

New Normal, Cultural Shifting and Intellectual Property Rights: An Anthropological Appraisal of Purulia *Chhau* Dance



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Abstract

Due to the ongoing demands of technological inventions and digital storytelling and emerging awareness of Intellectual Property Rights, Purulia Chhau, a tribal, folk, martial, and dance-drama form of Eastern India, had to adapt to the changes in cultural practices, making it a new normal in understanding social, cultural and creative expressions. Therefore, during the onslaught of Covid-19, Purulia Chhau artists invented online performances, brought up contemporary dance repertoires for several awareness programmes, and made various improvisations in their dance movements. Nevertheless, a larger community of Chhau are unable to cope up with this idea of the new normal and cultural shifting, and thus they had to suffer economic losses and find it quite challenging to keep alive their respective dance troupes. In this line of socio-cultural milieu, the present paper seeks to address the challenges faced by the Purulia Chhau communities during Covid-19 and its further consequences. Followed by a select case study, this paper enquires how traditional bearers and producers of Chhau have redefined its intangible cultural heritage during and afterwards the Covid-19. Finally, the paper also aims to pinpoint various cultural changes that took place during Covid-19, which in turn, becomes a new normal as we progress through the pandemic.

Keywords: New normal, Cultural shifting, Intellectual Property Rights, Purulia Chhau, Pandemic

Research Paper

Overview

The pandemic of COVID-19 has drastically impacted our ways of everyday life. Amid a global health crisis, the recent pandemic has altered the notion of normality and shifting perceptibility. People were quarantined at home, remained distanced from familiar faces and usual environments, and continued to experience the impacts of this disease and the socio-cultural transformation it has brought into our lives. As a result, almost all the institutions deemed nonessential services, including the socio-cultural industry of performing arts, were severely hit by this pandemic. However, the performing artists, through their power of reassessment and recognition,

have responded to this disrupted order in a multiplicity of necessary and inspiring ways. Similarly, as the pandemic spread, the performing art tradition of Purulia Chhau, a tribal, folk, martial, masked dance form of Eastern India, has moved from isolation to despair to innovation. From the anthropological point of view, as (Bhattacharyya 11) opined, the Purulia district is inhabited by scheduled tribes and castes; among those, the Bhumij, the Mura, the Santal, and the Kurmi are the important stakeholders of Purulia. It is performed annually during the Chaitra Parva (Spring festival) commemorating “short dramatizations of episodes from Hindu mythology which deal in some way with fighting or hunting” (Arden 69). However,

due to the ongoing demands of technological inventions and digital storytelling, Purulia Chhau, conserved and preserved by the respective communities, had to adapt to the changes in cultural practices, making it a new normal in understanding creative expressions and cultural and social aspects. Moreover, clouded by the onslaught of Covid-19, Purulia Chhau artists invented online performances for a shorter duration, brought up contemporary dance repertoires for several awareness programmes, and made various improvisations in their dance movements. Nevertheless, a larger community of Chhau are unable to cope up with this idea of the new normal and cultural shifting, and thus they had to go through major losses and find it quite challenging to keep alive their respective Chhau dance troupes. In this line of socio-cultural milieu, referring to the social and cultural perspectives and employing a qualitative approach as the primary methodological tool, the present paper seeks to address the challenges faced by the Purulia Chhau communities during Covid-19 and its consequences. Followed by a select case study, this paper enquires how traditional bearers and producers of Chhau have redefined its intangible cultural heritage during and afterwards the Covid-19 pandemic. Finally, the paper also aims to pinpoint various cultural changes that took place during Covid-19, which in turn, becomes a new normal in this performing art tradition as we progress through the pandemic.

Challenges and Responses

Performing artists are known for their inherent innovative skills by which they gain appreciation from the audience. But the onslaught of COVID-19, which began to impact India severely in 2020, has forced many artists to confront their mortality in a new way. As a result, the Purulia Chhau artists, too, first became fearful, and then realizing the fragility of this art form, they were compelled to stop their performances. As a ritual dance form, Chhau is performed during the Chaitra Parva or the Spring Festival, celebrated in mid-April. However, as a precautionary measure of the pandemic, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) asked people to stop any kinds of gatherings and advised them to stay at home. This isolation led to stop the annual Chaitra Parva and any other non-religious performances. Even other significant events such as Chhau Mask Festival, Chhau Jhumur Festival, and Tour-East programmes also get cancelled due to governmental restrictions and health crises in general. These events are organized and conducted by Banglanatak Dot Com (BNC), a Bengal-based non-governmental organization working across

India to foster inclusive and sustainable development using culture-based approaches. (see <https://banglanatak.com/documents>) From March to June, this period is the peak season of Chhau performances. The Chhau community experimented with their new Chhau repertoires during Chaitra Parva while dedicating their dance to Lord Shiva. Owing to the pandemic, the Purulia Chhau community had to stop themselves from any performance engagements, resulting in a substantial financial loss. Their home and abroad performance calls get cancelled without any compensation, Chhau masks get distorted due to their non-uses for longer times, and most importantly, the artists remain deprived of the minimum earnings for their livelihoods.

Mousumi Choudhury, a leading woman Chhau dancer and an accomplished Chhau exponent from Maldi village in Purulia, reported that both the performances and training of the neophytes at Maldi Chhau Resource Centre had stopped due to the pandemic. However, the Chhau artists began reimagining themselves and their place in this folk performing arts. Therefore, the performers started their self-guided performance practices at home, memorizing the Jhumur songs, which are the “elan vital of the culture of this vast stretch of land” (Mahato), listening to the family elders the storylines of Chhau collected from the Hindu epics of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the Puranas, self-practicing the gestures, postures, and dance movements of the Chhau characters such as Ganesha, Kartika, Mahishashura, Shiva, Durga, Kali etc., and so on. She had also informed that she was supposed to travel to Bangladesh and Singapore for international Chhau performances, but the pandemic had stopped her. It is worth mentioning that this is not only the case of Mousumi but also the story of almost every artist associated with Purulia Chhau and the challenges they faced during the recent pandemic and its consequent responses from the whole Chhau community.

New Normal and Cultural Shifting

The performing art tradition of Purulia Chhau is rooted in its orality, handed down from one generation to another over many years through Guru Shishya Parampara (succession of teachers and disciples). However, the recent pandemic posed a threat to this tradition, and a lot of new performative dynamics have emerged. Therefore, in order to create a balance between preserving their traditions and adopting new challenges, Purulia Chhau artists have gone through quite a few new normalizations and various modes of cultural shifting. What we mean



by new normalization is the situation prevailed due to the recent pandemic and the resilience shown by the Purulia Chhau artists. On the other hand, the experience of encountering new ways of performing Chhau due to the global health crisis is what we mean by a cultural shift. However, both these ideas may conflate with each other because the resilience shown by the Purulia Chhau artists in an unfamiliar and uncomfortable environment leads to defamiliarization, which gives a newer direction to enhance our perceptions about familiar things in an unfamiliar way.

One such significant development is seen in the form of emerging online performances. On the eve of the 75th Independence Day celebration in 2021, Mousumi Choudhury's all-female Chhau troupe was invited to perform in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. Due to the lockdown, they could not travel to Bhopal, and thus finding no respite, they were forced to do their Chhau performance in online mode. Thus, Mousumi and her troupe choreographed a new contemporary theme on nationalism- 'Jay Bharat Mata' (Hail to Mother India). Mousumi, during an interview, informed that they had first written down the themes according to their performance repertoire, then practiced it for perfection, and finally performed it online. This Chhau repertoire showed how four foreigners and four Indians people from Hindu, Muslim, Punjabi, and Sikh communities fought for their nation and finally gained independence. However, instead of traditional Chhau masks, these dancers wore more miniature masks representing human characters. Therefore, despite the conventional performance barricade, Mousumi and her troupe were able to do online performance, creating a new normalization and cultural shift on a positive note. In another instance, in 2020, the Chhau Dept. of Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University took an online initiative for a mass awareness program on the Corona outbreak through their students' 'Corona Chhau Dance' performance.

In this line of thought, Anita Gonzalez rightly points out that "each of these artists is part of a generation familiar with digital technologies, so they were able to easily and efficiently produce new digital works" (Gonzalez 359). For example, Bholanath Kumar, a Chhau dancer of Purulia, has created his own YouTube channel 'Bholanath Kumar Chhau' and established himself as a digital creator. His YouTube channel has almost 25 thousand subscribers, where he uploads complete performances of Chhau of his troupe and other Chhau troupe's performances. This innovation, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, has led to this

folk-dance form's wide circulation and provides a newer platform for further strengthening the financial grounds. There are quite a few other Chhau dancers who run their own YouTube channels, which indicates a cultural shift in the form of digital storytelling.

Intellectual Property Rights and Geographical Indications

With the advancement of technological innovations and easily accessible mass media, the questions of 'Intellectual Property Rights' (IPR) become prominent. IPR helps to protect the traditional knowledge systems and multifarious cultural expressions of Indian people from misuse by others. The same may have happened with the Purulia Chhau artists' communities, but they are hardly aware of IPR. For example, in 2019, a Bengali film named Jobordokhol, streamed by Zee5, an Indian digital entertainment streaming service, featured Mousumi Choudhury and other dancers from her troupe- Mitali Chhau Maldi. Although the artists were paid for their performances and a mention of her Chhau troupe was credited, the artists' names were not mentioned, which by law is the performer's right to be identified as the performer of a performance. Being mostly uneducated and agriculturalists in the profession, Purulia Chhau artists are only concerned about their daily lives and sustaining their tradition of intangible cultural heritage. However, many film and documentary makers, performance organizers, professional photographers, and researchers often visit the Purulia Chhau dancers, take photographs, record their videos and publish them for their benefit. But, the owners of those intellectual property holders hardly receive any remuneration or proper attribution. To address this problem, Heritage-Sensitive Intellectual Property and Marketing Strategies (HIPAMS) India, a project funded by the British Academy as part of their Sustainable Development Programme, has developed a 'Chhau Dance Code'. This code talks about the principles embedded in Indian law, such as the right of attribution for performers, the right to culture, respect for the environment and mutual respect between people, protection from decontextualization, commodification and misrepresentation and so on. As HIPAMS India outlined, the purpose of this dance code is that "through this process, respect will be shown for the Chau dancers and their intangible heritage, and that they will be given due acknowledgement and remuneration to ensure that their heritage continues into the future." (see <https://www.hipamsindia.org/research-output/code-of-ethics/>)

Purulia Chhau masks, made mainly in Charida village in Purulia district's Baghmundi block, acquired the Geographical Indication (GI) tag in 2018 for their unique quality and authenticity of making Chhau masks. Currently, 49 mask makers from Charida village are registered under this GI tag. (see <https://search.ipindia.gov.in/GIRPublic/Application/Details/565>) GI ensures that only authorized users can use the popular product's name. However, some masks are sold as Purulia Chhau masks without any knowledge of the original mask makers of Charida. During the pandemic, The Hindu newspaper ran a story about the mask makers of Charida making innovative masks in response to the COVID-19 health crisis, featuring a photograph of Falguni Sutradhar, an artist from Charida, wearing an innovative mask he had made. Unfortunately, the article did not either attribute the artist's name as Falguni Sutradhar or mention his village, Charida. To address these kinds of misrepresentations and improper recognitions of GI, unlike the Chhau dance code, HIPAMS India has also developed an 'Art Code for Chhau Mask', which talks about the code of ethics and practical guidelines for galleries, event organizers, museums, publishers, and the media workers. HIPAMS India shares this art code in fostering "a mutually beneficial relationship between the Charida mask-maker community and the individuals and organisations who distribute and make their masks available to others will be nurtured, helping to ensure the sustainability of the mask-making heritage into the future." (see <https://www.hipamsindia.org/research-output/code-of-ethics/>) Above all, these art codes created by HIPAMS India in collaboration with BNC and distributed among the artists of Purulia Chhau made them aware of their IPR and rights to use GI.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed significant challenges for art forms like Chhau. However, with the power of resilience, the Purulia Chhau artists transformed those challenges into innovations in a time of immense fear and isolation. The artists have re-envisioned their art forms as a vital source of self-renewal and resistance through various modes of cultural shifting, such as online performances. This coping mechanism has also helped them get rid of the monotony of being secluded from social interactions. Technology has been an important aspect of this global health crisis. Artists find ways to create online communities by posting their dance pictures and videos as a form of digital storytelling via various social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and so on. Therefore, "the digital platform was reluctantly activated, then innovated, institutionalized, and mobilized for ongoing performing art activities" (Gonzalez 368). Regardless of its shortcomings, this digital space which was then a foreign medium, has eventually become a new normal platform for artists to deliver their storytelling. However, it also raises questions about IPC for individuals and society at large. Thus, HIPAMS India's code of ethics on Chhau and Chhau Mask made the artists aware of their rights which have been very instrumental for the artists of Purulia Chhau. In a nutshell, Purulia Chhau artists, during the recent pandemic, have been quite innovative in creating powerful movements of change within performance communities and beyond by developing new modes of interactions and inventive cultural shifts of performances.

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