

**STATE PATRONAGE, TEXTUAL REPRESENTATIONS AND  
PERFORMING ARTISTES: THE CHHAU DANCE OF PURULIA**

*Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the award of the degree of*

**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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### Declaration

I declare that the dissertation entitled, **State Patronage, Textual Representations and Performing Artistes: The Chhau Dance of Purulia** submitted by me in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy from Jawaharlal Nehru University is my own work. The dissertation has not been submitted for any other degree of this University or any other University.

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*Dedicated to*  
*Professor M.S.S. Pandian And My Mother*

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**Figure 1: Mahishasuramardini in Purulia Chhau<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> John Arden, *The Chhau Dancers of Purulia*, *The Drama Review: TDR*, Vol. 15, No. 2, Theatre in Asia (Spring,

## Introduction

*About midnight the drummers came into the dancing area and began to play. Two of them manhandled enormous kettledrums about three feet in diameter. Three of them carried smaller cylindrical drums which were slung by cords from their necks and beaten at both ends. One musician played a wind instrument a little like an oboe -it made a high wailing noise, a bagpipe sort of noise. The kettledrums were placed on the ground and beaten with thick billets of wood. The cylinder-drummers stalked about the dancing area, up and down and round and round, playing a quicker and lighter rhythm as against the kettle-drummers' Prussian thunder.... Their movements behind their drums became a furious dance, they did indeed sweat, their bare feet pounded the dust, their fingers on the drumskins moved so fast one could hardly see them move. Then suddenly, from out of the darkness, gleaming and jingling in white and silver and black, Ganesha was made manifest... As danced in the Chhau he is a small boy wearing a suit of black jacket and trousers, all spangled with sequins and embroidery, bare feet, bells around his ankles, and a huge mask entirely covering his head and shoulders... There was nothing human about him at all. He was-to an audience already prepared by deep belief and the music of the drums-an incarnate deity who was gracing their village by his presence...it seemed of no importance that everyone had observed the boy who danced him walk into the street three hours earlier carrying the mask and then drink a glass of tea before getting into his costume.<sup>2</sup>*

Forty five years have passed since John Arden, the well-known British playwright's rendezvous happened with Purulia Chhau. Back then in 1970, Purulia Chhau was only three years old after its 'discovery' by Ashutosh Bhattacharya, a Calcutta-based folklorist. Need of the hour, hence, was to promote the form in all possible ways. So, on this particular occasion, Arden recalls, Bhattacharya had invited scholars and artists from Denmark, United States of America and Britain, including an UNESCO Representative from Paris who were "well furnished with tape recorders, flash cameras, and various other apparatus including copious notebooks" to record and write about the form. It is during this performance, the details of which Arden has provided with graphic details, he noticed how in this project of promoting a form, a subtle cultural appropriation was in process. He states that while researchers might

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1971),p.65.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.71.

gain from such 'exotic' and 'spectacular' performances, this prejudiced process of revival could, in no circumstances, alleviate the abject poverty and exploitation the performers were subjected to. Without restoring their socio-economic condition, such projects of revival in his opinion were doomed to failure. In turn, the performance would then only be reduced to a 'spectacle' serving the needs of the academicians and not developing the performance as a whole.

Forty five years later, the situation much remains the same. It is true that in these past years, Purulia Chhau has gained worldwide acclaim. At present there are more than 100 troupes in the Purulia district alone. The performers do not have to walk fifty miles to perform at a certain venue, as had happened in Arden's times. Owing to increased frequency of the performances, the troupes now have fixed remuneration which is quoted by the manager of the troupe to the inviters. Overall, performance has assumed a professional character and has improved in material resources. Despite these improvements, there is not a single Chhau performer who can solely earn his living through performance alone. Developments were initiated but the story of exploitation and poverty, which was first penned down by Arden, continues. Owing to the limited scope, increased competition and lack of financial assistance, the performers still lurk in the dark while the performance continues to receive scholarly attention.

It is from here that I begin my story on the Purulia Chhau. The Chhau dance of Purulia, one of the three major styles of Chhau viz. Seraikella, Mayurbhanj and Purulia itself, hails from the district of Purulia of the state of West Bengal. Being intimately connected to the spring festival of the *Chaitra Parab* (festival in the Bengali month of Chaitra), Chhau enacts episodes from the epics such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* and also local folklore. Its vocabulary of movement includes mock combat techniques, stylized gaits of birds and animals and also movements modelled on the chores of village housewives. The dance is performed at night in an open space to traditional and folk *Jhumur*<sup>3</sup> melodies, the rhythm being created by different local instruments like *Dhol* (Tom-tom), *Dhumsa* (Kettle-drum), *Chadchadi* and *Mahuri*.

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<sup>3</sup> Traditional lyrical poems based on day-to-day events



**Figure 2: Chhau performance**

It was from the second half of the 1960s that Ashutosh Bhattacharya, a renowned Calcutta-based folklorist, first started writing about the Purulia Chhau widely, representing it as a rich tradition of the state of West Bengal. Since then, Purulia Chhau had featured in several writings both inside and outside Purulia. As discourses were formed around it, Purulia Chhau became part of broader academic debates regarding its origin, authenticity and identity, which involved different representations addressed to different audiences. The representations have not been limited to academic discourses only, but have also been devised through state patronage as well, stretching to government publications and documentaries. How effective were such initiatives in preserving and promoting a dance form which has suffered in ignorance for along time? Do these endeavours pave the way for a better future for both the form and its practitioners?

These are the question with which this dissertation is initiated. And in the course of this process, I argue that despite such individual and state initiatives, both the performers as well as the form of Purulia Chhau remained marginalized in the discourses constituted on and

around them. Hence, the attempt here is to provide an account of the marginalization of the dance form through the three prisms of state patronage, textual representations and performer's narrative, following its famed 'discovery' in the late 1960s. Before delving into the details of the structure of the dissertation, I would like to situate my work within the vast array of works on the ethnographic, anthropological and sociological aspects of dance.

### **An Historiographical Survey of Studying Dance**

A number of historical, ethnographic and anthropological studies have shown how socio-political identities are formed and negotiated through dance in complex ways across class, ethnic and national lines.

#### **Dance as a marker of identity**

Dance as an expression of relations of power and protest, resistance and complicity and identity formation has been the subject of a number of historical, ethnographic, and anthropological studies.<sup>4</sup> J.C. Desmond's work, for example, focuses on how social identities are formed and negotiated through bodily movements.<sup>5</sup> Challenging the dominant methodology of relying mainly on textual sources in cultural studies, Desmond emphasizes on the importance of kinesthetic experience, i.e. movements read as text in situating dance practices within historical contexts and subsequently, showing how social identities are constructed and negotiated through such movements.<sup>6</sup>

Since dance styles and performance practices are both symptomatic and constitutive of social relations, tracing the genealogy of dance styles and their spread from one group to another can help uncover shifting ideologies with regard to identities such as race, gender,

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<sup>4</sup> Susan A.Reed 'The Politics and Poetics of Dance', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Volume 27, October 1998, p.505.

<sup>5</sup> J.C. Desmond, 'Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies', *Cultural Critique* No. 26 (Winter, 1993-1994), pp. 33-63.

<sup>6</sup> To quote Desmond,

The concept of dance and movements change and transmit itself from one form to another in a certain historical circumstance. As a result a certain form or movement which is acceptable to a certain group of people might not be acceptable to the others. For example, the waltz was regarded as too sexually dangerous for "respectable" women in Europe and North America when it was first introduced in the nineteenth century. Some books for women even claimed waltzing could lead to prostitution. Moreover, movements also helped in inscribing certain class values and more often than not gender hierarchy. As a result, social relations are both enacted and produced through the body, and not merely inscribed upon it. *Ibid.*, p.36.

class and nationality. In most cases, it is seen that dance forms originating in lower class or subordinated populations witness 'upward mobility' by means of being 'refined' and often desexualized.<sup>7</sup> This is a two way process. When a dance form gets appropriated, certain elements of the 'hegemonized' side also get incorporated in the practice as well.<sup>8</sup> Desmond illustrates,

For example, appropriation does not always take the form of the hegemonic groups "borrowing" from subordinated groups. The borrowing and consequent refashioning goes both ways. To take just one example, the 'Cakewalk,' a strutting couples' dance performed by African Americans during the slavery era, is thought to have been based on a mimicry of European social dance forms, where (heterosexual) couples dancing was prevalent, as opposed to the separate-sex dance traditions of West Africa. The meanings of the movement lexicons change when transported into the adopting group. While the notion of 'appropriation' may signal the transfer of source material from one group to another, it doesn't account for the changes in performance style and ideological meaning that accompany the transfer. Concepts of hybridity or syncretism more adequately describe the complex interactions among ideology, cultural forms, and power differentials that are manifest in such transfers.<sup>9</sup>

#### Dance as Resistance: The Colonial Encounter

There had been debates and discussions on the relationship between colonialism and native culture, demonstrating the importance of dance in the 'civilizing' process, the control and regulation of 'disorderly' practices, and the profound reconfigurations of both local and European culture.<sup>10</sup> While the European powers often exercised a hegemonic control over the colonies as shown by F. Cooper and A. Stoler, the categories used by the colonizers to justify and ensure their continued domination over the subject populations were contested and underwent continuous redefinition. The basic tension lay on the 'other'-ness of the colonized person as a result of which, colonial states pursued a "civilizing mission or...they tried to

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<sup>7</sup> Often the so-called desexualization of a dance form as it crosses class or racial boundaries, involves changes in body usage. Desmond argues that

...the usage of the pelvis (less percussive thrusting, undulation, or rotation for instance) and the configurations of male and female partnering are cases in point. For example, the closeness of the embrace may be loosened or the opening of the legs may be lessened. In analyzing these changes, we can understand what aspects of movements are tagged as too 'sexy', 'Latin' or 'low class' by the appropriating group. Of course, the same meaning may not at all be attached to the original movements by dancers in the community that developed the style. Ibid., pp.39-40.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p.41.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.,pp.40-41.

<sup>10</sup> N.B.Dirks, 'Introduction', *Colonialism and Culture*, eds. N.B Dirks and Ann Arbor (University of Michigan Press, 1992) pp. 1-25.



convert the colonized people into disciplined agriculturalists or workers and obedient subjects of a bureaucratic state.”<sup>11</sup> As a result, in the context of colonial encounters with native cultures, the colonial administrators often perceived indigenous dance practices as both a political and a moral threat to the hegemonizing objective of colonial regimes.<sup>12</sup> The colonial agents and missionaries often viewed local dances as excessively erotic; and either encouraged reform or enforced bans on them.<sup>13</sup> In Malawi, for example, the practice of Nyau dance posed a genuine threat of political resistance or rebellion against colonial rulers as slave masters.<sup>14</sup>

K.Hazard-Gordon’s analysis of dance in slave plantations in North America shows that while attitude towards and regulations of plantation dance varied across time and region, it was very often perceived as a significant threat.<sup>15</sup> In some states, legislations banning dance and drumming were imposed as dances came to be seen as likely sites for plotting insurrections or the occasions for the insurrections themselves.<sup>16</sup>

On a different note, D.A. Poole’s analysis of Andean ritual dance focuses on the complex ways in which the ‘convergence of Spanish Catholic and Andean conceptions of dance as “devotion” allowed the dance to be sustained over centuries.’<sup>17</sup> While the Andean dance was forced to work within the space of Catholicism and the Church (where it was largely conceptualized as an acceptable devotional practice akin to Christian church dances), for the Andeans the dance managed to retain much of its significance as a possible way of gaining individual status and power.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, S.R. Udall’s analysis of the impact of Euro-American image makers (photographers, painters and illustrators) of Hopi snake dance traditions explores the “transformative and intrusive aspects of colonial (and postcolonial)

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<sup>11</sup> F.Cooper and A.L.Stoler, ‘Introduction Tensions of Empire: Colonial Control and Visions of Rule’, *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Nov., 1989),p.610.

<sup>12</sup> Reed (1998), p.506.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. In the Indian context, see Lakshmi Subramanian, ‘The Master, Muse and the Nation: The New Cultural Project and the Reification of Colonial Modernity in India’, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*,2000, 23:2, 1-32.

<sup>14</sup> For details see, D. Kaspin, ‘Chewa Visions and Revisions of Power: Transformations of the Nyau Dance in Central Malawi’, in Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff,eds. *Modernity and Its Malcontents*, (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993), pp. 34-57.

<sup>15</sup> Reed (1998),p.506.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> “Taking the dance into the present, Poole argues that, like the colonial Spanish, some contemporary outsider observers (mis)read the dance within their own interpretive schemes, viewing the dance as a symbol of an essentialized Andean identity.” Ibid.pp.101-2.

visual representations on ritual practice.”<sup>19</sup> In similar vein and another instance, R.Scechner explored how the representations of Javanese performances by the Dutch established normative expectations for traditional performances perpetuating colonial thinking by valorizing one version of performance at the cost of the others.<sup>20</sup>

### Dance and Nationalism

By the nineteenth century, dance and music have emerged as potent symbols of identity for ethnic groups and nations worldwide.<sup>21</sup> G. Strauss’ study examines the ideological reasons for the adoption of ballet during China’s Cultural Revolution.<sup>22</sup> Through his studies on the Cuban Rumba, Y.P.Daniel shows how a national dance form was selected through seeking connection to the community of the lower-class, dark-skinned workers of Cuba.<sup>23</sup> Although there were two other legitimate contenders for the position v.i.z. ‘the conga’ and ‘the son’, the rumba form of dance was selected by the government because it was viewed as more “closely supporting the ideals of a socialist, egalitarian state, and also it is identified with the Africa-derived aspects of Cuban culture.”<sup>24</sup>

In Ireland, the authoritarian approach of the nation-state towards dance is evident in the regulations of the Gaelic League’s Irish Dancing Commission, as analysed by Meyer, which controlled virtually every aspect of Irish dance.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the domestication and regulation of a ritual dance form is exemplified in Ramsey’s study of the relationship between nationalism, Vodou and tourism in Haiti during the 1930s to the 1950s.<sup>26</sup> The attempts at state control over dance were extraordinary, in this case. In 1949, for example, when Jean-Lean Destine, Haiti’s premier dancer, was asked to organize a national folklore troupe, state ethnologists attended his performances every night to monitor the representations of Haitian identity.<sup>27</sup>

Dance as national symbol is also illustrated in T. Shapiro’s studies of Cambodian court dance in contemporary refugee communities.<sup>28</sup> Refugee Cambodian dancers are seen as

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.507.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.508.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.,p.511.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. pp.50-7.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.,p.512.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.pp.512-13.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.,p.513.

emblems of the Cambodian nation as it existed prior to the Khmer Rouge, and the elaborate court dance form, with over 4,500 gestures and postures, are sustained by Cambodians for serving as a link with a past from which they have been severed.<sup>29</sup> During the brutal repressions of Pol Pot during which scores of dancers and other artists were killed, dancers went undercover. However, despite such repression, the dancers managed to keep the dance alive by practicing the gestures and movements in the darkness of night. It is hence hardly surprising that after the devastations of Cambodian culture by the Khmer Rouge, the court dance traditions came to be represented for all that was lost.<sup>30</sup>

The appropriation of certain practices as the national tradition has its corresponding effects on the communities of original practitioners. S.A. Reed's ethnographic studies of the Kandyan dance of Sri Lanka<sup>31</sup> focused on the central role of traditional ritual dancers in the recontextualization of dance from a specialized ritual practice to a popular secular form. Like the process of the revival of *Bharatanatyam* in India, the Kandyan dance in Sri Lanka also went through the process of revitalization and sanitization.<sup>32</sup> As a certain local form of a particular community i.e. the Beravas, came to represent the identity of the majority community of the Sinhalese, the state had to sufficiently 'gentrify' the art form in order to present it as the national culture. The process included a gradual transfer of the guardianship of authenticity to the upper caste elites, getting rid of the rural and 'rustic' elements of the community out of the dancing repertoire, and associating the revival with modernity and development. As a result, the same community of the Beravas, later on, looked down upon their own ancestors and their way of practicing the art form as something inauthentic and derogatory. So in order to gain the acknowledgement of national identity, it had to repudiate its own history.<sup>33</sup>

### The Indian Context

Almost the same process was repeated in the context of the revival of neo-classical dance forms in the twentieth century India. This process of revival, which started with the transformation of *Sadir* i.e. temple dance into *Bharatanatyam*, was the product of the requirements of the nationalist phase in the early twentieth century. In the quest for defining the national 'self', dance provided a contentious site for complicating the interaction of the

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p.213.

<sup>31</sup> S.A.Reed, 'Performing Respectability: The Beravā, Middle-Class Nationalism, and the Classicization of Kandyan Dance in Sri Lanka', *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (May, 2002), pp. 246-277.

<sup>32</sup> Reed (2002), pp.255-61.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

nationalist discourse with the colonial one. As the distinction between public/material and private/spiritual distinction was taking shape, Indian temple dance was claimed to represent the inner spiritual domain of the nationalist imagination -- a domain which should be protected from the encroachment of colonialism of any sorts.<sup>34</sup> No doubt, the need for the revival was part of the modernizing project of the day. But, at the same time, it needed validation from tradition as well—the nuances of which left its mark on the formation of historiography and history of the Indian dance.

#### Foundation of the 'Indian' dance: The Revival Project

Extensive research on dance under colonial rule in India has been done, specifically on the *Devadasi/ Sadir* system—a prevalent practice of temple dance in the southern and eastern parts of India. Quite a number of scholarly works across the disciplines of sociology, anthropology and cultural studies have been done on the nature and functioning of the system and its decline and demise under the colonial rule in India. Following the colonial denunciation of the Devadasi system as a degrading practice, both the reformist and the revivalist section of the nationalist intelligentsia demanded either the total abolition of the system or a revival of the dance form by taking it away from the original practitioners. As a result, by the mid-1930s, the dance moved away from the realm of devadasis to the custody of the upper-classes and upper-castes. With the passing of the 'Devadasi Abolition Act' in 1947, the system gradually dies out.

Avanthi Meduri's study of the Devadasi tradition in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries shows the ways in which identities of indigenous dancers shifted as they were constituted in the discourses of colonialism, nationalism and orientalism. By tracing the transfiguration of the devadasi from her pre-colonial past as the temple ritual dancer to her degraded status in the nineteenth century as temple prostitute, Meduri demonstrates how the devadasis became implicated in the larger debates about sexuality, womanhood and nation.<sup>35</sup>

Mathew Harper Allen's work focuses on the complex processes involved in the re-contextualization of the Devadasi dance during the late colonial period.<sup>36</sup> Allen discusses the

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<sup>34</sup> Borrowing the concept of public/material and private/spiritual from Partha Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments*(Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1993), pp.260-275.

<sup>35</sup> Avanthi Meduri, *Nation, Woman, Representation: The Sutured History of the Devadasi and Her Dance*. (New York University Press, New York, 1996).

<sup>36</sup> M.H Allen, 'Rewriting the script for South Indian dance' *Drama Review*. 41(3): 63.100,1997.

multiple influences on the development of Bharatanatyam in the 1930s and 1940s. His work illustrates the process by which a ritual dance form was extracted from its original context and then domesticated, reformed, and re-sanctified for middle-class consumption.<sup>37</sup> Illuminating the many transformations that are masked by the term ‘revival’, Allen shows how this term obscures several processes of re-population (one community appropriating a practice from another), re-construction (altering elements of repertoire and choreography), re-naming (from ‘nautch’ and other terms to *bharatanatyam*), re-situation (from temple and court to the stage), and restoration (the splicing together of performances to invent a seemingly ancient practice).<sup>38</sup> The emergence of Rukmini Devi Arundale as the chief ‘saviour’ of Bharatanatyam and her association with the Theosophical Movement brings into light how gradually the art form came to be monopolized by the ‘respectable’ upper caste by marginalizing the original practitioners.

Almost similar, if not identical, was the process of modernizing tradition in the field of music during the same period. Recent historical and ethno-musicological works have concentrated on the process of defining a classical music tradition in the context of nationalism. While on the one hand, there is the conventional scholarship by music scholars who focused on the aesthetic conceptions and attributes of Indian music over time,<sup>39</sup> on the other, the works of Amanda Weidman, Bonnie C.Wade, Jon Higgins and Mathew Allen (as already mentioned) have tried to locate the practice of music within a larger political cultural and social milieu.<sup>40</sup>

Lakshmi Subramanian’s work titled, *From the Tanjore Court to the Madras Music Academy: A Social History of Music in South India* provides a nuanced understanding of the formation of the classical in the Carnatic musical tradition of South India.<sup>41</sup> Instead of providing a linear historical account of the musical developments in South India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Subramanian traces the history and significance of aurality as the defining factor in constructing an aesthetical taste in music in the twentieth

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<sup>37</sup> Reed, pp.520-21.

<sup>38</sup> Allen, pp.63-4.

<sup>39</sup> Swami Prajnananda, *Historical Developments of Indian Music* (Calcutta, 1973), Raghava Menon, *Indian Music* (Bombay, 1974), Ram Avatar Veer, *History of Indian Music and Musicians* (New Delhi, 1987) as cited in Lakshmi Subramanian, *From the Tanjore Court to the Madras Music Academy: A Social History of Music in South India*, (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2006).

<sup>40</sup> Amanda Weidman, *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Post-Colonial Politics of Music in South India*, (Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2006); Jon B.Higgins, ‘From Prince to Populace: Patronage as a Determinant of Change in South Indian (Karnatik) Music’ in O.P.Joshi (ed.) *Sociology of Oriental Music*, (ABD Publishers, Jaipur, 2004).

<sup>41</sup> Subramanian (2006),p.5.

century. Delving into the contribution of the Tanjore royal court of the eighteenth century and the Madras Music Academy of the twentieth century in the formation of the Carnatic musical tradition, the work shows how modernity intertwined with classicism and nationalism was constructed, re-shaped and negotiated through these institutions.<sup>42</sup> Janaki Bakhle's work, on the other hand, provides a historical account of the process of modernization of Hindustani tradition through the contributions of two influential ideologues of the time—V.N. Bhatkhande and V.D. Paluskar. Against the backdrop of colonial modernity, Bakhle provides a critical history of the ways in which the modern Hindustani tradition of Indian music was formulated through these two men of contrasting ideologies.<sup>43</sup>

On the 'rescuing' of Indian dance from its 'corrupt' form, a whole spectrum of scholarly works is available. While S. Karsenboom-Stori has painstakingly gone into the history of the devadasis in Tamil Nadu.<sup>44</sup> Amrit Srinivasan has analyzed both the trends of the reformist and revivalist section of the indigenous intelligentsia and how, as the end-product of the entire 'revival' project, the art form was separated from its traditional practitioners.<sup>45</sup> Continuing with this context, U.A. Coorlawala and Kalpana Ram has brought out the tenuous relationship of the dancer's body with the discourses weaved around it. The anxiety results in the Sanskritization of the body, tailored to suit the modern upper middle class' civilized sensibilities as more and more women from this group entered the proscenium stage.<sup>46</sup>

As the project of rescuing India's tradition was inextricably linked to the cultural nationalism of the day, several parameters that qualified as 'Indian-ness' were already at work. As J. Erdman's work on Uday Shankar shows, in the history of Indian dance and the historiography that followed, contributions of non-Indian performers like Anna Pavlova and Ruth St. Denis as well as Indian dancers like Uday Shankar himself were not adequately

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid. The same argument is articulated in two other articles by the same author., 'The Reinvention of a Tradition: Nationalism, Carnatic Music and the Madras Music Academy, 1900-1947', *Indian Economic Social History Review* 1999 36: 131 and 'The Master, Muse and the Nation: The New Cultural Project and the Reification of Colonial Modernity in India', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 2000, 23:2, 1-32.

<sup>43</sup> Janaki Bakhle, *Two Men and Music: Nationalism in the Making of an Indian Classical Tradition*. (Oxford University Press, New York, 2005).

<sup>44</sup> Saskia Karsenboom Stori, *Nityasumangali, Devadasi Tradition in South India* (Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi, 1987). In this context, another important work is Davesh Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2011).

<sup>45</sup> Amrit Srinivasan, 'Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 20, No. 44 (Nov. 2, 1985), pp. 1869-1876.

<sup>46</sup> U.A. Coorlawala, 'The Sanskritized Body', *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Winter, 2004), pp. 50-63. Kalpana Ram, 'Phantom Limbs: South Indian Dance and Immigrant Reification of the Female Body', *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, Vol. 26, Nos. 1—2, February—May 2005, pp. 121-137.

recognized due to the latter's association with European dance forms.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, through these works, a certain pattern of historical narrative clearly emerges. The temple dance traditions and courtly culture continued from the pre-colonial to the colonial period. As the colonial administrators encountered this cultural practice of the natives, a section of them, infused with the Victorian sense of morality, came to look down upon these practices. Consequently, they rejected them for exhibiting 'low' tastes which was conflated with the native culture. Following this, a certain section of the upper class and caste natives, influenced by Western education, accepted the colonial mode of thinking. Thus, the Anti-Nautch campaign was launched. However, another section of the intellectuals argued that although corrupted, the practice still belongs to the Indian tradition which should be preserved. They argued for the revival of various art forms and their respective 'restorations' to the 'authentic' original forms. Thus, the temple dance was relocated, desacralized and re-named as Bharatanatyam with a new class of upper middle-class women performers.

#### When Regional became National: Dance in Post-Independence India

While in the colonial period, dance became emblematic of the Indian tradition in the nationalist discourse, exhibiting the 'authentic spiritual essence', in the post-independence period, it was mobilised to uphold the unified identity of the newly-found nation-state. The appropriation continued, albeit in different ways. Against the background of fissiparous tendencies within the nation, the Indian state attempted to establish a common national identity.<sup>48</sup> Culture in general and dance in specific, was suitably appropriated for this. The attempt was to reconcile the virtues of the Western civilization (viz., modern science and technology) with the so-called essence of India's age-old tradition.<sup>49</sup>

One of the early initiatives taken by the state, with the help of the Academies, was to commission the writing of the history of the arts. The mainstream writing of the history of dance traced the tradition of Indian dance from antiquity (as validated by the *Natyashastra*) to the 1930s, giving a linear picture of uniformity without mentioning the discontinuities. The reference to the *Sadir* and the reconstructed history of *Bharatanatyam* remained important as

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<sup>47</sup> J.L.Erdman, 'Performance as Translation: Uday Shankar in the West', *Drama Review*. 31(1):64.88, 1987.

<sup>48</sup> Sarah Joseph, 'Identity, Culture and Community,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 28, No. 17 (Apr. 24, 1993), pp. 807-809.

<sup>49</sup> "The educated Indian was to be prepared to be an integrated person, attuned to his culture, capable of interregional dialogue, equipped to play a significant role in the social and economic development of the country", Kapila Vatsyayan, *Indian Classical Dance* (Publication Division, Government of India, 1974) p.25.

the dance community celebrated and relived history through its writings and performances. Moreover, a distancing from all the references to *devadasi* women strongly influenced the narratives around the dance, dancers and dance history. Consequently, from the very beginning in post-Independence India, dance writing carried strong references to religious sanctity and Brahminical texts.<sup>50</sup>

No doubt, history of writing dance in India in the post independence period by scholars like A. Coomaraswamy and Kapila Vatsyayan tended to underplay the significance of the Medieval period with its Muslim rulers and characterized Indian civilization as essentially Hindu.<sup>51</sup> *Indian Classical Dance* by Kapila Vatsyayan is one of the telling examples of state-sponsored history writing on Indian dance. Kapila Vatsyayan, an eminent dancer herself as well as dance scholar, provides an account of the classical Indian dance tradition through a detailed study of five forms, viz. Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, Odissi, Manipuri and Kathak, all of which were recognized as classical by the end of the first decade after independence.<sup>52</sup>

This genre of history writing not only aimed at achieving and consolidating national unity, but was also motivated to portray an essentially Hindu past of the so-called 'Indian tradition'. As a result, the history of Kathak as sketched by Sunil Kothari,<sup>53</sup> while acknowledging its origin to the Muslim period, glossed over the patronage of Muslim royal courts. The amnesia continued in the context of patronage of the courtesans and *tawaifs* in later times and also the different local and folk roots Kathak hailed from.<sup>54</sup>

In recent years such prejudiced view of history has come under the scanner. Attempts have been made to re-trace the history of the neo-classical forms with a more nuanced understanding. Purnima Shah provides an account of the transformation of local dance forms into 'classical' dances of India from the 1930s.<sup>55</sup> Starting with the 'Sanskritized' revival of Sadir into Bharatanatyam,<sup>56</sup> other regional forms were selected from different parts of India

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<sup>50</sup> Urmimala Sarkar, Munsii, 'A Century of Negotiations: The Changing Sphere of the Woman Dancer in India', Subrata Bagchi (ed.) *Women in Public Sphere: Some Exploratory Essays* ( Primus Books, New Delhi, 2011).

<sup>51</sup> Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Essays in National Idealism* ( G.A. Nateson & Co., Madras, 1909).

<sup>52</sup> Vatsyayan (1974).

<sup>53</sup> Sunil Kothari, *Kathak: Indian Classical Dance Art*, (Abhinav Publications, New Delhi, 1989).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Purnima Shah, 'State Patronage in India: Appropriation of the "Regional" and "National"', *Dance Chronicle*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2002), pp. 125-141.

<sup>56</sup> In an article written before 1957, Rukmini Devi claimed that Bharatanatyam was the quintessential dance described in the *Natyashastra* and that Kathakali and Manipuri were its variants while Bhagavata Mela and Kuchipudi came under the category of Bharatanatyam. For details see, Uttara Asha Coorlawala, 'The Sanskritized Body', *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Winter, 2004), pp. 50-63.



and assigned classical status. It was believed that these artistic performing traditions represented the broader Indian tradition. However, while through this process of 'classicization', certain regional identities were treated as contributing to forge the national identity, it marginalized other forms from the same region.<sup>57</sup> The analyses included the process by which dance forms like Kuchipudi,<sup>58</sup> Odissi<sup>59</sup> and Mohiniattam<sup>60</sup> are represented in the national arena, and as a result of which, classical status was bestowed upon them in the 1950s.

However, this form of writing failed to document the response of the very people from whom the art was appropriated. Several questions remained unanswered; for instance, why did the Bhagavataluru male performers agree to repudiate their age-old monopoly over the Kuchipudi dance?<sup>61</sup> Additionally, what privileges did they expect or what were the socio-politico-economic compulsions they had to face, while doing so? The voice of the performers iscompletely absent from such narratives.

Pallabi Chakravorty has dealt with the contribution of the emergent public sphere in the late nineteenth century in reviving Kathak as emblematic of the national-classical tradition in the post-independence period.<sup>62</sup> She shows how the traditional writing on the history of Kathak in the post-independence period glossed over many nuances that the Kathak tradition comprised of. Pursuance of the objective of establishing the identity of a national, that equalled Hindu culture, did away with any form of association with Muslim patronage. The intention was -to trace its lineage from a historical Brahminical past in tandem with a validation of textual authenticity from the *Natyashastra*. Not only the contributions of the Mughal courts and *tawaiifs* were discounted , but also the 'Muslim period' was represented as a period when the authentic Brahminical tradition was polluted. However, the marginalization of the different elements of a dance form did not happen through the revival project alone. With the establishment of the Kathak Kendra in 1964, under the jurisdiction of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, various *gharanas* of Kathak were marginalised. As a result,

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<sup>57</sup> Shah, p.130.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.,pp.131-134.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.,pp.134-6.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.,pp.137-8.

<sup>61</sup> Shah, p.127.

<sup>62</sup> Pallabi Chakravorty, 'Dancing into Modernity: Multiple Narratives of India's Kathak Dance', *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 38, No. 1/2 (summer - Winter, 2006), pp. 115-136.

certain genres were accorded state patronage for being more ‘authentic’ at the cost of others.<sup>63</sup>

Following the trajectory of the revival of the *Bharatanatyam* dance that did away with the erotic elements of the Sadir repertoire, Ananya Chatterjea delves into a similar narrative of the discovery and revival of the Odissi dance in the 1950s.<sup>64</sup> The dance of the *maharis*, i.e. the temple dancers of Orissa, which was gradually declining due to the lack of patronage and growing taboo against it in the colonial period, was re-discovered and revived in order to claim the classical status. However, the practices and the performances of the regional gurus were restricted to their own linguistic boundaries, until in 1954 when a performance was presented at Delhi by Priyambada Mohanty and Dhiren Patnaik. It is only after that, Odissi was recognized as a classical dance and acquired the name ‘Odissi’ which connotated the connection of its regional roots to the national self.

Chatterjea locates the historiography of Odissi within the larger politico-socio-cultural tensions of post-colonial India, without succumbing to the trope of a linear historical narrative that characterized earlier works. The main significance of Chatterjea’s argument lies in the fact that in her outline of the formations of historiography on Odissi dance in post-colonial India, the analysis is not restricted to the appropriation of the particular regional form by state appointed institutions only. In fact, Chatterjea has demonstrated how the regional practitioners of Odissi were placed at a disadvantageous position vis-à-vis the ‘revivalist’ school of the time which included the likes of Rukmini Devi.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, in the bid to fit Odissi according to the parameters of classicism set by the *Bharatanatyam*, many regional attributes from the original repertoire were done away with. In the Jayantika Project (inaugurated in 1957) that sought to codify the style, Guru Debaprasad Das opposed the process of defining Odissi according to the parameters of the ‘outsider’ that called for a cleaning of the folk erotic elements from its repertoire—leaving the repertoire without any uniqueness.<sup>66</sup> In the same vein, Rumya Sree Putcha on her study on Kuchipudi shows how

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<sup>63</sup> The legendary Kathak maestro Shambhu Maharaj explained during a rare interview in a leading English newspaper: “My great grandfather, six generations ago was blessed by Lord Krishna and was asked to compile a text of Natwari Nritya... here generations later in the time of Ishwarji this dance spread all over India ... Prakashji (eldest son of Iswarji) ... moved with the family ... to Lucknow then known as Laxmanpur. It was during this time, when Prakashji was Nawab Asaf-ud-daula's court dancer that Natwari Nritya came to be known as Kathak.”; the quotation shows the tendency of the tracing the lineage to an ancient past. For details see *Ibid.*, p.119.

<sup>64</sup> Ananya Chatterjea, ‘Contestations: Constructing a Historical Narrative’ in Alexandra Carter ed. *Rethinking Dance History*, pp.143-56, (Routledge, London, 2004).

<sup>65</sup> Chatterjea, p.156.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p.154.

some forms had to earn the status through continuous resistance against the hegemonizing archetype of Bharatnatyam.<sup>67</sup> I would also like to mention Anita Cherian's work<sup>68</sup> which gives a nuanced understanding of the politics of recognition of cultural traditions in post-independence India. She analyses the politics of institutional recognition of the classical in the 1953-58 period through a detailed reading of the reports of the Sangeet Natak Akademi to uncover the underlying agendas of the cultural policies of the institution.

Although such attempts were motivated against a linear historical narrative of Indian dance tradition, the scope only remained within the ambit of how the state institutions, endowed with the responsibility of effecting national unity through culture, appropriated some regional form and recast them as classical. Discussions on how certain forms were given more priority at the cost of the other have been taken upon, but only from the perspective of appropriation by the central government. Such methodologies are informed by the simplistic assumption of the centre being the sole authority and lone player in the realm of cultural politics. Since the underlying assumption is that regions were passive players in this game of institutional maneuvers, the possibility of regional stakes in the agenda of negotiating and delineating identities remained largely ignored.

#### State patronage and Folk Traditions and Studies on Purulia Chhau in Particular

Coming to the issue of patronage and state cultural policies towards folk tradition, Sadhana Naithani has argued how the different avenues of state patronage failed to provide proper recognition to the folk artistes in the present condition.<sup>69</sup> Through the analysis of the different terms that are being used to denote the folk artistes in different arenas of patronage viz. Republic day Parade or Festival of India or the Kathputli colony in Delhi, she argues that unless the patronage is directed towards the folk artistes directly, the state of folk arts will remain the same.<sup>70</sup> Talking specifically about Purulia Chhau, Debanjali Biswas and Anirban Ghosh argue how post-colonial state institutions and their tools of categorisation of folk art

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<sup>67</sup>Rumyasree Putcha, *Revisiting the Classical: A Critical History of Kuchipudi dance*, Unpublished Dissertation, (University of Chicago, Chicago, 2011).

<sup>68</sup> Anita Cherian, 'Institutional Maneuvers, Nationalizing Performance, Delineating Genre: Reading the Sangeet Natak Akademi Reports 1953-1959', *Third Frame: Literature, Culture and Society* Vol. 2, No. 3, July-September 2009, 32-60.

<sup>69</sup> Sadhana Naithani, 'How About Some Artistic Recognition? Folk Performers in Post-Independence India', in Simon Charsley & Laxmi N. Kadekar (eds.) *Performers and their Arts: Folk, Popular and Classical Genres in a Changing India* (Routledge, 2006), pp.113-14

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

forms marginalise the voice of the communities completely.<sup>71</sup> On a similar note, Urmimala Sarkar-Munshi's study show how traditional performances like Chhau gets re-contextualized to suit the needs of the modern urban audience.<sup>72</sup>

On the other hand, in her work titled *Writing Identities: Folklore and Performative Arts of Purulia*, Roma Chatterji has specifically worked on the representations of the folk art forms of Purulia, which remains the most relevant work for my topic. In this, Chatterji has analysed the different genres of representative writings that produced conflicting images of Purulia, which is defined by her, as constituting a rich 'folklore region'. For this, she looks at the three separate cultural traditions of the region viz. Purulia 'Chho', Bhadu festival and Jhumur songs and shows how the different representations of these three categories of tradition produced different ideas of Purulia as a region.<sup>73</sup>

### **Aims and Objectives of this dissertation**

From this entire corpus of historiographical literature, I diagnose two gaps which I have attempted to address in my dissertation. First, in the post-independence period, the contemporary writings have focused more on the forms that have been successful in gaining recognition of 'classical'. But what about the stories of failure like Chhau in general and Purulia Chhau in particular? As Urmimala Sarkar Munshi has stated that after the maiden performance of Purulia Chhau in 1968 in Delhi, "big names associated with the Ministry of Culture tried their best to get Chhau recognized as a classical dance."<sup>74</sup> However, things did not work as desired and Chhau had to remain satisfied with the status of UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2010.<sup>75</sup> It is this story of this failure and marginalization of Purulia Chhau and its performers that I would like to trace here. Secondly, in the case of writings on folk traditions or Purulia Chhau, although the theme of marginalization remained

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<sup>71</sup> Biswas, Debanjali & Ghosh, Anirban, 'The Altered Space: Community Dances from Everyday to the Proscenium', in Urmimala Sarkar Muni & Stephanie Burrige (eds.) *Traversing Tradition: Celebrating Dance in India* (Routledge, New Delhi, 2011).

<sup>72</sup> Urmimala Sarkar Muni, 'Another Time, Another Space---Does the Dance Remain the Same?', in Pallabi Chakravorty & Nilanjana Gupta (eds.) *Dance Matters: Performing India*, (Routledge, New Delhi, 2010).

<sup>73</sup> Roma Chatterji, *Writing Identities :Folklore and Performative Arts of Purulia, Bengal* (Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts, New Delhi, 2009).

<sup>74</sup> Urmimala Sarkar Muni, 'The Changing Stage: Chhau as an Intangible Cultural Heritage', *The International Journal of Arts, Culture and Heritage*, Volume 1, Special Edition, 2012,p.161.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. The dissertation does not include UNESCO's recognition within its scope as the present state of research does not permit it.

central while exploring state patronage in folk arts, attempts remained limited to one-way exploitation and cultural appropriation which do not include the view point of the performers themselves. Hence, my attempt is also to explore how the performers responded to such alienation by state and individual enterprises.

From here, I proceed with my first chapter where I look at how Purulia Chhau is situated in the context of state patronage in the post-independence period, both at the national and regional level. The emphasis here is laid on how, despite the difference in the cultural trajectories, Purulia Chhau as a dance form remained at the fringes in the cultural initiatives of both centre and the region. In the second chapter I then proceed to explore how Purulia Chhau had been interpreted and represented by different individuals and groups from Bengal. As a result, multiple identities of Purulia style of Chhau emerge viz. classical, semi-classical and folk, eventually marginalizing the performers in the process. While the first two chapters focus on the narratives that emerge from the 'above', in the third and final chapter, I have attempted to record how the performers themselves have attempted to resist this marginalization by developing their own narrative on the form.

## CHAPTER 1

### **Marginalizing Purulia Chhau: Issues of Governmental Patronage in the Post-Independence Period**

*In front of the government bungalow there could be no question of the gods visiting the village and blessing it. Government bungalows are not the normal haunts of errant deities. The dance simply became a performance-like Peer Gynt at Lincoln Center.*

--John Arden<sup>1</sup>

In Chapter 1, I appraise the aspects of governmental patronage furnished by the state institutions and individuals towards Purulia Chhau both at the national and regional levels. In this chapter while looking at the different cultural trajectories of both the centre and the region, I argue that unlike the central institution calling all the shots in the matters of cultural patronage, the region also has active participation in this project. Continuing from there, I then focus on the politics inherent within the project of the arbitrary official scheme of classicizing different styles (often within the same form) either as ‘classical’ (‘major dance traditions’<sup>2</sup>) or ‘folk’ (‘other dance traditions’/ ‘traditional’/ ‘tribal’), examines how Chhau in general and Purulia Chhau in particular have been marginalized through such categorisations.

The chapter is divided into three sections. Section I provides a critical overview of the formulation of cultural policies in the post-independence period. At the outset, I provide a general background on the nature of governmental patronage for arts in post-independence India is provided. Through this, I particularly devote attention to the methods – or the lack of a consistent one, used in distinguishing dance forms as classical or folk. I also look at how such arbitrariness in official categorisation is often actively used by state institutions as well as certain individuals, both at the centre and the region to further respective political objectives. Through this general background, I, then contextualize the position of Chhau in

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<sup>1</sup>John Arden, *The Chhau Dancers of Purulia*, *The Drama Review: TDR*, Vol. 15, No. 2, Theatre in Asia (Spring, 1971), p.72.

<sup>2</sup> In recent years Sangeet Natak Akademi has devised this terminology to designate the classical and semi-classical dance forms. It is worthy of mention here that one official in charge of the Dance section of the Akademi explained this hence proves that the Akademi actually doesn't have the authority to give classical recognition to any form.

the scheme of state patronage in the post-independence period and its vulnerability to state interference.

In Section II, I demonstrate how the dominant representation of a particular style within the form of Chhau at the national level results in the preferential visibility of that particular form, at the cost of other two styles. Importantly, I depict the critical role played by regional state institutions in promoting, preserving and embellishing respective dance forms at the national level. The emphasis is here is to show how the lack of such regional sponsorship hampered the growth and development of Purulia Chhau, in contrast to its regional siblings – the Mayurbhanj and Seraikella Chhau.

Finally, I conclude this chapter by looking at how Purulia Chhau is located in the cultural scenario of the regional state of West Bengal. In this section I argue that unlike the centre, Bengal has carved a separate cultural trajectory where folk as a concept and not a category, has been given sufficient attention. However, such attempts remain futile in providing Purulia Chhau with sufficient patronage resources owing to the absence of a proper regional dance idiom in the post-independence period.

### **Section1:Polic(y)ing culture: Delineating the official categories of performing arts**

In the post-independence period, the nascent Indian state emerged as the chief patron of ‘Indian’ culture. While inaugurating the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1953, Maulana Azad - the Minister responsible then for the Department of Education elaborated that

In a democratic regime, the arts can derive their sustenance only from the people, and the state as the organized manifestation of the people’s will, must, therefore, undertake its maintenance and development as one of its first responsibilities.<sup>3</sup>

Since it is the state that took up the responsibility of cultural patronage, the cultural policies and initiatives in the initial days were understandably steeped in the idea of national integration, which was the prime objective of the state in the first decade of independence. The policies regarding culture in postcolonial India have important precedents in the colonial period. In post-independence India, culture served as the process of binding disparate citizens within the common ambit of a consolidated ‘Indian culture’. This was critical particularly in

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<sup>3</sup>As quoted in the *Report of the High- Powered Committee Appointed to review the Performance of the National Akademis and the National School of Drama* (Department of Culture, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, July 1990),p.17.

light of the political hurdles faced by the Indian state post-independence such as the after-effects of the Partition alienating Muslims who chose not to migrate to Pakistan, frictions in the absorption of the Princely States within the Indian Union, claims for linguistic reorganization of regional identities, the Kashmir issue and so forth, all of which impeded the assertion and crystallization of a unified Indian entity.<sup>4</sup> Thus, devising a sound cultural policy was the need of the hour under a two-fold agenda - 'attuning'<sup>5</sup> citizens to a unified Indian culture<sup>6</sup> and reconciling the virtues of the Western civilization with the very essence of India's age-old tradition.<sup>7</sup>

So, culture in general was perceived to be a critical site, reinforcing the idea of the nation. In this context Anita Cheria explains that

Whilst the nationalist language of culture is expansive in its scope—recognizing a vast spectrum of practices and ideas - it is specific in its emotive appeal, drawing upon a shared visual and rhetorical language of symbols and slogans such as those of the eponymous Bharat Mata (Mother Bharat or India), and the spiritual unity of India. Unsurprisingly, the Indian state deploys a range of discourses, institutions, and disciplinary mechanisms concerning language, ethnicity, religion, place of belonging, tradition, and cultural forms to justify the formation of the Indian union.<sup>8</sup>

Cheria argues here that culture was used as the venue through which emotional integration of those contentious elements of the nation was effected, which could not have been subjugated through direct political integration. Cheria identifies three sites of the state's anxiety viz. the necessity of the Princely States to accede to the Indian Union, selection of an

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<sup>4</sup> "The belief that nationalities have a right to political self-determination is deeply in-grained in our thinking. A consequence of this link between nationality and political self-determination has been that the nationality claims of any group in the country have been viewed with suspicion as potentially subversive of the national community. The Left on the other has endorsed the right of political self-determination and even secession of groups claiming to be nationalities. Neither view questions the assumption that nationalities constitute homogeneous cultural communities which are able to generate firm identities. Further, they have overlooked the possibility of conflicts and contradictions within communities." Sarah Joseph, 'Identity, Culture and Community,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 28, No. 17 (Apr. 24, 1993), pp. 807-808. See also MSS Pandian, 'Nation Impossible', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 44, No. 10 (Mar. 7 - 13, 2009) p.68

<sup>5</sup> Using the concept of 'attenuation' from Pandian (2009), pp. 65-69.

<sup>6</sup> Vatsyayan argues that "The educated Indian was to be prepared to be an integrated person, attuned to his culture, capable of interregional dialogue, equipped to play a significant role in the social and economic development of the country" Kapila Vatsyayan, *Some Aspects of Cultural Policies in India*, (UNESCO, Paris, 1972) p.25.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Anita Cheria, *Fashioning A National Theatre: Institutions and Cultural Policy in Post-Independence India* (Unpublished Dissertation) (Department of Performance Studies, New York University, May 2008), p.18



official language and incorporating the tribal into the mainstream political discourse. These, according to her, motivated the cultural policies of the initial years after independence.<sup>9</sup>

Parallely, the writings on the formulation of cultural policies, modelled on the oft-used trope of 'unity in diversity', sketched the image of post-colonial India as a united and 'happy' nation, subscribing to a homogenous set of socio-cultural values. Kapila Malik Vatsyayan's, *Some Aspects of Cultural Policies in India*<sup>10</sup>, gives such outline of the cultural policy in India. According to her narrative which was commissioned for the purpose of furthering the objective of national integration, Indian civilization has a long, but continuous tradition. Although over different periods of time, the tradition has come into contact with different 'foreign' influences, owing to the multitude of cross-cultural encounters it has faced till the presentage, it has managed to preserve its own essence. Despite the addition and removal of different elements, India has always enriched its 'fundamental tradition'<sup>11</sup> with those elements which were in harmony with the true nature of its civilization and discarded the rest which created discord amongst its subject population. Influences, borrowings, impressions, were assimilated and synthesized to evolve new patterns albeit *with an unmistakable Indian identity*.<sup>12</sup> No wonder, this narrative was necessary as a palliative to the built-up tension that accompanied the emergence of the Indian state as the sole overarching authority controlling all the activities in both the political and cultural life of the nation.

However, despite the apparent importance accorded to the construction of a national culture, financial allocations to cultural activities was quite meagre in the first two Five Year Plans, appearing only in a complementary role within different departments. In the first Five Year Plan (1951-56) for example, 'culture' was quietly situated under the category of education, which itself was subsumed under the heading 'Social Services and Rehabilitation'.<sup>13</sup> The central function of the educational system, as mentioned in the First Plan, was to 'satisfy' the nation's 'cultural needs,' for it was through 'the growth of the

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p.21.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p.30.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Vatsyayan elaborates that for centuries Sanskrit provided the common medium of communication, not only amongst groups of the literate and educated, but for everybody who participated and shared the flourishing oral tradition of the Vedas and the epics. In years to come this unity was transformed into a picture of a rich variegated pattern of many hues and colours of languages and forms of expression.

<sup>12</sup> Vatsyayan, p.10. Emphasis mine.

<sup>13</sup>Cherian, p.13.

creative faculties’ and the development of a ‘spirit of critical appreciation of arts, literature and other creative activities’ that individuals with ‘integrated’ personalities would emerge.<sup>14</sup>

The Second Plan (1956–61) referred more substantively to culture and contains the earliest references regarding the provisions made for the creation of the Sangeet Natak Akademi and the other Akademies.<sup>15</sup> Accompanying these plans for expansion was the enhancement of the allocation of finances for education with provisions made for an amount of Rs. 307 billion.<sup>16</sup> It is in the Third Plan that the governmentsubstantially aimed at therevival and protection of culture with a total expenditure of Rs.418 crore including a provision of Rs. 10 crores for cultural programmes.<sup>17</sup>

The first few years after independence also witnessed the establishment of the three national academies of the arts which, as anticipated, would sustain and revitalize the traditional arts. The three academies were the National Academy of Letters (Sahitya Akademi)<sup>18</sup>, the National Academy of Visual Arts (Lalit Kala Akademi) and the National Academy of Music, Dance and Drama (Sangeet Natak Akademi)<sup>19</sup>. The need was articulated in these terms:

In Republican India, under changing political and social conditions, the patronage of arts underwent a major shift. The age-old court patronage ceased to function and was substituted by the people or their Government. One of the main purposes behind establishing the Sangeet Natak Akademi was to fill the vacuum, thus created. Under the changed set-up, the very nature and form of patronage had necessarily to undergo fresh experimentation to fall in conformity with the new outlook. The Akademi constituted as it is, is the voice and conscience of the art and the artist for

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p.14.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.,p.15.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p.93.

<sup>17</sup><http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/planrel/fiveyr/welcome.html> (last accessed: 28/6/15 at 12.30 p.m.)

<sup>18</sup> “The National Academy of Letters was set up by a government resolution in 1952 as a national organization to work actively for the development of Indian letters and to set high literary standards, to foster and co-ordinate literary activities in all-Indian languages and to promote, through them, the cultural unity of the country. Behind the incorporation of the Sahitya Akademi was the acceptance and recognition of the complex unity underlying the variety of Indian literatures and languages. It was alsoa bold reassertion of the faith that variegated richness, variety with regional vitality and authentic quality was a blessing rather than a curse-to be preferred to a monolithic unity without the capacity for fluidity, flexibility and diversity.) Vatsyayan,p.34.

<sup>19</sup> “The Sangeet Natak Akademi (National Academy of Music, Dance and Drama), was established in 1953, alsothrough a government resolution. It aims at promoting research in the field of Indian dance, drama and music and seeks to co-ordinate activities in these spheres. During the last sixteen years of its existence, the academy’s activities have been widely dispersed, comprising competitions, seminars and festivals, awards to performing artists of different categories, grants to institutions working in music, dance and drama and publication of, or subsidy for research work ondance, drama and music.” Ibid.,p.41.

whom it was formed. As such, it was incumbent on the Akademi to derive ways and means to extend patronage and bring it in harmony with the changed relationship between arts and its patron.<sup>20</sup>

These first three institutions set forth a holistic system of state sanctioned recognition and awards hitherto non-existent in pre-independence India, and concurrently sponsored several annual meets, exhibitions, and festivals, along with schemes of financial assistance to support the arts.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, the Indian Akademies for the arts are based on the Western concept of government patronage towards cultural activities provided through academies, the most explicit model being that of the French Academy.<sup>22</sup> It would seem that when the Akademies were instituted in India in the mid-50s, they were viewed as 'cultural organisations' but with pretensions of emulating the earlier (European) tradition of 'academies' as 'learned societies'. How exactly the term 'Akademi' was chosen by our political and cultural elite has yet to be clarified.<sup>23</sup> Certainly, the word was sufficiently elevated to designate the high ideals of an emerging nation which could be proud of its national institutions of fine arts, comparable in reputation to the long-standing Academies of art and language, particularly in England and France. The indigenisation of the word was effected through a change in spelling ('Akademi') and the use of Sanskrit complements and compounds like 'sahitya', 'lalit kala', and 'sangeetnatak',<sup>24</sup> whereby the differentiation between 'literature', the 'fine arts', and the 'performing arts' was embodied. The corollary of such endeavors endowed the newly formed Indian State with the ultimate right of ascertaining the 'authentic/true' tradition of India.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the lofty ideals, there was no unanimity about what exactly the Akademies stood for. Some wanted the Akademies to be institutions supporting and encouraging excellence; others wanted them to take culture to the masses.<sup>26</sup> Some wanted them to preserve the cultural heritage in general, be it for an urban or rural audience, or cultures associated with the sophisticated upper class and upper castes or the cultures belonging to the 'comparatively underdeveloped' tribal people. Others wanted, in the name of national integration, to do away with all the richness, the variety and virility of those cultural

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<sup>20</sup>*The Sangeet Natak Akademi Annual Report (1953-58)*, p.51.

<sup>21</sup>Rustom Bharucha, 'Anatomy of Official Cultural Discourse: A Non-Government Perspective' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 27, No. 31/32 (Aug. 1-8, 1992), p. 1668.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1670

<sup>25</sup> Cherian, p.27.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.40.

traditions of different sections of people which have survived the onslaught of time and evolve a homogenous (though in practice steeped in elite upper-caste motifs) unified culture applicable to the many peoples of an entire nation.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the institutions were autonomous only on paper. Cherian notes that, unlike their western counterparts, the central and state governments as well as other agencies nominated members to the Akademis, hence, making the appointments and by consequence the institutions, susceptible to political maneuvers.<sup>28</sup>

### Articulating the 'classical' in Indian dance: the activities of the Sangeet Natak Akademi

Following the resolution passed on 31<sup>st</sup> May 1951 by the Ministry of Education, Sangeet Natak Akademi- the institution responsible for the promotion of vocal and performing arts was established.<sup>29</sup> In the inaugural address to the first dance seminar in 1958, Dr. P.V. Rajamannar, the then Chairman of the Sangeet Natak Akademi (henceforth SNA) declared that this institution (i.e.SNA), "was established according to the Preamble to its Constitution, to foster and develop Indian Dance, Drama, Music and Films and to promote through them the cultural unity of the country".<sup>30</sup> The institution organized several seminars in an effort to develop new categories for Indian performing arts and also sponsored the writing of national and pan-Indian historiographies in English for classical art forms like the Bharatanatyam.

The objectives with which the institution was founded included the same lofty ideals, which are as follows:

to co-ordinate the activities of regional or State Akademis of music, dance and drama; to promote research in the fields of Indian music, dance and drama and for this purpose, to establish a library and museum etc; to co-ordinate with similar Academies as there may be and other institutions and associations for the furtherance of its objects and for the *enrichment of Indian culture as a whole*<sup>31</sup>; to encourage the exchange of ideas and enrichment of techniques between the different regions in regard to the arts of music, dance and drama; to encourage the establishment of theatre centres, on the basis

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<sup>27</sup>Satish Saberwal (ed.) *Towards a Cultural Policy* (Vikas Publishing House PVT LTD, Delhi, 1975), pp.16-17.

<sup>28</sup>Cherian, p.105.

<sup>29</sup>Cherian, p.101.

<sup>30</sup> P.V. Rajamannar, 'Inaugural address of First Dance Seminar (1958)', *The Bulletin of Sangeet Natak Akademi* (1953-58)

<sup>31</sup>Appendix ii of *The Report of the High- Powered Committee Appointed to review the Performance of the National Akademis and the National School of Drama* (Department of Culture, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, July 1990).Emphasis Mine.

of regional languages, and co-operation among different theatre centres; to encourage the setting up of institutions providing training in the art of theatre, including instruction in actor's training, study of stage-craft and production of plays; to encourage and assist production of new plays by awarding prizes and distinctions; to publish literature on Indian music, dance and drama including reference works such as an illustrated dictionary or handbook of technical terms; to give recognition to and otherwise assist meritorious theatrical organisations; to encourage the development of amateur dramatic activity, children's theatre, the open-air theatre and the rural theatre in its various forms; *to revive and preserve*<sup>32</sup> folk music, folk dance and folk drama in different regions of the country and encourage such regional festivals; to award prizes and distinctions and to give recognition to individual artistes for outstanding achievement in the fields of music, dance and drama; to take suitable steps for the maintenance of *proper and adequate standards*<sup>33</sup> of education in music, dance and drama with that object to organize research in the teaching of the said subjects; to foster cultural contacts between the different regions of the country and also with other countries in the fields of music, dance and drama.<sup>34</sup>

While it is clearly established that the institution retains the sole authority to take the ultimate decisions in matters of music, dance and drama with the objective of furthering the cultural unity of the nation, certain other guidelines are also set out from the onset. Firstly, despite the assurance of considerable autonomy to the regional centres, in practice, it remained secondary to the centre.<sup>35</sup> Secondly, the agenda of reviving and preserving the folk forms endowed a sense of fragility and vulnerability to those forms—as if they would disappear or be corrupted if not 'rescued' by the state.<sup>36</sup> This image about folk cultures constructed through such official narratives goes a long way in justifying their marginalization from the dominant cultural discourses of the time. While the folk and tribal (often conflated with each other) are exoticized for their primitive 'innocence', untouched by the vagaries of modernity, they also simultaneously form the 'other' with reference to the nuanced and structured classical forms. As a result, all non-classical (read, fails to qualify as classical) forms are clubbed together as folk, inscribing a binary between the two, imitating the subconscious hierarchy of the *Margi* ('of the path'—usually equated with the classical forms) and the *Desi* ('of the people'- usually associated with folk forms).<sup>37</sup> For the forms

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<sup>32</sup>Emphasis Mine.

<sup>33</sup>Emphasis Mine.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Bharucha (1992),p.1669.

<sup>36</sup>Cherian, p.67.

<sup>37</sup> For a different appraisal of how these binaries had shifting connotation in the nationalist period refer Roma Chatterji, 'Folklore and the Construction of National Tradition', *Indian Folklife*, Serial No.19, April 2005.

which do not fall into either of the categories, they are termed as ‘semi-classical’, ‘traditional’, or ‘major and other dance traditions’— all of which contribute towards upholding the classical-folk binary.<sup>38</sup>

These institutional categories created a web of discourses which legitimized and structured several dance forms of India. Following the model of Bharatnatyam (the classical and also the ‘national’ dance of India),<sup>39</sup> several other forms of dance traditions came to be recognized as classical. Through financial investments coupled with the desire of effecting cultural unity, several regional rural forms were appropriated as the ‘national’, de-contextualizing and restructuring them to suit different (mostly urban) audiences who were far removed from the socio-political background of these dances.<sup>40</sup> As a result, by the end of 1950s, three other dance forms were recognized as classical - namely Kathakali, Manipuri and Kathak, apart from Bharatanatyam.<sup>41</sup>

Interestingly, the initial annual reports and the news bulletins of the Akademi do not mention explicitly or comment on the processes of recognition and selection of certain dance forms as ‘classical’ amidst the diversity of extant practices. Nothing is mentioned also about the criteria offered to delineate the character of the classical as opposed to the non-classical forms. As a result, such recognitions remained subject to various interpretations. To elucidate, the instance of Bharatanatyam as the revived classical dance tradition made it imperative that a form should be judged from the aesthetic parameter prescribed in the ancient treatises like the *Natyashastra* or the *Abhinayadarpana*.<sup>42</sup> For example, in the first Dance Seminar organized by the SNA in 1958, such views were expressed in relation to the Bharatanatyam. In the seminar, P.V. Rajamannar, the chairman of SNA, V.Raghavan, the well-known Sanskrit scholar, and most importantly Rukmini Devi Arundale, the person

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<sup>38</sup>For the experimental or contemporary styles which did not fall into either of the categories, the ‘creative’ genre is designated. Cherian, p.119.

<sup>39</sup>*The Bulletin of Sangeet Natak Akademi (1953-58)*, pp.27-31.

<sup>40</sup> For details see Sadhana Naithani, ‘How About Some Artistic Recognition? Folk Performers in Post-Independence India’, in Simon Charsley and Laxmi N. Kadekar (eds.) *Performers and their Arts: Folk, Popular and Classical Genres in a Changing India* (Routledge, 2006), pp.113-14; Urmimala Sarkar, Munsri, ‘A Century of Negotiations: The Changing Sphere of the Woman Dancer in India’, in Subrata Bagchi (ed.) *Women in Public Sphere: Some Exploratory Essay* (Primus Books, New Delhi, 2011). For a detailed discussion on separate classical forms see, Purnima Shah, ‘State Patronage in India: Appropriation of the "Regional" and "National"’, *Dance Chronicle*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2002), pp. 125-141; Ananya Chatterjea, ‘Contestations: Constructing a Historical Narrative’ in Alexandra Carter ed. *Rethinking Dance History*, pp.143-56, (Routledge, London, 2004); Pallabi Chakravorty, ‘Dancing into Modernity: Multiple Narratives of India’s Kathak Dance’, *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 38, No. 1/2 (summer - Winter, 2006), pp. 115-136.

<sup>41</sup>Sattriya, the classical dance of Assam was added to the list in 2000. Also see Cherian, p.120.

<sup>42</sup>For details see, The Dance Seminar coverage by the Sangeet Natak Akademi in the Bulletin of 1953-58 issue.

responsible for 'reviving' Bharatanatyam explored this theme in their presentations. The repeated assertion here was on how much the essence of Bharatanatyam was derived from the ancient prescriptive treatises.<sup>43</sup>

However, the inclusion of Kathakali, Manipuri and recently Sattriya as classical dance forms defied that logic as they hardly had any direct connection with the above mentioned prescriptive texts. What happened instead is that, in the absence of direct sanction from the texts, efforts were made to match other criteria for joining the mainstream such as the presence of courtly patronage or the practice of *Ras-leela* as the dominant theme in the performance (connecting to the Vaishnavism of the north-Indian mainland along the way).<sup>44</sup> The lack of a set of well-defined parameters to classify dance forms as classical and folk, combined with the state's discretionary appointment of experts to committees governing this classification made the overall process of recognition susceptible to both individual vagaries, and state-initiated manipulations to serve broader political agendas.<sup>45</sup>

Purnima Shah provides an insight into how, this process of 'classicization' of certain regional forms which started with the transformation of Sattriya into Bharatanatyam, marginalized other forms from the same region.<sup>46</sup> In a bid to gain the coveted classical status, several forms started to model their movement patterns according to the Bharatanatyam, as a result of which, other unique regional or folk flavours were lost. That is why the popularity of

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> In the particular case of Manipuri, Kapila Vatsyayan attempted to legitimize Manipuri (which apparently had no connection with the so-called classical traditions) through emphasizing on the influence of Vaishnavism on the form—hence, linking with one of the mainstream religions of India. Cherian also notes similar process in the case of Sattriya. To quote her,

Elaborating on the 'spiritual' character of the dance, Saikia points out that the Sattriya, like the closely allied Manipuri, had its antecedents in neo- Vaishnavite devotional movements. The uppercaste religious doctrine of Vaishnavism arrived in Manipur as a discursive frame to civilize and Hinduize indigenous populations. The Ras, in this context was unmistakably a form signalling both Vaishnavite dominance, and relatedly the extension into the northeast of an upper-caste pan-Indianism. The SNA's decision to declare the Ras a 'classical' form, representative of the nation's classical traditions is surely attentive to the marks of these histories. (p.111)

<sup>45</sup> For example, Anita Cherian argues that

While the discourse of classicism encircling forms like the Ras and the Sattriya, reinforces the nation-state's pan-Indianist ideology in distant geographic and social contexts, the forms of cultural recognition accorded to Manipur also gesture towards the complexities of the state's governmental relationship with the Indian union. In other words, given the Indian state's less than honorable engagements with the (former) princely state of Manipur, it is not unreasonable to surmise that centrally accorded distinctions such as an institution for the preservation of the Ras, or, its recognition as a classical form were intended as palliatives, compensating its coerced accession into the Indian Union in September 1949, under the conditions of the 'Manipur Merger Agreement. (p.112).

<sup>46</sup> Purnima Shah, 'State Patronage in India: Appropriation of the "Regional" and "National"', *DanceChronicle*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2002), p.130.

the Bhagavatulu dance drama faded with the recognition of Kuchipudi as classical. Similarly the Gotipua dance and Banda Nritya from Orissa suffer the same fate with the ‘classicization of the Odissi.’<sup>47</sup>

Additionally, in the articulation of a classical tradition, legitimacy is often sought from an essentially Hindu past- which being the religion of the majority in the post-independence era becomes an important qualifier for being the ‘national’. What follows next is the pruning of the ‘unfavourable’ elements from the history of the dance tradition.<sup>48</sup> Then again, the classical tradition also embodied the spirituality that characterized the essence of Indian civilization. It all started with the revival of the Bharatanatyam when the spirituality of the form was emphasized as the ‘pure’ and more ‘authentic’ than its erotic aspect. Back in 1958, on the occasion of the Dance Seminar, Rukmini Devi first emphasized on the spiritual aspect of Bharatanatyam.<sup>49</sup> To her, the enactment of *BhaktiRasa* was more important during performances than the *SringaraRasa*, which she believed, only brought out the physical side of human emotions. As a result, she preferred to avoid certain *Padams* and *Javalis* which only highlighted the eroticism of the dance, considered to be a sacred and spiritual activity.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, in the case of Sattriya, Cherian notes:

‘The Assamese dancer, SharodiSaikia, while performing at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, began her lecture demonstration on the Sattriya Nat by paying homage to the eminent Sanskritologist from Madras, Prof. P. Raghavan, who in 1950 “recognised this as spiritual dance and as [sic] honour for its existence recommended it to be included in the category of awards of the Sangeet Natak Akademi.’<sup>51</sup>

Such cleansing of erotic elements happened in the case of Odissi also. Ananya Chatterjea in a similar narrative on the discovery and revival of the Odissi dance, explains how in the quest for classical recognition, Odissi was restructured according to the parameters of classicism set by Bharatanatyam and many regional attributes from the original repertoire were eliminated. In the Jayantika Project (inaugurated in 1957) that sought to codify the style, Guru Debaprasad Das opposed the process of defining Odissi according to the parameters of the ‘outsider’ that called for a cleaning of the folk erotic elements from its repertoire, denuding the repertoire of its uniqueness.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid.pp.134-5.

<sup>48</sup>Pallabi Chakravorty, ‘Dancing into Modernity: Multiple Narratives of India's Kathak Dance’, *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 38, No. 1/2 (Summer - Winter, 2006), pp. 115-136.

<sup>49</sup>*The Bulletin of Sangeet Natak Akademi (1953-58)*, p.30.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p.30

<sup>51</sup>Cherian, p.111.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p.154.



Also, as is evident from the above discussion, the concept of the classical was implied at the regional level. In 1955, on the occasion of the SNA's National Dance Festival, the Bharatanatyam dancer, Balasaraswathi claimed that the state's choice of classical dances in the Festival reflected an equal division of forms from the north and the south, with BharataNatyam and Kathakali representing the south, and Kathak and Manipuri showcasing the north.<sup>53</sup> Such assertions then went a long way in associating the forms to their particular regional states. Additionally, with the linguistic reorganization of the states, it became all the more imperative to represent these forms through their linguistic and cultural distinctiveness—emphasizing more on their regional identity than the national. As a result, the Akademi's Reports from the late 1950s onwards document the mounting pressure on the SNA to expand its classical canon beyond the four forms already recognized. As Cherian mentioned, "the classical appears here like a concept 'up for grabs', a space where demands for regional recognition were played out."<sup>54</sup>

Soon efforts were undertaken by regional centres through the organization of festivals, workshops and seminars to bring several 'marginalized' regional forms to the fore. For example, the Kerala Sangeet Nataka Akademi established in 1958 organized the Kerala Festival of Arts in 1958 followed by the Dance and Music Festival organized in May 1958 by the Orissa SNA.<sup>55</sup> The Andhra Pradesh state Akademi also organized a 'Kuchipudi Dance Seminar' in early 1959, where the claims of Kuchipudi dance being a classical dance from the Telugu region is upheld.<sup>56</sup> On a similar fashion, the Yakshagana seminar was organized by the then Mysore state SNA in September 1958 "with the object of formulating a scheme for the revival and preservation of the tradition of Yakshagana."<sup>57</sup> This seminar in essence sparked off a contest between Kuchipudi and Yakshagana in the race for the classical. In the process of presenting Kuchipudi as a classical dance, it was simultaneously posed in opposition to Yakshagana which was claimed to be of the *desi* genre.<sup>58</sup> This again, was contested by the promoters of Yakshagana, were engaged in inventing a classical lineage for the form.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Cherian, p.126

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> 'Cultural Diary', *The Sangeet Natak News Bulletins 1958*. Also, see pp.127-8.

<sup>56</sup> *The Sangeet Natak News Bulletin 1959*, p.5.

<sup>57</sup> Cherian, p.129.

<sup>58</sup> *The Sangeet Natak News Bulletin 1959*, pp.3-4.

<sup>59</sup> The context of Ashutosh Bhattacharya would be dealt in the second chapter in details.

The reasons behind such endeavours are multiple. Firstly, the status of classical is equated with the notion of ‘high art’ which every tradition aspired to acquire—be it through textual validation or state grants. After all, when choosing between *margi* and *desi*, *margi* is unambiguously accepted as culturally superior.<sup>60</sup> Also, the concept of classical undergoes certain shifts. Secondly, in the post-independence period, a classical form not only stood for a timeless tradition embodying the nation but also is materially synonymous with a tradition which received the highest patronage from the state.<sup>61</sup> As a result, for the first fifteen years after the establishment of SNA, only the classical performers were recognized through the coveted SNA awards and fellowships.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, apart from the value of these awards as markers of excellence, there was another critical issue at stake – not being recognized as ‘classical’ by the state entailed one’s inability to make ‘into’ its circuits of magnanimity and privilege.<sup>63</sup>

#### The ‘folk’ idiom—patronage for the ‘marginalized’

While the entire discourse on classicism remained arbitrary and shifting, the case of ‘folk’ arts was not much different. As already mentioned, these categories of ‘classical’, ‘folk’, ‘tribal’ and ‘traditional’<sup>64</sup>, although appearing in various policy statements and official documents of SNA, remained exceedingly fuzzy as far as exact definition and characteristics of these categories were concerned. As a result, these categories were often used interchangeably to describe the same form.<sup>65</sup> In the particular case of folk forms, despite lacking a proper definition, they came to represent certain aesthetic and cultural connotations in the cultural discourses constituted on and around them. While on the one hand, the folk idiom embodied the epiphanic notion of a pristine, unchanging and timeless tradition, on the other, it also served as a category into which initially all other non-classical forms were clubbed.<sup>66</sup> The charm of the folk was also in its ‘innocence’, presented as being ‘unpolluted’ by the ‘progress’ of modernity. Its incorporation into the official cultural discourse of the

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<sup>60</sup> *Margi* means ‘of the path’ and *Deshi* means ‘of the people’. However, these concepts have been defined differently by different people. For details refer to footnote 36.

<sup>61</sup> Probably, this in turn explains the reluctance of the artists to seek recognition in the ‘folk’ category, despite having provision for it.

<sup>62</sup> A study of the ‘Awards section’ of the The Sangeet Natak Akademi News Bulletins reveals that.

<sup>63</sup> Cherian, pp.128-9.

<sup>64</sup> Interestingly, in the news bulletins of the SNA in the initial years, these ‘other’ dance forms were designated as the ‘traditional’ (as opposed to the classical) and not ‘folk’.

<sup>65</sup> This continues also even after a ‘folk’ form is recasted as ‘classical’.

<sup>66</sup> Cherian, p.89.

time involved the selective appropriation of some of its elements and the rejection of the rest. To elucidate, the modern nation-state, wanted to preserve the untampered primitiveness of the folk while maintaining the hierarchy between refined art forms, often developed in urban centres, and the rural and rustic folk forms. Nevertheless, folk remained an important, albeit contentious area of the state's continuous negotiation and representation as according to the state, the responsibility of preserving the 'innocent' primitiveness of the folk belonged to the state alone.<sup>67</sup>

So began the drill of (re)presenting folk forms from different parts of India on the occasion of government festivities such as the Republic Day Parade and Folk Dance Festivals from the early 1950s where folk performances were reduced to a 'spectacle'. These endeavours were consistent with the spirit of 'unity in diversity', through which the urban audience of the 'new' India gets introduced to their exotic 'other'.<sup>68</sup> In fact, Nehru on the occasion of the First Folk Dance Festival in 1953, initiated as a part of the annual Republic Day celebrations on January 26<sup>th</sup>, made it clear that the objectives of this festival was to acquaint Delhi with the folk performers from the distant parts of India. He added that this interaction was organized by the state to enable the former to savour the richness of the 'real India'<sup>69</sup> and the 'unifying bond which holds' all of this 'together'.<sup>70</sup>

As is evident, all the celebrations of the folk at the same time are very much linked with the interlinked discourses of 'authenticity, preservation, revival, and dissemination'—with state being the sole authority taking decisions in all these matters.<sup>71</sup> In the particular case of folk, the trope of authenticity was vital owing to the vulnerability of it losing its unique rural and primitive innocence under the onslaught of modernity. The Haksar Committee Report, hence, states:

We are not overlooking the natural process of change which must affect the lifestyles of the folk artistes or the population in the rural and tribal areas. Nor are we suggesting that their arts must never be subjected to external exposure. On the contrary, we fully recognize the need to encourage on refined ways the wide appreciation of our art forms. What we wish to stress is that injurious

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<sup>67</sup>Cherian, p.90.

<sup>68</sup>Urmimala Sarkar Munsri, 'Another Time, Another Space---Does the Dance Remain the Same?', in PallabiChakravorty&Nilanjana Gupta (eds.) *Dance Matters: Performing India*, (Routledge, New Delhi, 2010), p.36.

<sup>69</sup>"real India with its rich cultural heritage not created by the imagination of a few gifted persons but shaped by a whole people in the course of centuries." GovindVidyarthi cited in Cherian, p.129.

<sup>70</sup>Cherian, p.130.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

extraneous elements ought not to be brought into any given cultural milieu in the name of promotion and progress.<sup>72</sup>

Hence, it is hardly surprising that in such instances (read opportunities) of state presentations, the standards were set by the organizers, in most cases the organizing bureaucracy—so that nothing but the ‘authentic’ gets (re)presented.<sup>73</sup>

While it is evident, folk constituted an important part of the nation’s aesthetic, it nevertheless remained secondary to the classical in importance and patronage. What entails then is a continuous anxiety of portraying several forms as classical—a point which has been discussed above. In the particular genre of Chhau, similar attempts were made. Not only that the exponents and scholars of individual styles of Seraikella, Mayurbhanj and Purulia have claimed for classical status, but this tension also manifested itself in a contest between the three styles for being represented as more authentic and classical in nature. Different narratives claiming validity for the respective styles emerged with the state playing the role of the adjudicator of legitimacy. I delve into this in the next section by exploring how the state with its own sets of cultural parameters creates a hierarchy among the three styles within the same form of Chhau, resulting in selective patronage opportunities and visibility of one at the cost of the others.

## **Section 2: The Hierarchy Within: A comparative assessment of governmental patronage from the centre towards Seraikella style, Mayurbhanj style and Purulia style.**

In the previous section, I have argued how the cultural discourses constituted by the state academies and individuals through the articulation of different categories have glorified some forms at the cost of the others. Now, in this section I would discuss the role of state patronage in the development and propagation of the Chhau form in specific by the central academy—which includes all the three styles viz. Seraikella, Mayurbhanj and Purulia within its ambit.

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<sup>72</sup>*Report of the High-Powered Committee Appointed to Review the Performance of the National Akademies And the National School of Drama*, (Department of Culture, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, 1990),p.117.

<sup>73</sup> “Given the charge of the Festival’s administration in the late 1950s, the Akademi used the opportunity, based, I must add, on expertise acquired over just a few years, to judge and document the “authenticity” of the troupes’ dance and costume. The Festival also helped the SNA expand its ethnographic archive on a yearly basis, by presenting visiting troupes with questionnaires in order to “collect an authentic record of their regional folk lore.” Cherian, p.131.

Seraikella Chhau is from the Seraikella Kharsawan district, presently located in the state of Jharkhand in Eastern India, adjacent to Purulia district in West Bengal. Pre-independence, this region came under the jurisdiction of the princely state of Mayurbhanja, courtesy which the performers of Seraikella Chhau enjoyed direct royal patronage for a considerable amount of time. Through a combination of martial arts and basic movement patterns called *Khels* and *Uphlis* (somersaults), this style mainly enacts various characters from folklore and mythology that emphasize on the emotional intricacies of the characters. The principle area of consonance between the Seraikella and the Purulia style lies in the usage of masks in performance. Some scholars have argued that Chhau dance originated from Seraikella and subsequently spread to the other two regions. Hence, this ancient lineage coupled with the legacy of princely patronage testifies the classical character of the form. According to Enakshi Bhavnani, Chhau dance of Saraikela has got three main elements of the classical dance, *Bhava* or mood, *Raga* or Melody of songs, *Tala* or rhythmic timing, as prescribed in the *Natyashastra*.<sup>74</sup>

Mayurbhanj Chhau is from Mayurbhanj District of Orissa and is performed without masks, unlike the Purulia or Seraikella forms.<sup>75</sup> According to S. Mohanty, it was during the rule of the late Maharaja Krishna Chandra Bhanj Deo (1863-82), that this style<sup>76</sup> rose to prominence and competitions were held between performers of the *Uttar Sahi* (North Province) and *Dakshin Sahi* (South Province), regularly. However, after his death in 1882 the *Chaitra Parva* ceremony and celebrations were just kept alive by the device of donating sweets to the two parties who danced for two nights.<sup>77</sup> In the post-independence period, in both the Mayurbhanj and Seraikella styles, the participation of female performers have been encouraged, unlike the Purulia style.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>Enakshi Bhavnani, *Dance in India* (D.B. Taraporewala Sons & Co. Pvt. Ltd., Bombay, 1965).

<sup>75</sup>Urmimala Sarkar Munsri, 'The Changing Stage: Chhau as an Intangible Cultural Heritage', in *The International Journal of Arts, Culture & Heritage*, Volume 1, Special Edition, 2012, p.162.

<sup>76</sup> A wide range of scholars working on Chhau, prefers to use the name 'chho', in order to be true to the tribal root of this word and against the naming of the dance tradition as 'chhau' by 'upper-caste' elites. To quote Pashupati Prasad Mahato, "the collective excellence, wisdom, accommodation, tremendous energy generating dance drama which we people by birth, socialization and training told as Chho, the wise prof. (Ashutosh Bhattacharya) has given the terminology 'chhaw' which means a delicious Chinese food." Pashupati Prasad Mahato, *The Performing Arts of Jharkhand*, (B.B. Prakashan, Calcutta, 1987), p.7

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p.49

<sup>78</sup>Shubha Srinivasan, 'Preservation of India's Intangible Cultural Heritage: The Case of Chhau Dance' in *Marg*, Volume 1 Issue 65, September 2013, pp.43-44.

As I have already mentioned in the Introduction, Purulia style of Chhau dance, hails from the district of Purulia, situated in the western part of West Bengal, neighbouring the Seraikella and Singhbhum regions of Jharkhand. Unlike the Seraikella and Mayurbhanj styles, Purulia Chhau prides in its exclusive folk nature which is in tune with the folk flavours of the region.

From my earlier contention about how the hierarchy between the classical and non-classical affected the overall 'visibility' and patronage of different forms, I now argue through a discussion on the nature of state patronage received by each of these styles, that such hierarchy exists in the case of Chhau as well. In other words, I show that even within the generic form of Chhau, the style which exhibits comparatively more stylistic elements – the Seraikella style - receives the maximum facilities, resulting in the marginalization of the other styles—the Mayurbhanj style to some extent but mostly the Purulia style . So, the marginalization works on two levels—first, it is always the classical form which is preferred to the folk and secondly, among the non-classical, there exists a preference for the semi-classical over the exclusively folk or the tribal. As a result, the official representation that follows such endeavours, often represents the Seraikella style blatantly as 'Chhau', without stating the specific regional identities associated with the individual styles. Such initiatives hence, portrays Seraikella as the sole representative of the Chhau dance form within which the other two styles are subsumed.

The Chhau in general has a complicated history of patronage as far as the central academy is concerned. Situating Chhau within the official cultural discourse of binaries was evidently difficult as the three styles within Chhau had completely different sets of movement patterns in their repertoire, which cannot be neatly bracketed into either the classical, or the folk binaries. Hence, several categories were invoked from time to time to depict all the three styles of Chhau —'semi-classical', 'traditional', 'martial', and also the oft-employed brackets of 'folk' and 'tribal'. This arbitrary usage of vague categories in respect to Mayurbhanj Chhau once prompted Kapila Vatsyayan to question the utility of such categorisations. On the occasion of Dr. Raghavan Shashtyabdapurti lecture organised by the Madras Music Academy, she explained:

Mayurbhanj Chhau presents many problems of classification in terms of the categories of Indian dance styles. During the last few years I have been concerned with the Indian cultural phenomenon which presents a complex picture of inter-dependance (sic.) of styles in an area and

inter-connection with similar forms prevalent outside a region, not to speak of inter-relationship of art forms about which I have spoken elsewhere. My inquiries into several dance-traditions, or for that matter, musical traditions, or the traditions of the plastic arts revealed that it was no longer possible to classify Indian artistic manifestations in to neat little categories of classical and folk. Mayurbhanj Chhau presents a good example for conducting case-study of these categories and the inadequacy of the terminology which hitherto has been used for describing Indian art-forms.<sup>79</sup>

This ambivalence disabled Chhau from for attaining the coveted status of classical. While the presence of a codified structure has been central in the arguments claiming classical status for the form, the non-elite socio-economic backgrounds of the tribal performers and mode of performance disabled it from the privilege of being the classical. As a result, when similarities were sought between Kathakali - a recognized classical dance - and Chhau, KapilaVatsyayan argued that the reason for Chhau not being accepted as classical is due to the lack of classical elements in its repertoire.<sup>80</sup> Interestingly, in the same work, while elaborating (read justifying) on the reasons behind the recognition of the Kathakali and Manipuri dance traditions as classical forms, Vatsyayan emphasized more on the putative syncretism of the local, rural and tribal influences.<sup>81</sup> Interestingly, the present official categorization places Chhau as a one of the 'Major Dance Traditions'<sup>82</sup> which includes both the recognized and the aspiring classical dances.

#### Background of patronage scenario of the three styles

Among these three styles, the existence of the Seraikella and Mayurbhanj styles of Chhau were known in the pre-independence period. By the time India achieved independence, the Mayurbhanj Chhau had already performed at the coronation of George V in Calcutta (1911) and Seraikella Chhau had completed its first foreign tour (1936-37). In contrast, the Purulia Chhau remains a 'discovery' of the postcolonial times. Additionally, there was also not much literature on the Purulia Chhau in the pre-independence period, limiting the visibility of the dance beyond the Purulia region. So, in the post-independence period, when the central government commenced with its initiatives towards the promotion

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<sup>79</sup>KapilaVatsyayan, 'A Study of Mayurbhanj Chhau in Relation to Other Dance-Forms of Orissa', *Journal of Madras Music Academy*, Vol.45, 1974, p.119.

<sup>80</sup>KapilaVatsyayan, *Indian Classical Dance* (Publication Division, Government of India, 1974), p.57.

<sup>81</sup>Vatsyayan (1974), pp.3-9. In the case of Kathakali, Vatsyayan mentions about the regional forms like Othamthullal and Theyyam but mainly emphasizes on the influence of the Sanskrit dance-drama tradition of Kudiattam on the final development of Kathakali.

<sup>82</sup> See Footnote 1.

and preservation of cultural traditions, the Purulia Chhau remained largely ignored. It was not until the end of 1960s following the efforts of Ashutosh Bhattacharya that Purulia Chhau made an appearance on the national stage. Following the performance of Purulia Chhau at Rabindra-Bhavan in New Delhi in 1958, Mohan Khokar, hence, writes:

“The name Chhau is not unfamiliar. But to most minds it is associated mostly with the tradition of mask dance obtaining in Seraikella. Some are also aware of another Chhau, of Mayurbhanj, which is performed without masks, but the Purulia version has till now more or less remained more or less obscure and unsung, for it has practically never been staged outside its own secluded habitat.”<sup>83</sup>

After this performance, the Purulia Chhau was well appreciated which possibly opened up new opportunities for the form and the performers. In 1971 at the initiative of Dr. F. Richmond, an American Professor, Purulia Chhau had its first abroad tour to America<sup>84</sup>, where it was represented as the ‘Indian village theatre’.<sup>85</sup> Soon after, a tour to Paris, London and the Netherlands was organized by Ashutosh Bhattacharya in 1972. In 1979, the Purulia Chhau dancers travelled to Australia for a performance<sup>86</sup> and in 1981, the Purulia Chhau performed in the International Seminar on Ramayana, organised by the Sahitya Akademi at Delhi,<sup>87</sup> followed by two consecutive performances held on the 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> October as a part of the programme of the LokUtsav of 1987.<sup>88</sup> In 1988, along with the Seraikella form, Purulia Chhau featured in the Nrityotsava organized by Department of Culture, Andhra Pradesh.<sup>89</sup>

However, despite such international acclaim, Purulia Chhau made little progress on the national scenario as far as state patronage was concerned. Although the performance of Purulia Chhau at Rabindra-Bhavan, initially created a stir amongst the national audience, resulting in occasional invitations for performance in different parts of the country,<sup>90</sup> the novelty associated with the form soon faded away. So while both the Seraikella and Mayurbhanj Chhau came to be presented in almost all the folk dance festivals that were organised under the aegis of Ministry of Culture and SNA since 1953, Purulia Chhau barely

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<sup>83</sup> Mohan Khokar, ‘The Chhau Dance of Purulia’, *The Times of India* (1861-current); August 3, 1969, p. 17.

<sup>84</sup> ‘Gesture Language’, *The Times of India* (1861-current), November 1, 1975, p. 6.

<sup>85</sup> T M P Nedungadi, ‘Saving A Rare Drama Form’, *The Times of India* (1861-current), November 9, 1975, p. 13.

<sup>86</sup> ‘Cultural Exchanges’, *The Times of India* (1861-current), January 31, 1979, p. 19.

<sup>87</sup> *The Sangeet Natak Akademi News Bulletin*, January-June 1981, p.12.

<sup>88</sup> *The Sangeet Natak Akademi News Bulletin*, October-December 1987, p.12.

<sup>89</sup> *The Sangeet Natak Akademi News Bulletin*, October-December 1988, No.4, p.9.

<sup>90</sup> In December 1977, Purulia Chhau performs at the SNDT Women’s University at Bombay as reported in *The Times of India* (1861-current); Dec 16, 1977, p.3.



made an appearance. Even contemporary writings on folk dances only mentioned Seraikella and Mayurbhanj styles in respect to the Chhau forms. In *Sangeet Natak* alone, the journal of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, there are two articles on Seraikella Chhau and three on Mayurbhanj, in contrast to one on the mask dances of Purulia Chhau by Ashutosh Bhattacharya in 1965.<sup>91</sup> Even in the special issue of the *Marg*--the celebrated journal of dance - on Chhau which has a detailed description of the both the Seraikella and Mayurbhanj styles, fails to include any article on Purulia Chhau which was then mentioned in passing along with the other two forms.<sup>92</sup>

### Reasons behind marginalization: the case of Purulia Chhau

It was first in the 1969 bulletins of the SNA that one finds the mention of Purulia Chhau. The two page coverage elaborated on the nature of the form with the cover itself depicting a Purulia Chhau dancer posing with his elaborate mask. Chronologically, it was published after the first programme of the Purulia Chhau in the premises of the Rabindra Bhavan in 1968, which ironically finds no mention in either of the 1968 or 1969 news bulletins. In the brief two page write up, a general idea of Purulia, its inhabitants and the dance form is provided where the latter is predominantly described as a martial dance form of the aboriginal people of the region. Unlike the trend of the SNA news bulletins where the cover itself provides an idea of the cover story and there is subsequently an elaborate explanation as to why particular story is chosen as the cover<sup>93</sup>, this time the general background of the Purulia Chhau did not mention the reason behind the choice. Such absence of clarity remains quite significant.

The reason for this apparent negligence of the Purulia Chhau, I argue, is due to two factors—first, as is the general belief, in contrast to Seraikella and Mayurbhanj styles, Purulia Chhau lacked any sort of stylistic sophistication.<sup>94</sup> Owing to the courtly patronage received by both the former two styles, their movement patterns were more codified than Purulia. Especially for Seraikella style, some scholars have argued how the different elements within

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<sup>91</sup>Asutosh Bhattacharya, 'Mask Dances of Bengal', *Sangeet Natak*, No.7, 1965, pp.9-12.

<sup>92</sup> Sunil Kothari (ed.), *Special Issue on Chhau Dances of India*, (Marg Publications, Bombay, 1968).

<sup>93</sup>For instance, the news bulletin which covered the Yakshagana seminar (i.e. *The Sangeet Natak Akademi News Bulletin* of 1959, No.11-12) had Yakshagana performer on the cover. Similarly, for the same reason, *The Sangeet Natak Akademi News Bulletin* of 1972 featured the sarod maestro Alauddin Khan on the cover after his demise.

<sup>94</sup> Sarkar Munsif (2012).

the Seraikella repertoire followed the dictums of the *Natyashastra*.<sup>95</sup> As far as the Mayurbhanj style was concerned, it was more or less accepted as a form syncretic of both the classical and folk elements.<sup>96</sup> The absence of masks also worked in favour for Mayurbhanj as it provided a novelty within the styles of Chhau. Thus, these representations of Seraikella and Mayurbhanj forms of being ‘almost-classical’ worked in their favour with respect to state recognition, contrary to the Purulia Chhau which had no ‘classical’ characteristics whatsoever.

Secondly, it always happened both in case of the classical and the folk that the manner in which a particular form is being (re)presented often came to determine the status it was accorded to. Among the three styles, Seraikella Chhau had the maximum number of representatives in the central academy, who were all too keen to promote the form in every possible way. That is why, despite the decline of the erstwhile patronage of the princely rulers, Seraikella Chhau boasted the maximum number of SNA awards (Sudhendra Narayan Singh Deo-1962, Kedarnath Sahu-1981, Bikram Kumbhakar-1990, Shashadhar Acharya-2004 and Jai Narayan Samal- 2012)<sup>97</sup> within the Chhau genre. Even at present, eminent personalities from the Saraikella Chhau such as Shashadhar Acharya remain at the helm of affairs on the Chhau at the central academy.

The state patronage provided by both the central and regional governments also amounted to lavish financial aid for infrastructural facilities. As the 1960 bulletin of Sangeet Natak Akademi records:

“A donation of Rs.15000 has been received from the Prime Minister’s Discretionary Fund for the promotion of ‘Chow’ dance of Seraikella (Singhbhum district). The Government of Bihar have also donated Rs.5000 to this end. The donations are proposed to be spent on the construction of a hall to be utilised as a “Chow” dancing centre at Seraikella.”<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup>Bhavnani(1965).

<sup>96</sup> “Chhau at Baripada has a wide range and style of performance, with influence of Kathakali, Manipuri and Kathak being quite discernible. Its “shringarras” is highly suggestive and near erotic being expectedly influenced by the temple sculptures at Konarak and Puri.” Madhu Upadhyay, ‘A Tattered Tradition’, The Times of India (1861-current), April 15, 1984, p. II.

<sup>97</sup><http://sangeetnatak.gov.in/sna/awardeelist.htm> (last accessed: 28/06/15).

<sup>98</sup> ‘Cultural Diary’, *The Sangeet Natak Akademi News Bulletin* 1960, No.17, pp.64-5. Overall Bihar government remained encouraging towards promoting its folk and tribal culture. The 1961 (*The Sangeet Natak Akademi News Bulletin* 1961, No.18) bulletin hence records :

“ ShriK.K.Singh, Bihar’s Deputy Education Minister, announced on August 7 at Ranchi that a full-fledged Tribal Dance and Music centre would be set up at Ranchi during the Third Plan. Inaugurating a three-day seminar on Development of Tribals in Bihar, he said that a Chhow Dance centre would also be started at Ranchi.

The receipt of such munificence from the state bestowed upon Seraikella Chhau nationwide recognition. As a result, the popularity of the Seraikella form extended far beyond Delhi to reach Chennai and Bombay. In 1973, Seraikella Chhau received the opportunity of performing at the Kalakshetra.<sup>99</sup> Not only that, V.K.Narayana Menon, the President of the National Centre for the Performing Arts took an active interest in promoting the Seraikella style.<sup>100</sup>

While there were certain individuals who were responsible for promoting Seraikella Chhau at the national level, for the Mayurbhanj form, it was the state government and certain dancers, who took the onus for bringing the form into limelight. The Odisha government as well as the Odisha Sangeet Natak Akademi, both were quite enthusiastic about portraying the Mayurbhanj Chhau as their cultural heritage. As a result, similar to Seraikella, the Mayurbhanj style boasts of five SNA awardees – Ananta Charan Sai (1971), Krishna Chandra Naik (1975), Madan Mohan Lenka (1987), Srihari Nayak (1988), and Chandra SekharBhanj (1991).<sup>101</sup> Additionally, with financial assistance from the central government a Chhau training centre was established in 1968 to impart training in Mayurbhanj Chhau named as the Mayurbhanj Chhau NrityaPratisthan.<sup>102</sup> Interestingly, in the governmental representation of Mayurbhanj style, its symbiotic association with the Odissi dance is often emphasized, implying the hegemony of the classical in the cultural discourses of state governments as well.<sup>103</sup> The second advantage of the Mayurbhanj style was that it attracted the attention of well-known dancers and eminent personalities from the theatre. Among the dancers, there was Ileana Citaresti, the Italian dancer,<sup>104</sup> and Daksha Seth, the famous exponent of Kathak, who learnt the Mayurbhanj style and incorporated it into their

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Such attempts would encourage the Adivasis to conserve the beauty and values of their culture, the Minister added.”p.59.

<sup>99</sup>*The Sangeet Natak Akademi News Bulletin*, May-August, 1973, p.8.

<sup>100</sup> Narayana Menon, ‘A Rejoinder: To The Editor, The Times of India’, *The Times of India* (1861-current) December 28, 1977,p.8.

<sup>101</sup><http://sangeetnatak.gov.in/sna/awardeeslist.htm> (last accessed: 28/06/15).

<sup>102</sup>*The Sangeet Natak Akademi News Bulletin*, September-December 1972,p.17.

<sup>103</sup>JiwanPani, ‘Chhau: A Comparative Study of Sareikela and Mayurbhanj Forms’, *Sangeet Natak*, No.13, 1971, pp.35-45.

<sup>104</sup> Sunil Kothari, ‘Ileana scores in Mayurbhanj Chhau: Dance,’ *The Times of India* (1861-current), June 7, 1986,p. 21.

contemporary dance idioms.<sup>105</sup> Even Manjushree ChakiSircar and RanjabatiSircar from the Dancer's Guild, Calcutta experimented with the form in their production.<sup>106</sup>

Unfortunately, in contrast to them, Purulia Chhau lacked both individual and governmental enthusiasm. Although there were concerted attempts by Ashutosh Bhattacharya for promoting Purulia Chhau as the authentic and classical dance form from West Bengal, there was not much support from the centre. Even while Bhattacharya was a fellow at SNA<sup>107</sup>, Purulia Chhau had very little presence in the events or festivals at both the central and the regional state academies, and after his death, the dance almost fell into oblivion till the 1980s after which the state government undertook some initiatives.<sup>108</sup> Even in case of the masks, there was very little interest. It was only in 1972, as part of the Exhibition of Masks and Puppets by SNA, Purulia Chhau masks were showcased along with Seraikella masks. The mask makers from Purulia were also invited for demonstrating the technique of mask-making.<sup>109</sup> Additionally, in contrast to Seraikella and Mayurbhanj, Gambhir Singh Mura, a well-known exponent of Purulia Chhau remains the sole SNA awardee for this style.<sup>110</sup> The hierarchy within the styles is so pronounced that on certain occasions, when all the three styles are performing, Purulia Chhau is generally demoted to the last slot in the programme schedule, without any well-defined reason for the same. On a similar occasion of the Asian festival of "theatre, dance and martial arts" at Calcutta in 1987, the Times of India coverage of the event, in fact, praised such sequential arrangement of the Chhau styles without elaborating on how such an arrangement enhanced the aesthetic qualities of the performance:

"As for the Chhau dances, someone had the sense to arrange them on the GyanManch stage in an ascending scale of impact. Mayurbhanj of Orissa came Seraikella of Bihar, and then Purulia of Bengal."<sup>111</sup>

Hence, it is quite evident that the efforts of the central government reached only the Seraikella and Mayurbhanj performers while the Purulia troupes remain outside the ambit of

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<sup>105</sup> N. Hariharan, 'Daksha's chhau fare breathtaking,' The Times of India (1861-current), November 15, 1987, p.8.

<sup>106</sup> Prakriti Kashyap, 'Delicate blend of styles: Chandaliika: choreographed by Manjusri and Ranjabati Chaki Sircar', The Times of India (1861-current), January 14, 1993, p.4.

<sup>107</sup> <http://sangeetnatak.gov.in/sna/fellowlist.htm> (last accessed: 28/06/15).

<sup>108</sup> To be dealt in the next section.

<sup>109</sup> *The Sangeet Natak Akademi News Bulletin*, September-December, 1972, pp.1-2.

<sup>110</sup> <http://sangeetnatak.gov.in/sna/awardeeslist.htm> (last accessed: 28/06/15).

<sup>111</sup> Dnyaneshwar A. R. Nadkarni, 'U.S. presence at theatre fest', The Times of India (1861-current), December 24, 1987, p.21.

its patronage. Interestingly, when I enquired about such tokenisms offered to the Purulia Chhau by the central academy, one official of SNA informed me that unlike the Seraikella and Mayurbhanj styles, the Purulia style receives patronage from local people. Therefore, she contended that the loss of princely patronage left the Purulia form relatively unaffected, as compared to the other two styles which were facing a serious crisis in the post-independence period. She then assured me that the academy is in the process of building institutions for the promotion and training of Purulia Chhau on the lines of the Seraikella and Mayurbhanj Chhau academies.<sup>112</sup> One does not fathom as to why such a project, which was initiated from the late 1980s failed to establish a separate institution for the Purulia style till the present day.

Now, it is imperative that despite its best efforts the central academy cannot promote a form without the active support of regional state institutions of culture, or a critical mass of eminent personalities. This is where the role of the regional state becomes instrumental.

### **Section 3: The patronage of Purulia Chhau: the West Bengal chapter**

Soon after the establishment of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, there were efforts undertaken to establish regional state academies for the promotion of cultural traditions from regions placed afar from New Delhi. The state of West Bengal was no exception. Hence, the West Bengal State Academy of Dance, Drama and Music was established in 1956 for promoting the regional art traditions. The SNA news bulletin of 1956 records:

A step towards advancement and enrichment of Bengal's culture was taken when the State Chief Minister Dr. B.C.Roy laid the foundation stone of the Academy of dance, Drama and Music inside the compound of Rabindra Bharati Bhavan at Dwarkanath Tagore Lane, Jorasanko. The Academy will be housed in a three storeyed building which is proposed to be constructed by the State Government at an estimated cost of Rs. 5½ lakhs. While inaugurating the function Dr.Roy referred to the noble influence which music exercises on the mind of the individual as also on the nation as a whole. He hoped that the teachers and students of the Academy would, through music hold aloft before the people the rich contribution which Rabindranath had made in this field.<sup>113</sup>

However, despite the establishment of this academy in emulation of central academy, the state of West Bengal followed a separate and singular politico-cultural trajectory. As the Khosla Committee report expounds, the matters of culture in West Bengal are controlled by

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<sup>112</sup> This conversation with one of the officers (name withheld) of the Dance Section, Sangeet Natak Akademi on 19/05/15.

<sup>113</sup> 'Cultural Diary', *The Sangeet Natak Akademi News Bulletin*, No.5, 1956, p.65.

the Department of Education which mainly functioned through two main institutions: the Rabindra Sadan, executing actions similar to the central academy, and the Rabindra Bharati University, focusing on professional training and research in different art traditions. In the midst of these two institutions, the West Bengal State Akademi remained relatively subdued in terms of importance received from the regional state.<sup>114</sup> The Rabindra Sadan was managed by a Committee nominated by the State Government, the Chairman being the Minister of Education or the Secretary of the Education Department (in the absence of the Minister). The Sadan owns a theatre, class rooms and conference rooms, all of which are lent out for cultural performances. The Rabindra Bharati University, established on the centenary birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore in 1961, on the other hand, provided degrees and diplomas for students trained in music, dance and theatre.<sup>115</sup>

### The singular cultural trajectory of West Bengal

Although initiatives such as the establishment of the West Bengal State Akademi were initiated from the 1950s by the West Bengal government, concerted state initiatives towards preserving and promoting regional cultural traditions remained significantly missing. In fact, in the first two decades after independence, while culture in general has begun to feature in the Five Year Plans at the centre, no state endeavours on the part of West Bengal government towards culture could be detected. Whatever initiatives that are taken in the direction of culture and specifically in dance in the post-independence period, were essentially individual efforts like Ahindra Choudhury<sup>116</sup> (modern theatre), Ashutosh Bhattacharya (Purulia Chhau) or groups like Indian People's Theatre Association.

Even on the occasions of national events organized by central state institutions, such reluctance was very much evident. Unlike the majority of other regional states, West Bengal barely made an appearance in the festivals and ceremonies organized by the central government in the first two decades after independence. In the Folk Dance Festivals which were held since 1953, West Bengal's participation has remained sporadic over the past seven

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<sup>114</sup>*The Report of the Committee Appointed To Review the Working of The National Akademies and The Indian Council for Cultural Relations*, (Ministry of Education And Social Welfare, Government of India, 1973), pp.116-118, 186.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p.118.

<sup>116</sup> The Sangeet Natak Akademi Bulletin, 1953, p.18.

decades.<sup>117</sup> In a review of the Folk Dance Festival of 1959, Mohan Khokar, the renowned dance critic, once urged:

The dance troupes this year were drawn from all corners of India, but one wishes there had also been parties from some of the regions which had sent none and this could have perhaps been arranged and adjusted conveniently if no single region had been allowed to send more than one troupe.... It would no doubt have added to the variety of the Festival if some of these additional dance groups had been replaced by ones from the unrepresented regions, such as Kashmir, Bengal, Saurashtra, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu.<sup>118</sup>

The Department of Culture also initiated the scheme on 'Inter-State Exchange of Cultural Troupes' from 1957, to facilitate visits of individual artists and groups of one state to other states, to give performances at various selected centres. The scheme was structured to promote emotional and cultural integration in the country and was supported with a budgetary provision of Rs.5,00,000, which was transferred in 1980 to the Akademi for implementation."<sup>119</sup> While there are mentions about the different cultural exchanges happening since then between the different regional states, artistes from West Bengal were again conspicuous in their absence. The news bulletins of SNA records that it had always been other states touring West Bengal excepting one instance, when a group was sent to the Andaman & Nicobar Islands.<sup>120</sup>

#### The idea of 'folk' through *Lokashruti*

It is only after the inception of the Left Front government in 1977 that the state of West Bengal took an active interest, separate from those of the central institution, in the matters of culture, and especially folk culture. At the initiative of the state government, the Folk and Tribal Cultural Centre (initially known as the Institute of Folk Culture) was established in 1980, serving as an important platform which encouraged dissemination and discussion on the culture of the subalterns. The institute brought out a biannual journal titled *Lokashrutithrough* through which the idea of the folk was constituted in an urban setting.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> A close perusal of The Sangeet Natak Akademi News Bulletins from 1952 to 1989 (as available) notices this significant absence of West Bengal in this endeavor of the central institution.

<sup>118</sup> *The Sangeet Natak Akademi News Bulletin*, No.11-12, April 1959, p.27.

<sup>119</sup> *The Sangeet Natak Akademi News Bulletin*, January-June 1981, p.21.

<sup>120</sup> *The Sangeet Natak Akademi News Bulletin*, January-June 1988, p.23.

<sup>121</sup> Roma Chatterji, *Writing Identities: Folklore and Performative Arts of Purulia, Bengal* (Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts, New Delhi, 2009), p.xiv.

*Lokashruti* was first published as *Lokavanga* in February 1984 and from then onwards continues to be published till date. The introduction of the edited volume of thirty-four selected essays from *Lokashruti* published in 1999 states that the main objective behind its circulation was to inculcate a critical study of folk culture through the tools of social science, in contrast to the descriptive and romanticized portrayal of the same which was in vogue in the recent past.<sup>122</sup> However, despite *Lokashruti*'s success in fulfilling a number of its objectives, the image of folk that emerged through its platform essentially remained elitist. The reason is that the editorial board, contributors and readers of the journal remained predominantly urban in character and were far removed from rural realities. As a result, the platform often voiced the concern of the state in the preservation and propagation of the folk art forms, referring to the familiar tropes of authenticity and vulnerability in their discussion about folk practices. Hence, despite the apparent differences in motivations and worldviews through which they approached the realm of the folk, the regional state government effectively remained on the same page as the central academy.

The discourse on folk that is constituted through *Lokashruti* hence has certain common themes. Firstly, the essence of folk culture lies in its timeless legacy of primitivism. This idea coupled with the shibboleth of 'unity in diversity' painted the picture of a harmonious existence of the different, often divergent cultures. As the folklorist Dr. Sudhirkumar Karan, argued:

আৰ্য--দ্রাবিড়--নিষাদ--কিরাতবর্গীয় বিভিন্ন ভাষা-উপভাষায় আবদ্ধ, রাজনৈতিক চিত্রে বিভিন্ন রাজ্যে বিভক্ত, ভৌগলিক কারণে বিভিন্ন ভূ-প্রকৃতির সঙ্গে সংশ্লিষ্ট এবং সামাজিক-সাংস্কৃতিক ধারায় বিচিত্র ভারতবর্ষকে একটি মহাদেশের সঙ্গেই তুলনা করা চলে। কিন্তু সামগ্রিকভাবে ভারতবর্ষ এক অখণ্ড এবং অন্তঃসলিলা সাংস্কৃতিক ধারায় সমন্বিত। এই কারণে, বিভিন্ন জনজাতি-জনজাতির সঙ্গে সমতলবাসী অগ্রসর সমাজের লোককথার মধ্যেও নিবিড় ঐক্য বর্তমান।.....ভাষাগত এবং সংস্কৃতিগতভাবে এইসব জনজাতির মধ্যে পার্থক্যেও থাকলেও, এঁদের লোককথা মূলতত সর্বভারতীয় লোককথার ধারার সঙ্গেই সংপৃক্ত। অবশ্য একথাও ঠিক যে.....স্থানীয় কিংবদন্তী, রীতিনীতি-অনুষ্ঠান-সম্পর্কিত কাহিনীও সম্প্রদায়ভেদে পৃথক। কিন্তু সামগ্রিকভাবে জনজাতির লোককথার মধ্যে হিন্দুপুরাণ-উপপুরাণের এবং পরম্পরাগত লোককথার প্রভাব যথেষ্ট।<sup>123</sup>

<sup>122</sup> 'Bhumika' (in Bengali) in Mihir Bhattacharya (ed.), *Lokashruti: PrabandhaSankalan* (in Bengali), Folk and Tribal Cultural Centre Publication, Calcutta, November 1999).

<sup>123</sup> SudhirKumar Karan, 'Bharatiya Lokakathar Anya Diganta' (in Bengali), Mihir Bhattacharya (ed.) *Lokashruti Prabandha Sankalan* (in Bengali) (The Folk and Tribal Cultural Centre Publication, Calcutta, 1999), pp.27-9.



(The simultaneous presence of Aryans, Dravidians and numerous indigenous groups, each with their distinctive schools of language; the numerous autonomous regional kingdoms fragmenting the political space; and the representation of multiple varied geographical regions make the Indian landmass akin to a continent. However, inspite of these heterogenous elements, there exists a unique brand of culture which originated from the soil of the country and had bound all Indians together over time and space. Precisely for this reason, there exists a deep-rooted unity within the underdeveloped indigenous groups, residing chiefly in the forested parts of the country, and the relatively advanced agrarian and urban populations...While there exists differences in language and cultural practices among these indigenous groups, their folklores are consistent with those prevalent across the rest of India. While it is undeniable that the presence of local traditions causes contrasts in the rituals and practices described in the folklores across ethnic groups, taken as a whole though, the indigenous folklore remains much influenced by the Hindu Puranas and Upapuranas.<sup>124</sup>)

Secondly, the view that folk culture with its inherent spontaneous innocence required active protection from the onslaught of modernity was propagated. It was believed and argued that the invasion of modern technological innovations such as the visual and audio broadcasting mediums into the realm of folk art would eventually ‘corrupt’ these forms, leaving them bereft of their uniqueness. While the natural evolution of folk traditions was acceptable, market oriented alterations was apprehended to have the potential of robbing them of their ‘spontaneous naiveté’. Thus, Mihir Bhattacharya, the editor of the compiled volume, expounds:

লোকসংস্কৃতি...নিজের নিয়মেই বিবর্তিত হয়, নিজের গতিতেই নিজেকে ভেঙেচুরে তার ডৌল বদলে ফেলে, নিজস্বতা ক্ষুণ্ণ না করেই।.....(কিন্তু) বাউল গাইয়ে যখন তাঁর গানে বিজাতীয় স্বরক্ষেপ বা চটুল বাক্ বিস্তার এনে ফেলেন তখন তাঁর চেতনায় কাজ করে নিজের গ্রামীণ গণ্ডির বাইরের সাংস্কৃতিক বাজারের চাকচিক্যময় সঙ্ঘারের আদল...লোকসংস্কৃতি লোকের মাঝখান থেকে অর্থাৎ গ্রামীণ জনগণের সান্নিধ্য থেকে তুলে আনলে বাজারের দায়িত্ব করা তার পক্ষে সবচেয়ে সরল বেঁচে থাকার পথ। শহরে বাজারের মানসিকতা এবং রুচি অনেক সময় সংক্রমিত হয় গ্রামীণ জনসাধারণের মধ্যে, এবং তখন অনুচ্চারিত হলেও দাবি গড়ে ওঠে ভিন্নতর প্রমোদের জন্য। আসল সঙ্কট এইখানে।<sup>125</sup>

<sup>124</sup>Translation courtesy Ritadhi.

<sup>125</sup> Mihir Bhattacharya, ‘Adhunik Ganamadhyam Ebang Lokasangskritir Bhabishyat’ (in Bengali) in Mihir Bhattacharya (ed.) *Lokashruti Prabandha Sankalan* (in Bengali) (The Folk and Tribal Cultural Centre Publication, Calcutta, 1999), p.45.

(Folk cultures evolve along their own distinct trajectories and retain the ability to completely transform themselves, while retaining their inherent originality. However, when a *baul* artist introduces foreign tunes or catchy lyrics into his/her songs, his/her mentality is influenced by the marketability of the music beyond the familiar domain of the village. If folk cultures are removed from their rural backdrop, its easiest mode of survival is to cater to urban consumers. Moreover, it is often seen that the demands of the urban market for performing arts often permeate through the rural populace, resulting in subtle calls for alterations of folk performances. The real threat to folk cultures lies in here.)<sup>126</sup>

While critiques were also launched against such assertions, they were fewer in number. Malini Bhattacharya, an activist and scholar, in one of her articles had explicated upon the cultural elitist appropriation which was continuing in the name of promoting folk culture.<sup>127</sup> Using the specific example of Purulia Chhau, she argued on how the predominance of the classical in the cultural discourse of the time has reduced folk forms into being a representative of the uncivilized subalterns, which required no training. Any exception to this general rule then was explained through a seeking of derivations from certain classical forms, regardless of the veracity of such derivations. She cites for instance that the codified structure and practice of rigorous training in Purulia Chhau is often confounded and misrepresented by certain folklorists like Ashutosh Bhattacharya, in their mission to define the Purulia Chhau as a classical tradition.<sup>128</sup> On a similar note, Dibyajyoti Majumdar, the folk culture expert, pleaded in another essay to alter the gaze of looking at folk culture in general. He asserted that instead of being anxious about the vulnerability of folk forms - again a construct of the dominant cultural discourse - it is better to let them thrive on their own without crying foul over the 'loss' of authenticity.<sup>129</sup> Scholars writing on Purulia Chhau like Subodh Basuray and Pashupati Mahato have also been critical regarding this anxiety of preserving the 'pristine purity' of folk forms such as Chhau.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Translation courtesy Ritadhi.

<sup>127</sup> Malini Bhattacharya, 'Loker Janye Lokasangskriti' (in Bengali) in Mihir Bhattacharya (ed.) *Lokashruti Prabandha Sankalan* (in Bengali) (The Folk and Tribal Cultural Centre Publication, Calcutta, 1999), pp.20-26.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p.21.

<sup>129</sup> Dibyajyoti Mazumdar, 'Lokasangskritir Bhabishyat: Kichhu Prasangik Bhabna', in Mihir Bhattacharya (ed.) *Lokashruti Prabandha Sankalan* (in Bengali) (The Folk and Tribal Cultural Centre Publication, Calcutta, 1999), p.52.

<sup>130</sup> Subodh Basuray, 'Puruliyar Chho Nache Mukhosh Keno' (in Bengali) in *Lokashruti*, Volume 2, No.2, June 2004; Pashupati Mahato, 'Shahure Budhijibi Bonaam Jharkhandi Biplabi Lokasangit' in *Lok*, Year 7, No.11, 2009-pp.22-33.

Apart from Purulia Chhau, several articles on the *Patachitra* tradition (scroll painting),<sup>131</sup> folk music of the Gambhira tradition,<sup>132</sup> folk theatre of the Malda district,<sup>133</sup> local language and dialects of Purulia<sup>134</sup> as well as essays on Adivasi cultural tradition featured across several issues of *Lokashruti*.<sup>135</sup> Owing to its popularity, *Lokashruti* also served as the launchpad of the ‘GaudiyaNritya’ project – which claimed and hailed GaudiyaNritya as the vanished classical dance of Bengal. It was in 1996 that Mahua Mukherjee, the discovered and exponent of the said form, published her first article on the dance.<sup>136</sup> Following this, three articles followed in succeeding issues, re-igniting the debate on the lack of a classical dance tradition of Bengal yet again.<sup>137</sup>

The direct role of the state is also discussed in such matters where the centrist overbearing approach of the Sangeet Natak Akademi was severely criticized and the vitality of regional governments in such matters was emphasized. To quote Malini Bhattacharya:

একমাত্র রাষ্ট্রেরই সেই আর্থিক এবং সাংগঠনিক ক্ষমতা আছে যা লোকসংস্কৃতির বিকাশকে বাণিজ্যিক শক্তির হস্তাবলম্ব থেকে বাঁচাতে পারে, অথচ রাষ্ট্রীয় কাঠামোর মধ্যেও রয়েছে শ্রেণীক্ষমতার সংস্থাপন, আর সে জন্যই তা নিরপেক্ষভাবে লোকসংস্কৃতির বিকাশে সহায়তা করতে পারে না, ঐ শ্রেণীবিন্যাসকে রক্ষা করাই তার চূড়ান্ত উদ্দেশ্য বলে লোকসংস্কৃতির বিবর্তনকে রাষ্ট্রও নিজের সুবিধা অনুযায়ী নিয়ন্ত্রিত করতে চায়। প্রজাতন্ত্র দিবসের প্যারেডে লোকসংস্কৃতিকে সাজিয়ে-গুছিয়ে রংচং করে তাকে পরিবেশন করার যে প্রবণতা, তারও মূল কথা হল রাজনৈতিক দখলদারি। লোকসংস্কৃতির যাঁরা ধারক ও বাহক তাঁরা নিজেদের ক্ষমতায় নিজেদের শিল্পরীতির বিবর্তন সাধন করবেন এটা মেনে নিতে গেলে যে সামগ্রিক দৃষ্টিভঙ্গীর দরকার, অকাদেমীগুলির তা নেই, থাকা সম্ভব নয়।<sup>138</sup>

<sup>131</sup>Binay Bhattacharya, ‘Pata, Patua: AstitverSankat’ (in Bengali), pp.72-80 and Dipak Kumar Barapanda, ‘Chitrakar-PatuaderJibon-Jibika O SamajikParibartanerDhara’ (in Bengali) in Mihir Bhattacharya (ed.) *Lokashruti PrabandhaSankalan*(in Bengali) (The Folk and Tribal Cultural Centre Publication, Calcutta, 1999), pp.105-112.

<sup>132</sup>Pushpajit Ray, ‘GambhiraGaan: EktiRuparekha’, in Mihir Bhattacharya (ed.) *Lokashruti PrabandhaSankalan*(in Bengali) (The Folk and Tribal Cultural Centre Publication, Calcutta, 1999), pp.256-263.

<sup>133</sup> Subodh Choudhury, ‘Domni: MaldahJelarLokanatok’ (in Bengali) Mihir Bhattacharya (ed.) *Lokashruti PrabandhaSankalan*(in Bengali) (The Folk and Tribal Cultural Centre Publication, Calcutta, 1999), pp.248-255.

<sup>134</sup>Subodh Basuray, ‘PuruliyarLokabhasha’ (in Bengali), in Mihir Bhattacharya (ed.) *Lokashruti PrabandhaSankalan*(in Bengali) (The Folk and Tribal Cultural Centre Publication, Calcutta, 1999), pp.126-130.

<sup>135</sup>Amal Kumar Das, ‘Adivasi JiboneBishwas O KusangskarerBhumika’ (in Bengali) Mihir Bhattacharya (ed.) *Lokashruti PrabandhaSankalan*(in Bengali) (The Folk and Tribal Cultural Centre Publication, Calcutta, 1999)

<sup>136</sup> Mahua Mukherjee, ‘BanglarLaukikNritya O GaudiyaNritya’ (in Bengali), *Lokashruti*, No.12, February 1996, pp.89-119; Mahua Mukherjee, ‘LaukikthekeShastriya’ (in Bengali), *Lokashruti*, Vol.3, Issue 1, December 2004.

<sup>137</sup> This will be discussed in greater details in the second chapter.

<sup>138</sup> Malini Bhattacharya, ‘Lokasangskriti O Sarkari Neeti: Koekti Proshno’ (in Bengali), *Lokashruti*, No.10, January 1993, p.51.

(Only the state has the financial and institutional powers to save the evolution of folk cultures from the onslaught of commercialization. However, even within the political establishment, there exists class divisions, and thereby, power divisions, which prevents the state from impartially aiding the evolution of folk cultures. As the protection and perpetuation of this power hierarchy is of utmost priority to the state, it remains malleable to support the evolution of folk culture, only when such an effort suits its needs. The initiative taken during Republic Day parades to present a gentrified version of various folk cultures for the purpose of mass consumption has at its roots these political machinations warranted by the state. The holistic approach which required to ensure the propagation of folk culture is missing from the state-founded akademies which have been created for this purpose – and moreover, it is infeasible to expect that they will be possessing the same.)<sup>139</sup>

But then again, she continues:

“কিন্তু বামফ্রন্ট সরকার লোকসংস্কৃতির ক্ষেত্রে যে ধারা গড়ে তোলার চেষ্টা করছেন তার স্পষ্টতই একটি বিকল্প রাজনীতি আছে। কেন্দ্রীয় অকাদেমীগুলি যে অদৃশ্য ও অনুক্ত রাজনীতির ভিত্তিতে গড়ে উঠেছিল, অথবা বাণিজ্যিক সংস্কৃতির মধ্যে যে রাজনীতি লুকানো আছে, এ তার বিপরীত রাজনীতি।”<sup>140</sup>

(However, in matters of folk culture, the Left Front Government has developed an alternative politics. This is in opposition to the implicit political underpinnings that accompanied the establishment of the central akademies and market-oriented cultural consumption.)

So, despite the criticism of the initiatives of the central akademies and commercialization of culture, the role of the state being the authority in ‘correcting’ such attempts, remained key. The critique, hence, limits itself to the nature of patronage that was being received and not the state itself. In spite of acknowledging the problem of appropriation of the folk culture by elite ‘outsiders’ the state (being represented by the same people), remained firmly entrenched in the role of the absolute benefactor, albeit a regional one.

#### Preserving authenticity: The 1979 seminar on Purulia Chhau

While *Lokashruti* proved to be an important platform for promoting on the folk in general, certain initiatives towards Purulia Chhau in specific, were also taken up by the state in collaboration with academicians and activists. One of such small but significant steps

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<sup>139</sup>Translation courtesy Ritadhi.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.,p.53.

undertaken for the promotion and preservation of the Purulia Chhau by the state government was the organization of a seminar on the form in 1979 in Purulia. The seminar, held in the first week of March 1979, was organised by the Akademi of Folklore in collaboration with the Department of Information and Culture (Purulia).<sup>141</sup> The programme opened with the filming of the documentary on Purulia Chhau by the noted Bengali filmmaker, Ritwik Ghatak (titled *Puruliar Chhau*) on 8<sup>th</sup> March, followed by the seminar on 9<sup>th</sup> March, and an exhibition on 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> March.<sup>142</sup> Folklore scholars as well as activists like Dr. Dulal Choudhury, Pashupati Prasad Mahato, Manik Sarkar, Bireswar Bandyopadhyay, Rebatimohan Sarkar, Shankar Prasad De, Haren Ghosh, Gangaprasad Bhattacharya and Sudhir Karan graced the occasion.<sup>143</sup>

The themes of the papers which were presented both in Bengali and English ranged from the need for preserving the tradition to uncovering the agenda behind specific cultural appropriations of the form by select individuals. Manik Sarkar's paper identified both the styles of Purulia and Jhargram Chhau as the 'Bengali' Chhau dance while urging for an acknowledgement of the latter, along with the former.<sup>144</sup> Using data from a survey conducted in ten villages within the Purulia district by the Akademi of Folklore in 1978, Indrajit Samanta depicted the socio-economic plight of the Chhau performers who were in urgent need of financial assistance.<sup>145</sup> Samanta argues that in 1978, less than 10 percent of Chhau performers were above the poverty line established by the Planning Commission in 1961-64 of Rs. 20 per day. Elaborating on the hindrances faced in promoting the Purulia Chhau in urban spaces, Shankar Prasad Dey showed that the cultural distance between a rural and an urban setup remained salient. This, he argued, could only be breached through concerted efforts in promoting the form.<sup>146</sup> While emphasizing on the role of the Akademi in encouraging Chhau performances, akin to Dey, Dulal Choudhury recommended an expansion of the repertoire of the performances through an incorporation of present day themes, to heighten their appeal to an urban audience.<sup>147</sup> This claim was countered by Pashupati Mahato who contested that the incorporation of such themes would destroy the uniqueness embedded in the local traditional

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<sup>141</sup> 'Akademi of Folklore Ayojito Chhonach Seminar' in Bengali, *Chhatrak*, 10<sup>th</sup> year, No.2, p.150.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Manik Sarkar, 'Jibon Theke Neowa Deowa Nach-Jhargramer Chhau' (in Bengali), *Chhatrak*, 10<sup>th</sup> year, No.2, pp.156-163.

<sup>145</sup> Indrajit Samanta, 'Chho Nach Shilpider Samajik O Arthanaitik Samikkha' (translated in Bengali by Dilip Kumar Mukhopadhyay) in *Chhatrak*, 10<sup>th</sup> year, No.2, pp.164-171.

<sup>146</sup> 'Akademi of Folklore Ayojito Chhonach Seminar' in Bengali, *Chhatrak*, 10<sup>th</sup> year, No.2, p.154.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p.152.

lifestyles of the performers.<sup>148</sup> In his presentation, which was interspersed by Gambhir Singh Mura and Hiralal Ray's performances, Mahato subsequently lashed out against a certain section of scholars, whom he termed as 'outsiders', as being incapable of understanding the basic ethos of the communities and performances they sought to write about.<sup>149</sup>

The debate pertaining to the nomenclature of the Chhau continued through the presentations of Bireswar Banerjee and Gangaprasad Bhattacharya. While the former accepted the use of 'Chho' as more authentic, interpreting it as an act of mime, Bhattacharya derived the word 'Chhau' from the Tibetan word of 'Chhang', meaning ghost.<sup>150</sup> Sudhir Karan also added that the term 'Chhau' is used in reference to the Seraikella style and not the Purulia style, which remains to be called 'Chho'.<sup>151</sup> Haren Ghosh and Sisir Kumar Mazumdar subsequently discoursed on the role and usage of masks in the folk dance forms of Darjeeling and West Dinajpur respectively.<sup>152</sup> Finally, in the end, the session was culminated with a series of recommendations. Gambhir Singh Mura (dance), Hiralal Ray (dance), Dhananjay Mahato (dance), Aklu Machheyar (shehnai) and Anil Sutradhar (mask making) were appointed as teachers for initiating formal training in their respective fields. It was also decided that the Akademi would not interfere into the affairs of the dance. It would only restrict its activities to organising informal discussions and seminars on the same.<sup>153</sup>

From the proceedings, it is quite clear that the need to preserve an authentic tradition constituted the central theme of these presentations, even though there were divergent interpretations regarding what's authentic and what's not. As a result, even while pressing for the promotion of Purulia Chhau, an anxiety remained regarding the preserving the purity of the form. Any sort of innovations were generally looked upon as an imminent threat to the uniqueness and indigeneity of the form. For instance, following the seminar, a Chhau performance was organised by the Akademi as a concluding event. Unlike the traditional performances which predominantly exhibited Hindu mythological themes, this performance was based on the historical event of the Santhal Rebellion. Ironically, despite being applauded for the effort, the performance received criticism from both the scholars and the performers. Dr. Sudhir Karan, from whose book this episode was taken, felt that it failed to

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., pp.152-153.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p.154.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p.155.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., p.154.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p.155.

present the ‘true spirit’ of Chhau performances.<sup>154</sup> Even Anil Sutradhar, the mask maker from Chorida village who was present at the venue, later explained that the historical theme was a misfit within the spirit of such traditional performances like the Chhau.<sup>155</sup>

As is evident, in both *Lokashruti* and the seminar organized by the Academy of Folklore, the theme of preserving the authenticity of the form remained important. Additionally, while *Lokashruti*, being the journal of a state institution, also emphasized on the importance of state interventions in cultural matters, the 1979 seminar underlined the need of preserving artistes’ liberty. On the whole, the ‘folk’ featured prominently in the cultural scenario of West Bengal,.

The reason for such importance placed on folk in Bengal can be traced back to colonial period. It is during the Swadeshi Movement of 1905 that folklore and folk culture, regarded as the quintessential marker of Bengali identity, was instrumental in mobilizing masses during that period. Dinesh Chandra Sen, the first historian of Bengali literature, was the foremost propagator of the folk character of Bengali identity. History of the Bengalees, to him and other like-minded scholars, was based on a wide range of things varying from myths, legends, ballads, genealogies to language, culinary practices as well as colloquial cultural practices, i.e. culture of ‘the people’.<sup>156</sup> This culture was thus constituted as an important seedbed of tradition and heritage of the ‘community’. Sen claimed that his ambitious project, embodied in two volumes of *BrihatBanga*, symbolized his effort to capture this concept of history through the telling of past experiences of the Bengali people. Its validity was derived from the claim that since it was a native tradition, it was uncompromisingly authentic.<sup>157</sup>

Hence, it is hardly surprising that unlike the centre, folk constituted an important part in the articulation of Bengali cultural identity even in post-independence period. This prominence of the folk from the pre-independence to post-independence is also attested by the presence and proliferation of rural Melas (fairs) where different folk forms of Bengal are showcased even now. For example, in the annual *PoushMela* (fair organized at the beginning of the Bengali month of Poush) held at Shantiniketan (initiated during the times of

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Interview conducted in Chorida, Purulia district, West Bengal (02/04/2015).

<sup>156</sup> Kumkum Chatterjee, *The King of Controversy: History and Nation-Making in Late Colonial India*, *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 110, No. 5 (December 2005), p.1475.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., p.1471.

Debendranth Tagore, father of Rabindranath Tagore) every year includes different folk traditions like the Baul music, Raibneshe Nach<sup>158</sup>, KhemtaNach<sup>159</sup> as well as Purulia Chhau in their itinerary.

### The cultural scene at Calcutta in the post-independence period

However, despite these attempts of preserving and promoting regional folk cultural practices, including Purulia Chhau, remained at the level of scholarly interest and organizing seminars and exhibitions. Also, owing to the shifts in cultural patronage in the post-Independence period, the folk primarily came to represent the fledgling aspect of Bengali culture. While the richness and variety remains acknowledged, the folk stood more as a thing of the past which warranted urgent preservation, lest it did not get corrupted by ever-swelling tide of ‘modernity’ and ‘commercialization’. As a result, while undoubtedly these initiatives played their part in promoting folk culture in theory, in practice, folk dance hardly featured in the dominant cultural trends in Calcutta, the seat of political and cultural power in Bengal. In contrast, the scenario largely remained hung over by the experimentations of Rabindranath Tagore and Uday Shankar initiated in the colonial period.

While it is from the third decade of the twentieth century that Tagore attempted to make dance ‘respectable’ by urging the middle class women to perform on the stage, Uday Shankar’s experiments ushered in the concept of contemporary Indian dance practice.<sup>160</sup> However, both the works of Tagore and Uday Shankar were not exactly ‘Bengali’ in character. In other words, the lineage of these dances cannot be exclusively situated in the land of Bengal. On the contrary, both were influenced by dance traditions associated with regions outside Bengal and India respectively. For example, Tagore commissioned experts from Kerala and Manipur to train students in Kathakali and Manipuri. Moreover, Tagore was also impressed by Javanese dances and was keen on incorporating it in the syllabus of Vishva-Bharati University.<sup>161</sup> On the whole, Tagore’s was quite influenced by the revival

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<sup>158</sup> A martial dance from Birbhum district.

<sup>159</sup> Group dance based on the romance of Radha and Krishna.

<sup>160</sup> Manjushri (Chaki) Sircar, ‘Community of Dancers in Calcutta’, in Surajit Sinha (ed.) *Cultural Profile of Calcutta*, (The Indian Anthropological Society, Calcutta, 1972), pp.190-1.

<sup>161</sup> “Tagore had been very much impressed with classical Javanese dance, performances which he had ample chance to witness at the Mangkoenegeran in Surakarta as well as the Pakoealaman and BeksoWirono Dancing School in Yogyakarta.” Martin Ramstedt, ‘Colonial encounters between India and Indonesia’ in Babli Sinha (ed.) *South Asian Transnationalisms : Cultural Exchange in the Twentieth Century* (Routledge, New York, 2012), p.76.



movement of dance practices which started from the 1930s with the Bharatanatyam.<sup>162</sup> The works of Uday Shankar on the other hand displayed the influence of European theatrical and ballet practices.<sup>163</sup>

In the post-independence period, following Tagore and Shankar, the emphasis in dance largely centred on the different regional classical dance forms and Indian contemporary dance practices. Hence, Manjushree ChakiSircar, the Director of the Dancer's Guild in Calcutta, notes that:

One change which the two decades have brought about is the stratification and segmentation of dance styles, whereas in the pioneer movements *synthesis* was the guiding spirit... One group is strictly devoted to classical styles like Manipuri, Kathak, Kathakali and Bharatanatyam... In recent years we feel a growing tendency towards specialization in terms of distinct forms. Kathak which held the major position in the classical field is gradually yielding ground to Bharatanatyam.... The other groups of dancers although starting from strong classical background in their training are less conservative in attitudes towards rigidity of techniques. They are willing to blend various classical forms into a creative synthesis... (this) group of modern dancers of Calcutta immediately attracts attention. From the beginning several of these dancers were influenced by Tagore's conception of blending several styles and Uday Shankar's dynamic presentation.<sup>164</sup>

However, in a later section of the same essay, Sircar mentions about the growing popularity of Purulia Chhau.<sup>165</sup>

Such synthesis on the one hand did not leave much scope for developing an indigenous 'Bengali' classical dance like the other regional states, making West Bengal an exception in these matters. As a result, it is hence not surprising that in recent years there had been attempts to recover an extinct dance form as the classical dance of Bengal.<sup>166</sup> On the other hand, the scope of folk traditions remained only within the ambit of the contemporary, which provided a platform for producing works that incorporated folk, classical and contemporary dance techniques. For instance, the famous dance exponent Shanti Bardhan, who was a part of the Indian People's Theatre Association, incorporated classical and folk

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<sup>162</sup>Leela Samson, *Rukmini Devi: A Life* (Penguin books India, 2010).

<sup>163</sup>J.L.Erdman, 'Performance as Translation: Uday Shankar in the West', *Drama Review*, TDR31(1), Spring 1987, pp.64-88.

<sup>164</sup>Ibid., pp.191-2.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.,p.195.

<sup>166</sup>This will be dealt in greater details in the second chapter.

dance techniques into her popular productions titled 'The Discovery of India' and 'Panchatantra'.<sup>167</sup>

### The marginalization of folk traditions including Purulia Chhau

However, these attempts were unable to provide an exclusive platform for the promotion of folk traditions. The same fate awaited Purulia Chhau as well. As far as state patronage is concerned (whatever that was available), Purulia Chhau also had to face tough competition from the other folk forms, even after being relatively popular. So, when different central and inter-state folk festivals or competitions were held, Purulia Chhau is not seen representing the state of West Bengal at all. From the beginning, it had been Tibetan dance, Baul dance<sup>168</sup> or the Gajan tradition<sup>169</sup> and other forms which featured in the folk category. Sadly enough, regardless of the varied creative experiments which were undertaken within the dance circle of Calcutta, there was a general reluctance to incorporate Purulia Chhau within their compositions citing the difficulty of learning the form. Thus, in the eighth National Conference and Festival of the same I.P.T.A held in January 1958, the Seraikella Chhau was performed, and not Purulia style<sup>170</sup> while the Dancer Guild from Calcutta employed the Mayurbhanj style in their production but not the Purulia style, all of which eventually highlights an almost deliberate indifference accorded towards Purulia Chhau. Seen in this light, it is hence quite understandable that, in the entire span of 40 years, not a single award of the state academy was bestowed on the form.<sup>171</sup>

The only silver lining in this entire story of marginalization was that following Gambhir Singh Mura's acceptance of the Padmashree awards, some individuals from Calcutta undertook efforts in documenting the form. For instance, Abhijit Dasgupta made a thirty two minutes documentary on Purulia Chhau being narrated by Mura, in association with the Calcutta Doordarshan, the regional branch of the national broadcaster.<sup>172</sup> However the efforts of these individuals, in conjunction with the Left Front government's cultural

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<sup>167</sup>Sircar (1972), p.190

<sup>168</sup> In the 1988 Lok Utsav, Baul from West Bengal was present whereas Seraikella Chhau performed from Bihar. *The Sangeet Natak Akademi News Bulletin*, October-December 1988, No.4, p.4.

<sup>169</sup>*The Sangeet Natak Akademi News Bulletin*, April 1961, No.18, p.29, 39.

<sup>170</sup>'Cultural Diary', *The Sangeet Natak Akademi News Bulletin*, April 1958, No.8, p.79.

<sup>171</sup>West Bengal State Akademi of Dance Drama Music and Visual Arts, *Cultural Directory of West Bengal* (Rabindra Bharati University, Calcutta, 1997).

<sup>172</sup>Abhijit Das Gupta, Gambhir Singh Mura- Chhau at the Crossroads, (Calcutta Doordarshan Production), Tape no.-AR/DG/60/1774, Prasar Bharati Archives. Accessed with required permission on 13/12/14.

wings (which as discussed above repeatedly re-affirmed their commitment to ‘preserving’ folk traditions in the state) remained insufficient in creating a sustained public interest in the Purulia Chhau, at either the national, or even the regional level. Thus, it took until 2014 for Purulia Chhau to be showcased at the national dance parade in New Delhi on Republic Day.<sup>173</sup>

Hence, Purulia Chhau, which was already situated at the fringes of the cultural discourse of the central institutions, fared no better at the regional level. While the unfolding of events at the central level where the Purulia Chhau was marginalized owing to a distinctive preference bestowed upon the other two styles, the dance at the regional level of the state bore the brunt of the absence of a proper dance idiom in Bengal. It is in fact quite unfortunate to notice that despite having a separate cultural trajectory different from the centre where folk featured prominently, Purulia Chhau did not receive the acknowledgement and patronage from the region which it deserved.

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<sup>173</sup>[http://www.telegraphindia.com/1140129/jsp/frontpage/story\\_17875848.jsp#.VboUj\\_mqqko](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1140129/jsp/frontpage/story_17875848.jsp#.VboUj_mqqko) (last accessed on 30/07/15)

## CHAPTER 2

### **‘Classical’, ‘Semi-Classical’ or ‘Folk’: Textual Representations and Multiple Identities of Purulia Chhau**

The second chapter will explore how the different modes of textual representation of Chhau dance constructed different, and often conflicting, identities of the form. I take up three categories of narrative representations by Ashutosh Bhattacharya, Mahua Mukherjee and *Chhatrak*, a local journal of Purulia: they reveal how such discursive representations, in the quest of an authentic past, produce conflicting images of a tradition – as firstly a classical tradition, then, a tradition in the folk-classical continuum and, finally, a folk tradition. The chapter is divided into three sections. Section I introduces the first of the three representative narratives on Purulia Chhau through a critical study of Ashutosh Bhattacharya’s writings on Purulia Chhau which portrays it as a classical form. In section II, I explore how the quest for a classical tradition of Bengal through the claims of Gaudiya Nritya marginalised the regional folk forms including Purulia Chhau. Finally, in section III, I deal with the writings on Purulia Chhau in *Chhatrak*, a local journal of Purulia, and those of other local scholars and activists.

#### **Section 1: Classicizing Purulia Chhau: Ashutosh Bhattacharya’s Representation**

A renowned folklorist and anthropologist, Ashutosh Bhattacharya came across a performance of Chhau dance in 1961, which immensely interested him.<sup>1</sup> Through his fieldwork in Purulia then, he came to the conclusion that this was a unique system of dance which has been well preserved and practiced for a long time in the region. Following this, Bhattacharya published some articles in English on Chhau in order to reach out to a larger audience outside the region and was successful in garnering interest in this dance form.<sup>2</sup> In June 1968, Bhattacharya was invited to Delhi by the Sangeet Natak Akademi for a performance with the local artistes and arrived with a troupe of 40 dancers from two villages of the Baghmundi Police Station area in the Purulia district. The performance was well received by the audience and appreciated. Subsequently, in May 1971, the Rabindra Bharati University in Calcutta invited the troupe to a performance and for the first time, a regular performance of the Chhau dance of Purulia was held in Calcutta.<sup>3</sup> Soon after, the first international tour of Purulia Chhau was conducted in 1971 under his guidance (in

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<sup>1</sup> Ashutosh Bhattacharya, *Chhau Dance of Purulia* (Rabindra Bharati University, Calcutta, 1972), p.1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.,p.2.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

collaboration with the Indian Council for Cultural Research) to Europe, including London and Paris. This tour was soon followed by another one to the United States in 1974.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the uniqueness of Purulia Chhau which impressed him, in both of his works, *The Chhau Dance of Purulia*<sup>5</sup>, and an article published in the Sangeet Natak Akademi journal<sup>6</sup>, Bhattacharya expounds on the reasons for his selection of the Chhau dance. In his discussion on *Gambhira* he specifically mentions why Chhau makes the cut for him:

The mask dance known as Gambhira is confined to the district of Maldah, in North Bengal... The case was different with the Chhau dance...unlike the Gambhira it could spread in all directions. The area of the Gambhira dance exists as an isolated pocket and consequently it has become stereotyped and devoid of vitality...The story of the Ramayana in particular, and any other Puranas including the Mahabharata in general are represented through the Chhau dance... sometimes secular legends are also introduced. But in the Gambhira dance there is absolutely no scope, whatsoever, for representing through dance, any secular incident... Though Chhau is also ritual in character, yet it is never performed under so-called 'inspiration' (of the Gambhira dance). Therefore, it can never grow wild or unrhythmic at any time.<sup>7</sup>

While recognising impact of some other local dance forms like *Nachni*, *Natua* and *Paik* on Chhau, Bhattacharya argues that only Chhau which developed an independent character of its own which subsequently led to its survival in contrast to the others. So, Chhau remains superior on the accounts of its systematized form, secular content and widespread practice.

There is no doubt that Bhattacharya was the first person, due to whose efforts the Chhau of Purulia was a subject of discussion in front of a national audience, which in turn, went a long way in raising awareness and acknowledgement for the entire form. Lack of mention about Purulia Chhau in the works of his predecessors like Gurusaday Dutta<sup>8</sup> or Mani Bardhan<sup>9</sup>, both of whom worked extensively on the folk dance traditions of Bengal in the colonial period, made the efforts of Bhattacharya all the more significant.<sup>10</sup> Quite naturally, as the one who must mediate between a hitherto unknown tradition and the outside world,

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<sup>4</sup> Ashutosh Bhattacharya, *Purulia theke America* (in Bengali), (Calcutta, 1975)

<sup>5</sup> Bhattacharya(1972), pp.20-22.

<sup>6</sup> Ashutosh Bhattacharya, *Chhau Dance of Purulia* (Rabindra Bharati University, Calcutta, 1972).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.,p.6.

<sup>8</sup> Gurusaday Dutt, *The Folk Dances of Bengal* (Reprinted by Katha Publishers, Kolkata, 2003). The date of the first publication is in 1954.

<sup>9</sup> Mani Bardhan, *Banglar Lokanritya O Gitibaichitra* (in Bengali) (Folk and Tribal Cultural Centre, Calcutta, 1961).

<sup>10</sup> One of the probable reason for such omission could be due to Purulia being a part of Manbhum district of Bihar in the pre-1954 period and hence, not considered to be a part of Bengali culture.

Bhattacharya inserted his own coloured ideas in his representation of the dance tradition of Chhau, essentially as a classical dance.<sup>11</sup> His narrative, hence, is based on the following postulations: firstly, Chhau is a product of a classical tradition of Bengal (which corresponds to the territorial boundaries of the political state of West Bengal) which degraded over time and reached its present condition. Secondly, the original homeland of the Chhau dance is in Purulia from which the form travelled to Seraikella and Mayurbhanj in later times.<sup>12</sup> This narrative obviously had two types of audience in mind: regional and national. For the regional audience, the necessity was to present Chhau as the repository of the glorious cultural tradition of Bengal which should be recognised and acknowledged, especially by Calcutta-based cultural elites, to which Bhattacharya himself belonged.<sup>13</sup> For the national audience, the need was to project Purulia Chhau as the classical dance from West Bengal, which is in need of revival.

The portrayal of Chhau being a classical dance is initially attempted in his first book on Chhau written in English in 1972 titled *Chhau Dance of Purulia*. However, the arguments in this book better clarity in his Bengali publication in 1976 titled *Banglar Lokanritya* (Folk Dances of Bengal) Vol.1. Despite the title, this book is majorly built around his arguments pertaining to the classical nature of Chhau.<sup>14</sup>

The three main tenets of Bhattacharya's thesis on the classical nature of Chhau are: Chhau dance is a tribal dance<sup>15</sup> which can be traced back to pre-Muslim era in Bengal implying a 'higher' (classical) origin of the form; the form subsequently underwent a gradual degradation during Islamic rule until the eighteenth century, when the local tribal rulers who adopted Hinduism for legitimising their rule came forward to patronise this form; the Chhau of Purulia is more ancient than the other two styles of Mayurbhanj and Seraikella.

If one places Bhattacharya within the larger context of contemporary cultural politics, one would find that his classical fetish is a product of the anxiety of participating in the 'race for the classical status' which was transpiring across multiple regions in the 1950-70 period,

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<sup>11</sup> In this context one needs to remember that Ashutosh Bhattacharya belonged to the upper caste Bengali intelligentsia, bred and seeped into the idea of a 'higher' culture of the Bengalees. It is of no wonder, that the prejudices of his class-caste position will automatically reflect in his narrative on Chhau.

<sup>12</sup> Bhattacharya (1972), p.20.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.,p.21.

<sup>14</sup> Ashutosh Bhattacharya, *Banglar Lokanritya* Vol.1 (in Bengali), (A.Mukherjee&Co., Calcutta, 1976).

<sup>15</sup> By tribal, here, Bhattacharya implies its association with the tribal performers, which according to him, is responsible for mislead people to identify Chhau as a folk form.

as described in the first chapter. The form which evidently had impressed him now also provided him with the additional opportunity to claim for himself the exalted status of a ‘discoverer’, of a classical dance of Bengal<sup>16</sup>, along the lines of Vallathol Narayana Menon<sup>17</sup> who is acknowledged for his efforts towards reviving the Kathakali dance form. However, this enterprise was not as easy as it appeared. When judged from its present form, Purulia Chhau seemed largely to be a folk form exhibiting ritualistic performances with masks—contrary to the basic parameters of any classical dance.<sup>18</sup> So, the need arose for the construction of a glorious past for the dance form. In the words of Bhattacharya,

The system which is followed in Chhau dance today could not have been developed by the aboriginal people who practice the dance. It is indeed a contribution of higher culture keenly conscious of an aesthetic sense. Some basic elements of the dance must have been borrowed from the aboriginals and incorporated into it in later times also, but the attribution of system, and, its codification into a definite form are the contributions of conscious and sophisticated arts. Most of the aboriginal people of India do not have any organized form of dance though there are sometimes tribal dances of unsystematised character. Chhau dance belongs to the tandava form of Indian Classical dance; though, due to its masks and elaborate costumes it has not been able to fully adhere to the classical principles. Moreover, we have to remember that all the cultural elements possessed by the aboriginals are not their own. They sometimes borrow them from superior cultures and some time it so happens that the members of a higher cultural group are also degenerated into aboriginal state of living due to some reason or other.<sup>19</sup>

The narrative, thus formulated, traced the form to 1000 C.E. arguing for its validation from an ancient text called the *Buddha-nataka*.

There is a reference of a drama on Budha (Buddha Nataka) in ‘Baudha gan O Doha’—a work supposed to have been written in West Bengal either between 900 A.D. and 1200 A.D. or, between 700 A.D. and 900 A.D. It is not known how this drama used to be staged, therefore, it cannot be definitely said whether this was a form of Chhau dance in those days. In the work mentioned, it has been stated that the drama on Budha used to be performed through dance and music..... It is indeed a

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<sup>16</sup> As has been dealt in the ‘Introduction’ section, the state of West Bengal remained quite behind in claiming any of its cultural traditions as a classical tradition.

<sup>17</sup> Vallathol Narayana Menon was a renowned Malayalee poet and the founder of the Kerala Kalamandalam.

<sup>18</sup> The trend of recasting and reviving different regional forms as classical dances involved a set pattern of judging. Although not stated explicitly anywhere about what exactly is the cornerstone for the recognition, it was generally checked how far a particular form abides by the *Natyashastra* or any other ancient treatises of dramaturgy and if its practice is testified by historical evidences and guaranteed by a glorious tradition.

<sup>19</sup> Bhattacharya, pp.23-4.

fact that from a very ancient time a tradition of folk drama performed on the basis of dance and music only developed in West Bengal.<sup>20</sup>

The model here followed is that of the Odissi and the Kathakali forms which were revived following Jayadeva's *Gitagovindam*. So, according to Bhattacharya, Chhau dance originates from a high cultural tradition of the region which then deteriorated under tribal influence. To elucidate, he invokes another parallel narrative that seeks to trace the trajectory of a particular untouchable community of the Doms, who are associated with the dance form as hereditary musicians. He refers to the *Mangal kavyas* and *Buddha Gaan o Doha*, to argue that the Doms, who are now an untouchable community, once enjoyed a privileged position in the society. This position originated chiefly due to their military prowess and valour under princely patronage.<sup>21</sup> However, with the advent of the British rule, they were disbanded and consequently, their socio-economic status gradually waned to ultimately reach the present status.<sup>22</sup> This change in fortunes, according to Bhattacharya, signifies that the greatness of a tradition or communities cannot be understood only by observing its present condition.<sup>23</sup>

Bhattacharya then explains how certain tribes, mainly from the Bhumij community, came under the influence of Hinduism in the eighteenth century, following the adoption of Vaishnavism by the royal Mallaraj family of Bishnupur and emerged as local feudal rulers.<sup>24</sup> The legitimacy was provided by local Brahmins who commissioned invented genealogies of their rule tracing their origin to some distant upper-caste communities. Bhattacharya specifically mentions about the Rajas of Baghmundi who according to him were instrumental in developing the form by introducing Hindu themes into the tribal repertoire. To quote Bhattacharya:

The Rajas of Bagmundi were great patrons of Hinduism... Therefore, it can be concluded that the Raj family of Bagmundi introduced the present form of Chhau dance which spread up to the neighbouring areas of Seraikella and Mayurbhanja. Almost all the Rajas and the Maharajas and the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp.22-3.

<sup>21</sup> Bhattacharya, p.24. There are many folklores in Bengali celebrating the valour of the Doms .I have also grown up learning some of them , of course, without knowing the context.

<sup>22</sup> I am unable to comment on how far this narrative is correct factually.

<sup>23</sup> Bhattacharya writes: "it so happens that the members of a higher cultural group are also degenerated into aboriginal state of living due to some reason or the other. Therefore, it is not unusual that a classical form of dance is being practiced by the most backward communities of Purulia today. Perhaps they have been following in some form or other a tradition through the ages from the days of their ascendancy of culture down to the present day of its degeneration. When a higher culture is degraded some of its elements are retained even at the worst stage of its degradation." Ibid.,p.24.

<sup>24</sup> Bhattacharya (1976),p.27.



tribal chiefs patronized it, but the Maharajas of Seraikella and Mayurbhanj ultimately developed new characters out of it.<sup>25</sup>

So, the narrative touched upon all the set aesthetic parameters which had already been followed in the process of revival of the neo-classical dance forms of India - origination in a textual tradition, classical vocal and instrumental accompaniments, presence of royal or temple patronage and a codified system of movement practices.<sup>26</sup> Despite this, still Bhattacharya had problems in reconciling the practice of using masks in Chhau with his claim of the form being a classical dance. As a result, in *Chhau dance of Purulia*, he even makes a comparison with the Manipuri dance to argue that unlike the latter, Chhau cannot claim to be a classical dance form for its masks, which according to him, was used to hide the dark faces of the performers in their impersonation of divine characters!<sup>27</sup> After facing much criticism for such blatantly racist comments, Bhattacharya later on weaves another narrative in *Banglar Lokanritya* where he comes to justify the use of masks in a classical dance form by citing similarity with Kathakali face paintings.<sup>28</sup> One can discern a strategic reason for this choice as Kathakali has strong folk associations. The points of similarity Bhattacharya draws are as follows: first, both were based on epics, mostly the *Ramayana*<sup>29</sup>; second, the songs used in the Chhau performances are in the local language of the region – Bengali<sup>30</sup> - just like Malayalam is used in Kathakali<sup>31</sup>; third, similarity in the musical accompaniments, whole night open-air performances and the influence of other associated folk forms; and finally, no participation of women in the dance.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, Bhattacharya also sought similarity in the usage of masks despite the absence of masks in Kathakali. According to him, the face-painting in Kathakali, resembling masks, actually imply the usage of masks in earlier times. The implicit assertion here, therefore, was that if a dance tradition which had a previous practice of using masks (i.e. Kathakali, in this case) can be recognized as classical, then why can't the same treatment be extended to Chhau? Ironically, through this argument, there is an

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<sup>25</sup> Bhattacharya (1972), pp.26-7.

<sup>26</sup> Refer to footnote 18.

<sup>27</sup> Ashutosh Bhattacharya, *Banglar Loka-Sahitya* (in Bengali), Vol.4,(1965), p.762.

<sup>28</sup> Bhattacharya (1976), p.38.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.,pp.37-8.

<sup>30</sup> This again is an evidence of appropriation as the songs accompanying Chhau are mostly composed in a dialect called *Manbhumi*, the predominant tongue spoken in the Manbhumi region, from where the dance originates.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.37.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp.38-9.

attempt to cover up his initial postulation regarding the inability of Chhau being a classical dance primarily due to its usage of masks.<sup>33</sup>

However, he recorded their dissimilarities as well, only to link with it with the problem of reviving Chhau. He argued that unlike Kathakali, Chhau lacked specific textual prescription which was possible under the continuous royal patronage Kathakali received. Also, Chhau could not develop its own music as Kathakali. That is why, it becomes all the more difficult to revive Chhau as it is only based on an oral tradition. However, he also argues that Chhau, which exhibits only two types of *Abhinaya* (expressions)<sup>34</sup> viz. *Angika* (expression of movements) and *Aharya* (costumes) is far better than Kathakali in the ‘nritya quality’ (which however, exhibits all the four types of *Abhinaya*, including *Vachika* (expression of speech) and *Sattvika* (expression of emotions)) as it neither dependent on music nor facial expressions to convey the feeling of the performance.

Bhattacharya contends that this lack of an authoritative text outlining the dance pattern of Chhau is compensated through a structured set of movements, governing the overall performance. To quote Bhattacharya on the topic:

“পুরুলিয়ার ছোনাচের সাহিত্য যেমন মৌখিক, তেমনি তার সঙ্গীতও মৌখিক, অর্থাৎ উভয়ই লোকসাহিত্য বা লোকসংস্কৃতির অন্তর্গত, তা সত্ত্বেও পুরুলিয়ার ছৌ নৃত্য লোকনৃত্য নয়। কারণ মুখে মুখে থাকলেও তার একটা সুনির্দিষ্ট শাস্ত্র আছে, তার একটি সুনির্দিষ্ট পদ্ধতি আছে, তার কোনো ব্যতিক্রম দেখা যায় না। একটি মৌখিক বা অলিখিত শাস্ত্রও যে কত কঠিন হতে পারে, পুরুলিয়ার ছৌনৃত্য তার প্রমাণ।”<sup>35</sup>

[In the case of Chhau, despite its literature and music falling under the folk genre owing to their transmission through an oral medium, its dance cannot be categorised as a folk dance. The reason for this is that despite being transmitted orally, Chhau dance follows a strict canonical pattern of movements. That an oral tradition can be this difficult is evidenced by Purulia’s Chhau dance.]

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<sup>33</sup> Bhattacharya (1972), p.26.

<sup>34</sup> As prescribed in the *Natyashastra*, an ideal performance would exhibit these four types of *Abhinaya* (expressions).

<sup>35</sup> Bhattacharya (1976), p.39.

“পুরুলিয়ার ছৌন্ত্যে একদিন রাজসভার পৃষ্ঠপোষকতা লাভ করেছিল সত্য, কিন্তু তা সত্ত্বেও তার জন্য কোনও লিখিত শাস্ত্র রচিত হয়নি... রাজসভার পৃষ্ঠপোষকতা থেকে বহুদিন ধরেই বঞ্চিত হয়ে পুরুলিয়ার ছৌন্ত্যে নিরক্ষর আদিবাসী ও নিম্নশ্রেণীর হিন্দু কৃষক-সমাজের মধ্যে আশ্রয় নিয়েছে। তার ফলে তার মৌলিক দিকটিকে যথাসম্ভব অবিকৃত রেখে নানা বিষয়ে তার লৌকিক বিকৃতিও আরম্ভ হয়েছে...।”<sup>36</sup>

[Once upon a time, Purulia Chhau received royal patronage, despite which, no written tradition developed. In later times, when the royal patronage stopped, Chhau dance survived among the illiterate tribal communities and the low-caste Hindu population of the region. As a result, several folk distortions have crept within the repertoire which however kept its original flavour intact.]

After contesting the claims of Chhau being a folk tradition (which according to Bhattacharya was nothing but a ‘distortion’) on the grounds of its structured movements, he continues to re-iterate the unchanging timeless essence of the form to claim its classical nature. To quote him:

“লোক-নৃত্য ক্রম বিবর্তনের ধারা অনুসরণ করে যখন তার সামাজিক প্রয়োজনীয়তা দূর হয়ে যায়, তখন লুপ্ত হয়ে যায়। শাস্ত্রীয় নৃত্য সমাজ-জীবন নিরপেক্ষ হয়েও তার একটি অবিচল এবং আদর্শে রক্ষা করে। ছৌন্ত্য যদি লোক-নৃত্যের ধারায় ক্রম বিবর্তিত হতে থাকত, তবে পরিবর্তিত সামাজিক জীবনের মধ্যে তার আর কোনো অস্তিত্ব থাকত না; ছৌন্ত্য যে প্রতিকূল সামাজিক অবস্থার মধ্যেও তার সুনির্দিষ্ট প্রথাগত রূপটি নিয়ে যে ভাবেই হোক, আত্মরক্ষা করে আছে, তাতেই একথা মনে হয়, তার পদ্ধতির মধ্যে একটি শক্ত শাস্ত্রীয় (classical) বাঁধুনি ছিল।”<sup>37</sup>

[It is a folk dance, which when loses social relevance, declines. But a classical dance continues unchanged irrespective of societal changes. If Chhau dance has been a folk dance, then it would not have survived through the altered circumstances. That Chhau dance pulled through adverse circumstances without losing its original structure itself provides evidence that it surely had been a classical tradition.]

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.42.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p.36.

It is hence quite evident that through these claims, Bhattacharya literally created a tradition whose authenticity was determined by his own definitions. Such endeavours, then again, was not restricted to his writings only, but also extended to the dance festivals he organized. Richard Schechner, while describing a dance performance that he saw in Matha in 1976, notes:

During the dancing he (Bhattacharya) sits behind a desk... All night he watches and writes. The next day, one by one the villagers appear before him. He warned one party not to use starry elements not found in the Hindu classic. He chided another for not wearing skirt over leggings decorated in rings of white, red and black. Bhattacharya selected this basic costume from one village and made it general. When I asked him about it he said that the costumes he chose were the most authentic, the least westernized.<sup>38</sup>

Such high-handedness was then again complemented by his discriminatory attitude towards the dancers of Purulia Chhau. As is evident through his classicization of Chhau, he wanted to separate the dance form from its original performers as they were a misfit within the paradigm of the so-called highly cultured and sophisticated artistes typically associated with classical dance. In other words, in his bid to represent Chhau as a classical higher art form, he had to do away with whatever deemed non-classical. Consequently, the tribal communities are described as ‘invaders’.<sup>39</sup> Also, as has been mentioned earlier, the widespread prevalence of masks in Purulia Chhau are interpreted by Bhattacharya as an attempt to disguise the *dark faces* of the performers while enacting the divine characters, usually represented in popular depictions as fair-skinned characters.<sup>40</sup> Although these blatantly racist arguments are considerably toned down in his later work, *Banglar Lokanritya*, the essence more or less remained the same as his classicization project viewed the association of Buddhism and Hinduism (both Aryan religions) with the form as evidence of ‘higher’ cultural influences in contrast to its tribal and folk associations.<sup>41</sup> This hierarchy

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<sup>38</sup> Roma Chatterji, ‘Purulia Chho: Discursive Space and the Constitution of Culture’, in M.D. Muthukumarsawamy and M. Kaushal (eds.) *Folklore, Public Sphere and Civil Society*, (IGNCA, New Delhi, 2004), p.50.

<sup>39</sup> “The cultural tradition of the country in which Chhau dance is prevalent, is undoubtedly very ancient. In course of time, for some reason or the other, continuity of this tradition broke up.... *It is also likely that there was an invasion of tribal people from outside and the original population degradation on account of its contact with them. The degeneration of the Sarak, the Jaina Community of the Purulia District, is a noteworthy instance of this racial degradation.*” Bhattacharya (1972), p.21. Emphasis mine.

<sup>40</sup> Refer to footnote 27. Emphasis mine.

<sup>41</sup> Bhattacharya’s narrative traces the lineage of Chhau to Buddhism, considering it to be a derivative of high culture (which, in this case is Buddhism). Later on, illustrating the contribution of the Baghmundi Rajas,

remains so pronounced through Bhattacharya's narrative, that the same tribal communities whom he derides for corrupting the form earlier receives acknowledgement for developing Chhau, solely by the 'virtue' of adopting Hinduism—a marker of 'progress' in his case. For him, the tribal identity of the rulers, here, takes a back seat.

Now, the reason for Bhattacharya's choosing Chhau for projecting a classical tradition of West Bengal can be linked with the nineteenth century Bengali romanticism of the 'folk', which I have explored in a different context in the first chapter.<sup>42</sup> Since the Swadeshi movement, rural folklores and folk cultures have been viewed as an important seedbed of tradition and heritage by the Bengali 'community'. Along similar lines, Gurusaday Dutta treated folk culture as the 'national culture of Bengal',<sup>43</sup> which was a product of the rural landscapes of Bengal—considered to be the 'pure' sites left untouched by the onslaught of colonialism. However, while Bhattacharya borrowed Dutt's romanticism of the folklore culture of the villages, he was also conditioned by the needs of his time. For Bhattacharya, Chhau not only represented the authentic Bengali tradition but also became the specimen for representing West Bengal in the ongoing efforts undertaken by the various regional governments across India of obtaining classical status for their indigenous dance forms.<sup>44</sup> As a result, Bhattacharya sought to consolidate Bengali identity on both cultural and territorial terms through his projection of Purulia Chhau as an authentic classical tradition of West Bengal. As the discussion in the first part of the section reveals, through his historical narrative on Chhau, Bhattacharya first asserts how Chhau is essentially a Bengali dance tradition in the cultural realm to primarily achieve two aims-- the imposition of a Bengali identity for the form, while simultaneously separating it from its present tribal identity, in the process, creating a 'sanitized' product, tailor-made to suit the tastes of the Calcutta-based cultural elites-- his main target audience within the state. Likewise, the territorial identity is consolidated through his claim of absolute authenticity of the Purulia Chhau over the other two forms, implying the regional superiority of West Bengal over Orissa and Bihar (now Jharkhand).<sup>45</sup>

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Bhattacharya treats the inclusion of Hindu elements into the repertoire of Chhau as a sign of being 'revived' to its earlier identity of 'high culture' which was corrupted in the intermediary period of tribal association.

<sup>42</sup> Kumkum Chatterjee, *The King of Controversy: History and Nation-Making in Late Colonial India*, *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 110, No. 5 (December 2005), p.1470.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Dutt (1954), pp.23-5.

<sup>45</sup> Bhattacharya (1972), p.32

To elucidate on the Bengali-ness of Purulia Chhau, hence, he argues that performances are strictly based on the regional version of the epics such as Krittivas' *Ramayana* and Kavichandra's *Mahabharata*. To quote him:

Though the performances are not held on the basis of any written diction in either of the places, yet by investigation it has been found that it is the Bengali translation of the *Ramayana* by Kavi Chandra that is generally adopted for performance. Kavi Chandra whose full name was Sankar Chakravarti Kavi Chandra...lived in the seventeenth century A.D. in the Visnupur sub-division of Bankura, an adjoining district on the east of Purulia..... The Puranic and pseudo-Puranic episodes which have been adopted for the Chhau dance of Purulia represent essentially the character of Bengal.<sup>46</sup>

Even the masks, Bhattacharya contends, are modelled on Bengal's Krishnanagar school of clay-modelling.

The themes which are presented through the Chhau dance of Purulia, are all West Bengal's own, and save one or two items of Mayurbhanja there is nothing in common with Purulia or anywhere in Seraikella or in Mayurbhanja....Another internal evidence of Chhau dance, having originated in Purulia, is the model of the masks as used there. They all follow the standard style of Bengali clay-modelling generally represented by the school of Krishnanagar in Nadia District of West Bengal.<sup>47</sup>

He even makes a distinction between Bihari and Bengali Doms to highlight the role of the latter, who played an important part in his narrative on the origin and development of the Purulia Chhau, while completely negating any contribution of the former, thereby impressing upon his readers the inherent Bengali-ness of the dance form.

There is yet another community which has made definite contribution to the development of Chhau dance of Purulia. It is the Dom. The Dom is divided into two-groups—the Bihari Dom and the Bengali Dom. The Bihari Dom are also known as Maghaiya or Turi and they are generally Hindi-speaking though they can also speak a bit of Bengali. The Bihari Dom have no relationship whatever with the Chhau dance performances. It is the Bengali Dom who participate in it as musicians.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.,pp.32-3.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., pp.34.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.,p.10.

Also, to further stress the separation of the Purulia Chhau from any Bihari elements (read ‘corruption’), Bhattacharya adds:

For a considerable period of time Purulia remained under Bihar, a Hindi speaking State. But the Bengali elements in Chhau dance were so strong that no element of Bihari culture could penetrate into it. Some confuse Bihari festival ‘Chhat’ with Chhau. But there is a gulf of difference between these two and it will be useless to make any comparison between them.<sup>49</sup>

Now, after placing Chhau within the Bengali cultural milieu, Bhattacharya then had to represent Purulia Chhau as the most authentic of the three variants of Chhau corresponding to the regions that fall under the territories of the post-independence political states of West Bengal, Orissa (Odisha) and Bihar (now Jharkhand). The problem lay in the fact that in the absence of any provision to jointly accord classical status to a dance form owned by two states with overlapping geographic and socio-cultural identities, only one regional state alone could claim any sort of recognition from the central institution in either categories of classical or folk. In the particular case of Purulia Chhau, there existed three regional claimants vying for the ownership of the same tradition. To make matters worse for Bhattacharya, the other two variants were placed better placed in terms of patronage since the pre-independence period owing to the direct princely patronage offered by the Bhanj Deo Raj families.<sup>50</sup>

So, Bhattacharya argues that the most ancient and pure form of Chhau originated in the Purulia region, from which the form later travelled to Seraikella and Mayurbhanj - refuting the claims of other scholars.<sup>51</sup> He argues:

Those who claim that Chhau dance as prevalent in Mayurbhanja originated in Orissa instead of West Bengal, ignore some basic facts. But it must be said that the number of such claimants is not very large. On the other hand the people of Mayurbhanja believe that Chhau dance there, has been borrowed from Seraikella instead of from Purulia in West Bengal. In such case it becomes like borrowing from a borrower, as Seraikella borrowed its basic character from Purulia, and Mayurbhanja borrowed it from Seraikella and developed it in its own way and according to its own character and talent.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Bhattacharya (1972), p.35.

<sup>50</sup> Even prior to independence, Mayurbhanj Chhau had already performed at the coronation of George V in Calcutta and Seraikella Chhau had completed its first abroad tour (1936-37).

<sup>51</sup> Mahato (1987), p.37, pp.39-40, pp.56-8, p.76.

<sup>52</sup> Bhattacharya (1972),p.31.

To clinch his argument that the dance form sprang its roots first in Purulia, Bhattacharya falls back upon the Aryan migration theory which attempts to expound on the pattern of transmission of Aryan communities from one region to the other, in an overall southerly direction. This is only to be expected as according to Bhattacharya, Chhau after all remains a product strictly grounded within the Aryan culture!<sup>53</sup>

Thus, Ashutosh Bhattacharya's own politico-cultural stakes motivated his representation of Purulia Chhau as a classical dance form through which he wanted to compensate for the lack of a classical tradition of West Bengal. Being the first person, he held the power to determine the authenticity of the form he wanted to showcase—creating a gap between what the form actually is and what he wanted to present. Although Ashutosh Bhattacharya's attempts remained futile given the lack of classical recognition accorded to Purulia Chhau, his representation went a long way in determining the identity of the overall nature of the form so much so, that even the counter-narrative that emerged in response to his writings (dealt in the third section) was marred by his view 'from the above'.

The process of marginalization of the performers of the Purulia Chhau, effected by Bhattacharya while projecting Chhau as a classical dance form is compounded by Mahua Mukherjee through her efforts to construct an 'imaginary' classical dance tradition of Bengal. As narrated in the subsequent section, this zealous quest for a classical dance tradition of Bengal results in a simultaneous appropriation and marginalization of multiple rural folk forms situated in Bengal, inclusive of the Purulia Chhau.

## **Section 2: Purulia Chhau as a semi-classical form: Mahua Mukherjee's Representation**

The second section looks at how Purulia Chhau is getting represented within the narrative of 'Gaudiya Nritya', the claimed classical dance of Bengal. Being a contemporary phenomenon, the concept of *Gaudiya Nritya* was first articulated by Mahua Mukherjee, a dance scholar and dancer, in 1996 as a dance form which traces its origins in ancient Bengal.<sup>54</sup> Through a study of Bengali literature, sculptures and local dance traditions,

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<sup>53</sup> To quote Bhattacharya, "All the areas of Mayurbhanja, Seraikella and Purulia are inhabited by a large number of aboriginal and semi-aboriginal people. The ethnic character of the entire area is the same; therefore, it was possible to develop an identical culture over this area. In the process of Aryanization or Hinduization, when one element of alien culture was borrowed at one place, it could easily spread over the entire area. If we accept the historical fact that the Aryan culture travelled from the North to South we cannot disagree that the Chhau dance with all its Hindu elements travelled from Purulia to Seraikella and Mayurbhanja, both in the south." Bhattacharya (1972),p.34.

<sup>54</sup> Mahua Mukherjee, *Banglar Laukik Nritya O Gaudiya Nritya*(in Bengali), *Lokashruti* No.12 February 1996.



Mukherjee argues about the existence of a rich Bengali tradition of dance, which originated with the *Devadasi* system in Bengal. The importance of this section lies in the articulation of how a historical narrative while constructing a classical tradition appropriates folk traditions such as the Chhau through establishing a dialogical relation between the two. While the first part of this section sketches the basic postulations of Mukherjee's argument, the second part looks at how this regional representation of the Chhau as a form stuck within a folk-classical continuum altered the identity of the form.

While it was in 1999, that the idea of *Gaudiya Nritya* was floated by Mahua Mukherjee in the March edition of the *Desh*, a Calcutta-based urban Bengali periodical, Mukherjee claims that recognition of this form was sought as early as in 1993.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, this idea of a classical dance of Bengal initiated debate and discussion on the form. In 2002, a seminar was also organised by the Asiatic Society on *Gaudiya Nritya*, the proceedings and papers of which were then published later on.<sup>56</sup> However, as far as the official proceedings are concerned, despite much publicity, *Gaudiya Nritya* still awaits recognition as a classical dance at the national level.

Delving into the question of why there has been a lack of a classical dance tradition in Bengal in mind, Mahua Mukherjee, once chanced upon a sculpture of a dancing woman in the temple of Ananta Vasudevan in Bansberiya (Hooghly district of West Bengal) in 1971.<sup>57</sup> This then motivated Mukherjee to study different literatures, sculptures and history of existing dance traditions of both Bengal and beyond, in her efforts to identify the existence of a lost dance tradition of Bengal. The name 'Gaudiya', coined by historian Bratindranath Mukherjee, is derived from the term 'Gaud' which hosted the political capital of Bengal between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. Thus the name Gaud not only delimited the territorial region of Bengal, but also denoted the regional and cultural identity of the region and also a prosperous urban centre.<sup>58</sup>

Mahua Mukherjee's narrative of *Gaudiya Nritya* originates in the pre-Pala rule in Bengal, tracing the trajectory of a continuous rise and fall of the tradition owing to different socio-political crises afflicting the region throughout the entire course of history. The first

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<sup>55</sup> Gayatri Chattopadhyay, 'Gaudiya Nritya' (in Bengali), in Pallab Sengupta, Manabendu Bandyopadhyay and Mahua Mukhopadhyay (eds.), *Gaudiya Nritya: Nibandhaguchha* (in Bengali), (The Asiatic Society, Kolkata, 2005), p.49.

<sup>56</sup> <http://www.narthaki.com/info/reviews/review42.html> (Last accessed: 03/06/15)

<sup>57</sup> Mahua Mukhopadhyay, *Gaudiya Nritya: Prachin Banglar Shastriya Nrityadhara* (in Bengali), (The Asiatic Society, Kolkata, 2004), p.5.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1.

disjuncture at which the form declined was analysed to have been caused due to the Turkish invasion of Bengal.<sup>59</sup> It was only during the time of Chaitanya Dev, the great Bhakti saint of fifteenth century Bengal, that the form was could regain its past glory at least for a considerable period. Denouncing the ‘cheap bodily’ elements from the repertoire, which had entered due to Islamic influence, the dance regained its purest spiritual form.<sup>60</sup> However, with the advent of the British in Bengal, the dance again declined. Too much emphasis on western culture, considered to be an effect of colonial influence since the eighteenth century, led the native classical tradition of the land to the backseat once again. Additionally, by this time, north Indian musical and dance forms had become quite popular in Calcutta. These had come to the city in the wake of the exile of the Nawab of Avadh, Wajid Ali Shah, to the city.<sup>61</sup> Hence, the presence and practice of an erstwhile classical dance tradition was gradually erased from the collective memory of the Bengalees, a period which Mukherjee terms as the ‘Dark age’ of dance in Bengal.<sup>62</sup> Hence, when numerous attempts were made across India in the early twentieth century under colonial rule to revive different regional dance traditions, Bengal could not participate. Even in the post-independence period, owing to the post-partition crisis and migration problems, Bengal could hardly put forward any concerted efforts in recollecting and reviving its erstwhile glorious heritage.<sup>63</sup>

Mahua Mukherjee bases her narrative on four types of source materials—the general political history of Bengal, the ancient and medieval treatises on dance, sculptural and archaeological evidences and the *Guru-shishya prampara* traditions.<sup>64</sup> In the context of textual reference, Mukherjee argues that the dance form traces its roots back to the *Natyashastra*, in which four *Pravrittis* are mentioned: *Dakshinatya*, *Audramagadhi*, *Avanti*, and *Panchali*, among which *Gaudiya Nritya* falls under the genre of *Audramagadhi*.<sup>65</sup> Along with this, Mukherjee cites Kalhana’s *Rajatarangini* where there are mentions about the

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.,pp.15-33.

<sup>60</sup> Mukhopadhyay (2004), p.30.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.,p.38.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p.40.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.,p.12.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.,p.14.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.,p.43. “Pravritti in Natyashastra refers to specific human behaviours varying from region to region. It divides India into four broad zones accordingly, to facilitate the understanding of them, so that Vritti or the dramatic style may find proper expression through the required portrayal in the text as well as performance. The four Pravritti are dakshinatya i.e. southern, avanti i.e. western, audra magadhi i.e. eastern, and pancala madhyama i.e. north-western and northern. In each, behaviour varies due to predominance of different vrittis, and requires careful study by the playwright and actor so that description and performance achieve the accurate representation.” (Source: <http://www.indianetzone.com/47/pravritti.htm> . Last accessed: 05/08/15).

prevalence of Devadasi dancing in temples of Bengal.<sup>66</sup> Along with this, other contemporary texts like the *Srihastamuktavali*, Matanga's *Brihaddesi*, Pandit Subhankara's *Sangeeta Damodara*, Saranga Deva's *Sangeeta Ratnakara* and Mahesvara Mahapatra's *Abhinaya Chandrika* testify to the presence of a classical dance tradition of Bengal.<sup>67</sup>

Coming to the sculptural remains, Mukherjee argues that traces of this dance form can be noted in temple sculptures of Bengal as early as the 4th century B.C.E. The Vasudeva temple in Hooghly, Kenduli's temple in Birbhum, Pratapeswar temple at Kalna (Bardhaman), Bhabanishwar temple in Murshidabad and so forth have rich illustrations of the different dance mudras that were used in specific performances, the most abundant of them being the themes of *Mahisasuramardini*, the demise of the demoness *Putana*, *Kaliya-daman*, the *swayamvar* of *Sita* and so on.<sup>68</sup> Four types of temple sculpture depicting dance postures are available—stone, wood, terracotta and metal. An analysis of them reveals that the ancient dance tradition of Bengal exhibited all the four described postures of Indian aesthetics—*Samabhanga*, *Abhanga*, *Tribhanga* and *Atibhanga*.<sup>69</sup> Also, the presence of *Natamandirs* (the theatre) in the terracotta temples of ancient and medieval Bengal like the temple of Deulia (Bardhaman), Siddheswar temple of Bankura, the Paharpur temple etc. proved to be the archaic theatre for both music and dance performances.<sup>70</sup> In the genre of painting, Bengal's earliest specimens date back to eleventh and twelfth centuries C.E. and mainly constituted paintings in thatched manuscripts or paper.<sup>71</sup> In these, there are pictures of dance depicting several movements, gaits, musical instruments and ornaments.<sup>72</sup>

Although investigating the veracity of these claims is not the focus of this section, certain observations are warranted. In her bid to project an ancient legacy of the past to validate the present need of seeking a classical tradition for Bengal, Mukherjee uses several textual and sculptural evidences which spans across the entire historical period of Bengal, almost endowing a sense of timelessness. Moreover, her picking and choosing from a variety of texts randomly from different contexts corresponding to different time periods, without

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.50.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.,27-30.

<sup>68</sup> Mukhopadhyay (2004),p.242.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.,p.243.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.,p.216.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.,p.243.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

delving into the nuances of the same, makes her narrative chronologically invalid.<sup>73</sup> As far as her emphasis on the sculptures are concerned, along with the anachronistic evidences again from different time periods,<sup>74</sup> it is also not clear as to how and why she is interpreting certain sculptures as depicting specific dance postures. Moreover, even if there had been a dance tradition, there are no evidences to suggest that it was specifically the ‘Gaudiya Nritya’ which was in practice as claimed.

The main problem lies in Mukherjee’s assumption that whatever tradition flourished within *Gaud* i.e. geographical territory of eighth century C.E. Bengal, is a product of Bengali culture. Not only this fixity over a territory representative of the political and cultural identity of the entire Bengal misplaced (as it excludes eastern and northern Bengal), it is also historically inaccurate. This is because the consciousness of a Bengali identity does not develop prior to the rise of nationalism in Bengal in the nineteenth century. There again, in her definition of Bengali culture she only emphasizes on the Hindu influences, discounting thereby all other cultural influences which contributed to the history and culture of Bengal in different phases. It is evident from her narrative that Mukherjee wanted to create a Hindu past of the dance form by creating an ‘other’ in the Islamic influence as ‘corrupting’ practices—a common narrative that almost all the revived neo-classical dance forms of India since the 1950s took recourse to.<sup>75</sup> The construction of the past thus in all these instances, is informed by the anxieties and insecurities of the present.

Now, how this urge of reviving the past motivates Mukherjee to provide a new turn to the age-old folk-classical debate by representing rural folk forms as semi-classical *guru-shishya parampara traditions* will be discussed in the following part of the section.

After establishing the existence of an erstwhile classical dance tradition, Mahua Mukherjee discusses the important role the *guru-shishya prampara* traditions of Bengal can play in the revival of *Gaudiya Nritya*. By *guru-shishya pramparas*, Mukherjee implies those forms which have been practised in the rural areas and have survived through the guidance of successive generations of teachers or Gurus. While articulating this premise, Mukherjee defines how the folk and classical dances are related to each other. According to her, it is

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<sup>73</sup> For example, Mukherjee uses *Natyashastra* (composed between 200 B.C.E. to 200 C.E.), Kalhana’s *Rajatarangini* (1200 C.E.) and *Srihastamauktavali* (between 1200 C.E. to 1600 C.E. approx.) simultaneously to prove her point.

<sup>74</sup> In case of the sculptures also, for example she cites Paharpur temple (8<sup>th</sup> century C.E.) along with Kenduli temple of Jayadeva in Birbhum (of 15<sup>th</sup> Century C.E.), Bansberia temple of Hooghly (estd.1788 C.E.) and Pratapeswar temple at Kalna in Bardhaman (18<sup>th</sup> century C.E.)

<sup>75</sup> For details see, Pallabi Chakravorty, ‘Dancing into Modernity: Multiple Narratives of India’s Kathak Dance’, *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 38, No. 1/2 (Summer - Winter, 2006), pp. 115-136.

always from a folk form (spontaneous) that a classical (codified) form develops.<sup>76</sup> In support of this theory, she offers as examples the nature of evolution of the other classical dance forms of India. She argues that in the case of Bharatanatyam, influences of rural folk traditions like the *Bhagavatamela* drama, *Kuruvanji* (traditional Tamil dance drama), *Sadir* (the dance of the Devadasis) and *Terukuthur* (street play) are very much visible.<sup>77</sup> On a similar note, Kathakali draws its present form from the *Ashtapadiattam* (*Gitagovindam*), *Kudiyattam* (Sanskrit drama from Kerala), *Ramanatyam* (folk drama on the life of Rama), *Krishnanatyam* (folk drama on the life of Krishna) etc.<sup>78</sup> Similar processes are visible in the case studies of Odissi, Manipuri and Kathak as well.<sup>79</sup> This to Mukherjee clearly implies that all these classical forms are based on the associated local folk forms.

Now, Mukherjee argues, that such conversion from folk to classical had happened under royal or temple patronage. It is under such systemic and institutional patronage, that a spontaneous amorphous form is converted into a structured and codified tradition. However, this process gets reversed in the absence of such patronage i.e. this structured form then again gets re-converted (read, degenerated) to its erstwhile folk forms.<sup>80</sup> Mukherjee argues that however, traces of the classical form somehow survive in these otherwise spontaneous forms. Hence, several folk forms which Mukherjee terms as the *guru-shishya parampara* tradition exhibits many classical elements in their performance. To illustrate, Mukherjee cites the examples of Odissi and Bharatanatyam. She contends that the Gotipua dance form of Odisha which has contributed in the development of the Odissi dance, has been influenced by the classical dance itself in its present form.<sup>81</sup> Similarly, the influence of Bharatanatyam can be observed in the *Bhagavatamela natakam* as well.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Mahua Mukhopadhyay, 'Banglar Guruparamparabahi Nrityadhara' (in Bengali) in *Gaudiya Nritya: Nibandhaguchha* (in Bengali), (The Asiatic Society, Kolkata, 2005), p.78.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.,p.80.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> For details see Purnima Shah, 'State Patronage in India: Appropriation of the "Regional" and "National"', *Dance Chronicle*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2002), pp. 125-141.; Ananya Chatterjea, 'Contestations: Constructing a Historical Narrative' in Alexandra Carter ed. *Rethinking Dance History*, pp.143-56, (Routledge, London, 2004).

<sup>80</sup> Mukherjee(2004),p.78

<sup>81</sup> Mukherjee cites Kapila Vatsyayan, "What we recognise the Orissi dance today, is an attempt at reconstruction of a dance form from all these fragments of the Mahari tradition of the Gotipua tradition, of the Bandhyanritya tradition of the martial arts and Chhau tradition known to Orissa, and the inspiration drawn from the sculptural relief and pictorial image. Thus on one level, Orissi is perhaps the oldest because its revival or its neoclassical format emerged only in the 1950s of this century. After lying dormant or being fragmented or certainly underground for sixty years or may be hundred, it arose again as a new whole. The story of the reconstruction of the Orissi in Independent India is parallel to the story of the reconstruction of the Bharatanatyam is (sic.) the 30s of this century. It is also parallel to the new lease of life which was given to Kathakali by the efforts of poet Vallathal in Kerala. In what is recognised as the art dance of Orissi, cognizance

So, this process can be observed in the case of *Gaudiya Nritya* as well, but only in reverse. Since, *Gaudiya Nritya* no longer survives as a proper dance form in Bengal, Mukherjee argues that it is only through the *guru-shishya pramapara* traditions, that one can obtain a glimpse of the nature of the extinct dance form. She argues that the folk traditions have several classical elements in their performance which not only testify their association with this erstwhile classical tradition but also provide the materials through which the *Gaudiya Nritya* can be revived.<sup>83</sup> Although she has made separate discussions on the different folk forms such as *Bishahara*, *Manasakirtan*, *Kushan*, *Gambhira*, *Nachni*, *Baul*, *Kirtana Nritya* etc.<sup>84</sup>, I will only concentrate on her discussion on Purulia Chhau.

Mukherjee argues, in the specific case of Chhau, that every performance starts with the worshipping of Ganesha, a process which, according to her, was once followed in the *Gaudiya Nritya*.<sup>85</sup> Secondly, that Chhau performances are held either in temple premises or in the honour of any deity proves its connection with the *Gaudiya Nritya* which again traces its origin to the Devadasi tradition. Thirdly, the performance of Chhau exhibits *Angika* (expression of limbs), *Vachika* (expression of speech) and *Aharya Abhinaya* (costume) as prescribed in the *Natyashastra*. In exhibiting *Angika*, it includes all the prescribed genres of movements and positions.<sup>86</sup> For the *Vachika*, vocal music is accompanied by *shehnai* and *Dhamsa* which had also been referred in both the ancient texts of *Natyashastra* and *Sangeeta Damodara*. The vocal music which is performed is generally based on the local *Jhumur* tunes which had developed from the *Kirtana* tradition, a product of Gaudiya Vaishnavism.<sup>87</sup> Fourthly, the nature of Chhau performance clearly exhibits the *Virarasa* which epitomised the *Tandava* element of the *Gaudiya Nritya*.<sup>88</sup> Fifthly, Chhau despite being a folk form still requires a Guru to provide training in the basic movements. Mukherjee argues that since the main difference between a folk and a classical form is that while the former is a spontaneous form which can be learnt by anyone, the latter is a codified systematized form requiring proper guidance from a teacher (Guru). The presence of the Guru in the tradition of Chhau thus again, testifies its relationship with *Gaudiya Nritya*. Mahua Mukherjee cites her

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must be taken on this historical background. Often people mistake the full recital on the stage as an authentic unbroken continuation of the ancient past. In fact, it is the reconstruction of the fragments available from different periods and milieus as also the immediate remote past.” Ibid.,p.79.

<sup>82</sup> Mukherjee (2005), p.93.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.,p.94.

<sup>84</sup> Mukherjee (2005), p.249.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.,p.252.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.,p.250.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.,p.248.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.,p.253.

interview with late Gambhir Singh Mura, a famous exponent of Purulia Chhau, as an authoritative source for this reconstruction.<sup>89</sup>

It is evident from the above discussion that Mahua Mukherjee wanted to construct the tradition of a classical dance of Bengal following the trajectory of other classical forms. To establish that, the requirements were that the *Gaudiya Nritya*, should not only be completely rooted in the Bengali cultural traditions but also should be qualified enough to be portrayed as the cultural representative of the state of West Bengal. Thus, while she follows same set of authentic parameters (i.e. textual, archaeological and sculptural evidences), which are used in ascertaining classical status for other regional forms such as Bharatanatyam, Odissi, Kathakali etc., she also includes all the prominent aspects of Bengali cultural traditions in her narrative, providing a composite and synthetic nature to the form—thus making it qualify under both categories.

Moreover, through the course of this narrative, Mahua Mukherjee represents Chhau as a form which is neither fully folk nor completely classical. As Mukherjee has argued, *Gaudiya Nritya* was the systematised form of the rural folk forms of Bengal of which Chhau is also a part. In hostile circumstances, when the tradition failed to survive, the folk proved to be the repository of the traces left behind. As a result, while Chhau retains its folk elements in its usage of masks and spontaneous movements, it also simultaneously, exhibits classical elements in the form of Ganesha worship.

Although both Bhattacharya and Mukherjee wanted to project a classical dance form of Bengal (read, West Bengal), the difference lay in the selection. While Bhattacharya wanted to present Purulia Chhau as the classical dance by constructing a glorious legacy for Chhau, Mukherjee wanted to use all the folk forms including Chhau to construct a composite dance form, albeit an imaginary one, to present as the classical form of Bengal. In both the cases, the stake is on representing an authentic tradition while articulating their respective claims. As a result, while Bhattacharya's representation of Chhau dance as a classical form stripped it from its tribal/folk present through the projection of a glorious past, Mukherjee's narrative subsumes Chhau under the burden of projecting a lost tradition.

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.p.12.

### **Section 3: Claim of the ‘insiders’: Representation of Purulia Chhau through *Chhatrak* and other writings.**

*Chhatrak*, edited by Subodh BasuRay, had been one of its own in discussing the local traditions of Purulia. Throughout its lifespan of 20 odd years, starting in 1969, this quarterly journal had not only catapulted Chhau to the spotlight but also taken ample care in encouraging discussions on other dance forms and cultural traditions of the Purulia region. The editorial board of this journal boasted of several erudite local scholars such as Dhiren Saha, Bankim Mahato, Pashupati Mahato and Subodh Basuray himself, who were the first to develop a critique of Ashutosh Bhattacharya’s representation of the Chhau dance. The reason for *Chhatrak*’s inclusion in the selection of representative narratives on Chhau is on this ground that despite being a small magazine published and circulated locally, it provides an idea about how the representation of a form gets determined by local identities/politics.

*Chhatrak* was pioneered in 1969 as a solo effort on the part of Subodh Basuray, a lecturer in the Purulia College, to initiate and encourage research and discussion on the ‘dying’ cultural traditions of Manbhum.<sup>90</sup> The reason or the motivation behind such endeavours remained unknown, given *Chhatrak* had no predecessors in the field at that time.<sup>91</sup> Probably the need for ‘self’-representation became quite imperative as by that time, Ashutosh Bhattacharya’s initiatives in reviving the form was becoming well-known. Also, by 1969, the Chhau performers have already performed at the Rabindra-Bhavan in New Delhi under the guidance of Bhattacharya, where they were widely appreciated. So the ‘idea’ of Purulia Chhau constituted through Bhattacharya’s writings and marketing had already reached an audience beyond Purulia. Since Bhattacharya’s narrative on Chhau is controversial on many accounts, the need was then to provide an ‘authentic’ representation which would be provided by the ‘insiders’ this time.

An analysis of the general trajectory of *Chhatrak* over two and a half decades reveals several trends. Starting with a general critique of Bhattacharya’s narrative which spans across several issues, the counter-narrative also involved debates on the origin and development of the Purulia Chhau tradition. However, from the 1980s onwards, the emphasis gradually shifts to the other local forms of the region as by that time Chhau had already been established as a

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<sup>90</sup> The broader cultural region which includes the district of Purulia and some parts of present day Jharkhand.

<sup>91</sup> The information is gathered from Mr. Dilip Kumar Goswami, a local scholar and in-charge of Haripada Sahitya Mandir (Rabindra Bhavan, Purulia) in a casual conversation at District Library Purulia on 18/03/15.



well-known form locally and internationally owing to the visits of Chhau troupes to Paris and America under the auspices of Bhattacharya. While the discussions and debates on Chhau continued (in smaller numbers), several articles now talked more about *Jhumur* (a local folk musical tradition) and *Nachni* (a prevalent folk dance form performed by women). In the specific case of *Nachni*, articles mainly appealed for the revival of this disgraced form keeping Chhau as the parameter.<sup>92</sup> Even, the fiction section of the magazine often published stories on the need for this revival. The requirement was then, the overall glorification of Purulia/Manbhum<sup>93</sup> through the highlighting of other forms following the trajectory of Chhau. It is hence, quite evident, that Chhau, by this time not only had become the sole representative of cultural richness of the region but its growing popularity provided an impetus for the ‘revival’ and the attempted expansion of other cultural forms along similar trajectories.

The critique of Bhattacharya that developed was based on several postulations which produced a simultaneous counter-narrative. The first assertion is aimed at defining the identity of the form which inverts the basic assumption of Bhattacharya’s argument of Chhau dance being a derivative of high culture. It is argued instead that Chhau is a product of the aboriginal people of the land who are addressed as both tribal and folk populations (often interchangeably) in the narratives.<sup>94</sup> The counter-narrative to Bhattacharya subsequently contends that this indigenous product in due course of time got ‘polluted’ by Hinduism - the high culture, in this case - and has reached its present state. For example, Bankim Mahato identifies Chhau as a tribal dance form which sought inspiration from their own ritualistic lifestyle. It is only in the last 150-200 years that this tribal dance form has come under the influence of Hinduism as a result of which masks and Hindu religious themes were introduced into it, thereby corrupting the form.<sup>95</sup> The reason provided for this corruption is that the aboriginal population of the region, except their familiarity with the *Rasa* theme of Radha-Krishna were not accustomed to such Puranic and epic stories. Such cultural imposition happened due to the migration of the upper-caste Hindu population into the region during the colonial rule. So, the present day masked dance which happens is not the authentic

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<sup>92</sup> Shibusanatan Mukhopadhyay, ‘Nindita Nritya Nandita Hok’ (in Bengali), *Chhatrak*, Sharadiya Sankhya 1975.

<sup>93</sup> Purulia and Manbhum were both interchangeably and separately used.

<sup>94</sup> Bankim Mahato, ‘Chho naach: Ekti shomikha.’ (in Bengali) *Chhatrak*, No.3,1978,pp. 205-213; Pashupati Prasad Mahato, ‘Jhumur: Samajik Prekshapater Jibandarshan’, (in Bengali)*Chhatrak* No.4, 1988, pp.116-127; Subodh Basuray, ‘Ja Dekhechhi, Ja Sunechhi: Baghmundir Encyclopaedia’ (in Bengali)*Chhatrak*, No.2, 1988,pp.140-7.

<sup>95</sup> B.Mahato (1978), p.236.

Chhau whose origin lay in a pre-Hindu tribal past.<sup>96</sup> Roma Chatterji notes here how such critiques could not go beyond the narrative sketched by Bhattacharya, owing to its pre-occupation with the 'tradition'.<sup>97</sup> The only difference here lay in considering tribal elements as superior to the Hinduised elements. Similarly, oral tradition based on memory is considered to be more authentic than literary tradition which requires a medium of language to convey its knowledge and hence, is subjected to distortion. The second most scathing critique of Bhattacharya was posed by Pashupati Mahato.<sup>98</sup> According to him, such interest in cultural traditions of the region by people like Ashutosh Bhattacharya is nothing but a conspiracy hatched by the upper-caste elites of Bengal, Bihar and Odisha in order to appropriate the form to serve their own individual and societal needs.<sup>99</sup>

However, despite the unanimous identification of Chhau as a non-classical dance by the local scholars, there was no homogeneity in deciding upon the region to which Purulia Chhau belonged. For example, Pashupati Mahato and Bankim Mahato argues that the very essence of this dance form is located in its tribal characteristic which in turn is connected with its the Jharkhandi identity.<sup>100</sup> Since, these scholars were articulating these arguments prior to the formation of the state of Jharkhand and henceforth signified the region (mentioned first in the *Chaitanyacharitamrita*) of eastern Chhotanagpur which is predominantly inhabited by the tribal population. Subodh Basuray, in contrast connects it with the idea of a broader Manbhum culture.<sup>101</sup> Here again, instead of being a politically defined territory, Manbhum signified the cultural region corresponding to the erstwhile district of the Bihar state, a part of which was added to the state of West Bengal as the Purulia

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.,p.234.

<sup>97</sup> Roma Chatterji, *Writing Identities :Folklore and Performative Arts of Purulia, Bengal* (Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts, New Delhi, 2009), pp.14-15.

<sup>98</sup> P.Mahato (1988),p.120.He later develops his critique in his book titled, *The Performing Arts of Jharkhand*, (B.B.Prakashan, Calcutta, 1987).

<sup>99</sup> Pashupati Prasad Mahato, *The Performing Arts of Jharkhand*, (B.B.Prakashan, Calcutta, 1987), p.25. I am citing this book here as his earlier critique of Bhattacharya in *Chhatrak* has been elaborately developed here.

<sup>100</sup> "The geo-political boundaries of Bihar, West Bengal and Orissa are mainly responsible for the confusion of the origin of homeland of Chho. The ethnic groups which are responsible for the creation of this art form are the Mahato (Kurmi), Bhumij (Tamaria, Deshua, Patkumia, Barabhuia of Mayurbhanja), Bhuiya etc. This entire cultural and ecological tract is known as Jharkhand, in Chaitanya-Charitamrit following the Reorganisation of States in 1955, this whole belt is divided between Bihar, West Bengal and Orissa." P.Mahato, 1987, p.11.

<sup>101</sup> Subodh Basuray, 'Ja Dekhechi, Ja Sunechi: Baghmundir Encyclopaedia' (in Bengali)*Chhatrak*, No.2, 1988,pp.142.

district in 1956 (discussed in detail in the introduction of Chapter 3).<sup>102</sup> In case of Basuray, the emphasis was on the composite rural folk identity of Chhau, which often included the tribal as well. On similar lines, other scholars also argued and showed that how the dance form of Chhau was an admixture of the existing dance traditions of the region.<sup>103</sup> According to him, *Natua* dance is the first form of Purulia Chhau and the dance in its entirety is a blend of all the performing art forms of the region, especially *Dhanr Nach*, *Natua Nach*, *Majhi Nach*, *Kirtan* and *Nachni Nach*,<sup>104</sup>

The second point of the critique shows how the representation of Purulia Chhau as a classical tradition by Bhattacharya subsequently marginalized the tribal and low-caste performers due to its upper-caste prejudices. It is argued that the ‘sons of the soil’ i.e., the major ethnic groups namely Kurmi (Mahato), Bhumij, Bauri Dom, Rajwar, Turi Ghasi, Munda, Santhals, Bathudi etc. are completely denied all agency in the formation and development of the Chhau in Bhattacharya’s narrative. To quote Pashupati Mahato,

It should be noted that anthropologically and sociologically these ethnic groups are regarded as low caste in the light of stratification of the Jati-Varna model of existing Hindu society. As Chho is a very popular dance of Jharkhand, interested scholars of upper caste, and classes, mainly Brahmins, Kayastha, Karan and Baidya communities have tried to establish that ‘Chhow’ is only a product of their own state of which they are the ruling elite. Bengali and Oriya scholars are more aggressive than the others. They ignore the migration of the indigenous communities.<sup>105</sup>

Not only that but also the authenticity of the performance is determined by an individual whose own vision is coloured by upper-caste bias as expressed through his own fetish about the classical. Hence, every aspect of Chhau dance gets defined through the ‘borrowed’ terms of a different (read, higher) cultural set up. The following excerpt from Mahato’s discussion on Mayurbhanja Chhau, will show the result of such endeavours.

It is very interesting that all the dance experts of Mayurbhanja Chho have failed to understand the cognative (sic) aspects of the dancers or of the local people. They always interpret the ‘Bhab’ or mood or ‘Rasa’ or aesthetics in terms of the ‘great tradition’ or Sanskritic tradition. In village Chitorda, or in Sirajuri or in Bhurkhundi and in Rairangpur areas, the cognative feeling of these

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<sup>102</sup> For details see, Dilip Kumar Goswami, *Manbhumer Bhasha Andolon O Bangabhukti*, (in Bengali) (Bajrabhumi Prakashan, Purulia,2006) and Gautam De, *Manbhum theke Purulia* (in Bengali)(Punascha, Kolkata, 2006)

<sup>103</sup> Kuchil Mukhopadhyay, ‘Manbhumer Chhau Nach’, *Chhatrak*, 1994 No.3.,pp.8-12.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.,p.12.

<sup>105</sup> P.Mahato (1987),pp.26-7.

aesthetics or mood are almost similar. The *Sringara Rasa* portrays Lord Krishna with a flute, Nataraj as *Tandava Rasa*, Gopis and Radha's moods are *Lasya*, Durga as *Roudra* warriors in *Vir Rasa*, are according to the 'Great tradition' of India are very much used in Chho dance. But one needs to remember that the tribals and peasants of Mayurbhanja are unconsciously using these *Rasa* or *Bhaba*.<sup>106</sup>

And this idea remains quite pervasive in all levels so much so that while conducting interviews for my field study, I found several of the performers readily using concepts such as '*Virarasa*', '*Tandava*', '*Lasya*' when asked to describe the aesthetic and emotional mood of their dance. This shows how the dominant representation of the form, in due course of time, actually alters the identity of the dance for the performers as well.<sup>107</sup>

While the critique of Bhattacharya continued, discussions included the debates related to the origin and nomenclature of Chhau. There was hardly any unanimous view on these topics. Thus, while Nimaichandra Ojhha citing his interview with Chhau exponent Kalipada Mahato emphasizes on the narration of how the Baghmundi Rajas imported the form from Seraikella and Mayurbhanj,<sup>108</sup> Kuchil Mukhopadhyay contrastingly narrates how different local forms have contributed to the development of Chhau.<sup>109</sup> For the term 'Chhau', Sudhir Karan derives the name from *Sang* meaning clown.<sup>110</sup> However, in a letter to the editor, one Rajyeshwar Mitra argued that it actually derived from 'Chham', a Tibetan ritual dance.<sup>111</sup> Finally, regardless of its origin, Pashupati Mahato asserted that the word itself is 'Chho' and not 'Chhau' which is a corrupt pronunciation of the word created by the 'outsiders'.<sup>112</sup>

However, all such debates fall into line when it comes to the practice and preservation of an authentic tradition. In almost all the writings, there are mentions about the different innovations that had taken place in the Chhau performances, both local and outside. While some have stayed neutral on the topic, most have lamented on the 'loss' of a 'tradition'. Thus, Nimaichandra Ojha in an interview with Chhau dancer Kalipada Mahato, attributes the loss of authenticity to the lack of physical strength amongst contemporary performers, saying:

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.,p,46.

<sup>107</sup> This would be discussed in details in the second chapter.

<sup>108</sup> Nimaichandra Ojhha, 'Chho nacher Shilpi Kalipada mahato' (in Bengali)*Chhatrak*, 1979, No.4 p.139.

<sup>109</sup> Kuchil Mukhopadhyay, 'Manbhumer Chhau Nach'(in Bengali), *Chhatrak*, 1994 No.3.,pp.8-12.

<sup>110</sup> SudhirKumar Karan, 'Chho-Nacher Kotha', (in Bengali) in *Simantabanglar Lokyan*, (Karuna Publishers,1969).

<sup>111</sup> Rajyeshwar Mitra, 'Letter to the Editor' in *Chhatrak* 1979 No.2.

<sup>112</sup> P.Mahato (1987), p.23.

“ছোনাচের আসল ছকের সঙ্গে কিছু কিছু কৃত্রিমতা ঢুকছে। ছোনাচ নাচতে যে ক্ষমতার দরকার তা বর্তমানের বহু শিল্পীর নাই বলেই কৃত্রিমতার আশ্রয় নিচ্ছেন শিল্পীর নাচ আর পূর্বের মত উৎকর্ষতা নাই।”<sup>113</sup>

(Certain mechanical aspects have been introduced into the original repertoire of Chho recently. Since the present day performers lack the strength required for Chho dance, they take recourse to these superficial techniques which ultimately tarnishes the original flavour of the performance.)

On the other hand, a more accepting view on new innovations is offered by Satya Gupta, while expressing reservations regarding their impact on the form's authenticity:

“বাঘমুণ্ডির হিকিমিডি কুলীর আক্লু মাছেয়ার.... বাঘমুণ্ডির যুব উৎসবে আমি তাঁর ক্লেরিওনেট বাদন শুনেছি। তাঁর ঝুমুরের সুরে কীর্তনের ছোঁয়া আর তালে তালে নেচে চলেছে মুখোশ শিল্পীরা। ছোনাচের মৌলিকত্ব কিছু নষ্ট হয়েছে কিনা জানিনা কিন্তু নতুনত্ব এসেছে নিশ্চয়....।”<sup>114</sup>

(There was this Aklu Machheyar from Baghmundi HIKimidi Club (?). I have listened to his playing of the Clarionet in the Baghmundi Youth Festival. The Jhumur tunes that he played was laced with Kirtan but aptly blended with the rhythm of the masked performers then. I do not know whether such innovations sap away the uniqueness of the Chho dance or not but can surely say that it has atleast introduced some new elements into the performance.)

Finally, a scathing critique regarding the use of modern amenities such as a decorated stage and electric lighting is offered by Anil Kumar Choudhury who says:

“এই আসরের জন্য কোন সজ্জিত মঞ্চ বড়োই বিসদৃশ ও বেমানান। স্বাভাবিক ও প্রাকৃতিক পরিবেশই এর একমাত্র উপযুক্ত ও গৌরবময় ক্ষেত্র। বিদ্যুতালোক সহ সুসজ্জিত রঙ্গমঞ্চ ছোনাচের প্রকৃতিকে, বহুলাংশে কৃত্রিমতায় অবনমিত করে...।”<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Ojhha, p.139.

<sup>114</sup> Satya Gupta, ‘Manbhume Srichaitanya’, (in Bengali) *Chhatrak*, 1986 No.1 p.189.

<sup>115</sup> Anilkumar Choudhury, ‘Puruliyar Sanskriti’ (in Bengali) *Chhatrak*, No.2 1995, pp.299-339.

( Chhau performance is not fit for the urban theatre. Instead, it can only be enjoyed in a natural environment. Proscenium space or theatre with their modern paraphernalia degrades the nature of the Chhau performance.)

Collecting the principal local counter-narratives to Bhattacharya on the origin, geographical location, and nomenclature of the dance form, one can discern some broad trends, in spite of the healthy differences of opinions amongst the local scholars. Majorly, Chhau is a unique product of the local people, both tribal villagers and low-caste communities, which lost its authenticity when it came under the influence of Hinduism. Nonetheless, Chhau remained a spontaneous ritualistic dance form of the region until recently it is losing its charm owing to the growing market-oriented popularity.

However, despite attempting to provide the other side of their ‘own’ story, the perceptions remained coloured by and through the same set of prejudices that they sought to criticize in their counter-narrative of Bhattacharya’s representation. As a result, often these local scholars continue to re-iterate the aesthetic sensibilities of the same Ashutosh Bhattacharya whom they sought to criticize.

For instance, Anil Choudhury mentions:

“ছৌ মূলতঃ ভারতীয় নৃত্যধারার ‘তাণ্ডব’ শ্রেণী সজাত। তাই, এর আঙ্গিকে কোথাও ললিত বা লাস্যভাবের কোন সন্নিবেশ লক্ষ্য করা যায় না।”<sup>116</sup>

(Chhau basically belongs to the Tandava genre of Indian dance traditions. As a result, Lasya rasa or Lalita bhava are absent from its repertoire.)

The regular description of this form in terms of a classical performance implies here a false sense of a fixed unchanging tradition which goes a long way in determining the identity of the dance form.

Moreover, despite the general tenor of these local scholars being critical to the main arguments of Bhattacharya, overall he remained accepted as the first person to bring Chhau to the limelight. In the words of Kuchil Mukhopadhyay,

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<sup>116</sup> Anil Kumar Choudhury, ‘Puruliyar Sanskriti’ (in Bengali), *Chhatrak* No.2 1995, pp.299-339.

“মানভূমকে বিশ্ব সংস্কৃতির দরবারে নিয়ে, তার যে কয়টি সাংস্কৃতিক শাখা, তাদের মধ্যে প্রথমেই নাম করতে হয় ‘ছৌ নাচ’ এর। আর সঙ্গে সঙ্গেই উচ্চারণ করতে হয় প্রয়াত আশুতোষ ভট্টাচার্যর নাম—যাঁর অবদান এ ব্যপারে অনস্বীকার্য।”<sup>117</sup>

[Chhau dance is the first cultural tradition to have brought Manbhum to the forefront. And nobody can deny the role that Ashutosh Bhattacharya played in that]

Also, the anxiety amongst the local scholars about ‘losing’ a tradition, and their subsequent attempts to counter the same, resulted in their replacing of Bhattacharya as the ‘legitimate spokespersons’ of the Chhau dance form. By attempting to set up an authentic standard for a living tradition - which by itself is a misplaced idea - the local scholars, alike Bhattacharya, leave the performers bereft of any agency to decide for their own dance.<sup>118</sup> Thus, this local representative of the form constituted through *Chhatrak*, ironically remained the product of a select group of ‘insiders’ - the academic elite of the region who despite their best intentions to locate the voice of the performers, could not do away with their own share of prejudices and socio-cultural biases.

Based on the two broad channels through which the counter-narrative of Bhattacharya is weaved, we can glean that the trope of authenticity is critical in the representation of the tradition. The counter-narrative which emerges builds around depicting Chhau as a local folk form influenced by other cultures, which has shown degeneration over the years owing to the combined onslaught of regional upper caste hegemony, and a more recent trend of modernization. Underlying such assertions remained the sense of the monopolistic authority of having the last word over the form. Now, the claim articulated by local scholars is two-fold. Firstly, being ‘insiders’, the local scholars lay claim to an intrinsic legitimacy to represent, showcase and interpret ‘their’ form. This inherent legitimacy is denied to outsiders like Bhattacharya and Mukherjee. Secondly, there is also an attempt by the local scholars to showcase themselves as the ‘cultural guardians’ of the regional dance forms, who are de facto responsible for correcting the ‘mis’-representations and subsequent corruptions of the form at the hands of ‘outsiders’ through an authentic representation of the past. The educational advancement of the local scholars, coupled with their status as ‘insiders’ offers

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<sup>117</sup> Mukhopadhyaya,(1994) p.5.

<sup>118</sup> This study mainly looks at the general views articulated by the magazine. The views, often contradictory as well as complementary, as I am aware, cannot be homogenized. Hence, I am not claiming that *Chhatrak*, as a whole was subjected to such falsified understanding.

them this privilege – unlike the performers, who despite being ‘insiders’ lack formal knowledge regarding the dance form, resulting in their absolute domination and marginalization at the hands of the ‘outsider’.

So, Purulia Chhau is consecutively represented as classical, semi-classical and folk form in these representations. For Ashutosh Bhattacharya, Purulia Chhau as a classical form, would have provided him an opportunity of national and international fame. Mahua Mukherjee treats Purulia Chhau as well as other folk forms of Bengal as traces of a classical dance tradition which no longer exists. In case of *Chhatrak* and local scholars of Purulia, Purulia Chhau remained essentially an authentic folk form, quintessentially linked to the culture of the region. These multiple representations produced multiple identities of Purulia Chhau which constantly interacted and influenced each other. In fact, such representations often influence the terms through which the form continue to be described. The effects of such influence would be explored in the next chapter where the onus would be on performers of the dance form, who remained significantly absent in these narratives.



## **Identity, Authenticity and Negotiation: Purulia Chhau In The Narrative of the Performing Artistes**

In chapter three of this dissertation, I attempt to uncover the ‘voice’ of the performers, which remained significantly absent from the extant narratives on the Purulia Chhau, both official and individual. In the first two chapters, I have shown how the form and the performers were marginalized through the official cultural discourses and individual representations of Purulia Chhau. Against this backdrop, in this chapter, I particularly look at how this awareness of marginalization has motivated the communities of performers directly associated with the dance form to construct a counter-narrative on the form. I argue that it is through this counter-narrative, built around the collective memory of the communities involved, that attempts are made by the performers to reclaim their agency and authority over their performance. However, the effort fell through as their counter-narrative remained predominantly influenced by the dominant narratives which they sought to critique.

To show this, I have primarily relied on the oral testimonies of the performers and local scholars who have first-hand Purulia Chhau. In my brief visit to Purulia in March 2015, I had interviewed Kartik Singh Mura<sup>1</sup>, son of the famous exponent of Purulia Chhau and Padma Shri recipient, the late Gambhir Singh Mura; Nepal Mahato<sup>2</sup>, student of Gambhir Singh Mura and the recipient of 1983 Padma Shri award; Subrato Mahato, aged around 30, the eldest son of Nepal Mahato who is also an independent researcher on the Chhau dance; Anil Sutradhar, aged 88, a contemporary of Gambhir Singh Mura and the manager of the Chorida Chhau dance troupe; Dilip Kumar Goswami, aged 64, a former school-teacher who is actively involved at present in researching the history and culture of Manbhum; and finally, Malay Choudhury, in his 60s, who hails from the family of the Ketika zamindar family and is currently in-charge of the certificate course on Chhau dance in the Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University. Along with my primary interviews, I also look at the transcript of a set of interviews composed by Birinchi Pad De, Narendranath Khan and Subodh Basuray. These

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<sup>1</sup> Muras originally belongs to the Munda tribe. He was in his late 50s when this interview happened.

<sup>2</sup> Nepal Mahato was around 60 years of age when this interview took place. Mahatos are, as generally known, originally belonged to the Kurmi-Mahato tribe. However, in recent years in Purulia, Mahatos are disregarding their tribal identity and are keener on being included within the Hindu system. This is an observation made by a local student Sabita De and has not been verified.

scholars, on behalf of the journal *Chhatrak*, made a compilation of interviews of performers residing in Baghmundi on 9<sup>th</sup> March 1979, 13<sup>th</sup> March 1979 and 14<sup>th</sup> March 1979.<sup>3</sup>

In general, as far as the structure and nature of the two sets of interviews are concerned, certain differences need to be stated outright. In the later set of interviews personally undertaken by me in 2015, the selection of the interviewees was not predetermined and was a product of chance encounters with one meeting leading to another. Purposefully, I had kept the interviews unstructured to avoid predetermined answers and attempted to obtain the information relevant to my research through casual conversations. Thereby, the questions posed were simple and direct, with emphasis being laid primarily on how the performers and the other local people viewed Purulia Chhau through their own lenses.

On the contrary, in the interview from 1979, the interviewees and questions were pre-selected. The interviewees were Gambhir Singh Mura; Kalebar Kumar, a Chhau exponent who went abroad with the troupe of Ashutosh Bhattacharya and was trained under the French dancer, Milena Salvini; Suchand Mahato<sup>4</sup>, a veteran in Chhau dance and *Nachni*<sup>5</sup>; Dwijendranath Singh Deo and Brajendranath Singh Deo<sup>6</sup>, who hailed from the Baghmundi royal family and were active participants in the Chhau dance; and finally, Sheikh Golam Muhammad Khan<sup>7</sup>, a local expert of Baghmundi. It was categorically stated by the interviewers that only artistes from Baghmundi, barring the Chorida mask-makers, were included in this set of interviews. The questions in these interviews mainly aimed at unearthing the origin and evolution of the Chhau form, the debate around the nomenclature of the dance, its relationship with other local forms such as the Paik and other styles like Seraikella Chhau, etc. It has been stated at the outset that this set of interviews remains uncorroborated with any documentary sources.

#### The District Profile of Purulia: The Socio-economic Condition of the Region

Prior to presenting my analysis based on the oral traditions of the performers of Purulia Chhau, I would like to situate them within the present socio-economic context of their place of origin, the Purulia district.

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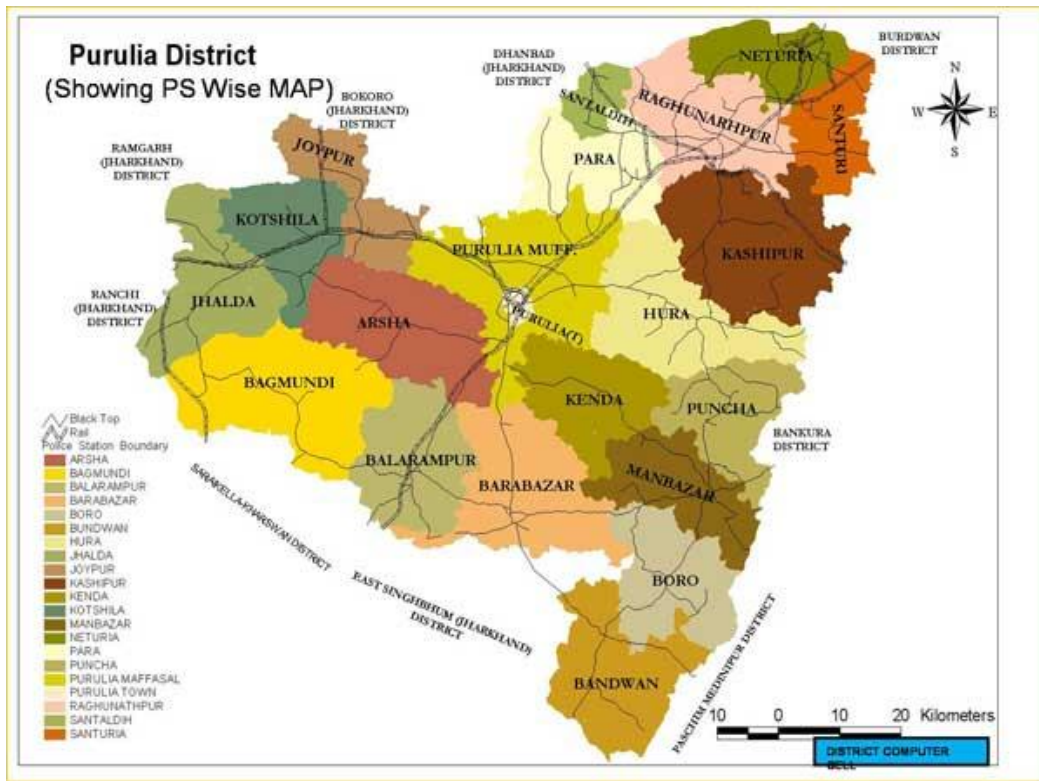
<sup>3</sup> Birinchi Pad De, Narendranath Khan and Subodh Basuray, 'Baghmundir Sakhya' (in Bengali), *Chhatrak*, year 10, No.2, 1979, p.172.

<sup>4</sup> 81 years old.

<sup>5</sup> Nachni is a folk dance tradition of Eastern India usually performed by women.

<sup>6</sup> Age unknown.

<sup>7</sup> 57-58 years.



**Map 1: The District of Purulia<sup>8</sup>**

The district of Purulia is located in the south-western part of the state of West Bengal, around 300 kilometres west of the state capital Kolkata. In the context of its topographical alignment, the Purulia district is located politically within the state of West Bengal. However, its location aligns it with a broader contiguous geographical region, encompassing south-eastern Jharkhand, the northern-tip of Orissa, and western West Bengal—an area locally termed as Manbhum. Importantly, even though bereft of its political relevance, the term remains in practice at present to define the region from a socio-cultural perspective. A resultant feature of this geographical contiguity with three different cultures is that the predominant language and culture of the region is also a composite one, influenced primarily by Bengali and Jharkhandi elements, in addition to traces of Odiya influences. Linguistically, over 80 percent of the population of the district report Bengali as their mother tongue. Since the 1960s, the proliferation of Bengali amidst communities such as the Bhumijis and Mahatos could be noticed. The Bengali spoken however, particularly in rural areas and amongst the

<sup>8</sup><http://www.mapsofindia.com/maps/westbengal/districts/puruliya.htm> (Last accessed: 02/08/15).

non-upper castes is a distinct sub-dialect unique to the region, known as Manbhumiya. Other major languages spoken in the district are Santhali, Hindi, and Urdu.<sup>9</sup>

As far as the present economic condition of the region is concerned, according to the 2011 Census of India, the district of Purulia was populated by nearly 30 lakh individuals, a mere 13 percent of whom resided in urban areas.<sup>10</sup> In this respect, given that approximately 30 percent of the nation's population resides in urban areas, Purulia is a predominantly rural district, both in absolute and relative terms. Compared to the findings of the Census of 1971 four decades ago, the population of the district has doubled with almost imperceptible growth in urbanization, in a period where many parts of the nation has witnessed a tremendous surge in the same.<sup>11</sup>

Demographically, nearly 40 percent of the population of the district are classified as either *Dalits* (Scheduled Castes), or *Adivasis* (Scheduled Tribes) – the two most disadvantaged socio-economic groups residing in India. The rate of literacy in the district, however, is close to the all-India average, with over two-thirds of the population being categorized as literate. From the presence of household amenities recorded by the Census of 2011, it can be inferred that Purulia is relatively underdeveloped from an economic perspective.<sup>12</sup> Only a third of the residences are classified by the Census as 'good' and two-thirds of the residences are constructed with mud-walls. While over 50 percent of households have over 5 members, 80 percent of residences are restricted to only two dwelling rooms.<sup>13</sup> Within the working population, a little under a fourth of the workers are employed in agriculture, either as cultivators, or as agricultural labourers.<sup>14</sup> Overall, 43.5 % of the population is under the poverty line.<sup>15</sup> Out of this 43.65%, SC and ST families constitute 20.59 % and 24.15% respectively.<sup>16</sup>

It is these performers, living in such pitiable conditions and marginalized from all sides, who resorted to their collective memories in their attempt to regain their agency. Validity in such cases is sought from tradition, which is invented to represent the past in the

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<sup>9</sup>*West Bengal District Gazetteers* (Government of West Bengal, 1985), pp.117-122.

<sup>10</sup>[http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/population\\_enumeration.html](http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/population_enumeration.html) (last accessed 15/07/15).

<sup>11</sup>*West Bengal District Gazetteers*, p. 108.

<sup>12</sup>[http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/population\\_enumeration.html](http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/population_enumeration.html) (last accessed on 15/7/15).

<sup>13</sup>[http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/hlo/HLO\\_Tables.html](http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/hlo/HLO_Tables.html) (last accessed on 15/7/15).

<sup>14</sup>[http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/population\\_enumeration.html](http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/population_enumeration.html) (last accessed on 15/7/15).

<sup>15</sup>*West Bengal District Gazetteers*, pp. 115-116.

<sup>16</sup>[http://www.purulia.nic.in/aboutDistrict/district\\_profile.html](http://www.purulia.nic.in/aboutDistrict/district_profile.html) (last accessed: 20/7/15).

present.<sup>17</sup> Then again, the past and the present cannot be distinguished clearly as the past often seeps into the present and vice versa. The emphasis here, hence, is not on verifying the veracity of the statements made, but to uncover how and why such a narrative emerges. In order to comprehend these oral testimonies, I have primarily relied on two salient aspects of Alessandro Portelli's arguments. First, I proceed by admitting that both the interviewer, i.e. me, and the interviewees have shaped my interview.<sup>18</sup> The answers that were received had been conditioned by the questions I put forth and vice versa. More importantly, the narrators had a pre-conceived notion about what I, posed as the 'outsider', wanted to know. Hence, there existed a certain selection, manipulation and censoring during the presentation of their respective narratives, which will gradually become clearer as the chapter proceeds. Secondly, I agree with Portelli that oral narratives are not immune to, or independent of textual traditions and writings.<sup>19</sup> In fact most of the times, there is a dialogue between the two, where both condition and re-inforce each other. As I gradually unpack the narrative of the performers, this argument becomes all the more relevant when we see how these oral testimonies are characterised by several borrowings from textual traditions, while at the same time, retain their autonomous characters.

### **Section 1: Tradition and Identity: Formation of the Counter-Narrative**

In this section, I demonstrate the manner through which the construction of a counter-narrative allows the performers of the Purulia Chhau to assert their autonomous identity. I argue here that through the formation of this counter-narrative, the performers both accept and reject the aesthetic parameters set out by the predominant cultural discourses of the time, attesting the continuous negotiation that they have to indulge in with the 'outsiders'.

#### **Invention of Tradition: The myth of Shiva and Brata ritual of Baghmundi**

The account begins with the origin and development of Purulia Chhau over the years. It is in its articulation that two narrations predominantly emerge. First, a mythical past is invoked which seeks legitimacy through its association with Lord Shiva and secondly, a ritualistic past of the form is evoked by connecting the inception of the Chhau with the local

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<sup>17</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli, and Other Stories : Form and Meaning in Oral History* *Suny Series in Oral and Public History*, (State University of New York Press, New York,1990),p. 30.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp.3-5.

‘Brata’ tradition. Then, in both the cases, the mythical/ritualistic past is fused with the events of the historical developments belonging to the recent past.

Articulating the first theme, Nepal Mahato traced the origin of the Chhau dance of Purulia from the *Tandava* dance of the Hindu god Shiva. Acknowledging the similarity of Chhau with other extant local dance forms such as the *Majhi Nach*<sup>20</sup>, *Natua Nach*<sup>21</sup> or *Nachni Nach*<sup>22</sup>, Mahato then forged a connection between the mythical dance of Shiva with the *Majhi Nach*, a dance form that is currently prevalent. In his opinion, the Chhau actually developed from the *Majhi Naach*. In order to reconcile the absence of masks in the *Majhi Nach*, Mahato argues that the unique characteristic of using masks was borrowed from another local form, the *Kaap Nach*.<sup>23</sup>

For the second theme, Kartik Singh Mura, and Anil Sutradhar, both residents of the Chorida village in Baghmundi, fondly recollected that the dance form originated due to a local Brata (unnamed) festival celebrated by the region’s womenfolk.<sup>24</sup> They narrated how this dance owed its inception to the need to keep these women entertained during the span of this particular Brata ritual, which necessitated staying awake through the night. Hence, claimed Mura and Sutradhar, there were initially neither any specific dance costumes, nor masks. Flowers and ornaments made from plants and trees were the only accessories used in these performances. They claimed that only later on, during the rule of the Baghmundi royal family, when the dance revolved solely around the enactment of events from the epics, that masks were introduced to identify the characters. Thus, the ritualistic origin of a distant past is connected to the historical developments of the recent past. Subsequently, Mura and Sutradhar proceed to give a detailed account of the developments that had happened over the course of rule of this princely dynasty. Interestingly, in contrast to the first part of Mura and Sutradhar’s narrative where there were no fixity of dates, the second part stuck to strict chronology and minute details.

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<sup>20</sup> A local performance tradition.

<sup>21</sup> Natua dance is another folk dance form of the region, which is considered by many as the predecessor of Chhau dance. This is usually performed in groups where individuals paint their bodies with chalk. (Source: [http://www.daricha.org/sub\\_genre.aspx?ID=54&Name=Natua](http://www.daricha.org/sub_genre.aspx?ID=54&Name=Natua) (last accessed: 01/08/2015))

<sup>22</sup> Refer to Footnote 11.

<sup>23</sup> Nepal Mahato, interview taken at Adabana village (Barabazar Tehsil, Purulia, West Bengal) on 26/03/15.

<sup>24</sup> Interviews conducted at the village Chorida on 30/3/15 and 2/4/15 respectively.





**Figure 3: Anil Sutradhar at his home-cum-workshop**

With regard to the princely rulers of Baghmundi, Dwijendranath Singh Deo and Brajendranath Singh Deo, the duo at the outset provided a genealogy of the dynasty. The dynasty, as remembered, started from Bhootnath Singh Deo followed by Hridaynath, Brajagopal, Madanmohan, Khetramohan, Jatindramohan and Brajendranath. Forty five years later, Anil Sutradhar, in conversation with me, also recounted the same genealogy along this exact chronology, without any hitch, demonstrating the historical awareness prevalent amongst these individuals. Amongst the Baghmundi princes, the reign of Madanmohan Singh Deo is considered to be remarkable as far as his enthusiasm for the dance is concerned. According to Golam Muhammed Khan, Madanmohan's keen interest in the dance is evident from the fact that he repeatedly commissioned two to three new acts every year, based on *Saraboli*, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Krishnaleela* and the Puranas and was a strict adherent to rules and regulations. To quote him,

“রাজা ত গানের আসর ছেড়ে উঠতেন না। উঁয়ার আর কাজ কি, চেয়ার খাপরাছেন আর তাল দিছেন....বেতাক কানে গেল কি, ডেকে পাঠাতেন। শুদ্ধ তাল চাই, নাহলে বিপদ।”<sup>25</sup>

(The king never left during the performance and diligently kept the rhythm. He would summon us anytime we skipped a beat - he demanded absolute perfection in the matter of rhythm.)

Different trainers were appointed for the supervision of these performances. For example, during Madanmohan’s reign, Yugalkishore Singh was in charge of composing the music, and Srinath Mistri from Chorida supervised mask -making.<sup>26</sup> Another notable trainer of the time was Hariprasad Singh.<sup>27</sup> Golam Khan also informs that Madanmohan’s reign witnessed the emergence of performers such as Dhanukdhari Sing Babu from Pusti-Torang, and Babulal Mistry.<sup>28</sup>



**Figure 4 : Mask of Purulia Chhau**

<sup>25</sup> Golam Mohammed Khan in ‘Baghmundir Sakhya’ (in Bengali), *Chhatrak* (1979),p.182.

<sup>26</sup> Golam Mohammed Khan. However, where from these trainers learnt the form is not known.

<sup>27</sup> Dwijendranath Singh Deo and Brajendranath Singh Deo in ‘Baghmundir Sakhya’ (in Bengali), *Chhatrak* (1979), p.178.

<sup>28</sup> Such was the excellence of Babulal Mistry, the raised platform where the performance was happening collapsed due to the huge outpouring of people, Khan reminisced.



The unpacking of these oral accounts depicts how these performers and local experts are informed by an omnipresent past which is conditioned by the requirements of the present. First, a glorious tradition has been invented during each portrayal. Secondly, the accounts show a transition from a timeless past to a chronologically accurate reminiscing of the historical events. In the first case, the deliberate connection of the origin of the dance form to a mythical and ritualistic past can be ‘read’ as a classic case of inventing a tradition. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger have defined invention of tradition as “a set of practices... (which) attempt to establish continuity with a *suitable* historic past.”<sup>29</sup> The past of a tradition thus needs to be suitable for acceptance by the present. In the case of the performers, this idea of suitability is conditioned by the aesthetic parameters set out in the contemporary writings on Chhau, which emphasised on the connection to a ‘higher tradition’ for gaining acceptance. Hence, in the first instance, the lineage is traced back to Shiva, who being the *Nataraja* (The King of the ‘Nata’ or dance) is unanimously accepted as the forbearer of all Indian dance forms within the Hindu canon. In the instance of tracing the inception of Chhau to an unknown *Brata* ritual performed exclusively by women, the situation is a bit more complex. The legacy did not directly connect Chhau to that particular *Brata* celebration as the stress is on the need to entertain the local womenfolk who are actually involved in the ritual. Nevertheless, the significance of this account not only lies in delineating the gender role in society but also signifies the convergence of different traditions.<sup>30</sup> The only reason that these tribal communities adopted this Brahminical ritual is because of the fact that this reverse appropriation provided a logical rationale for a performing tradition which is primarily based on the themes of Hindu epics and Puranas.<sup>31</sup>

Secondly, the transition from a timeless mythic/ritualistic origin attributed to a distant past (“once upon a time”) to a chronological narration of the events of the recent past needs to be understood in relation to the collective psyche of these communities.<sup>32</sup> In both the cases, tracing the inception of the form to a mythic or ritualistic past has been characterised by

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<sup>29</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983), p.1.

<sup>30</sup> For details see Kunal Chakrabarti, *Religious Process: The Puranas and the Making of a Regional Tradition*, (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2000).

<sup>31</sup> The popular plays are Ganesha-Parasuram (the combat of Ganesha and Parasurama), Abhimanyu-Badh (the slaying of Abhimanyu), Kurukhetrer Juddha (the Kurukshetra war), Draupadi’s Swayambar (The swayamvar of Draupadi), Kiraat-Arjun (the encounter between Shiva as Kiraat and Arjuna), Mahishasur-Badh (The slaying of Mahishashura), Raktabij-Badh (the slaying of Raktabija) etc. Suchand Mahato in ‘Baghmundir Sakhya’ (in Bengali), *Chhatrak* (1979), p.173.)

<sup>32</sup> Portelli (1990), p.26.

‘invariance’,<sup>33</sup> something which neither progresses nor degenerates. In contrast, when the narrative touches upon the development of the form in the second part, there is a sudden change in the mode of narration. To elucidate, now there is a greater attention to the details as to how and when certain changes were initiated into the form, and also to the individual names of the trainers present at that particular time. Moreover, this transition from timelessness and invariance to time-bound developments remains blurred. I have already argued that the invocation of a mythical/ritualistic past is an act of invention of tradition by the performers, conditioned by the compulsions of their present. Continuing from here, I argue that they needed such an invention as they themselves were not confident in discussing the ‘true’ origin of the dance form. Given the poor state of folk/tribal cultural traditions in receiving patronage and the uneasiness of Ashutosh Bhattacharya in locating the form in its tribal background, it was clear to them that just being the ‘product of the soil’ was insufficient and additional qualifiers were required. The royal patronage received by Purulia Chhau remained one of such salient qualifiers. Hence, the need was to play up this card perfectly with as many details as possible, in the process, promoting Chhau into the same league of ‘higher’ dance traditions that had received considerable royal patronage in the past. Remembering in details warranted both validity and acceptance.

Hence, in both the instances, the performers are accepting the criteria set out by the official and individual narratives on Chhau. However, the following sub-section will explore the areas where they are resisting the encroachment of such narratives.

#### The Best among the Equals: Asserting Identity

Now, I explore how the performers selectively highlight some features of the performance while maintaining their silence on other aspects. It is through such selections that I argue that they carve their own autonomous identity. In fact, as the story unfolds, we will see how the same elements which have been rejected as unacceptable by the dominant cultural representations are contributing in their assertion of uniqueness and authority.

The formation of identity through this counter-narrative involves two processes. First, Purulia Chhau is differentiated from the other styles viz. the Seraikella and Mayurbhanj styles, by implicating the hierarchical superiority of Purulia over others. Secondly, the uniqueness and novelty of the form is greatly emphasized.

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<sup>33</sup> Hobsbawm, Ranger (1983), p.2.

The first half of this sub-section looks at how the performers treat Purulia Chhau in contrast to the other two styles. For instance, Nepal Mahato described Seraikella as a style more in the genre of folk-classical continuum and Mayurbhanj as a style where the *sringara* and *lasyarasa* prevails, In contrast to Purulia Chhau which is characterised predominantly by *Virarasa*.<sup>34</sup> Referring to the concept of *Rasa* from the *Natyashastra* in describing Chhau once again attests to this tendency of borrowing from a ‘higher’ Hindu tradition.

Golam Muhammed Khan also made a stark distinction between Purulia and Seraikella styles. To quote him,

“সেরাইকলার বাজনা ছোট তালের। নানা কসরত, চালের মধ্যে প্যাঁচ দিয়ে বসা, উঠা চলা। অত যুদ্ধবিগ্রহ নাই। ঢঙটা ইখানে চলে না।”<sup>35</sup>

(The Seraikella form uses short rhythmic cycles. It requires rather intricate movements involving sitting down, getting up and walking around. Unlike the Purulia style, there is not much warfare depicted - the Seraikella style is just not popular in these parts.)<sup>36</sup>

However, in such simple descriptions of the different styles of Chhau, gradually a sense of hierarchy seeps in. The general belief then articulated is that the Purulia Chhau is the superior-most among the three styles, as far as the quality and authenticity of the style is concerned. Malay Chaudhuri, hence, takes pride in asserting that unlike the other two styles, Purulia Chhau is ‘*karmanritya*’ i.e. linked with the lives of the indigenous people. As a result, despite the negligence shown by the state and regional elites, it has not only survived but also been successful in garnering huge popularity which the other two lacked, in spite of the royal and state patronage heaped upon them in the pre-independence and post-independence periods. However, Suchand Mahato goes a step further to declare the following—

“সরাইকেলার নাচ—উ ত বেপ্লিকের নাচ, ইখানে পছন্দ হয় নাই।”<sup>37</sup>

(The Seraikella style is danced by buffoons only. (Hence) Nobody likes it here.)

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<sup>34</sup>Nepal Mahato, interview taken at Adabana village (Barabazar Tehsil, Purulia, West Bengal) on 26/03/15.

<sup>35</sup>‘Baghmundir Sakhya’ (in Bengali), *Chhatrak* (1979), p.182.

<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, in the interviews conducted by the *Chhatrak* team, Mayurbhanj is not mentioned at all in the context of the origin of Chhau dance.

<sup>37</sup>‘Baghmundir Sakhya’ (in Bengali), *Chhatrak* (1979), p.174.

This sense of contempt also echoed in Subrata Mahato's voice when he mentions that in the competitions that are held among these three styles<sup>38</sup>, the other two appear jaded in comparison to Purulia Chhau. I have mentioned in Chapter 1 how in such competitions Purulia Chhau is usually given the last spot to perform. When asked about this issue, Subrato Mahato informed me that this is courtesy the vigour of Purulia Chhau, which remains unmatched by any other form. Moreover, he also mentioned to saying 'to save the best for the last' in this context. Regarding the debate on the nomenclature of the dance form, Subrata Mahato distances himself from the name 'Chhau' as used (pronounced) in Mayurbhanj and Seraikella. He instead informed that in the local dialect, the name is actually 'Chha' which when purified, is pronounced as 'Chho'.<sup>39</sup>

After consolidating the distinctiveness of Purulia Chhau by establishing the form as hierarchically superior to the rest, the performers then focus on certain features which are strictly defined and provide uniqueness to the form. These features can be categorized generally under two heads—the spontaneous folk nature of the form that requires no formal training and the vigour of the style. Thus, for instance, it was with great pride that Nepal Mahato exclaimed that Chhau 'runs in the blood' and cannot be acquired through formalized training.<sup>40</sup> Taking the example of his two year old grandchild making impromptu postures of Chhau during our interview, Mahato declared that each and every child of this region was trained in the dance form from the moment of their birth. He also informs that he himself was initiated into dancing from the age of five.

The rigorous combative techniques of Purulia Chhau are also emphasized in defining the form. Kalebar Kumar informed the interviewers in 1979 that as leg movements constituted the basic movements of the Purulia Chhau, it could be fatal for the performers if it is not practiced with caution. Simultaneously, an understanding and inculcation of the *bhava* (emotion) of the character that is being enacted by the performers was also emphasized by

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<sup>38</sup>Anil Sutradhar mentions that these competitions are usually organised by the central and state akademis or likewise institutions. Subrato Mahato informs that in 2012, one such competition was organised by the Sangeet Natak Akademi where the three styles of Purulia, Seraikella and Mayurbhanj represented the states of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Orissa respectively.

<sup>39</sup>Anil Sutradhar also complies with this version. Kalebar Kumar also mentions that the original name of the form is 'Chho' and not Chhau in 'Baghmundir Sakhya' (in Bengali), *Chhatrak* (1979), p.173.

<sup>40</sup>Nepal Mahato, interview taken at Adabana village (Barabazar Tehsil, Purulia, West Bengal) on 26/03/15. His younger son whom I met on the day of the workshop at Bongabari (28/03/15) re-iterated this to me in a casual conversation. Suchand Mahato also informs - "No formal training in Chhau dance. My father bought me Madol and Dhol which I used to play. I mainly learnt Chhau dance by imitating." in 'Baghmundir Sakhya' (in Bengali), *Chhatrak* (1979), p.175.

him.<sup>41</sup> However, this aspect of the performance remained secondary as it was the vigorous combative essence of the form that was highlighted more. This essence which is associated with the celebration of masculinity in an all- male form is posed as superior to other styles, especially Mayurbhanj, which emphasizes on *lasya* rasa associated with feminine charm.

That the Chhau of Purulia cannot be ‘learnt’ is echoed in the narratives of all the performers in both the sets of interviews. It is through this they claim their exclusive ownership of the form. It is, hence, imperative that those not native to the soil, regardless of their calibre as dancers, will forever remain ‘outsiders’, denied the privilege of savouring and understanding the true flavour of the dance form. The same holds true for their emphasis on the vigour of the form. The implication here as well is that the form is not for all—only the brave-hearts of the soil possess the right blend of physical prowess and mental flexibility required to enact this style. One is reminded here of Portelli’s study on Luigi Trastulli, concerning an Italian worker’s death, where “the dynamics, causes, and chronology of the event are manipulated in order to heal the feeling of humiliation and the loss of self-esteem following upon the impossibility of reacting adequately to the comrade's death.”<sup>42</sup>

Following this, I argue that the same sense of feelings of humiliation and marginalization have led these narrators to inscribe superior values to certain elements of the performance. For instance, where the ‘classical’ style of Seraikella is ridiculed for its poor quality of performance and lack of popularity vis-à-vis the Purulia style, the quintessential folk features of the form is posed against the dominant preference of the classical. In another instance, the explanation for Purulia Chhau being pushed to the very end in government events, which in any case is humiliating, is sought in the unique vigour of the form in relation to the rest, which seem dull. Henceforth, the very reason for which they have been marginalized is emerging as the site for their own identity formation.

## **Section 2: State Institutions and Ashutosh Bhattacharya: Situating the ‘Other’ in the Narrative of the Performers**

It is quite evident that the counter-narrative of the performers is posed as a mode of defiance to the marginalization that they had faced. The onus of this narrative, hence, lies on the assertion that it is ‘us’, the ‘insiders’, who know the form better and not the ‘others’. So,

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<sup>41</sup>Suchand Mahato, Kartik Singh Mura and Anil Sutradhar have repeatedly emphasized on this aspect of the performance.

<sup>42</sup> Portelli (1990), p.24.

in this section, I go back to the place from where it all started—the reactions of the performers to state patronage, and Ashutosh Bhattacharya<sup>43</sup> in relation to their dance form.

### State Patronage Received by Purulia Chhau

By the performers in general, government patronage is preferred over any private enterprise as remuneration is guaranteed.<sup>44</sup> Anil Sutradhar recounted that when invited for performance by the central government for international tours, they earned a sufficient income. In the 1986 tour, each received Rs.17,000 from which Sutradhar could keep Rs.8,000 as savings.<sup>45</sup> Even the recent state government enterprises and NGOs yield sufficient remuneration for the artistes, as Sutradhar informs. However, while the central government is seen to have organized a number of competitions, providing an opportunity to display folk arts, the state government is seen to have been taking an interest in the Purulia Chhau only in the recent years. According to Nepal Mahato, throughout the thirty-four years of uninterrupted Left Front rule in West Bengal, state encouragements were hardly noticeable. During this period, it had always been the central government or some institutions approved/invited by the central government which came forward to their rescue. It is only after 2011, with the shift of political power to Trinamool Congress, that certain active interventions have been taken to promote Purulia Chhau.<sup>46</sup> For example, in 2014, as Sutradhar narrated, they were gifted twenty-five coats, hats and fans along with one *Dhumsa* and two *Madol* by the state government for winning a competition. Apart from this, there is the Loka-Prasar-Prakalpa (L.P.P.), which has been initiated to provide monetary allowance to the artists of not only Chhau but also other folk forms such as *Nachni*, *Natua* etc. To receive this source of support, one has to register oneself at the DICO (Department of Information and Cultural Affairs Office) in Purulia. Moreover, the Lalan award has been initiated by the present government of West Bengal for recognizing excellence in the folk art forms.<sup>47</sup> Apart from this, mentions are also being made of certain initiatives by NGOs, such as the annual

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<sup>43</sup> There is mention about Ashutosh Bhattacharya only.

<sup>44</sup> Role of institutional patronage remained absent in the interview conducted by the *Chhatrak* team. Given the timeperiod, it hardly seem to be surprising as by that time hardly any concerted effort is to be found towards Purulia Chhau. For details see my first chapter.

<sup>45</sup> Anil Sutradhar, interview taken at Chorida village (Block-Baghmundi, Purulia, West Bengal) on 02/14/15.

<sup>46</sup> Nepal Mahato, interview taken at Adabana village (Barabazar Tehsil, Purulia, West Bengal) on 26/03/15.

<sup>47</sup> Partha Chakrabarty, interview taken at DICO Office, Ranchi Road, Purulia, West Bengal on 30/03/15.

folk festivals organised by [banglanatak.com](http://banglanatak.com) which provides new channels for the artistes to showcase their talent.<sup>48</sup>

As far as the institutional initiatives undertaken for imparting training in the Purulia Chhau is concerned, Malay Choudhury informs that the government of West Bengal recently started a certificate course on Chhau in the Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University. On the day of this interview, a workshop related to this course by Nepal Mahato was in progress.<sup>49</sup> The workshop was organized for sending a progress report to the Government. In the current academic year, approximately 36 students have enrolled in this course. It is not a significant figure.<sup>50</sup> Choudhury mentions that being in charge of the course, he wishes to upgrade the certificate course into a diploma. He believes that with sufficient assistance, fortune and efforts, a Chhau academy can evolve through this endeavour. He also asserts that it is also due to such abundant government patronage that Chhau troupes have multiplied over the years.<sup>51</sup>

Now, state initiatives entail state control as well. For instance, Nepal Mahato informs that all the offers or performance invitations do not reach the artists directly and has to proceed through the DICO office of the Government of West Bengal. It is only through this 'proper channel' that the invitations reach the performers.<sup>52</sup> Not surprisingly, this alleged bureaucratic intervention impinges on the profits of the artistes who are, by and large, dependent on Chhau for survival.

Since the process of selecting a particular troupe by the government remains random and fuzzy, often government nepotism is alleged in such affairs. For example, Subrato Mahato, the elder son of Nepal Mahato openly claims that 'internal' politics completely determine as to who gets chosen to perform in important festivals.<sup>53</sup> Continuing with this assertion, Kartik Singh Mura also informs that due to internal squabbles amongst organisers, their troupes are no longer invited to foreign tours. Moreover, government

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<sup>48</sup>Kartik Singh Mura, interview taken at DICO Office, Ranchi Road, Purulia, West Bengal on 30/03/15.

<sup>49</sup> Malay Choudhury, interview taken at Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University, Bongabari Campus, Purulia, West Bengal on 28/03/15.

<sup>50</sup> One of the student mentioned that reason he enrolled for the course is that it is Puruliya's pride, shows the popularity that Chhau now enjoys. (Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University, Bongabari Campus, 28/3/15).

<sup>51</sup>Malay Choudhury, interview taken at Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University, Bongabari Campus, Purulia, West Bengal on 28/03/15.

<sup>52</sup>Nepal Mahato, interview taken at Adabana village (Barabazar Tehsil, Purulia, West Bengal) on 26/03/15.

<sup>53</sup> Subrato Mahato, interview taken at Purulia city, West Bengal over telephone on 28/03/15.

allowances are insufficient for continuing with the practice. Mura laments that the state government grant provides an allowance, akin to a pittance of only Rs.1,000 per month. Although there are 109 registered Chhau dance troupes in the district, only 77 artists receive this grant, which again points towards irregularities.

#### Ashutosh Bhattacharya as Remembered by the Performers

In the collective memory of the performers, both older and younger, Ashutosh Bhattacharya remains sufficiently familiar. While there are performers like Anil Sutradhar and Nepal Mahato who have a first-hand experience of working with Bhattacharya, there is also Golam Muhammed Khan who was Bhattacharya's contemporary. For the rest, Ashutosh Bhattacharya has survived through different anecdotes which have been transmitted across generations.

Such familiarity implies that Bhattacharya, as a person, remains adequately important even to the present generation of performers of Purulia Chhau. Till now, personal anecdotes are shared establishing connections with Bhattacharya in an attempt to bask in the reflected glory. For instance, Anil Sutradhar can recount the detailed steps that had led Bhattacharya to his famed 'discovery' of Purulia Chhau. Sutradhar narrates how Bhattacharya once stumbled upon one of the workshops of his maternal uncle in Purulia town, which eventually provided him impetus to visit Chorida in 1967, following which his work on the Purulia Chhau commenced. Ashutosh organized a competition amongst the various Chhau troupes at Matha Range Officer's bungalow, Chorida, from which artistes for the Delhi tour were selected. Noted amongst them were Gambhir Singh Mura, Kalebar Kumar and Anil Sutradhar himself.<sup>54</sup> In this narrative, Sutradhar's fondness in remembering how Bhattacharya's chance encounter with *his* maternal uncle altered the course of Purulia Chhau, underlines his propensity for forging personal connection with the 'discovery', directly responsible for changing the lives of many performers like him.

However, such fondness is not present in the rest of the performers. Instead, there existed a palpable disdain against Bhattacharya. However, there was also a reluctance to share these grievances with an 'outsider' like me, probably out of guilt or due to the fear of backlash. For instance, rejection was evident in Nepal Mahato's recounting of the constant monitoring of Chhau performances by Bhattacharya's students, even after Bhattacharya's

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<sup>54</sup>Kartik Singh Mura, interview taken at DICO Office, Ranchi Road, Purulia, West Bengal on 30/03/15.



demise.<sup>55</sup> His elder son Subrata Mahato was quite agitated when asked about the role of Bhattacharya in promoting Chhau. He even went to the extent of saying that once he himself had asked Bhattacharya about the treatment he meted out to the performers! Given Bhattacharya's death in 1974 and Subrata's current age, this makes such an encounter highly improbable, providing another instance where the chronology of an event is 'horizontally displaced' to suit the narrative.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, he informs that when Bhattacharya was at the helm of affairs, he used to retain the passports of the performers so that no performance could be planned independently without his mediation.<sup>57</sup> Even Anil Sutradhar, who participated in two international tours to the USA and Europe under Ashutosh Bhattacharya, was reluctant to divulge the level of remuneration when enquired. After much persuasion, he informed that during the tenure of Bhattacharya, there was hardly any monetary gain as the entire channel of finances was controlled by Bhattacharya, the organizers appointed by him, and his students.<sup>58</sup>

To Golam Muhammed Khan, Ashutosh Bhattacharya is not the 'discoverer' of the form at all. He cites names to argue that much before Bhattacharya, there were other performers who undertook the initiative of showcasing their form to audiences beyond their native place. To quote him:

“আশুবাবু ছোনাচ আবিষ্কার করেছেন, ই কেমন কথা? উঁয়ার অনেক আগেই ১৯৩০-০২ সালে সেরাইকেলার যুবরাজ লগুনে ছোনাচ নিয়ে গেছেন। ১৯৫৩ সালে মধু ভাট কলকাতার রাজভবনে ছোনাচ দেখান। হরেন ঘোষও দিল্লীতে নাচ নিয়ে গেছেন। এত সবার পর আশুবাবু।”<sup>59</sup>

(It is not true that it was Ashutosh Bhattacharya who discovered Chho. Before him, in 1930-32, the prince of Seraikella had taken his troupe to London. In 1953 also, Madhu Bhat presented Chho in Raj Bhavan, Calcutta. Haren Ghosh also performed in Delhi before Bhattacharya.)

<sup>55</sup>Nepal Mahato, interview taken at Adabana village (Barabazar Tehsil, Purulia, West Bengal) on 26/03/15.

<sup>56</sup> To quote Portelli in the context of lack of accuracy in the narrative of the observer's,

“In order to preserve the all-important 1953 date and layoffs context, narrators need to rearrange all their personal chronology. For instance, Antonina Colombi discovers a discrepancy between the date which she reconstructs on the basis of her personal and family chronology, and the date which seems "right" to her on the basis of the event's political and social meaning.” For details see Portelli (1990), p.24. Here Subrato is pushing his age backwards a generation earlier. Because it is the only way to have a face-to-face confrontation with Bhattacharya, the person he loathed for his discriminatory practices.

<sup>57</sup>Subrato Mahato, interview taken at Purulia city, West Bengal over telephone on 28/03/15.

<sup>58</sup>Anil Sutradhar, interview taken at Chorida village (Block-Bagmundi, Purulia, West Bengal) on 02/14/15.

<sup>59</sup> 'Bagmundir Sakhya' (in Bengali), *Chhatrak* (1979) p.183.

In one of his recollections about his field experiences, Portelli mentions a specific incident which eventually enlightened him about “the historically conditioned nature of field work.” He recalls that the “changed political climate allowed the Valnerina singers heightened exercise of free speech in 1970-72 than in 1958-59” as a result of which he was able to collect those materials which were not available to the earlier researchers in the field.<sup>60</sup> A similar historical conditioning is present in this instance as well. Although I do not have an account of the academic research surging in this field prior to Bhattacharya’s initiatives, it can be easily surmised that the very act of being open about their negligence by the state and the self-acclaimed ‘discoverer’ is a result of their awareness of historical and social-political developments. For instance, the performers are presently well aware of the politics of control exerted by the state institutions and Ashutosh Bhattacharya. However, over the years, the performers have also realized that the power structure too has changed. People are interested in a first-hand account of their experiences, and are not just content with reading a coloured summary of their lives from the works of other scholars. As a result, they themselves have understood that they possess considerable autonomy in showcasing their own dance form as they now have the opportunity to be heard ‘directly’, without the presence of a mediator. Hence, criticism of Ashutosh Bhattacharya has become much easier in the aftermath of the critique formed by local scholars via the *Chhatrak*. The same rationale holds true when they repeatedly emphasise on the contribution of the present Trinamool Congress government of West Bengal in contrast to the treatment meted out to them during the rule of the Left Front—a time when they suffered the most due to a total lack of government initiatives.

### **Section 3: ‘Modern’ innovations and Search for an Authentic Past**

Since the 1970s, owing to widespread interest and growing recognition, Purulia Chhau made frequent appearances across both national and international stages. Although Purulia Chhau had already made appearances in Kolkata and Delhi in 1953 (under Madhu Ray) and 1968 (under Ashutosh Bhattacharya), the form was not yet accustomed to proscenium stage scenarios. So, altered (often ticketed) performance spaces, such as the annual Republic Day Parade in New Delhi or the Festival of India abroad, warranted new innovations. For instance, the dance at present no longer restricts its repertoire within Puranic stories or tales from the epics. Instead, it now tries to incorporate issues and themes of

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<sup>60</sup> Portelli (1990), p.34.

contemporary significance (*Kanyashree prakalpa* – the present scheme of the West Bengal government for the girl-child) or some historical events from the recent past (Santhal rebellion of 1856).<sup>61</sup> Apart from these changes, certain changes can be observed within the style of the performance. According to Anil Sutradhar, *Ulfas* or somersaults have at present replaced most of the basic movements due to the sheer popularity of such moves. While jumps initially characterized the enactment of certain select characteristics like the *Kirat* in the *Kiratarjuna* episode of the *Mahabharata*, it has now become a predominant feature of the performance. Moreover, the erstwhile style of introducing the performance through elaborate *Jhumur* songs has also been done away with. Also, Nepal Mahato mentioned that a separate section of ‘Mukabhinaya’ has been introduced in the performance where the narrator quickly gives an idea of the story which will be enacted, to reduce the overall duration of the performance. Additionally, nowadays the performance begins with the conflict of Ganesh and Parasuram, unlike the earlier practice of having separate entries for Ganesh and Parasuram.<sup>62</sup>

Touches of ‘modernization’ are also visible with regard to the music associated with the dance form. Synthesizers have been added to the traditional *Dhol*, *Dhumsa* and *Shehnai* in the musical repertoire. The use of microphones is also quite rampant. With regard to costumes, plastic has replaced lace and brocade work.<sup>63</sup> In the same vein, dancing bells have also been discarded. Apart from that, initially, glass, wool, and wood were used in the making of the masks which have now been replaced by plastic. Suchand Mahato also informs that in contrast to the masks of earlier times which were devoid of ornamentation, present day masks are more gaudy and larger in size.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Anil Sutradhar, interview taken at Chorida village (Block-Baghmundi, Purulia, West Bengal) on 02/14/15.

<sup>62</sup> Suchand Mahato in ‘Baghmundir Sakhya’ (in Bengali), *Chhatrak* (1979), p.175.

<sup>63</sup> Given the frequency of the performance ranging from 150 to 250 performances per year, plastic provides an affordable and sustainable replacement of the lace which could no longer be afforded, mentions, Kartik Singh Mura.

<sup>64</sup> Suchand Mahato in ‘Baghmundir Sakhya’ (in Bengali), *Chhatrak* (1979)



**Figure 5 : Purulia Chhau in a Rural Setting**

In order to cater to an urban proscenium-suited audience, certain modifications were initiated in the overall nature and direction of the choreography. Nepal Mahato recounted how it was a challenge to complete the *paala* (act) which usually spans from fifteen to twenty minutes within the allotted slot of five minutes during a performance in Paris.<sup>65</sup> However, such adjustments have not been received wholeheartedly across the board. For example, Kalebar Kumar reminisced how it was initially difficult to orient the entire performance in a single direction as unlike the rural spaces where the performers are surrounded by audience from all sides, they have to face the audience in a single direction when performing within the confines of an auditorium. Also, only one set of *Dhol* and *Dhamsa* are played in the theatre in contrast to the usual practice. Additionally, while performing in a foreign land, the cultural difference instilled a sense of disconnect with the foreign audience, particularly as

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<sup>65</sup>Nepal Mahato, interview taken at Adabana village (Barabazar Tehsil, Purulia, West Bengal) on 26/03/15.

the primary story being enacted is unknown to much of the audience —a hindrance which the performers do not encounter in a Chhau performance in a rural set up.<sup>66</sup>

The lack of consensus regarding the acceptability of such ‘modern’ innovations and adhering to the changed circumstances under which the performances are held have given rise to a stark divergence of opinion amongst the performers regarding the compatibility of these nascent introductions with the vital essence of Purulia Chhau. While the younger performers are a lot more accommodating, the older generation of performers regularly lament the loss of purity and authenticity of the form.

Hailing from the younger generation, Nepal Mahato, when asked about these changes, explained that the basic nature of any art form is to stay abreast of recent innovations and modify itself accordingly. In his opinion, it is imperative that both the performers and the dance form should be open to modifications to suit the requirements of the time and tastes of the audience. For example, he explains that initially *ghunghur* or the dancing bells were an important part of the costume. But later, its use was discontinued as it became a source of serious discomfort for the performers. However, the enthusiasm of Mahato is absent in his contemporary, Kartik Singh Mura. To him, the ‘modern’ innovations are administered chiefly by the programme co-ordinators who call the shots in every aspect of the performance.<sup>67</sup> For instance, in both national and international events, the schedule and the time of the performance is always pre-set by the organisers without any inputs from the performers.<sup>68</sup> In recent times, owing to the growing popularity of the form, several Chhau dance troupes have sprung up in Purulia — ushering an intense competition for survival. It is such heightened competition, coupled with an increased frequency of performance which has resulted in a reduction in the economic budget behind each performance. As a result, more and more emphasis has been laid on popular but comparatively cheap resources. Mura grudgingly admitted however, that if one wanted to survive in the market, one needed to accept such changes.

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<sup>66</sup> To quote Kalebar Kumar, “Many foreign people take photographs and make films of the performance. Some also want to talk but we can’t understand, although we have learnt a few words.” in ‘Baghmundir Sakhya’ (in Bengali), *Chhatrak* (1979), p.174.

<sup>67</sup> Nepal Mahato informs that what and how a play should be performed gets decided only after the troupe reaches Delhi. On being asked that what kind of preparation that was taken, given a different setting of performance, Mahato informs that it was the organisers who had the sole authority in deciding all the matters.

<sup>68</sup>For example, PuruliaChhau is usually allotted the last slot. For details see first chapter.

In contrast, the older generation of performers, while elaborating on the alterations that were brought into the performance, complain about the loss of the basic essence of the tradition. Curiously though, none of the artistes from the older generation can provide a specific articulation on what constitutes this basic essence of the tradition. Instead, it is through the negation of the new innovations of the present that they construct their own version of authenticity. For instance, they paint a golden past for themselves where everything was perfect. The performance strictly followed the so-called ‘norms’ of the form, independent from the compulsions of market-oriented and official public performances. The clothes and arrangements were simple, so were the audience and the performers (who danced spontaneously for enjoyment and not merely remuneration). Hence, Dwijendranath Singh Deo and Brajendranath Singh Deo exclaim,

“ আসরে ধুলো উড়িয়ে দিচ্ছে, কিন্তু ভাব সৃষ্টি হচ্ছে কৈ? যে কোনও সুর বাজিয়ে দিচ্ছে, যে কোনও তাল লাগাচ্ছে, যে কোনও চালে চলছে। কারোর সাথে কারোর মিল নেই। নাচের পেছনে শাস্ত্র নেই।”<sup>69</sup>

(The performers are raising a tumult on the stage through their movements, but are they able to reach the audience emotionally? Melodies are being haphazardly combined with rhythmic forms and tempos, without any consonance with either the mood of the dance, or the overall aesthetic essence of the music. This is due to an absolute disconnect nowadays of the dance performance, with the inherent theory from which the dance form is derived.)

Inclusion of other popular folk forms into the movement patterns of Chhau is also frowned upon and considered to be a corruption of the form. According to Suchand Mahato, there has been an overall deterioration in the form as is evident by the popular ‘trend’ of assimilating elements from *Jatra*, the rural theatre. Similar sentiments are also echoed by Brajendranath and Dwijendranath Singh Deo, often smacking of frustration:

“আজকাল ছোনাচে খেমটা, নাটুয়া, দাঁড়ধরা চুকছে। সার্কাস করছে, কাঁধে চাপে ডিগবাজী দিচ্ছে। আসল নাচের movement চলে যাচ্ছে। যুদ্ধ জিতে রাম কি ডিগবাজী দিতেন? ভাবের সঙ্গে মিলছে কি না দেখবার

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<sup>69</sup>Dwijendranath Singh Deo and Brajendranath Singh Deo in ‘Baghmundir Sakhya’ (in Bengali), *Chhatrak* (1979),p.178.

দরকার নাই, কসরৎ দেখালেই হল? তীরটা সত্যই ছুঁড়ত, না ভাবটা করত?...ছো করার মানেটা তবে কোথায় রইল?”<sup>70</sup>

(Chhau today has been corrupted by other forms such as Natua. It has deteriorated into a circus, with performers somersaulting without reason, and lacking the basic movements of the dance. The focus is solely on movements, not the emotions. Did Rama engage in somersaults after vanquishing Ravana? Does it all end at depicting the firing of an arrow, or do you also want to convey to your audience why you are firing the arrow? No one considers these things today. What's the point then of performing the Chho?)

They then announce with pride that:

“আমাদের বাঘমুণ্ডীতে যে সকল নাচা হয়, সেগুলি বাজাতে গেলে বর্তমান কালের কোন নাচইয়ার, ফরেন-রিটার্ণদেরও ধরে, পা ফেলার সাধ্য নাই। মুখোশ রাখার কায়দাও এদের জানা নেই।”<sup>71</sup>

(The rhythms that are performed in our Baghmundi, no present dancer or foreign return can perform on them. They do not even know how to tie/keep/use masks properly)

Even Anil Sutradhar, who himself composed the *paala* (act) on the Santhal Rebellion on the occasion of the Academy of Folklore organised Chhau seminar at Purulia in 1979, exclaims that modern experimentations within Chhau which can never be as successful as traditional plays.

So, what is the cause of such deterioration in the quality of the performance? The answer lies in the disavowal of the rules that defined erstwhile performances, providing to the process its authentic flavour. Hence, Suchand Mahato laments:

“এখনকার নাচে বেদ নাই, শাস্ত্র নাই, প্রথমেই যুদ্ধ, গণেশ বধ। তারপর কার্তিক, লক্ষ্মী সরস্বতী, শেষে কালি। এসব আজকালের তৈরী।”<sup>72</sup>

(No proper canon is followed in today's performance and is all about combat. So, in the very first combat, Ganesha is killed followed by Karthik, Lakshmi, Saraswati and Kali at the end. All these are recent innovations.)

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<sup>70</sup>Golam Muhammed Khan, 'Baghmundir Sakhya' (in Bengali), *Chhatrak* (1979), p.183.

<sup>71</sup>Dwijendranath Singh Deo and Brajendranath Singh Deo in 'Baghmundir Sakhya' (in Bengali), *Chhatrak* (1979), p.178.

<sup>72</sup>Suchand Mahato in in 'Baghmundir Sakhya' (in Bengali), *Chhatrak* (1979),p.175.

Emphasis on codified and authentic performances is also found in Golam Muhammed Khan's narrative:

“সব শিল্পেরই নিয়ম আছে, না জানলে কি করে চলবেক। এক একটা চাল, ত এক একটা অর্থও ত থাকবেক। এমনি করে আগাবেক।”<sup>73</sup>

(All art forms have their own set of rules. One cannot perform in ignorance. Each movement has an inner meaning associated with it and a performer needs to learn that. Then only the form will progress.)

There are two aspects of this narrative which I would like to highlight. First, there is again a continuous reference to a pristine ‘perfect’ past which has been lost amidst the current modern innovations. Secondly, the authenticity of the performance is linked to some *shastras* (canon), which however remains undefined. Both the aspects are entwined with the single thread that runs through the chapter—the dialogue between textual and oral traditions. In fact, the vagueness in defining the nature of the oft-mentioned *shastras* attests that this idea of authenticity of the performers is also invented and is conditioned by the needs of the present. After all, a performance which has a textual basis is always advantageously placed with regard to gaining recognition and appreciation. At the same time, the idea that the present had been ‘corrupted’ by new innovations introduced at the behest of ‘outsiders’ is in the same league as asserting that the basic essence and importance of the form cannot be understood by these very outsiders, who are only showcasing a ‘corrupt’ version of the form. To whatever extent the outsiders might manipulate extant performances, the capacity to comprehend and accurately execute the original essence of form lies solely with the local performers. This, I argue, is how the power relation between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ is inverted.

In summary, my narrative shows how the performers of Purulia Chhau are using their memory to weave their ‘own’ narrative on the dance form in order to recover their agency and assert their identity. However, the boundary between ‘us’/‘self’ and ‘them’/ ‘other’ remains blurred. As a result, the narrative based on which the performers could carve their independent niche failed to remain completely autonomous. Instead, their self-representation has been defined through the borrowing of terms and aesthetic parameters from the very

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<sup>73</sup>Golam Muhammed Khan, ‘Baghmundir Sakhya’ (in Bengali), *Chhatrak* (1979), p.183.



‘outsiders’ whose representations they seek to challenge and invert. Thus, while on the one hand, the counter-narrative of the performers is articulated against the dominant cultural narrative on Purulia Chhau, on the other hand, it adopts the same set of terminologies and tropes used in this dominant narrative. J.C. Desmond has argued in his study that since dance styles and performance practices are both symptomatic and constitutive of social relations, when a dance form gets appropriated, it is not always the hegemonizing side which borrows from the subordinate culture.<sup>74</sup> Instead, the borrowing often is a two-way process. Thus, a Hindu Brahminical past is invoked to subtly detach the tradition from a tribal origin, royal patronage is highlighted, *Rasa*-theory from the *Natyashastra* is invoked while explaining the nature of the Chhau and authenticity is ascribed to undefined ‘shastras’.

It is in this simultaneous opposition and compliance between the two narratives, that the anxiety for acceptance of a dance tradition and its performers are located. After all, at the end of the day, the performers are the ones in need of resources to both sustain their dance form, as well as, themselves. Resultantly, they have to accept “the hegemonic view of the culture.”<sup>75</sup> This illustrates how the dominant cultural discourse of the time, with its inscribed hierarchy of privileging one form of cultural essence at the cost of another, influenced, affected and conditioned the self-representation of the performers.

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<sup>74</sup>J.C. Desmond, ‘Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies’, *Cultural Critique* No. 26 (Winter, 1993-1994), pp. 33-63.

<sup>75</sup>Ronald J.Grele, ‘Movement Without Aim: Methodological and Theoretical Problems in Oral History’, in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds.) *The Oral History Reader* (Routledge, London, 1998), pp.47-8.

## CONCLUSION

The primary objective of this dissertation was to unfold the different levels of marginalization which has afflicted the Purulia Chhau in the post-independence period, culminating with the impact of this process of marginalization on the artistes involved with the execution of Purulia Chhau. I started with the role of the state in this marginalization process, tracing the attempts made by different regional forms to gain classical status in the post-independence period, mostly through an adherence to a rather arbitrary set of guidelines implemented by the state. Here I showed the critical role played by both the regional government in promoting their respective dance forms and also by powerful regional elites who often held key offices in the institutions deciding upon state patronage. My research showed that Purulia Chhau suffered on both counts – a lukewarm attitude taken by the state government towards promoting the dance form, coupled with hostile regional elites, who were unwilling to bestow attention on a dance form originating from the fringes of the state.

While concerted state patronage remained missing, certain individuals attempted to showcase the dance form. However, it was more to use the dance form to further their own personal objectives, than to selflessly introduce the Purulia Chhau to a wider audience. This is dealt with in my second chapter, where I show how Ashutosh Bhattacharya takes great pains to present Purulia Chhau as a classical dance form and Mahua Mukherjee incorporates the form in her endeavour to unearth a classical dance of West Bengal. Finally, local scholars from the Purulia region, in their efforts to counter Bhattacharya's claims, present an alternative saga of the origin and evolution of the dance form. The common thread running through all the above three forms of representation is that the voice and opinions of the performers about their own dance tradition is conspicuous by their absence. The voice of the performers form the crux of my final chapter, where I use the methods of oral history to narrate how the artistes use their collective memories to create a counter-narrative, and aim to regain some agency regarding their performances. Unfortunately, the narrative of the performers remained replete with the borrowings from the dominant narratives they sought to critique, ultimately showing the hegemonising influence of the latter in determining the identity of the form.

I acknowledge that this dissertation remains far from being perfect with several gaps in data, analysis and conceptualization. In addition, several unanticipated questions that

cropped up in the course of this journey and had been left unanswered owing to the shortage of time and resources, which I would like to take up in my future research plans. For instance, I would like to continue with my study on the oral interviews for better insights into how memory is used in constituting identity of a community. I want to put special emphasis on this as this time, these oral interviews were conducted rather hurriedly within a span of twenty days which left no time for me to experiment with a larger number of people or to cross-check the accounts. Secondly, the role of the district administration has not been beyond the purview of this body of research. It would however be intriguing in the future to discern how far cultural bodies at the district level lobby with the regional government for local patronage and recognition of their respective cultural forms. My limited conversations with the DICO in Purulia suggested that they did work for the promotion of their district's art forms at the regional level, and assist their local artistes to receive institutional and economic support from the regional government. Thirdly, I would sincerely wish to look at why the post-colonial period in West Bengal did not witness concerted government endeavours towards dance practices, unlike music and theatre.

Finally, the fuzziness surrounding what defines a dance form to be classical can be studied in much greater detail. This would require an elaborate and careful reading of the accounts of proceedings of the Sangeet Natak Akademi – inclusive of minutes from meetings and committee discussions - particularly in the first two decades of post-independence period. This would uncover which parameters were favourably taken into consideration when granting classical status to a dance form, and which facets of a dance tradition made it unsuitable in the eyes of the committee members of the Sangeet Natak Akademi to receive the same honour.

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