

## Intangible Cultural Heritage in a Neoliberal Age: Situating the Purulia Chhau Dance of West Bengal

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### Abstract

*The Chhau dance is an indigenous folk dance form prevalent in West Bengal in eastern India that recreates scenes from epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana, as well as from other local folklore, performed primarily by men demonstrating a mix of martial arts, acrobatics and athleticism. This folk art form has lately attracted global attention of academic scholars and the scholarship around this performance art is growing. In 2010, the UNESCO included the Chhau dance on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The present study is a qualitative ethnographic exploration of the art, artists and artisans engaged in the inter-generational practice and preservation of the Chhau mask-making and dance form at Charida village in Purulia district of West Bengal. The diary notings by the researchers reveal that despite lack of institutional support, compounded also by the Covid pandemic, the artisans and performers have adopted digital media technologies, including social media and online payment gateways to revive and promote their age-old practice to a wider global audience. Using a novel conceptualization of intangible heritage that captures the purpose of cultural artifacts in people's daily lives, this study encourages a rethinking of the space between intangible heritage and the process of modernisation. This study clearly demonstrates that cultural commodification is a deliberate and an inevitable process in a neo-liberal world. The researchers could clearly sense, that the 180 odd families living in Charida village are today caught in the crossroads of time. They are caught between two worlds, a familiar rural world of Chhau performance and mask-making, which is slowly dying, and the other is a strange unfamiliar world of modernity and rampant consumerism that they are slowly getting around to comprehend and negotiate.*

**Keywords:** Chhau dance, Chhau mask, Charida, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Purulia.

### Research Paper

#### Introduction

Chhau is a folk dance form prevalent in eastern India, particularly in the states of West Bengal, Odisha and Jharkhand. This indigenous performative art form recreates scenes from epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana, as well as from other local folklore (Acharya, 95). Regional celebrations, particularly the spring festival Chaitra Parvan (Bengali festival), are closely related to the Chhau dance (Mahata & Doreswami 302). Its roots can be found in indigenous dance and combat styles. Its movement lexicon includes simulated fighting moves, stylized animal and avian gaits, and choreography inspired by village housewives

(Chandrasekhar). Male dancers from local communities or the families of traditional artists are trained in Chhau. The reed pipes Mohuri (Music Instrument) and Shehnai (Music Instrument) play traditional and folk music, as accompaniment to the dance performance that takes place in an open space at night. The accompanying music ensemble is dominated by the echoing rhythms of different drums (Amrita). The Chhau dance plays a significant role in the community's culture. The dance encompasses a variety of styles, with Shaivism, Shaktism, and Vaishnavism religious elements that celebrates martial arts, acrobatics, and athleticism (Cardinale 79). Chhau dancers use masks to distinguish

the character from the costume, which varies depending on the style (Cardinale 82).

Since the start of the new millennia, the concept of cultural heritage has undergone a significant change, with the UNESCO developing advanced instruments to enlarge the ambit of the term. It is no longer restricted to monuments and historical structures alone. It includes customs and practices, indigenous knowledge systems, rituals and cultural expressions, and art forms passed down from generations. It also includes the techniques and know-how of traditional arts and crafts. In 2010, UNESCO declared Chhau to be on the representative list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. According to UNESCO, "For the first time, culture has been referred to as a sector by the international development agenda within the structure of the SDGs. The operationalization of UNESCO's Culture Conventions on safeguarding and promoting cultural and natural heritage, along with cultural and creative industries, joint programs with other UN agencies, and strong cooperation with national authorities will play a key 12 role in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" (Srivathsan).

In 2023, the researchers through field study visited the Bagmundi region of the Purulia district to observe and analyze the condition of the Chhau dancers and Chhau mask-makers of Charida village. The investigators spent 10 days at Charida Village located in the Bagmundi region of Purulia and spent quality time with the Chhau dancers and Chhau mask-makers to undertake an ethnographic study of the place and its people. The ethnographers observed the rural lifestyle, food habits, cultural practices, customs and traditions, and livelihood patterns of the people engaged in Chhau dance and mask-making in this village in rural Bengal. The researchers collected various information about the locale and the people through a participatory observation method and got a first-hand experience of the nuances of the traditional Chhau dance and Chhau masks. Through ethnography, it is possible to bring out the deeper meanings embedded in a particular culture, and the lived experiences of the people in a specific socio-cultural context.

The word "Chhau" comes from the Sanskrit word *chaya* which means shadow, canopy, or an image (Sarkar & Mistri 91). The Chhau dance has its origins in the Gajan festival (a religious ritual). The "Kapjhap" dance style is performed. Kapjhap is a form of social design dance, where a novel combination of deity characters, animals,

etc (Singh & Lahane 66). The Chhau dance is generally considered to be of three forms. They are Purulia Chhau, Mayurbhanj Chhau, and Seraikella Chhau. These three forms differ from each other in style, region, and origin (Mahato). The production of masks for Chhau is an ancient occupation of the people of Purulia. This mask-making tradition goes back to over 150 years to the times of King Madan Mohan Singh Deo, who ruled over Bagmundi (Paul 82). Charida, which is about 5 km from Bagmundi village in the Purulia district of West Bengal, is the main village where these masks are being made. This small village Charida, also known by its local name Chorda has more than 180 artisans whose sole occupation is making different types of masks for Chau dancers as well as replica versions of masks for the tourists who visit the place. These mask makers are originally the inhabitants of the region at the foothills of the Ayodhya range (Bhattacharya 34). This landlocked village serves as a major tourist destination for art lovers who visit this place for the vibrant, colorful masks which portray animals and characters from the Hindu epics. Traditionally, the Chhau mask is implanted with motifs of mytho-religious figures like goddess Durga, Ganesh, and asuras (demons). However, nowadays the Chhau artisans are also manufacturing home décor and lifestyle items to cater to the demands of the visiting tourists (Kunwar 6).

### Purulia Chhau in Context

Purulia is a colourful mix of nature, people, and heritage (Mondal). In this land of natural beauty, the small Charida village, also known as the Mukhosh Gram (Mask Village) in Bagmundi block, is in the Jhalda subdivision of Purulia district in West Bengal. This village is the hub of the famous Chhau masks, which is an integral part of the Chhau dance of Purulia. And that is how the name of Mukhosh Gram has come to mean Charida village. The story of Charida, becoming the 'Mask Village' of Purulia is quite interesting (Dutta). According to local history, Bagmundi king Madan Mohan Singh Deo, invited 20 Sutradhar families from Burdwan to make idols of deities in the palace and allotted their lands to live. They settled in the village and began making idols of the deities. But gradually, they also started making masks for the Chhau dancers as well. And this is how Charida evolved as the Mukhosh Gram to the future generations (Stefania 83). People started recognizing Chhau dance in the early nineteenth century.

Today, in this village, there are nearly 180 families who are involved in making large and colorful Chhau masks

to eke out their living as well as to keep their heritage alive. This mask-making profession has been handed down to them by their forefathers. In recent times, Charida has emerged as a major tourist destination for art lovers. The affection for Chhau dance is a perfect blending of the hardness of the 'rock soil' of Purulia and the softness of the flexibility of dance (Mondal). It projects a joyful attitude saturated with exuberant youth as they try to depict the mythological ambience with a style of skilled rhythmic performance of music first. It starts with chanting hymns of Lord Ganesha in some cases. Not only is there mythology from the Puranas, but also contemporary incidents are reflected in various ways (Dash 2).

Purulia Chhau masks are larger than the Seraikella Chhau (prevalent in Jharkhand), as well as they have jazzy decorations, which is why Purulia Chhau masks are heavier (Chakra). The Purulia Chhau masks are made mostly around gods and goddesses and some epic characters, as the Chhau dance is themed around these stories. Apart from these, small Santhal couple masks are also used, which are decorated with feathers and other ornaments to surround the face. Buddeshwar, a resident of Charida village, is regarded as the first mask-maker and credited with popularising this tradition. The first male and female masks were made by him, and these masks were named 'Kirat' and 'Kiratani,' which represent the avatars of the Hindu God Shiva, and his consort Goddess Parvati. This dance form portrays different mythological and epic stories to the audience, which is why wearing these heavy and exaggerated masks are essential (Mahato, Mahato, & Ojha 946).

### **Chhau as an Intangible Cultural Heritage**

The UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage defines intangible cultural heritage as "practices, representations, expressions, as well as knowledge and skills (including instruments, objects, artifacts, and cultural sites), which communities, groups and in some cases individuals possess as part of their cultural heritage" (UNESCO).

The visit to Charida and the interactions with the artisans have revealed a mixed bag of hope and concern. It is clear from the interactions with the Chhau performers and the mask-making artisans that they find themselves torn between a lost legacy and an uncertain future. There is evidently a sense of pride in being involved in a craft passed on to them by their forefathers, but at the same time, there is a distinct undertone of anxiety and desperation. They look up with hope for the

government or non-governmental agencies to work out ways to popularise their art form to a global audience, bring about a sustainable livelihood model, and perhaps with the help of today's digital technology bring greater awareness about this art form. The Purulia Chhau has today earned a distinct name for itself among cultural scholars and art lovers around the world. This unique dance form has attracted the attention of people from around the world and domestic and international tourists have flocked to Purulia to see and experience the Chhau dance performance and Chhau mask-making by the artisans of the village. It has clearly become a subject for cultural anthropologists and sociologists and media and communication scholars to explore and address the various aspects and dimensions of this rural art form largely practiced in eastern India. The national recognition of Chhau dance artists like Gambhir Singhmura has also contributed to its growing interest among certain circles. It also cannot be denied that the Internet and digital technology have also triggered a popularisation of the art form in the virtual space that has led to a renewed interest among art aficionados and researchers. It has been seen that cultural expressions passed down through generations change as a result of their changing contexts, which in effect help define a culture's identity as well as continuity. In the face of accelerating globalization, these vulnerable intangible cultural heritage plays a crucial role in preserving the cultural identity of a community. The Chhau artists and their families in the Purulia region need a variety of distinct occupations and a meaningful way of life rooted in the intangible cultural heritage of the Chhau art to achieve some degree of stability and sustainability and preserve their distinct artistic identity. As this intensive study, through the first-hand encounters with the people at the epicentre of this cultural art form has revealed, the intangible legacy of Chhau has the potential to enhance their lives in ways that go beyond the straightforward means of generating cash. These ways can also be seen as a collection of intangible heritage-based 'capabilities' that they have available (Bebbington, 1999). These intangible capabilities may be:

1. Gaining access to a distinguished position in social circles and village life;
2. To collaborate with various parties at the institutional, local, international, and project levels;
3. As Chhau dancers get older and gain experience and reputation, they form their group of dancers and begin instructing children to serve as the agents of heritage transfer;



4. To spread awareness among group members about the group's heritage and daily life;

Our grasp of the concepts of culture and development is deepened by the findings. Regarding the former, interests in an intangible heritage that is seen as holistic in the way it is implemented as a cultural practice, a way of life, and a means of subsistence, the result pushes our attention towards its socio-anthropological interpretation and the process by which it is created also within informal groups, local social movements, or networks of international development action. This study does demonstrate that the intangible heritage is a socio-material construction, and it also demonstrates the need for a pluralistic reconstruction of the intangible heritage to ensure its survival.

### Materials and Methods

The primary objective of this research study is to observe the lifestyle of Chhau dancers and Chhau mask makers, the art of Chhau mask-making, and what issues dominate the lives and thoughts of the people in this rural outpost in West Bengal generationally involved in the production and transmission of a unique cultural artifact. This research study was conducted in the Bagmundi region of the Purulia district in West Bengal. The study was carried out in one village of the Bagmundi region namely Charida.

This research study employed a qualitative ethnographic research approach. The principal research instruments used by the investigators were the participant observation method and field notes to document the life patterns of the artisan population of this village. For this purpose, a small hand-held camera was also used, as a film elicitation visual methodology, to document the process of the Chhau dance performance as well as Chhau mask-making techniques, along with other aspects in the day-to-day life of the artisan community. Field notes and video documentation about the artists' daily routine, the village life, dance training regimen, performance rehearsals, and project activities were collected through casual talks, unstructured interviews, and observations through diary notings.

### The Chhau Mask-Makers of Charida

The investigators observed that, a majority of the people (almost above 80 %) have chosen to continue with the family trade of mask-making as their occupation. The winter period is their peak business season, as more and more tourists visit Purulia during December-January. Earlier women were not allowed to make or trade masks

in the market, however now, we witness more and more women are joining in the art trade. Children are taught this art form very casually by their parents or elders in the family. The summer months are a real struggle, as the tourist flow dwindles. Then whoever bids the lowest amount attracts a handful of tourists and they sell their products (Chatterjee 229) at a pittance.

The masks are made from paper, glue from tamarind seeds and flour-water mixture, fabric colors, and mold. To decorate the masks, peacock feathers, Zari works, beads, and plastic flowers are used. 'Babu Masks', 'Ghost Mask', 'Bir Mask', 'Animal Mask', 'Nari Mask' (women's mask), and Bid masks are the varieties that are available right now in the Charida village. It takes almost 3 days to make a mask and can be worn by the performers for at least 5-6 performances. Depending on the design pattern and elements used, the price of a mask ranges from Rs. 50 to Rs. 1000.



**Picture 1:** Chhau Mask-maker Joydeb Sutradhar, is busy making masks at his makeshift shop at Charida village.

### Chhau Dance

Chhau dance is one of the main attractions of Purulia. To survive in this ever-competitive media-saturated world, Chhau artists are today performing even in private gatherings in hotels and resorts. Each dance performance goes on for about an hour and a half (Chattopadhyay & Das, 12). It depicts mythical stories of the goddess Durga and stories from the Ramayana. They incorporate many modern-day elements like any popular pop culture reference, dance step, or even Ganesh Vandana (prayer to God). Dance requires a lot of physical strength, balance, and flexibility. It is only performed by male performers, however sometimes, in between the dance act, a child or two does a summersault or backflip.

Chhau is mainly taught to male dancers from traditional artist families and local communities but nowadays female dancers take part in a few performances.

Chhau dance is connected to regional festivals. These performances are generally scheduled at night time in an open space with live music and songs. This dance form originated from martial arts and contains vigorous leaps and movements. The movements include mock combat techniques. The performers must wear masks made of clay and paper. Different moves of different dances are illustrated with different body movements (Chattopadhyay & Das 14).



**Picture 2:** A live Chhau dance performance in front of the researchers at a guest house in Charida village.

### The Ethnographer's Dairy Noting

Tapas Sutradhar is a mask maker by profession. He lives in Charida village. He said that making masks for Chhau artists was done even by his grandfather and father, and so he also selected this profession as the main goal of his life and a means of earning money. He also said that his main aim is to spread this industry in other districts of West Bengal apart from Purulia. His family members participate in the mask-making process with him in some way or the other. Even the women of the family are encouraged to participate in the process that tells us about their effort to climb up the ladder of gender equality. Most of the family members contribute by making the masks whereas, there are families where the younger generation help by supporting their elders by looking after their digital presence like keeping a check on their GPay and Paytm accounts. (Tapas)

Joydev Sutradhar, another Chhau mask maker said he was not aware of any mythological beliefs associated with mask-making or the history of mask-making. They prepare masks for two main reasons only, first to earn their livelihood and second, to keep their culture alive. He also said that the culture of making masks started only to adorn the Chhau performers and has now become a souvenir for the tourists. Joydev Sutradhar narrated the impact of the Covid pandemic on their livelihood. For the Chhau dancers, Joydev says, "the tourists are the actual target audience, and unfortunately during the pandemic, we had to survive with penurious savings as

the sale of masks stopped completely due to the absence of tourists and performers." He also said they had to rely on alternative occupations like idol-making for their survival. After the easing of pandemic restrictions, sales have gradually picked up due to the inflow of tourists again. However, the selling price of items remains the same to attract tourists despite the increase in the cost of manufacturing the masks. (Joydev)

Asha Sutradhar is working in the mask-making profession and is another resident of Charida village of the Purulia District. She said the raw materials used to produce the masks are river water and 'etel' mud that is used to make the adhesive with which the next raw material, cloth, is stuck. Apart from these, pieces of pages only from books (any other kind of pages are not used as they are not as durable and strong as those books, and the discarded books from schools are used by the artists) are stuck to the structure with flour-made glue. The formation procedure includes the mounding of the mask in the desired shape and then provided with two layers of cloth and paper respectively, after which it is dried and then colored, and finally, polished twice. (Asha)

Chhau mask maker Dipali Dutta said the time taken to make these masks ranges from a day to a week depending on their size. Small palm-sized masks that are sold as souvenirs are ready within a day, whereas bigger masks used both as souvenirs and dance costumes take around 3 to 7 days to make. Dipali Dutta says most people are not satisfied with the little income they earn by selling masks. Thus, people from the community are getting engaged in the alternative profession of idol-making for more income and to support their families. The different types of masks made that we got to know and see were Adivasi masks, masks resembling Goddess Durga, Sautés masks, Kathakali masks, and other masks made to demand. (Dipali)

Manohar Kumar is an expert Chhau dancer and a resident of Charida village in Purulia. He has long been associated with the Chhau dance art. Manohar Kumar said a Chhau dance group named Rongoli was formed in 2006-2007. The main motive behind creating this Chhau dance group was to provide entertainment to the people living in Purulia. This group has 20 members at present. "Apart from Purulia, we have done several programs in various districts of West Bengal and also in Kolkata," Kumar says. In 2019, Manohar Kumar even visited Chicago in the US to perform Chhau dance for an international audience including the Indian diaspora.

He thinks that this Chhau dance group should engage social media for the promotion of their activities and awareness of the art form among a wider audience. (Manohar)

Ram Chandra Biswas is a Chhau dance master. A resident of Charida village, he has traveled to 156 countries with his bicycle to spread the message of world peace for the last 22 years of his life. He says that Chhau dance is in essence a martial arts form, and boys and girls can protect themselves from any danger if they train well. He has set up a farmhouse and Bishwa Adivasi Kalyan Scout Group in Charida village to teach Chhau dance to the small boys and girls of this village. (Ram Chandra)

The researchers were witness to the immense passion of Chhau artisans of Purulia as well as their love towards the tradition pioneered by their forefathers. They are trying to promote and preserve Chhau, through the 'Fit India Movement' (Pathania) by involving the children in physical activities while training them for acquiring acrobatic skills to perform Chhau. They are also using Chhau as a tool to promote contemporary social issues and awareness on them. However, the researchers also observed a general lack of involvement of the youths of the village in taking up the vocation of their fathers. The lack of youth participation in the Chhau performance is another evident reminder of the changing times and the changing priorities of the younger generation. The older artists are anxious if their sons and daughters would carry forward the legacy of their trade that their forefathers had bequeathed to them. They are uncertain if the art form would survive another generation, especially when the young lot, exposed to mass media and social media, and influenced by the neo-liberal values of globalisation, aspire for better opportunities in the urban centres away from their village, thus bringing an end to a generations-old heirloom of a unique cultural enterprise. Every mask maker at Charida Village comes with the 'Sutradhar' surname. Their unique tools for carving, especially molds make the art impossible to replicate acutely without expert training. However, most of the mask creators would still prefer a settled job for their children, rather than pushing them to follow the family legacy.

## Conclusion

The observations from the field clearly demonstrate that cultural commodification is a deliberate and an inevitable process in a neo-liberal world, and commercialization is a part of the survival strategy of the intangible legacy of a community of people. The Chhau dance art form has

survived for the past few generations. However, times have changed. The great epics Mahabharata-Ramayana-Mahisasura no longer attracts people. Mustachioed men have been playing women for ages. Such incongruities are not well-received by audiences anymore. The researchers could clearly sense, that the 180 odd families living in Charida village are today caught in the crossroads of time. They are caught between two worlds, a familiar rural world of Chhau performance and mask-making, which is slowly dying, and the other is a strange unfamiliar world of modernity and rampant consumerism that they are slowly getting around to comprehend and negotiate. Intangible cultural heritage is valued for more than only its rarity or remarkable worth when compared to other cultural goods. For it to thrive today, the onus is on those practitioners of the art form, to spread, promote and disseminate it to the next generation within the community and instill them with a sense of ownership of the craft to carry it forward to keep alive the legacy of their forefathers.

The Chhau art of Purulia is an example of intangible cultural heritage because it has been passed down from one generation to the next, has undergone change in response to its environment, and has helped bind the people involved in the craft to their past, present, and the future, fostering a sense of identity and responsibility that helps them feel a part of a community or society.

Just like culture in general, the Chhau art form has also changed and evolved with time. Today, this intangible cultural heritage of a small artisan community is threatened by the forces of globalization. The lack of government and institutional support has only compounded matters. Preserving this heritage will require committed efforts from all stakeholders, including the government, and chalking out a broad road map to strengthen it and at the same time make it viable for the people involved in the craft. They must engage with new media technologies to keep their heritage and practice alive, and promote and propagate it to the next generation within the community and the outside world.

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