



Research Article

## Digitalization and Cultural Identity in Purulia Chhau

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### Abstract

Purulia Chhau is an exuberant folk performance that is based on ritual performance, community involvement, and cultural memory. It is also characterised by elaborate masks, martial action and mythological story, and it has long been a cultural outpouring of the rural society. The rapid development of online sources, such as YouTube and Instagram, over the past years has altered the way Chhau is performed, distributed and consumed. The paper examines how digitalisation is changing the image of Chhau such that it is no longer a localised ritual practice but a cultural commodity that can be accessed by people around the globe.

According to the article, there is a dualism in digital media in preserving and breaking up cultural identity. On the one hand, it increases the visibility, documentation of the performers, and their economic viability; on the other, it facilitates the modifications in the style, length, and beauty of the performances to suit the online audiences, which can negatively affect the authenticity of the performances. The paper presents the clash between authenticity and adaptation through a synthesis of the field-based observations and digital ethnography. It concludes that even though digitalisation presents new opportunities towards cultural sustainability, precautionary measures should be observed to ensure that the integrity and identity of Purulia Chhau are not lost in an ever-mediated cultural environment.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

A combination of martial moves, mythological tales and a rich mask culture, the Purulia Chhau of Purulia is one of the most expressive examples of the folk tradition in eastern India. Chhau is based on the socio-cultural existence of rural people and has traditionally been sung on different festivals like Chaitra Parva, as an entertainment, a source of cultural transfer, and a sense of groupness. It is a wonderful expression of the local identity since the dance is the mirror of the local beliefs and oral traditions, and reflects the caste-community relations. Its performative qualities, like active body movements, figurative gestures and colourful masks produced by the artisans, are all blended to produce a unique cultural form that has been handed over to generations through guru-shishya tradition.

Nevertheless, the past several years were marked by the introduction of digital technologies and social media apps such as YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, which influenced the pattern of Chhau performance, distribution, and perception even more significantly. The wider availability has been enabled by digitalisation, whereby plays in remote villages can be seen by the rest of the world in real time. This has generated a new awareness, cultural exchange and monetary possibilities for artists. At the same time, it has transformed the locale of performance, ritualistic and communal spaces into digitally mediated, audience-mediated spaces. The aspects such as time, choreography and aesthetic delivery are thus getting changed to online consumption.

Such a change brings up critical issues of cultural identity and authenticity in the virtual era. The digital platforms are assisting in preserving and propagating Chhau, yet they can also give rise to the commodification of Chhau and remodelling. This shift of sacred and seasonal performances to an ongoing digital presence can be a watering down of cultural significances embedded in the practice. Thus, the analysis of the idea of digitalisation in connection with Purulia Chhau becomes crucial to comprehend the process of cultural identity negotiation, reconstruction, and even disputing in modern reality. It indicates the need to establish a balance between the integration of technological advancement and the conservation of the intangible cultural heritage that renders this folk tradition different.

### Historical Background

Purulia Chhau is a historical process, which could be traced through a complex set of interactions between the martial tradition and ritual performance, and community identity in the Junglemahal region of eastern India. Chhau is a semi-classical dance that occurred in the 18th to 19th century at the bequest of kings and zamindars of the area and is a mix of the local tribal dance and the Hindu mythology, particularly of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. It was rooted in seasonal festivals like the Chaitra Parva, and was not necessarily entertainment, but a general statement of the village and farmer community and warriors, including the Kurmi and other Adivasi communities. The other feature of Purulia Chhau is its abundance of colored masks that are made to depict gods, demons and animals and add a symbolic touch to the performance. The dance was

traditionally passed on in the guru-shishya Parampara, and it was based on oral wisdom and physical punishments. However, with the advent of digital platforms such as YouTube and Facebook, this traditionally localised art form has gone global on circuits, a monumental move that has incorporated it into the digital pathways of the global mediation of cultural identity.

## 2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. The initial aim of the study is to discuss how digital media like YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram are affecting the performance, presentation, and distribution of Purulia Chhau. It seeks to learn how digital exposure is transforming the conventional formats and viewer interactions.
2. The second objective is to investigate the impacts of digitalisation on cultural identity and authenticity of Purulia Chhau. The research aims to determine whether tradition is preserved or cultural dilution and commercialisation occur in online representation.
3. The third objective is to find out what the socio-economic impact of digitalisation on artists and practitioners in Purulia is. It dwells on the way digital media establishes new livelihood, visibility and cultural sustainability opportunities and points out the problems that exist.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper has a qualitative research design in order to investigate the relationship between cultural identity and digitalisation in the Purulia Chhau. This study is mainly exploratory and interpretative, and it is geared towards learning how digital platforms impact performance practices and the creation of identity in the traditional way. It takes a case study approach, which is founded on certain villages in Purulia where Chhau is widely practised. This is what allows for analysing local experiences and cultural shifts in detail.

Fieldwork will assist in gathering primary data, which will be semi-structured interviews with dancers, mask-makers and gurus with regard to Chhau. Rehearsals and performances are also employed in participant observation to record embodied practices and rituals. Furthermore, the digital ethnography is conducted through the analysis of video content, viewer engagement, and trends of representation on such sites as YouTube and Instagram. This helps in the learning of the production and consumption of Chhau in the virtual worlds.

The secondary data is collected in books, journal articles, and reports about the folk culture, performance studies, and digital media. The data is analysed in thematic terms, and such issues as authenticity, commodification, and change of identities are considered. The application of field-based knowledge and digital analysis makes the study holistic in its respect to the ways digitalisation transforms the cultural identity of Purulia Chhau in the contemporary world.

### Digital Promotion and Global Reach

The concept of digitalisation has greatly increased the exposure of Purulia Chhau to areas outside its local and regional territories. Chhau was historically sung in the villages and at the seasonal celebrations in Purulia, but nowadays, it is performed

on an international level through such apps as YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. The artists can use these sites to upload performances, documentaries and behind-the-scenes processes and leave the global audience to the rest of this original folk tradition. As a result, Chhau has gained recognition in cultural festivals, academic circles and cross-border artistic circles, and this has made Chhau an important intangible cultural heritage.

In the meantime, the digital promotion has transformed the consumption and presentation of Chhau. The transfers of the performances in smaller and more appealing forms to suit the online audience are not a novelty, and the aesthetic values are often prioritised over the conventional richness. As much as this increases access and audience engagement, it may also be a risk of simplifying complex stories and ritualism that is deeply rooted in the dance style. Nevertheless, online networks have presented other ways of earning money to performers, including monetisation, sponsorships, and invitations to national or international events. Digitalisation is thus quite essential to boost the global presence as well as to change the cultural expression of Chhau.

#### **Cultural Identity and Authenticity.**

Purulia Chhau has a cultural identity that is so ingrained in its ritualistic foundations, mythological accounts and its community performances. Traditionally, it is not just a type of entertainment, but an embodiment of the beliefs of the locals, especially in the case of festivals and seasonal festivities. The authenticity is boosted with the use of handmade masks, indigenous music and the guru-shishya form of transmission, which relates the performers to their ancestral background. However, Chhau is increasingly becoming digital, and YouTube and Instagram have been introduced, which are being translated into the foreign market. This usually results in changes in length, dance steps and presentation, and this raises the issue of the erosion of its original cultural nature.

At the same time, the digitalisation threatens the authenticity and changes it in a contemporary context. Incorporating performances on the Internet, Chhau has a wider audience and becomes a subject of a cultural discourse on a large scale, and artists have a chance to show their identity beyond their territories. Authenticity is, therefore, not rigid but changes to new forms of representation without losing fundamental symbolic characteristics. The dilemma is how to balance innovation and preservation and make sure that the culture of Purulia Chhau, its cultural meanings, community engagement, and ritual importance, will not be neglected despite the transformation in the digital age.

#### **Economic Opportunities in the Digital Age**

The Purulia Chhau has also provided artists who are related to it with new economic possibilities as they are able to reach wider horizons of visibility. The use of social media such as YouTube and Instagram enables the performer to share his art with the whole world, which consequently attracts cultural bodies, festival directors and even international partners. This exposure typically results in stage performances, workshops and cultural exchange programs invitations, and therefore this exposes new

sources of income, which previously were not available to rural artists.

In addition, alternative monetisation has been enabled by the digital platforms. Through monetisation of videos, sponsoring and online crowdfunding, the Chhau artists can make money directly from their performances, instead of having to rely on seasonal festivals and state subsidies. E-commerce and social media marketing also played a role in providing a push to promote Chhau masks and other types of handicrafts, especially in the markets of the artisan centres like Charida. This not only assists the performers but also keeps the mask-makers and other people of the community related to the tradition afloat.

These economic opportunities are, however, not evenly spread and are linked with certain challenges. Not all artists have access to digital tools, technical knowledge, and regular internet access, creating a digital divide in the community. The necessity to create aesthetically appealing and commercially viable content can also lead to a change in traditional performance forms, and the issue of cultural dilution is brought up. Therefore, since digitalisation is bound to enhance the economic prospects, it will also mean that more balanced practices are needed to ensure that the financial benefits are not obtained at the cost of cultural genuineness.

#### **Challenges of the Digital Divide**

The issue of digital divide is extremely influential in the interface of digitalisation and cultural identity in Purulia Chhau. Even though online platforms, such as YouTube, Instagram, etc., give artists unmatched exposure, there are several Chhau artists living in rural Purulia who do not have access to smartphones, regular internet access, and digital literacy. This unequal access results in a hierarchy in that only a small number of technologically prepared performers or urban intermediaries are able to control online representation and usually distort performances to appeal to the audiences and not necessarily retain traditional meanings. As a result, any genuine voices of grassroots communities are bound to be marginalised, and only a biased cultural reflection is rendered rather than a holistic one. Moreover, the dependence on an outside agent to document and post performances can result in the misrepresentation of narrative ownership and loss of agency to the community in regard to their own cultural expression. Another consequence of the digital divide is the economic aspect, as most artists are not able to monetise their work or even engage with wider audiences on a personal level. Thus, instead of an empowering tool, digitalisation may support the status quo of the inequalities, which is a serious threat to the equal representation and reproduction of the cultural identity of Chhau in the digital age.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Treating Purulia Chhau as a digitalisation problem, it is noticed that the connection between tradition and modernity is complex and intricate. The rise of such websites as YouTube and Instagram made this folk type very popular, which is why it became very popular not only in its local frames but also on a national or international scale. The exposure has assisted in the appreciation and preservation of Chhau by recording

performances and attracting the younger generations. In the meantime, the digitalisation encouraged innovativeness in choreography, costume, presentation and made the dance more adaptable to modern tastes. Within this regard, it is possible to regard digital media as a powerful means of cultural propaganda and revival to keep Chau relevant in a rapidly changing world.

This transformation, however, also brings up important issues in terms of erosion of cultural identity and authenticity. As performances grow increasingly personalised to be consumed in a digital manner, it is clear that a ritualised and community-oriented expression is being replaced by a more commercialised and entertainment-oriented expression. Some of the aspects that can be oversimplified or even lost altogether are narrative depth, symbolic meaning, and traditional context. In addition, equal access to digital resources is not possible, thereby further dividing artists, limiting the benefits of digitalisation to the privileged few. Therefore, digital platforms open up new opportunities, yet a middle ground has to be made, which would safeguard the cultural values that are naturally inherent to Chhau. To make sure that digital development does not destroy cultural integrity, sustainable preservation policies such as community involvement and policy backing are required.

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