

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Erosion of Tradition: Negative Cultural Impacts on Purulia Chhau Dance

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Abstract

Chhau dance is a dance form which is originated in Purulia, West Bengal. It is known for its intricate masks, dynamic movements, and mythical storytelling. It is a type of dance-drama which consists of elaborate folk performances which also include aspects of Purulia's traditional tribal rituals, martial arts and a fabled narrative. It is not only rooted in cultural heritage but also reflects social values, religious beliefs and creativity of the communities that practice it.

The findings of the study underscore the cultural dilution due to the contemporary preferences of the tourist community. Lack of resources poses a threat to youth participation, training artisans and maintaining regular practices. Artisans perform, altering the traditional practices of the dance form to satisfy the audience. The study also stresses on the institutional support and creation of opportunities for the local youth, which would in turn help the art form to flourish, balancing both modern and traditional practices.

The present study explores cultural degradation through an empirical study. A qualitative research design is used in this research. Data collection involved conducting semi-structured interviews with the local Chhau dancers, mask makers, trainers, and cultural experts. Interviews were taken from 85 Chhau performers, out of which 30 performers' responses were retained for the final analysis. Data collection also involved field observations and focus group discussions.

1 INTRODUCTION

Purulia district in West Bengal is famous for its folk dance, known as Chhau. The dancers wear elaborate masks; their movements are energetic and rhythmic with the drumming. They incorporate mythical storytelling in their performances. This art form integrates martial arts, tribal rituals, and dance-drama format. It enacts episodes from the Indian epics, such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. This dance form has its roots in the agrarian communities where martial arts and ritualistic performances were prevalent. The performances and the practices of this art form have been passed down from one generation to the next through oral traditions. There is little to no written documentation. The cultural values, social identities, artistic expression and beliefs of the local communities, which are rooted in the cultural lifestyle of eastern India, are all maintained by these traditional dance-dramas (Kumar, Nayak & Swain, 2024). During the Chaitra Parva festival, these performances take place, making them an important symbol of regional identity and heritage.

However, there have been several challenges to the traditional structure and cultural authenticity of Purulia Chhau dance. While globalisation has brought wider recognition to Purulia Chhau, it has also introduced global media exposure that has often contributed to the dilution of its original cultural context and authenticity. The migration of younger generations and rapid modernisation raise concerns about the preservation of its original forms, meaning, and community-based practices. Under continuous external influences, the dance performance styles, costumes, training methods, cultural context and themes are also transformed into a more modern version of their original form. Research highlighted that the integration of contemporary elements in the dance training, practices and performances by the artisans has resulted in a shift toward entertainment-based performances, often weakening the ritualistic and community-based features of the dance (Cardinale, 2016).

Studies show that many practitioners rely on Chhau dance as their primary income source. They receive very little institutional support, and the decline in participation among younger generations threatens the art form's sustainability and their income (Pramanik & Das, 2025). Additionally, migration and changing cultural preferences have reduced collective participation in traditional culture, gradually disconnecting communities from their heritage. Hence, exploring these negative cultural impacts on the Purulia Chhau dance is essential for gaining insight into how social change affects traditional art forms and for identifying ways to mitigate, conserve and sustain this unique cultural heritage for future generations.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Negative Cultural Impacts on Chhau

Traditional practices in rural areas are often subjected to commercialisation in order to cater to tourists. This has led to the modernisation of traditional dance-drama styles. This new version incorporates modifications in the structures of narration, storytelling, themes, dance movements, training styles, and stories. Historically, it was seasonal performance during the Chaitra Parva festival as a ritual, but with an increase in tourist footfalls, the purpose of these performances became merely entertainment.

Commercialisation and Loss of Authenticity

UNESCO included Purulia Chhau dance on its Representative List in 2010, which led it to gain global attention. It has since become a global tourism market and has resulted in visitor footfall from various parts of the world. However, due to tourist arrivals from across the globe, cultural commodification has become a major concern for the locals. This has led to what is called the "heritagization" of the destination. This is the process in which some alterations are made in ritualistic performances to turn them into staged presentations for tourists, often distorting their original meaning and context, resulting in commercialisation (Chakraborty, 2021).

This involves regulating artistic expression, encouraging simplified choreography, overemphasising costumes, and planning shorter performances to appeal to the audience. Such modifications transpire, adulteration of traditional narratives, symbolic gestures, and ritual significance (Banerjee, 2018; Chakraborty, 2021). Consequently, a lack in cultural depth in performances can be noticed through this shift toward entertainment-based presentations (Srinivasan, 2013).

Declining Traditional Patronage

The decline of feudal patronage systems has weakened the support structures for these performances, as traditionally, these performances were funded by kings, landlords and village communities (Mahapatra, 2016). The older systems used to have a structure that the local communities relied upon which has not been fully replaced by the contemporary cultural institutions and government schemes. As a result, artists find it difficult to maintain regular practices and training routines (Pramanik & Das, 2025). This has also affected other customs and traditions, such as in the villages like Charida where mask-making and Chhau-related crafts are prevalent (Mukherjee, 2019).

Economic Marginalisation of Artists

The heavy reliance of the artisans on seasonal cultural festivals and occasional performances has resulted in economic instability (Pramanik & Das, 2025). The younger generation's refusal to adapt to the cultural heritage and carry it forward is influenced by its low remuneration and irregular opportunities. The decline of traditional training systems and performance groups has its roots in the financial vulnerability of the practitioners (Sahoo, 2017; Sen, 2020). Additionally, the financial limitations pose challenges to the community regarding the purchase of costumes, masks, training resources, travel, and musical instruments, among others (Banerjee, 2018).

Declining Youth Participation

The youth in the villages are migrating to larger cities to pursue education and better employment

opportunities. This might induce a feeling of unwillingness among other locals with regard to participation and physical training required for Chhau (Dasgupta, 2015).

Erosion of Ritual Context

Purulia Chhau traditionally was a seasonal performance, offered to the local deities during the seasonal agricultural cycles. However, the contemporary shift in the performance form and structure became a reason for the disconnect between the dance and its ritualistic ideology (Srinivasan, 2013). This detachment between the cultural-festival environment and community participation risks reducing the dance to a mere performing art form rather than a living cultural heritage (Chatterjee, 2016).

Loss of Oral Knowledge and Traditional Repertoire

Purulia Chhau has little to no written record of its ancestry, as it employed a traditional approach of oral transmission of knowledge from generation to generation. This ritualistic transmission has led to the disappearance of several old and traditional dance items and narrative sequences (Srinivasan, 2013). The reduction of repertoire reflects broader cultural erosion within the tradition.

Impact of Modernization and Globalization

With the advent of new aesthetic expectations, modern and advanced technologies, and performance formats, there can be seen very little responsible production and consumption of this art form. The performances have become a quantitative output for fulfilling commercial purposes with less regard to quality and authenticity. Due to globalisation, modern preferences have become dominant, which often forces performers to comply with staged performance frameworks to cater to audiences' tastes. New choreography, music, and stage have become normalised for the practitioners to adapt to, hence compromising traditional ambience and aesthetics (Roy, 2019). Hybrid performances are born out of this dilemma between

preserving authenticity and ensuring the art form's survival through adaptation (Banerjee, 2018).

Challenges in Institutional Support and Cultural Policy

Even though Chhau dance has gained widespread recognition over the years, institutional support remains inadequate. Lack of funding for training schools, archival records, and artist welfare initiatives needs to be taken into account (Sahoo, 2017). Moreover, the encouragement of commercialisation and commodification of the art form by the legislation is prevalent as it often prioritises cultural tourism over sustainable development of the local community (Chakraborty, 2021).

The literature consistently highlights multiple negative effects of cultural commodification, financial instability among the local communities, youth participation decline, loss of ritual context, and insufficient institutional support. While several studies have investigated the cultural significance, preservation, and promotion of Chhau dance, the existing literature lacks a comprehensive analysis of the negative cultural effects of technological advancements, commodification, and globalization on its traditional structures. There is a significant lack of research on how these transformations affect the authenticity, cultural context and community-based performances of Purulia Chhau.

Overall, the literature indicates that commercialisation and loss of authenticity, declining traditional patronage, marginalisation of artists, declining participation of youth, dilution of ritual context, loss of oral traditional knowledge and need for written documentation, impact of modernisation, and limitations in institutional support and funding are deeply interlinked concepts, and these contribute to the cultural erosion of Purulia's Chhau Dance. These issues are often studied separately, and little to no research has been conducted to examine their collective influence on authenticity, cultural context, and sustainability of Chhau in modern society. This paper attempts to connect these fragmented yet interrelated themes through an empirical

framework using field observations and a qualitative research approach.

3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study are as follows -

- To examine the negative effects of modernisation on the dance form.
- To explore how the alteration of performances affects the authenticity of Purulia Chhau Dance.
- To investigate the cultural commodification of the dance form.

4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to identify the negative cultural effects on the Purulia Chhau. A descriptive and exploratory method is used to comprehend shifts in customs, cultural interpretations, and practitioners' socio-economic environment. Field observations were employed in the Purulia district of West Bengal to collect data. Fieldwork was done in a few local villages, namely, Bandwan, Jhalda, and Burrabazar, including those where mask - making and Chhau performance were actively practised. Both primary and secondary data were used. While secondary data were gathered from scholarly publications, books, and reports on Chhau dance and cultural heritage, field observations and semi-structured interviews were employed to collect primary data.

Out of 85 selected Chhau performers within the age group of 31 - 50, 30 performers' interview responses were retained for the final analysis. Most of the participants were unmarried with an income of less than 25,000 per month. The dancers were mostly male, while the handicrafts were predominantly handled by the female population. Chhau dancers, mask makers, and members of the local community were interviewed in a semi-structured, open-ended manner to learn about their perspectives on cultural change, economic difficulties, and the evolution of customs. Field observations were made during rehearsals, performances, and the manufacturing of crafts. This aided in understanding audience participation, performance styles, and the

integration of contemporary elements into conventional methods.

5 ANALYSIS OF QUALITATIVE DATA

The interviews and field observations data were analysed using thematic content analysis. The objective of the analysis was to identify repeated patterns, experiences, and perceptions related to the cultural modification of Purulia Chhau dance. To identify recurring words and ideas that are associated with commercialisation, authenticity, globalisation, youth participation decline, and economic challenges, the interview responses of the participants were thoroughly examined. Broad thematic categories were identified, and the collected responses were manually coded and then

grouped according to similarities in meaning and context. The identified themes included commercialisation, loss of authenticity, economic instability of practitioners, declining youth participation, cultural dilution and erosion of ritual context.

To understand the influence of globalisation and modernisation on the traditional practices and cultural identity of the Purulia Chhau dance, several passages from their responses were interpreted. Then, thematic analysis was conducted, which provided insights from the collected participants' responses that helped connect participants' experiences with the broader research objectives.

<i>Major Theme</i>	<i>Sub-Theme</i>	<i>Observations</i>
<i>Commercialisation</i>	Shortened Performances	Alteration of Performances for Tourists
<i>Financial Insecurity</i>	Irregular Income	Practitioners Depend on Seasonal Earnings
<i>Declining Youth Participation</i>	Migration	Youth Moving to Urban Areas
<i>Cultural Dilution</i>	Influence of Bollywood	Replacing Traditional Songs with Movie Songs
<i>Authenticity Loss</i>	Ritual Detachment	Dance separated from Chaitra Parva

6 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that the transformation of Purulia Chhau dance is structurally shaped by poverty, market forces, and unequal power dynamics rooted in globalization, and not merely a process of cultural evolution. While previous research portrays globalisation as both a threat and an opportunity, the current study critically shows that local experiences of globalisation are influenced by economic marginality (Cardinale, 2016).

Economic Instability

The socio-economic environment has significantly influenced the development of Chhau dance. Practitioners are economically vulnerable due to financial instability owing to their reliance on fluctuating, seasonal income, which forces them to diversify into other income sources, which could be more uncertain. This economic pressure transforms ritualistic and culture-driven practices into a

survival technique, where artistic choices are increasingly made in accordance with financial needs rather than cultural intent.

Mask-making is a significant art form and a means of earning a livelihood for villages like Charida. But the mask-makers have to operate under fluctuations in wages, even though there is a demand for the symbolic significance of these masks. This highlights the marginalisation of the local people and the unequal valuation of the local labourers. One respondent said, 'Our income is unstable; that is why many performers work in other occupations when there are off-seasons.'

Commercialisation

Authenticity is also constantly being negotiated and often compromised to satisfy commercial demands, tourism and also for financial survival. Chhau has been detached from Chaitra Parva, its temporal and spatial root, as the performances are being staged to cater to tourists and digital audiences. A local Chhau performer

stated, 'The visitors prefer short performances as they find it more entertaining than the regular ones, so for that reason the performance timings are cut short.'

Youth Participation

The young population of Purulia district has been moving towards urban cities for better career opportunities; meanwhile, the community of practitioners, performers and trainers can barely make a living out of their cultural dance performance. The reason for youth detachment from cultural practice is the lack of a prospect of the art form, as it is also lacking institutional support and funding. An old Chhau dance trainer mentioned, 'City jobs are more appealing to the young people than learning Chhau, and they also seek education, and I don't blame them for that.'

Cultural Dilution

This paper has identified that Chhau has become a mass cultural tourism product targeted towards audience preferences, rather than a community-based cultural heritage. The performances are shaped by market demand, which led them to include Bollywood songs and cinematic elements. A local mask-maker shared, 'Modern music and staged performances have degraded the traditional atmosphere of the art form.' This study underscores that globalisation and poverty are mutual reinforcers, pushing practitioners to adapt to external market demands, not as a cultural choice but as economic necessity. Dealing with this confusion between cultural preservation and sustenance of livelihood, Chhau practitioners still maintain a strong commitment to preserving their cultural heritage.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The study concludes that while Globalisation has brought worldwide recognition for the Purulia Chhau

dance, it also encouraged commercialisation, cultural dilution and transformation of authenticity. Consequently, the Chhau dance has become merely an entertainment-oriented staged performance, rather than a community-oriented narrative performance. Additionally, economic insecurity plays a significant role in these changes as external pressures push practitioners to adapt performance based on tourist expectations for their financial survival rather than choosing to follow community traditions.

Moreover, it has also come to notice, a trend in declining youth participation due to a lack of adequate remuneration and opportunities. There has also been a lack of institutional support, funding and infrastructure to sustain the art form for future generations. This paper suggests a legislative initiative to support the art form and sustainable and responsible tourism in the Purulia area, which could influence the responsible production and consumption of the art form.

Furthermore, the paper has also highlighted the necessity for proper written documentation of the cultural heritage to preserve it for future generations to experience. The study also advocates for strong financial support to the practitioners and related organisations working to facilitate regular training, practices and necessary resources for the sustenance of the Chhau dance form that would influence youth participation.

Overall, the paper argues that globalisation has been negatively affecting the cultural heritage, leading to cultural erosion. Globalisation empowers cultural practices while marginalising the communities. Therefore, this calls for a deeper address of the structural flaws such as economic insecurities and institutional gaps rather than just promoting the art form for its 'symbolic heritage'.

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