only ritual wise, but also as per demographic. The narratives identified to be studied were *Mahishasur Mardini*, *Parashuram er Matri Hatya*, *Tarakashur Bodh*, *Visana Rakshasi Bodh*, *Manasha Mangal*, *Lav Kush er Ghora Dhora*, *Hirannakasipu Bodh*, *Abhimanyu Bodh*, *Sati Dahan* and *Kamsa o Keshi Bodh*. Whereas Section 5.5 deconstructs these narratives as

to how these manifest the icons, conflicts and beliefs resonating the everyday life of the locals – Section 6.2 the social negotiations arising out of these demographics. The religious, cultural and political undercurrents arising from these tribal and caste-based dynamics are also described in Section 6.4.

In Purulia, the languages spoken by the people ranged over Bengali (80.5%), Santhali, Kurmali, Gond, Kheria and Hindi, amongst others (Census, 2011). As the researcher was well versed in Bengali and Hindi, it was through these mediums that the IDIs were conducted. But then, Manoranjan Mahato a community elder from the Kurmi tribe who accompanied the researcher as a facilitator in most of the expeditions was fluent in Kurmali, Santhali and other local dialects. He provided valuable insights, especially during the FGDs.

4.5. Selection for Study

As the study was centered upon large populations of introverted and reclusive communities, a characteristic selection has been considered. Consciously refraining from pre-conceived notions to enhance applicability, a purposive representation of all the categories has been sought. But then, the selection being non-probability based, although the figures cited are approximate, they are generally indicative. As the earlier decisions in regards to the selection procedure had emerged from the ethnographic experiences of the researcher during the initial formative field visit and during the 1st phase of fieldwork, the selection was accordingly revised as per need

and situation. Furthermore, a snowball sample of eminent artists and community elders considerably developed over the field phases.

4.5.1. Selection of the Performance Troupes

There are 137 Chhau troupes registered with the Dept. of Information and Cultural Affairs (DICA), Purulia, WB Govt., residing across the villages of twenty block divisions within the Purulia district, primarily concentrated in Bagmundi, Balarampur, Barabazar, amongst others (see Annexure – 1). Utilizing the data accessed from DICA, the troupes were categorized under three genres / categories, on the basis of telephonic interviews with each of the 137 troupe leaders in regards to their objectives, uniqueness, narratives, innovations and performance format:

- i) Religious orthodox
- ii) Commercial with religious base
- iii) Purely commercial without any religious base.

It was found that the second category comprised of the major share of the troupes (approx. 50 percent). As the typically religious troupes constituted around 30 percent of the overall troupes in the district, the purely commercial ones without any religious base emerged amongst the remaining 20 per cent of the total number of troupes (approx). Since the study focuses on the negotiations maneuvering how religion is manifested and conveyed through performances, the sample of troupes were considered from the first two genres / categories only. Those that have retained their

religious base, rather than completely shifting from it. The non-religious troupes being totally ornamental, were not relevant to this study. Employing a non-probability based purposive selection process, a total of five troupes representing two of the categories were selected for study, as shown below.

Category of Chhau troupe	Selected
Religious/orthodox	02
Commercial with religious base	03

Table 4.1: Showcasing the sample selection from each category of Chhau troupes

Despite the reluctance of the indigenous community to interact, the relevant troupes provided access based on the resourceful recommendations of senior government officials, NGO workers and community elders. But then rather than convenience, the decisions for sample design were guided by the overall purpose, aim and objectives of this study. In each of the above categories of troupes, 1 performance, and 2 practice sessions leading to it, was considered. In each performance (considered as text), the troupes enacted two or three narratives of duration 25 to 30 minutes each. Thus, the total duration of the text that was studied amounted to 407 minutes. The semiotics based textual analysis focused on the narratives and characters of ‘these’ performances to unearth the layers of religious philosophy that are embedded within. All of the associated masks, costumes, kinesics, music, etc., were comprehensively taken into account. Furthermore, the study of the earlier practice sessions facilitated an ethnosemiotic insight into the performances, from a ‘behind the scenes’

perspective. As categorized in Table 4.1, the following five troupes were selected for study:

a) Religious/orthodox:

1. Late. Rasu Sahis Baligara Kisan Chhau Nritya Samiti

Based in *Baligara* village of Purulia – 1 block, this performance troupe was setup by legendary Chhau artist and guru Rasu Sahis in the 1950s. Locals believe that he was the pioneer in incorporating the concept of script and *palas* (narratives) into the treatment of the earlier script-less acrobatic Chhau performances (*mel naanch*). This enabled him to incorporate religious narratives of Shiva, of whom Rasu Sahis was an ardent disciple. Presently lead by his grandson Ustad Nripen Sais, this troupe is one of the most popular troupes in all of the region. Showcasing refined technical prowess and ability, this troupe has maintained the legacy of Rasu Sais by adhering to the orthodox traditions and religious narratives. Significantly, this troupe was also selected by celebrated British theatrician Robert Meagher for his 2005 experiment to merge Purulia Chhau with Greek theatre. The troupe's resistance to shift from its orthodox structure, even during its collaboration with Meagher, has also been considerably described in the forthcoming chapters.

2. Padmashree Late. Gambhir Singh Mura Rural Welfare Society / Chhau Dal

Based in *Charida* village of Bagmundi block, this performance troupe is the oldest existing troupe and was setup by legendary Chhau artist and guru Zipah Singh Mura in the 1940s. Legend has it that he was exiled by then ruler Shankari Prasad Singh Deo of the Panchakot Raj as an outcast into the forests for having delayed a performance at his behest. After his consequent death, his son Gambhir Singh Mura is said to have trained in the forests incorporating animal based movements into the kinesics of the Chhau art form. Emerging as a Chhau Guru and regional icon, Padma Shree recipient Gambhir Singh Mura's efforts ensured that this particular troupe went on to perform at various prestigious international events in Europe and America. Presently, lead by his son Ustad Kartik Singh Mura, the troupe strictly adheres to the religious orthodox format enshrined by the ancestral stalwarts of his earlier generations. A large part of the syntagmatic analysis, studying the synchronic elements of Purulia Chhau as a composite performance based text, revolved around this troupe.

b) Commercial with religious base:

1. Palma Shakti Sangha Chhau Nritya Party

Based in *Palma* village of Barabazar block, this performance troupe is led by President's Award winner Ustad Giasuddin Ansari. This is a unique troupe as

a majority of its members are Muslims. Despite following a different faith, these artists enact the characters of Shiva, Durga, Bramha; amongst others, with dedication, as per the prescribed narratives of the Puranas. In fact, Ustad Giasuddin is famous for his rendition of Krishna. Patronized as a torchbearer of the secular narrative of the Trinamool Congress led state govt., this troupe often performs in the urban settings of Kolkata at govt.-organized events. Although keeping intact the Vedic religious base, the various modern day innovations adopted and the inter-religious negotiations of this troupe have been considerably discussed in the forthcoming chapters.

2. Mitali Chhau Maldih

Based in *Maldih* village of Balarampur block, this performance troupe is famous for having challenged the age-old tradition of ‘only male’ performers. Indulging in female performers enacting female roles shoulder to shoulder with their male counterparts, this troupe has gained immense popularity as an example of women’s empowerment, challenging archaic patriarchal norms. Led by Chhau Guru Jagannath Chowdhury, this troupe also has an only-women sub-unit named Mitali Chhau Maldi Mahila Dal, featuring Jagannath’s daughters Mousumi and Shyamoli. This incorporates a transcendental role reversal as even male characters are enacted by female actors, during their performance. Experimental to the core, apart from breaking norms/ traditions in regards to women performers, this troupe has also incorporated various innovations such as performing social and political narratives apart from the

traditional religious ones. They have also popularized what came to be known as Macbeth Chhau, an infused rendition of the Shakespeare narrative. Furthermore, to enhance livelihood and spread the popularity of Chhau, they have collaborated with Banglanatok.com (NGO considerably engaged in Purulia) to conduct regular workshops at their village featuring Chhau Gurus from across the district.

3. Shib Durga Chhau Nritya Party and YouTuber Debashis Das

Based in *Kustaur* village of Purulia – 2 block, this performance troupe mostly comprise teenagers and is led by 21 year old Tapan Mahato. Famous for its extreme acrobatics and martial arts, the troupe has choreographed various death defying stunts, high intensity rhythms and a fast paced treatment. Ardent students of various Chhau gurus such as Binoya Dhar Kumar, Jagannath Chowdhury; amongst others - the troupe was formed in 2017 by their leader Tapan to showcase unique renditions of religious narratives. Many being college students themselves, they have managed to create a niche space for themselves amongst the youth. But then, despite retaining an orthodox religious base and ritualistically performing *pouranic* narratives, it is striking to note that this troupe has enhanced their commercial value adopting various digital initiatives in collaboration with Chhau artist/ YouTuber Debashis Das of Jambad village who has achieved the feat of garnering 1,16,000 subscribers and an overall number of 50,125,424 views of his uploaded videos on YouTube, since 2014. Using mobile phone cameras, they seem to have

enhanced their visibility by consistently posting videos of their performances on social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram and Youtube to propagate their brand, leading to a considerable following, even beyond Purulia. Shib Durga Chhau Nritya Party is one of the most frequent contributors to Debashis' channel.

The respondents corresponding to each of the five selected troupes were:

- Troupe leader (*Dala Neta*): 5 nos. (1 per troupe).
(Initial telephonic interviews with leaders of all the 137 troupes registered with the DICA were also conducted to identify the sample; see Annexure -1).
- Script / Narrative developers: 5 nos. (1 per troupe).
- Mask makers and Costume Designers: 5 nos. (1 per troupe).
- Choreographers: 5 nos. (1 per troupe).
- Actors: 25 nos. (5 per troupe).
- Narrators (*Bhashyakar*) and Musicians 15 nos. (3 per troupe).

4.5.2. Interactions with Audiences

Audiences corresponding to the performances of the above selected troupe sample, were identified for FGDs. Thus, 3 FGDs were conducted within the audience study. Of the approx. 200 people attending each performance, 10-12 of them were identified after each performance for the FGDs with the help of the respective village administration (*Panchayat*), and community elders. Initiated on the days following

the overnight performances, the researcher's field associates Manoranjan Mahato (belonging to the *Kurmi* tribe) and Moloy Choudhury; upheld the role of facilitators for these FGDs. Sidhukano Birsa University student Pramod Rai also assisted in the same. Perceived as non-threats by the local communities, the facilitators meticulously followed the FGD guidelines explained to them (see Annexure - 2) and triggered significant insights. Seldom interacting at these one-time meetings, the researcher consciously remained an observant, so as not to intimidate them as an urban outsider.

4.5.3. Key respondents

To develop a holistic understanding of the origin, development and religious negotiations of Purulia Chhau; amongst others - IDIs of the following key respondents were conducted (community elders, eminent/ veteran artists, young generation performers, artists from other contributing cultural traditions of Purulia, NGO workers, govt. officials, folk experts and other key individuals associated with Bengal/ Purulia's culture and religion). The IDIs were as per the categorical guidelines for this segment (see Annexure – 2).

- Community elders:
 - Nikhil Chandra Mahato (Berada village).
 - Naren Chandra Mahato (Berada village).
 - Bisambhar Pramanik (Dolma village).
 - Thakurdas Mahato (Bama village).
 - Kshitij Chandra Mahato (Dakshinbohal village).

- Kedar Chandra Mahato (Dakshinbohal village).
 - Baidyanath Mahato (Bodhgada village).
 - Madanmohan Mahato (Pabrapahari village).
 - Deben Mahato (Baligara village).
 - Pranab Kumar Mhato (Baligara village).
 - Manoranjan Kumar (Sattrā village).
 - Shibu Kumar (Sattrā village).
 - Dhiren Kumar – Hindu religious preacher (Sattrā village).
 - Moloy Choudhuri (Purulia town).
 - Amulya Mahato – Priest at Dumdumi Shiv Temple (Dumdumi).
 - Bhudev Kumar Panday – Priest at Gourinath Dham, (Chirka village).
- Eminent/ Veteran artists:
 - Anil Sutradhar - Internationally acclaimed mask maker and former manager of Padmashree award recipient and internationally acclaimed Chhau Guru Gambhir Singh Mura's troupe (Charida village).
 - Duryodhan Mahato – Chhau Guru; nemesis and rival of Padmashree Gambhir Singh Mura (Khatjuri village).
 - Binoya Dhar Kumar – Chhau Ustad; grandson of legendary Chhau Guru Bucharam Kumar (Bamunia village).
 - Brindavan Kumar – Chhau Guru (Kochahatu village).
 - Suphol Chandra Rajwaad – Legendary *Dhamsa* player associated with various iconic Chhau troupes (Baligara village).
 - Babulal Sais – Legendary *Dhol* player and Guru associated with various iconic Chhau troupes (Palma village).

- Nakul Chandra Dutta – Owner of Charida Mukhos Ghar; the first Chhau mask shop in Purulia town (Purulia town).
- Bibhuti Karmakar – Famed *Dhamsa* maker; nephew of legendary *Dhamsa* maker Gopi Karmakar (Battray village).
- Kanchan Rai – Chhau Ustad; grandson of Chhau Guru Madhu Rai who was the teacher of Padmashree Gambhir Singh Mura (Dumurdee village).
- Baghambar Singh Mura – Chhau Guru (Govindapur village).
- Dodhibor Kumar - Famed costume artist (Govindapur village).
- Bikal Rajak – Chhau Guru and legendary ‘Chhau Script writer’ (Sitalpur village).
- Durgacharan Sais – Popular Chhau script writer (Dubchoroka village).
- Kartik Singh Mura* – Chhau Ustad; eldest son of Padmashree Gambhir Singh Mura (Charida village).
- Parasuram Singh Mura* – Chhau Ustad; youngest son of Padmashree Gambhir Singh Mura (Charida village).
- Bangshi Mahato* – Chhau Guru; former team member of Padmashree Gambhir Singh Mura (Bodoldi village).
- Nripen Sais* – Chhau Ustad; grandson of legendary Chau Guru Rasu Sais (Baligara village).
- Giasuddin Ansari* - President’s award recipient Chhau artist and Ustad (Palma village).
- Jagannath Choudhury* – Chhau Guru (Maldih village).

(Please Note – Artists marked with * were interviewed not just from the perspective of the guideline sheet for eminent artists, but also as members of the sample performance troupes; see Annexure - 2).

- Artists from other cultural traditions of Purulia that have influenced Chhau (Jhumur, Nachni, Pala Gaan, etc).
 - Bhootnath Chitrakar – ‘Pala Gaan’ artist; follows both Hinduism & Islam (Bonbohal village).
 - Dhananjay Mahato – Popular ‘Pala Gaan’ artist (Dubcharka village).
 - Sripati Mahato – Popular ‘Pala Gaan’ artist (Dubcharka village).
 - Santosh Mahato – Popular ‘Jhumur’ musician and team manager (Berada Village).
 - Revati Singh Dhaval – Popular ‘Jhumur’ singer (Berada village).
 - Kavita Mahato – Popular ‘Jhumur’, ‘Bhadu’ and ‘Tusu gaan’ singer (Polma village).
 - Pastubala Devi Karmakar – ‘Lalon Puroshkar’ (State govt. award) recipient; senior ‘Nachni’ artist (Surulia village).
 - Bimala Devi – ‘Lalon Puroshkar’ recipient; senior ‘Nachni’ artist (Sattrra village).

- Young Generation Chhau Artists (Below 20 years of age):
 - Swapan Kumar Mahato (Dubcharka village).
 - Pramod Rai (Dumurdee village).
 - Kaifuddin Ansari (Polma village).
 - Asit Sais (Polma village).

- Anjan Mitra (Purulia Town)
 - Trilochan Sais (Baligara village).
 - Bholanath Kumar (Satra village).
 - Kush Mahato – Chhau artist also associated with the Gajan ritual (Dumdumi village).
 - Raju Sutradhar – Chhau artist also associated with the Gajan ritual (Namopada, Purulia town).
- Dr. Gouri Basu – Director, Easter Zonal Cultural Centre (EZCC), Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India.
 - Dr. Sayan Bhattacharya – Education Officer, Indian Museum.
 - Dr. Bandana Mukherjee – Research Officer, Asiatic Society, Kolkata.
 - Jyotirmoy Biswas - Asst. Director, India Tourism (Incredible India), Kolkata, Govt. of India.
 - Arnab Dutta - Former Project Leader, Kheriya Sobor Kalyan Samiti (NGO based in Purulia).
 - Prasanta Rakshit - Project Leader, Kheriya Sobor Kalyan Samiti (NGO based in Purulia).
 - Dulal Sutradhar – Secretary, Charida Sutradhar Samiti (Association of Mask makers in Purulia).
 - Pallab Pal – District Information and Cultural Officer, Dept. of Information and Cultural Affairs (DICA), Purulia, Govt. of West Bengal.
 - Anup Motilal – Curator, Rabindra Tirtha, Govt. of West Bengal.
 - Amitava Bhattacharya – Founder and Full time Director, Banglanatak.com (NGO considerably engaged in Purulia).

- Dr. Ananya Bhattacharya – Director & Vice President: Projects, Banglanatak.com (NGO considerably engaged in Purulia).
- Prabir Kumar Banerjee – Regional Officer, Banglanatak.com (NGO considerably engaged in Purulia).
- Subha Das Mollick – Award winning Documentary Filmmaker.
- Ruby Pal Choudhury – Art connoisseur, Folk expert & Hon. General Secretary, Crafts Council, Kolkata.
- Dilip Goswami - Folk enthusiast; retired school teacher based in Purulia.
- Chandam Deb – Associate Professor and Head, Dept. of English, JK College, Purulia (Assisted celebrated British theatrician Robert Meagher when he organized a drama infusing Purulia Chhau with Greek Theatre in 2005).
- Ajoy Ganguli - Associate Professor, Dept. of English, JK College, Purulia (Engaged in research projects in regards to the changing dialects of Purulia).
- Sadhan Dutta – Administrative Officer, Ramakrishna Mission, Purulia.
- Manoranjan Mahato - Political worker, teacher and senior representative of the *Kurmi samaj*²⁴.

²⁴ Social community of the Kurmi tribe.

4.6. Tools of Data Collection

Sr.	Category of respondents	Tools
1	Performance troupes	FGD guidelines and IDI guidelines (Semi-structured) [see Annexure - 2].
2	Performances & practice sessions	Transcripts based on videography of the performances, photographs, diary, field notes and memos.
3	Audience	FGD guidelines
4	Key respondents	IDI guidelines

Table 3.2: Showcasing the tools of data collection

4.7. Facilitators

Residence and Travel within the district, contact building, key interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) were supported and facilitated by the following individuals:

- 1) Moloy Chowdhuri; community elder and teacher; from Purulia town.
- 2) Manoranjan Mahato; political worker, teacher and senior representative of the *Kurmi samaj*; from Dubcharka village (Block – Purulia 2).
- 3) Pramod Rai; young Chhau artist and Sidhukano Birsa University student; from Dumurdee village (Block – Joypur).

4.8. Data analysis

Following a non-linear iterative-inductive approach, the analysis of data was ongoing and consistent throughout every stage of the research process. Facilitating the scope for field-based decisions, changes in the data collection process were implemented as and when required. Becker (1970, p. 27) refers to this as “sequential analysis”, further asserted by Ezzy (2002) who observes that data collection; analysis and *writing up*²⁵ are inextricably linked to each other (as cited in O’Reilly, 2005, pp. 177-179). The researcher ensured this flexibility throughout the course of research.

Apart from charting the audiovisual recordings of the performances them as transcripts, these were dissected using semiotic models of rhetorical analysis to gain an in-depth understanding of not just what each performance denoted as a composite sign system, but also the individual function/ role of the narratives, characters, masks, costumes, iconography, color, kinesics, choreography and music - in constructing the overall religious message. Identifying the icons²⁶, indexes²⁷ and symbols²⁸, the performance-based text was analyzed from a syntagmatic²⁹ perspective to understand the synchronic³⁰ aspects and also from a paradigmatic³¹ perspective to understand the diachronic³² aspects. Apart from the audiovisuals – photographs and ethnographic notes significantly aided this process.

²⁵ Preparing information in a way that it can be presented to others (O’ Reilly, 2012).

²⁶*Icon* – Anything that has a physical resemblance to what is being represented.

²⁷*Index* – Anything that provides evidence of what is being represented.

²⁸*Symbol* – A mark, sign or material object that represents/ refers to something.

²⁹*Syntagmatic* – Relationship that occurs within the elements in the construct.

³⁰*Synchronic* – Refers to something, as it exists at one point of time.

³¹*Paradigmatic* – Relationship between elements that can be substituted by each other.

³²*Diachronic* – The way in which, something has developed and evolved over time.

As the recordings/ transcripts of the IDIs and FGDs were analyzed to unearth the personal experiences and historical/ semantic³³ insights of all the respondents, the interpretations were categorized as per the researcher's objectives. From a syntagmatic perspective, considering the prescribed denotation as the primary sign, the various connotations interpreted by the audiences were identified and deconstructed to understand the underlying influences and context - drawing parallels to the social structure, daily life and activities of the local community. Relevant literature was consistently weaved in, to corroborate/ re-affirm these understandings. Furthermore from a paradigmatic perspective, to identify the original denotation or at least the earlier connotations of Purulia Chhau, the researcher also tracked the transformation at each level of connotative acquisition, from one generation to the other, as secondary signs. Whilst analyzing the FGDs and IDIs, the researcher further re-affirmed the explanations of the respondents, through sustained contact with them in the field.

In order to bring forth the trends, patterns and negotiations - the variables of the study have been mapped on a defining axis to unearth the primary influences, roles and functions, in regards to social, cultural, political, socio-economic and even technological aspects affecting the 'media- religion' relationship. Assigning separate sections for each sub-category, the findings in regards to each variable such as the masks, characters, etc., were separately presented from a syntagmatic as well as paradigmatic perspective simplified through qualitative graphs, charts and tables to indicate the trends and contributions. The origins of Purulia Chhau and its evolution trajectory were also elaborately illustrated.

³³ The study of meanings.

4.9. Reflections

As the adopted methodology significantly enabled the researcher to understand/decipher the overall socio-cultural setup, underlying influences and the inter/ intra-religious negotiations that are key factors in the everyday life of the people of Purulia - these negotiations were observed to not just play out through the cultural manifestations/ expressions of the region (predominantly Purulia Chhau), but also be effectuated by them. Whereas the in-depth interviews brought out diverse standpoints, they resonated upon key issues and revealed important information. As the pre-designed interview guidelines (see Annexure – 2) enabled the researcher to focus on questions relevant to each particular interviewee, a pleasant attitude ensured that the respondents were in their comfort zone whilst the engagements took place. Furthermore, the fact that the researcher speaks and understands their language and dialect enabled the locals to shed their inhibitions and enhance their circle of trust to accommodate the scholar.

Apart from an in-depth literature review having earlier contributed to the knowledge framework upon which this study was initiated, consistent visits/ revisits to relevant studies even during the fieldwork phase considerably refined the researcher's focus. Furthermore, apart from utilizing the administrative data facilitated by the DICA³⁴ in shortlisting, contact-building and logistics - the NCAA archives³⁵ accessed during this research enabled the researcher to develop a comparative frame of reference with earlier times; a holistic insight into the evolution of Purulia Chhau.

³⁴ Dept. of Information and Cultural Affairs, Purulia, West Bengal Govt.

³⁵ Audiovisuals of iconic performances by legends of earlier generations archived by the National Cultural Audio-Visual Archives, Govt. of India.

Sincere to the purpose and objectives of this study, a qualitative multi-methodology such as ethnosemiotics was ensued. Keeping intact a descriptive, interpretative and exploratory approach, the overall compatibility and resonance of the multiple methods was evident not just from the expediency/ practicality of the field exercise, but also from the findings and revealing insights. As is apparent from the extensive deliberations and results upheld in the forthcoming chapters, the objectives and purpose of this research were methodically fulfilled, nonetheless.

4.10. Summary

This chapter outlines the methodology that was adopted by the researcher in pursuit of achieving the objectives of the study (Section 1.4). Initiating with an overview of the process in brief, a methodological review on ethnosemiotics was also provided. Describing the method in which the study was conducted, a comprehensive description of the demographic listings, timeline of fieldwork and field map outlining the accessed interiors/ villages of the district, were elaborately provided. The selected troupes, audiences, and other key respondents, done on the basis of their relevance to the study was also listed, followed by the tools of data collection used and the process of analysis undertaken. Reinforcing the researcher's approach through relevant literature, the reasons for adopting a multi-methodology approach such as ethnosemiotics and its efficacy were justified here as well.

Chapter 5

An Ethnosemiotic Analysis of Purulia Chhau

5.1. Introduction

Whereas the folk media of a region endure to manifest the social, cultural, economic and religious verve of the people, they continue to resonate with the everyday life and struggles of the diverse inhabitants, even in contemporary times. As the trajectory of their development into seminal representations consistently reflect the evolution of their mother society, it is not just the inter-religious/ intra-religious negotiations, cultural infusions, enculturation and acculturation that are echoed, but also the transitions, strife, revolutions and class struggles. Having preserved a significant space within the ritualistic itinerary of tribal societies, these expressions continue to exist as substantial meaning-making conduits enabling the hermeneutic and phenomenological processes that shape the distinct regional context, character and identity of the people. Identifying these traits and gauging this phenomenon in the Purulia district of West Bengal, this chapter traces the origin and development of Purulia Chhau in the context of the social, cultural, political, economic and religious life of the people. Furthermore, apart from analyzing the data (interactions and archival information), expressing the researcher's reflections and interweaving them into a discussion laced with relevant literature - the chapter outlines the evolution of Purulia Chhau, not just as a chronicle of its inception and change over time, but also

as to ‘why’ it was initiated, ‘what’ maneuvered the changes and all in all, how it manifests the evolution of life in Purulia altogether.

5.2. The Origin of Purulia Chhau: The Shiv Gaajan

Given the contrasting arguments outlined by scholars (Awasthi, 1979; Banerjee, 1991; Chatterjee, 2019; amongst others), the origins of *Purulia Chhau* have remained uncertain ever since its discovery. In fact this uncertainty can also be gauged from the interactions with not just the community elders, but also the eminent artists and other key respondents directly associated with the expression. Even the origin of reference for the name ‘Chhau’ is uncertain. There are various conjectures that have been drawn though. Pronounced in three different ways ‘Chhau’, ‘Chhow’ and ‘Chhaaw’, whereas some respondents have stressed upon its etymology originating from *Chhauni* (depicting the barracks of warriors), some believe it depicts youth and youthfulness owing to the wild acrobatic performance form requiring strength and agility. Some respondents drew reference to *Chhau* meaning ‘six’, as a term encompassing the six different dance forms that combined to become Chhau. Some referred to it meaning *Chhaya*, depicting ‘shadows’ and stealth. Based on his ethnographic experience, Ashutosh Bhattacharya (1972) described it as a ‘masked dance theatre’ in the region³⁶, accentuating its collaborative/ combined nature.

As the researcher assessed through observation, thorough archival revisits and an evaluation of the in-depth interviews - it is the composite nature of *Purulia Chhau*

³⁶ See Awasthi (1979); Banerjee (1991).

encompassing various art forms, having diverse origins of their own that has contributed to the conflicting arguments in terms of its origin and inception. As described by various community elders interviewed across the district, although presently performed at various other events - traditionally Purulia Chhau performances have specifically been intertwined with the Shiv Gaajan festival. Traced back up until two hundred years ago, the Shiv Gaajan involves various ritualistic elements such as *Upvas*, *Bhokta naanch*, *Latan*, *Charak*; amongst others; Purulia Chhau performances being such an integral ritualistic element, as well. An initiative to reach out to Shiva and his various localized village avatars (different *Goram devtas*³⁷ referred to by different names at different villages) – Shiv Gaajan is an effort by the village folk to appease their God through their devotion and sacrifice.

Inflicting pain upon themselves as an avenue to this end, legends/ rumors of the *naraboli* (human sacrifices) conducted in the past, also exist. Celebrated over the last week of the Bengali month *Choitro* leading into *Poila Baisakh* (Bengali New year), it is believed that this festival marks the marriage of Shiva to Goddess *Kali*, the most popular manifestation of *Shakti*³⁸ after Goddess *Durga*, in Bengal. Whereas *Durga* is manifested as a motherly form of divinity, the philosophy associated with *Kali* is contrastingly shamanistic, associated with various elements of animism, *tantra* and black magic. A belief system that is revered in most of the rural areas of Bengal, the tribal/ animistic culture in Purulia sincerely resonates with such shamanistic beliefs and has genuinely led the people to further embrace this ritual. It is believed that ‘Gaajan’ literally emerges as a combined word that refers to a “village folk gathering” *ga* meaning village and *jan* meaning folk gathering.

³⁷ Indigenous avatars of Shiva such as Buro Baba, Durgeshwar; amongst others.

³⁸ Divine Female spiritual energy that manifests itself as various Goddesses of the Hindu pantheon.

Although still performed intensively, ceremoniously and ritualistically during the days of the Shiv Gaajan festival, Purulia Chhau performances have significantly spilled over the period before, as well as after. In the context of the Shiv Gaajan, the Purulia Chhau performances start at least a month before (March onwards) intensify in frequency during the Gaajan week and lead on until the *Rohin Din*, the day when the new harvest cycle begins with the sowing of new seeds of crop. Practically, given that most Chhau artists are also farmers, it enables them to divert their time and attention to their farming duties after this phase.

The Shiv Gaajan is upheld in a specific formalized sequence. The *bhoktas* (disciples of Shiva) ensure an *upavas* (fast) throughout the four day phase and engage in a rhythmic group dance holding cane sticks (*bhokta naanch*) and *latan* (rolling over on the ground) circumambulating the central village Shiv temple on each evening. They are clad in white *dhotis* and a *gamcha* (cotton cloth) around their head. They are otherwise bare-feet/ bare-bodied. The entire village is witness to this and the night is spent at the village *akkhara* (central space/ field) adorned by the masked deities and demons in performance - Purulia Chhau. Usually three troupes perform on each night at each venue invited over from different villages. Each troupe performs three narratives of thirty minutes each depicting the tales of Lord Shiva or his village avatars. Narratives disseminating the philosophy of their God, elucidating not just the logic and reason behind the festival, but also the rhetoric of Shiva's greatness and divinity. There are Chhau performances on every night not just during the final four days of Gaajan, but also over the month leading into it.

As per the ritualistic system, during the mornings of the four final days, Shiva and his wife Kali/ Parvati represented by two heavy blocks of Charak wood laden with vermillion are carried around the entire village in what is referred to as a *parikrama*, by the *bhoktas*. These are bathed in the adjoining river/ pond and then housed back at the central village temple. The *bhoktas* undertaking the ongoing Shiv Gaajan ritual are aided/ supported by all the other villagers who have been a *bhokta* in earlier times or intend to be so in future, in various ways. As the researcher witnessed at the Shiv Gaajan of 2021, at the ritual being conducted at the central temple in Chirka village (20 kms from Purulia town), some of the people aided the *bhoktas* by carrying them on their shoulders throughout this *parikrama* phase from the temple and back. The rest lay down of the ground as a human carpet/ chain so as to provide a cushioned road for the feet of the *bhoktas*. Furthermore, most villagers offer ready to reach food for the *bhoktas* so as to provide them with a constant supply of nutrition on the days before the *bhoktas* finally initiate fasting (*upavas*) over the last four days. In parallel to the activities throughout the period of Gaajan, the local priests undertake a vigorous recitation of *mantras* (Sanskrit chants invoking God), *yajnas* (fire based sacrificial practice) and *anjalis* (the prayers on behalf of each participating individual) inside the central village temple (dedicated to Shiva or *Goram Devta*).

Although the overall Shiv Gaajan is observed for four days at most places, at some venues it is held over weeks, leading to those four days. But then leading through to the last day of the Bengali new year, the Gaajan ritual ends with the *bhoktas* piercing their necks, shoulders and backs with metal hooks and then being suspended from a pole revolving around the central Charak tree or tall pole (70 feet tall in some venues) made out of its wood. The other end of the revolving pole is balanced by the weight

of the other *bhoktas* on a pedestal who are also tasked with constantly revolving the pole with the suspended man. This is known as *bhokta ghura*. Women are not allowed to be *bhoktas*. As the local temple priest (*pujari*) presiding over the ritual at *Dumdumi* village in the Purulia-2 district sub-division, Amulya Mahato, justified their exclusion –

“this is owing to various conjectures; most importantly their menstrual process being deemed as unholy/ dirty” he said.

Having being a *bhokta* himself during his youth and presided over the Gaajan ritual in Chharra for over twenty years now, he mentions –

“most men in this village have been *bhoktas* at least once, whatever their livelihood. It is only unmarried individuals who are allowed to be *bhoktas*; setting a youthful age-limit. The *bhoktas* are showered with gifts by the other village folk to convey their wishes and prayers (*kamanas*) to God (Goram/ Shiva) who is surely to take notice of their devotion, immense pain and self-harm. As you can see, when their body and necks turn blue just like *Nilkantha*³⁹, it is a sign of validation and blessings from God” he said.

Whilst each *bhokta* is revolved on the Charak pole/ tree 108 times (not all go through it so many times though), he distributes *batashas* (sugar lumps) upon the gathered crowd below waiting in anticipation of the *prasad* (blessing in the form of food). He is then brought down using a ladder after which he dances around the venue in a trance, reaches the central village temple and rings the large bell at its entrance (see

³⁹ Shiva is also referred to as *Nilkantha* owing to his blue neck. It is mentioned in the Shiv Puran that as Shiva is an immortal, he consumed all the poison of the world to save humanity, turning his neck blue.

Image 5.1 and 5.2). His blue neck (hemorrhaging) resembling Shiva makes for a holy sight for the devoted villagers who consider him to be God at this point and showcase their affection in touching his body as they would their deity. They next *bhokta* then makes his way up the ladder and the ritual continues.



Image 5.1: *Bhokta* Kush Mahato with hooks pierced into his body during Gaajan
(Photograph by the researcher, 2021)



Image 5.2: *Bhokta* Kush Mahato suspended from the Charak Pole during Gaajan
(Photograph by the researcher, 2021)

Deben Mahato; a community elder from Baligara village, mentions that each year there are at least twenty-five such *bhoktas* at each venue. Many of the *bhoktas* undertake this penance three or four times in their life, not just once. Rumor has it that there have been various instances of death of the *bhoktas* as well due to the internal hemorrhage suffered from the Charak event. These are not officially confirmed however. Animals (commonly goats) are sacrificed at each ritual venue as the final step after which the meat is distributed amongst the villagers. As Dulal Kalindi a community elder at Charra village mentioned, although none of his grand children were participating as *bhoktas* during that year, his family had donated one goat to be sacrificed at the ritual.

As Kush Mahato (featured in Image. 5.1 & 5.2), a *bhokta* at Charra village and also a Purulia Chhau artist with the ‘Late. Rasu Sahis Baligara Kisan Chhau Nritya Samiti’ (one of the sample troupes of this study), explained –

“It is extremely painful at the initial stage. But then, the body becomes numb after a certain point. I felt as if I was immersed in an ecstatic trance; a spiritual feat I have always dreamt of achieving. In fact not sleeping for three days, fasting during the period and the preliminary sequence of events over the past few days has prepared me for this difficult end phase. This was the first time for me, and now that I feel a sense of divine satisfaction in my heart, I will do this again in the years to come. It was a proud moment for not just me, but also my entire family. All the villagers had met me beforehand and explained their *kamanas* (prayers and wishes) to be conveyed to God. I remembered to convey all of them. I could not however perform with my troupe over the past few days.

We had many shows at various venues over the past few nights. I usually enact the role of Ganesha with my troupe and have been together for 3 years now. Considered an orientation into the folds of Chhau, all Chhau performers ensure to become a *bhokta* at least once in their lifetime. Not just all of the Chhau artists who are Hindus, but also those who follow other animistic faiths. All are ardent followers of Lord Shiva and his avatars; encompassing and overflowing beyond the barriers of religion” he said.

Kshitij Chandra Mahato, a community elder from *Dakshin Bohal* village in Purulia - 2 pointed out that whether Gaajan is celebrated for a month, week or less - it is the last four days that is most essentially the ritual. Strikingly, it is actually the Purulia Chhau performances that start from a month before that have ensured that the ritual is stretched and considered to have started much beforehand. Significantly, these performances are ‘crucial’ in establishing the context of the forthcoming ritual. As each narrative that is performed during these times revolves around Shiva, the villagers’ devotion is gradually rekindled and effectively revitalized. They are not just reminded of the significance of Shiva in their lives, but also of the importance of their engagement and contribution towards his appeasement as benefitting for the community. Upheld by the entire community, rather than fear, the emotion is one of love and respect towards Shiva. Something beyond religion.

As Kshitij specifically explained, the *bhoktas* engage in their role over the last four days only. Sequentially for a *bhokta*, day one starts with him consuming a highly nutritious meal (mangoes, jiggery, lentils and grams). This phase is known as *bar-upvas*. He must not just clean himself up, but also mentally prepare himself at this

phase (spiritual cleansing). Furthermore, he must not only fast from the next day onwards until he completes the ritual, but also deprive himself of sleep throughout. The Purulia Chhau performances of the night are thus integral for the *bhoktas*, so as to keep them motivated and reminded of the greatness of Shiva. The performances enhance the devotion of not just the *bhoktas*, but also the audiences furthermore. This was validated by various other community elders from various other villages in the region such as Baidyanath Mahato (Bodhgara village), Budhev Kumar Panday (Chirka village), Amulya Mahato (Dumdumi village), Manoranjan Kumar (Sattrra village) and Moloy Chowdhury (Purulia town). Every evening on all the final four days, as the *bhoktas* engage in *bhokta naanch* and *latan* (rolling over on the ground) circumambulating the temple, the stage for the Purulia Chhau performances are set up at the central *akkharas*. Apart from accentuating and rewarding the efforts of the *bhoktas* through announcements in between the performances - their presence amidst the audience at the end of the day is acknowledged by not just the crowds, but also the performers - ensuring a devoted gaze from all quarters nonetheless.

The Gaajan ritual is not only undertaken in the villages of the district, but also in the various neighborhoods of the central semi-urban Purulia town. As Raju Sutradhar, a *bhokta* at the Gaajan ritual at the Namopada neighborhood of Purulia town elaborates, the ritual has been upheld in their neighborhood for over a hundred years. Even his grandfather had been a *bhokta* during his time. He further specified that it is mandatory for the *bhoktas* to stay awake at night all throughout the ritual days. The Purulia Chhau performances during these nights portraying *Pouranic* narratives are thus a way of re-enforcing his devotion of the *bhoktas* towards Shiva – so that they

can bear the painful ordeal the next day when pierced with hooks and suspended from the Charak tree. The sleeplessness aids in this as it keeps the *bhoktas* delirious.

5.3. The Evolution of Purulia Chhau: A Paradigmatic Perspective

Whereas the Chhau based historiography emerging from the discourse between key respondents resonated in the context of religion and also Gaajan being the source/ origin of its inception - all the discursive participants agreed that there has been a paradigmatic transformation at various levels over time. An evolution that has accommodated/ synthesized various other elements into its fold. Retaining its original context/ core of religion and its ritualistic role in the Shiv Gaajan, various other social, cultural, religious, political, economic and technological aspects have also contributed towards its inception. Whereas the forthcoming chapter 5 elaborately outlines how the ‘negotiations’ and ‘undercurrents’ arising out of these have maneuvered the significant transformation of Purulia Chhau (micro perspective) over the ‘past decade’ - this section identifies/ outlines the contributing factors in regards to its birth and evolution (macro perspective).

As community elder and teacher Moloy Chowdhury elaborated, the overall presentation, core message and objectives of Purulia Chhau has undergone a major transformation over the decades. As he has been attending Purulia Chhau performances since his childhood along with his father and elder brothers and later went on to become a guest teacher at Sidhukano Birsa University sharing his

knowledge of Puruli Chhau amongst the youth – the timeframe of his experience with Purulia Chhau, extends over forty years.

Chhau was never so ‘decorative’ as it is today, Moloy mentioned. And furthermore, it was not just Chhau performances that used to be organized in isolation but various cultural extravaganzas/ hybrid events bringing together *Kirtan, Manasha Mangal, Ramyan Gaan, Jhumur, Balak Sangeet, Nachni* and other such cultural expressions of Purulia along with Chhau performances at the end. As Moloy had been intrigued by the folklore/ stories associated with Purulia Chhau that his father and grandfather would often tell him about - attending these events had become a ritualistic affair for him, all his life. Not just for him, but also for most members of his community based in Purulia town, the semi-urban center of the rural/ tribal culture dominated district of Purulia. Acknowledging that the cultural landscape of Purulia had majorly influenced his way of life and contributed towards his upbringing, the folktales associated with these cultural expressions have genuinely served as educational/ moral conduits shaping his understanding of society and his beliefs. For him rather, more than the formal education received in school, it was the education that he derived from his exposure to the cultural motifs of Purulia that has truly shaped his life and living.

Moloy underscores that whereas Panchakot Raj royals’ (Raja Jyoti Prasad Singh Deo; 1901-38, Raja Kalyani Prasad Singh Deo; 1938-45, Raja Shankari Prasad Singh Deo; 1945-56, and Raja Bhubaneshwari Prasad Singh Deo; 1956-72) love for Purulia Chhau was evident through myths surrounding Purulia Chhau performances sponsored by these royals of Kashipur, their patronage had majorly contributed towards the transformation of Purulia Chhau from entertainment based tomfoolery (a

recreational affair that was devoid of rhetoric), into an institutionalized structure/ conduit disseminating narratives from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas and the Vedas. The Zamindari raj rulers of neighboring Burdwan (Maharajadhiraj Bahadur Sir Bijay Chand Mahtab; 1887-1941, Maharajadhiraj Bahadur Sir Uday Chand Mahtab 1941-55) were also major contributors to this. Analyzing the major transformation that was effectuated by them, the guiding objective that seemed to be at the core of their initiative was to utilize the popular expression as a conduit for the dissemination of the religious philosophy of their choice - Hinduism. Given that the tribal subjects occupying the region were traditionally/ largely animistic in their beliefs, this was a conscious methodical effort at proselytization.

As Moloy Chowdhury elucidated, although the origins of Purulia Chhau were somewhat vague before the intervention of the royals, traces of various other indigenous expressions of the region (some of which are now obsolete or nearing obsolescence) can still be identified despite the recent commercial overhaul of Chhau's identity. Strikingly, the common context/ factor that has somewhat been preserved throughout its evolutionary journey has been 'religion'. Moloy stresses that although presently performed during harvest celebrations, *melas* (fairs), and other casual events, Purulia Chhau performances being ritualistically intertwined with the Shiv Gaajan festival is a vindication of its religious origin; nonetheless. In fact, Chhau was not just an entertainment-based contributor, but always a crucial element of the holy process of Gaajan, observed in the month of April every year.

Moloy opines that although associated as a ritualistic element of the *Gaajan* festival, Puulia Chhau was not expressed in its present form ever since the beginning. It

emerged as a culmination of various other elements or rather indigenous expressions ensured during the Gaajan, as well as otherwise. One such key element within Gaajan, was the *Kaap Jhaap*. *Kaap Jhaap* was the ritualistic element of dressing up as Gods and Demons, especially by children as a form of entertainment aimed at supporting the *bhoktas* to divert their minds away from the pain of their penance. Whereas the adults were engaged as *bohurupis* (people wearing costume and makeup to appear as Gods such as Shiva and Kali) maintaining a dignified persona enacting the prescribed kinesics, characteristic of the God being depicted - the children engaged in *Kaap Jhaap*; a similar costumed/ depictive expression of the Gods playfully engaged in skips, jumps, somersaults, etc. All in all, expressing their lighthearted mischievous nature. As we perceive at present, Purulia Chhau is a refined manifest having major influences of *Kaap Jhaap*, designed within the trajectory of the scripted religious narratives. As presented in Section 4.4, the researcher has conducted an in-depth analysis of Purulia Chhau as a performance text to confirm these assumptions and those that follow. Only those that have been confirmed have been mentioned here though. As the *bohurupis* engaged in blessings and children engaged in *Kaap Jhaap* are a common sight in all the Gaajan venues in Purulia, even today – comparative references of similarity could easily be drawn.

Whereas Chhau yet continues to serve a mutually beneficial relationship with Gaajan, it has eventually developed a specific religious as well as non-religious itinerary throughout the year, when it is performed. As per their contemporary ritualistic calendar, Chhau performances are upheld in the month of January to mark the auspicious *Makar Sankranti*⁴⁰ and *Tusu Parbo* (a ritual dedicated to the indigenous

⁴⁰ A festival dedicated to Surya; the sun God.

deity *Tusu* considered to be a folk avatar of Goddess Durga). Rigorous practice sessions of the Chhau troupes and overnight performances at village *akharas*⁴¹ are frequent during this time. In February, the popular ‘*Jhumur Utsav*’⁴² is upheld. Although not religious/ ritualistic, Chhau performances are upheld here. A platform for the revival of the cultural expressions, performances of the various other art forms of Purulia (*Jhumur, Natua, Nachni, Bhadu, Tusu*; amongst others) are also presented at the venue in the large fair ground in Purulia town.

Next in the yearly ‘ritualistic’ sequence, Chhau performances are resumed for Shiv Gaajan and held throughout the months of March and April. This is when Purulia Chhau plays its most significant role as earlier described; it’s perceived origin. Corresponding to the *Chaitra* festival encompassing the *Shiv Gaajan* ritual, tribal festivals such as *Disum Sendra* and *Baha* as well as *Ram Navami*, the end of the festivities are marked by the *Rohin Din* which initiates the sowing of seeds; the beginning of the agricultural cycle. Post the *Rohin Din*, during the short but vigorous farming season, cultural expressions such as Chhau are discontinued until July as the artists focus towards farming, or other means to a livelihood as migrant laborers to Kolkata and other cities of India.

Corresponding to the holy month of *Shravan* (mid July to mid August), a period again dedicated to Shiva, Purulia Chhau performances are once again resumed to set the religious context in the minds of the people. These performances are integral to motivate the *Kanwaryas* who carry a considerable weight of water in *ghots* (clay/ brass containers) suspended from a *baank* (a balanced bamboo pole) placed on their

⁴¹ A part of a field that is cordoned using bamboos, into a central rectangular space at ground level.

⁴² A festival to celebrate the culture of Purulia, organized by Banglanatok.com

shoulders. The devotees from Purulia travel to the Hoogly district by train, they fill up their *ghots* with water from the Hoogly river (a tributary of the Ganga) at *Nimai Chitto* ghat in Baidyabati, and then walk bare-feet for 36 kilometers to reach Tarakeshwar temple (one of the holiest Shiv temples in Eastern India) to pour the water on the Shiv *linga*. Although carrying so much weight for hours is an extremely tedious task (carrying the *baank* laden with two water filled *ghots*), millions of people from all over North India engage in this ritual and converge upon this temple on any of the Mondays during this month. For the *kanwaryas* venturing from Purulia, experiencing the Purulia Chhau performances before they set out acts as a motivating factor, genuinely preparing their mindset for the devout/ difficult journey dedicated to their God. As Anjan Mitra; a *kanwariya* and Chhau performer who is a resident of Purulia town describes –

“Shiva is at peace when the water from the Ganga is poured on him. As we see in the Chhau performances, even great warriors and other Gods have engaged in this practice at least once in their lives. The narratives of the Chhau performances are like a moral revision that reminds us of our religious duties and place in this world”, he said.

During this *Shravan* phase, Purulia Chhau performances are also held corresponding to the indigenous *Manasha Puja* (dedicated to the local snake goddess; considered as a daughter of Shiva) and tribal festivals such as *Erokh Sim* and the *Karam Parab*. The narratives performed revolve around the *Goram devtas* or Shiva.

After a brief gap during the rainy season spanning over end-July, August and September, frequent Purulia Chhau performances are ensured over the months of October and November, corresponding to the autumn harvest, *Durga Puja*, *Vijay Dashami*, *Raavan Shokh*, *Bhadu Parbo*⁴³, *Kali puja*, *Diwali* and the tribal *Jathela* festival. Regular overnight performances at village *akharas* are also ensued during this time for the ‘entertainment’ rather than spiritual catharsis of the villagers. These entertainment-based performances continue into December until the harsh winter sets in.

As earlier described in Chapter 4, Section 4.4 (Fieldwork), the researcher has ensured to span out his fieldwork in the villages of the Purulia district as per the yearly schedule/ itinerary of Purulia Chhau (ritualistic as well as general). Given that the narratives performed by the Chhau troupes are as per the context of the ritual/ situation/ time around which the performances are happening, there is a diverse range of narratives augmenting Purulia Chhau into a diverse medium/ conduit having various distinct identities.

In the performances at *melas* (fairs), college fests, urban settings etc., the role of religion is not done away with though. It is carefully shifted from central to peripheral. Furthermore, the religious/ non-religious elements incurred from the other contexts in which Chhau is performed around the year can also be perceived at its renditions at the Shiv Gaajan, to a certain extent. A rebounding influence upon its core. As it has also become a vehicle for protest, social messages (*samajik palas*), political rhetoric and cultural countenance - Chhau has evolved as per the trajectory of

⁴³ Indigenous festivals of Purulia.

the history of the region, nonetheless. Apart from accommodating the context of various rituals that are time specific, Purulia Chhau has also accommodated various non-religious syntagmatic elements, which are essential from a synchronic standpoint. All in all, emerging as a composite sign system projecting a holistic/ paradigmatic context that extends over time.

As Moloy elaborates –

“Purulia Chhau was earlier devoid of masks. Just like it’s counterpart from Mayurbhanj, Odisha – the performers were dressed up in costumes and wore make-up to resemble the characters they intended to portray. Much like the *Bohurupis* and *Kaap Naanch* dancers. Eventually, the rulers of Purulia (Panchakot Raj) who were Hindus, effectuated a major change to this presentation. As it was evident to them that Purulia Chhau was an efficient conduit as perceived from its role in the Shiv Gaajan – they identified its potential as a vehicle for the substantiation of the religion of their choice, amongst the subjects. Thus, to enhance the dissemination capacity of Purulia Chhau, they ensured some significant steps. Providing land to the *Sutradhars* (community of artisans and carpenters) of Burdwan (the neighboring region) – as they migrated to Purulia, they were tasked with constructing large, evocative yet lightweight masks for Chhau, depicting the Gods and Goddesses as per the narratives that the royals wanted to leverage. This not only rendered more clarity towards the interpretation of the narratives, but also endowed the Purulia Chhau performances with greater impact; bringing in a sense of reliability, believability and enhanced devoutness. The people were somewhat provoked to

believe that the deities of Hinduism themselves have descended upon the people” he said.

But then, even before the masks were accommodated within the foray, the raw form of Purulia Chhau witnessed at the earlier Shiv Gaajan rituals had traces/ influences of various other contributing elements. Traced by some scholars as a martial dance of the *Santhal* and *Kurmi* tribes (Kaul & Pillai, 2005, as cited in Chatterjee, 2019), the various elements (dance, music, theater; amongst others) that together culminate into Purulia Chhau have different sources of influence. Whereas the ‘costumes’ have significant resemblance drawing an origin of influence from the *bohurupi* and *kaap naanch* traditions – the ‘characters’ were inherited from the narratives of the Ramayana, Mahabharata and Puranas. In fact, some of the characters were localized/ animistic/ anthropomorphic accentuations accommodating the localized reference into the larger contexts. Whereas the ‘treatment’ in terms of disseminating information (religious or otherwise) synthesized various local dance forms, martial arts and theatre – the ‘presentation’ itself can be traced to have significantly modified over time.

As eminent Chhau artist Brindavan Kumar described - Purulia Chhau was in the form of *Ekaira Naanch* and *Mel naanch* in earlier times; solo and group acts devoid of narratives. The performers used to perform somersaults (*ulfa*), leaps (*topka*), melodramatic walks (*chaals*) and other choreographed animal-based movements to present a stunning display combining the local martial arts (*parikhanda, paikali*) and the local tribal folk dances (*pata naanch, santali, nachni*; amongst others) and ‘nature’ itself, to deliver a vibrant expression that was ‘shocking’ or ‘stunning’ rather than telling a story. As Kumar upheld, it was Chhau icon and guru Rasu Sais who first

initiated the concept of presenting narratives in a theatrical way at the behest of the then king; Shankari Prasad Singh Deo of the Panchakot Raj. Drawing considerable reference from the *Jatra* (theatre) art form of Bengal, even as the melodramatic method of presenting narratives was accommodated, the earlier narrative based renditions were however devoid of any element of vocal narration or dialogue. In present times, *bhasyakars* or ‘narrators’ use a microphone to set/ explain the context and plot of each narrative that is presented. Although there are no dialogues even in present times - over the years, it is through the lyrical *Jhumur* songs (religious as well as non-religious) that the *rasas* (emotions) of each performing character are accentuated at regular intervals. A confluence of one of the oldest folk music forms with such a vibrant masked dance theatre. Eventually even *kirtans* (religious) have made their way into the presentations. The music is not just a combination of the local musical instruments though. Apart from the local made *dhamasa* (a skin based metal drum to be played with curved sticks) and *marui* (wind instrument that resembles a *shehnai*) - large instruments such as the *madan bheri*, *singa*; amongst others, which were used by the Mughal army during war, were also traced within Chhau. In fact the *dhamasa* used at present is a shrunken descendant of the *nagra* (large/ loud war drums) earlier used by the Mughal army. As Suphol Chandra Rajwaad, the famed *dhamasa* player earlier associated with the iconic Chhau troupe ‘Late. Rasu Sahis Baligara Kisan Chhau Nritya Samiti’, reiterated, other war based instruments such as *madan bheris* and *singas* (large trumpets) were also earlier used; now discontinued due to their inconvenient size. Legendary *dhol* player Babulal Sais, who used to be associated with various Purulia Chhau troupes in his younger days, also echoed this adding that the frequent urban shows of present times entail long distance travel and thus require smaller/ convenient musical instruments.

In the course of Purulia Chhau's evolution, it was only when the masks were brought in that it significantly took shape as an evident religious conduit. Before this, it was just a peripheral supportive element within a religious ritual (Shiv Gaajan). As the people were presented with characters resembling the deities at their temples enacting the heroic tales that they had heard of throughout their childhood - Purulia Chhau emerged as a powerful medium of influence. This not only enhanced its role within the Shiv Gaajan in terms of setting the context, etc., but also enhanced the overall Shiv Gaajan ritual itself. The devotees, audiences and most importantly the *bhoktas* were finally provided a conduit effectuating the 'mediation of meaning' in regards to 'why' the religious ritual is taking place. Whereas the inclusion of masks into the tradition of Purulia Chhau genuinely ensured the possibility of telling stories using characters, the faces of the Gods depicted as masks bore a striking resemblance to the manifestations in the *patachitra* paintings of Burdwan, the place of origin of the *sutradhars* (carpenters who took up the role as mask-makers) of Charida village. As explained further in Section 4.5.2, this inclusion was a conscious effort by then Panchakot Raj king Shankari Prasad Singh Deo who wanted to utilize Chhau to disseminate religious narratives.

As Moloy chronologically explained, the overall development of Chhau can be categorized into three consecutive stages – 1) *Ekoira Naanch* (solo performance), 2) *Mel Naanch* (team based performance; choreographed and orchestrated) and 3) *Pala Naanch* (theatrical presentation of narratives/ stories; mostly religious). The *Ekoira naanch* and *Mel Naanch* renditions are still upheld within the entire *Pala Naanch* performances of present times though. Whereas the *Ekoira Naanch* segments present a platform for the best performer/ icon/ guru of each troupe to showcase his talent - the *Mel Naanch* segments provide an opportunity to the troupes to showcase their co-

ordination, tightness and harmony; matching in costume, symmetrical in height. These segments are intertwined within the narratives (*palas*) to focus, accentuate, amplify, navigate, epitomize and exemplify; amongst others - as per the conceptualization/ direction of the troupe leader (*dala neta*). In fact, four distinct *Gharanas* (sub-genres) had emerged 1) Baghmundi, 2) Jhalda, 3) Arsha and 4) Bundwan. A geographical cluster of troupes in each case, the subtle differences in the everyday lives of the people of each sub-region had been reflected in this distinctness, one may say. But then, in recent times there has been a re-unification of these *gharanas* due to the commercial, technological, socio-political and inter-cultural undercurrents.

Over the years, apart from various emerging contexts and the elements of other art forms contributing to Purulia Chhau, the arenas/ venues of the performances have also diversified. Earlier performed beside the Charak tree during the Shiv Gaajan opposite the central Shiv temple – presently, various *akkharas* or centrally located fields/ clearings cordoned by bamboos are used to present the performances. These venues present Chhau performances in the context of *melas*, fairs, and other such entertainment-based events though. When performed in the context of religion (Gaajan, Durga Puja, *Shravaan*, etc.), the performances still happen at the space opposite the central Shiv temple. Patronized by the royals of the region, Chhau performances were also organized at the courtyards of the royal palaces and the mansions owned by the *Zamindars*.

In recent times, given the rising popularity of Chhau amongst the urban audiences, performances are frequently organized in auditoriums and *maachas* (stages constructed out of bamboo and ply) in cities across India and abroad, on occasions

such as annual college festivals, celebrations and cultural presentations. But then, whereas this has enhanced its visibility amongst international audiences - it has also contributed to diminish, degrade and demarcate its identity by taking away its root context and objective. A contradiction to its recognition as intangible cultural heritage of humanity by UNESCO, as earlier mentioned. But then, there is a significant upside to this, not just in terms of commercial aspects, but also in terms of religion, culture and heritage; amongst others. This has been explained comprehensively in the forthcoming chapters

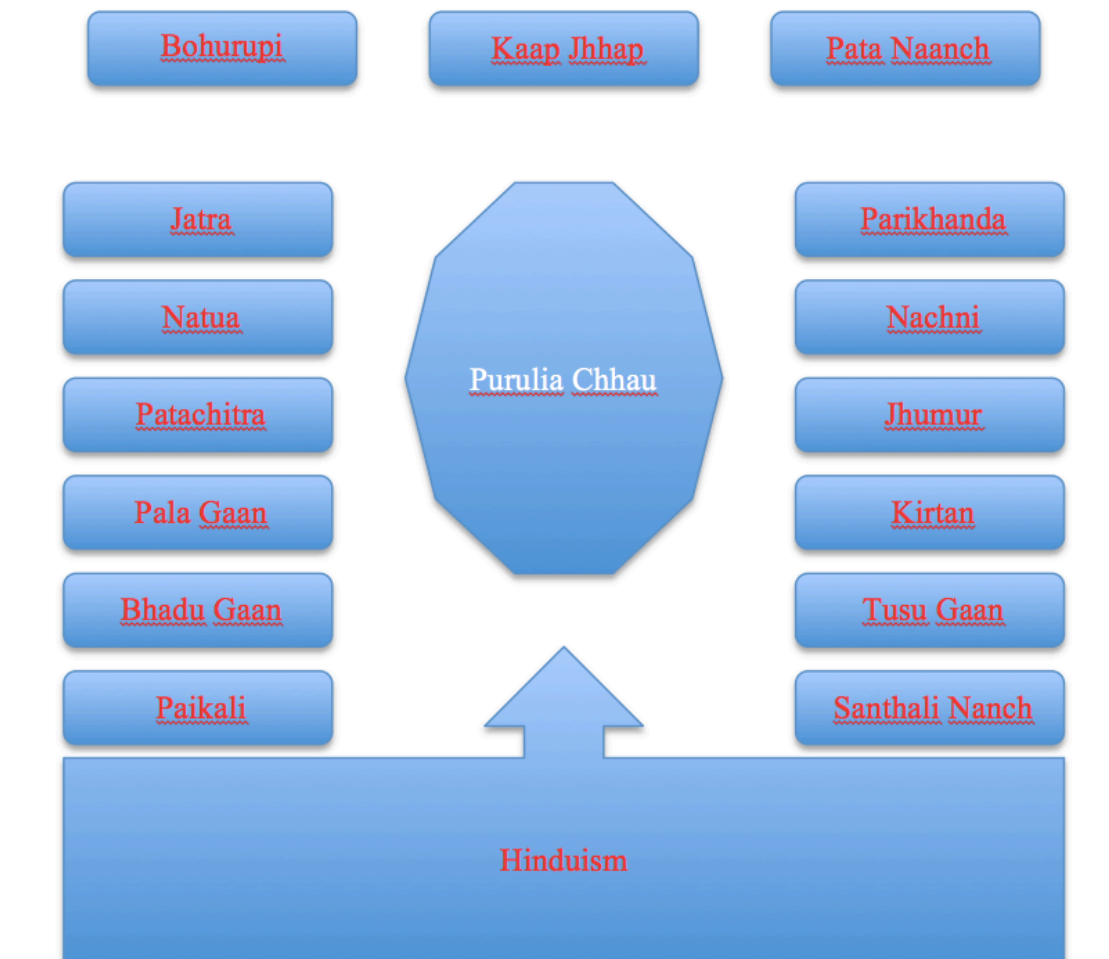


Fig. 5.1: The Folk Expressions that have merged into Purulia Chhau

5.4. Chhau Types and Genres

As such, the broader term ‘Chhau’ refers to a *tridhara* (three types) and is expressed in the *adivasi* areas of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Odisha, bordering each other - Purulia Chhau (West Bengal) Seraikella Chhau (Jharkhand) and Mayurbhanj Chhau (Odisha); as was earlier showcased in Fig. 1.1 (Chapter 1). Specific to Purulia Chhau, even the four *gharanas* of Purulia Chhau that emerged prior to their re-unification (Baghmundi, Jhalda, Arsha and Bundwan) had further classifications within - representative of the negotiations at a micro/localized level. Although Seraikella Chhau is masked just like its Purulia counterpart, the fact that the Prince Suwendu of Seraikella was himself a passionate performer rather than an intrigued audience is reflected in the refined presentation and the graceful, semi-classical nature that developed within Seraikella Chhau (Awasthi, 1979). Although the focus was common (disseminating religious narratives) - the central character was Vishnu/ Krishna rather than Shiva or other indigenous Gods as is the case in Purulia. Utilized as a vehicle of prayer based expression by the royals themselves rather than an avenue to proselytize or contextualize religious rituals - the puritan approach of the Jharkhand/ Odisha princes ensured the preservation of a refined vibe to Seraikella Chhau, in contrast to Purulia Chhau, over the decades. But then, devoid of such an elite intervention safeguarding its core - the aggressive and raw identity of Purulia Chhau is a genuine reflection of the everyday life of the indigenous people of the region, rather than a controlled/ doctored manifest. Although utilized as a communication medium and ensuring the inclusion of masks to revitalize the narratives, the Baghmundi rulers weren’t as involved as the neighboring royals in maneuvering the growth of their respective folk art. Strikingly different, Mayurbhanj Chhau is devoid of masks

altogether. Ensuring the common objective as a vehicle for the dissemination of religious narratives, it is performed in groups brandishing swords and shields, choreographed as a martial display rather than a story divulged.

At a micro level, the contrast within the *gharanas* of Purulia Chhau itself, was mostly narrative-based. Whereas Bagmundi Chhau was more inclined towards mainstream religious narratives emerging from the Shiv Purana, Ramayana and Mahabharata – Jhalda Chhau was very experimental in regards to commercializing and inculcating shorter performances. The use of Bollywood music and improvising with current affairs based narratives was also rampant in this variant. Whereas both Arsha Chhau and Bundwan Chhau were more inclined towards presenting religious narratives with an indigenous twist/ connect - the Bundwan performers were significantly bent on inculcating various instances of *ekoira naanch* (solos) within the *palas* (narratives). Given that Bagmundi and Jhalda are quite semi-urban compared to the Bundwan and Arsha regions, the steering negotiations had been strikingly different. But then in recent times, these *gharanas* have infused and unified beyond recognition - as has been discussed in further in the forthcoming chapters.

5.5. Purulia Chhau as a Composite Sign System: A Syntagmatic Perspective

In the course of its evolution, as Purulia Chhau has emerged as a representation of life in the region, each element such as the masks, costumes, etc., that was accumulated over time, now ensues a significant role as a ‘syntagm’; each serving a specific purpose. As all of these elements genuinely collaborate in harmony, they collectively

take shape as Purulia Chhau; a vibrant communication conduit having powerful impact. Upon a casual observation, whereas these elements may be categorized as technical contributors or tools working together to facilitate the projection of the intended messages, the researcher observed that there is a sort of contextualization that is driven by these that is also manifested as an additive. Given the specific goals/intentions with which these elements were included, they continue to influence the meaning making process. Although there are conscious efforts by the performance units to project their selected stories, it is striking to note that these localized accumulated elements significantly accentuate the message, lacing it with the ethos and spirit of the region itself. Thus, it is not just the adopted message/ narrative that is communicated, but also the overall vibe/ sense of the region as a whole. Whereas the narrative or rhetoric can be directly interpreted by the audiences, the historical underpinnings, cultural vibes, socio-political aura, etc., emanating from the region are also subtly manifested; implanted within the machinations of the acquired elements. Deconstructing Purulia Chhau into its synchronic elements and analyzing each as a contributor to the performance based text, in this section the researcher has identified the contextualizing role and influence of each element.

5.5.1. Narratives and Characters

Catering to the interpretative urge of the audiences, Purulia Chhau has consistently emerged to become a meaning making medium, upholding narratives; religious or otherwise. Post the phase of *ekoira naanch* and *mel naanch*, recent times have ensured a demand for story based descriptive formats. Although there have been considerable experimentation in regards to the *palas* (narratives) initiated by the

creative urges, political influences, compatible modern contexts, etc., religion remains the central framework though. As Chhau guru and icon Brindavan Kumar explained, the Gods and Goddesses are like the protagonists of the stories. Just like the star actor of the film industry, it is their presence that ensures the success of any script. A narrative without Shiva or Vishnu or Krishna or Durga is like a film without a leading actor.

As legendary Chhau icon and guru Rasu Sais initiated the concept of presenting narratives in a theatrical way, not only did he borrow considerable reference from the *Jatra* (theatre) tradition of Bengal in regards to the treatment, but also in terms of presenting heroic figures and icons. Given the large repository of Hindu mythology, it presented the ideal stock; also resonating with the proselytizing intentions of the then king. As the presentations started including the peripheral narratives that were religious but yet less popular, the need for a *bhasyakar* (narrator) explaining the proceedings was realized. Just as melodramatic in diction as the enactments itself, the vocal narrations and voiced-over dialogues allowed the troupes to genuinely navigate around the predesigned plots/ institutional narratives in their own unique ways. Diverting into sub-plots where Shiva was showcased alongside local anthropomorphic characters, defeating local demons and even politicians – the localized cultural context was significantly upheld, intertwined with the mainstream. In various instances only the characters are drawn from Hindu mythological epics, projecting them within enactments of original/ localized scripts. Often divergent from the mainstream religious meta-narratives - apart from characters representing icons of animistic reverence, heroes, forefathers and saints - infused manifestations of local/ regional conflicts, resolved by mainstream Gods are frequently depicted. Strikingly,

sometimes characters such as Mahishasur and Raavan are also depicted as heroic. Resonating with the marginalization of such characters within the mainstream narratives of Aryan origin, the tribal find various instances of similarity with their own state of marginalization; generation after generation. As Brindavan further validated, the crowds cheer the loudest at the appearance of Mahishasur, even in his role as an antagonist.

Whereas the scripts based on the meta-narratives of institutional Hinduism are referred to by locals as *pouranic palas*, these divergent scripts that are sometimes deviant from the mainstream narratives but yet religious, are also considered in the same category. The Vedas/ Puranas as per the people's belief and understanding, may thus also accommodate local beliefs, rather than just mainstream Hindu discourse. Also, it is interesting to note that in contemporary times, one finds the presence of a considerable number of non-religious scripts and generalized social narratives (*samajik palas*) that have emerged.

As Bikal Rajak, a famed script writer from Sitalpur (Purulia - 2) associated with various Chhau troupes over the past three decades, described, he has composed various *palas* (narratives) experimenting with 'conflicts' and 'resolutions' - but it was always essential to ensure an underlying religious 'exposition', nonetheless. Every narrative, *pouranic* or *samajik*, must derive from the renowned pool of deities or characters, in order to strike a chord with the audiences. Thus, there is a set piece/ formula/ structure, around which the plots are usually rendered. He explained that the exposition must always have a localized setting introducing a powerful protagonist such as Shiva, Vishnu, Parashuram, Ram, Durga; amongst others. Although most

troupes strive for unique renditions and innovate, the exposition is usually standardized, even in modern times. As Agniswaran (nd) had observed, the vast repository of mythological characters encompassing gods and demons had provided opportunities to the different Chhau troupes to innovate and present an expression that is unique to their unit. But then as Bikal pointed out, it is in the ‘conflict’ and the ‘resolution’ that the troupes innovate. The exposition is usually retained. As the antagonistic demons such as Mahishasur, Tarakasur, Raavan, Visana Rakshasi; amongst others, are introduced through the conflict, it sets up the premise for the ‘good versus evil dichotomy’; a common factor in most narratives. The ‘resolution’ generally brings forth the victory of good over evil, i.e., the Gods defeating the demons. Although the ‘conflicts’ are derived from the institutional meta-narratives of Hindu mythology - in the course of experimentation by the troupes, various ‘treatments’ of the same have emerged. The conflicts have been re-contextualized.

For example, as Bikal explained -

“Given the popularity of antagonistic characters such as Mahishasur and Raavan, providing a heroic touch to their enactment garners a positive response from the audiences. In fact, back-stories and anecdotes revealing the bravery, benevolence and devotion of such characters are also presented. Providing a background of how the demonic antagonists were victims of circumstance provoking them to become evil genuinely resonates with the audiences. It is not only the emotion of anger or vengeance that is represented through the demons, but also despair, sorrow, devotion, bravery and repentance.”

Whereas most troupes have their own script-writers (usually the *dala netas* themselves), they also are in the practice of buying scripts from veterans such as Bikal, who have in-depth knowledge of Hindu mythology. It is through attending the regular *Ramayan pat/ Mahabharat pat* (reading sessions) held at the village temples in the evenings that ideas for the palas (narratives) are gathered. These reading sessions are a ritualistic affair, nonetheless. It is not just the Chhau artists who attend, but also most residents of the respective village. That too on a regular basis. Thus, the audiences are already aware of the stories enacted to a certain extent. Adding to their perception, the theatrical rendition of Purulia Chhau ensures to further impact their imagination by igniting a realistic frame of reference in their minds. An instance when their Gods come to life and perform miraculous feats, as expected. This genuinely amplifies the impression/ impact of the reading sessions. Furthermore, given that lower caste Hindus, tribal animists and women are allowed only partial access at temples/ reading sessions, the Purulia Chhau performance venues embrace them within from their peripheral position – ensuring that they are even more engrossed than others; learning through experience.

As Bikal described, in present times, most performances start with a *jhumur* song followed by an orchestral music rendition after which an *abir bhab* (introductory walkthrough of all the characters in the narrative; a trailer/ advertisement of what shall follow) is presented. Whereas the lyrics and emotion attached with the *jhumur* song sets the context of the plot and characters, the outburst of music announces the beginning call for all across the village. The *abir bhab* is essential to invoke an interest after which the narrative actually starts. As earlier mentioned, the narrative shall always start with an ‘exposition’ to lay the foundation, followed by a ‘conflict’

and then its ‘resolution’. Bikal upheld that this format was significantly adopted from the theatrical *Natua* folk tradition of the region. The legendary Chhau guru Rasu Sais; credited with having initiated the *pala naanch* (narrative based rendition) format of Purulia Chhau, was also an acclaimed *Natua* artist, in those times (1960s). The characterization and narration rendered in Purulia Chhau was more influenced by the *Jatra* theatrical tradition though. A list of *palas* (narratives) also upheld/ validated by the researchers interactions with other eminent/ veteran artists such as Padmashree Anil Sutradhar (Charida village), Chhau guru Duryodhan Mahato (Khatjhuri village), Chhau Ustad Binoydhar Kumar (Bamunia village), Chhau Guru Brindavan Kumar (Kochahatu village) and popular pala-writer Durgacharan Sais (Dubcharka village) – and given Bikal Rajak’s professional association with most of the leading troupes of the region over the past decades - he upheld that by far, the most popular/ frequent narratives performed in Purulia Chhau are the following -

Mahishasur Mardini (The Death of the Mahishasur)

A narrative upholding the rhetoric of women’s empowerment, it portrays Devi Durga as the protagonist, who along with her children; Ganesha, Kartik, Saraswati and Lakshmi, slay the invincible demon king Mahishsur who could never have been defeated by any ‘man’, God or otherwise. Wife of Shiva, Durga; the mother of his children, fights the battle as a representative of all the Gods and human kind and emerges victorious with the help of Vishnu who manifests himself as her *bahan* (abode/ vehicle), a lion on which she arrives. Each character is also accompanied by their own respective *bahans* - Ganesha, along-with a mouse; Kartik, along-with a

peacock; Saraswati, along-with a swan; Lakshmi along-with an owl and Mahishasur; who emerges from within a *kada* (buffalo). This *pala* although most relevant during the Durga Puja festival in India, is performed all throughout the year. In rural as well as urban settings. It has emerged to become the most popular/ flagship narrative of Purulia Chhau. Whereas extended versions including/ showcasing the spinoffs/ anecdotes of the strength, turmoil, powerful enablement of Mahishasur due to his devotion, as well as his evil deeds are frequently enacted at the village settings, the urban performances of the *pala* are shorter renditions outlining only the central structure and climax presenting the victory of Durga over Mahishasur. The kinesics, choreography and music of each character are specific though, as has been explained in Section 5.5.2.

Parashuram er Matri Hatya (Parashuram Murders his Mother)

Considered to be the sixth re-incarnation of Lord Vishnu, the journey of the moral reform of Parashuram from a *dashyu* (dacoit) into a warrior saint and how he is compelled to kill his mother at the behest of his father, and then re-incarnate her, is showcased in this popular narrative (adopted from the Vishnu Puran). In appreciation of his devotion, his weapon - the *Vidyudhabi* (axe), being bestowed upon him by Shiva is also upheld. Whereas the extended performances of this narrative of Parashuram also showcase these mythological incidents - the urban performances are otherwise centered upon the act of him killing his mother. Innovating upon the belief of Parashuram being a *chiranjeevi* (immortal) some troupes even enact the prophecy of him emerging as the Guru of Kalki, the tenth avatar of Vishnu prophesized to

arrive at the end of the *Kali yug* (the mythological ‘present era’ in time, when evil forces reach their peak) and destroy the world.

Tarakasur Bodh (The Death of Tarakasur)

A narrative yet again upholding the rhetoric of the victory of good over evil, the central plot revolves around the death and destruction caused by the mythological demon Tarakasur and his eventual death and defeat at the hands Kartik, the son of Shiva and Durga. Representing the good, apart from characters representing various indigenous Gods, *munis* (sages), *rishis* (saints) and other anthropomorphic individuals, the protagonist of this narrative is Kartik. Tarakasur is the antagonist. Based on the epic *Kumarasambhava* written by Kalidasa, extended versions showcasing the birth of Kartik and his training process to become a warrior is also showcased in rural settings.

Visana Rakshasi Bodh (The Death of Visana Rakshasi)

An anecdotal adaptation from the *Mahabharata*, this *pala* is an acrobatic extravaganza encompassing various anthropomorphic characters, fearsome demons and the Pandavas (Arjun, Bhim, Yudhishtir, Nakul and Sahadev). Setting up an exposition through the incidents leading to the beautiful *sakhi* (maiden) Visana being cursed into becoming a *rakshasi* (gigantic demon witch), by an angry sage for being lustful and thus distracting his meditation – the conflict is rendered out through the battle

between the Pandavas and Visana's various avatars including a crocodile god/ demon and also a large gigantic ape. The acrobatics are enacted by Visana's demonic aids as well as the Pandavas showcasing their war-based skills. The performance ends with the death and defeat of Visana, at the hands of the powerful Bhima. The iconic Purulia Chhau troupe 'Late. Rasu Sahis Baligara Kisan Chhau Nritya Samiti', now lead by Rasu Sais's grandson Ustad Nripen Sais is famous for their high-flying rendition of this difficult *pala*, as was also witnessed by the researcher at a field at the Badaldi intersection, near Polma village, in the Barabajar block of Purulia on 14th January, 2021, on the occasion of Makar Sankranti.

Manasha Mangal (Invocation of Manasha)

This *pala* is adapted from various segments of the oldest of the *Mangal Kabyas*⁴⁴ based on how Manasha (the local snake goddess) ensured the ritual of her worship by setting a harsh example out of the character Chandradhar who was an ardent follower of only Shiva, and no other deity. Chandradhar was made to suffer by Manasha in terms of his ships being wrecked and all his seven sons dying. Their lives are however re-ignited at the end upon gaining the appreciation of the deity, through the efforts of Behula; the newly wed wife of Chandradhar's youngest son Lakhindar. Apart from the rhetoric of an indigenous deity challenging the might of the central deities of Hinduism being portrayed, the rhetoric of the power of a village girl (Behula) persevering against the might of a Goddess through her love and devotion towards her dead husband is also it projected. Is a very popular narrative in the rural settings of

⁴⁴ A group of localized Hindu texts composed between the 13th and 18th century in Bengal.

Purulia and is performed especially during the Manasha Puja ritual held within the *Shravan* month period (between July and August).⁴⁵ Manasha, symbolized by snakes, is considered to be a daughter of Lord Shiva.

Lav Kush er Ghora Dhora (Love and Kush's Horse Entrapment)

Lav and Kush are the twin sons of Ram and Sita. In this *pala*, the situation from the Ramayana when Lord Ram ensures to battle his own sons (unaware of this relationship) to free Hanuman (his primary disciple) being held hostage by them, and avenge the defeat of his brother Lakshman, as well as his army in the context of an *ashwamedh* (white horse). The plot is structured such that it is presented to begin with the *ashwamedh yagna* (fire ritual dedicated to Lord Rama's white horse) after which the horse is set away to travel with a dictate that none shall come stop the horse. If any one does they would have to face the army of Lord Ram in battle. The horse is playfully captured by Luv and Kush who then showcase their war skills and valor in defeating Hanuman, Lakshman and Lord Ram's army. This *pala* is very popular as apart from the actors depicting Lord Ram's army; almost all the characters in this narrative including the costumed horse are considered to be extremely holy - Lord Ram being the primary character, one of the holiest of the vast pantheon upheld in the Hindu institutional meta-narratives.

⁴⁵ *Shraavan* is a month in the Hindu calendar dedicated to Lord Shiva. On the Mondays during this month, the ritual of the *kanwariyas* (mass number of devotees upholding this ritual) carrying water from the Ganges for long distances and pouring it on the Shiv Lingas, at holy temples such as Tarakeshwar is ensued, as earlier mentioned.

Hirannakasipu Bodh (The Death of Hirannakasipu)

Adopted from the Vishnu Puran, the protagonist of this *pala* is Narsimha (literally meaning man-lion). A fearsome avatar of Lord Vishnu, he defeats the demon king Hirannakasipu (symbolic of all the demons of the universe) to accentuate the concept of Mahapralay).⁴⁶ Hirannakasipu was tyrannical and sadistic not only towards the Vaishnavas but also towards his demon son Prahlad, who had reformed himself and become a disciple of Lord Vishnu. As Hirannakasipu ensued death, destruction and chaos throughout the world, Narasimha arrived to put the world back in order. This *pala* is performed to generate a sense of fearsomeness and the wrathful deity Narsimha is depicted as a God who has no mercy instilling a sense of alarm amongst the audiences. Setting down a sense of jurisprudence and consequences as per actions, apart from instilling a God fearing atmosphere, the character of Prahlad projects the possibility of even demons to be given the opportunity to reform. A moral guide to the audiences.

Abhimanyu Bodh (The Death of Abhimanyu)

This *pala* has been adopted from the Mahabharata and features Abhimanyu (the son of Arjuna). A great warrior, the plot revolves around how Abhimanyu is lured into a *chakravyu* and felled by the Kauravas, featuring Duryodhan and Karna, through deceit. The wrath of the Pandavas (especially Arjuna) and his deliberations with Lord Krishna on these lines, are also ensued in extended versions of the narrative, as and

⁴⁶ Destruction and dissolution of the entire universe, to be reinstated in the course of Dharma.

when performed. The acrobatic circulatory motion of the performers in generating a sense of the *chakravayu* (circular vortex/ trap) requires genuine experience and skill on the part of the entire troupe. As was gauged and observed by the researcher, the troupe from Charida village - ‘Padmashree Late. Gambhir Singh Mura Rural Welfare Society / Chhau Dal’ (troupe founded by led Gambhir Singh Mura; presently administered by his sons Kartik, Ganesh and Parashuram) is most acclaimed for their rendition of this difficult *pala*.

Sati Daha (Sati in Flames)

This *pala* has been adopted from the Shiv Puran and features the most popular deity of the region, Shiva, in the central role. As per mythology, Shiva’s wife Sati (also a manifestation of Shakti just like Durga and Kali) sets herself on fire to burn herself to death in protest of the insult meted out to Shiva by her father Daksha Prajapati, a king and rishi. On hearing of this incident, an infuriated Shiva goes into a trance and initiates a Tandav (dance of death) set to destroy the entire universe holding onto Sati’s charred body over his shoulder. To save the universe, Lord Krishna sends out his primary weapon; the *Sudarshan Chakra*, which splits Sati’s body into various pieces that land on earth (the holy *Shakti Peets*) and in turn invokes Shiva out of his destructive trance and satiates him. This is considered one of the oldest *palas* of Purulia Chhau and is performed especially during the Shiv Gaajan festival. It is extremely popular amongst the audiences as it features both Shiva as well as Krishna together. The best performers of the respective teams enact these Gods to ensure the

requisite prowess, masculinity, power and artistic touch that are required. Especially the sequence where Shiva's destructive dance is upheld.

Kamsa o Keshi Bodh (The Death of Kamsa and Keshi)

Adopted from the Vishnu Purana, the plot is presented through how the character Kamsa (Lord Krishna's evil uncle) firstly murders all the children born to his sister Devaki, to null away the prophecy of his death at the hands of her son Krishna. Presenting the extravagant situation of a storm/ tempest where the baby Krishna is transported in a basket across the Yamuna river by his father Vasudeva, sheltered from rain by Vasuki (a ten headed serpent), to reach Gokul (at the home of Nanda and Yashoda) and thus escape being murdered at birth - the *pala* goes on to accelerate the passage of time to also showcase how Kamsa sends out Keshi (a horse headed demon) who engages in a viscous battle with Lord Krishna in his youth. Keshi is felled by Lord Krishna, who then fulfills the prophecy by slaying Kamsa. This is an extremely popular *pala* in the rural settings of Purulia as it features Lord Krishna. Present day Chhau Gurus such as Binoydar Kumar, Bangshi Mahato, Giassuddin Ansari and the legendary Baghambar Singh are famous for their rendition of the blue-bodied Lord Krishna, through this *pala*.

Reflections

In addition to these, there are various other such religious narratives (pouranic palas) derived from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Vedas and Puranas (especially the Shiv Puran and Vishnu Puran). In fact, the troupes are always in search of new plots from within these that can be adopted. The basic requirement is that there must be a war-based conflict between the Gods and the demons. Innumerable opportunities are already available within the aforementioned scriptures, providing a vast repository of ideas. But each troupe has their own unique rendition of the same narratives though. The masks, costumes, kinesics, choreography, etc., are also slightly different. In recent times, as *samajik pala* based productions such as *Rakte Ranga Kargil* (on the Kargil war); *Betar Bihai Bhatbhati Libo* (on dowry); *Santhal Bidroho* (on the Santhal rebellion); *Amphan* (on the destructive storm that recently occurred in Bengal); *Dashyu Rani Phulan Devi* (on the life of Female dacoit Phulan Devi) and *Coronasur Bodh* (about defeating the corona virus),⁴⁷ are gaining popularity, there is a lure for the troupes to completely deviate from religious storytelling. In fact, apart from the need for survivability in the present competitive market characterized by an increasing number of troupes, various other influences may have contributed to such innovations. The social, cultural, technological and political maneuverings accentuated by tourism, urbanization and the emerging culture industry, have genuinely influenced these narrative innovations. But then strikingly, despite the people's partial disenchantment from religion, the lure towards commercialization and prolonged poverty - these negotiations have yet been inadequate to oust the religious bedrock of Purulia Chhau, given the devout sentiments and love of the

⁴⁷A troupe from Balarampur, Purulia, depicted the coronavirus as a demon that is slayed by Goddess Durga. Masks resembling the corona virus were constructed and used. The performance took place during the lockdown period without local audiences and was uploaded on Youtube.

artists for their Gods, even at a sub-conscious level. Rather than completely detaching from the religious fold, the modern narratives are assimilated/ synthesized along-with the religious ones, in most cases. For example, the *Amphan pala* about the storm in Bengal is accentuated by the presence of Lord Varun (the god of wind) and his anger. Similarly, *Coronasur* the demon character signifying the Corona-virus in the *Coronasur Bodh pala*, is projected to be felled by Goddess Durga. The audiences too are devoted, even in contemporary times. They expect to perceive the arrival of their Gods and celebrate their exploits, at Purulia Chhau performances, under all narrative circumstances. There is a sense of wonder that they derive (see Section 4.5). Thus, the performed narratives not only reflect the tastes (likes and dislikes) of the people of Purulia, but also a measure of their religiosity.

5.5.2. Masks, Costumes, Iconography and Color

It is essential to provide a realistic representation of the Gods and Goddesses in order to successfully invoke religious feelings. Furthermore the demons must also be realistic enough to invoke fear. Thus, the masks and costumes are meticulously constructed by a specific community of artisans who have upheld this role for generations. In fact, the *sutradhar* (carpenter) community from Burdwan was invited to migrate and settle down in the Charida village in Baghmundi block of Purulia by then king Raja Shankari Prasad Singh Deo himself, to be engaged in the role of making masks catering to the requirements of Purulia Chhau. This genuinely enabled the theatrical storytelling process, which was then utilized for the mediation and communication of Hindu philosophy. Furthermore, the faces of the Gods depicted as

masks bear a striking resemblance to the manifestations in the *patachitra* paintings of Burdwan, which in turn have major influence from the paintings of Raja Ravi Verma and his depiction of the Gods and Goddesses of Hinduism. In fact, such an influence can also be found in the deities of most Indian temples (Chatterjee, 2004). Thus for the audiences, it generates a feeling as if the Gods of their temples have come to life.

As veteran Chhau performer and mask-maker Padmashree Anil Sutradhar described, the technique of constructing the masks using paper mache rather than wood was to make them very light, enabling the performers to engage in martial-arts based acrobatic moves and other enduring choreography – thus enhancing Purulia Chhau's ability/ flexibility to not just accommodate, but also keep intact the various infusions and embraces with the other art forms. In fact, this even enabled the experimental initiatives of Chhau guru and icon Padmashree Gambhir Singh Mura to incorporate animal based movements into the kinesics of the performances. An innovation that has genuinely set Purulia Chhau apart amongst the *tridhara* (three type – Purulia, Seraikella and Mayurbhanj) Chhau tradition. As Anil further described, although masks are sold to tourists as souvenirs and collectibles, each artisan has specific orders to fulfill for the performances troupes. These are not just for the construction of new masks but also for repairing old ones. Priced between Rs 2000/- and Rs 10,000/- as per the associated props, size and design, the tourists are charged higher prices being one time customers; the masks sold to them for display only. On the other hand, although the masks made for the performances troupes are costlier to produce as they are designed to be sturdy, light and of wearable size – there is an understanding between the artisans and the troupes so as to charge subsidized reasonable rates

(Between Rs 700/- and Rs 4000/-). Whereas most troupes have specific vendors at Charida village, some even make their own masks.

As Kanchan Rai, the troupe leader of ‘Madhu Rai Parampara Chhau Nritya Dal’ of Dumdumee village; Joypur Block (the grandson of the legendary Chhau Guru Madhu Rai), explained, the capacity to produce their own masks enable the troupe to innovate and be unique in their performances. Incorporating specific expressions and faces to the characters as per need, this allows the troupe to diversify their narratives using the inter-play of more emotions. He described –

“Given that the masks purchased from Charida village have a generalized expression on the faces of characters, the enactments have to somewhat adhere to the expression on the mask. For example, the enactment of an angry Shiva having a serene face is not realistic”, he said.

Such self-sufficient troupes can also sell masks at the performance venues as an added source of livelihood, he upheld. In fact, masks are also being sold online on e-commerce websites (see Chapter 6; Section 6.3).

The masks bear specific iconography to facilitate the symbolic interpretation of the characters; the colors used are also very specific. Whereas the demons are depicted having green faces significant of greed and envy, the masks of most of the Gods are ‘pink’ – inherently pleasant, emanating a sense of ‘hope’. The Shiva mask is white in color suggestive of peace and tranquility. The colors, iconography and props are not selected conscious of these signifiers though. It was revealed through the interactions

that the artisans ensure to uphold the *patachitra* traditions (manifestations of the deities) in terms of the elements of the masks and costumes, no questions asked - but then for the demon masks, the conscious use of green as well as other additive experiments with iconography and props have been frequently upheld so as to accentuate as per script. For example, whereas the traditional iconography of Shiva entails a *jata* (hair bun resembling the roots of the banyan tree), a crescent moon lodged on top of his head, a chillum tied to his waist, *rudraksh* (holy seeds) jewelry on his wrists, a *trishul* (trident) and *damru* (musical instrument) in either hand and a snake around his neck – the following are some of the local innovations –

- 1) The use of a circular halo made out of cardboard and polystyrene (thermocool), lodged behind his head to signify the universe.
- 2) The use of gold dust to signify stars on his forehead.
- 3) The use of body armor when depicted in battle to add a more humane touch.

Furthermore, the white or sometimes blue mask bears a third eye bearing a calm and peaceful expression. The *kirat* (tribal) avatar of Shiva is presented through a mask resembling a tribal face and dark body; replaced in an instance of darkness (lights out) as per the needs of the *pala Arjun er Lakhyabed*. There are specific mask that depicts the Kirat and Kiratin characters. It is dark coloured with a feathered headband on the heads. When the characters transform to emerge as Shiva and Durga, the earlier mask are taken off and new masks – that of Shiva and Durga, are worn when the lights are turned off for a few seconds, and back on again (see Image 5.3).



Image 5.3: The Kirat Kiratin masks and the typical Shiva Mask of Purulia Chhau
(mapsus.net, 2021; puruliachhau.com, 2021)

As per the logistical, technical innovative needs of the performed narratives and its characters, the masks, color and costumes play a significant role in the communication process. As Bikal Rajak described, over the decades, it were not just the masks, but also the costumes that have been upgraded. Additions such as a long feathered tail for the peacock accompanying the divine character Kartik in the *Mahishasur Mardini* and the *Tarakasur Bodh* pala; using tarpaulin sheets and rubber tires to create the alligator costume for the *Visana Rakshasi Bodh* pala; amongst others (see Image 5.4). Even hairy demon costumes (Image 5.5) that are ten feet tall are created with two people wearing the same (one perched over another's shoulder). Although the demons (Visana's avatars) being projected here have been upheld as per the narrative of the Mahabharata, the treatment/ presentation of the same is significantly similar to the descriptions of demons as per the indigenous folktales of Purulia. Thus an interpretative/ representational reference is often drawn here. References to the demons that were a part of the everyday life of the people, ever since they were children - referred to in order to scare/ motivate them to sleep. This

adoption, is in fact an example of a metaphorical battle between the antagonistic characters of indigenous narratives and the protagonists (Gods) of the mainstream.



Image 5.4: Alligator avatar of Visaka Rakshasi

(Photograph by the researcher, 2021)

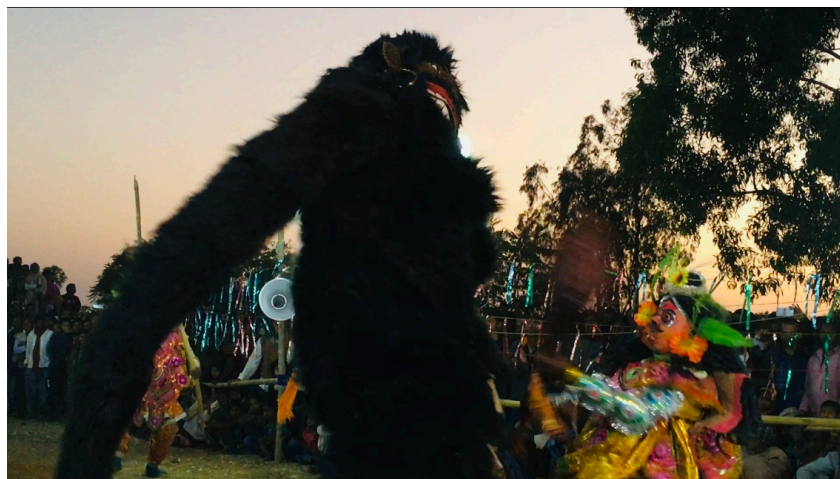


Image 5.5: Ten Feet Indigenous Demon Costume.

(Photograph by the researcher, 2021)

Mahishasur wears a woolen cape to represent his hairy shoulders. Whereas the masks manifest the outlook, expression and aura of the *patachitra* depictions of Bengal, the costumes are an assimilated re-incarnation of the *Bohurupi*, *Kaap Jhhaap*, *Pata*

Naanch, *Natua* and *Jatra* traditions of Bengal. Thus, although not a conscious denotation, the cultural motifs and hermeneutic references of the Gods and demons are upheld as per the mythological projections; both in terms of masks and costumes. The deities at the temples always provide ready reference to the artisans. Temples dedicated to Shiva, Durga; amongst others, are present in every village. It is only when the anthropomorphic characters and indigenous deities are depicted that the artisans generate their own projection of the same; their own life and surroundings as their guiding frame of reference eg. *Kirat*, *Kiratin*, *Goram* avatars; amongst others.

Reflections

Given the fixed expressions on the faces of the mask, there is a generalization in terms of the emotions being conveyed. Whereas Mahishasur would always be angry and wrathful - Shiva would always be serene and calm. So, even when Shiva is depicted in a destructive Tandav (dance of death) with the charred body of Sati on his shoulders, his face is not wrathful and angry, as it should ideally be. Whereas the economically well off and self-sufficient troupes ensure to construct masks specific to the situations they depict, it is not always feasible for all troupes. This is seemingly a limitation due to the masks. Unlike other theatrical expressions such as Kathakali which allow the characters to innovate with their eyes and facial muscles, the Purulia Chhau expression banks more upon *angikabhinaya* (body movements). The kinesics, choreography and music are thus melodramatic and sensational. Furthermore, given that the costumes are an amalgamation of various traditions that were vibrant on their own accord, the imprint of entire traditions are present within Purulia Chhau. An

enrichment through accumulating the treasures of the past, although they aren't always aware of the legitimate semiotic underpinnings that they are upholding through the masks, iconography, etc., they somehow realize the aura that is in turn generated by the same. In present times, as the masks are well maintained and sometimes innovated upon as per script, the performances have become even more realistic. Experiments such as ten feet characters, demonic structures and the depiction of storms, realms and *chakravyus* (circular vortex/ trap as described in the Mahabharata) using minimal props are a manifestation their expanding imagination, nonetheless.

5.5.3. Kinesics, Choreography and Music

Each of the narratives performed encompass *ekoira* (solo performances by characters such as Shiva, Durga, Krishna, etc.) to establish each character as well as group based performances (*mel* and *pala*). Accompanied by a diverse choice of heroic Hindu hymns (*jhumur* and *kirtan*), the sequential use of these formats differ, group to group, as per treatment. The troupes having strong co-ordination and tightness opt for more of a group oriented treatment whereas those that bank on individual skill resort to *ekoira* more often. In fact, during the *abir bhaab* (introductory exposition) of the *palas*, the *ekoira* performances introducing Shiva, Krishna, Durga and Ram; amongst others, are integral in providing a personal space between each audience member and their God. A moment of spirituality and catharsis. Furthermore, even the antagonistic characters such as Mahishasur are introduced through *ekoira* renditions, throwing up dust through energetic and aggressive bursts.

Whereas Chhau guru Rasu Sais's contributions in terms of storytelling significantly transformed Purulia Chhau, the contributions of legendary Chhau guru Padmashree Gambhir Singh Mura, in terms of the kinesics, choreography and music has genuinely set it apart as a unique art form; with specific structure. As community elder and teacher Dilip Goswami from Purulia town described, the son of legendary Chhau performer Zipah Singh Mura of Bagmundi, Gambhir Singh Mura was keen on observing the kinesics of animals and incorporating them into his performances. Legend has it that the then king, Raja Shankari Prasad Singh Deo (Panchakot raj) was offended at the delay caused by Zipah and his troupe to start their performance organized at his palace in Kashipur. This led to Zipah being banished into the forests along with his family. Living in poverty, surrounded by nature, his son Gambhir Singh was his only student whom he trained into his protégé. In fact, an agile and talented acolyte, not only did Gambhir Singh incorporate the techniques of his father, but also started experimenting with movement and its possibilities, utilizing the references he drew from his surroundings. From apes to elephants; birds to insects, he innovated at various levels; even accommodating animals/ animal-based stock characters into narratives initially devoid of these. Later recognized as one of the greatest folk artists of India, Gambhir Singh Mura's legacy is still evident through the kinesics, choreography and music of present Chhau troupes that have embraced and developed upon his experiments.

His Purulia Chhau school in Charida village (eponymous to his troupe) is famous for teaching such animal-based kinesics. Presently administered by Padmashree Anil Sutradhar, the manager of Gambhir Singh's iconic troupe as well as his sons Kartik, Ganesh and Parashuram Singh Mura. As Parashuram upheld, it is this representation

of the wild natural setting of the land through Chhau that sets it apart from other masked dance theatre forms. Whereas others have a sense of refinement, Purulia Chhau is a true grass-root representation owing to its imitation of animals and surroundings. In fact, in the Purulia Chhau competition organized by famed anthropologist Ashutosh Bhattacharya to select as to which troupe would represent the art-form at a prestigious event held in Paris, France, in 1972 - although Gambhir Singh's nemesis Duryodhan Mahato's troupe had put up a stellar performance of the *Abhimanyu Bodh pala*, Gambhir Singh's *ekoira naanch* (solo) enacting Mahishasur incorporating the movements of an angry tiger, genuinely mesmerized the audience. He won on this account and went abroad. The beginning of his rise. This instance of oral history was also reminisced/ validated by Duryodhan Mahato himself, during his interaction with the researcher at Khatjuri village in Jhalda -1 block.

Composed using *bhavas* (bodily expressions; as the face is masked into one constant expression) and *mudras* (postures) to express the *Navarasas* (nine emotions) – based on the interactions of the researcher with Chhau Ustad Binoydhar Kumar (Bamunia village), Chhau Ustad Giassuddin Ansari (Polma village) and the observation of the practice sessions and performances of 1) 'Padmashree Late. Gambhir Singh Mura Rural Welfare Society / Chhau Dal' and 2) 'Shib Durga Chhau Nritya Party' – the kinesics of Purulia Chhau revolve around the following –

Deg – The specific ways of stepping on the ground. It varies from rough stomps to soft heel steps. Toe movements and suspended heel steps are also outlined.

Chaal – The gait and walk of the characters. There are various types of *Chaals* such as –

- 1) The gracious *Dev Chaal* used during the movement of the Gods and Goddesses.
- 2) The aggressive *Asura Chaal* used during the movement of the demons.
- 3) The animal-imitative *Poshu Chaal* used by anthropomorphic characters, animal depictions in the narrative, and other innovations. Various animals such as lions, crocodiles, elephants, buffaloes and apes are imitated. In fact, the kinesics of the *bahan* of Durga – the lion; the *bahan* of Mahishasur – the buffalo; amongst others are critical to the narrative as well. These characters wear costumes resembling the depicted animal, and move accordingly.
- 4) The bird-imitative *Pakhi Chaal* used by leading characters such as Shiva, Durga, Vishnu, Kartik, Ganesh; amongst others to depict a sense of urgency. The birds imitated are peacock, swans, cranes and sparrows. The kinesics of the character Garuda who accompanies Lord Vishnu and Mayur who accompanies Kartik, majorly revolve around this *chaal*.
- 5) The *Sakhi Chaal* used by characters depicting women and their femininity. This *chhal* somewhat resembles the walk of an elephant. Draws major influence from the *Nachni* art form.

Digbaji – This refers to rolling over on the ground throwing up dust. It is used as a war motion when fights are depicted between Gods and demons. All characters engaged in battle uphold it.

Ghoora – This refers to spinning oneself several times in the air amidst a jump. It is done to accelerate the narrative into a faster pace and to signify alarm, alacrity and ensuing danger/ conflict.

Ulfa – This refers to aerial somersaults enacted as a war skill when fights are depicted between Gods and demons. A showcase of their agility, it is used by most characters engaged in war.

Topka – A powerful jump straight up into the air from a seated position and landing back down, leading with the toes. This is similar to the motion of a grasshopper and is enacted in groups in a coordinated manner.

Bahimalka – This refers to the movement of the arms. There are various ways in which the arms are held up higher than the torso to give an impression of broad shoulders. It signifies valor.

Rongbaji – This refers to the act of intimidation through body language. It is upheld through menacing head movements, aggressively moving forward and raising the arms and legs as signs of warning. This action usually precedes any war or battle enactment.

Chhatiphoola – Refers to the act of protruding the chest to signify bravery, fearlessness and valor. It is a posture usually enacted by the character victorious in battle.

Kamarghoora – This refers to the act of twisting the waist. Usually done in a swift motion generating a sense of urgency, it is ensured that the entire torso is twisted beyond the usual, thus providing a melodramatic effect.

Pitheela – This refers to the act of moving the shoulders and back in swift motions, twitching the muscles. Subtle moves that vibrate the costume worn and also its loosely draped ornaments.

Muhachala – This refers to the act of twitching the neck muscles so as to vibrate the mask and its crown. Sudden movements of the head are also upheld; amplified by the large size of the mask. This is an integral move that enables the masked head to convey emotions despite the fixed expression of the mask.

Eridhamsa – This refers to the heel and ankle movements, a critical aspect that accentuates the postures. The performers hardly ever stand still. When steady at a certain position, they ensure to keep twitching their heels and ankles, along with their mask.

Whereas the structure of the plot of each *pala* is choreographed so as to enable mask/costume changes as and when required, shorter and longer renditions of the same *pala* are based on including and excluding tertiary anecdotes. The inductive *ekoira naanch* (solo) based *abir bhhabs* (character introduction sections) are very popular though

and are usually retained. Given that the exposition and background of the narratives are already known, the treatment is more conflict and resolution oriented. Whereas specific acrobatic segments are ensued to showcase the skills of the performers, the *mel naanch* (synchronized group dance) segments are included to showcase the troupes tightness. These are usually resorted to whilst depicting the Pandavas (group of five), Kauravas (large group), warriors and *sakhis* (group of men depicting women), amongst others. Given that until recent times, men, in female costumes, enacted all female characters - the kinesics and gait of women had to be genuinely emulated to bring in accuracy. For this purpose, those depicting *sakhis* (women) are trained by women *Nachni* artists (lustful song and dance performers in the villages of Purulia), in makeshift schools for the same. As Bimala Devi; a ‘Lalon Puraskar’ (State level award for folk artists) winning *Nachni* artist from Sattrra village, Purulia – 2, explained –

“In order to develop the lustful gait, the men are made to believe that they are actually women. In has to be imprinted on their minds. During the casting process itself, only effeminate actors having a thin and petite body are chosen for such roles. The trainees would be taught to walk, dance and gesture in the way that women do. Only the ‘kinesics’ of the *Nachni* art are taught to them. Not the musical rendition” she said.

Pastubala Devi, another ‘Lalon Puraskar’ recipient and legendary *Nachni* artist from Surulia village, also upheld that rather than young girls enrolling to learn the art of *Nachni*, in present times most of her students are actually young boys working their way up into Purulia Chhau troupes, as *sakhis* in the *palas*.

In harmony with the choreography and kinesics, the music of Purulia Chhau is integral to the overall presentation. Upholding the role of conveying emotions, whereas the lyrical *jhumur* songs, *pala gaan* renditions and *kirtans* (devotional songs using *harmonium*, *dhol* and *tabla*) ensure to set a spiritual context to every Chhau performance in terms of melody, the thunderous *dhamasa* and *dhol* players accelerate and decelerate the tempo of their powerful rhythms as per the choreography - accentuated by a high pitched *shehnai (marui)*, setting out eerie winding tones. In fact, the *dhamasa* is an instrument unique to Purulia Chhau. As famed *dhamasa player* Suphol Chandra Rajwaad of Baligara village explained, there are specific rhythms for each character that is enacted. The choreography is such that it shall only resonate with these specific rhythm patterns. Throughout his association with various troupes over a professional life of forty years, the rhythm patterns have not changed. This has also ensured the same choreography.

“For example the eight beat ‘*ke te ta ke te ke te*’ (1-2-3-1-2-1-2) bar repeating again and again introducing the entrance of Mahishasur in the *Mahishasur Mardini pala* could never be replaced. As Mahishasur enters the arena, he lands his feet on the ground with immense thrust. His gait must be as per the masochism and masculinity emanating from the groove of the *dhamasa*. As the tempo of the groove is gradually increased, the actions of Mahishasur too become more vigorous. There are such specific beats for Durga (‘*ke te the ke te the ke te the ke te the*’; ‘*geram geram geram geram*’; amongst various others) at specific times within the narratives. Whereas the character Durga’s rhythms are adopted from the *dhhak* (large traditional rhythm instrument of Bengal) based counts ensured during the Durga Puja, as the rhythms are different on every day

of the Durga Puja, the rhythms change as per her actions in the narrative. The rhythms of Shiva are very vigorous. They are adopted from the traditional counts of the *pakhwaj* (indian classical rhythm instrument). In fact, the rhythms of Shiva are diverse as they enable his *Tandav* (destructive dance), as well as his peaceful mood, as per the narrative”, he said.

Furthermore, as legendary *Dhol* player Babulal Sais explained –

“The choreography and music section are synchronized to fluctuate with each other as per the vibe at the venue. One does not lead the other. They move hand in hand. As the dynamics of the *dhamsa* or *dhol* moves towards a different *rasa* (emotion) there is a subconscious urge in the mind of the performing actor to follow suit in his rendition of the choreography. Similarly, if the actor starts moving more aggressively, the *dhamsa* and *dhol* players also start playing louder in coordination. This way of ‘luring each other in and out’, comes from experience”.

Ustad Jagannath Chowdhury, the leader of the popular troupe ‘Mitali Chhau Maldih’ also validated this. The groove fluctuates together with all other elements. “There is a sense of a symbiotic inter-dependency of influence”, he said. He also explained –

“Although various large instruments earlier used in Chhau such as the *Singa*, *Madan Bheri* and *Nagras* have moved towards obsolescence, instruments such as the *ghungroo* (used by *sakhis*), *harmonium* and *tabla* (used during *kirtans* and *jhumur* renditions in Chhau) have found their way in. Whereas the war-based

Nagra shrunk in size to become the modern day *dhamsas* of smaller volume, their rhythms did not alter. The war based codes used between generals and soldiers in communicating war formations and commands have been significantly represented in the battle narratives of Purulia Chhau. In fact, the *Bir rasa* is best accentuated through these war codes. For example, ‘ger ger ger ger’, amongst others. The recent use of Casio (electronic keyboards) is an adulteration though. Most troupes which are serious about their art avoid this”.

Whereas the revival of Purulia Chhau has invited in and accommodated various other musical traditions such as *Jhumur*, *Pala gaan*, *Tusu Gaan*, *Bhadu Gaan* and *Kirtan* (the artists of which were struggling to survive), their entry has significantly lead to an enrichment of Purulia Chhau. In fact, Purulia Chhau has now emerged as the primary source of income for such artists in present times. This was validated by the following musicians interviewed - Revati Singh Dhaval and Santosh Mahato from Berada village and Kavita Mahato from Polma village (popular *Jhumur* artists) - Dhananjay Mahato and Sripati Mahato from Dubcharka village and Bhootnath Chitrakar from Bonbohal village (*Pala gaan* artists). It was also upheld by Bibhuti Karmakar (a *dhamsa* maker and the grandson of the famed *dhamsa* maker Gopi Karmakar) that there has been a massive increase in the demand for *dhamsas*, indicative of a revived interest amongst the present generation of musicians to be associated with Purulia Chhau.

Reflections

As was gauged from the performances and the *palas* usually enacted, amongst the *Navarasas*, [*Shringara* (Love), *Hasya* (Happiness), *Roudra/Krodha*

(Exasperation/Anger), *Bheebhatsa* (Abhorrence), *Bhayanaka* (Trepidation or Fear), *Shanta* (Tranquility), *Veera* (Valour), *Karuna* (Compassion or Sorrow), and *Adbhuta* (Awe)] (Bhattacharya, 2018) - it is the *Veera* ras (referred to as *Bir Ras* by the locals) that is most frequently projected in Purulia Chhau. The other *rasas* which are frequent are *Krodha*, *Bhayanaka* and *Karuna*; a reflection of their everyday lives, as upheld by most of the community elders.

The kinesics, choreography and music have the capacity to effectuate role reversals as well. For example although the narrative *Mahishasur Mardini* projects the character Mahishasur as an evil antagonistic demon, somehow his embodied masculine kinesics laced with youthful nonchalance transforms his interpretative retention into one that is heroic. His marginalization within a divine hierarchy institutionalized resonating with the marginalization of the locals, is also a major reason for this though, nonetheless.

The choreography of each narrative deviates to a certain extent troupe-wise. It is mostly at this level that the improvisations take place. Although set within a cycle of conflict and resolution, It is the music that modulates and conveys the emotions. Suspense is hardly a parameter here, as the audiences already know the narratives. They are already aware of what the outcome will be, given their knowledge of Hindu mythology, already acquired. Whereas the rhythmic fluctuations of the *dhamsa* accelerate and decelerate the heartbeats of the audiences, they derive joy with the adrenalin rushes and spiritual catharsis at the junctures when the *jhumur*, *kirtans*, etc. exuberate. In fact, the musical extravaganza associated with Purulia Chhau somewhat sets it apart from other such expressions. There is a heavy dependence on the music; a keystone/ critical element of this masked dance theatre. Given the confluence of so many musical traditions (classical as well as folk) and diverse musical instruments,

the audio section is rich in its cultural identity, well interpreted and respected by the audiences. It majorly contributes to the success of the overall output.

5.6. The Production Process

Based on the in-depth interviews of the troupe leaders, script-writers, mask-makers, costume designers, actors, choreographers, narrators and musicians - providing an insight into the production standpoint of each element - the five troupes selected and studied were - 1) Padmashree Late. Gambhir Singh Mura Rural Welfare Society / Chhau Dal; 2) Late. Rasu Sahis Baligara Kisan Chhau Nritya Samiti; 3) Palma Shakti Sangha Chhau Nritya Party 4) Mitali Chhau Maldih and 5) Shib Durga Chhau Nritya Party. Unique in specific ways of relevance to the researcher's objectives, an insight into the diverse mindsets formulating the production processes was also thus derived. It emerged that Purulia Chhau has genuinely taken shape of an industry in which various people must collaborate and ensue their expertise in order to put up performances. The production of each upcoming performance was observed to start with concept meetings between the *dala neta* (troupe leader/ director), scriptwriter and *bhashyakar* (narrator). The handwritten scripts were thus jointly devised. The plots drawn upon were based on the context of the upcoming performance and had to resonate with the context of the show, nonetheless. Based on the requirement of characters as per the script, the masks and costumes were accordingly prepared.

Most troupes already possess the masks of the common characters such as Shiva, Durga, Krishna and Mahishasur; amongst others. If new characters are required as per new scripts, the masks and costumes are constructed afresh. Thus the troupes

somewhat stick to the common characters (the logistics for which are already in place from previous performances) even when innovating with new scripts so as to save on the production costs. Once the script is finalized, the choreographers, musicians and actors are called in for at least one or two weeks of regular practice. Given the shorter renditions and diminishing attention spans of the audiences, the *bhashyakars* (narrators) played a critical role in interconnecting the scenes and sequences. In present times, it is mostly the lead *Jhumur* singer who sings and also narrates during the performances. Managers usually fix the performances and claim ten to fifteen percent of the performance fee (ranging from thirty to fifty thousand rupees).

Similar to the film industry, the musicians, actors, narrators, choreographers are hired hands and perform across/ with various troupes. It is usually the *dala neta* (troupe leader/ director) and sometimes the lead actors who are constant to one specific troupe and retain most of the income. Travelling together to the village performance venues in trucks (owned or hired) laden with masks and costumes, they are seated atop the roof of the same rejoicing all the way. Drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana is a common trend during this journey. A preparatory phase that sets the mood, they said. The truck is laden with the troupe's posters highlighting their contact number.

5.7. The Audience's Interpretation

Purulia Chhau is an integral part of the lives of the people of Purulia. Drawing a sense of spirituality, entertainment, knowledge and hero worship, they are extremely enthused by the renditions. Transported into imaginary realms of Gods and demons, as the audiences draw reference from these narratives in lieu of their everyday

struggles, they derive a sense of catharsis, nonetheless. The narratives of the victory of good over evil ensues a sense of jurisprudence; interpreted into a sense of hope for them to look forward to. There are various connotations though. Whereas the troupes enact the *palas* as per their interpretation of the mythological narratives, the audiences, influenced as per their own individual lives, further interpret the performances. This phenomenon of varied connotations genuinely resonates with Roland Barthes' (1968) concepts of primary sign, secondary sign and parasitic signification. In fact, the mythological narratives too, being derived from by the performers have undergone such connotative levels. Generation after generation. Respondents Nikhil Chandra Mahato and Naren Chandra Mahato, community elders from Berada village described –

“Shiva is like a father figure for all the people of Purulia, irrespective of their tribe and social status. The Purulia Chhau performances are a way of reminding the people of this belief and also educating them in terms of the morals of life. Each narrative of Purulia Chhau showcases the significant morals of good living, which the villagers ensure to inculcate. The performances are like a rekindling of their conscience. Although entertaining, the performances also serve the purpose of providing an avenue to take recourse in. A temple where the Gods come to life”.

As respondents Kshitij Chandra Mahato and Kedar Chandra Mahato, community elders at Dakshinbohal village further described –

“Purulia Chhau performances are an avenue for deriving spiritual contentment and acquiring stress relief, for the people. As the spiritual *jhumur* hymns and *kirtans* start off the performances, it creates a spiritual aura that call out to all the residents who then ensure to participate as audiences. In fact, the gatherings at the performances are unique in the sense that all inhabitants of the region, irrespective of caste, tribe, social status and gender gather together as a heterogeneous cluster, symbolic of their brotherhood as the children of Shiva and Durga”.

As resident of Sattrra village, Shibu Kumar and community elder Manoranjan Kumar described –

“There is a celebratory sense to it all. Whereas the children are seated down by their parents and made to pay attention so as to learn about their culture and heritage being presented through the performances, the extravagant displays, high flying entertainment, beautiful masks and bright colors ensures to catch the eye and provide an engaging learning experience through storytelling”.

But then, as the researcher gauged through his observation of the performances held at the field at the Badaldi intersection near Polma village on 14th January 2021 (on the occasion of Makar Sankranti) and those held at the temple ground in Kustaur village on 12th October 2021 (on the occasion of Durga Puja) - there were various connotations drawn and diverse sentiments that were manifested by the people in the audiences. Whereas the devout individuals seated at the front as well as the community elders and women derived a sense of catharsis as was evident from their

facial expressions and pious body language during the performances – a section of the villagers were invariably drunk and engaged in gambling seated in clusters at the periphery of the venue. Smoking marijuana in *chillums* (earthen pots), they were in a trance as well. On being asked about their contrasting actions, the deviant crowd (on the condition of the researcher upholding their anonymity) ensured to justify that what they were engaging in was also connected to religion itself. Whereas their God Shiva is himself known for the use of marijuana, the Pandavas of the Mahabharata; heroes nonetheless, were also skilled gamblers. A crowd of only male individuals, they also joked about how the Pandavas had to give up on Draupadi, who was then stripped by the Kauravas. As one of the organizers of the event at Badaldi described (on the condition of anonymity) -

“The gambling stalls, snack shops and alcohol vendors in the adjacent area were actually sponsors of the event. Furthermore, the presence of the deviant crowd was acceptable to the organizers not just on account of them being consumers, but also on account of the justification that Shiva is the God of all Gods, as well as ‘demons’. He is the God of Ram as well as Raavan. So the deviant crowd shall be blessed too. Furthermore, given that the rhetoric of reform is frequently upheld through narratives such as *Parashuram er Matrihatya* (Lord Parashuram was earlier a dacoit), *Valmiki Pratibha*; amongst others – the heroic tales can perhaps act as a motivation for those who are struggling with their beliefs”.

The following are some of the significant observations/ interactions from the focus group discussion (FGD) held at Polma village on 15th January, 2021 (on the occasion of Makar Sankranti) - the day after the performances of 1) ‘Padmashree Late.

Gambhir Singh Mura Rural Welfare Society / Chhau Dal' from Charida village, 2)'Palma Shakti Sangha Chhau Nritya Party' and 3) Palma Harijan Jankalyan Samiti Chhau Nritya Party', held overnight at the field in the Badaldi intersection –

The audiences were generally enthused and contended. They were lauding the performance of Ustad Parashuram Singh Mura, the son of Padmashree Gambhir Singh Mura for his precise rendition of the character Kartik in the *Tarakasur Bodh pala*. Parashuram's troupe; 'Padmashree Late. Gambhir Singh Mura Rural Welfare Society / Chhau Dal' was the star attraction at the event. The performance of Ustad Giassuddin Ansari, the leader (*dala neta*) of the local village troupe 'Palma Shakti Sangha Chhau Nritya Party'; a Muslim performer who enacted Krishna's role in the *Kamsa o Keshi Bodh pala*, was also sincerely appreciated. Giasuddin being a Muslim and yet enacting a Hindu expression was not considered offensive, but actually an act of religious respect and brotherhood. "Hinduism is accommodative", the respondents said. Specific situations from the *palas* performed and the rhetoric that was upheld, soon became the focus of the discussion. The context of the character of Kartik and how he defeats Tarakasur soon became a point of debate. Whether it was Tarakasur's ego that resulted in his downfall or the warrior skills of Kartik that ensured that he could overpower Tarakasur was one where consensus couldn't be reached amongst the respondents. It was an open-ended narrative at various levels, as it emerged. Triggered by the performance, the respondents had a tendency to delve deeper into the background of the story as per mythology. Tarakasur's boon that he could only be defeated by the son of Shiva was a backstory that all were aware of. The negotiations such as Shiva being an ascetic yogi because of which he was childless for ages, until Sati was re-incarnated as Parvati, eventually leading to the birth of Kartik was an area

of focus that led to passionate discourse amongst the discussants. All the discussants seemed well versed about the issue. Although the Tarakasur *pala* performed the previous night was only an abridged rendition of the battle and not the backstory, yet, most people were aware of the same. When asked, they upheld that it was the regular reading sessions that they all attend at the temple in the evenings that have led to such in-depth knowledge. The Purulia Chhau performances are an extravagant manifestation of these. Conducted in their native language Bengali, the researcher was an observant at this focus group discussion whereas community elder Moloy Chowdhury upheld the role of the moderator.

Similar FGD sessions of the audiences were also held at 1) Mohorbhuta village in Purulia - 1 block, after the performance of the Purulia Chhau troupe ‘Shib Durga Chhau Nritya Party’ led by Tapan Mahato on 14th April 2021, on the occasion of the Shiv Gaajan - and 2) also at Basudebpur village in Barabazar block on 13th August, 2021 (on the occasion of Manasha Puja and the ongoing holy month of Shraavan) after the performance of the Purulia Chhau troupe ‘Late. Rasu Sahis Baligara Kisan Chhau Nritya Samiti’ led by Nripen Sais. Some of the significant observations/interactions from these sessions are as follows –

The audiences were in a spiritual trance enthused by the performances not only throughout the night, but also the morning after. It was as if they were sharing the pain of the *bhoktas* during Shiv Gaajan. A similar outlook was also gauged in the month of Shraavan, in the context of the penance of the *kanwariyas*. Whereas the discussions on 14th April 2021 at Mohorbhuta centered around Shiva and his love for his disciple irrespective of their social status, the importance of undergoing this pain

was also validated by all. They all agreed that it was necessary to take the pain as the *bhoktas* do so as to prove their devotion to Shiva. It was logical and justified for them. As far as the role of Purulia Chhau as an element was concerned, whereas some discussants agreed that it essential in terms of a reminder of the greatness of Shiva, the others argued that Shiva was too great and popular to be forgotten. On this account some of the community elders reiterated that with modern technologies such as mobile phones serving as a distraction, it was essential to have more Chhau performances to re-ignite the lost sense of spirituality of the youth. Some even went to the extent of referring to smart phones as profane instruments luring the youth into pornography. It was evident that to all the discussants, the Purulia Chhau performances were not just an essential aspect, but also one that upheld the spiritual context and cultural backdrop. Without it the ritual would be incomplete they all agreed. Apart from the acrobatic skills and technical prowess of the young Tapan Mahato's team being lauded and constantly referred to as the next generation of Chhau artist - their selection and performance of the *pala Arjun er Lakhyabed* from the Mahabharata in which Arjuna (one of the Pandavas) is defeated by Kirat; an indigenous depiction of Shiva in the form of a tribal hunter, witnessed by his wife Kiratin (tribal form of Durga) was sincerely appreciated by them. Apart from discussing about the tactful use of lights by Tapan Mahato's troupe when the mask of Kirat which resembles a dark tribal man with a moustache is replaced by the mask of Shiva as he ensures to show his original identity to the defeated egoistic Arjuna during the narrative – the relevant context of Shiva being omnipresent in the soul of all the tribal people was agreed upon by all discussants.

Similarly, the FGD session at Basudebpur was also engaging with the conversations moving around the *pala* performed. The narrative that was presented by Nripen Sais's troupe was *Visana Rakshasi Bodh*. As the troupe had portrayed the ten feet demon very accurately and also an alligator/ crocodile that was pulling away children from the crowd, as often happens in real life beside the rivers – the discussants seemed to feel sympathetic towards the antagonist Visana who became a *rakshasi* (demon witch) on receiving a curse. It was only partially her fault they said. The sage who cursed her was too harsh. It is not a punishment that suits her act of being lustful. Women are naturally lustful, they said. Whereas comparative references were drawn of the troupe leader Nripen and his grandfather the legendary Rasu Sais, Nripen was genuinely respected as an icon of present times, nonetheless. One who has taken forward his grandfather's work. Like in the earlier FGDs, both these sessions were also moderated by community elder Moloy Chowdhury in their native language Bengali, with the researcher as an observant. Pramod Rai; a young Chhau artist and student at the Sidhukano Birsa University; from Dumurdee village, also contributed in organizing the same.

Reflections

All in all, the audiences seemed to be sincerely connected with the production of the enactments. They were not just mere receptors. Given their knowledge of the mythology being upheld, a majority of them were in the position of connoisseurs. Whereas the older generations were fonder of the earlier legends, the present generation looked upon the present performers as heroes. Like movie stars in the

cities, the Chhau artists were stars in their own way. Everybody recognized their names and pointed out their houses in the respective villages. The troupes moving in and out in trucks loaded with masks and costumes bearing an advertorial banner on the sides, was often observed by the researcher. Children running along these trucks as it maneuvered through the narrow mud pathways were also a frequent sight. As the trucks would move away, the children would engage in enacting their favorite Chhau characters. Characters like Mahishasur and Raavan were very popular amongst them and adult alike. It was the ‘persona’ that was attractive to most. The context of marginalization at the behest of the privileged was something the audiences could genuinely gauge and lament; all across Purulia. As community elder Manaranjan Mahato of Sattrra village had emotionally upheld –

“Raavan was a great father. He loved his son Meghnad to the extent that a major part of him died upon hearing about the deceitful murder of his son at the hands of Lakshman. Raavan was a scholar who had mastered the Vedas and had the capacity to put up a fight to Ram, a God incarnate. He was the greatest devotee of Shiva who himself had acknowledged this, and moreover he was a gentleman in the sense that he never harmed Sita although she was his captive. Thus, Raavan was even more accomplished than Ram in various ways. Whether it be Ram’s patriarchal and regressive mindset in how he made Sita undergo an *agnipariksha* (fire trial) to prove her celibacy, or how he almost killed his children Lav and Kush in battle; amongst others, perhaps he may not be all that *purushottam* (the ideal man) after all, compared to Raavan”.

5.8. Summary

This chapter showcases the findings not just in regards to the origin, development, and evolution of Purulia Chhau, but also the audience's interpretations and its influence upon their daily lives. A paradigmatic overview. Furthermore, how Purulia Chhau has played a critical role as a meaning-making conduit for the Shiv Gaajan festival being held over centuries has been revealed here. Also addressing the uncertainties in this regard through evidence, the entire evolutionary journey of Purulia Chhau was charted providing an insight into the social, cultural, economic, technological, religious and political undercurrents prevalent - yet changing over time. The various types of Chhau and its emerging/-localized genres were also described.

On the other hand, from a syntagmatic perspective, the effective use of narratives, characters, masks, costumes, iconography, color, kinesics, choreography and music coming together as a composite signification system was deconstructed into its elements and analyzed as a performance text. A holistic overview was thus presented using social semiotics at the paradigmatic level and textual semiotics at the syntagmatic level. The audience's interpretations and influence drawn upon their daily lives was also measured, identifying the various connotations ranging from spiritual catharsis to revolutionary/ egalitarian/ educational impact, amongst others.

Thus, based on the insights drawn from this chapter, it is evident that Purulia Chhau remains a significant part of the daily lives of the people of Purulia. In the course of its evolution, whereas its flexibility has enhanced its relevance as per the changing

times and popularized it beyond borders – the preservation of its religious core has ensured its ritualistic reverence and alacrity amongst the locals. As the innovations/modifications have been more accommodative than diminishing, most of the people of Purulia have been included into the pool that harbor sentimental value towards it. Unlike classical expressions that are more institutionalized and rigid, Purulia Chhau has showcased the capacity to preserve and yet transcend as per the needs of the evolving times. Thus, despite representing a society that is heterogeneous and diverse, the rhetoric of the expression genuinely reveals the cultural imagination of the indigenous Purulia landscape, framed upon its convergent religious identity. Not only have the Hindu rituals/ narratives been represented - the animistic/ anthropomorphic accentuations have also been ensured a sacred space in embrace. Its modern adoptions have not just accommodated the new thought. These have also amplified the reach and impact of the original message, without interfering beyond a certain point. Having negotiated the socio-political influences, cultural synthesis, inter-religious conflicts and intra-religious undercurrents - the context of Purulia Chhau remains extremely relevant to the daily lives of the people as well as the region as a whole, thus manifesting the sacred socio-religious character of Purulia as a region. The identity of indigenous people yet remains well framed. As it continues to represent the indigenous culture and its communities, the communities have accepted the modern innovations (the shorter *palas*, various contexts, use of social media, videography, etc.) adopted by the troupes to strengthen their livelihood and reach out to international audiences – as it is beneficial/ glorious for not just their own identity, but also that of their Gods. Whereas the paradigmatic transformation of Purulia Chhau over the decades has ensured that it has developed into a comprehensive cauldron housing the history and culture of Purulia – its present role as a coordinated

expressive mnemonic, continues to ensure significant impact amongst the modern and orthodox audiences alike. A powerful composite sign system disseminating socio-religious narratives.

In the past decade, as Chhau has taken shape as an industry, providing the troupes with an organized support structure - the financial considerations/ initiatives of NGOs/ Govt. agencies have provided substantial leverage to the artists, ensuring that the upcoming generation of performers are already looking forward to this as a robust livelihood that commands respect, rather than deserting their aspirations. This is evident from the numerous Chhau schools and workshops that are being attended in large numbers by the children of Purulia, encouraged by their parents.

Chapter 6

Purulia Chhau in Contemporary Times: Negotiations and Under-Currents

6.1. Introduction

Focusing on the negotiations and under-currents maneuvering Purulia Chhau over the past decade, this chapter outlines the major transformations in the everyday life of the people that unfolded during this phase. Furthering Durkheim's (1912/1995) functionalist perspectives of 'collective consciousness', as Carey's (1989/2009) acknowledgement of 'rituals' considerably advocated the acts of involvement, participation, association and fellowship, it ensured the scope for various anthropological connotations. Strikingly echoing their thoughts - in the context of India, apart from the institutionalized classical arts, numerous ritualistic 'folk expressions' such as Purulia Chhau that significantly represented the earthen spirit, diversity and vibe of the regional communities at the grass-root level have evolved into composite forms in the course of their advancement. Infusing with each other - either to survive, express their rhetoric with a greater/ complimentary power of significance, and/ or to manifest the negotiations and undercurrents of influence emanating from the evolution of society. Vibrant expressions enabling the priming of indigenous values, despite the elements of mainstream Hinduism providing an underlying foundation - whereas the regional diversification of the institutional meta-narratives have significantly transpired through these mediums, the phenomenon was

effectuated by the inclusion/ accommodation of anthropomorphic characters, animistic philosophies, indigenous knowledge and essentially, the struggles of the ‘everyday life’ of the local communities. Thus, although ‘Chhau’ is of three kinds, Purulia Chhau as the name suggests is representative of the people of Purulia, unlike the other variants.

Although the trajectory of the evolution of Purulia Chhau has emanated over a century - there has been a significant/ radical metamorphosis over the ‘past decade’. The negotiations of considerable note that have contributed to this can be categorized as social, cultural, religious, political, economic and technological. Amongst these categories, upholding specific case studies, whereas this chapter outlines all the above-mentioned under-currents, the forthcoming chapter (Chapter 6) has specifically taken forward the issues described here, with focus on ‘religion’ and its relationship with Purulia Chhau.

Whereas social maneuverings such as the acceptance of women performers were ensued by the defiant initiatives of a first of its kind ‘women’s Chhau troupe’ - the caste lines were blurred with the emergence of heterogeneous troupes. An expression once reserved for lower caste Hindus and the tribal, even Brahmins have now taken this up as a profession. In terms of cultural negotiations, whereas an inter-cultural infusion between the tribal and non-tribal had ensued in the past, the infusion of rural, urban and even foreign cultures has been a major contributor over the recent period. Given the increasing/ regular influx of tourists - the exposure of the indigenous inhabitants to Bollywood music, western attire, empowered and educated women; amongst others, had a major impact. Furthermore, apart from foreign thespians

initiating artistic infusions with Chhau, the indigenous performers travelling to the urban centers of India and abroad have accelerated the re-molding.

Furthermore, whereas the economic negotiations based on livelihood have ensured various innovations to commercialize, sell and ‘commodify’ - the technological negotiations have aided the artists in their efforts to ensure enhanced visibility, networking, packaging and impact.

6.2. The Social Negotiations

Malinowsky’s (1922) methods had ensured focus on not just the origins, characteristics, customs, culture (‘imponderabilia’); amongst others - but also, the folk expressions that mirror indigenous existence. In the present case, delivering the local communities an avenue to achieve a sense of catharsis and contentment - Purulia Chhau has ameliorated to reflect the conflict in their lives; fantasizing a resolution nevertheless, through divine intervention. Thus, although laid over a metaphorical exposition of mainstream Hindu philosophy, the socio-cultural milieu of Purulia is intertwined, contextualized and framed in her expressions, as per need. A representation of life in the region. Amidst the various issues, the researcher noted that the most significant ‘social’ contributors that have maneuvered the metamorphosis of Purulia Chhau over the past decade were ‘gender’ and ‘caste’.

6.2.1. Case Study: Mitali Chhau Maldih Mahila Dal

Reiterating Paulo Freire's observations (1968/ 2000) yet again, despite their difficulties and hardships, poor people always keep silent. But provided with a potent platform to communicate, it empowers them to affect change. Thus, although typically local and culture specific, their artistic expressions occupy a significant space in the determinative landscape of societies. But navigating through the contemporary innovations and diffusion of these expressions, it is only when the underlying layers are unveiled through in-depth research that the life struggles of those associated, can clearly be identified. Recognizing such a statement of resistance upheld by the young artists who together constitute *Mitali Chhau Maldih Mahila Dal*; a first of its kind village-based women's performance troupe from Maldih village in Balarampur block, Purulia - the journey of their rise from an oppressed ostentatious class to one that is socially empowered, has been chronicled, as revealed in this section. Emerging from intense field based phase discernments, it was gauged that the revolutionary dimension of 'women's empowerment' through Purulia Chhau, had extraordinarily surfaced over the last 7 years, as a significant facet that necessitated special attention.

Gathering initial information in respect to the unusually popular/ infamous 'women's troupe' *Mitali Chhau Maldih Mahila Dal* that had arisen in defiance of the established male-oriented traditions in the region, the researcher had set out on a scholarly pursuit, centered upon this issue. To provide an authentic manifest of this immersive,

field-based, exploratory experience, the case study has been presented in its entirety; the scholar's diary.

(26.02.2021, Friday)

Place – *Maldih* village

Block – *Balarampur*

District – *Purulia*

To reach Maldih, the 30 km journey from Purulia town took us around 2 hours due to the difficult off-road that had to be accessed after about 20 minutes into the trip. Accompanied by community elder Moley Chowdhury, we entered a winding road within the forests moving off National Highway - 18 and bypassing a central village named 'Boro Urma'. On reaching Maldih village, the sound of the adjoining 'Kumari' river seemed to float through the large grove of mango trees and eucalyptus that surrounded the area. Moley however pointed out that the district mostly resided upon rocky soil; not very suitable for farming. Of the 3 types of expanses; *baidh* (highlands), *kanali* (midlands) and *bohal* (lowlands), only the lowland regions were fertile all year round as it retained water in the soil due to accumulation. Thus, Purulia is also referred to as *Ahalya Bhoomi*, drawing reference to the mythological narrative from the *Ramayana* (Hindu mythological epic) in which the curse of the aged Gautama Maharishi upon his young wife Ahalya, turned her into stone as a punishment for her infidelity.

As we crossed the uneven pathways amidst the mud homes, it was striking to note that the *adivasi*⁴⁸ homes were two storied, despite being made out of mud. Pointing out the beautiful renditions of *adivasi chitra* (paintings) adorning the outer mud walls, Moloy explained that the second floor was a measure to keep their children safe from animals and snakes that may enter into their homes at night. Bamboos inserted across the walls covered by thatches of giant palm leaves, facilitated this. But unusually in most cases, the height of the ceiling above the ground floor, were very low (6 ft. approx.), given their shorter heights.

Maldih is a village having a 400 strong heterogeneous population of indigenous tribes such as *Mura*, *Bhumij* and *Adivasis*, as well as Hindus of all castes. A lowland village, the fertile soil had ensured that most of the villagers were farmers following the harvest cycle in regards to their daily lives. As we reached the outskirts of the village, there appeared a forest grove by the river from which emerged the sounds of a drum playing a military rhythm. As we made our way through the numerous trees, the rhythm kept growing louder to finally reach a pulsating volume that seemed to resemble the sound of a thunderous storm (*kal baisakhi*), common in the region during the Bengali month of *Baisakh* (15th April to 14th May as per the English calendar).

As we emerged into a clearing surrounded by the trees, we saw a group of young girls moving synchronically to the rhythm, in the gait of warriors brandishing spears and swords in their hand. Their motion was circumambulatory around a central woman who seemed to be battling with the rest of the group. Her face exuberated an

⁴⁸ Original indigenous inhabitants of various accumulated tribes.

ambitious/ passionate vibe laced with melodramatic expressions of bravery and vigor - her enlarged eyes sincerely emanating the texture of a *devi* (goddess) as is described and depicted in the vast pantheon of goddesses in Hindu scriptures (see Image 5.1). She was Mousumi Chowdhury, the first female Purulia Chhau artist and daughter of Chhau *Guru*⁴⁹ Jagannath Chowdhury. Apart from the actors, there was an old man with white long hair playing a rusted blue *dhamasa*⁵⁰, seated on a mat. Casually dressed in a shirt and *dhoti*⁵¹, he was accompanied by a young man in similar attire playing a *rosun chowki*⁵². It was striking to note that the loud thunderous sound of the *dhamasa* somehow failed to drown the high pitched sound of the *rosun chowki* and in fact was complementary to each other in regards to their texture.



Image 6.1: Mousumi with some of her teammates and students

(Photograph by the researcher, 2021)

⁴⁹ In this case, an exponent and master with numerous disciples.

⁵⁰ A bass heavy drum that is made out of iron and animal hide.

⁵¹ A traditional wrap-around cloth, covering the lower part of the body.

⁵² A small sized bone-carved wind blown instrument with a rubber outer-coating. It resembles a miniature *shehnai*.

Given that most of my previous observations of Purulia Chhau had always been of characters wearing masks and costumes, the facial expressions of the actors beneath the masks, warranted a considerably impact, triggered by the histrionic efforts of these women. Despite the absence of the suggestive masks, it was evident from their facial expressions that the central character was depicting a goddess, whereas the antagonistic expressions of the surrounding others clenching their teeth, were depicting demons. The actors were moving in the steps of an exaggerated military march with their arms held out to make their shoulders seem broad. The swords and spears were blunt props, so as to avoid any injuries. The demonstration by the group was taking place surrounded by a circle of 18 children, who watched the proceedings with a focused gaze. Boys and girls from neighboring villages aged between 10 to 20 years, they were attendees at the Chhau workshop (*karmashala*) being conducted. As we approached, Mousumi called for a break from the proceedings and seated (center), surrounded by some of her teammates, students and younger sister, for our interaction.

Mousumi introduced herself with a confident *namaskar* (respectful greeting gesture) and reaffirmed that she is a 24-year-old female Chhau artist who leads *Mitali Chhau Maldih Mahila Dal*, the first all women Chhau troupe. A performance unit within her father's Chhau group *Mitali Chhau Maldih*, it includes 15 female performers who enact the performances wearing masks and costumes. The musical instruments are however played by men. Although another girl team (*Jambad Pancha Mukhi Mahila Chhau Nritya Samiti*; led by Aparna Mahato from 'Jambad' village) had recently emerged in Purulia as well, Mousumi's team was the pioneer in this regard.

Since her first performance in 2014 at the Nimdih village in the neighboring state of Jharkhand, as Mousumi became a regular performer (over 200 shows) in the villages of Purulia, she and her family had to face various challenges and hardships. As the community elders raised questions for breaking the age-old norms that debar women from doing any form of theatre on stage, others raised question in regards to their safety at the performance venues of the interior villages especially since the audiences consume alcohol and the performances happen at night. Changing their clothes and putting on the masks and costumes were also a problematic issue, due to the absence of any enclosed rooms for artists, at the *akharas*⁵³. Furthermore, apart from being accused of religious blasphemy, political pressure echoing the public dissent also supervened. But then, despite the mounting pressures, she and her family remained adamant towards their aspirations. As Mousumi proudly explained -

“it is actually from a religious point of view, that the audiences finally have come to realize that *Goddess Durga* is a mother who resides within women such as us. If *Durga* is to remain a symbol of women’s empowerment, the women in the villages must be empowered. In any case, no man can ever emulate her feminine grace. It is only when girls like us ‘enact’ the goddess, that her true character/ soul is embedded and established. In the tradition of conducting *Kumari Puja*⁵⁴ on *Ashtami*⁵⁵ during the *Durgotsav* (religious festival), a girl child is prayed to by senior monks as a manifestation of *Goddess Durga*. Can it ever be a boy who can be used instead of the little girl? Thus in our case, the

⁵³ Centrally located elevated grounds in villages, evened out to host performances surrounded by seated audiences.

⁵⁴ The ritual of worshipping a little girl (above eight years old before she attains puberty) decorated as a manifestation of *Goddess Durga*.

⁵⁵ The eighth day of the Durga Puja festival.

logic is similar. We have thus embodied the masked character of *Goddess Durga* as an authentic representation, even from a religious perspective”.

Traditionally, even in other theatre forms of West Bengal such as ‘Jatra’, it is the men who dress up as *sakhis* (cross-dressers ensuring effeminate kinesics) to enact the women characters of the script. In the case of their group, the set of women actors not only enact the women characters such as *Durga, Radha*; amongst others, but also the male warrior characters such as *Mahishasur* and even Gods such as *Krishna* and *Shiva*. A role reversal within the male dominated expression. In this regard, I asked her a question; comparative to my conversation with the *Ustad* (expert) of another popular Chhau team (*Polma Shakti Sangha Chhau Nritya Party*) that I had earlier studied; Giassuddin Ansari. As Ansari had revealed, when a masculine warrior based character such as *Mahishasur* is enacted, there must be a powerful thrust that must be generated in terms of the *angikabhinaya* (kinesics). For example, every time *Mahishasur* puts down his leg, it should be with so much pressure that it makes the earth move beneath his feet, throwing up dust into the air. How do you cope with the treatment of such vigorous male characters? Mousumi answered –

“under the guidance of my father Jagannath who was famous for his rendition of *Mahishasur*, and with rigorous practice, our rendition of the masculine demon is equally promising. We try to raise our legs higher so as to land on the ground harder. We actually jump to greater heights given our lighter weight and land on our knees. Earlier, it used to hurt, but now our body has become seasoned for this. Despite this if our renditions are yet insufficient compared to male performers, we make up for it in our performances of female characters

such as *Goddess Durga*, which the men could never match. When I perform with my father's troupe (*Mitali Chhau Maldih*), us women play female characters whereas the men perform the male characters. This is ideal from a technical standpoint. But then, performing as an all-women team is a symbol of women's empowerment, a 'statement' we want to depict and stand by. It is a priority for us to send this message to the people".

Mousumi then went on to describe that amongst the various *rasas* (emotions) expressed in Purulia Chhau, the *bir rasa* that depicts bravery and valor is most significant as per the popular performed narratives. Narratives such as *Mahishasur Mardini*, *Tarakasur Bodh*; amongst many, are totally based on this *bir rasa*. Given that the *rasa* can only be manifested if the actor actually feels the emotion - apart from their team training with swords and shields since their childhood and genuinely acquiring the skills associated with Purulia Chhau, the emotions of valor and bravery have considerably emerged from their real-life struggles against violence, discrimination, and subjugation; amongst others. Given that the expressions of the masks are fixated, the *bhavas* (non verbal expressions) must be depicted through the appropriate technique, sincerely emerging from within.

“As the face is covered by the mask and cannot be used to express, the movement of every other part of the body must collaboratively depict the emotions and actions. For example, when *Mahishasur* enters the arena, his masculinity and power must exuberate from the sudden movements of the legs, hands and shoulders, as well as through acrobatic vaults (*baji*) and aerial rotations (*pak*). The actions of *Goddess Durga* must be graceful and feminine,

yet valiant and strong. Each character has its own set of *angikabhinaya* (kinesics). *Angabhangi* (body acting) also plays a critical role in Chhau compared to other performance forms because facial gestures, movement of the eyes, and face paintings are detached from this art”, she explained.

Mousumi then went on to mention that she had learnt the proper techniques not just from her father Jaggannath Chowdhury, but also other Chhau *gurus* such as Kartik Singh Mura (son of Padmashree Gambhir Singh Mura), Baghambar Singh and Binoydar Kumar. They regularly visit Maldih from their respective villages to conduct special classes for the workshops (*karmashalas*) organized by their team, funded by ‘Banglanatak.com’ a non-governmental organization supporting rural culture and livelihoods.

On being asked as to which are the *palas* (narratives) that their team usually perform and why - she said that amongst the various enactments such as *Abhimanyu Bodh*, *Kirat Arjun*, etc., they are most popular for their rendition of *Mahishasur Mardini* in which she plays *Goddess Durga*. This is a narrative in which *Durga*, who is the mother goddess and wife of *Lord Shiva*, travels across realms to slay the powerful demon king *Mahishasur*, accompanied by her children *Ganesha*, *Kartik*, *Saraswati* and *Lakshmi*, at the behest of all the other *devtas*⁵⁶. In their case, this is the most relevant narrative that truly resonates with their cause of breaking free from the shackles of gender-based subjugation and the association of women, with weakness. Furthermore, within the narratives, she has also enacted male characters such as *Ganesha*, *Kartik*, *Abhimanyu* and *Mahishasur*, as and when required. Her favorite

⁵⁶ The innumerable Gods of the Hindu pantheon.

male character rendered is *Krishna*. Sometimes she has even had to portray both male and female characters in the same narrative. She mentions –

“in a performance in Norway in 2018, I had enacted *Durga* as well as *Mahishasur* in the same performance of the *pala* (narrative) - *Mahishasur Mardini*; in which *Durga* is the protagonist and *Mahishasur* the antagonist”.

This also serves as an ideal example of the local belief that the good and evil dichotomy is existent within the same person and manifests as per circumstance. As to which narrative shall be performed at which venue is however, decided by her father. Usually in village programs, 3 *palas* of approx. 1 hour each are performed overnight whereas in urban settings, only 1 *pala* is performed; that too abridged within 30 minutes.

“Although in tomorrow’s performance in the neighboring Balarampur town we shall perform the *Mahishasur Mardini pala*, in our next outstation program in the city of Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh, to be held next month, we are going to debut a short new *pala* named *Bharat Mata*⁵⁷ in which I shall be depicting the *devi* in character. It is a *Pouranic pala* weaved into a script by my father. In the villages of Purulia, the *Pouranic palas* (religion based narratives, most of which are adopted from the Vedas, Puranas, etc.) are much more popular than the *Samajik palas* (narratives based on social issues)” she said.

⁵⁷ Personified deification of the republic of India, referred to as ‘Bharat’ *Mata* (mother) in ancient scriptures.

Mousumi had completed her masters degree in Bengali from the Sidhukano University, situated in Purulia town and acknowledged that her enhanced knowledge of localized religious narratives such as *Manasha Mangal* and *Chandi Mangal* which were part of the syllabus, considerably inspired her to ideate narratives for her future Chhau endeavors. Apart from her education evidently empowering her personality, it helped shape her feministic aspirations, she admits. Travelling 60 kms per day to reach her University and back, on a bicycle; it provided her an ideal fitness regime and lots of time to ‘think’. She used to return from her University and then engage in rehearsals and performances; a balance that her father ensured that she upheld. Rehearsals were organized accordingly and performances cancelled during her exams.

After Mousumi’s marriage was arranged a month before in January, she now resides in the Raghunathpur block of Purulia district, around 60 km away in her husband’s village; Pahargora. Her husband is a dancer to Bollywood based music and runs a dance school called ‘Gurukul’ in his village. Although not associated with the Chhau tradition, Mousumi’s husband and his family have pledged to support Mousumi’s ambitions and allows/ encourages her to travel back to her father’s village every weekend, attend practice with her Chhau team and return the next day. But then Mousumi admits that earlier she could practice much more with her team and was more involved in the inception of the new narratives. She has not yet performed in the month after her marriage.

Also seated beside Mousumi during this interview was her younger sister Shyamoli Chowdhury, 21 years of age. She explained that after Mousumi’s marriage, as she left

for her in-law's home, the bulk of the responsibilities in regards to their unit, were now Shyamoli's.

“It was always a team effort and each team member was prepared to take on each other's responsibilities, as and when required. We are all-rounders”, she said.

When Mousumi is not available, Shyamoli plays the role of *Goddess Durga* in *Mahishasur Mardini*. Presently, although the team is engaged in practice almost everyday, Mousumi only joins them on weekends, since her marriage. Shyamoli was happy that her sister had always encouraged her to take her place and guided her in many ways beyond Chhau. Also, it was always Mousumi who stood up against any insults they had to face for being women Chhau artists.

Mousumi explained that she was happy that her little sister didn't have to face the insults that she faced during her initial days. She said that when she used to practice in the riverside forest groves, the community elders and even other women would sarcastically pass comments saying “*Hatt; ai biti chela gula abar Chhau nachbe. Ei sob cheleder kaaj. Bir ras laage. Kon din haath paa bhangbe ei sob korte giye. Bari jaa*” (Stop it! You are a frail woman. Stop trying to act like men. Chhau requires warrior-like strength and valor. You will break your arms and legs if you keep trying. Go home). She had also faced sexual comments and catcalls at village performance venues, as some people in the audience are invariably drunk. More of a vicious brunt though, was extended towards her father Jaggannath; abused and ostracized on various occasions. He is still shamed from time to time for living out of his daughter's

earnings. Furthermore, the family was also punitively excluded within their own community for being Brahmins (high caste Hindus) engaged as Chhau performers; a societal role traditionally suited for the tribal and lower caste Hindu men. But then as Shyamoli yearningly clarified, in recent times she has sensed a considerable turnaround. Apart from receiving support and encouragement from the audiences, the overall public sentiment has evolved over the years into considering them as exalted real-life manifests of *devis* (Goddesses). As devout followers of the *devis* themselves, the carefully selected 'women-centric' narratives genuinely intensified the performing women's aspirations, enabling a spiritual catharsis within them as well - apart from invigorating the impact of the empowerment statement upon audiences. Herself an ardent disciple, Shyamoli recently received a lot of appreciation for enacting *Goddess Kali* in the *pala - Raktashur Bodh*. Furthermore, in the course of their trip to Norway facilitated by the efforts of Banglanatok.com, they have done their village proud, becoming celebrities across the Purulia district, ever since.

Shyamoli feels that people who pass lewd comments and also find fault in their performance belong to an archaic mindset that just cannot accommodate women into realms that were traditionally male dominated. Their comments were painful and discouraging. But then, the love for performing Chhau, laced with passion for the cause, has considerably buoyed the girls forward. Mousumi avowed this by re-affirming that more the discouragement, the harder they worked. They have now learnt to utilize the sarcastic insinuations, as motivations to trounce the dissenters.

“Earlier some people in my village used to say that I wouldn't be accepted for marriage because of my extroverted Chhau interests. I thus made it a point to

invite them as well to my recent marriage into a family that is supportive of my ambitions”, she said.

Shyamoli was however sad that for some time now they had not performed in the village programs. After some untoward incidents of lewd comments being passed, their father had decided not to engage the girls unit in the village performances of the night. But then, she laments that it was most exciting to perform in the villages; a familiar ambience in which they could feel the soil of the *akhara* (central village square or field) underneath their feet, rather than wooden stages. A comfortable vibe.

“In the villages, it feels as if we are performing at home. And moreover, after the audience set aside their apprehensions and forget/ accept that we are actually women beneath the masks, their cheers emerge louder, sans inhibitions. Villagers genuinely perceive the *akhara* like a temple in which Gods and Goddesses (the masked characters) appear. Thus emotions run high”, she said.

As our interaction ended, Shyamoli introduced the team of women Chhau artists; Sarala (the *Mahishasur* expert), Konika (the *Shiva* expert), Kabita (more inclined towards the female characters), Milee (usually plays *Ganesh* and *Kartik*), Seema, Anima, Manju and sisters Anna and Mangali. Most of them were titled as ‘Mahato’; indicating that they were from the *Kurmi* indigenous tribe. Mousumi and Shyamoli were titled Chowdhury, indicating that they were Hindu Brahmins. Shyamoli also introduced the group of 18 students (boys and girls) who had come to attend the Chhau workshop being held that day. Shyamoli mentioned that conducting workshops had emerged as a great source of income for the team after the lean period suffered

during the Covid Pandemic when there were no shows for 9 months, so as to avoid social gatherings. They now earn around Rs 500/- each, per weekly workshop engagement. After our interaction, the women re-grouped for the final session of the workshop as I keenly observed (see Image 5.2).



Image 6.2: Mousumi and her team conducting a Chhau workshop.

(Photograph by the researcher, 2021)

Observations from the Workshop

Mousumi was a good communicator. She first explained the narrative before practically enacting it. The weapons were kept aside and not used. She referred to the weapons, as ornaments and that the girls must look like warriors even without using the ornaments. She provided references of where she had come to know of the story she is describing; ensuring credibility. As the students asked questions, she was a patient listener and responded to the point. As she enacted the narrative she described, her rendition was serious, as if in performance. Without a mask on, the expressions on her face were resonant to the *bhava* (body movement) and complimentary to the *rasa* (emotion) she was portraying. She constantly stressed on the importance of bringing

out the *rasa* (emotion). She also laid stress on spreading out the shoulders and keeping the head held high. Some of the other team members were co-instructors. As Sarala, Kabita, and Konika, moved around amongst the seated children checking their postures, Shyamoli stood beside Mousumi following her moves. Facing Mousumi and Shyamoli, the children then lined up with adequate distance between them and began to emulate the postures being shown by Mousumi, just like in a karate/ dance class. As the students were maintaining the posture and emulating the shoulder spread of Mousumi, it was evident that her spirit inspired them. Upon a casual observation, the children seemed to be very talented.

“The facial expressions are also very important, even though the performance will be masked. It establishes the emotion from within” Mousumi reiterated.

As the rhythm of the *dhamasa* was initiated, the emotions seemed to become more intense. As the pace was increased, the movements also became more vigorous. Mousumi instructed the students to focus on the music, as it was the key that stitched together the performance of each individual into a synchronized group effort. She underscored that ‘music’, ‘dance’ and ‘theatre’ are the three primary components of Purulia Chhau, achieved through a collaborative, team based rendition. She tasked the children to ‘stomp’ their feet on the ground as hard as they can, but together. As the students constantly failed to synchronize, Mousumi asked them to keep trying. She even scolded a few students for being half hearted in their stomp. It was only when the children focused on the musical rhythm of the *dhamasa* that their legs could stomp down together. The synchrony was referred to as *mel naanch* by Mousumi as she pointed out that it was the rhythm of the warring drums that enabled an army to march

in tandem. Just as soldiers march to a rhythm, the students were instructed to match Mousumi in her character-based march-walk, adhering to the beats of the *dhamsa*. Everyone had to ensure that there is a *mel* (uniformity) between all. At the end, Mousumi asked all the students to further inquire about the story of *Durga* and *Mahishasur* amongst their peers at home, as this would be enacted as a narrative in the next session of the workshop.

Reflections

As the day's engagements ended, and the group dispersed, I excused myself to pensively wander across the riverside lining the village; organizing my thoughts and notes. Aided in my interpretations by my earlier conversations with community elder Moley Cowdhury, the relevant underlying contexts and cultural settings were constantly taken into account. As Mushengyezi (2003) elucidates, "since culture shapes the environment within which a message is decoded, indigenous media forms such as very specific performances - dance, music, drama, drums and horns, village criers, orators and storytellers – continue to present themselves as effective channels for disseminating messages in predominantly rural societies" (p. 108). Over the decades, the 'hybridization' and 'cross-fertilization' of ideas have further triggered diverse inter-cultural infusions and innovations (ibid.).

In the context of Purulia, it is evident that the constant influx of urban tourists had significantly influenced the indigenous people of the region. As the urban women intermingled with their rural counterparts, a new world was introduced to them. A world where Hindu women were empowered and free. Enthused by their dominance/

parity with men in their interactions, perhaps the rural women found this showcase of smartness, independence and knowledge considerably inspiring. Amongst them, given that Mousumi had been fortunate to receive an education and was supported by her father to travel to Purulia town everyday, her nature and attitude had been shaped into an infusion; a transitory bridge between the urban and rural scenarios. Unique amongst her counterparts.

As Mousumi's performances across India and abroad further enhanced her personality and confidence, the rural women of the region invariably resolved to derive considerable motivation from her actions, as was revealed during some of my previous interactions with Uma, Ruhi, Sneha and Puja of *Polma* village in the Barabazar block - as well as Shiuli, Pritha, Lakshmi and Promita of *Charida* village in Balarampur; amongst various others. Notably, Ira, a septuagenarian woman from *Charida* who has spent here entire life within its perimeters, also upheld utmost respect for the young Mousumi's courage. Thus in her efforts, Mousumi had unequivocally emerged as an icon to a large number of rural women who are yet to break the shackles of social subjugation, and earnestly look up to her as a role model. As Weatherford (1990) had observed, there are various cultures in transition. In a long history of contact with Europeans and Americans, many a tribe's first exposure to a camera as an item or object, established the cultural divide. Having transcended considerably, in the last twenty years, indigenous people from many parts of the world have already adopted film and photography, as a part of their lives. In the present case, apart from technology, it is the diffusion of the concept of women's education, empowerment and equality that is resonating with the transitory phenomenon. A liminal phase.

As I headed back to the village, I realized that evenings in the village were very ‘social’ as the people gathered at the central fields and temples in groups. Although some engaged in gambling, playing cards and drinking (across all age groups) – most people engaged in the chanting of the excerpts of the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, lead by priests or community elders. These were followed by question answer sessions. Participating in one such gathering being held at the central temple courtyard, I realized that the interpretations were based on issues pertinent to their troubles and ‘day to day’ situations. The examples cited were of regular villagers and their actions, rather than that of famous kings and warriors, as is portrayed in the institutionalized epics. The locally relevant anecdotes were evidently woven in so as to ensure catharsis and spiritual contentment, in regards to the everyday life of the locals. There were very few women at these gatherings though, seated secluded, in distanced corners. This has traditionally been the case, Moloy said. A social division.

The environment outside the premise was pitch dark. Apart from the few tungsten bulbs meagerly emanating light through the edges of closed doors, the frosty hue of the moonlight, somewhat helped identify the pathways. The pollution free environment revealed a spangled sky, sparkling with innumerable stars; like I had never perceived before. As I was lead to the courtyard of Mousumi’s home in the central part of the village, I was finally introduced to her legendary father Jagannath Chowdhury, who had returned from his engagements in Balarampur town; the venue for their performance, the next day. After being treated to a sumptuous dinner (fermented rice, millets and curd), I was provided a *khatiya* (bed made of bamboo and rope) to sleep in the courtyard looking up at the clear night sky.

(27.02.2021, Saturday)

Place – *Maldih* village

Block – *Balarampur*

District – *Purulia*

The next day began early, attending their practice session as an observer followed by an in-depth interview with Jagannath Chowdhury. Even during rehearsals, Mousumi was very proactive. She paid attention to every detail; the masks, costumes, kinesics, music and all the other elements of Purulia Chhau. She was so much of a perfectionist that she ensured that the actresses first rehearse without their masks, as she wanted to gauge their facial expressions and thus their spirit, which are otherwise concealed by the character's facades during performances. As Mousumi multi-tasked as a director, production manager as well as the lead actress, her father Jagannath watched appreciatively, sparing a smile from time to time. As per the itinerary of the performance scheduled later that day, they rehearsed the *Mahishasur Mardini pala* (45 minutes) three times. One of these times, Shyamoli enacted the role of *Goddess Durga*, so as to prepare a backup in case required. She was otherwise enacting the role of *Ganesha*; *Durga's* divine son. Mousumi mentioned that training to enact each other's roles was a regular exercise. It had happened before that one of the participants was beaten up and restricted at home at the last moment by her inebriated father, on the day of a critical performance, a few months back. These backup measures were thus a way of being prepared to maneuver around challenges as and when they arise.

Having initiated his troupe in the early 1980s, Jagannath had faced many hardships throughout the 40 years he has been a Chhau artist. But eventually, his talents were recognized on various occasions (Folklore Academy award recipient; amongst others). However, it was nevertheless very difficult to maintain this as a livelihood, until he received the support of Banglanatok.com; who provided his troupe with various platforms and opportunities. This actually reinforced his strength to consider allowing his daughter to embrace this unique profession as a Chhau artist. Yet still, given the caste based struggles and hostilities he had faced, he was initially apprehensive. Furthermore, he feared that many people would find the idea of a women Chhau performer ‘offensive’ - not just from a social standpoint, but also as per religious norms.

“But then as I used to return home late at night after performances, my small sized daughter Mousumi would wait for me and run out into the courtyard and imitatively stand enacting the *bir rasa*, the posture of *Goddess Durga* as she initiates her battle against *Mahishasur*. This inspired me to allow her to blossom as per her passion. In due course, the real *Mahishasur* in her life emerged to be the regressive chauvinists, who she has now defeated. The techniques that I had learnt as an ardent student of Chhau exponent Padmashree⁵⁸ Nepal Mahato, have now been bestowed upon my daughter. She has made a name for herself not just because she is a woman. It is because she developed a strong foundation, as is evident from her spirited performances” he proudly assured.

⁵⁸ One of the highest civilian awards conferred upon Indian nationals.

Despite a spiraling demand, Jagannath carefully selects the performances of his daughter's troupe, based on the organizer and venue. Although they have performed on various occasions in the interior villages, these programs are now mostly avoided due to the risk that comes with it. As people are usually inebriated at these venues, there have been incidents where people have entered into the performing space and tried to grab hold of the women performers. The instincts of these people often surpass the religiosity associated with the masked God or Goddess, as most revere them as, usually. Given that most people are uneducated, if one person becomes aggressive, many others join in and amplify the situation. As police stations are generally far away, the girls are not safe at such venues. Even though he had appointed some strong men to accompany the team to such places, they are vastly outnumbered, as hundreds usually throng the venues. Thus, Jagannath has decided against exposing his daughter to such perilous situations in future. But then, village performances (such as the one that day) were accepted when organized by trusted sources such as political leaders, schools, NGOs and the Government.

Observations from the Performance

After the lockdown due to the pandemic and then Mousumi's marriage, that evening's performance was their first in a while. Organized by the 'Ravidas Janma Jayanti Organizing Committee' supported by the local Panchayat⁵⁹ on the occasion of the birth centenary of Saint Ravidas⁶⁰, the performance was set to take place at the 'Registry para' neighborhood in the outskirts of Balarampur town, Purulia. After an

⁵⁹ Elected village representatives.

⁶⁰ A 14th century poet, philosopher and religious saint of India, who distinctively propounded the 'premise of equality' amongst all living beings irrespective of religion, gender, caste and class, during his time. His birth anniversary is celebrated every year on the auspicious 'Maghe Purnima' (usually the 2nd full moon in February) as per the lunar calendar. It was celebrated on 27th February in 2021.

early lunch, Jagannath's truck was loaded with the musical instruments, costumes, masks and props as most of the performers boarded atop its roof. As it set off towards the performance venue, the residents of *Maldih* (especially youngsters) appeared at the junctures/ pathways to wave at the passing truck. I sat beside the driver of the truck throughout the journey. As the young performers seemed very excited getting back to work after a long break, they acted as children do, during the recess in between classes/ or in the school bus. Amidst the playfulness, laughter and gossips, as we reached *Balarampur* town an hour later, the truck was parked beside the *akkhra* where the performance was to ensue.

As the male musicians set up their corner space, the crowds gathered and seated themselves on the tarpaulins laid on the surrounding area of the barricaded central space. The team was provided a room in the adjoining building to gear up and prepare. Strikingly, I noticed that as the performance approached, the girls readied themselves not just in terms of script, costumes, masks, etc., but also in regards to gathering a strong mental setup accounting for all of their struggles, and cause. When it was finally time (4.30 pm), the performance was initiated with incredulous pomp and grandeur, accompanied by thunderous music. Rhythms specifically intended to signify that the heavens were parting for the Gods/ Goddesses to descend upon them, as Shyamoli pointed out. As an announcement of the arrival of the masked deities, the *bhasyakar* (vocalist/ narrator) amongst the musicians setup a dramatic ode. The *pala* (narrative) being performed; *Mahishasur Mardini*, was thereby commenced.

The narrative of *Mahishasur Mardini* is synonymous with the cultural history of Bengal. As the Durga Puja festival has been celebrated here for centuries, the audiences already knew the story of how Goddess Durga was created by the Gods to defeat *Mahishasur*. Based on the mythological premise that Lord *Bramha* impressed by his penance, granted special powers to this demon king *Mahishasur* that no ‘man’ could ever defeat him, as the tyrannical *Mahishasur* could no longer be defeated by any of the Gods (as they were all ‘men’) - *Durga* the all powerful woman warrior was created through the blessings and contributions of all of them. The savior of all the male Gods in the wake of their inadequacies, *Goddess Durga* can thus be considered as the symbolic epitome of women’s empowerment, nonetheless. But then, for all these years, as women were not allowed to perform, the character of *Durga* had always been portrayed by a masked ‘man’, by all troupes. For the first time, a woman was empowered enough to challenge this and portray *Durga*, as we witnessed. As the women marched in depicting *Durga* and her divine family (see Image 5.3), the crowds cheered in praise as well as religious subservience. As I had experienced various performances by other famous troupes before this as well, I realized that Mousumi and her team were thorough professionals who adhered to a well-rehearsed script. They not only matched the capacities of their male counterparts, but also surpassed them in various aspects. Even the masculine character *Mahishasur* being enacted by Sarala was vigorous and intimidating.



Image 6.3: Mousumi's troupe (*Mitali Chhau Maldih Mahila Dal*) in performance

(Photograph by the researcher, 2021)

The crowds were mesmerized. A visibly large presence of female audiences vehemently applauding a female protagonist and her women's team; the message of empowerment was unmistakable and ubiquitous; before all to perceive. It seemed as if *Goddess Durga* being portrayed by a woman, immersed the divine feminine universal (*Shakti*), into the costumed character (see Image 5.4). As revealed through the devout gestures and post event interactions, it was an auspicious resonance for most amongst the audiences, including men. The women's life-struggles somehow permeated into the overall ambience as a show of strength. Not just of the performers for whom it was a matter of standing up for their right through a passionate rendition, but also for the audiences (especially women) for whom it was an avenue for catharsis, aspiration, solidarity and hope. The men were either intrigued by the novelty of the unique scenario (women performers), or in seek of blessings from the evermore-pervasive *Goddess Durga* before them, now reinforced with a soul. Amidst the celebrations, the

voice of the scornful were altogether drowned; excommunicated beyond the emerging perimeters of egalitarianism and a progressive social order.



Image 6.4: Mousumi in her costume with the *Durga* mask

(Photograph provided by Shyamoli, 2021)

Reflections

From being historically conquered as the weaker section of society suffering regular bouts of domestic violence and rape, to being anathematized in revulsion owing to their menstrual cycle - rural women in India have been subjected to unimaginable social dogmas such as dowry, child marriage, polygamy and even *sati*⁶¹. Furthermore, disallowed entry at various temples and debarred from cultural activities⁶², their existence has somehow been socially manufactured into one of slavery and subjugation. But then, as rural society advanced in terms of education, technology and

⁶¹ The ritual of ‘burning a widow alive’, by forcing her to sit upon the funeral pyre of her deceased husband so as she may accompany his soul even in death.

⁶² Women were however allowed to perform as a seductress or *Jhumur* singer within the low-culture *Nachni* tradition of Purulia. No other cultural expression accommodated them.

urbanization, these oppressed women have developed a newfound courage to denounce their state of conformism and cultivate the rhetoric of empowerment and equality. Outpouring their repressed emotions through dramatic renditions, *Mitali Chhau Maldih Mahila Dal* have emerged as torchbearers of social justice. Challenging the archaic social norms barring women from performing, these women have not just maneuvered themselves around the reverberations of regressive voices, but also embraced their role as representatives of the suppressed rural women of the region; victims of gender based systemic racism, suffering in silence over centuries. As the dissenting chauvinists reappeared time and again, their aggressive methods of devaluing, discouraging and even threatening dire consequences - were genuinely resisted. Undeterred by the pressures, these brave women unrelentingly persisted with their spirited demand for assimilation, using non-violent, artistic perseverance.

The fact that Mousumi and her team have carved out a niche space for themselves within the male dominated Purulia Chhau heritage is itself an indication of the success of their ascendancy. As they established themselves over the past 7 years, their statement gradually gained momentum and has now been effectively communicated. Resonating with other women in the rural belt, they have now become a powerful voice for the voiceless. In fact, their act seems to have had a considerable impact on the overall regional mindset as well - one of 'self-realization' amongst men, and 'liberation' amongst women.

Challenging stringent societal norms through their performances, it was not just the non-compliant measure and 'women centric' narratives chosen, but also, the expression itself that contributed to the revolutionary rhetoric as well. As Chhau as an

art-form had evolved infusing most of the other art forms of Purulia such as *Jhumur*, *Nachni*, *Jatra*, *Natya*, *Tusu*, *Bhadu*, amongst others - it was the symbolic wholesome representation of the overall culture of Purulia; the ideal holistic conduit to accommodate the women's defiant stance, against their derogation of cultural exclusion. This symbolic statement of *Mitali Chhau Maldih Mahila Dal* that broke the barriers of chauvinism guarding the male dominion of culture, can genuinely be considered as revolutionary leaps mirroring the sentiments, values and everyday life of 'presently existing society'; rather than an archaic representation of history and the social structure of the past. What once was; has changed. Purulia Chhau has in-fact facilitated this; utilized by the emboldened. Whereas the ontologically inclined may regard this innovation as an adulteration, but then from an epistemological standpoint, it is evident that the capacities of folk expressions are beyond just religious interpretation and entertainment.

Contrary to the women's predicament, given that the central character of the most popular mythological narrative *Mahishasur Mardini* that is depicted in Purulia Chhau is *Goddess Durga*, a symbol of women's empowerment – her role being finally depicted by an iconoclastic woman, rather than a masked man, was a metaphorical testimonial of newfound authenticity. Also, *Mahishasur Mardini* literally means 'death of *Mahishasur*'. As the demon king *Mahishasur* is synonymous with oppression and tyranny, his death at the hands of the empowered *Durga*, is representational and emblematic. Thus, when the mythological narrative of women's empowerment featuring *Goddess Durga* was performed, the parallel empowerment narrative of the artists themselves played out as an allegory. Furthermore, as the depiction of male characters such as *Mahishasur*, *Raavan* and even *Shiva* were also

elegantly upheld by these women – it reflected the initiation of a social metamorphosis; a role reversal that further amplified their resistance. Endowed at the helm behind the masks and costumes, the capacity of these women to proficiently enshrine the masculinity of *Shiva* as well as the grace of *Durga*, was remarkable in itself. Apart from substantiating their statement of gender equality, it also reminded the audiences and even society as a whole, that their *Goddess Durga* is actually a mother/ daughter/ wife; as are they. Thus, vindicated by religion itself, as the girls' vivification towards the acceptance of women into the cultural stronghold of men gained momentum, the approach of most religious priests, political leaders and community elders; amongst others, was negotiated to change. It was not just the actions of *Mitali Chhau Maldih Mahila Dal* that motivated them, but also the resonant voice of a large number of uprising women, including their own wives and daughters. Moreover, as an overpowering trend, various others are now in line to step up and culturally participate. A resonant voice; here to stay.

6.3. The Economic and Technological Negotiations

Apart from the need for survivability in the present competitive market characterized by an increasing number of troupes, various influences and negotiations have contributed to the modern innovations of Purulia Chhau. Studying the social, cultural, economic and political influences from the perspective of tourism, urban culture and the emerging culture industry – it is evident that a lure towards commercialization has considerably influenced some of the artists. But then most prominently, it is the diffusion of technology, Internet penetration in the villages, their utilization of smart

phones; amongst others, which has ensured a modern day overhaul of the mindset of the tribal performers who constitute the Purulia Chhau troupes. A giant leap nonetheless.

With the advent of the internet penetration in the villages, as the people gradually started using smart phones, their utility in regards to marketing and outreach was aptly recognized by the Chhau performers. Realizing its potential to reach out to urban audiences, various Chhau troupes started posting their performance videos recorded on their mobile phones on platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. As the regular influx of tourists had earlier set the stage for shorter commercial performances of five to ten minutes length, these shortened enactments were consciously designed to attract urban viewers. Whereas these short renditions were laden with acrobatic displays, sensational choreography, kinesics and music, the significance of the storytelling process was majorly distracted/ diminished. Short scenes were enacted and uploaded rather than the entire narrative. But then, their motive was not to disseminate narratives any more, as is the case in the villages. It was to be contacted for performances (both urban and rural), sell Chhau memorabilia and all in all, enhance the popularity of their art form as a commodity.

As Sen, Chattopadhyay & Chakravarty's (2017) survey indicates, owing to the digital revolution, as the price of smartphones and data packs were reduced, most people in Purulia could afford to access the Internet on smartphones, which were easily available in the market. Now accustomed with the use of Facebook, Whatsapp and Youtube, most users spend between two to four hours on the internet everyday. Based

on the responses/ survey of a representative sample of 200 respondents in the Purulia district, the following (Figure 6.1) is an indication of the digital habits of inhabitants.

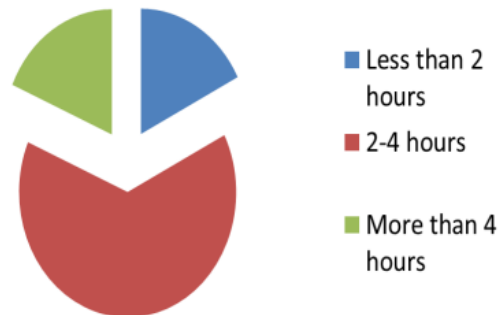


Figure 6.1: Showcasing the number of hours spent on the Internet by users in Purulia
(Sen, Chattopadhyay & Chakravarty, 2017)

Utilizing the digital revolution in the past decade, Purulia Chhau has taken shape as an industry, providing the troupes themselves, an organized support structure. As the financial considerations/ initiatives of NGOs/ Govt. agencies have provided substantial leverage to the artists, the upcoming generation of performers is already looking forward to this as a robust livelihood that commands respect, rather than deserting their aspirations. This is evident from the numerous Chhau schools and workshops that are being attended in large numbers by the children of Purulia, encouraged by their parents.

In fact, there are various schools dedicated to teaching the Chhau art form in Seraikella in Jharkhand as well as in Mayurbhanj (the other regional variants of Chhau, apart from Purulia) catering to their respective styles. Whereas most of the prominent Chhau troupes had taken such initiatives in Purulia not just as an avenue

for income, but also to ensure the progress of their traditions – the RCCH (Rural Craft and Cultural Hub) initiative by Banglanatok.com in association with Jagannath Chowdhury’s troupe has been immensely popular amongst the youth of Purulia. As Jagannath mentions the workshops are conducted by Chhau icons from across Purulia such as Binoydhar Kumar (Bamunia), Gaissuddin Amsari (Polma) and Baghambar Singh Mura (Govindapur).

Taking shape of an industry, the commercial sale of Chhau memorabilia has also been initiated online by the *sutradhar* (carpenter/ mask-maker) community who are most commonly settled in and around the Baghmundi sub-division of Purulia. The central village Charida has in fact also emerged to become a significant tourist destination in the past decade, lined with shops selling Purulia Chhau masks of various sizes, as collectibles. Although traditionally engaged in producing the masks as per the orders presented by the Chhau troupes spread out across the Purulia district, they are overbooked with orders received online on portals such as amazon.in. (Image 6.5).

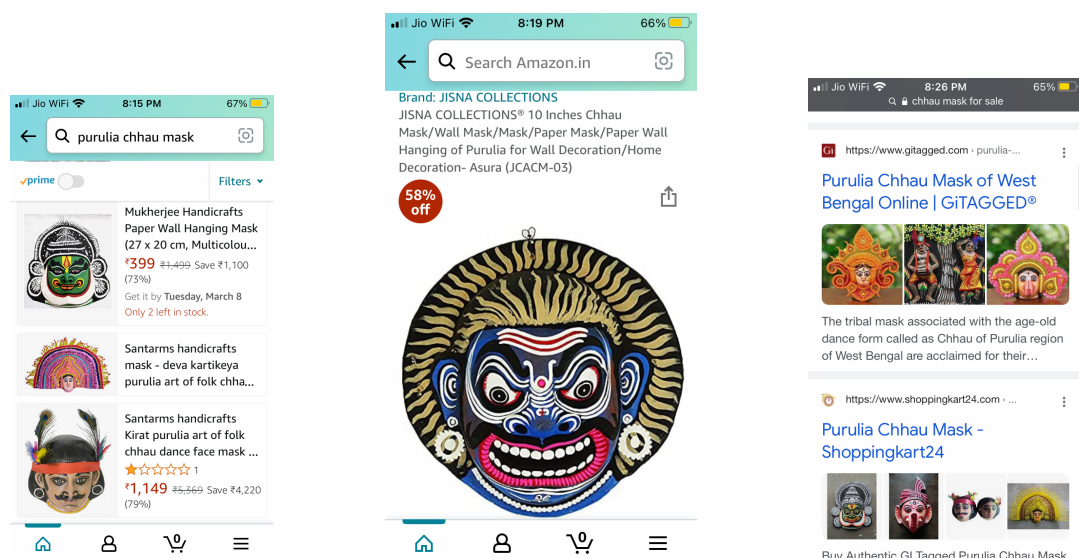


Image 6.5: Screenshots of websites selling Purulia Chhau Masks.

Implementing their accumulating experience, these cultural collectibles (sometimes GI tagged)⁶³ are being professionally marketed on digital platforms presenting the background, history and novelty of Purulia Chhau to the consumers to generate their interest. At present, there exists a ‘Sutradhar Committee’ in Charida to regulate the production and sale, in the interest of preserving this as a livelihood.

6.3.1. Case Study: Chhau YouTuber Debashis Das

Debashis Das, is a Chhau artist and the troupe leader of New Star Chhau Dance Group from Anai Jambad village in Purulia. He is also associated with the promotion activities of various other troupes such as ‘Shib Durga Chhau Nritya Party’ from Kustaur village. Apart from being dedicated to his purpose for the past 10 years; directing the religious scripts through unique treatments and choreography, he has himself enacted the role of Shiva and Krishna on various occasions. But in recent times, he has become an extremely popular icon owing to his capacity to innovate and transcend into the digital realm. One who has ensured considerable headway in utilizing the Internet based opportunities. Up until February 2022, his eponymous YouTube channel (Debashis Das) was having 1,16,000 subscribers, accumulating an overall number of 50,125,424 views of his uploaded videos since 2014. These numbers are rising every day.

⁶³ A geographical indication (GI) is a sign used on products that have a specific geographical origin and possess qualities or a reputation that are due to that origin.

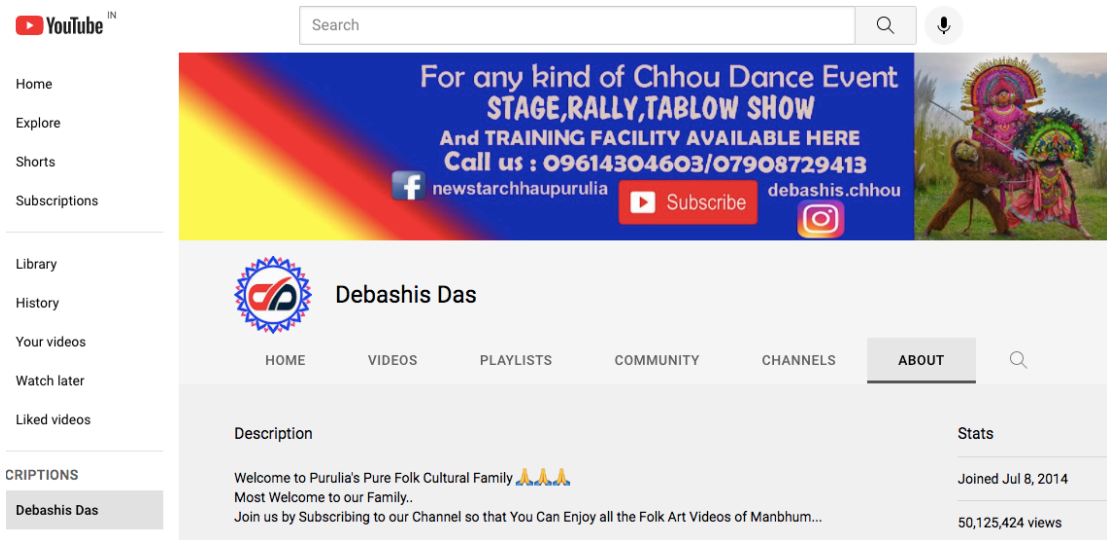


Image 6.6: A screen-shot the YouTube channel of Debashis Das

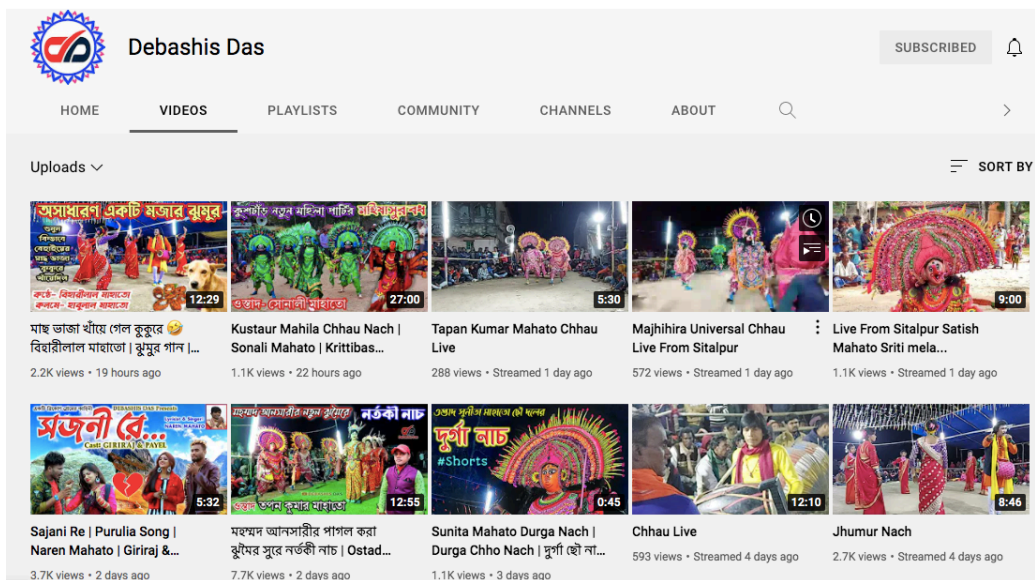


Image 6.7: A screen-shot of the recent videos on Debashis Das' YouTube channel

As Debashis laments though, despite the exponential growth in the number of subscribers, the performances going viral are a commercial representation of Purulia Chhau. Not the original thing. Gauging from the success of certain videos that he uploaded and the failure of some, he has noted that the type of performances that go viral are those that are laced with comedy and high-flying acrobatics. Lengthy performances based on the entire religious narrative do not garner even half as much views in comparison. But then, he and his troupe have become extremely popular amongst the audiences in and beyond Purulia. He is now a well-known name amongst event managers and organizers in Kolkata and other urban centers of Bengal. He has performed in Delhi and Mumbai as well, amongst others. Given the requisite regularity of upload, he also posts the performance videos of various other troupes in the region as and when he attends. In fact, this has popularized not just the troupes of his association (New Star Chhau Dance Group; Shib Durga Chhau Nritya Party; amongst others), but also many more. His YouTube channel has thus emerged as a platform for various other troupes that have been contacted for shows via this digital outreach. Furthermore, he also posts the performances of the eminent artists and troupes of Purulia to generate traffic and mobilize the locals online.

For Debashis, his YouTube channel has genuinely emerged as a lucrative source of income. Not just through the performances that he gets contacted for, but also through the content-creator remuneration provided by YouTube. He has earned approximately Rs 14 lakhs/- (1.4 million rupees) over the last five years, as compensation for the number of views incurred on his channel. He became eligible for this after achieving the initial requisite of a thousand subscribers in 2017. Although recently accused to be allegedly demanding/ accepting money from the other troupes for covering their

performances and uploading on his channel with a large subscriber base, Debashis maintains that his objective is to showcase/ promote the culture of Purulia to the world. Nothing more. As he does not own any DSLR camera or isn't adept with editing software, the performances uploaded are captured on his smart phone, which has a good quality camera. The videos uploaded are unedited and thus a representation of the real situation in the villages as and how the performances happen. For themselves, by themselves; a presentation from within. But then, as he realizes the importance of uploading short and commercial videos, he captures only the most dramatic parts and uploads these. Not the entire performances. Having gradually developed an understanding of the YouTube algorithms of virulence, he is even compelled to even instruct the troupes in focus to tailor-make performances to suit the requirements of the digital based audiences such as short time frames, aggressive bursts and sensationalism.

There are now various others such as Debashis who have also garnered a large number of followers on social media platforms. Apart from Buddheshwar Mahato (Barabajar), Swapan Kumar Mahato (Bodoldi), Pramod Rai (Jhalda) and Kaifuddin Ansari (Polma), NGOs such as Banglanatak.com have also ensured a vast presence of Purulia Chhau, online. But then, the videos uploaded by Debashis and the other artists themselves are grass-root representations; very different from the packaged and edited renditions uploaded by Banglanatak.com and other such organizations providing them support. But as validated by all of these innovators, apart from becoming a repository of the culture of Purulia, these digital showcases have genuinely ensured economic stability and a revival of Purulia Chhau. Artists performing other expressions (*Jhumur, Bhadu Gaan, Nachni*, etc) have also adopted these measures, from various

other districts. In fact, the recent virulence of folk songs such as ‘Kaccha Badam’ by Bhuban Badyakar of Birbhum (West Bengal) is in fact a vindication of how well tribal folk artists are embracing digital measures to reach out to the entire world.

Reflections

Whereas digital innovations have ensured sustenance, growth and a source of livelihood for the Purulia Chhau artists, the general content that they themselves consume at other times from the Internet has in turn influenced them though. Whereas earlier the source for ideas in regards to Purulia Chhau narratives performed had emerged from philosophical/ religious contexts, their present access to issues such as current affairs, politics and commercial entertainment has provoked them to innovate on these lines as well. Whereas the earlier urban influence through the influx of tourists had already ensured a considerable yet limited influence, regular access to digital environments have in fact opened the floodgates in this regard. This rapidly changing phase of Purulia Chhau has had a significant impact on the rituals with which it is intertwined. As the performers gradually suited into the commercial performance formats, their success during performances at urban settings gradually motivated them to experiment with the treatment during ritualistic performances as well. Thus, whereas the performances during the Shiv Gaajan have also accommodated Bollywood based music tracks to support the Shiva based narratives; the performances during Durga Puja were laden with Rabindra Sangeet and other popular songs. The new electronic instruments have also been accommodated into the fray. The shorter performances conceived for digital audiences are also performed at the ritual venues. A diversion from the core context, nonetheless. And given that this

has transformed the once devout environment (ritual venues) into one that is festive/ celebratory, this has not just lead to a partial secularization of the events, but also an avenue for entertainment; allowing the use of alcohol, gambling and marijuana. An overlap between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’.

Although Hjavard is credited with popularizing the discourse on mediatization, Hoover (2009, as cited in Lundby, 2013) observes that the complexities of the mediating practices in religious cultures have lead to a metamorphosis of the nature of religion and spirituality itself; mediatization as an outcome of the mediation. As Hjavard (2013) established that the influence of media exists in its changing relationship with other socio-cultural spheres, “the boundaries between what is ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ are constantly changing” (p.2). It was observed by the researcher that although a case of ritualistic folk media based communication, it is evident from the modern innovations and commercial initiatives within Purulia Chhau, that the negotiations between the ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ have various implications both positive and negative. Although constantly overlapping, this has brought forth the peripheral narratives of Hinduism to the forefront in the form of ‘banal religion’⁶⁴. But then as a resistance to the trivialization, given the present experimental approach, narratives of the *Goram Devtas*, *Manasha* and other local deities are now being frequently revisited. In an effort to diversify from the age-old, repetitive projections, these new narratives majorly allude to the local cultural setting and although peripheral compared to the meta-narratives - they effectively compliment the localized context in regards to religious sentiments. The mainstream narratives of Shiva are yet upheld though, accommodating new localized contexts.

⁶⁴ Peripheral religious concepts that are not institutionalized.

The ‘profane’ variables are considered an extension of the localized culture of the marginalized, nothing more. Thus, although Hjavard (2013) lays stress upon secularization of religion due to mediatization, Jeremy Stolow (2005) not only questions secularization, but also establishes that media plays a major role in strengthening religion as an institution. Thus, although the present study resonates with Hjavard’s concepts of overlapping boundaries in regards to the sacred and profane, the emergence of a banal form of Hinduism adopting an indigenous context has additionally been revealed.

6.4. The Religious, Cultural and Political Undercurrents

Over the past decade, apart from the sociological negotiations, economic and technological influences, there were various other maneuverings that ensured Purulia Chhau also uphold the religious identity, political fabric and cultural ethos of the region, as per present times. Given the diversity within the region, the negotiations ensued during the assimilation; amalgamation, acculturation and enculturation processes of modern day context of the various communities have genuinely played out through this expression. As Jyotirmoy Biswas; Assistant Director, India Tourism (Incredible India), Kolkata, Govt. of India described in an interview with the scholar –

“Although the state of West Bengal has perpetually been a cultural cauldron, it could never have been effectively represented by a single cultural identity. But then, it was only the culture of its central city Kolkata (the Durga Puja festival,

Rabindra Sangeet, films, theatre, culinary traditions, etc.) that was ensured international recognition and enhanced visibility. The culture of the rural regions of Bengal had always been neglected. Apart from the *Baul* tradition of the Birbhum district, the other folk expressions of Bengal such as *Patachitra*, *Jhumur*, *Natua*, *Nachni*, etc., were consistently sidelined to the periphery. Until its recognition by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage in 2010, even Purulia Chhau had remained relegated. As the present dispensation is sincerely engaged in propagating folk culture, intertwining it with tourism based prospects and all in all preserving it as a heritage - there has been a revival of these in recent times. Over the past decade, Purulia Chhau has now significantly taken shape as the leading cultural identity of rural Bengal, even surpassing the popular *Baul* tradition. Leaving a mark even beyond borders, it has transcended into an assimilated representative showcasing almost all the other cultural elements of its region”.

Kolkata based documentary filmmaker Subha Das Mollick also upheld this in an interview with the researcher. She further described that recent depictions of rural Bengal in other texts such as literature and cinema have also started showcasing Purulia Chhau. For example the Bollywood 2012 blockbuster ‘Barfi’ directed by Anurag Basu. Whereas a film well made is expected to genuinely represent the cultural backdrop and identity of the setting in which it thrives, the nature, spirit and expressions of the showcased surroundings are also necessary accentuations to the script. Although fiction films utilize the cultural underbelly of the setting, as per need in its treatment, documentary films should ideally present the entire picture, she explained. But it is not the glorification of the culture that should ensue – the reality

of the situation should be upheld. Ritwik Ghatak's 1970 documentary film 'Purulia Chhau' (21 minutes and 27 seconds) is a classic example of such a representation; in regards to struggles of its people in those times.

As Mondal, (2015) outlined, the opening lines of the Ghatak's film – "*Ei sei Purulia; rukkho, dhushor jar mati-r buke pran rash... Abahelito manush, je manush sangram kore taar aparaajeyo shilper jonyo. Taar sei durjoy shilper pratik chhau nach, Aajo beche aache taar jibonsangrame*".... [Translation: This is Purulia. The land in whose barren womb we can still find an expression of life. That of the down-trodden, but life nonetheless. Fighting to ensure the survival of their art, their fight, a symbol of their indomitable spirit.] – had genuinely outlined the struggle of the performers to keep their art form alive despite their poverty. A representation of life in Purulia in the seventies. Whereas the film itself did not glorify or sensationalize the expression itself, it did make the world aware of such a vibrant cultural heritage leading to various interventions to ensure its upkeep (UNESCO, Banglanatak.com; amongst others). Over the past decade, depictions of Purulia Chhau have been vibrant, celebratory and ornamental. A reflection of its present state nonetheless.

Genuine ripples have been effectuated by the initiatives of eminent institutions such as the Indian Museum, Kolkata as well as the Asiatic Society, Kolkata, not just in terms of showcasing the Purulia Chhau masks, costumes and memorabilia, but also in terms of hosting relevant literature and organizing performances of its authentic form, so as to create awareness about the cultural heritage amongst urban audiences. As Dr. Sayan Bhattacharya; Education Officer, Indian Museum, Kolkata, upheld, their institution's efforts are not just aimed at the 'museumization' and archiving of

cultural expressions such as Purulia Chhau. It is also to spread awareness about their heritage form and existence. Given that the modern renditions of Purulia Chhau when held in urban settings are mostly ornamental displays of their acrobatics in masks and costume - upholding the unaltered identity and character is essential to preserve and showcase the original cultural chronicle that it represents. As it is the responsibility of a museum to preserve, the cultural expressions of the region are also significant motifs that must be included.

In an interview with Dr. Bandana Mukherjee, Research Officer, Asiatic Society, Kolkata, she described that all art forms mirror the religion, culture and politics of their region. Usually interconnected with a cultural/ religious festival, the expressions genuinely accentuate the context. An educative force focused on spreading cultural knowledge amongst the audiences, most of these however originate from religious objectives. Although synonymous with culture, the religious embrace emanates at the core of these expressions. As both cultural representation and religious representation can be located at the core of folk expressions such as Purulia Chhau - amongst the various other undercurrents (social, economic, technological, etc.) which influence the medium at a superficial level, the manifest arising from the negotiations of/ between culture and religion is thus most impactful and dynamic. In the case of Purulia Chhau, it has not only maneuvered the evolution of the art since its inception, but significantly over the past decade as well. She opined –

“Whereas religion segregates us, culture unites. The negotiations between them are like opposing forces, surmounting over/ relegating the other influences on Purulia Chhau into the backdrop. Thus, despite the enhanced social, economic

and technological influences over the past decade, the religious core of the art and the representation local culture has been retained. Although people have adopted modern measures, given that they have not deviated from their religion and culture in their everyday life, their indigenous expression has held its ground”.

But then, as Ajoy Ganguly, Associate Professor, Dept. of English, JK College, Purulia (also engaged in research projects in regards to the changing dialects of Purulia), explained to the researcher, the culture of the folk has undergone an ‘urbanization’ over the past decade. Apart from the influence of the consumer driven economy spreading out into semi-urban regions like Purulia town and in turn their surrounding villages, the overlapping dialects, social structure and exposure to Bollywood has ensured that the culture of the region itself has transformed. And the effects of this change have permeated into Purulia Chhau, ensuring a change to the expression as well. Contradicting Dr. Bandana’s assertion - “whereas religion segregates us, culture unites”, Ajoy Ganguly upheld that the meta-narratives of religion are ‘constant’, and thus the uniting factor. Culture is diverse and regional, and thus ensures that the same religious narrative is presented in diverse ways, unique to regions. For example the depiction of the narratives of Ramayana in the Yakshagana art form of Karnataka is strikingly different from its depiction in Purulia Chhau. The difference is because of the difference in the culture of the regions, which is manifested.

But then as Dr. Bandana elaborated, most narratives of Chhau and other such expressions as well are generally consistent upon the premise of universal

brotherhood. Bringing people together into social gatherings at the venues, the performances act as facilitators of social interaction. Interactions based on culture, religion and other tertiary. Even though different religious beliefs have different rules and structures, the cultural expressions that mediate their philosophies somehow emanate similar/ universal moral goals. For example, there is a striking similarity between the Sufi musical traditions of Islam and the Hindu hymns of Chaitanya (Vaishnav saint) of the Nawadwip region of Bengal.

Ajoy Ganguly explained that, in the Purulia district, even the demons are revered as heroes. As the researcher himself had observed, one would often find people named as Duryodhan (an antagonist as per the Mahabharata; king of the Kauravas), Meghnad (son of Raavan), Prahlad (a demon who prayed to Vishnu), Vali (ape god); amongst others. The marginalization meted out to the poor residents of the region in various walks of life have genuinely triggered a realization of how the demons too are victims of circumstance, demonized from their earlier virtuous/ devoted selves. The researcher had gauged these sentiments on various accounts during the audience study and interactions with community elders. Even the best Chhau performers are actually famous for their renditions of demonic antagonists such as Raavan and Mahishasur. As Bikal Rajak described, the iconic Gambhir Singh Mura used to spend his days playing around with buffaloes and engaging in *kada lodai*⁶⁵ (buffalo fight), a popular sport in the region. Given the obsession of the locals with buffaloes not just in terms of *kada lodai* but also in the context of buffaloes being the *bahan*/ representative vehicle of the demon king Mahishasur, the primary antagonist at Purulia Chhau performances - it was metaphorical that Gambhir Singh Mura became world famous

⁶⁵ The buffaloes are trained to fight with each other representing different villages. After locking horns for a while, the victor starts chasing the loser guided by the skilled villagers holding sticks; leading them into a frenzied chase along-with a fleeing crowd into a designated area previously demarcated.

especially due to his energetic enactments of the demon king himself, emerging from its popular abode.



Image 6.8: *Kada Lodai* (Buffalo Fight) at Palma village

(Photograph by the researcher, 2021).

Although it may seem that the negotiations between culture and religion are exclusive between the two, local politics also plays a critical role. It is a tripartite maneuvering. Over the past decade, whereas the rise of *samajik palas* such as *Duare Sarkar*, *Amphan* and *Coronasur Bodh* may seem to be innovations upholding social issues, there are underlying manipulative forces which ensure to influence the narrative, on most occasions. As the researcher observed, some troupes project the actions of the Government on these issues (disasters, calamities and the pandemic) in terms of how efficiently the situations were managed and how the political leaders were heroes empowered by the Gods who ensured to save the people. On the other hand, some other dissenting troupes showcased how the government and certain political leaders were demonic and ensured that the people suffered even more due to their corrupt sadistic intentions. Although the researcher did not find any evidence of financial

considerations being accepted by the troupes from political parties so as to disseminate their respective rhetoric within the narratives – the resonance to either side (Trinamool Congress, BJP or the Left Front) was evident and for all to see. An effective medium nonetheless, as the rulers of the Panchakot Raj earlier disseminated their religious belief through Purulia Chhau, the present political leaders of the region were keen in terms of spreading their ideology. Given that official permissions for holding Purulia Chhau performances, invitations to perform at government organized events, foreign/ urban opportunities, *bhata* (financial stipend); amongst others are all facilitated by the ruling Trinamool Congress Government in Bengal - most Purulia Chhau troupes are attracted towards them rather than other political parties. Thus the secular narratives of religions united, equality, universal brotherhood; amongst others championed by the Trinamool Congress party through all other mediums (television, radio, newspapers, etc.) can also be identified in most of the performances. Especially in those organized by the State Government on a large scale.

In fact, as Pallab Pal; District Information and Cultural Officer, Dept. of Information and Cultural Affairs (DICA), Purulia, Govt. of West Bengal, elucidated, the govt. schemes for the welfare of the people are disseminated through Purulia Chhau so as to make them aware of the opportunities. He explained –

“We call the Chhau troupes and provide them with the information about our govt.’s welfare schemes and how these shall benefit the people and task the performance troupes to direct and produce performances that revolve around these. We are utilizing Purulia Chhau for development purposes. The people are not only being provided information about the govt. schemes but also about the

importance of vaccination, social distancing, hygiene and education, etc., through Chhau. We are also propagating the concept of universal brotherhood and being tolerant of other religions. In fact, one of the leading troupes of present times 'Palma Shakti Sangha Chhau Nritya Party' are Muslims. Lead by President's Award winner Ustad Giasuddin Ansari who is famous for his rendition of Krishna, the artists; most of who are Muslims enact Hindu characters, as per the prescribed narratives of the Puranas. This is classic example of the prevailing religious harmony that the present govt. has ensued in the region.

There are various troupes that have taken an oppositional stand though. Numerous troupe leaders (on condition of anonymity) informed the researcher that a proximity to the ruling Trinamool Congress party ensured a large number of shows. Despite their talent and experience, the oppositional troupes were facing a dearth of shows. Not just in terms of govt. organized programs, but also in ritualistic programs organized by the villagers, due to political pressure. But then, as troupes such as 'Mitali Chhau Maldih' which have been performing narratives such as *Bharat Mata*, synonymous to the rhetoric of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) have also held on to their leaning, the majority of their performances in recent times have been ensured in cities of BJP ruled states, rather than in Bengal.

However, from a cultural perspective, as some of the troupes/ performances were driven away into faraway lands, apart from the rural-urban intermingling in terms of cultural exchange over the past decade, the performances in urban settings have in

fact affected the performance format itself, to a certain extent. As veteran Chhau artist Brindavan Kumar upheld –

“The urban performances are invariably very brief (five to ten minutes), as the focus of the audiences is very little. As they aren’t as devout and also unaware of the religious context associated with Chhau, they lack the patience to sit through the entire thirty-forty minutes, the usual length of each narrative. They are amused by the acrobatics and cheer upon the stunts performed. In fact in present times, Chhau performers are also lured into enactments as mere ornamentation, in big cities like Kolkata. They are asked to walk along in marriage processions and emulate ‘circus clowns’ at the gates of parties, doing somersaults in their costumes and masks. This is an insult to the God whose mask they wear in doing so,” he said.

On the other hand, as Chandam Deb; Associate Professor and Head, Dept. of English, JK College, Purulia, described to the researcher - during his 2005 engagement when he assisted celebrated British theatrician Robert Meagher who expressed a organized a drama infusing Purulia Chhau with Greek Theatre at Nandan (cultural venue) in Kolkata, the compatibility and incompatibility of Purulia Chhau with other cultures genuinely poured out. The most critical issues revolved around religion and ‘identity’ though. As Prasanta Rakshit; Project Leader, Kheriya Sobor Kalyan Samiti (NGO based in Purulia dedicated to Tribal welfare), explained, it is the goal of his organization to preserve the identity of tribal, unadulterated. Whereas western influences have dismantled/ adulterated certain aspects of the Purulia way of life through their presence as tourists, experiments (such as that of Robert Meagher) and

via the Internet; it is essential to preserve the core identity and values of the tribal to ensure their growth and development.

Amitava Bhattacharya, Founder and Full time Director, Banglanatak.com, however described to the researcher that, cultural relativism is a natural phenomenon and should be embraced, rather than resisted. It is also important for their livelihood. As the initiatives of his organization ensured to utilize culture as a tool/ facilitator for inclusion and sustainable development, there has been a major turnaround/ revival over the past decade. The efforts of his wife Dr. Ananya Bhattacharya; Director & Vice President, Banglanatak.com in ensuring a research-based approach in terms of their initiatives, they have genuinely utilized the western support in the upliftment of the communities of Purulia rather than limiting the possibilities. The 2010 UNESCO recognition for Purulia Chhau has been a vindication of their efforts, Amitava felt.

Reflections

Over the past decade, even though various other negotiations have assumed a center-stage effectuating the transformation of Purulia Chhau, the influence of religion, culture and politics as a tripartite framework has also genuinely contributed. Whereas the political narratives of universal brotherhood ensured to utilize religion in terms of assimilation, the oppositional forces were divisive/ separatist, but yet, upon religious lines. Thus, although having opposing political ideology, religion was a constant that was utilized as the underlying context nonetheless. Furthermore, as these were framed

into the narratives of Purulia Chhau, the cultural representation emanating through the expression itself entered into the ensuing fray.

But then, as the revival of Purulia Chhau was ensured over the past decade, it emerged as an opportunity, not just for religious communication as it had originally/consistently upheld; but also for political, social and development based communication. Given its credibility and reverence owing to its religious origins, the credibility of the political messages being communicated was also enhanced. As ‘trustworthy’ characters such as the Gods themselves were drawn in as brand ambassadors of political rhetoric, the medium ensured the impact of the message. The content of the message was validated by the religious context. Given that the means for the livelihood opportunities surrounding Purulia Chhau is now wrested with the political class, the rhetoric is thus in their control. Given that religion and culture are nevertheless inseparable from Purulia Chhau, the political messages must thus adhere within its sphere though, and pledge space only at the periphery.

6.5. Summary

This chapter elaborately reflects upon the negotiations and under-currents (social, economic, technological, cultural, religious and political) that maneuvered the development of Purulia Chhau, over the past decade (2010 - 2020). Whereas the ‘gender’ and ‘caste’ based dynamics and its manifestations through Purulia Chhau were described in the ‘Social Negotiations’ section (6.2) based on the case study of ‘Mitali Chhau Maldih Mahila Dal’, a first of its kind, all women Purulia Chhau troupe

lead by an educated Brahmin girl Mousumi who recently married – the ensuing mediatization of religion in the region/ technological determinism effectuated through Purulia Chhau was described in the ‘Economic and Technological Negotiations’ section (6.3) based on the case study of Chhau artist; Debashis Das, who has accumulated 1,16,000 subscribers and an overall number of 50,125,424 views of his uploaded videos on YouTube, since 2014. Instances of mask and other Chhau memorabilia being sold through e-commerce websites such as ‘Amazon’ and ‘Flipkart’ were also presented. The ‘Religious, Cultural and Political Undercurrents’ section (6.4) of this chapter specifically identified the tripartite nature of these influences and how they worked together over the past decade to ensure a steady tide of altering stimulus. Presented in the form of a discussion between cultural experts (filmmakers, museologists, sociologists; amongst others) as well as other academics, local community elders and political representatives - the maneuvering weightage of each parameter (culture/ religion/ politics) was analyzed to finally identify a steady inter-dependence/ symbiotic relationship between themselves, and with Purulia Chhau as a whole.

As is evident from this chapter, providing a common premise to this recent synergy of negotiations and undercurrents over the past decade, the transformation of Purulia Chhau has genuinely upheld an accurate visage of the changing everyday life of the people of the region. Whereas an inter-cultural infusion between the tribal and non-tribal had ensued in the past, the infusion of rural and urban culture has been a major contributor over the past decade. Given that the increasing/ regular influx of tourists - the exposure of the indigenous inhabitants to Bollywood music, western attire,

empowered and educated women; amongst others, had a major impact - foreign thespians (Robert Maegher; amongst others) initiating artistic infusions with Chhau, the indigenous performers travelling to the urban centers of India and abroad; amongst others, have genuinely accelerated the re-molding. Emerging to become a lucrative form of livelihood perhaps for the first time since its inception, as the various innovations to commercialize, sell, teach and commodify have ensured a strong foundation for the future generation of Chhau artists - the adoption of digital technology has amplified the outreach, visibility, fame and impact of the folk art form. Whereas many such expressions have declined, Purulia Chhau remains an integral part of the everyday lives of the people. A powerful heritage revived. Although prescribed as an 'intangible' cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2010), transformations such as these have proved to be essential to its sustainability and growth.

However, although a casual analysis of Purulia Chhau may seem to provide an accurate impression of the indigenous life it represents, these are sometimes synthetic/ commercial/ mechanical reproductions, especially in contemporary times. Over the past decades, as new commercial dimensions/ innovations were accommodated and enmeshed, many of its progressive aspects have unfortunately disintegrated into obsolescence. In present times, just as the efforts of the young women of *Mitali Chhau Maldih* underscored the role of Purulia Chhau as a platform to express resentment, revolution, and resistance; amongst others – the liberal religious approach of the Muslim performers of Polma Chhau Nritya to disseminate their contention of universal brotherhood underlined the capacity of Purulia Chhau in terms of a powerful medium that has now been revived. In fact, the use of Purulia Chhau by the

present dispensation to disseminate knowledge about welfare schemes, generate awareness on health, etc., also validates this capacity. As a sense of sustainability has been achieved over the past decade, the medium is now even more powerful.

Be it the cultural infusions, technological innovations, religion, politics or livelihood - the identity of indigenous people yet remains well framed through Purulia Chhau. As it continues to represent the people and their indigenous culture, the communities have accepted the modern innovations (the use of social media, videography, digital marketing, etc.) adopted by the troupes to strengthen their livelihood and reach out to international audiences – as it is beneficial/ glorious for not just their own identity, but also that of their Gods. Re-ignited to flourish through the efforts of NGOs, the govt., innovators such as Debashis and most importantly the efforts of the artists – the revival of Purulia Chhau has ensured that the voice of the marginalized is yet again amplified.

Chapter 7

The Manifestations of Religion in Purulia Chhau

7.1. Introduction

Although upholding a key role in popularizing Hinduism among the tribal animists, it may however be simplistic to assume that Purulia Chhau merely echoes the mainstream Hindu philosophy. Even as characters, anecdotes, conflicts, etc. are drawn from Hindu mythology, the people ensure to re-contextualize it as per their life and localized setting. Often divergent from the mainstream rhetoric, apart from characters representing icons of animistic reverence, heroes and forefathers - manifestations of infused local/ regional conflicts were also gauged by the researcher. The representation of 'conflict' was a common thread though. Conflict resolved by the victory of good over evil. Representing *dharma* with relevance to the everyday lives of the locals, whereas the *pouranic palas* are heavily drawn from mythology, the *samjik palas* are not completely divergent/ deviant from the mainstream narratives though. They are yet religious, to a certain extent.

Given these experiments involving the presence of mainstream Gods within the social narratives (*samajik palas*), the people's understanding of Hindu philosophy is one that has also accommodated local beliefs, rather than just mainstream Hindu discourse. In fact, the liberal use of masks of gods and demons; conversations between religious and anthropomorphic characters in the narrative; extensive use of imaginative colors; mythological overtones; extravagant imagery – all add to the preponderance of the

religious and sacred nature of the folk dance theatre. But then, the nature of the religion being manifested through Chhau is not just an amalgamation of Hinduism and animistic beliefs. There are various other religious undercurrents. Apart from the above-mentioned maneuverings, this chapter outlines the inter-religious negotiations such as Muslim performers enacting Hindu deities; troupes/ performances showcasing other religions in bad light; those projecting the concept of religious tolerance and universal brotherhood; amongst others. Furthermore, the intra-religious undercurrents such as caste dynamics, the competitive power structure and hierarchy of the deities showcased, representation of demons; amongst others are also described. Describing the meaning-making role of Purulia Chhau and how it facilitates the mediation of meaning in the context of Shiv Gaajan and the other religious rituals of its association - this chapter also describes the mediatization of religion that has been effectuated by Purulia Chhau as an extension of its own modernization and metamorphosis. As the medium has changed, so has the message it delivers. The specific religion based ritualistic itinerary of Purulia Chhau held throughout the year in present times has also been described.

7.2. Religion in Purulia: The Ritualistic Itinerary of Chhau

Although earlier performed exclusively as a meaning-making conduit for the Shiv Gaajan festival, in present times the ritualistic timeline of Purulia Chhau has become interwoven with the annual cycle of all the religious festivals of the region. As these festivals are entwined as per cultural and agricultural entailments with gaps as per need, the performance timeline before and after each religious festival is specific to

the context of the festival around which it is being held. The narratives performed are thus resonant to the context of the festival. When the Purulia Chhau performances corresponding to the auspicious *Makar Sankranti*⁶⁶ and *Tusu Parbo* (a ritual dedicated to the indigenous deity *Tusu considered to be a folk avatar of Durga*) are held throughout the month of January leading into February, having a conclusive extravaganza in the form of the '*Jhumur Utsav*'⁶⁷ – the renditions are framed upon the narratives of Durga and Kali. Shiva too is represented. Corresponding to the *Chaitra* phase (end March - mid April) encompassing the *Shiv Gaajan* and *Ram Navami*, the performances revolve around the narratives of Shiva and Ram respectively. The entire holy month of *Shravan* (mid July to mid August) is dedicated to Shiva. All performances during this time emanate the narratives of Shiva. The indigenous *Manasha Puja* (dedicated to the local snake goddess; considered as a daughter of Shiva) is also held during this phase and thus represented in the performances as well. Throughout October and November, corresponding to the autumn harvest, as the *Durga Puja*, *Vijay Dashami*, *Raavan Shokh*, *Bhadu Parbo*⁶⁸, Kali puja and Diwali celebrations are upheld, the regular overnight performances at village *akharas* during this time are centered around the respective narratives relevant to each. Strikingly, performances at tribal festivals such as *Erokh Sim*, *Karam Parab*, *Disum Sendra*, *Baha* and *Jathela* revolve around Shiva and *Goram Devtas* (indigenous deities). The narratives are sometimes even innovated to overlap. The *Arjun er Lakhyabhed pala* (narrative) showcasing *Kirat* and *Kiratin* (tribal manifests of Shiva and Durga) is most popular at such events.

⁶⁶ A festival dedicated to Surya; the sun God.

⁶⁷ A festival to celebrate the culture of Purulia, organized by Banglanatok.com

⁶⁸ Indigenous festivals of Purulia.

The urban/ commercial performances are however not festival specific and happen at any time, as and when the troupes are employed. Even at such events, the performances revolve around religious narratives itself (modified/ shorter renditions), as per the choice of the troupes, nonetheless.

But then, although the narratives performed are festival-wise, certain contexts are upheld throughout, at all times. The context of Shiva and him being the *Mahadev* (God of Gods). As Moloy elucidated, for the people of Purulia, Shiva is the God of agriculture as well the God of culture. He is *Nataraj*, from whom all that is art, manifests. Not just classical dance and music, but essentially the diverse folk art forms across India are believed to have emerged from him. More so because the annual agricultural cycle is intertwined/ complimentary to the folk festivals of the region. As the cultural expressions serve as an avenue to appease the Gods and pray for fertility of the land and a bountiful harvest - interestingly, the reference to fertility was also observed as having sexual connotations, with a reference to harvest in terms of children. Shiv is also believed to be the *devta* of the *krishis* (farmers), marginalized communities and indigenous people. He is also the God of the demons. Unlike Krishna who is more institutionalized/ corporatized/ 'Aryan' as understood through the guiding premises of the of Hindu sacred texts - Shiva has emerged in various indigenous avatars as a non-Aryan local God (*Gramya devta* / *Goram devta*), accommodating the localized cultural contexts. A bond that brings together animistic faiths, as well as Hinduism. Thus, the central character/ protagonist of Purulia Chhau is predominantly Shiva. Although the *Shivpuran*⁶⁹ disseminates the philosophy/ narratives of Shiva and have been adopted into the folk art forms of the region, the

⁶⁹ One of the Hindu Puranas. It is dedicated to expressing the philosophy and narratives of Lord Shiva.

localized narratives focusing on the *Goram devtas* (indigenous avatars of Shiva) can only be found in the local folk expressions of each region; not even in the *Shivpuran*.

7.3. The Inter-Religious Negotiations

Purulia is a regional cauldron that has enabled a diverse amalgamation of religion. Surrounded by the Bardhaman, Bankura and Paschim Mednipur districts of West Bengal on the north and west, it is outlined by the states of Jharkhand in the east and Odisha in the south. Traditionally occupied by various indigenous tribes and communities (*Kheriya, Sobor, Kurmi, Mura, Bhumij, Santhal*, amongst others). As per the (2011) Census, whereas 19.2% of the approx. 30-lakh population falls within the category of Scheduled tribes – 19.3% are scheduled castes and 7.1%, Muslims. Thus, although 83.4% are Hindus, more than 45% of the entire population fall within the minority/ marginalized category. The researcher has identified various repercussions and negotiations due to this that have manifested itself through Purulia Chhau.

7.3.1. Case Study: Palma Shakti Sangha Chhau Nritya Party

Based in Palma village of Barabazar block in Purulia, this performance troupe is led by President's Award winner Ustad Giasuddin Ansari. A unique troupe, as a majority of its members are Muslim. Despite following a different faith, these artists enact the characters of Shiva, Durga, and Brahma, amongst others, with dedication, as per the

prescribed narratives of the *Puranas*. In fact, Ustad Giasuddin is famous for his rendition of Krishna. Patronized as a torchbearer of the secular narrative of the Trinamool Congress led state govt., this troupe often performs in the urban settings of Kolkata at govt.-organized events. Re-enforcing the statement of communal harmony and universal brotherhood through Purulia Chhau the success of the troupe in recent times is a vindication of their acceptance by the people into their religious fold, despite being Muslim. Whereas most temples remain out of bounds for non-Hindus in the region, the Purulia Chhau renditions of this troupe are not only thronged in large numbers. Also, the general/ regular religious essentials such as the festival context, spiritual catharsis and blessings are yet derived by the audiences.

But then, given that they are Muslims, the various modern day innovations adopted by this troupe are sometimes looked upon with scorn. Although the other Hindu troupes are allowed of the same, any act of deviation/ innovation is a challenge for these performers as they are easily accused of causing an insult to Hindus and their expression. Whereas the social, cultural, political, economic and technological negotiations have ensured that most troupes innovate as per the times, the threshold to do so was earlier very much limited for this troupe on account of their religion. The first troupe in which the majority of the performers is Muslim, and furthermore is led by one, the initial struggle was almost insurmountable. It was only when they received the support of the Trinamool Congress led State govt. dedicated towards disseminating the message of universal brotherhood that Giasuddin and his troupe could establish themselves. Although keeping intact the Vedic religious base/ underlying narrative, they have eventually also adopted various innovations that

genuinely project them as a unique troupe not just because of their religion, but also because of their act.

As Giassuddin upheld, having learnt the art from Chhau Guru Hem Mahato of Palma village, he has been a full time performer for the past twenty years. Over the past decade though, apart from receiving considerable adulation from the audiences, he has received genuine support of the state govt. to further his art. The journey was not easy though. Not only did he have to face the insinuations of the Hindu dominated audiences at every village, but also the wrath of the Muslim community for promoting Hindu philosophy through his art. But then as he explained –

“I perform Purulia Chhau as I am passionate about the art. That it is. The kinesics, choreography and music are a representation of the spirit of the region itself. I have always had warrior genes in me. I am very good in the *parikhanda* martial art form that enables me to be very good in Purulia Chhau. The use of the sword and shield is in fact critical to manifest the *bir* rasa (emotion of bravery). Especially for characters such as Mahishasur. Presently, I enact the more gracious roles such as Krishna and Vishnu. The aggressive characters such as Mahishasur, Raavan; amongst others, are enacted by my son Kaifuddin in present times. Over the years, I have become quite well versed with Hindu mythology. Given that I have performed most of its narratives over and over again. I have probably connected to the Gods and Goddesses and their spirit, even more than many Hindus perhaps. When I perform the role of Krishna, I have to sincerely imagine myself as him in order to genuinely emanate the aura and vibe. Devoted, just like a method actor. But then I am a devout Muslim on

all accounts. So is my son. We perform Chhau as we are passionate about the art, not the associated religious belief. ‘Bravery’, which is the primary emotion associated with Purulia Chhau is something we are born with. Thus we resonate’.

The performers weren’t dedicated to disseminating the religious narratives of Hinduism. But then the dissemination was ensured nonetheless, given the spiritual core of the art. Although Giasuddin never visited any temple or the Ramayana/ Mahabharata reading sessions like the other performers do so as to conceptualize performances in terms of narratives – the scriptwriters for his troupe Narayan Chandra Mahato, Rampada Mahato and Sunit Kumar Mahato are devout Hindus. They regularly attend and adopt as per need. Giasuddin, his son Kaifuddin and his nephew Shyamsuddin are more inclined towards the choreography and kinesics and ensure to render the narratives in the best way possible. As he further upheld -

“We are people who respect other religions. We are brothers and want to live in peace and harmony. I want to teach my children the same philosophy. Even my father was a *Jhumur* artist. Although not a vocalist, he used to play various supportive instruments. Given that *Jhumur* songs were mostly about Shiva, Krishna and diverse *Goram devtas*, Hindu philosophy has always been allowed to flow into our homes without any distaste. This is our livelihood and passion. In fact, after a point into the performances, when the people forget that I am a Muslim beyond the mask, they express their devout sentiments towards the character being enacted by me. They touch my feet in seek of blessings and offer *pranami/ kheri* (financial donation in the context of prayer; usually

presented at temples). For them, ‘I’ am Krishna at that point. It is actually a beautiful moment for us, them, and our entire community. One that establishes the message of love, friendship and hope. We have many Hindus in our troupe. All of us eat together and are best friends determined to excel in our art. We will one day amplify this bond. Amplify it over into the larger community”.

Over the years, the team has performed extensively, not only across Purulia, but also in Kolkata, Burdwan and Jharkhand, on various occasions. He opined –

“Although our performances disseminate Hindu philosophy, when our names are announced, the message of universal brotherhood is established on parallel lines. It remains as a lesson to the audiences that ‘art’ is beyond religion. It sets us apart on account of our munificence. ‘Apart’, from the rest of the troupes who sometimes engage in downgrading Muslims. Even iconic troupes like the Baligara Kisan Chhau Nritya Samiti (see section 6.3.2) led by the grandson of Rasu Sahis engage in such polarizing. A hateful approach. Perhaps they are threatened by our expertise and do this to defame our cause and our kind”.

Given that over the past decade, most troupes have innovated in various ways so as to present unique signature performances, Giasuddin’s troupe too has been experimental. The same old narratives performed again and again have resulted in the audience’s inclination towards new scripts and contexts. Ensuring the treatment/ enactment of the star characters (the popular Gods and Demons) in his own unique ways, he has upheld the narratives as they were, but deviated only in kinesics, choreography and music. This he has done on various *palas* such as *Abhishyapto Mahamuni Narad* from the

Mahabharata, *Ganesh er Danta Bhanga* from the Puranas; amongst others. Wary of being accused of insulting Hindu belief, Giasuddin ensured to not deviate beyond a certain point though. Rather than modifying, or re-molding the religious story lines as some other troupes do - Giasuddin has rather devised various *samjik palas* and adopted neutral scripts from the works of Rabindranath Tagore such as *Valmiki Pratibha*, as well as the works Abanindranath Tagore such as *Samrat Digvijay Bappaditya*. In fact, in March 2022, he collaborated with Barnali Ghosh, a Rabindra Sangeet artist and theatrician to ensure an extravagant rendition of the *Valmiki Pratibha* at Naihati in Kolkata, organized by the Directorate of Information and Culture Affairs; Govt. of West Bengal.



Image 7.1: Giasuddin's troupe in rehearsal with Barnali.

(Photograph by the researcher, 2021)

7.3.2. Case Study: Late. Rasu Sahis Baligara Kisan Chhau Nritya Samiti

Based in *Baligara* village of Purulia – 1 block, this performance troupe was established by legendary Chhau guru Rasu Sahis in the 1940s. The pioneer experimentalist who incorporated the concept of *palas* (narratives) into the earlier script-less performances (*mel naanch*) – it was him who enabled the capacity of the medium to ensure the mediation of meaning/. Given the dearth of creative/ ideative prowess amongst the naïve tribal performers they eventually resorted to incorporate religious narratives, a vast repository of which was easily at hand. Supported, patronized and facilitated by the king (Raja Shankari Prasad Singh Deo), enabling the migration of an entire community (*suthradhars*) to build mask and costumes - first and foremost, the narratives of Shiva, of whom Rasu Sahis was an ardent disciple, was adopted. Presently lead by his grandson Ustad Nripen Sahis, this troupe remains one of the most popular troupes in the region. As Nripen upheld in regards to his troupe –

“The performers are all well versed not only in the technicalities of Chhau but also the religious scriptures that they enact at the performances. We not only practice the art but also have regular mythological reading sessions. All members are regulars at the village temple”.

Showcasing refined technical prowess and ability, this troupe has maintained the legacy of Rasu Sahis by adhering to the orthodox traditions and religious narratives. Upholding the importance of impactful storytelling through the use of *bhasyakars* (narrators) and *jhumur* songs with lyrics precise to the character and his role, the

troupe performs popular scripts such as *Mahishasur Mardini*, *Sati Dahanu*, *Visana Rakshasi Bodh*, *Parashuram er Matrihatya*; amongst others, which present forth the core narratives of Hinduism, led by core characters (Gods). Limited in terms of deviating from *pouranic* philosophy, even when they experiment to present unique scripts these are constructed in a way that sincerely upholds the supremacy/ ascendancy of Hinduism, over other faiths and cultures. The troupe has recently devised the *pala - Bhokto Haridas* (Disciples of Krishna), in which Lord Brahma curses the *haridasas* who consider themselves as devoted slaves of Lord Krishna so as to take birth as Muslims. As per legend, the curse was a result of Brahma's jealousy that the *haridasas* was ignoring him and showing their unconditional love and adulation for Lord Krishna instead. Saints and wandering bards dissociated from material lust, as per the *Krishna Leela* (Legends of Lord Krishna upheld by various authors of the Bhakti Cult), earlier, the entire community (*haridasas*) including women were abducted by Brahma so as to teach them a lesson. On realizing this, Lord Krishna is infuriated and reinstates the *haridasas* in their place of origin just as they were. As Brahma is overpowered, overridden and thus insulted, he curses the *haridasas* that they will take birth as a Muslim for at least one lifetime. The worst punishment imaginable.

As can be gauged from the conflict being showcased, there is no respect for Muslims, as per these legends. They are considered way worse than the lowest caste of Hindu. But then it is not just the legends, but also the 'selection' that is critical here. Selecting a *pala* that upholds this rhetoric is an indication of the repressed beliefs of one community towards the other, even in present times. Furthermore, the audiences' consumption/ encouragement of the same is an indication of the larger picture in this

regard as well. Especially given the presence of minorities within the audiences, who yet attend. Furthermore, the specific masks showcasing Muslim characters that had to be constructed for this *pala* were demonic. Adhering to local stereotypes, the projected facial features through the masks were aesthetically ugly, their actions menacing and their intentions violent.

As Nripen described –

“The objectives of Purulia Chhau must not be forgotten. We are doing Gods work and spreading his philosophy. God enters our bodies when we perform and people even touch our feet after our performances to convey their devotion. It is a spiritual experience for both the performer and the audience”. Purulia Chhau should not be allowed to become like song and dance Bollywood films. This is not cheap entertainment. It is a heritage that has been handed down to us. We must preserve its essence and pass it on to the future generations. Muslim performers are abominations that insult our faith. For them this is a way of making money. For us this is religion. So, they can never out-perform us. They lack the devotion. The Muslims consume beef and then put on the mask of Krishna and Shiva. This enrages us. It has to be stopped. The govt. should not encourage this”.

Significantly, Nripen’s troupe was also selected by celebrated British theatrician Robert Meagher for his 2005 experiment to merge Purulia Chhau with Greek theatre. The troupe’s resistance to shift from its orthodox structure, even during its collaboration with Meagher, has also been a considerable vindication of its refusal to

deviate/ adulterate. As Chandam Deb, Associate Professor and Head, Dept. of English, JK College, Purulia, described –

“Although the members of the troupe were very excited about the opportunity and cooperated sincerely, there was considerable friction when the masks of Hindu Gods were being accommodated into Greek contexts. Contexts in which their supremacy had to be depreciated. For example as Robert Maegher required the troupe members to dance around a dead Greek warrior in circles wearing the masks of the Hindu Gods, the performers refused as they felt as if the Hindu Gods were being portrayed as demons in the Greek context. A middle ground was reached and they wore the masks of anthropomorphic characters instead. Diminish thyself, not thy God”.

Given that Chandam was the bridge between the Robert Maegher and Nripen’s troupe, he had to negotiate/ manoeuvre as per the religious sentiments of the performers and yet achieve the intended western script. A challenge, nonetheless. He had selected Nripen’s troupe not just because of their popularity and legacy, but because he felt them to be the most talented Purulia Chhau troupe in present times, a selection that would ensure to project the most novel form of Purulia Chhau in front of a world wide audience.

7.4. The Intra-Religious Negotiations

Although the inter-religious negotiations have emanated through the narratives, in an amplified perceptible way, the intra-religious negotiations have been very subtle. Manifesting at its core, the intra-religious negotiation have complicated origins in themselves and have ensued ever since the beginning of the art form. Even though animistic beliefs may be considered a competing faith to Hinduism, given that it was accommodated within the Hindu folds, the negotiations somewhat took the shape of an internal power struggle rather than an extraneous conflict.

As Bhudev Kumar Panday, Priest at the Gourinath Dham in Chirka village, explained –

–

“The ‘Pandays’ of Deoghar who migrated to Purulia in the early 1900s along with the Panchkot Raj rulers, were the first to bring forth the meta-narratives of Hinduism. Before their arrival, the local tribes were animistic and prayed to the sun, large rocks, animals and snakes. We enabled a contextualization that ensured that their deities were also accommodated. That is the way of the *Sanatan Dharma* (Hinduism). All religions lead to the same God. We simply educated them to realize the morals, philosophy and knowledge also associated with the Hindu way of life. This enabled a realization for them and provided them a concrete path in terms of spirituality”.

On being asked as to how this influence was achieved and was it by force or persuasion, he answered –

“It was as per the model/ recommendations of the *Natyashastra* that the people were enlightened. We disseminated the philosophy of *Dharma* through the art and culture of the land. The songs, dances and theatre forms were revitalized with meaning and presented to them. They themselves embraced these and presented the expressions themselves. For the people, by the people. Such is the spirit of *Dharma*. Although some may accuse us Hindus of forcing our religion upon them, unlike some other faiths, we are not intolerant towards others. They always had the choice of not following Hinduism. Most of the animists embraced Hinduism by choice, it must be noted”.

During his stay at various villages of Purulia, the researcher observed that in most cases, the central temple (dedicated either to *Goram devta*, Shiva, Durga or Kali) at every village is an integral part of social life, for most villagers. Irrespective of religion/ tribe, it is like a fireplace that brings all the people together, every evening. Although the space in and around it is segregated in terms of caste and gender, it enables a sense of community that unifies the entire village. Whereas women group together at the periphery, the Brahmins are welcomed to be seated at the core. The lower castes; although allowed at a distance, are somewhat mistreated. Even on the basis of trivial issues. But then, those who do not attend are considered anti-socials assumed to be drinking, gambling and engaged in criminal activity. So, the lower castes also attend despite their mistreatment, to avoid being ostracized and categorized as anti-socials. This was sarcastically upheld by two such respondents, in separate villages (both on condition of anonymity). One went on to prank –

“Given the fact that the temple is in most cases the cleanest place in the village, sometimes having ceiling fans, lights and electricity – the lure of luxury is too much to be done away with, for most villagers”.

The activity ensued at the temples each evening revolves around reading sessions. Initiated by a prayer and meditation session in some villages, the Mahabharata, Ramayana, Vedas, Puranas and the Bhagavad Gita are read and also interpreted at intervals. The readings/ interpretations are led by Brahmin priests and their associates. Some villagers who live life as ascetics and preceptors also contribute. All the villagers listen in devout silence. Sometimes travelling *Sadhus/ Sanyasis* (seers, mystics and clairvoyants) and priests from other temples are also welcomed to share their interpretations. These are considered as special events.

As most Chhau troupes and their scriptwriters admitted, the *palas* (narratives) of Purulia Chhau are mostly derived/ drawn from these reading/ interpretative sessions, held at the temples. As they attend since their childhood, the narratives of Hinduism are well engrained into their minds. The temple reading/ interpretation sessions are thus a ritual that has majorly contributed to the development of Purulia Chhau. Especially after its transformation into a *pala*-based expression, post the fifties. But then, as famed scriptwriter Bikal Rajak upheld –

“The renditions must not only amplify the narratives in a grand melodramatic display, but also contextualize as per the localized cultural setting. This ensures the most critical connect. The umbilical chord. Thus the local deities must also be acknowledged. Their story also told”.

The negotiations between animistic faith and the Hindu way of life are thus drawn from very different pools. Whereas the animistic standpoints are drawn from local culture and familial heritage, the annals of Hindu philosophy are disseminated via the central temple as a ritual. Whereas the ritualistic itinerary of Hindu festivals all throughout the year further amplify Hindu reverence, animistic festivals such as *Tusu Pujo* are also held. In fact, the non-confrontational accommodative approach of Hinduism is most effective. But then, even though assimilation and integration has occurred, the local deities have been provided a space; much lower in hierarchy as compared to the mainstream Hindu Gods. Furthermore, the *palas* sometimes showcase the local deities such as the *Goram devtas* as subservient and devout towards Shiva, Vishnu and the other primary deities. They are even showcased as inferior to Kartik and other such deities of a subordinate stratum. They are sometimes even showcased as evil, selfish and misled (eg. Manasha, the snake goddess) who eventually transforms upon an intervention/ realization to become devoted towards the mainstream Hindu Gods. As Sadhan Dutta, In-Charge of the Library and Cultural Center at Ramakrishna Mission, Purulia, explained –

“Any representation in/ of Purulia, must emanate an organic and earthen spirit. And so, any representation from any other source, be it religion or otherwise, has to be molded as per the local beliefs. The essence of life in the region. But in doing so, although Purulia Chhau was born out of indigenous rituals, the conscious maneuvering through which the segregations and assigned hierarchy of the Gods have arisen, can be traced back to the efforts of the political/ ruling class”.

In an effort to proselytize, the anthropomorphic characters and other tribal characters are always showcased as devoted towards the Hindu Gods, although that is/ was not always the case in the region. A tailored frame of reference. In fact, the religious system of Hinduism is designed to further this hierarchical segregation in the region. Seers, ascetics, mystics and even mendicants always uphold the integration/ assimilation of animistic Gods, but place them at the periphery. This is why Hinduism has accumulated around three hundred and thirty million Gods and Goddesses over the course of its timeline. As Bisambhar Pramanik; a community elder and ascetic from Dolma village upheld –

“Hinduism is a way of life. The way life should be lead, has been represented in its philosophy. The philosophy is framed into narratives in the form of the mythology. Art forms such as Purulia Chhau disseminate these narratives amongst the general people. Even though the ritualistic temple sessions may be attended by the common folk. They sometimes do not understand the stories. Given their limited education, limited imagination - it is through the Purulia Chhau performances that they are impacted the most. The sensational extravaganza grabs their interest and educates them about their religion. It ensures that they do not remain in a state where they pray to animals, but realize that their beliefs are part of an already established larger system. Their Gods are part of the repository of the three hundred and thirty million Gods and Goddesses of Hinduism”.

As religion itself has changed. So have the negotiations over time. Given the change in the caste dynamics, the liberal approach of the present generation has genuinely

unified the people. The decreasing levels of blind faith, aided by rational thinking have blurred the intra religious fault-lines. Although the segregations of the earlier still emanate as a chronicle through its elements, people from all castes and tribes now perform Chhau. Attended by all members of the village, the performances have emerged to become the modern ritualistic fireplace where all the people converge and the only segregation showcased is that of good and evil. Whereas the unification/ integration of the castes of Hinduism through Purulia Chhau is ongoing at present, the integration of the animists within its fold can also be now categorized within the intra religious negotiations itself, as the process has now shifted within.

7.5. Purulia Chhau: A Hermeneutic Reading

Thematically, even as one can observe the liberal employment of explicit Hindu mythological narratives in the dance theatre, the conspicuous presence of animal based movements and nature based phenomenon, is reminiscent of its deep-rooted connection with their original animistic way of life. Over the decades, there has been a shift in the religious undercurrents though. A change from the negotiations being centered upon the animistic-Hindu contentions, to recently, those between Hinduism and Islam.

But then, it is striking that all other negotiations (social, cultural, political, economic and technological) are somehow fuelled/ powered by religious undercurrents. Only then is there resonance with the art form. Only then is it flexible. Otherwise not. In the context of ‘folk media and religion’, the relationship is not mutually exclusive. Nor is

it devoid of the influences of the past. Given that animistic beliefs were earlier the core around which the everyday life of the earlier generations were knit, the influence of local culture, local politics, local social-structure, local livelihood; amongst others are a representation of the everyday life of the people and the religion of their past. As no aspect of everyday life is discrete or disconnected from the other, they are an overlapping mold, nonetheless, animistic at the core.

There is a very large repository of narratives within Hindu mythology though. Providing an ocean of opportunity for the artists. But then, representing everyday life as it happens, the *palas* that are performed are actually ‘selected’, are based on their proximity to reality. Those that reflect the life of the people the most are somehow selected. Whether at a sub-conscious level or through trial and error based derivations or erudite commercial calculations - the decisions somehow resonate with the everyday life of the tribal. Those *palas* that aren’t relevant to their lives are gradually discontinued, even if initiated. Those most representative, ensure to flourish. For example, as new religious dimensions such as the Hindu-Muslim oppositional of recent times have emerged, similar narratives have been identified and have started to take shape with the expression. *Palas* relevant to these have started to be devised. As Bhootnath Chitrakar, a *Pala Gaan* artist from Bonbohal village who follows both Hinduism & Islam, upheld –

“Even though Chhau has flourished riding the wave of hatred on certain occasions, ‘our’ art (*pala gaan*) and livelihood is now in jeopardy. Given that the Hindu community looks down upon us for also following Islam and the Muslims despise our Hindu beliefs, we are left at a precarious lurch fearing for

our lives. We no longer perform, as it would attract attention in regards to our religious beliefs, earlier an example of communal harmony. The *pala gaan* tradition could never accommodate hate for other communities. The underlying rhetoric was always peace. Thus even as our art is heading into obsolescence, some parts of it are retained within the larger structure of Chhau as an element. We are sometimes employed by the troupes for short musical renditions”.

But then as the researcher gauged through the interactions, Purulia Chhau is more reflective than moderated. Rather than being an edited platform, it is one that is most maneuvered by the nature and spirit of the region itself. As the *samajik* palas reflect the current affairs and present times, the *pouranic* ones represents the religious belief in the present context. A mirror of life. Informed by it as well. The popular narratives of Purulia Chhau are all thus resonant. As animistic life is manifested at various levels through the *palas*, situations such as an alligator capturing a child (upheld in the *Visana Rakshasi Bodh pala*), snakes entering the homes and ensuring untimely death (upheld in the *Manasha Mangal pala*), reformation of a hardcore criminal (upheld in *Parashuram er Matrihatya pala*, *Valmiki Pratibha pala*, amongst others), devotion to God (upheld in most *Pouranic palas*, but in the context of the meta-narratives of Hinduism); amongst others, genuinely represent their existence.

But then, as the researcher observed during attending the performance of the *Valmiki Pratibha pala* by Nripen Sahis’ troupe from Baligara at Basudebpur, when the tarpaulin clad alligator were pulling the children out of the crowd, there was a roar of laughter amongst the audiences. A lighthearted ambience, rather than one of fear. Although representing a fatal tragedy that frequently occurs in the region, the

representation of the sense was yet celebratory. Similarly, despite the audiences' respect and adulation for demonic characters such as Mahishasur and Raavan on account of their shared state of marginalization, the victory of good over evil and their death is celebrated and cheered, nonetheless. As Chandam Deb explained –

“Resonant to the Bhakhtin's concept of 'carnavalesque', Purulia Chhau has considerable similarity to Greek theatre. Only the celebratory language of the Greeks and that of Purulia is different. The language of nature, and that of the environment. In fact, the people's response to/ through art is also through the same. But then, given that the context of the ancient Dionysian festival of Greece where the theatrical traditions of comedy, tragedy and satire originated is similar to the *Nabanna* (harvest) festivals held in Bengal - the 'response' of the people through theatrical expressions is perhaps a vindication of the universality of people's responses to nature and life. A spirit of hope”.

James Fraser's (1922/ 1996) *Golden Bough* upheld the 'king killing' festival of some cultures, as a celebration of death – i.e. if the king was identified as infertile, this would result in his land being infertile as well, in terms of harvest – and thus, it would be best for the people/ subjects, if he dies. An occasion to celebrate. As similar rituals were also identified from the rituals of various other tribes across the world (especially in Africa and Papua New Guinea), they were referred to as the 'fertility cult'. Strikingly, the Shiv Gaajan festival held during the end of the harvest month of *Chaitra* (Bengali calendar month), within Purulia and the legends of *Naraboli* (human sacrifice), somewhat identifies the people of Purulia and their psyche as resonant to this celebratory cult. Whereas the proselytization through Hinduism streamlined re-

contextualized and assimilated the animistic rituals, there were some which were yet accommodated and some that were sidelined. Thus, as Bhaktin's concept of 'carnivalization' inspired Zygmunt Bauman to declare that "Bhaktin's approach to folk culture can be understood as a cultural system in which the situational context, social relations, genres and codes of imagery are all mutually inter-dependent" (as cited in Bapat, 1994, p. 37) - this approach thus yet finds resonance, even in the context of indigenous communities of interior forest regions such as Purulia.

But then although celebratory, the satirical, metaphorical, underlying connotations; amongst others, are also interwoven nonetheless. As Heidegger's (1999) concept of the sense of the 'being' of human existence has been first derived on the basis of the premise of "man as 1) a 'living being' endowed with reason, and 2) 'person or personhood', having arisen within experiencing and looking at contexts of objects in the world which were in each case given in advance in a definitive manner" (pp.17-27)" - the definitive connotations of everyday life events, objects and beliefs have genuinely been guided by the extravagant contextualization of Purulia Chhau. The audience's interpretation as a characteristic of their 'being'.

For example, in the *Arjun er Lakhyabed pala* of Purulia Chhau described in the opening anecdote (section 1.1), the character Arjun is depicted in a meditative state seated in a forest. He is consistently distracted/ disturbed by the sound of a wild boar, which angers him. He takes out his bow and arrow and takes aim to kill the boar. Just as he lets go his arrow, another arrow is ensued by a tribal hunter also in the vicinity, which overtakes Arjun's and slays the boar beforehand. Arjun takes this as an insult and accosts the tribal hunter challenging him to a duel. The tribal hunter is also

accompanied by his wife (a dark saree-clad woman). He proposes that if Arjun can shift him away even an inch from the place where he stands, he would admit defeat. As Arjun tries and fails despite various attempts, he realizes that the tribal hunter is a special being, much more powerful than him. Humbled, Arjun requests him to show his true identity. At this point the tribal hunter showcases his true self. The God of Gods (*Mahadev*); Lord Shiva, accompanied by his wife; Goddess Durga.

In a larger context, this *pala* not only showcases the egoistic and racial approach of the Aryan kings (represented by Arjun) towards tribal communities, but also their punitive exertions that have resulted in the death of many. Furthermore, apart from showcasing the inherent power, strength and resolve of the tribal people, the *pala* conveys that Shiva is himself a tribal and resides within each. Even though showcasing anthropomorphic supremacy, this *pala* is not an indigenous one though. Drawn from the Shiv Puran, it is actually an accommodative reference that accentuates the resonance and similarity between the *Goram devtas* of each village and Shiva. It validates that all the *Goram Devtas* are actually avatars of Shiva. The resonance is not just in terms of appearance though. The narratives of the *Goram Devtas* that usually revolve around strength, immortality, fertility, war and protection are also to be found within the Shiv Puran, projected in the context of Shiva. Thus, Shiva is considered as an accumulation, encompassing all indigenous deities, God to both deities and demons. Accommodating the sacred as well as the profane. Not an Aryan representation such as Vishnu or Indra.

Further drawing reference of the popular *palas* to their everyday life and beliefs, the researcher also identified similar connections to the Hindu meta-narratives in the

context of Shakti; the female manifest of God. Whereas the narratives of Durga and Sati are vibrantly upheld as in other places - their dark skinned, violent and bloody representation in the form of Kali is also sincerely revered, if not more. Thus, tantric representations encompassing indigenous deities such as Chandi, Chamunda, Bonbibbi, Manasha, Tara; amongst others, are also upheld. In fact, local folklore has also found space within. Whereas characters such as Tusumoni, amongst others, have also been deified – personifications of the mountains, rivers and the forces of nature have also been upheld. Thus, the religious landscape of Purulia has found genuine representation through Purulia Chhau - its narratives, characters; amongst others. Not just an extension of institutional Hindu beliefs, but a sincere and holistic interpretation of religious life in the region.

7.6. Purulia Chhau and the Pangtoed Chham: A Comparison

As the local culture, religion and political influences majorly contribute towards the evolution of the folk media forms that emerge from that region; the localized negotiations significantly play out, imprint and manifest in the origin, evolution, development and form of these, as a mediated maneuvering force. Thus, although some having similar origins, the present form of each of these are significantly different from each other. The masked dance theatre forms of India such as Chhau, Gomira, Chham and Yakshagana, amongst others, are not only distinct, but also specific/ unique historical chronicles representative of their region. To understand Purulia Chhau better, it was thus apt to compare it to another masked dance theatre form – the Pangtoed Chham of Sikkim.

Given that the inherent nature (whether flexible or rigid) emanating from the negotiations of driving the folk forms are diverse as per region, context; amongst others - folk media could thus never be categorized into one similar whole. But then, the outcome of the flexibility upheld by some of the folk forms compared to the rigid nature of some others also have implications of survivability and growth. Thus, rather than production/ presentation, the negotiations maneuvering two similar masked dance theatre forms - Purulia Chhau (West Bengal) and the Pangtoed Chham (Sikkim), have been contrasted in this section.

Similar to the Purulia region of West Bengal in regards to disseminating religious narratives through folk based renditions/ rituals, the North-East region of India is a cauldron of indigenous culture preserved within its expressions. To provide a comparative reference of the evolution of folk media forms influenced by localized contexts - as a study in contrast, the researcher has inquired into a) the Pangtoed Chham of Sikkim; a contextualizing/ communication element of the Pang Lhabsol festival – in contrast to b) Purulia Chhau; contextualizing the Gaajan festival of West Bengal.

Pang Lhabsol is a festival unique to Sikkim and is observed to mark the union between the indigenous Lepchas and the migrant Tibetans (Bhutias) since 1274 AD. A brotherhood witnessed by the ‘mountains’, personified and revered by both communities as the sacred deities of the region. Consistently since then, ‘Pang Lhabsol’, which literally means ‘homage to the witnesses’ is celebrated to mark this occasion (Subba, 2008). Although Shiv Gaajan too has ancient origins, whereas Pang Lhabsol is well chronicled and defined – both have been celebrated for centuries and

encompass a masked dance theatre form to enshrine the contextual rhetoric; Purulia Chhau and the Pangtoed Chham.

Whereas Pang Lhabsol of Sikkim has been significantly maneuvered by socio-cultural and political life in the state, the ritualistic Shiv Gaajan in Bengal has been rigid and orthodox in its renditions. Reflecting the transition of Sikkimese society as per the political re-alignments in the region, whereas Pang Lhabsol as a ritual/ festival has been genuinely flexible - the Shiv Gaajan has not shifted its core or form, even in contemporary times. The folklores/ myths surrounding human sacrifice and deaths during Shiv Gaajan are a thing of the past though.

Strikingly however, whereas Pang Lhabsol as a festival/ ritual has demonstrated its ability to modify itself sufficiently to resonate with the socio-political transition of Sikkim - from a Buddhist monarchical to a Hindu/ Nepali dominated secular democratic regime within India - the Pangtoed Chham (masked dance theatre performed during Pang Lhabsol) has remained the same, holding on to its initial political/ socio-religious rhetoric facilitating monarchical substantiation (Chattopadhyay & Das, 2021). In contrast, Purulia Chhau (initially performed only during Gaajan) has undergone a significant metamorphosis and ameliorated into various other contexts. This, despite UNESCO's recognition of it as an intangible cultural heritage and calls towards its preservation, undiluted.

The most pivotal transformation of Pang Lhabsol took place in the fourth phase of its evolution. As Vandenhelsken (2011) affirmed, after its merger with India in 1975, the State of Sikkim has been instrumental in reshaping ancient rituals in order to reposition Sikkim as an integral part of the State of India despite its peripheral

position. In fact, given the major political implications of the elements of Pang Lhabsol (especially the Pangtoed Chham), this ritual had been banned shortly after the merger of Sikkim as the Indian government saw it as a display of royalist and monarchical sentiments (Pommaet, 1996, as cited in Vandenhelsken, 2011, p. 84). It resumed in the late seventies only to be stopped again for logistical insufficiencies in the early eighties. In 1983, it was revitalized by the royal priests of the Pemayangtse monastery who were the primary proponents in regards to the celebration of this festival at the earlier royal palace. The Pangtoed Chham was the focus in terms of their intended rhetoric, nonetheless. As Vandenhelsken (2011) described, this re-initiation was as a mark of protest against India's annexation of Sikkim.

But Pang Lhabsol in its present form is a manifestation of the political centralization effectuated by the re-interpretation of the myth linked to the ritual transforming it into a foundational narrative that unifies all the people of Sikkim. The myth of the foundation of the earlier kingdom has been transformed into the myth of the foundation of the State of Sikkim - ensuring that the fall of monarchy saw the end of Pang Lhabsol's use to monopolize the political legitimacy of the ancient regime (Blondeau and Steinkellner, 1998; Steinmann, 1998, as cited in Vandenhelsken, 2011). But then in contrast, despite the political re-alignments in Purulia (tribal lords to the Panchakot Raj (1901- 1972); the departure of the British to rise of the Congress, Left front and Hindutva affiliates and now the Trinamool Congress led present State govt.) – the Shiv Gaajan festival has held on to every element and ensued without fail over the centuries. Religion priming over politics.

Although legends of *naroboli* (human sacrifice) at the *Gaajan* of earlier times exist, these have no evidential records. Not deviating from its core context, the Shiv Gaajan that is still held, is very much the same, as was centuries ago. Although Purulia Chhau eventually emerged to become a part of the ritual as an accumulation of the various song and dance forms of the region as earlier described, it took concrete shape only through the efforts of the rulers of the Panchakot Raj, nonetheless.

Similarly, in the context of Pang Lhabsol, the Pangtoed Chham was initiated as an element by the king Chakdor Namgyal. Critically, the narrative of the Pangtoed Chham was initiated inculcating various ceremonial sacraments derived from mythological metaphors, to glorify the king. An effort to effectuate political ascendancy, nonetheless. In contrast, although Purulia Chhau was later moulded and institutionalized by the Panchkot Raj kings, it was then framed purely religious.

Post 1975, although the rhetoric of the overall Pang Lhabsol festival was transformed into an inclusive secular avatar resonating with the idea of India - the devout sentimental/ ideological/ religious association of the people with the Pangtoed Chham ensured that even though the rest of the festival transformed, the 'folk media' form graced by their Gods within, was preserved. But then, even as the Pangtoed Chham is performed at present (2018-19) within the premises of the monasteries – it is attended by very few people (approx. 150 people) compared to the parallel cultural celebrations organized by the present dispensation in various cities in Sikkim (Gangtok, Ravangla, amongst others) attended by thousands. Moreover the tourists attending this annual orthodox rendition of the Pangtoed Chham aren't aware of its

narrative and can't even identify the characters in most cases. For them it is a colorful cultural extravaganza worthy of photographs.

In contrast, the flexibility of Purulia Chhau in accommodating modifications as per modern times has in fact allowed it to expand beyond its previous periphery, unlike the Pangtoed Chham. Despite being directly intertwined with religious sentiments, as it has ameliorated into the foray of other festivals/ celebrations performed at diverse venues throughout the year - it has transcended from an annual expression confined within the villages of Purulia into a regular, profitable, extravagant expression - recognized internationally. From the various Youtube videos of the Chhau performances going viral, the use of modern production technologies and logistics to becoming a part of mainstream films and television programs - the flexibility of Purulia Chhau in keeping intact a religious core, yet innovating, has enhanced its visibility, sustainability, outreach and impact - manifold. A folk media form, yet in its prime.

Reflections

As Purulia as a region is ancient to the extent of being referred to in the *Mahabharata* itself (in the context of the *Shobor* tribe), the surviving art forms are indigenous chronicles/ knowledge systems that date back beyond history. Purulia Chhau is the perfect example of the same. Although acquiring its present form only over the last century, the various other art forms/ artifacts that it has accumulated (some of which have become obsolete) such as *Pata naanch*, *Kaap jhaap*, the war rhythms of the

dhamasa, etc., ensure that Purulia Chhau is an extensive chronicle of antiquity. A genuine repository emanating the everyday life and history of Purulia. In the course of its evolution, whereas the flexibility of Purulia Chhau has enhanced its relevance as per the changing times and popularized it beyond borders – the preservation of its religious core has ensured its ritualistic reverence and alacrity amongst the locals. As the innovations/ modifications have been more accommodative than diminishing, most of the people of Purulia have been included into the pool that harbor sentimental value towards it.

Unlike classical expressions and even some other folk expressions such as Pangtoed Chham that are more institutionalized and rigid, Purulia Chhau has showcased the capacity to preserve and yet transcend as per the needs of the contemporary times. Thus, despite representing a society that is heterogeneous and diverse, despite emerging from a ritual known for its strict/ rigid penance - the rhetoric of the liberal expression has genuinely upheld the cultural imagination of the indigenous Purulia landscape framed upon its convergent religious identity, despite a metamorphosis. Not only have the Hindu rituals/ narratives been represented - the animistic/ anthropomorphic accentuations have also been ensured a sacred space in embrace. The profane has been provided space as well, but in the context of the sacred. The modern adoptions have not just accommodated the new though. These have also amplified the reach and impact of the original message, without interfering beyond a certain point. Having negotiated the modern tides, socio-political influences, cultural synthesis, inter-religious conflicts and intra-religious undercurrents - the context of Purulia Chhau remains extremely relevant to the daily lives of the people as well as

the region as a whole. A manifestation of the contemporary, as well as the ancient character of Purulia. Religious or otherwise.

Unlike some other folk media forms, it is striking that ‘religion’ has not been a burden on Purulia Chhau. It has allowed the conduit to transform and innovate. Whereas the fire torches have been replaced by the tube-lights, halogens, mercury lights and even LED lights – the brightening future of Purulia Chhau is genuinely highlighting the benefits of its flexibility. But then, subtle undercurrents of a mediatization of religion have been triggered though. The recent innovations of Purulia Chhau have affected the context of the rituals it is associated with to certain extent. Given its meaning making role, the mediation process has been laced by the things it has accumulated from the other negotiations; digital makeovers, urban influence, Bollywood etc. This has in turn affected the context of the religion that is represented by the rituals in question. As was earlier explained, whereas digital innovations have ensured sustenance, growth and a source of livelihood for the Purulia Chhau artists, the general content that the performers themselves consume at other times from the Internet has in turn influenced them to accommodate/ adopt things that they like. Whereas earlier the source for ideas in regards to Purulia Chhau narratives performed had emerged from philosophical/ religious contexts, the performers’ access to commercial entertainment and ‘other’ issues have provoked them to innovate on these lines as well. As the regular access to digital environments opened the floodgates over the past decade, a significant impact is now emanating on the rituals with which it is intertwined. Now gradually suited into the commercial performance formats - ritualistic performances emanate such vibes as well. A diversion from the core context, nonetheless. And given that this has transformed the once devout

environment (ritual venues) into one that is festive/ celebratory/ 'carnavalesque' - this has not just lead to a partial secularization of the events, but also an avenue for entertainment; allowing the use of alcohol, gambling and marijuana. An overlap between the 'sacred' and the 'profane'.

Furthermore, the present experimental approach of revisiting the narratives of the *Goram Devtas*, *Manasha* and other local deities are also in vogue. Efforting to diversify from the age-old, repetitive projections - an overlap between the religious peripheral and the institutional core has genuinely been achieved. The mainstream narratives of Shiva are upheld as always, but accommodating the 'new' localized contexts of 'now'. The 'profane' variables are considered an extension of the present localized culture of the marginalized, nothing more. The emergence of an improvised form of Hinduism, adopting the indigenous context of Purulia. All in all over the past decade, whereas, a sense of communal harmony has emerged, an oppositional sense of amplified Hindu rhetoric has also taken shape. As the caste lines blurred and contentions for gender neutrality were initiated, the religious narratives themselves were contextualized for enforcement. Although a hierarchy of Gods was established during the religious assimilation/ integration projected through Purulia Chhau, the underlying regional currents manifested in various ways ensuring the Hindu meta-narratives, but in a localized way. A 'tribalization' of the Aryan 'sanskritization' process; a localization of the mainstream. Not a trivialization though, but deviant resistance from a banal outcome.

7.7. Summary

In this chapter, the critical premise of the relationship between ‘Purulia Chhau’ and ‘religion’ was specifically attended to. Taking into account the accentuations of all the other variables in the fray (social, cultural, political, economic and technological) – this chapter was structured to focus on the role of religion as a common factor/ catalyst in all other maneuverings. The significance of religion in Purulia Chhau and vice-versa. Deliberating upon the inter-religious negotiations (section 7.3) emanating from the Hindu-Muslim oppositional and also the encapsulation of animistic faith into the folds of Hinduism, case studies of 1) ‘Palma Shakti Sangha Chhau Nritya Party’ a troupe led by Giasuddin Ansari, in which the majority of the performers are Muslim, and 2) the iconic troupe ‘Late. Rasu Sahis Baligara Kisan Chhau Nritya Samiti’, known to be orthodox, traditional and devoted communicators of Hindu philosophy through their art – were comprehensively upheld. Furthermore, intra-religious negotiations such as demon worship, the segregation of the animistic Gods now assimilated within Hinduism into the lower folds of its hierarchy and the position of castes in the context of religion, have specifically been explained. Moreover in this chapter, a hermeneutic reading describing the interpretation of everyday life in the context of religious philosophy mediated by Purulia Chhau was also significantly outlined. Analyzing the role of the Purulia Chhau platform, the aspects of power play due to the mediatization of religion, revival of animistic narratives, the overlap between the sacred and profane, and the resistance ensured against the adulteration/ disintegration of Hindu rituals into banal forms, were also comprehensively described. As an insight into the larger context of the ‘folk media-religion’ relationship, a comparative case study contrasting another similar masked dance

theatre form and its relationship with religion was also upheld identifying the differences due to the localized factor on this media-religion relationship and its non-universality.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

Purulia Chhau has echoed many of the social, cultural, political, economic and technological negotiations that have occurred over time in the everyday life of the people. Most significantly, however, it was the underlying religious undercurrents over which all else transpired – the keystone of Purulia Chhau. Moreover, the repercussions too were reiterated through the same. As the outcome of the negotiations also played out through Purulia Chhau, the diverse embrace between the orthodox and the contemporary - the sacred and profane – the rural and urban – the indigenous and mainstream, were all well represented. Furthermore, warranting its traditional meaning-making purpose at rituals in projecting religious philosophy in marginalized rural settings, the progressive nature of Chhau has ensured its success and revival though. A seminal representation of the history/ identity of the people, yet a powerful media form, even in contemporary times.

The first chapter begins with an anecdote, which sets the larger context of the thesis. The anecdote that captures an early experience of the researcher in the field problematizes the intricate relationship between religion and the folk medium — Puruulia Chhau, in the current instance. Drawing upon the people’s intimate connection with the folk medium, the anecdote takes us through their everyday life and underscores the central position that religion occupies. The anecdote helps explain the theme of the study and the various manifestations of religion implicit in the folk medium. Focusing on the key research questions, the chapter lays out the

specific four-fold objectives of the study. These were to: (1) trace the evolution of Purulia Chhau in the context of social, cultural, political, economic and religious life of the people, (2) elicit the religious meanings latent in Purulia Chhau by examining the composite signification system as a combined communication process, (3) examine the meanings that the local community draws from the Purulia Chhau performances and how they employ this resource to interpret their everyday life and struggles, and (4) examine the role of Purulia Chhau in the negotiations between native religion and mainstream Hinduism.

The first chapter also provides an initial elucidation of ethnosemiotics — a method that combines semiotics and ethnography — and provides a justification for the same in the study. While semiotics was employed to deconstruct the various elements of Purulia Chhau (e.g., masks, costumes, kinesics, characters and narratives) in to its elements, it was necessary to dwell upon the every day life of the people and draw the corresponding references. As the life of the people changed over time, Purulia Chhau also evolved, echoing the negotiations.

Despite the political reorganization of the Purulia from Bihar to Bengal in 1956, Purulia had retained its distinct character in contrast to its neighboring districts within Bengal (i.e., Bardhaman, Bankura and Mednipur) as well as with the bordering states (i.e., regions of Odisha and Jharkand). Over time, a cultural amalgamation ensued resulting in significant changes in the form and content of the dance-theatre form. Such a cultural infusion and its resulting outcome also got mirrored through it.

In the second chapter, an attempt was made to locate Purulia Chhau in the broader context of the diverse folk media landscape of India. As a hybrid or composite folk form it stands as a distinct expression in that it encompasses various folk song traditions, folk theatres, folk dances and even martial arts. As a prominent folk expression of Bengal it has accommodated various other folk traditions of the state that were nearing obsolescence. The chapter has given an account of Chhau and its three types, and compares one with the other, arguing that Purulia Chhau is a 'raw' indigenous representation unlike the semi-classical renditions of Seraikella Chhau (of Jharkand) and Mayurbhanj Chhau (of Odisha). Significantly, however, the common thread that binds them all are: (i) the preponderance of religious content inspired by Hindu mythological epics and (ii) their popularity and significant role in the communication environment in the region.

Drawing from archival sources and literature, juxtaposed by in-depth interviews with community elders, eminent artists, scholars and others, the second chapter underscores that there are conflicting theories on the origin of Purulia Chhau. This itself was an opportunity for the researcher to explore and identify the true trajectory of the evolution of the art form. The chapter underscores the role of the Panchakot Raj royals as well as Zamindars of neighboring Burdwan district in propagating Hinduism among the tribal animists.

In the third Chapter, an examination of the various domains, inter-disciplinary perspectives and overall scholarly works on folk media was made. The review underscored that while folk media, in general, has been historically attracting the attention of various folklorists, anthropologists, development scholars and also

semiotic researchers, there is lack of focus on folk media from a media-religion perspective. While ‘folklorists’, for quite some time now, have been exploring various aspects of folk media such as their history, origin and development (Gabbert, 2018; Korom, 2017; Banerjee, 1991; Handoo, 1987; amongst others), studies on intercultural infusions, innovations and hybridization (Weatherford, 1990; Mushengyezi, 2003; Vatsyayan, 2016; Wang & Dissanayake, 1984; Bharucha, 1984; amongst others) can be largely found within the domain of Media Anthropology. Within the specific domain of ‘Media-Religion’ studies, the focus has largely been within the realms of ‘television’ (Hoover, 2005; Hjavard, 2013; amongst others) and ‘digital/online media’ (Lundby, 2013; Campbell, 2010; amongst others). Ironically, studies on folk media have largely been neglected within media-religion scholarship.

The chapter also demystifies the different connotations of religion as understood by different approaches within media-religion studies, and underscores the application of Lynch’s (2012) ‘mediation of sacred forms’ approach and Hjavard’s (2013) ‘mediatization of religion’ approach.. Most importantly, Hoover’s (2005) ‘mediation of meaning’ approach has been majorly adopted for this study.

Apart from the ethnographic works of Frazer (1922/ 1996), Brown (1906) and Mallinowski (1922), classical contributions in regards to hermeneutics (Heidegger, 1923/ 1999; Bauman, 1978; amongst others) have also been significant in the current work. Also, major contributions have significantly been drawn from social semiotics (Wilson, 2019; Voigt, 2014; Pollock, 1995; Bogatyrev, 1971; Levi-Strauss, 1963; amongst others). Further, literature on textual semiotics based research (Peterson,

2008; Bapat, 1994; Yankah, 1985; Barthes, 1977; Eco, 1976; amongst others)⁷⁰ on meaning-making, interpretation, influence and ‘folk expressions as signification systems’ have been reviewed.

Chapter four details out the methodology (i.e., ethnosemiotics) that was adopted by the researcher. The chapter starts with a methodological review of the significant works. Greimas (1982) significantly described ethnosemiotics as an area of curiosities and methodological exercises, upholding the syntagmatic negotiations of rituals and ceremonies. He thus identified ethnosemiotics as central to constructing general models of signifying behavior. While there has been as two major strands in ethnosemiotics, the current study drew inspiration from Yankah (1985) for whom “the discovery of ethnic-based semiotics should form an integral part of all studies in performance, for it brings into focus the cultural base upon which audiences encode and decode messages, size up performances and produce aesthetic judgment” (p.133).

The fieldwork spanned over five phases in 2021 and these phases corresponded to the ritualistic itinerary of the locals. For instance, one month was spent in Purulia leading to the Shiv Gajan festival in March-April that year. Thus the researcher spent 141 days covering 37 villages of Purulia district. Villages were visited as per the performances and practice sessions of the troupes. Archival research, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were also carried out in between the phases.

⁷⁰ Although most of the mentioned authors in regards to semiotics have contributed in both the strands (social semiotics as well as textual semiotics), they have been segregated based on context of the references drawn within this present study.

The fifth chapter (An Ethnosemiotic Analysis of Purulia Chhau) inquired into the origin of Purulia Chhau and how it played a critical role as a meaning-making conduit reflecting the everyday life of the people. The entire evolutionary journey of Purulia Chhau was also charted here providing a paradigmatic perspective of its development in the wake of the social, cultural, economic, technological, religious and political undercurrents prevalent - yet changing over time.

From a paradigmatic standpoint, it is due to the composite nature of Purulia Chhau that there was so much of uncertainty regarding its origins. Given the prolonged phases and various junctures over which the assimilation of the various art forms, expressions, motifs and philosophies of the region into Purulia Chhau was ensured - the origins of each of these other art forms were also drawn into the connotative fray. As Purulia Chhau culminated into a pnemonic, rather than a single point of origin, a network of various origins thus emerged, just like the roots of a tree. In terms of origins and etymology, whereas scholars have provided contrasting arguments (Bhattacharya, 1971; Awasthi, 1979; Banerjee, 1991; Chatterjee, 2019; amongst others) by assigning a singular source - the present research has identified the varied but 'primary sources' that have together contributed to the foundation of Purulia Chhau as well as the 'secondary sources' that were accumulated along the timeline of its evolution and development, over the decades. Although performed at various festivals throughout the year in present times, Purulia Chhau was earlier only performed during the Shiv Gaajan festival. The true origin and source of Purulia Chhau.

Performed at the *akkharas* in front of the Shiva/ *Goram devta* temple of the villages at night, the narratives of the performances genuinely outlined as to why the Shiv Gaajan is happening, who is Shiva, how great he is, which were his miraculous deeds and all in all why all must be devoted to him. A localized medium (masked dance theatre) communicating philosophy.

All along the trajectory of its evolution - apart from the religious – the cultural, political, social, economic and technological negotiations were also accommodated. ‘Time’ as it happened. An indigenous chronicle of history. Thus, critically, it is evident through this study that Purulia Chhau has a unique trajectory of origin and is ‘not’ a generic extension of Chhau and its three forms (*tridhara* – Seraikella, Mayurbhanj and Purulia) as is generally categorized. It has a history of its own and is a result of life, localized. But then, given that Seraikella Chhau and Mayurbhanj Chhau were already in vogue before Purulia Chhau was discovered, it was categorized along-with due to its regional proximity.

Also, in this chapter, from a syntagmatic perspective, the effective use of narratives, characters, masks, costumes, iconography, color, kinesics, choreography and music coming together as a composite signification system was deconstructed into its elements and analyzed as a performance text. Purulia Chhau exists as a composite signification system, communicating adopted narratives. Based on the espoused *pala* (story) and its characters - the masks, costumes, iconography, color, kinesics, choreography, music, etc., all contribute in ‘framing the message’, but in a localized regional context. Whereas the masks (varied in expression) trigger emotions (devout or otherwise) by providing the audiences the designated characters as per narrative,

the costumes and iconography significantly remind them of the heroic tales and metaphors associated with the same.

From an interpretative standpoint, the researcher also identified that the audiences draw various connotations from the performances. An integral part of their everyday lives, the people sincerely derive a sense of spirituality, knowledge and hero worship, as they are extremely enthused by the renditions. It is a form of entertainment as well. Transported into imaginary realms of Gods and demons, as the audiences draw reference from these narratives in lieu of their everyday struggles, they derive a sense of catharsis, nonetheless. Encouraged into after-show discussions amongst themselves, it further allows them to put forth their religious opinions. An open forum (devoid of caste, gender and other divisions), where they can showcase their knowledge. A public/ community sphere. Although many are uneducated, they are proud of their religious knowledge. This is their education they feel. The performances allow them to gain such knowledge and an opportunity to meet others and showcase it as well. Furthermore, Shiva represents a father figure revered by all. Thus, the performances enable them to meet their father/ creator, nonetheless. It is as if the heavens have parted and their Gods have descended. The temple deities are fixed and thus not as realistic in terms of impact, some made evident. Serving a moral structure, a religious reminder, an avenue for spiritual catharsis, as well as an entertainment-based education – it is a chronicle of their history. A mirror that showcases not just themselves, but also their Gods and ancestors beside them.

The sixth chapter (Purulia Chhau in Contemporary Times: The Negotiations and Under-Currents) elaborately reflected upon the negotiations and under-currents

(social, economic, technological, cultural, religious and political) that maneuvered its development over the past decade (2010 - 2020). Whereas the ‘gender’ and ‘caste’ based dynamics and its manifestations through Purulia Chhau were described in the ‘Social Negotiations’ section (6.2) based on the case study of ‘Mitali Chhau Maldih Mahila Dal’, a first of its kind, all women Purulia Chhau troupe lead by an educated Brahmin girl Mousumi who recently married – the ensuing mediatization of religion in the region/ technological determinism effectuated through Purulia Chhau was described in the ‘Economic and Technological Negotiations’ section (6.3) based on the case study of Chhau artist and YouTuber, Debashis Das. Instances of mask and other Chhau memorabilia being sold through e-commerce websites such as ‘Amazon’ and ‘Flipkart’ were also presented. The ‘Religious, Cultural and Political Undercurrents’ section (6.4) of this chapter specifically identified the tripartite nature of these influences and how they worked together over the past decade to ensure a steady tide of altering stimulus. Presented in the form of a discussion between cultural experts (filmmakers, museologists, sociologists; amongst others) as well as other academics, local community elders and political representatives - the maneuvering weightage of each parameter (culture/ religion/ politics) was analyzed to finally identify a steady inter-dependence/ symbiotic relationship between themselves, and with Purulia Chhau as a whole.

Inquiring into these issues, the case study of Mitali Chhau Maldih Mahila Dal the first of its kind all female Chhau troupe led by Brahmin girl Mousumi Chowdhury – and the journey of their rise from an ostentatious state of subjugation, to one of empowerment, was significantly revealing. Utilizing Purulia Chhau as an evocative

conduit, as the women defied the archaic community norms that forbid women to participate in cultural events/ rituals, as a statement of their non-conformity and protest - their contention was established through Purulia Chhau, ensuring them a space within the art, as icons resonating with the aspirations of innumerable rural women across the region, suffering in silence. Revitalizing the women's empowerment rhetoric already embedded within the carefully selected religious narratives rendered (frequently *Mahishasur Mardini*), their performances not only enforced the progressive assertion of an egalitarian plea, but tactfully, also appealed to the spiritual/ ethical sense of the devout male dominated audiences, otherwise engaged in *devi* (goddess) worship. Whereas the troupe's struggle maneuvering the dissuasions, coercions, threats, and repercussions were considerably identified, how they overcame the chauvinistic impediments, to significantly deliver an iconoclastic voice to the voiceless, through their cultural expression was also revealed.

The caste-based negotiations were also deciphered along-with. Earlier performed only by lower castes and the tribal, Purulia Chhau has eventually become a neutral expression over the past decade. In fact, Mousumi's father Jagannath was one of the first Brahmin performers of Purulia Chhau. Ostracized by his own community and threatened of boycott, he has now set an example for all other performers as an icon of inclusiveness and universal brotherhood. As the performance troupes have become heterogeneous over the years rather than clustered representatives of communities, the dynamics arising from caste have more or less now been nullified. Even Hindus and Muslims collaborate together to perform as a troupe (Palma Shakti Sangha Chhau Nritya Party). Unlike temples, the performance venues are thronged by 'all' people,

who sit 'together' to experience the expressions. A universal fireplace. A 'carnavalesque' celebration for all.

The economic and technological negotiations over the past decade were genuinely centered on the commercialization of Purulia Chhau and furthermore their dissemination using digital platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. This was elucidated through the case study of Debashis Das who accumulated 1,16,000 subscribers for his YouTube Channel garnering 50,125,424 views since 2014. Also, studying the process by which a Kustaur village based troupe 'Shib Durga Chhau Nritya Party' framed their performances as per the requirements of the digital realm, urged and tutored by Debashis - revealing insights in regards to their acquired prowess were gathered. Not just pertinent to their use of mobile phone cameras/ lights to capture the performances, but also in terms of their treatment and modification.

Consequentially, it was realized that when the troupe perform these digital based narratives at other religious events such as Durga Puja, where Chhau's role as a contextualizing/ meaning-making conduit was upheld - the meaning making was somewhat depreciated/ adulterated though. Thus, a mediatization of religion in the region had been affected due to the transformation of the Chhau troupes such as 'Shib Durga Chhau Nritya Party'. Enabled by Debashis and others such promotional facilitators such as Banglanatak.com, the opportunities for visibility, branding and an enhanced opportunity of livelihood have genuinely lured the performers to shape their art according to the digital plane.

Given that Purulia Chhau performances were earlier held only during the Shiva Gaajan, it could never have been a source of livelihood back then. Over the years although other religious festivals too employed Purulia Chhau as a meaning-making conduit, there were however gaps in the performance phases especially after the *Rohin din* (the day of sowing the new seeds) to facilitate farming. At present, college fests, carnivals, and even film-based projects have ensued a yearlong itinerary for Purulia Chhau artists, ensuring a regular source of income.

In terms of the cultural, political and religious undercurrents of the past decade, it was realized that the three factors (cultural, religious and political) were a tripartite force intertwined with each other. Not exclusive, but complimentary and inter-dependent. Given the requirements of the political class, a large number of *samajik palas* (social/political narratives) also came into being. Earlier, Purulia Chhau was sincere only to religion and its meaning-making, through *pouranic palas* (religious narratives) that were ritualistically performed. As the commercialization through performances at college fests, carnivals, etc., resulted in the emergence of shorter current affairs based narratives and others which were partially or completely detached from religion - an opportunity was sensed by the political class to utilize the medium and capitalize on its religious/ grass-root credibility. Given the realization of its potent efficacy, political rhetoric was thus woven in with the façade of social development. Although some development communication initiatives such as the *Coronashur Bodh pala* employed at the behest of Govt. organizations such as the DICA (Directorate of Information and Cultural Affairs), Purulia, were genuinely beneficial to inform the people about the importance of social distancing, etc., – most of the palas such as Duare Sarkar, Amphan; amongst others, were projections of the development

initiatives of the ruling Trinamool Congress party. Political promotion. But then, as the researcher precisely gauged, religion was not done away with altogether. It was in fact employed to enforce political rhetoric. The masked characters representing the Gods were utilized but within modern day scripts to accentuate and establish the arguments placed. Just like celebrities endorsing brands/ ideas. Given that the performances were frequently sponsored/ organized by the political class, the performance troupes' association with such organizations were critical towards their livelihood. Thus, although devout as in some cases, the troupes had to give in to political campaigning through their art, on either side.

The critical premise of the central role of 'religion' as the keystone of 'Purulia Chhau' was specifically attended to in the seventh chapter (The Manifestations of Religion in Purulia Chhau). Bringing forth the accentuations of all the other variables in the fray (social, cultural, political, economic and technological) – this chapter was structured to focus on the role of religion as the common foundation/ catalyst in all other maneuverings. Deliberating upon the inter-religious negotiations (section 7.3) emanating from the Hindu-Muslim oppositional and also the encapsulation of animistic faith into the folds of Hinduism, case studies of 1) 'Palma Shakti Sangha Chhau Nritya Party' a troupe led by Giasuddin Ansari, in which the majority of the performers are Muslim, and 2) the iconic troupe 'Late. Rasu Sahis Baligara Kisan Chhau Nritya Samiti', known to be orthodox, traditional and devoted communicators of Hindu philosophy through their art – were analytically presented. Furthermore, intra-religious negotiations arising out of demon worship, the segregation of the animistic Gods assimilated within the lower folds of Hinduism, the hierarchy and position of castes in the context of religion, were also explained. Moreover in this

chapter, a hermeneutic reading of Purulia Chhau was also outlined, describing the interpretation of everyday life of the locals in the context of religious philosophy.

Having played a key role in popularizing Hinduism among the tribal animists, - even as the narratives, characters, anecdotes, conflicts, etc. of Chhau were drawn from Hindu mythology – the media-religion relationship was discovered to have many layers. Often divergent from the mainstream rhetoric, apart from characters representing icons of animistic reverence, heroes and forefathers - manifestations of infused local/ regional conflicts were also gauged. Representing *dharma* in the context of the everyday lives of the locals, both the *pouranic palas* (drawn from mythology) as well as the *samjik palas* (social/ political narratives) are religious. The *pouranic* ones - a direct representation, and the *samajik* ones - subtly endorsed/ enforced by religion. Accommodating anthropomorphic beliefs, rather than just mainstream discourse, the liberal use of the masks of gods and demons - conversations between religious and anthropomorphic characters in the narrative - and other such innovations, genuinely allowed the performances to be as per the spiritual needs of the people. To resonate rather than impose. Also revealing the inter-religious negotiations such as Muslim artists enacting Hindu deities, troupes showcasing other religions in a derogatory sense, the oppositional of those projecting the concept of religious tolerance and brotherhood; amongst others – the dynamics of the ‘Purulia Chhau-religion’ relationship was comprehensively presented in the context of various religious manifests. To present the standpoint of religious harmony and brotherhood, the case study of ‘Palma Shakti Sangha Chhau Nritya Party’ a troupe led by Giasuddin Ansari, in which the majority of the performers are Muslim, was deliberated upon. On the other hand, to present the oppositional standpoint - a case

study of the iconic troupe 'Late. Rasu Sahis Baligara Kisan Chhau Nritya Samiti', known to be orthodox, traditional and devoted communicators of Hindu philosophy through their art – was contrasted.

On the whole, it was gauged that the audiences preserved an unconditional adulation towards religious characters. The primary Gods such as Vishnu, Durga, Krishna; amongst others were most revered. Shiva considered supreme. But then, animistic Gods such as the *Goram devtas* were also respected by all, including non-tribal Hindus. An embrace with animistic faith on their part. Given the polytheistic structure of Hinduism – an assimilation/ integration had been achieved. Masked personifications and deifications of rivers and mountains were also loved, at the performances. But then strikingly, even the demons such as Mahishasur and Raavan were revered. Deriving a frame of reference between Hindu philosophy and the everyday life of the people of Purulia, it emerged that the selection of the narratives from the vast pool of available options (Mahabharata, Ramayana, Vedas, Puranas, etc.) were based on their relevance to the life of the people in the region. The narratives most proximal to their reality. As the people had suffered decades of poverty and marginalization, they even drew reference to the marginalization of those deemed as antagonists by the meta-narratives of Hinduism, such as Mahishasur. Rather than the classical oppositional dichotomy of good-evil, hero-villain; etc., - issues such as the Aryan-tribal hegemony, the urban-rural divide, the privileged and the ostracized; etc., were more relevant to them. Thus, even though the traditional concepts of the victory of good over evil, reformation, devotion, etc., were showcased/ denoted, the connotations that were drawn were sometimes even satirical.

To derive an insight into the larger context of the 'folk media-religion' relationship, a comparative case study contrasting another similar masked dance theatre form (Pangtoed Chham of Sikkim) and its relationship with religion was also carried out. Unlike Pangtoed Chham, which has remained confined within monasteries, Purulia Chhau has expanded beyond its form and original context with the changing times. Thus, studying one folk media form cannot represent the entire folk media universe. Apart from identifying the differences due to the localized factor on this media-religion relationship and its non-universality, the diversity of folk media forms as being strikingly different, and thus, not a representative of each other, was evidently identified; changes over time.

However, the common/ core purpose of most Indian folk media forms in effectuating an undiluted simplification (*sadharanikaran*) of complex rhetoric could yet be argued in general. Unity in their meaning-making role. Rooted conduits ensuring the mediation of meaning, nonetheless. Strikingly ethnosemiotics, as a method to study this characteristic of folk media in general, has genuinely been vindicated through this effort. Thus, as it is evident that the predominant religious setup and socio-cultural ethos of India emerging out of the villages and tribal areas can be significantly discovered through its folk expressions - this research thus provides a foundational framework for more such studies using ethnosemiotics to trace the evolution of the everyday life of the people, by studying their region-specific folk media forms.

All in all, unfolding the significance of folk media as communication conduits and how they frequently serve a meaning-making role in the context of religion, the selection of Purulia Chhau as a representative case was not meant to posit that the

same negotiations and undercurrents are maneuvering ‘all’ folk media forms. It was meant to manifest the localized nature of these maneuverings. It was not meant to manifest the same trajectory of evolution for all folk expressions, but that all such expressions are localized manifestations of the everyday life of the ‘local’ communities. A chronicle of their localized history.

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Annexure – 1

List of Purulia Chhau Troupes registered with the Dept. of Information & Cultural Affairs (DICA), Govt. of West Bengal.

Sr.	Purulia Chhau Troupe	Leader / <i>Dala Neta</i>	Village	Block
1	Dubcharka Adibasi Kishan Chhau Society	Bijay Sahis	Dubchorka	Purulia - 2
2	Aagamani Chhau Nritya Party	Chitta Kumar	Kochahatu	Jhalda - 2
3	Late Naruhai Pratisthita Beldih Harijan Chhau Nritya Samiti	Krishna Chandra Sahis	Beldih	Arsha
4	Nimdiha Tarun Sangha Chhau Nritya Party	Dinabandhu Mahato	Nimdiha	Hura
5	Chirumarcha Shib Shankar Manmohini Chhau Nritya Samiti	Jagadish Mahato	Chirumarcha	Purulia - 2
6	Baligara Dhananjay Chhau Nritya Samiti	Dhananjay Mahato	Baligara	Purulia - 1
7	Binapani Chhau Nritya Bikash Kendra	Ajat Chandra Mahato	Khatjhuri	Jhalda - 1
8	Bhatdih Jai Baba Loknath Chhau Nritya Party	Swapan Kumar	Bhatdih	Joypur
9	Rankoushal Chhau Nritya Party	Gorish Roy	Dakshin Bohal, Dumdumi	Purulia - 2
10	Kudlung Krishnananda Chhau Nritya Samiti	Tarapada Mahato	Kudlung	Hura
11	Jaladhar Chhau Nritya Academy	Jaladhar Bauri	Karcha	Purulia - 2
12	Binay Badal Dinesh Sangha Chhau Nritya Party	Sudarshan Mahato	Palma	Barabazar

13	Barorola Harparbati Adivasi Chhau Nritya Samiti	Kariram Nayak	Bararola	Jhalda - 1
14	Radhanath Chhau Bikash Kendra	Binoydhar Kumar	Bamunia	Jhalda - 2
15	Sanjoy Chhau Nritya Party	Sanjay Mahato	Choto - Urma	Balarampur
16	Ayodha Pahar Ghatiyali Adivasi Yub Shakti Chhau Nritya Party	Abinash Singh Mura	Gundlideh	Baghmundi
17	Chholagora Harpabati Chhau Nritya Party	Bholanath Mahato	Chholagura	Hura
18	Yub Shakti Sangha Chhau Nritya Dal	Bhishwadeb Mahato	Velaidih	Barabazar
19	Panipathar Shakti Sangha Chhau Academy	Anil Mahato	Salogram	Puncha
20	Ma Durga Chhau Nritya Bikash Samiti	Dharmadas Kumar	Oldi	Jhalda - 2
21	Kudlung Baba Loknath Chhau Nritya Party	Somnath Mahato	Kudlung	Hura
22	Kudlung (Rakab) Adivasi Chhau Nritya Samiti	Sunil Mahato	Kudlung	Hura
23	Chandanpur Susangbadha Tarun Chhau Nritya Party	Heramba Mahato	Chandanpur	Barabazar
24	Matkuma Shibrangan Chhau Nritya Samiti	Rashbehari Kumar	Matkuma	Jhalda - 2
25	Bamnidi Adyashakti Chhau Nritya Dal	Anil Chandra Mahato	Bamnidi	Barabazar
26	Late Lal Mahato Chhau Nritya Dal	Gangadhar Mahato	Singri	Bagmundi

27	Royal Chhau Academy	Nagendranath Singh Sardar	Diputar	Balarampur
28	Ma Tara Chhau Nritya Party	Barun Mahato	Sitalpur	Purulia -2
29	Adya Shakti Mahamaya Chhau Nritya Samiti	Muchiram Kumar	Tatuara	Jhalda - 2
30	Hetjari Bagandih Adivasi Chhau Nritya Party	Tarani Mahato	Hetjari	Arsha
31	Vivekananda Chhau Academy	Ajith Kumar Mahato	Salberia	Para
32	Kolbandh Haragouri Chhau Nritya Samiti	Madhab Chandra Mahato	Kolbandh	Purulia - 2
33	Chakulia Yubak Sangha Chhau Nritya Party	Shibram Mahato	Chakulia	Balarampur
34	Naba Biplab Chhau Nritya Samiti	Padma Kumar	Tatuara	Jhalda - 2
35	Shib Shakti Chhau Nritya Sangha	Prabhash Mahato	Haranjanga	Purulia - 2
36	Bhaskar Krisimangal Chhau Nritya Samiti Baligara	Bhaskar Mahato	Baligara	Purulia - 1
37	Kalipada Chhau Nritya Samiti	Susanta Mahato	Haranjanga	Purulia - 2
38	Tatuara Chhau Dance Samiti	Jagdish Kumar	Tatuara	Jhalda - 2
39	Shishu Kalyan Chhau Nritya Samiti (Brindaban Kumar)	Dukhulal Kumar	Kochahatu	Jhalda - 2
40	Majhihira Universal Chhau Academy	Joyprokash Mahato	Majhihira	Manbazar - 1
41	Murgabera Krishi Mangal Chhau Nritya Party	Biswanath Mahato	Murgabera	Barabazar

42	Tilabani Mahamaya Chhau Nritya Party	Rabindranath Sahis	Tilabani	Hura
43	Shib Shakti Chhau Nritya Dal	Arun Chandra Mahato	Lanka	Barabazar
44	Arkali Shalgram Mahabir Club Chhau Nritya Party	Bipadtarn Mahato	Shalgram	Jhalda - 2
45	Biswabinodini Chhau Nritya Academy	Fatik Mahato	Lagudi	Barabazar
46	Sidpur Ramkrishna Seba Sangha Chhau Nritya Party	Binay Mahato	Sidpur	Purulia - 1
47	Chirugora Paglananda Chhau Nritya Kalyan Samiti	Debsaran Mahato	Chirugora	Barabazar
48	Koldih Natraj Harijan Club Chhau Nritya Party	Sanjay Bagdi	Koldih	Purulia - 2
49	Sishu Kalyan Chhau Nritya Samiti	Rangalal Kumar	Barabanda	Joypur
50	Maa Adyashakti Mahamaya Chhau Nritya Party	Padma Mahato	Maltor	Purulia - 2
51	Ba Baligara SRAMJIBI Yubak Mandal Chhau Nritya Samiti	Dipak Mahato	Baligara	Purulia - 1
52	Durku Kalindi Rankoushal Chhau Nritya Party	Dushasan Kalindi	Durku	Purulia - 1
53	Kochahatu Adi Kurmi Chhau Nritya Party	Dharani Mahato	Kochahatu	Jhalda - 2
54	Tentlow Jangal Mahal B. Ba. Di. Chhau Dance Society	Dipak Mahato	Tentlow	Barabazar

55	<u>Mitali Chhau Maldih</u> (Includes a special Female Chhau Unit; 1st of its kind).	Jagannath Chowdhury	Maldih	Balarampur
56	Hensla Vivekanada Chhau Nritya Samiti	Baka Mahato	Hensla	Arsha
57	Panipathar Yuba Kalyan Chhau Nritya Dal	Bhaktipada Mahato	Panipathar	Puncha
58	Pani Pathar New Tarun Chhau Dance Society	Mukchand Sahis	Panipathar	Puncha
59	Hetkahan Mahabir Chhau Nritya Party	Chutubabu Mahato	Hetkahan	Joypur
60	Ban Baligara Nabin Sangha Chhau Nritya Party	Mariram Mahato	Baligara	Purulia - 1
61	Pokhariya Yuba Sangha Chhau Nritya Party	Bhadari Mahato	Pokhariya	Purulia - 2
62	Ban Baligara Sanyasi Baba Chhau Nritya Samiti	Ashis Kumar Mahato	Baligara	Purulia - 1
63	Purulia Jambad Chhau Dance Academy	Pelaram Mahato	Jambad	Purulia - 2
64	Palma Harijan Janakalyan Samity Chhau Nritya Party	Rajkishor Mahato	Palma	Barabazar
65	Kalebar Memorial Chhau Dance Party	Ganesh Chandra Kumar	Torang	Baghmundi
66	Tetlo Jangal Mahal Yuba Kalyan Chhau Nritya Samiti	Shyamapada Mahato	Tetlo	Barabazar
67	Senabana Bir Netaji Chhau Nritya Samiti	Ankur Mahato	Senabana	Arsha
68	Adbana Tarun Sangha Chhau Dance Society	Sougata Mahato	Adabana	Barabazar

69	Shitalpur Ganesh Chhau Dance Party	Chinibas Mahato	Shitalpur	Purulia - 2
70	Saridih Binapani Chhau Nritya Club	Hemsingh Mahato	Saridih	Baghmundi
71	Bamu Manbhumi Chhau Dance Society	Birendranath Mahato	Bamu	Barabazar
72	Prabhu Nityananda Chhau Nritya Samiti	Mangal Pramanik	Baligara	Purulia - 1
73	Basudebpur Bishhari Chhau Nritya Dal	Chakradhar Mahato	Basudebpur	Barabazar
74	<u>Padmashri Late. Gambhir Singh Mura Rural Welfare Society</u>	Kartik Singh Mura	Charida	Baghmundi
75	Palma Harijan Jankalyan Samiti Chhau Nritya Party	Babulal Sahis	Palma	Barabazar
76	Banjora Mahaprabhu Naba Biplab Sangha Chhau Nritya Party	Haradhan Sahis	Banjora	Barabazar
77	Bishri Namopara Biplabi Sangha Chhau Nritya Samiti	Rampada Majhi	Bishri, Namopara	Manbazar - 1
78	Manthor Mahamaya Chhau Nritya Samiti	Tapan Kumar Mahato	Manthor	Purulia - 2
79	Nalkupi Hansobahini Chhau Nritya Academy Party	Kamal Mahato	Nalkupi	Jhalda - 2
80	Kudlung Har Parvati Chhau Nritya Party	Tapan Kumar Mahato	Kudlung	Hura
81	Sidhu Kanhu Birsha Chhau Samiti	Shambhu Mahato	Jhoriardi	Arsha
82	Baro Rola Sib Durga Chhau Nritya Samiti	Dinabandhu Kumar	Boro Rola	Jhalda - 2
83	Balakdih Kargil Chhau Nritya Party	Bidhan Chandra Mahato	Balakdih	Puncha
83	Annai Shibananda Chhau Nritya Party	Atul Chandra Bauri	Annai	Purulia - 2

85	Birgram Mahabir Chhau Nritya Samiti	Dara Singh Majhi	Birgram	Bagmundi
86	Matkumar Shib Durga Chhau Academy	Rupchanda Kumar	Matkuma	Jhalda - 2
87	<u>Palma Shakti Sangha</u>	Giasuddin Ansari	Palma	Barabazar
88	Ma Kamala Chhau Nritya Samiti	Buddheswar Kumar	Marcha	Baghmundi
89	<u>Shib Durga Chhau Nritya Party</u>	Tapan Mahato	Kustaur	Purulia - 2
90	Matkuma Haragouri Chhau Academy	Sanatan Kumar	Matkuma	Jhalda - 2
91	Chhota Mukru Shib Shakti Chhau Dance Party	Nepal Mahato	Chhota Mukru	Barabazar
92	Bagdega (Nimdih) Bishari Chhau Nritya Party	Rabi Lochan Mahato	Bagdega	Manbazar - 1
93	Gyan Chandra Kumar Matkuma Chhau Academy	Gyan Chandra Kumar	Matkuma	Jhalda - 2
94	Manbhum Lok Sanskriti Nabarup Chatwar Chhau Nritya Dal	Biswanath Mahato	Haranjanga	Purulia - 2
95	Lagadih Bajrangbali Chhau Nritya Dal	Fulchand Mahato	Lagadih	Barabazar
96	Bamnia Namopara Binapani Chhau Samiti	Bhabataran Kumar	Bamunia	Jhalda - 2
97	Puriara Palli Seva Sangha Chhau Nritya Party	Hare Krishna Mahato	Puriara Palli	Barabazar
98	Jambad Pancha Mukhi Mahila Chhau Nritya Samiti (Female Troupe).	Aparna Mahato	Jambad	Purulia - 2
99	<u>Late. Rasu Sahis Baligara Kisan Chhau Nritya Samiti</u>	Nripen Sahis	Baligara	Purulia - 1

100	Late Rasu Sahis Baligara Krishna Chhau Nritya Samiti	Bishnu Mahato	Baligara	Purulia - 1
101	Chayadih Nabin Bharati Chhau Nritya Party	Ashari Mahato	Chayadih	Jhalda - 2
102	Ashpara Seva Jatna Chhau Prashikshan Kendra	Shambhunath Karmakar	Ashpara	Bandwan
103	Baraparashya Palli Mangal Chhau Nritya Party	Naba Kumar Mahato	Baraparashya	Bandwan
104	Chiruhatu Nityananda Chhau Nritya Party	Ajit Kumar	Chiruhatu	Jhalda - 2
105	Paglananda Club Chhau Dance Party	Dilip Kumar Mahato	Madhupur	Bandwan
106	Madhupur Netaji Sangha Chhau Nritya Samiti	Gurupada Mahato	Madhupur	Bandwan
107	Bamni Shri Gouranga Chhau Nritya Party	Avay Kumar Mahato	Bamni	Manbazar - 1
108	Bari Agragami Chhau Nritya Party	Ananda Mahato	Bari	Manbazar - 2
109	Kuriam Adivasi Chhau Nritya Party	Sunil Singh	Kuriam	Jhalda - 2
110	Ratiakoch Shishu Sangha Chhau Nritya Sampraday	Ghaltu Charan Singh	Ratiakoch	Manbazar - 2
111	Kudlung Naba Yubak Chhau Nritya Party	Anil Mahato	Kudlung	Hura
112	Metyala Model Chhau	Brihaspati Mahato	Metyala	Manbazar - 1
113	Kudagara Ram Krishna Chhau Nritya Dal	Panchanan Kumar	Kudagara	Arsha
114	Binapani Chhau Nritya Party	Gunadhar Mahato	Penchara	Manbazar - 2

115	Sindurpur Jewel Chhau Dance Samiti	Nityananda Mahato	Sindurpur	Manbazar - 1
116	Chakirban Kishalay Sangha Chhau Nritya Party	Trilochan Mahato	Chakirban	Purulia - 2
117	Ma Anandamayi Chhau Nritya Party	Ananda Mahato	Chirumarcha	Purulia - 2
118	Shamuk Gorla Adivasi Shib Shakti Chhau	Bibhuti Bhushan Mahato	Shamuk Gorla	Hura
119	Tilabani Paharia Ganesh Chhau Nritya Sanstha	Basudeb Mahato	Tilabani	Hura
120	D.C.T. Chhau Nritya Party	Partha Sarathi Mahato	Choupan	Manbazar - 2
121	Nathurdih Nabadiganta Chhau Nritya Samiti	Krishnapada Mahato	Nathurdih	Manbazar - 1
122	Tarapada Chhau Dance Academy	Tarapada Rajak	Sitalpur	Purulia - 2
123	Shiv Shakti Chhau Dance	Manohar Kumar	Rarangtar	Baghmundi
124	Majhidih Joy Siyaram Chhau Nritya Ada	Malur Kumar	Majhidih	Jhalda - 2
125	Shib Shakti Chhau Dance Academy	Jodharam Kumar	Majhidih	Jhalda - 2
126	Bhutam Ma Basanti Chhau Nritya Society	Birinchi Mahato	Bhutam	Puncha
127	Dabra Adivasi Chhau Nritya Samiti	Bikash Chandra Mahato	Dabra	Manbazar - 2
128	Shivshankar Chhau Nritya Samiti	Kiriti Kumar	Statjumahatu	Jhalda - 2
129	Tunta Naba Yubak Chhau Nritya Samiti	Bikash Mahato	Tunta	Puncha

130	Jilinglahar Bolbom Club Chhau Nritya Party	Gunadhar Kumar	Jilinglahar	Jhalda - 2
131	Satish Mahato Adivasi Kisan Chhau Academy	Krittibas Mahato	Sitalpur	Purulia - 2
132	Rural Develoment Kurmi Society Chhau Nritya Party	Rakesh Mahato	Hupri	Jhalda - 1
133	Patatiri Vivekananda Chhau Nritya Party	Sujit Kumar Mahato	Patatiri	Purulia - 1
134	Ma Basuli Chhau Nritya Party	Netai Bauri	Mohara, Bonbohal	Purulia - 2
135	Bhelaidih'r Adivasi Club	Dhananjay Munda	Bhelaidih	Arsha
136	Garaphusra Sabujsangha Kishore Chhau Nritya Samiti	Badal Chandra Mahato	Garaphusra	Purulia - 1
137	Shitalpur Tapashili Mahila Chhau Dal (Women's troupe with male troupe leader)	Swapan Kumar Mahato	Shitalpur	Purulia - 2

Selected Troupes (As indicated) –

1. Mitali Chhau Maldih (Sr. – 55).
2. Padmashree Late. Gambhir Singh Mura Welfare Society (Sr. – 74).
3. Palma Shakti Sangha (Sr. – 87).
4. Shib Durga Chhau Nritya Party (Sr. – 89).
5. Late. Rasu Sahis Baligara Kisan Chhau Nritya Samiti (Sr. – 99).

Annexure - 2

Guidelines for IDIs and FGDs

General Information

(For community elders, eminent artists, performers and audiences)

- Q.1. What is your name, age and gender?*
- Q.2. What is your educational background?*
- Q.3. What is your source of income?*
- Q.4. How many members are there in your family?*
- Q.5. What is your family income?*
- Q.6. What is your religion?*
- Q.7. Since which generation has your family been following this religion?*
- Q.8. What is your caste / community / tribe?*
- Q.9. Where do you reside within your village?*
- Q.10. Are you the recipient of any Govt. support scheme provided to marginalized communities?*
- Q.11. What is your place of origin?*

Note – The IDI (In-Depth Interview) / FGD (Focus Group Discussion) guidelines have been categorized into segments as per the objectives of this research (Chapter-1, section 1.6). However, the questions have been accessed and modified as per:

1. Each individual respondent.
2. Each respondent category.

Segment - 1

Objective –

Trace the evolution of Purulia Chhau in the context of socio-cultural, political, economic and religious life of the people.

Respondents -

- Community elders.
- Eminent artists.
- Key individuals associated with the history and culture of Purulia.

Note – IDIs to be conducted.

Questions

Part - 1

- RQ 1 - What is the context in which Purulia Chhau evolved?

Q1. Outline the origin and history of Purulia Chhau describing the major changes in the course of its evolution and what has influenced these.

Q2. What are the political factors that have contributed to the changes in Purulia Chhau and to what extent? (First get a subjective response). Then -

Q2.1. What were the traditional forms of political organization in Purulia?

Q2.2. Has political changes such as the implementation of the Panchayati Raj contributed?

Q2.3. How far have the govt initiatives in this regard helped in the sustainable development of Purulia Chhau?

Q2.4. Has the change from a medieval political system to the modern political system contributed to the changes?

Q2.5. Has election campaigning contributed to the changes?

Q2.6 Has the kings being replaced by the present political leaders of the region had an effect on Purulia Chhau?

Q2.7. Change in administrative services, provisions for Government services, change in the nature of government resources and incoming funds for development contributed to the changes? Explain.

Q3. *What are the Social factors that have contributed and to what extent? (First get a subjective response). Then -*

Q3.1 Has changes in 'marriage age' contributed?

Q3.2 Has Family structure (Joint to Nuclear etc.) contributed?

Q3.3 Has changes in Kinship, such as decreasing attendance at social events earlier attended by the entire community affected Purulia Chhau?

Q3.4 Has this affected the number of events and performances?

Q3.5 Has the social inclusion of women into the performances and audiences over the years, contributed to the changes?

Q3.6. Has the convergence Rural and Urban populations contributed to the changes?

Q4. *What are the Economic factors that have contributed to the changes in Purulia Chhau and to what extent? (First get a subjective response). Then -*

Q4.1. Has liberalization and globalization contributed over the years?

Q4.2. Has the arrival of technology contributed?

Q4.2.1. Has the influence social media and digital media contributed to the evolution?

Q4.3. As the nature of the job contributes to time, What economic activities were the people of the region engaged in? (Temporal Mapping)

Q4.3.1. Was there adequate free time?

Q4.3.2. Has there been an increase or decrease in leisure time?

Q4.3.3. Has this contributed?

Q4.4. Was the performances providing livelihood earlier?

Q4.5 Can it be considered as a commercially viable thing at present?

Q4.6. Has the museumization of tribal culture contributed to monetary incentives and commercial viability for their product?

Q4.6.1. Has this Monetization and commercialization contributed to the changes?

Q5. *What are the Cultural factors that have contributed to the changes in Purulia Chhau and to what extent? (First get a subjective response). Then -*

Q5.1. Has urban culture influenced Purulia Chhau? How?

Q5.2. Has the dominance of mainstream Bengali culture upon tribal culture impacted Purulia Chhau?

Q6. *What are the Religious factors that have contributed to the changes in Purulia Chhau and to what extent? (First get a subjective response). Then -*

Q6.1. Has the framing of the narratives been influenced by the Hinduism based proselytization efforts of the rulers of Baghmundi?

Q6.2. Was Purulia Chhau a religious ritual even before the Baghmundi rulers initiated its royal patronage?

Q6.3. Did the rulers of Baghmundi implement the religious narratives or were these existent even before their intervention into Purulia Chhau?

Q6.4. Did the changing context of Purulia Chhau in terms of accommodating a religious identity further establish it?

Q6.5. Did the popularity of Purulia Chhau increase because of its religious identity?

Q6.6. Did the masks representing Gods and Goddesses ensure that the audiences revered and worshipped their presence even at the performances?

Q6.7. Which Gods and Goddesses are revered the most and why?

Q6.8. Are the demon characters feared by the people?

Q6.9. Do the audiences derive a sense of religious fulfillment and spiritual catharsis from these performances?

Q6.10. Are the emerging non-religious narratives depreciating the value of Purulia Chhau amongst the local audiences?

Q7. *What are the other factors that have contributed to the changes in Purulia Chhau and to what extent? (First get a subjective response). Then -*

Q7.1. Has the framing of new laws contributed to the changes?

Q7.2. Was Animal sacrifice ever a part of the ritual?

Q7.3. Did the replacement of traditional food and drinks with present day innovations have an impact?

Q7.4. Did the changing environmental factors have an impact?

Q7.5. Did the use of Natural colors be replaced by artificial colors? Why?

Q7.6. Did the use of Props at the performances change?

Q7.6.1 Which are the new innovations?

Q7.6.2 What was replaced?

Q7.7. Did the use of Lighting at the performances change?

Q7.7.1. Which are the new innovations?

Q7.7.2. What was replaced?

Q7.8. Did the use of Musical instruments at the performances change?

Q7.8.1. Which are the new innovations?

Q7.8.2. What was replaced?

RQ 2 - How has the changing social-cultural milieu influenced Purulia Chhau?

Based on analysis of the information derived from Q2. and Q4.

RQ 3 - What economic activities revolve around it and what role does it play in the area?

Based on analysis of the information derived from Q3.

RQ 4 - How much is Purulia Chhau central to the religious life of the people?

Based on an analysis of the information derived from Q5.

RQ 5 - What has ensured its sustenance despite the emergence of modern media technologies?

Based on an analysis of the information derived from Q1-Q6.

RQ 6 - Has religion played an important role in this?

Based on an analysis of the information derived from Q5.

Part - 2

- **RQ 7 - Which are the innovations, interpolations and adaptations, adopted in contemporary times?**

Q1. What are the new innovations in Purulia Chhau that have emerged?

Q2. Where were each of these innovations adopted from?

Q3. Why were these adopted?

Q4. What has influenced this?

- **RQ 8 - What are the factors that have influenced these innovations?**

Q1. What are the economic negotiations that have influenced these innovations? Which ones?

Q2. What are the political negotiations that have influenced these innovations? Which ones?

Q3. What are the social negotiations that have influenced these innovations? Which ones?

Q4. What are the cultural negotiations that have influenced these innovations? Which ones?

Q5. What are the religious negotiations that have influenced these innovations? Which ones?

- **RQ 9 - How far have the troupes deviated from the primordial form?**

- Q1. What was Purulia Chhau like before?*
- Q2. How would you describe Purulia Chhau at present?*
- Q3. How is it different?*
- Q4 Which differences are most striking?*
- Q5. Has the overall quality of Purulia Chhau depreciated or developed?
Explain further.*
- Q6. What is the present value of Purulia Chhau compared to its primordial form? Explain.*

- **RQ 10 - How far does religion surface even in these secular forms of Purulia Chhau?**

- Q1. Is religion still one of the major contributors towards the performances?*
- Q2. Has the role of religion in Purulia Chhau depreciated compared to before?*
- Q3. Do religious narratives still form the bedrock of the performances?*
- Q4. Is the impact of the religious narratives more than the commercial narratives?*

- **RQ 11 - Was there a conscious effort to popularize Hindu religious belief through this platform? (Thematic response analysis)**

- Q1. Yes or No?*
- Q2. If Yes why*

- **RQ 12 - What was the role of the royal family of Baghmundi, in this effort?**

- Q1. What were the initiatives taken by the royal family of Baghmundi to popularize Purulia Chhau?*
- Q2. What were their religious beliefs?*
- Q3. Did Purulia Chhau receive any special patronage during any of the ruler's reign?*
- Q4. Describe the historical incidents in the the context of the Royal family and Purulia Chhau.*

Segment – 2

Objective –

Elicit the religious meaning latent in Purulia Chhau by examining the composite signification system (effective use of masks, narratives, characters, color, iconography, kinesics, figurative language, props, costumes and music) as a combined communication process.

*Note – The primary method adopted to achieve this objective was - semiotics based analysis of the performances, as a text. The performances were observed and documented in the forms of videos (audio-visual) and photos, for consequent analysis. But then, to get an insight into the encoder's perspective, IDIs and FGDs of the members of **5 troupes** (selected through Purposive sampling) were conducted as follows.*

Respondents –

- Troupe leaders (*Dala Neta*).
- Script / Narrative developers.
- Mask makers and Costume Designers.
- Choreographers.
- Actors.
- Narrators and Musicians.

Note – IDIs of the above-mentioned individuals and FGDs of each entire troupe to be conducted.

Questions

- RQ 1 - How does the composition and performance of Purulia Chhau represent local religious contexts?

- Q1. Where do you draw inspiration from when you perform?*
- Q2. What is the role of religion in your performance?*
- Q3. Is it spiritually fulfilling to perform?*
- Q4. Is it a religious ritual for you? Why?*
- Q5. Which are the characters that you revere the most and why?*
- Q6. Do you feel you are blessed as you perform this religious ritual (performance)?*
- Q7. Do you feel empowered or that the energy of God has entered within you when you wear a mask representing a God or Goddess?*
- Q8. As a man, how does it feel to wear a mask that depicts a Goddess?*
- Q9. How religious are you on a scale of 1 to 5? Explain your personal belief.*
- Q10. Where did you learn to perform Purulia Chhau?*
- Q11. What inspired you to become a Purulia Chhau performer?*

- RQ 2 - What is the framework of its composite structure?

- Q1. What are the key elements?*
- Q2. What are the logistics that must be considered?*
- Q3. How do these elements compliment each other?*
- Q4. What is the importance of each element?*
- Q5. How does each element contribute?*
- Q6. Explain their interdependency.*
- Q7. List the elements in a priority based order.*

- RQ 3 - How are the religious messages embedded into it through masks, narratives, characters, iconography, kinesics, figurative language, color, props, costumes, and music?

- Q1. Describe each mask used in the performances.*
- Q2. Describe each narrative used in the performances. (Counter questions as per field output)*

Q3. Describe each character depicted in the performances. (Counter questions as per field output)

Q4. Describe the iconography used in the performances.

Q5. Describe the kinesics of each character separately and in groups, as per the performances. (Counter questions as per field output)

Q6. Describe the figurative language in the announcements within the performances and what meaning is intended towards through these?

Q7. Describe the color categories in regards to the masks and costumes, as per the characters in the performances and what is signified through them.

Q8. Describe each prop used in the performances.

Q9. Describe each costume used in the performances.

Q10 How does music enhance its religious value? Explain.

- **RQ 4 - How does the combination of these signifiers contribute towards meaning?**

Q1. What is the primary message that you try to convey through the performances?

Q2. Which are the Rasas being depicted?

Q3. How do you specifically depict each?

Q4. How are they composed using the performance elements?

Q5. Which non-verbal actions are critical in this regard?

- **RQ 5 -What are the relationships between these signifiers? For example - What is the significance of each mask representing gods, demons and anthropomorphic characters?**

Q1. How do the masks compliment the costumes?

Q2. Are there any specific strategies in this regard? Explain.

Q3. What is the relationship between each element of Purulia Chhau? Explain.

Q4. How do these elements compliment each other?

Q5. Are there any traditional directives that are followed to enhance the performances?

Q6. Describe the signification system of each character. (masks, narratives, characters, iconography, kinesics, figurative language, color, props, costumes, and music)

Q7. Describe the signification system of each narrative? (masks, narratives, characters, iconography, kinesics, figurative language, color, props, costumes, and music)

- RQ 6 - What is the representative role of each character?

Q1. Describe the role of each character in the context of everyday life.

Q2. Do you relate to any of these characters in your everyday life?

Q3. Who would you consider to be evil amongst the characters? Why?

Q4. Connect the role of each character to the people in your life.

- RQ 7 - What colors are used to represent the demons, and why?

Q1. Where do these color combinations originate from?

Q2. Are there any specific directions in terms of colors to be used?

Q3. Who has established these and why?

Q4. Would you call this color-coding? Explain.

Q5. How do you use color to invoke emotions amongst the audiences?

Q6. Which color is meant to invoke which emotion?

- RQ 8 - How is the music used to convey emotions?

Q1. Describe each melody and musical rhythm used, its dynamics and the emotion associated with the variations during the performances.

Q2. Which are the specific musical melodies and rhythm as per each narrative and why? Explain

Q3. Which are the musical instruments used and since when?

Q4. Has the music of Purulia Chhau changed over time? Explain.

Q5. Which are the new instruments used and how do they contribute/enhance the performances?

Segment – 3

Objective –

Examine the meanings that the local community draws from the Purulia Chhau performances and how they employ this cultural resource to interpret their everyday life and struggles.

Respondents –

- Audiences at the performance venue.
- Community elders.

Note – FDIs of the audiences at the performance venue and IDIs of the community elders to be conducted.

Questions

- **RQ1 - Is there a sense of religious fulfillment after watching the performances? (Sentiment Analysis)**

Q1. What was your reason for attending? Religious or Entertainment or Both?

Q2. Watching so many Gods and Goddesses emerge amongst us, how do you feel?

Q3. Do you think you have been blessed by attending this event?

Q4. Did you pray?

Q5. Do you think your prayers were heard?

- **RQ 2 - Do these performances answer the basic religious questions of the natives?**

Q1. What is religion to you?

Q2. What did you learn in regards to God from this performance?

Q3. What did you learn in regards to Evil forces from this performance?

Q4. Will you implement any message that you received today into your daily life?

Q5. Was there any spiritual realization that you achieved from the performance today?

- **RQ 3 - How are the performances interpreted and understood by the natives?**

Q1. What moral did you derive from the Narrative 1, presented by the troupe?

Q2. What moral did you derive from Narrative 2, presented by the troupe?

Q3. What moral did you derive from Narrative3, presented by the troupe?

Q4. What moral did you derive from Narrative 4, presented by the troupe?

Q5. Narrative based questions emerging in the field based on the performance such as – What lead to Raavan's defeat? Did he deserve to die? Can he be considered evil or was he a victim of circumstance? Etc.

- **RQ 4 - Do they experience a sense of catharsis from these performances?**

Q1. Did you derive emotional support from the performances?

Q2. Did it provide an avenue for you to vent out your repressed emotions and negativity through this medium?

Q3. If yes, did the presence of Gods and Goddesses at these performances contribute to this?

Q4. Did the underlying narrative establishing the victory of good over evil provide a sense of hope?

Q5. Did the religious narrative being showcased provide a plan or a way out of misery in your real life?

Q6. Where were the repressed emotions originating? Categories - Poverty, Marginalization, Violence and Psychological.

- **RQ 5 - Does it influence their behavior in social life?**

Q1. Have you adopted any measure deriving an idea from these performances?

Q2. How do interpret and apply the morals that you derive from these performances, into your everyday life?

Q3. Has the performances had an impact on you real life? Explain.

Q4. Do you derive psychological support from these performances?

Q5. How has it affected your daily life?

- **RQ 6 - What influences their interpretation and understanding?**

Q1. How does the general categories mentioned in Section 1 influence their interpretation and understanding?

Q2. Since which ancestral generation is your family following this religion?

Q3. How religious are you on a scale of 1-5?

Q4. How far are you aware of the meta-narratives of Hinduism?

Q5. Did the rendition of the narratives performed by the troupe adequately adhere to meta-narratives prescribed by the Vedas?

Q6. Counter questions – But then ‘Raavan’ has not been portrayed as totally evil? Isn’t he represented as an antagonist in the meta-narratives of Hinduism? How come not so here?

Q7. Do you connect more to ‘Raavan’ than you do to Ram?

Q8. Describe any one of the narratives showcased today in its original/Vedic form.

Q9. How far it is adhering to the original narrative?

- **RQ 7 - Which are the most popular characters and why?**

Q1. Who is your favorite character?

Q2. Why?

Q3. If the character chosen is negative, do you think this character has been unjustly portrayed in the Vedic narratives?

Q4. If yes, why?

- **RQ 8 - Which are the most popular narratives and why?**

Q1. Which was your favorite narrative amongst those performed today?

Q2. Why did you choose this narrative over the other options?

Q3. Does it somehow connect to your daily life?

Q4. Do any of the other narratives connect to your daily life?

- **RQ 9** - How do they interpret these narratives and their meanings in their everyday life?

Q1. Will you implement any of the lessons learnt from today's performance, in your everyday?

Q2. To be identified through observation and analysis of IDIs & FGDs.

- **RQ 10** - What are the various connotations?

To be identified through analysis of IDIs & FGD.

- **RQ 11** - What is the pattern of their understanding?

To be identified through analysis of IDIs & FGD.

- **RQ 12** - How do they react to the performances at the venue?

To be identified through observation and analysis of IDIs & FGDs.

- **RQ 12** - How do they interpret their daily life and struggles from the resources drawn from Purulia Chhau?

Q.1. Do you get motivation to face hardships?

Q.2. Does it enhance your pleasure?

Q.3. Did it reduce your trauma? If yes, explain.

Also to be identified through observation and analysis of IDIs & FGDs.

- **RQ 13** - Do these interpretations differ in terms of gender and sub-tribal communities?

To be identified through analysis of IDIs & FGDs.

- **RQ 14** - Do these interpretations differ in terms of the categories mentioned in the general information section?

To be identified through analysis of IDIs & FGDs.

- **RQ 15** -Do audiences connect more with the religious narratives than with non-religious themes?

Q1. Which was your favorite performance? Why?

Q2. How do you like the modern day non-religious narratives?

Q3. Which narratives do you prefer to experience? Why?

Q4. Do you think the new non-religious narratives can replace the religious ones? Explain.

- **RQ 16** - How do the natives perceive commercialized innovations?

Q1. Do you feel the commercialization of Purulia Chhau is justified? Explain.

Q2. Do you think the commercialization can contribute towards its existence? Explain.

Q3. Will you allow Purulia Chhau, a ritualistic heritage, to become a commercial performance for enjoyment?

Q4. How do you intend to preserve it?

Q5. What are the things about Purulia Chhau that you don't like? Why?

Segment – 4

Objective –

Examine the role of Purulia Chhau, in the negotiations between native religion and mainstream Hinduism.

Respondents -

- Community elders
- Eminent artists
- Key individuals associated with the history and culture of Purulia.

Note – IDIs to be conducted.

Questions

- **RQ 1 - Has Purulia Chhau influenced the tribal community to embrace Hinduism?**

Q1. What was the influence of Purulia Chhau on the religious belief of the natives?

Q2. Were they influenced by the Hinduism based narratives being showcased through these performances? Explain.

Q3. Did it have a major impact on their everyday life?

Q4. Did it institutionalize their faith into a Hinduism based structure?

Q5. Did Purulia Chhau affect the moral values and the concept of God, amongst the natives? Explain.

Q6. Given that the natives are mostly Hindus at present, since when did they start embracing Hinduism? Why?

- **RQ 2 - How has the indigenous religion of the tribal community accommodated the grand narratives of the Hindu mythologies?**

Q1. Which are the indigenous elements that have been accommodated?

Q2. Which are the elements that are based on Hinduism?

Q3. Which elements are overlapping?

Q4. Which of the classical characters that have had a role reversal? How?

Q5. What was their role according to the meta-narratives of Hinduism?

Q6. What are the indigenous concepts that have effected this?

(Also to be identified based on observation and the analysis of the IDIs and FGDs).

- **RQ 3 - Is there a significant difference between the grand narratives of Hindu mythologies and those of the tribal? If yes, how and why?**

(To be identified based on observation and the analysis of the classical meta-narratives of Hinduism and also the insights from the IDIs of the performers).

- **RQ 4 - Does the folk media form resist the grand narratives and thereby contribute to rescuing the religious beliefs and myths of the tribal?**

Q1. Was there a conscious effort to accommodate indigenous elements into the narratives? Why?

Q2. Which are the parts in the grand narratives of Hinduism that have been omitted or replaced? Why?

Q3. Has this made Purulia Chhau more acceptable to the people?

Q4. Has this negotiation between two religious structures provided a support system towards the much lesser indigenous participant?

Q5. Has the confluence of the two religions institutionalized the indigenous religious values altogether? Explain.

Q6. Purulia Chhau is a conduit for the negotiations and confluence between native religion and mainstream Hinduism. Explain.

- **RQ 5 - Does Purulia Chhau resist the marginalization and demonization of the community? If yes, how?**

Q1. Do the modified religious narrative provide a sense of inclusion for the marginalized class of people? Explain.

Q2. Do instances of hero worship towards 'Raavana' considered to be the primary antagonist in other mainstream art forms, provide a sense of belonging? Explain.

Q3. Does the humane context of depiction of the classical antagonists inspire the tribal community who themselves have been demonized by the /established social strata?

Q4. Is the marginalization of the tribals into the periphery a major reason for the popularity of Purulia Chhau, a ritual that is accommodative of demons as misunderstood warriors?

Remarks: