



Research Paper

## A Cultural and Mythological Study of Purulia Chhau Nach

Subhas Mandal

(Independent Researcher, Knowledge Valley College of Education, Baba Saheb Ambedkar Education University)

**Abstract:** India, a diverse country characterized by various communities, exhibits a wide range of cultural expressions rooted in different social classes, races, customs, religions, languages, and geographical locations. Among these cultural manifestations is Chhau dance, an energetic and vibrant semi-classical dance form found in specific regions of West Bengal. This art form combines elements of martial arts and folk traditions, serving as a unifying force that brings together individuals from diverse backgrounds and beliefs. Each regional variation of Chhau dance showcases a deep connection with local culture, nature, and the community. Unlike many other dance forms, chhau lacks a standardized grammar of performance across its variants. One notable variant, that has been recognized as an intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO. Chhau dance, a captivating and dynamic form of semi-classical dance in India, stands as a testament to the country's rich cultural mosaic. Embracing a fusion of martial arts and folk traditions, Chhau dance emanates a vibrant energy that resonates with both performers and audiences. Each regional variation of Chhau dance showcases a deep connection with local culture, nature, and the community. At the heart of Purulia Chhau lies the artistry of masks, which play a central role in the performance. These traditional masks, adorned with intricate designs, hold a significant place within the cultural heritage of the Purulia region and are protected under geographical indications, safeguarding their authenticity and historical value. The aim of this paper is to showcase the profound cultural heritage, historical significance, mythological perspective and the evolution of Chhau dance as an esteemed and celebrated art form in Bengal.

**Keywords:** Folk Dance, Chhau Nach, Cultural Values, Performance, Cultural Heritage.

### I. Introduction

Purulia is one of the oldest districts in West Bengal and has a rich cultural heritage. Encircled by Bankura, Midnapore and Burdwan districts of West Bengal and Singhbhum, Dhanbad, Ranchi, Jamshedpur and Bokaro districts of Jharkhand state, the place has undergone a lot of changes over the past years of its existence. Purulia has a rich cultural heritage and mixed culture of Bengal, Jharkhand and Orissa as it was a part of these areas for various times. From archaeological evidence to local festivals, every cultural event has gotten a tribal touch in it, which is the speciality of Purulia. The rural people of Purulia have their folks to speak about many of their tenets. The distinctiveness of those is well demonstrated with the sentiments and feelings of the population and these are marked with splash of colours and often entwined with pathos, romanticism, velour and social consciousness. Purulia has a distinct folk culture of Jhumur, Tusu, Bhadu songs. It is also the birthplace of a martial dance of Bengal Chhau. Purulia's folk culture is intertwined with its religious beliefs. Deities such as Durga, Kali, Vishnu, Chandi, and Krishna have a significant presence, along with rural deities like Banshuli, Rankini, and Manasha. The worship of these gods helps maintain a balance between traditional and modern values, emphasizing morality and disciplined living. The region of Purulia celebrates various festivals and conducts unique rituals. Bhadu-Puja, a significant festival, involves worshipping the goddess Vadhu. This festival, divided into three categories, reflects the moral value of treating women with respect and dignity, which has diminished in modern times. By upholding the tradition of worshipping daughters as goddesses, the importance of respecting women are reinforced. Purulia is renowned for its folk songs and dances. Jhumur, a special dance form, expresses social culture, rituals, entertainment, emotions, and Indian traditions through its songs. Chhau dance, featuring Purulia's unique masks, has gained global recognition, showcasing the flow of Indian culture. Other local dance forms like Tusu dance and Kathi dance also contribute to the propagation of moral values like unity, cooperation, and respect. Overall, Purulia's folk culture, moral values, population diversity, religious practices, festivals, folk songs, and dances contribute to the preservation and propagation of ancient traditions and moral values. With its vibrant costumes, energetic movements, and rich cultural heritage, Purulia Chhau Nach has become an integral part of the region's artistic expression. This dance form has a long history that years back several centuries and is deeply rooted in the local folklore and mythology. To explore its origin, we must delve into the historical and cultural context of Purulia. The district of Purulia, located in the

eastern part of India is known for its diverse cultural traditions and tribal communities. The region is inhabited by various indigenous tribes, including the Kurmis, Santhals, Mundas, and Kharias, who have contributed to the cultural fabric of Purulia. These tribes have their unique art forms, rituals, and dances, which have influenced the development of Purulia Chhau Nach. Chhau, in general, is a form of martial dance-drama that originated in the eastern states of India, primarily West Bengal, Jharkhand and Odisha. It is believed to have evolved from ancient martial arts practices and has strong connections with the region's tribal communities. Chhau incorporates elements of combat, storytelling, music, and dance to create a captivating performance. The origin of Purulia Chhau Nach can be traced back to the 18th century when the local rulers and aristocrats patronized and encouraged the art form. The dance form flourished under their patronage and became an integral part of the cultural landscape of Purulia. It was performed during various festivals, religious ceremonies, and social occasions, reflecting the community's collective identity and aspirations. The mythology and folklore of Purulia played a significant role in shaping the themes and narratives of Chhau performances. The stories of gods and goddesses, epic tales from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, and local legends were adapted into dance dramas and performed by skilled artists. These performances not only entertained the audience but also served as a medium to convey moral values, social messages, and historical events. One of the distinguishing features of Purulia Chhau Nach is its unique mask tradition. Masks play a vital role in Chhau performances as they represent various characters, including gods, demons, animals, and mythological figures. Each mask is meticulously designed to capture the essence of the character it portrays and is considered sacred by the performers.

The movements and choreography of Purulia Chhau Nach are characterized by agility, grace, and precision. The dancers, often male, perform complex footwork, acrobatics, and martial arts-inspired movements, accompanied by live music and rhythmic beats of traditional instruments like the dhol, dhamsa, and shehnai. The costumes worn by the performers are colorful and elaborate, reflecting the traditional attire of the region. Over the years, Purulia Chhau Nach has faced both challenges and recognition. The art form struggled to survive during the colonial era when traditional practices were suppressed, and western influences dominated the cultural landscape. However, the efforts of local communities, artists, and cultural organizations have helped preserve and promote Purulia Chhau Nach. "Today, Purulia Chhau Nach has gained national and international recognition for its artistic merit and cultural significance" (Aestheticizing without Agenda). It is performed not only in Purulia but also in various parts of India and has been showcased in prestigious festivals and platforms globally. The dance form has also undergone adaptations and innovations, incorporating contemporary themes and techniques while retaining its traditional essence. One of the remarkable aspects of Purulia Chhau Nach is its exploration of the integral relationship between local culture and mythological tradition. Purulia Chhau Nach is deeply rooted in the local culture of the Purulia region, which is predominantly tribal. The dance form reflects the customs, rituals, and traditions of the indigenous communities inhabiting the area. These tribes have their unique folklore, myths, and legends that have been passed down through generations. Purulia Chhau Nach acts as a medium through which these narratives are brought to life, allowing the local community to celebrate and connect with their cultural heritage.

Mythological tradition plays a pivotal role in Purulia Chhau Nach. The dance form draws inspiration from various Hindu epics, such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, as well as local legends and folktales. The performers, known as Chhau dancers, depict characters from these stories, embodying gods, goddesses, demons, and heroes. Through their intricate movements, gestures, and expressions, they recreate the mythological events, reenacting the triumphs of good over evil or showcasing the divine interventions in human affairs. The integration of mythological elements in Purulia Chhau Nach serves multiple purposes. Primarily, it serves as a form of entertainment, captivating audiences with its vivid storytelling and visually appealing choreography. The narrative aspect of the dance form allows the audience to engage with the performance, following the characters' journeys and experiencing the emotions conveyed through the dancers' expressions and movements. This connection between the performers and the spectators strengthens the communal bond, as everyone becomes part of the shared cultural experience.

Purulia Chhau Nach acts as a vehicle for the transmission of cultural and moral values. Through the medium of dance, these values are not only communicated but also internalized by the performers and the audience, contributing to the preservation of cultural and ethical norms within the community. Moreover, Purulia Chhau Nach serves as a repository of historical and cultural knowledge. The dance form preserves the collective memory of the local community, preserving stories and traditions that might otherwise be lost or forgotten. It serves as a living archive of the region's history and mythology, keeping them relevant and accessible to present and future generations. The transmission of these stories through dance ensures their continued existence and fosters a sense of identity and belonging among the community members. The elaborate costumes and masks used in Purulia Chhau Nach are significant in exploring the integral relationship between local culture and mythological tradition. The costumes are inspired by traditional tribal attire, incorporating vibrant colors, intricate patterns, and decorative embellishments. They reflect the sartorial aesthetics of the

indigenous communities and provide a visual representation of their cultural identity. The accompanying music is a blend of traditional tribal melodies and classical Indian music, creating a unique sonic landscape that complements the dance movements. The rhythmic patterns, beats, and melodies are carefully crafted to evoke the mood and emotions associated with the particular mythological story being portrayed. The music serves as a powerful medium to transport the audience into the world of the narrative, heightening their engagement and emotional connection with the performance. (Bhattacharya, 45) The musical compositions in Purulia Chhau Nach often incorporate traditional instruments such as the dhol, dhamsa, khol, and flute, which are deeply rooted in the local musical traditions. By incorporating these instruments, the dance form not only pays homage to the regional musical heritage but also reinforces the connection between the local culture and mythological tales. The rhythmic beats of the drums and the melodious tunes of the flute resonate with the cultural and emotional fabric of the community, further enhancing the immersive experience of the performance. In addition to the performances themselves, the training and transmission of Purulia Chhau Nach also contribute to the exploration of the integral relationship between local culture and mythological tradition. The dance form is traditionally passed down through generations within the community, with experienced dancers serving as mentors and teachers to the younger generation. This system of oral transmission ensures the continuity and authenticity of the dance form, as well as the preservation of cultural knowledge embedded in the mythological stories. The training process involves not only the physical aspects of the dance, such as movements, postures, and gestures but also the deep understanding and interpretation of the mythological narratives. The aspiring Chhau dancers learn not only the technical aspects but also the historical and cultural significance of the stories they portray. This holistic approach to training fosters a profound connection between the dancers, their cultural heritage, and the mythological traditions they embody. It instills in them a sense of responsibility and pride in carrying forward the legacy of their community's cultural and mythological heritage. Furthermore, Purulia Chhau Nach serves as a platform for cultural exchange and interaction. The dance form has gained recognition and popularity beyond the Purulia region, with performances being showcased at national and international festivals and events. This exposure provides opportunities for dialogue and collaboration between different cultural communities, allowing for the exchange of ideas, techniques, and experiences. Such cross-cultural interactions enrich the dance form, as it evolves and adapts while maintaining its essence. This process of exchange reinforces the integral relationship between local culture and mythological tradition by highlighting the universality of certain themes and narratives across different cultural contexts. Furthermore, the exploration of the integral relationship between local culture and mythological tradition in "Purulia Chhau Nach goes beyond the surface level of performance and aesthetics"(89). It delves into deeper aspects of identity, spirituality, and social dynamics within the community. One of the significant aspects of Purulia Chhau Nach is its ability to reinforce a sense of identity among the performers and the community. By embodying mythological characters and narratives that are deeply rooted in the local culture, the dancers forge a connection with their cultural heritage. They become the custodians of their community's traditions, carrying forward the collective memory and values through their performances. This not only strengthens their personal connection to their roots but also instills a sense of pride and belonging within the community. The dancers are seen as cultural ambassadors, representing and preserving the unique cultural identity of their region.

Purulia Chhau Nach serves as a platform for spiritual expression and transcendence. The enactment of mythological tales through dance allows the performers to transcend their individual identities and merge with the divine or supernatural beings they portray. It becomes a form of spiritual practice and devotion, enabling the dancers to experience a deep connection with the mythological characters and the metaphysical realms they represent. This spiritual aspect of the dance form resonates with the religious and spiritual beliefs of the community, fostering a sense of reverence and awe for the mythological traditions. The integral relationship between local culture and mythological tradition in Purulia Chhau Nach also reflects the social dynamics and power structures within the community. The portrayal of mythological events often involves conflicts, struggles, and power dynamics between different characters. Through the dance, these dynamics are brought to life, shedding light on social issues and tensions that exist within the community. "By addressing these issues in a symbolic and artistic manner, Purulia Chhau Nach provides a platform for reflection and dialogue within the community. It allows for a deeper understanding and examination of social structures, moral dilemmas, and the consequences of actions, thereby promoting social awareness and introspection."(87)

The performances of Purulia Chhau Nach often take place during festivals and celebrations within the community. These occasions provide a collective space for the community members to come together, celebrate their cultural heritage, and reaffirm their shared values and beliefs. The performances act as a unifying force, fostering a sense of solidarity and cohesion within the community. The integration of mythological elements in the dance form adds an extra layer of significance to these celebrations, as they connect the present generation with the mythological past and the larger narrative of their cultural history. Purulia Chhau Nach serves as a vehicle for the interplay between local culture and mythological tradition, allowing for a dynamic and evolving

exploration of their integral relationship. While the dance form has deep roots in the traditions and customs of the Purulia region, it also embraces adaptation and innovation to remain relevant in contemporary times.

In recent years, Purulia Chhau Nach has witnessed collaborations with artists from diverse backgrounds, including contemporary dance, theater, and music. These collaborations have resulted in fusion performances that blend traditional elements of Purulia Chhau Nach with contemporary artistic expressions. Such collaborations not only breathe new life into the dance form but also facilitate cross-cultural exchange, enabling the exploration of connections between different artistic traditions and mythologies. The integration of modern technology has also played a role in furthering the exploration of the integral relationship between local culture and mythological tradition in Purulia Chhau Nach. Video documentation, digital archiving, and online platforms have made the dance form more accessible to a wider audience, both within and outside the Purulia region. This accessibility not only helps in preserving and disseminating the cultural and mythological knowledge embedded in Purulia Chhau Nach but also fosters a global appreciation and understanding of the dance form.

Additionally, the exploration of gender roles and representations in Purulia Chhau Nach is another aspect that reflects the interplay between local culture and mythological tradition. Traditionally, the dance form was performed exclusively by male dancers. However, in recent years, efforts have been made to promote the participation of female dancers in Purulia Chhau Nach. This shift challenges the traditional gender norms and provides a space for reinterpreting mythological narratives from a contemporary perspective. The inclusion of female performers not only expands the artistic possibilities but also opens up new avenues for exploring the roles and agency of women within the context of local culture and mythological tradition. It is worth noting that the exploration of the integral relationship between local culture and mythological tradition in Purulia Chhau Nach is an ongoing process. As society continues to evolve and change, so does the dance form. It adapts to new influences, incorporates contemporary themes, and addresses emerging social and cultural issues. This fluidity ensures its relevance and sustainability as a living tradition that continues to resonate with both the performers and the audience. "Purulia Chhau Nach embodies the integral relationship between local culture and mythological tradition through its dynamic performances, collaborations, technological advancements, and exploration of gender roles"(121). It serves as a bridge between the past and the present, preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of the Purulia region while embracing innovation and adaptation. The dance form not only engages and entertains but also fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation of the rich cultural and mythological traditions within the community. Through its continued exploration, Purulia Chhau Nach remains a vibrant and evolving expression of the interplay between local culture and mythological tradition, ensuring the preservation and transmission of this valuable heritage for future generations.

## **II. Conclusion**

In conclusion, Chhau dance stands as a testament to the rich cultural tapestry of India and specifically the region of West Bengal. Its diverse regional variations, including the renowned Purulia Chhau dance, reflect a deep-rooted connection to local culture, nature, and the community. The incorporation of masks in Purulia Chhau adds a distinct theatricality to the performance, showcasing the artistry and historical significance of these traditional masks. The recognition of Purulia Chhau as an Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO further highlights its importance in preserving and promoting India's cultural heritage. Chhau dance's lack of standardized performance rules allows for creative interpretation and regional distinctiveness, enabling the art form to evolve and adapt while retaining its core essence. This dynamic dance form serves as a platform for communication and expression of cultural values, bringing people from diverse backgrounds together. Through its vibrant energy and fusion of martial arts and folk traditions, Chhau dance captivates both performers and audiences alike, transcending barriers of class, race, ritual, habit, religion, language, and geography. As Chhau dance continues to evolve, it addresses cultural traditions and mythological perspectives. It serves as a medium to convey messages and narratives that reflect the social fabric of society, highlighting important themes and raising awareness. By embracing Chhau dance, communities have the opportunity to explore their identity, preserve their heritage, and address pertinent socio-economic challenges. In essence, Chhau dance represents the beauty, diversity, and unity of India's cultural mosaic. Its historical significance, meticulous choreography, and artistic expression make it an esteemed and celebrated art form. Through this exploration of its origins, defining features, costumes, and musical instruments, we gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the enchantment and enduring legacy of Chhau dance in Bengal and beyond.

The evolution of Chhau dance as a revered art form in Bengal is a testament to its enduring appeal and adaptability. Over the years, Chhau has evolved, incorporating new elements while preserving its traditional essence. This evolution is a result of the dynamic nature of culture and the interplay between tradition and innovation. Purulia Chhau, in particular, has witnessed changes in its performance style, choreography, and thematic elements. While remaining rooted in mythological traditions, Purulia Chhau has embraced contemporary narratives and social issues, allowing for a deeper engagement with the audience. This evolution

has ensured the relevance and continued vitality of Chhau dance in today's ever-changing world. Additionally, Chhau dance serves as a powerful medium for the communication of cultural values. Through its expressive movements, intricate costumes, and evocative storytelling, Chhau conveys important moral, ethical, and spiritual messages. It reinforces cultural norms, celebrates historical figures, and imparts wisdom from generation to generation.

Moreover, Chhau dance holds the potential to address socio-economic issues within society. It provides a platform for artists to shed light on prevalent challenges such as gender inequality, poverty, environmental concerns, and social injustices. By creatively incorporating these themes into their performances, Chhau dancers can raise awareness, provoke thought, and inspire positive change. Chhau dance stands as a vibrant and dynamic art form that showcases India's rich cultural heritage. The evolution of Chhau, particularly exemplified in Purulia Chhau, highlights its adaptability and ability to resonate with contemporary audiences. As Chhau dance moves forward, it will undoubtedly continue to captivate, inspire, and contribute to the cultural landscape of India and beyond.

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