

THE STORY OF *PURULIA CHHOU*: INNOVATION IN THEMES AND CONTEMPORARY CHANGES – A TEMPORAL PHENOMENON

Sharmila Chandra*

Abstract

Chhou is an indigenous folk dance of Eastern India. Originally, it evolved as a martial art prevalent in the Chotanagpur Region of Jharkhand, Odisha and the western part of West Bengal. It is essentially a masked dance and conventionally, all the participants of *Purulia Chhou* wear masks. It originated as a ritualistic masked dance performed by the tribals of the Chotanagpur Plateau on the occasion of *Chaitra Parva* with the objective of worshipping *Lord Shiva*. However, *Purulia Chhou* underwent a long journey over time during which it saw many innovations and a large degree of transformation. This paper discusses the changes that have taken place in the performance over decades and its present status.

Keywords: *Purulia Chhou*, Chotanagpur Plateau, masked dance, innovations, transformation.

Introduction

The early days of Purulia Chhou

A very attractive and popular masked dance of Eastern India is the *chhou dance*. *Chhou* is basically a tribal dance, performed by the *Bhumij*, *Munda*, *Kurmi*, *Kalindi*, *Oraon*, *Santhal*, *Ho* and *Sahoo* communities of the Chotanagpur Region. The dance is performed in three, distinct pockets of Eastern India – in the Purulia District and adjoining regions West Bengal, Saraikela-Kharsawan in Jharkhand and the Mayurbhanj District of Odisha. Hence, *chhou* came to be classified

* Senior Fellow, ICSSR, Asiatic Society, Kolkata.

into three types – *Purulia Chhou*, *Saraikela Chhou* and *Mayurbhanj Chhou*. While the *Purulia Chhou* and *Saraikela Chhou* are distinctive for their masks, *Mayurbhanj Chhou* does not use any masks at all.¹

The place of origin of *Chhou* is debatable. Dr. Ashutosh Bhattacharya, the eminent exponent of *Purulia Chhou*, is of firm conviction that *chou dance* originated in Bengal and its place of origin was Manbhum.² However, some scholars have expressed the opinion that *chhou* was not a performance indigenous to Purulia, but was borrowed from Saraikela or Mayurbhanj. Dr. Ashutosh Bhattacharya has negated this point on several grounds (Bhattacharya, 1972). Whatever the place of origin, *chhou* evolved as a martial dance in all the three states. It must be emphasised that *Purulia Chhou* presents a very high degree of acrobatics and is physically exacting. The moods expressed by the dancers are *veer rasa* and *raudra rasa*. Originally, the rituals and ceremonies connected with *Purulia Chhou* were purely based on religious convictions. The dance was held once a year during the month of *Chaitra* (March-April) to celebrate the *Gajan Festival*, also known as the *Chaitra Parva*. The festival was marked by the worship of *Lord Shiva* and was also known as the *Shivaganjam Festival*. On this occasion, *chou dance* performed by the villagers was highly patronised by the feudal lords of Baghmundi,³ who were ardent followers of *Lord Shiva*. In this festival, *Śhiva* is worshipped as a tribal deity⁴ by the tribes living in this area. Among the patrons of those days, mention must be made of Raja Madan Mohan Singh Deo, who is said to have introduced masks in the dance about two hundred years ago.⁵ Raja Brajagopal Singh Deo, his father, was also highly instrumental in popularising *Purulia Chhou*. However, in later years, *Zamindari* was abolished and in course of time, royal patronage waned. *Purulia Chhou* became a dance of the common people who, in spite of acute poverty, struggled to sustain *chhou* culture in this region. Thus, unlike other subgenres of *chhou* which enjoyed royal patronage for a long time, *Purulia Chhou* has retained its native, rudimentary form.

Purulia Chhou moulded itself under the influence of Hinduism. (Mondal, 2021). Conventionally, all the *chhou palas* in Purulia are based on Hindu mythology. The episodes are taken from the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas*. Even among these, there is a particular preference for episodes from the *Ramayana*. The emphasis laid on Hindu mythological episodes in the enactment of *Purulia Chhou* gives an indication of the fact that the feudal chief of Baghmundi, who is thought to be of tribal origin, underwent sanskritisation. The entry of this feudal chief into mainstream

Hinduism perhaps induced his subjects to take up Hinduism so that they chose to incorporate episodes from the epics and the *Pauranic* tales into their *chhou palas*. The *Raja* of Baghmundi, after becoming a Hindu, invited artisans from Bardhhamaan to settle in Chorida and to make clay images of Hindu gods and goddesses. In course of time, these artisans began to handcraft masks of Hindu deities for the *chhou dance* of Purulia. This fact can be further supported by the appearance of the *Purulia Chhou masks*, which closely resemble the idols.⁶ Dr. Ashutosh Bhattacharya, the doyen of *Purulia Chhou*, has drawn attention to the fact that all the masks used in *Purulia Chhou* follow the standard style of Bengali clay-modelling generally represented by the Krishnanagar School⁷ of the Nadia District of West Bengal. He has also stressed that all the *chou palas* begin with an invocation to *Lord Ganesha* who first appears on the stage and performs a dance (Chatterji, 2009). This is typically indigenous to the Bengali Hindu society. Hence, the original home of *chhou* must have been none other than Bengal (Bhattacharya, 1972). The researcher supports this fact by observing that the donning of a white *dhoti* and loin cloth by *Ganesha* at the time of the dance is also a Bengali Hindu tradition.



A typical *chou mask* of Purulia-Tarakasur. Source :Niranjan Sahish.

Among the *chhou palas* enacted in Purulia the most popular one is *Mahishashur Badh* in which the Mother Goddess, *Durga* slays the demon, *Mahishasura*. This episode of *Mahishasur Badh* stresses on the victory of 'Good' over 'Evil.' Apart from *Durga* and *Mahishasura*, the other characters involved in this *pala* are *Lakshmi*, *Saraswati*, *Kartik* and *Ganesha* and the lion – the *Vahana* of the Mother Goddess. Originally, all these characters used to be played by male actors. As in the case of other *chhou palas*, here also the dance reflects *veer rasa* and *raudra rasa*.

Another episode enacted in *Purulia Chhou* is *Hiranyakashipu Badh*. This story is based on the *Pauranic* concept of the life of *Prahlada*. *Prahlada* is a young boy, an ardent follower of *Vishnu*. He is tortured by his father, the demon *Hiranyakashipu* who forbids him to worship *Lord Vishnu*. *Prahlada* keeps praying to *Lord Vishnu* to save him from the tortures inflicted by *Hiranyakashipu*. Ultimately *Vishnu* appears to kill *Hiranyakashipu* so that *Prahlada* is relieved of his miseries.

Other *palas* involved in *Purulia Chhou* strictly based on mythology are *Sitaharan*, *Ravana Badh*, *Raktabeejer Matri Darshan*, *Kirat Arjun Pala*, *Sita Swayambar*, *Abhimanyu Badh*, *Tarakasur Badh*, *Chikurasura Badh*, *Parashuramer Matrihatya*, *Taranisen Badh*, etc. Traditionally, all the *chhou palas* are based on pure mythology. Dr. Ashutosh Bhattacharya has remarked, 'It must be noted that in the Chhou dance of Purulia the episodes of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the orthodox Puranas are represented through dance and music and no popular theme has entered into it.' (Bhattacharya, 1972).

Discussion and Analysis

Innovations:

However, it cannot be denied that with the passage of time, the contents of the *chou palas* began to show a change and folk elements entered into these *palas*. *Purulia Chhou* became a typical folk dance of the Chotanagpur Region with a distinctive tribal orientation. Later, the villagers adopted classical elements into the dance so that the dance became a modified form of the classical type. Classical *ragas* such as *Malhar*, *Bhairav*, *Desh* and *Shree* etc. began to accompany *chhou* in the form of instrumental music. Dr. Bhattacharya is of the opinion that in this dance, a Hindu classical character of *Tandava* is very important. (Bhattacharya, 1972). At present, some even categorise *chhou* as a semi-classical dance. Actually, the dance is a combination and modification of the classical dance as adopted by the rural folks, which makes it a blend of semi-classical, folk and tribal performance.

While traditionally mythological themes formed the only content of *Purulia Chhou*, with the progress of time, certain secular themes were introduced into the performing art. These themes have a social appeal and convey social messages. Among these are *palas* based on tree planting and afforestation, COVID-19 and its impacts, female education, family planning, dowry problems and so on. Today, new *palas* are being performed such as 'Jai Bharat Mata,' 'Safe drive, save life,' 'Swami Vivekanander katha,' 'Eksho diner kaaj,' 'Saontal

Bidroho,' 'Dashyurani Phulan Devi,' etc. Again, it must be mentioned that local legends, folklore and abstract themes abound in the *palas* staged now.

Traditionally, in Purulia, there were four distinct *gharanas* of *Chhoudance* –Baghmundi, Jhalda, Arsa and Bandwan. However, at present, *chou* is performed mainly in Jhalda, Baghmundi and Balarampur Blocks. Very little changes have taken place in the technique of *chhou dance* in case of the Baghmundi School, Bandwan School and Arsa School. The doyen of *Purulia Chhou*, Guru Gambhir Singh Mura was associated with the Baghmundi School in the past. Guru Gambhir Singh Mura was strongly opposed to any kind of changes brought about in *Purulia Chhou* as he felt that it would adversely affect the traditionality and of the dance.⁸ Therefore, the Baghmundi School could remain highly conservative to this day. The *chou dancers* of Baghmundi are fully conscious about the authenticity of the dance as well as the costumes, stage-craft and the aesthetic value of *Purulia Chhou*. But major changes have been introduced in the Jhalda School. These changes have been strongly influenced by the wave of modernisation. The *chou dancer*, Binadhar Kumar has played a major role in bringing about these innovations in the Jhalda School. It was Binadhar Kumar who made an attempt to present Tagore's *Chitrangada* in the technique of *Purulia Chhou*. On this occasion, massive innovations were introduced in designing the masks and costumes. However, the *pala* failed to attain popularity among the viewers.



A scene from *Dakini Mangal* (Shakespeare's *Macbeth*). Source : Cardinale, 2019.

Dakini Mangal was another new production, launched at the initiative of *banglanatak dot com*. It was based on Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and directed by Siddhartha Chakravarty, a theatre director with training from the National School of Drama. It was staged in 2009 by Jagannath Choudhury and his group of male dancers at the ICCR, Kolkata and later at Jadavpur University, Kolkata, the Golf Green Festival and at Shilpagram, Santiniketan. Massive innovations were made on this occasion also. "Macbeth chhou, presented with the title of *Dakini Mangal* (or the Tale of Three Witches) was developed as a main innovative chhou production fusion of different folk-art elements, during the AL project, to circulate particularly in national and international cultural events....In Macbeth chhou a number of aesthetic and style proprieties are made absent" (Cardinale, 2019). For the staging of this drama, masks were designed in an innovative way; the elaborate masks typical of *Purulia Chhou* were abandoned and in their place, simpler masks were carved out of wood, paper and cotton. In this drama, *kathakali-style chhou masks* were used besides western outfits. Also, there was a fusion of elements from different local folk arts with classical *chhou* dance steps. Cardinale has quoted "...this modern artefact of Macbeth chhou and its process of production are addressed as new untypical productions compared to what artists define chhou." (Cardinale, 2019).

Another innovative production was Tagore's *Kalmrigaya*, performed by Jagannath Choudhury's group around 2009. The new concepts introduced in this dance drama were thunder and lightening, storm and rain. These characters were presented with novel costumes and masks. *Rabindrasangeet* was used in both *Kalmrigaya* and *Chitrangada* and the music was composed accordingly. For *Lakshmaner Shaktishel*, written by Sukumar Roy, *Ravana's* mask was designed in an innovative way.⁹

Purulia Chou is a vernacular art. The dance was traditionally accompanied by *Jhumur* songs and instrumental music. However, of late, *Jhumur* has turned out to be a very popular form of performing art so that the *Jhumur* artists charge an exorbitant sum. As it is becoming more and more expensive to recruit singers, the songs are now being replaced by narrations which help to recount the stories to the audience. Many modern *chhou* performances modify the narration, music and singing accompaniment to attract audiences, and reduce costs. The use of synthesisers such as the Casio, which is directed to gain cheap popularity, prevents the musicians from moving around to accommodate the dancers and disrupts the sensitive choreography. Again, while earlier a performance of *Purulia*

Chhou was held for long hours throughout the night, today the *chhou* groups of Purulia are trained to make the *palas* shorter in order to avoid boredom. The newly composed *chou palas* are made brief and last for about thirty minutes or so.

Digital technology is emerging as an essential tool for ensuring a fair share of the benefits of production to artists and craftspersons. While on the one hand, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted traditional value chains, on the other, it has accelerated the use of digital tools to access culture. As part of the HIPAMS¹⁰ project, training was provided to improve online visibility of *Purulia Chhou*. The *chhou dancers* are now transmitting their performances online with the aid of the media. As more and more documentation is done with the help of advanced technological inputs, photographs, video-clips and audio-visual recordings of *chhou* performances and the mask making heritage are made available to far-off audiences. The online content has been extended to include more stories about individual dancers, dance teams, preparation and experience of performances. This helps in publicity and in establishing online contacts and ensures a strong market for the mask makers and the dancers.

The formation of all-women chhou troupes in Purulia:-

A major change that has come about in *Purulia Chhou* is the entry of women artists into the performing art. In the early twentieth century, the participation of women was already in vogue in the case of *Mayurbhanj Chhou* and *Saraikela Chhou*, training centres had developed in Saraikela and Mayurbhanj in the mid-twentieth century. It is said that Bijoy Pratap Singh Deo, the prince of Saraikela was a liberal-minded man and encouraged women's participation in *Saraikela Chhou*. Perhaps it was this royal patronage extended by the prince of Saraikela that made women take up *chhou dance* early in the area. But in the male-dominated society of rural Purulia, there existed strong taboos that deterred women from participating in the dance. Women were not even allowed to touch the masks or to enter the arena of *chhou*.¹¹ If a woman participated in *chhou dance*, she would come to be known as '*nachni*' and would be looked upon as an outcaste by the rural society of Purulia. As a consequence, she would not be considered for marriage. Her future would be ruined. The male hegemony in *chhou* can further be assessed from the fact that the teaching of *chou dance* in Purulia is also traditionally controlled by the males. However, in the past ten to twelve years, in

several pockets of Purulia District, *all-women chhou troupes* have been formed. In these villages, young women have taken a keen interest in *Purulia Chhou* and are diligently practising the art. Sudip Bhui, co-ordinator and Head, Department of *Chhou*, Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University, is of the opinion that women have the power to excel in *chhou* because they are adorned with a flexible body and are naturally more graceful. There now exist as many as 36 *all-women chhou troupes* in the entire district of Purulia. Among these, there are about 15 groups that are active. In Para Block itself, there exist five *all women chou troupes*. In Balarampur Block there are three such women's troupes – *Mitali Chhou Maldi* in Maldi Village, *Sanjay Mahato Mahila Chhou Samity* in Choto Urma Village and *Maa Saraswati Mahila Chhou Nritya Swanirbhar Dal* in Shyamnagar Village.

These *all-women chhou troupes* often go outside their villages to perform and to conduct workshops. Mousumi Choudhury, the first young *woman chhou dancer* of Balarampur Block has earned quite a reputation in this respect. Following the footsteps of the girls of Kenda Girls' High School who had performed *Purulia Chou* earlier in 2006,¹² in 2010, she, along with her father, Ustad Jagannath Choudhury, established the group – *Mitali Chhou Maldi* – an all-women troupe in her native village – Maldi in the Balarampur Block of Purulia District. The group was ready for performance in the year 2012.¹³ Mousumi has trained a large number of girls in her village and in the neighbouring villages. Banglanatak dot com helped Mousumi to reach out to a wider audience. She performed in places like Kolkata, Delhi, Mumbai, Pune and often conducted *chhou* workshops in these cities. She was the first *woman chhou dancer* to go abroad. In 2019, with the initiative of banglanatak dot com, Mousumi Choudhury of Maldi Village gave training in *Purulia Chhou* to children in more than eighty schools in South 24 Parganas District on the occasion of the *Sunderban Lok Utsav*.

As a student of *Purulia Chhou*, Mousumi was blessed with renowned *gurus* such as Ustad Lalit Mahato, Guru Jagannath Choudhury, Guru Moloy Choudhury, Binadhar Kumar, Kartik Singh Mura, Baghambar Singh Mura and so on. After completing her education in Bengali and also the diploma course in *chou* from the Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University of Purulia, she continued to give lessons in *chhou* at the *Chhou Department* of the university as a part-time teacher.

In the year 2018, Mousumi went to Trondheim, Norway to conduct a *chhou* workshop with school children. She participated in the Transform Trondheim World Music Festival in Norway. It was immensely successful. In 2019, she participated in the *Sundarban Lok Utsav* and gave training to children in more than eighty schools in

the South 24 Parganas District.¹⁴ In the same year, Mousumi won the Grand Prize at the Asia-Pacific Youth ICH Storytelling Contest, organised by UNESCO.

At present, *Mitali Chhou Maldi* is an *all-women chhou troupe* comprising 16 girls. They are all young – under twenty five years of age. The troupe has performed several plays based on mythology as well as social issues including *Mahishashur Mardini*, *Mukhosh Khola – Mukh Dekha*, *Abhimanyu Badh*, *Taranisen Badh*, *Kiratarjun Pala*, etc. The other girls in Mousumi's *chhou* troupe are Mousumi's sister Shyamali Choudhury, Sarala Mura (Munda), Manju Mahato, Kanika Mahato, Swarnalata Mahato, Mongoli Sardar, Koni Deoghariya, Mandira Mahato, Sukla Goswami, Anna Sardar, Anima Mahato, Shibani Mahato, etc. Side by side with *chhou*, all these women have taken up their studies. All of them aspire to become world famous in *Purulia Chhou* and to go to foreign lands to display their skill and expertise.¹⁵

Maldi Chhou Sibir is a training centre in Maldi where girls and boys of Jagannath Choudhury's group take lessons in *Purulia Chhou* in unison. It was established around 2019-2020. Veteran *chou gurus* including Ustad Anil Mahato, Baghambar Singh Mura, Ustad Binadhar Kumar, Ustad Jagannath Choudhury and Ustad Lalit Mahato teach here. There is a resource centre in *Maldi Chhou Sibir*.

Sanjay Mahato Mahila Chhou Samity in Choto Urma Village of Balarampur is led by Sima Mahato, the cousin sister of Sanjay Mahato. This group was established as an *all-women chou troupe* in the end of 2020.¹⁶ There are 18 girls in the troupe. *Sanjay Mahato Mahila Chhou Samity* has staged *palas* such as *Mahishashur Mardini*, *Abhimanyu Badh*, *Hiranyakashipu Badh*, *Kirat Arjun Pala*, etc. Even girls less than ten years of age perform in this group. Lessons are given by veteran *gurus* such as Kartik Singh Mura, Kartik Karmakar, Anil Mahato, Naren Mahato, Pashupati Mahato and others. Some of the female artists of this *all-women chou troupe* such as Sima Mahato and Kabita Mahato have taken *chhou* lessons from Mousumi Choudhury of Maldi.¹⁷

Maa Saraswati Mahila Chhou Nritya Swanirbhar Dal of Shyamnagar Village has 21 *women chhou dancers*. The age of the girls range from ten years to over forty years.¹⁸ The group is led by Simarani Mahato. This *all-women chhou troupe* was founded in 2018. They are still in a rudimentary stage.

Bongabari Matangini Hazra Mahila Chhou Nritya Dal is led by Ustad Sunita Mahato of Bongabari Village – the headquarters of Purulia II CD Block in *Purulia Sadar* Subdivision. Not only is she the leader of the group, but as a senior member of the troupe (she is now 28 years old), she plays the more difficult and artful roles like that of



Sima Mahato, dressed in the attire of *Mahishashur*. Source: Sanjay Mahato, 2022.

Kartik, *Mahishashurmardini*, *Parashurama* and *Krishna*, allotting the easier roles to the trainees. This group was established in 2017. There are 12 girls in this *all-women chhou troupe*. Many of them are very young (eight of them are below eighteen years of age).¹⁹ They perform plays based on mythological themes such as *Parashuramer Matrihatya*, *Mahishashur Mardini*, *Hiranyakashipu Badh* as well as *palas* involving social episodes like *Dasyurani Phulan*. In 2020, Sunita Mahato completed the diploma course in *chhou* from the *Department of Chhou*, Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University and now often performs in the shows organised by the department.²⁰

The woman *chhou* dancer, Aparna Mahato formed the Jambad Panchamukhi Female Chau Dance Academy in Anai Jambad Village, Purulia II C.D. Block, in the year 2015. About eighteen girls have joined the academy. Some of the *women chhou dancers* in this troupe are even middle-aged. This *all-women chhou troupe* of Purulia had received training from Ustad Mousumi Choudhury of Maldi. This all-women troupe has staged *chhou palas* such as *Tarakasur Badh*, *Chikurasura Badh*, *Mahishashur Mardini*, *Sitaharan*, *Kirat-Kiratini* and *Ravana Badh*.²¹ They perform locally within the area and in Nadia, Jharkhand, etc. Aparna Mahato usually plays the male roles in the *palas* such as *Chikurasura* in *Chikurasura Badh*, *Kirat* in *Kirat-Kiratini*, *Rama* in *Sitaharan* and so on.



Sunita Mahato dressed as *Kartik* in the *pala*, *Asur Nidhan Jagya*.
Source: Sunita Mahato, 2022.

Palashkura Mahila Chhou Samity is led by the *woman chhou dancer* Nehari Sahish. This *all-women chhou troupe* functions in Palashkura Village in the Para Block of Purulia. This group was established in 2019 with 17 girls. At present the number of women in this troupe is 28.²² This *all-women chhou troupe* has staged *palas* such as *Bir Birsa Munda*, *Satyaban Sabitri*, *Tarakasur Badh*, *Mahishashur Mardini*, *Kirat Arjun Pala*, etc.

Suchitra Sahish is the leader of the *all-women chou troupe*, *Maa Parbati Mahila Chou Samity* in Panipathar Village, Puncha Block. This troupe has 17 *women chou dancers*. It came into form in 2022. The *palas* enacted by this group are mostly mythological – *Sitar Balir Pindadan*, *Sree Krishnar Leela Abasan*, *Sabitri Satyaban* and so on. This group of *all-women chou dancers* is very active and performs locally in the district of Purulia.

In 2020, Krittibas Mahato established an *all-women chou troupe* in the village of Bindudi in the Puncha Block of Purulia District. 15 girls are involved in this group. The group is led by Dilip Mahato, the brother of Krittibas Mahato. The *palas* enacted by them are *Ganeshar Tantabhanga*, *Mahishashur Badh*, *Narakasur Badh*, *Ekalabyer Gurudakshina* and so on. The last of these *palas* was performed in Joyrambati in December 2022. Apart from local programmes, this group has performed in Mukutmanipur and other places in Bankura.²³

Bandwan Adivasi Mahila Chou Nritya Party has 25 women *chou dancers*. This group is led by Kunti Mudi. The girls here launched their first programme on the day of *Makar Sankranti* this year. The *palas* staged on this occasion were *Mahishashur Badh* and *Bhishma Parashuramer Yuddha*. Since then, the group has been receiving constant invitations.

Among the *all-women chhou troupes* established in Purulia in the present age, *Mitali Chhou Maldi* is the pioneer. This group has been practising *Purulia Chhou* for more than a decade and has carried the art forward a long way. From personal interviews taken by this researcher it has been found that such progress has been possible primarily owing to Mousumi's diligence towards the dance. Not only so, during primary survey in the field, each of the women in this group has expressed a true passion for *Purulia Chhou* and has said that she is determined to pursue it as long as possible.

The performance of *Purulia Chhou* by *all-women chhou troupes* in the present age started in the year 2012. In the last ten years, *all-women chhou troupes* have rapidly multiplied throughout Purulia. While there was only 1 troupe in 2012, the number of active troupes today stands at 15. Primary survey in the field has revealed that in the initial stage, the rise in *all-women chhou troupes* in Purulia was rather slow. But this rise has been drastic since 2020. Now every year three to four new *all-women chhou troupes* are being created. It is found to be a dynamic process.

Conclusion

From the above discussion and analysis, it is obvious that drastic changes have occurred in *Purulia Chhou* over the years. The performing art originated as a ritualistic dance by the tribals of the Chotanagpur region, on the occasion of *Chaitra Parva*, with the intention of offering worship to *Lord Shiva*, a revered deity of the tribals. Prof. Roma Chatterji had referred to *Purulia Chhou* as a 'tribal war dance.' (Chatterji, 2009). Originally, the dance was held locally in the countryside of Purulia by the menfolk of the *Bhumij*, *Mahato*, *Santhal*, *Kurmi*, *Kalindi*, *Oraon* and *Ho* communities. Women were debarred from taking part in the dance. Even the female roles in the drama were enacted by male actors. It was purely a tribal dance. *Purulia Chhou* was patronised for a limited period by the *Rajas* of Baghmundi. Unlike the cases of *Saraikela Chhou* and the *Mayurbhanj Chhou*, in the case of *Purulia Chhou*, with the abolition of the feudal system, royal patronage waned. But the local tribes continued to perform this dance with diligence and this led to the rapid progress

of *Purulia Chhou*. As is inevitable in the case of all cultural practices, changes took place in the themes as well as the masks and costumes and the presentation of *Purulia Chhou* over the years. Training has mostly focused on revitalising the art of giving a *chhou* performance as well as different themes and stories including the works of Tagore and Shakespeare. These changes were directed to be mostly innovative, and were useful in creating new opportunities for the dancers as well as a new market for the mask makers, but in the process, the authenticity and the original form of *Purulia Chhou* were affected adversely. Experts have expressed their concern over performances becoming more acrobatic and less focused on narrative elements, in order to appeal to new audiences who are hardly aware about the mythological stories. It is also observed that some dance postures which are authentic to one kind of character are being used instead to denote another character as these are deemed more attractive. Moreover, the transformation of *Purulia Chhou* from a ritual performance to a stage show threatens the traditional association of the dance with *Chaitra Parva* and its relevance to the harvest festival. *Purulia Chhou* received a boost in 2010, when the UNESCO declared the performing art as an Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. *Chhou masks* of Purulia were adorned with the GI tag in 2018. The entry of women in this dance in the past decade by breaking all taboos and restrictions brought about a drastic change in the rural society of Purulia in the post-colonial period. This transformation of *Purulia Chhou* now allows the *women chhou dancers* to earn in their own right and to showcase their talent before an enthusiastic audience. This is a positive turn and may ultimately lead to the emancipation of women in the rural society of Purulia.

Acknowledgement

Dr. Sharmila Chandra is the awardee of the ICSSR Senior Fellowship. This paper is largely an outcome of the Senior Fellowship sponsored by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR). However, the responsibility for the facts stated, opinions expressed, and the conclusions drawn is entirely of the author.

Notes

1. Interview with Professor Mohua Mukherjee, a pupil of Guru Gambhir Singh Mura, 2022.
2. In the first decade of the 21st century, Usharani Singh Sardar, the Headmistress of Kenda Girls' High School, Pancha Block, got a group of girls from her

school trained in *Purulia Chou*. The trainer was Gunadhar Sahish. Santoshi Bauri, Upashi Sahish, Saraswati Singh, Monibala Mandal, Manashi Das and a whole lot of other girls formed the trainees. This group performed *chhou* for the first time before the Chief Minister, Buddhadeb Bhattacharya in November 2006.

3. Interview with Ustad Mousumi Choudhury, 2022.
4. Interview with Ustad Mousumi Choudhury, 2022.
5. Primary Survey in Maldi Village.
6. Interview with the *chou* dancer, Sanjay Mahato, 2022. There is a controversy as to whether this group was formed at the end of 2020 or at the beginning of 2021.
7. Interview with Sanjay Mahato, January 2023.
8. Interview with Simarani Mahato, 2023.
9. Interview with Ustad Sunita Mahato, 2022.
10. Heritage-sensitive Intellectual Property and Marketing Strategies. HIPAMS is an initiative of Coventry University and banglanatak dot com.and is supported by the British Academy. Its main objective is to develop 'heritage-sensitive' IP protection and marketing strategies for the rural artist communities in India.
11. Interview with Professor Mohua Mukherjee, a pupil of Guru Gambhir Singh Mura, 2022.
12. In the first decade of the 21st century, Usharani Singh Sardar, the Headmistress of Kenda Girls' High School, Puncha Block, got a group of girls from her school trained in Purulia Chou. The trainer was Gunadhar Sahish. Santoshi Bauri, Upashi Sahish, Saraswati Singh, Monibala Mandal, Manashi Das and a whole lot of other girls formed the trainees. This group performed *chhou* for the first time before the Chief Minister, Buddhadeb Bhattacharya in November 2006.
13. Interview with Ustad Mousumi Choudhury, 2022.
14. Interview with Ustad Mousumi Choudhury, 2022.
15. Primary Survey in Maldi Village.
16. Interview with the *chou* dancer, Sanjay Mahato, 2022. There is a controversy as to whether this group was formed at the end of 2020 or at the beginning of 2021.
17. Interview with Sanjay Mahato, January 2023.
18. Interview with Simarani Mahato, 2023.
19. Interview with Ustad Sunita Mahato, 2022.
20. Interview with Professor Sudip Bhui, professor of *chhou* at the *Department of Chhou*, Sidho-Kanho- Birsha University, Purulia.
21. Telephonic interview with *chhou* dancer, Gautam Mahato, husband of Ustad Aparna Mahato.
22. Telephonic interview with the *chhou guru*, Niranjan Sahish.
23. Interview with Krittibas Mahato.

References

- Barik, Satyasundar and Mukherjee, Anusua, 2021- "Heroines of Chau." The Hindu Magazine, January 3, 2021.
- Bhattacharya, Ananya, Dutta, Madhura *etal*, Waelde, Charlotte,2021

- “Designing Heritage Sensitive IP and Marketing Strategies for ICH-Based Creative Economy.” Culture. Society. Economy. Politics, Vol.1, No. 2. pp : 72 – 87.
- Bhattacharya, Ashutosh, 1972 – “Chau Dance of Purulia.” Publisher : Rabindra Bharati University, 6/4 Dwarakanath Tagore Lane, Calcutta – 700007. pp. 33, 63, 65-69.
- Cardinale, Stefano, 2019 – “Intangible Heritage and Livelihoods : A case study on the heritage of Purulia Chhau dance from India.” Ph.D thesis in Culture, Tourism and Development, August 2019. pp. 198 – 200.
- Chatterji, Roma, 2009 – “Writing Identities : Folklore and Performative Arts of Purulia.” Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), New Delhi and Aryan Books International, New Delhi. pp. 1 – 24.
- Gangopadhyay, Uttara, 2022–“The dynamic twirls of Chhau may leave viewers agape, but its supporters call for urgent moves to keep the dance form going.” Retrieved from <https://www.outlookindia.com/>. (Accessed on 28.02.2023).
- Goswami, Kartik, 2022- “*Purulia ‘Chha’-er sampurna eitibritta o sankhipta bekaran.*” (in Bengali). Publisher – Purulia Chou Samity, Baligara, Purulia.
- Mahato, Vivek, 2022- “*Nari Chou dharar utsa sandhane*” (in Bengali). Purulia Darpan, Issue 25, 2022.
- Mehta, Gouri Nilakantan, 2004–“Enacting New Spatial Contexts: Pan Indian Identities of Female Performers of Seraikela and Mayurbhanj Chhau.” Thesis submitted to the Miami University for Master of Arts.
- Mondal, Subhadeep, 2021 – “Purulia Chau Dance. A Cultural Heritage from West Bengal.”