Ethnicity, Indigeneity and Globalization: Renegotiating Identity Through a Study of Select *Chhau* Dance Performance

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Abstract
The ethnic identity of a community is often reliant on the distinguishing of its cultural attributes from other groups, and the identification of the community with certain cultural beliefs and expressions as an exclusive or authentic articulation of their own. This identity in differentiation can trigger the community towards building resistance to changes caused by intercultural contacts. It is often done through cultural expressions performed and shared by that community. *Chhau* dance of the Purulia district, with its recent exposure to a globalised world, is often seen to posit the same ambiguous space. Representation of Chhau dance in popular culture, especially in commercial films, has mostly bolstered an essentialist image where the dance is shown only as a decorative addendum. On the other hand, few recent Chhau performances have aimed at tying the dance to the cultural traditions of the communities who actively participate in the dance. These performances propagate some of the cultural and ritualistic practices which the communities believe to have become extinct due to the hegemonic power structure of Brahminic tradition and Sanskritization. This article explores the issues of cultural-homogenisation, identity formation and ethnic resistance through community-centric performances of Chhau dance. The research was carried out by ethnographic data gathered through fieldwork. It is suggested that community-centric Chhau performances, although exclusive to a certain degree, have posed a resistance to the hegemonic tradition propagated through mainstream Brahminic tendencies, and the current impacts of globalisation.
Keywords: *Chhau* Dance, Identity-Formation, Globalization, Cultural-Homogeneity, Regionalism, Representation.

Introduction
Projecting any culture or cultural expression as authentic is accepting the

notion of a homogenous, exclusive, mythically pristine and practically impossible product. The formation and perpetuation of ethnic identity by a particular community relies on its deliberate distinction of cultural attributes from those of other groups, and identification with certain cultural expressions as an authentic articulation of their own. There are often deliberate attempts by the community to build a consolidated cultural ground through various cultural expressions such as religion, dresses, language, and territory, and through performative expressions like myth, rituals, and folkloric traditions. These ethnic symbols are often upheld by the group to set up a resistance to changes caused by intercultural contacts brought by socio-cultural impacts of globalisation. Quite paradoxically, although globalisation realigns and sometimes erases the cultural characteristics and ethnic geography, it also sometimes facilitates the articulation of experiences of ethnic communities. *Chhau* dance, a cultural performative articulation of different folk communities of the Purulia district and its adjacent areas, has recently been used as a tool that pertains to the identity mobilization of a few communities. As a district in West Bengal, Purulia is culturally rich with different performative genres which are interconnected to each other. Scholars have argued over the historical origins of these genres, in terms of their interconnections and the communities responsible for their growth. However, at this stage, this argument is somewhat superfluous, as multiple different communities sustain and revitalise these performances. These performances are righteously owned by communities who are responsible for such a development.

Some of the performative traditions of Purulia district are *Chhau*, *Bhadu*,[1] *Tusu*,[2] and *Karam*.[3] As a matter of fact, the Chhau dance of Purulia, perhaps the most famous of all, is performed by peoples from diverse Indigenous and ethnic backgrounds of the district. Although Chhau performances are mostly based on legendary and mythical stories in their thematic contents and rarely touch contemporary socio-cultural issues, there

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[1] Bhadu is a social festival primarily celebrated by unmarried girls. According to legend, Bhadu or Bhadrabati was a princess of the Panchakote Raj family, and the festival songs are sung in her memory.

[2] Tusu is a folk festival that takes place during the Bengali month of *Poush* (mid-January).

[3] Karam is an agrarian-based festival honouring Karam (a deity) by planting a branch of the Karam tree. Both married and unmarried girls participate actively in this festival.

has recently been an emergence of *Samajik palas*.[4] These palas are usually based on present social issues and upheld beliefs and practices of some communities associated with Chhau dance. It has raised some serious concerns among scholars in terms of the 'essential qualities' of Chhau dance. One single pala is taken under discussion amongst others, named *Bhagna Purohit* which was performed by Sufal Mahato Chhau Dance Troop. Thematically this pala is based on a ritualistic tradition of making *bhagna* (sister's son) as *Purohit* (priest). This particular tradition is claimed as exclusive to *Kurmi-Mahato*[5] community.

This article critically analyses this performance and considers how it shapes the 'authentic' nature and ontological character of the Chhau dance itself, as well as whether this pala is responsible for the creation of any ethnic hegemony over other communities who regularly participate in Chhau dance. It also takes into account whether these performances of Chhau dance might result in circumscription, and absorption into community-centric performance, or in identity formation and articulation of marginalised communities. It will focus on ethnographic data gathered through fieldwork and interviews and concentrate on the aforementioned performance. This article first aims at grounding and deconstructing the notions of ethnicity and indigeneity and how these two notions have been shaped by the impact of globalisation. Next, it moves toward an ethnic history of *Kurmi* communities and their social movements to proclaim themselves as indigenous to the land. Finally, the article discusses and analyses the specific Chhau performance Bhagna Purohit, considering the text and its context in the light of the deconstructed sense of ethnic minority and indigeneity.

Conceptualising Ethnicity, Indigeneity, and Globalisation

In Western critical discourse, the idea of ethnicity is traditionally seen in association with the formation of national identity. This concept of ethnicity is often seen as rooted in the British colonial discourse resulting in a general disinterest towards other groups. The ethnic identity of a community has come to be located in its difference of cultural practices with other groups and identification of the community with certain cultural beliefs and

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[4] A *pala* is a singular episode or performance of *Chhau* dance. The *Samajik Pala* is a performance based on social issues.

[5] Usually in *Kurmi* communities, Mahato/Mahata/Mahto is mostly used as the surname. I have used the term *Kurmi-Mahato* in order to avoid confusion with the Kurmi community of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

expressions as an exclusive articulation of their own.[6] This colonial root, its contribution to national identity formation, and its deliberate dissociation with other groups through cultural appropriation and authentication have pervaded the history of ethnic discourse. Ethnicity as a form of discourse has been deployed from a White supremacist perspective, using identity and difference to ostracise and 'other' peoples who are deemed non-British. Here, ethnicity is constructed as fixed, universal, and transcendental.[7] This 'stable' nature of colonial ethnicity, and its role in colonisation in general, has come under question in recent years.

The postmodernist approach in critical theory unsettles, deconstructs, and dissociates this 'ethnicity' from its "culturally constructed sense of Englishness" and endorses a more inclusive approach.[8] Ethnicity came to be seen as more contingent through culture, language, and history, and constructs subjectivity and group identity. This concept of ethnicity, also known as New Ethnicities, coined by Stuart Hall, recognises diversity and difference, and the importance of positionality. Here, subjectivity and identity are constructed and constantly moulded by one's position. "We are all… ethnically located and our ethnic identities are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are."[9]

Ethnicity and Nationalism

The conventional concept of ethnicity, as it had been stabilised for years, was threatened by the impact of globalisation on political, cultural, and economic levels. With the erosion of national boundaries and the penetration of globally produced mass culture in the nation-states, the authenticity of national identity upon which the idea of ethnicity was earlier concretized was seen as being threatened, polluted, devalued, and dismantled.[10] The relation between globalisation and ethnic identity is predicated upon the fact that ethnic identity has almost invariably been seen as a builder and stabiliser of a homogenic national identity. Globalisation is a severe onto-

[6] Hsieh Shih-Chung, 'Tourism, Formulation of Cultural Tradition, and Ethnicity: A Study of the Daiyan Identity of the Wulai Atayal', in *Cultural Change in Postwar Taiwan*, ed. Stevan Harrell (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 184–201.
[7] Stuart Hall, 'New Ethnicities', in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 453–462.
[8] Hall, 'New Ethnicities', pp. 454-455
[9] Hall, 'New Ethnicities', p. 456.
[10] Gal Ariely, 'The Nexus between Globalization and Ethnic Identity: A View from Below', *Ethnicities*, vol. 19, no. 5 (2019), pp. 763–783.

epistemological threat, resulting either in an interpenetration, hybridisation, and alteration of the previous 'authentic' national identity, or in reinvigorating national identity consciousness as a backlash effect.

In the post-industrial age, London was decentred from being the lynchpin of culture, politics, and civility. Along with it goes the sense of English ethnicity, a firmly centred and highly exclusive form of social identity. For Hall, this sense of ethnicity was constituted through the structured and binary representation of the colonised other. The identity was then stabilised as a universal benchmark, unbound by any spatio-temporal milieu.[11] The sense of fragmentation and decentralisation that the earlier concept of English ethnicity went through was not solely precipitated by the postmodernist approach. Globalization played a crucial role in it as well.

The epistemological tension of the ethnic identity created by the contrasting attitude between national-identity and globalisation had twofold consequences. On the one hand, increasing awareness of global citizenship and the consumerism of individuals partly weakens the national boundary. Thus, ethnic individualism is extremely difficult to sustain. On the other hand, as a political backlash and defence mechanism, increased globalisation has been met with an increased sense of national emotion, a sense of belonging and rootedness, and building up a resistance against the onslaught of globalised identity.[12] Global consumerism, immigration, labour migration, global circulation of mass culture, and everything that interrogated or altered the stable and 'authentic' national identity in the post-War era was responded to by turning back to the past and conceptualising it as a lost 'golden age'. These threats ultimately trigger groups towards resistance to changes; Hall summarises, "when the era of nation-states in globalisation begins to decline, one can see a regression to a very defensive and highly dangerous form of national identity which is driven by a very aggressive form of racism."[13]

Relocation and De-location

Globalisation has dominated global politics in recent decades. It is responsible for assimilating and integrating the locals into a more extensive

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[11] Stuart Hall, 'The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity', in *Culture, Globalization and the World-System*, ed. Anthony D. King (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 19–39.
[12] Mary Bosworth, Ben Bowling, and Maggy Lee, 'Globalization, Ethnicity and Racism: An Introduction', *Theoretical Criminology,* vol. 12, no. 3 (2008), pp. 263–73.
[13] Hall, 'The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity', p. 36.

and grand narrative. The study by the anthropologist McKim Marriott reveals that smaller traditions are often subsumed or appropriated by the more dominant traditions, which he termed "universalisation". Contrarily, parochialisation is the localisation of a cultural aspect from a grand to a more specific form.[14] Thus, aside from assimilation, globalisation is also responsible for bringing historically marginalised cultures to the fore.

Many transnational companies are seen to promote local cultural heritage and traditions, and thus ultimately construct a narrative of creating space for marginalised. Ulrich Beck sees this process of globalisation as one of both de-location and relocation.[15] Traditions becoming global is seen as them being sanitised into a grand narrative where the distinct nature is lost, hence de-location. The concept of relocation, in basic terms, is the appropriation of local and marginalized cultures to bring them to the global arena. As this whole process of globalisation is run with the neo-capitalist paradigm as the lynchpin, these local cultures and heritage are seen and evaluated only through their value in a global market. Thus, this concept of relocation by promoting little traditions is replete with a commercial purpose, an opportunity for a new market economy, and consumerist culture.

Globalisation and Cultural Identity

National identity connects the nation with its past symbols, mythical romantic origin, and collective identity, which live through the consciousness of the people of that nation.[16] As argued earlier, this identity mobilisation of an entire nation is precipitated through stabilising and upholding a sense of cultural pristineness and authenticity that transcends time and space. Robert Holton, in this context, talks about a threefold perspective of globalisation in culture through homogenisation, polarisation, and hybridisation.[17] As Beck and Eric Hobsbawm argue, promoting a cosmopolitan nature of citizenship that has no relation to nationality or other communal affiliations makes nationalism obsolete in the face of

[14] McKim Marriott, 'Little Communities in an Indigenous Civilization', *Village India: Studies in the Little Community*, ed. McKim Marriott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), pp. 171–222.

[15] Ulrich Beck, *What is Globalization?* (London: John Wiley and Sons, 2018), p. 41.

[16] Ariely, 'The Nexus between Globalization and Ethnic Identity: A View from Below', pp. 780-781.

[17] Robert Holton, 'Globalization's Cultural Consequences', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 570, no. 1 (2000), pp. 140–152.

globalisation.[18] Ethnocentrism is deeply weakened when multi-national corporations create a consumer culture based on promoting local cultures, although it aligns with a capitalist interest. It also happens that foreign cultures penetrate local cultures to such an extent that individuals become accustomed to them.[19]

On the other hand, Anthony Smith argues for the backlash effect of globalisation.[20] The reinvigoration of national identity due to immigration, the idea of a national history, and the existence of self-reflective communities even after many decades of globalising process points to the resistance and intensification of national identity in front of globalisation. Manuel Castells talks about the 'resistance identities' that groups develop within the same nation where many citizens are drawn to cosmopolitanism.[21] When a local culture's 'stable' identity is perceived as threatened by its members, a deliberate exclusion of 'foreign' influence and a return to their constructed, mythical past are brought to the fore. The hybridisation concept contends that globalisation leads towards the interaction of varied local cultures, thus building not only cosmopolitanism or resistance but also a hybridisation: a soil that blends various cultural influences.[22]

Deconstructing Ethnicity

The most widely accepted notion of ethnocentrism, either through psychodynamic, individualistic, or collective perspective, is predicated on its association with national or communal identity and a separation, difference, negative perception, disdain towards other groups or communities. These negative attributes of what constitutes ethnicity are also reinforced with its placement in the dichotomy of ethnic/indigeneity, where ethnic identities are always conflated with statist paradigm and national identity formation that helps in legitimising existing state structure. Indigeneity, on the other hand, is placed in relation to the colonial project that challenges the foundations of

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[18] Ariely, 'The Nexus between Globalization and Ethnic Identity: A View from Below', pp. 763-783.

[19] Satoshi Machida, 'Does Globalization Render People More Ethnocentric? Globalization and People's Views on Cultures', *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, vol. 71, no. 2 (2012), pp. 436–469.

[20] Anthony Smith, *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity, 2013) p. 40.

[21] Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

[22] Machida, 'Does Globalization Render People More Ethnocentric? Globalization and People's Views on Cultures'.

the nation-state model as part of a process of decolonisation. Both are perceived as fundamentally distinct in origin, purpose, development, perspectives, and ideologies.

Hall works to deconstruct ethnicity from its stereotypes, which he believes are by-products of the concept of ethnicity derived from a Brito-centric perspective. He rescues ethnicity from its European and thus colonial ideology, predicated on an exclusive and regressive form of English national identity. The concept of ethnicity has been traditionally deployed from a White supremacist discourse and placed in difference and Othering of non-white individuals and cultures, appropriated with transcendental claims. This traditional concept of ethnicity also vouches for a stable, singular, homogenous identity that excludes any difference in race, class, caste, gender, and other markers of subjectivity-formation. He exemplifies this by the colonial notion of a "true born Englishman" which excludes all the aforementioned identity markers. Hall's concept of ethnicity, which he calls 'New Ethnicities', acknowledges the "place of history, language culture in the construction of subjectivity."[23] For Hall, each subject is ethnically located, and those ethnic markers (place, history, experience, culture) are crucial factors in an individual's formation of subjectivity. His dissociation of ethnic identity from its nationalist paradigm and homogenic sense marks a significant departure from the way the notion of ethnicity has been seen, perceived, and deployed in cultural and literary practices.

The concept of ethnicity in this article is placed precisely in this context, as espoused by Hall. It destabilises the dominant, White, nationalist, English ethnicity and vouches for a positionality with multiple categories of identity, intersecting and influencing one's subjectivity and worldview. The fluidity of the notion of ethnicity as liberated by Hall has allowed it to intersect with several other analytical categories and thus create fields for different discursive formations. "The concept of ethnicity does not have any pre-established or fixed referents. It is fluid and malleable, a form of categorization and identification that shifts depending on the historical context or the person who is doing the categorizing/ identifying."[24] As a result of this divorce of ethnicity with national identity formation, several categories of analysis came to the fore: ethnic-indigeneity, Indigenous ethnicity, ethnic minority, ethnic regionalism, and others which offer diverse

[23] Hall, 'New Ethnicities,' p. 460.

[24] Joanna Crow, 'Introduction: Intellectuals, Indigenous Ethnicity and the State in Latin America', *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2010), pp 99–107.

ways to reflect upon subjectivities, identity formation, and communities that share similarities within themselves.

The collapse of cultural boundaries across nations has posed, or rather compelled, cultural practices across the world to either alter the way they were previously accustomed to manifest, or to regress and retreat to the verge of extinction. This change in 'essence' that occurred in mass cultural practices due to globalisation is often replete with a lost sense of identity, belongingness, nostalgia for a glorified past, and a growing sense of security. In terms of the effects of globalisation on Indigenous communities and expressions, the existing narratives built around them are primarily replete with a lost sense of belongingness. These alterations perceived in the mainstream are often placed in opposition to indigeneity and its 'authentic' culture. Cultural practices of indigeneity are seen as evocative of an authentic and pristine culture that is neither polluted nor corrupted. These are also seen as an embodiment of a glorified tradition that has been left behind.[25]

Kurmi-Mahato Communities and Ethnicity

This deconstructed sense of ethnicity and Indigeneity becomes a little more complicated with considering the case of the *Kurmi-Mahato* community that traditionally reside in the adjoining regions of the Chota Nagpur Plateau. Kurmi-Mahatos are seen as an agrarian ethnic group. Different reports made during the colonial period suggested an Indigenous origin of the community.[26] Kirity Mahato reported eighty-one clans of Kurmi-Mahatos. Thus, the diversity could best be emphasised using the term 'communities.[27] Although they are seen as a non-scheduled Hindu caste today, in the 1921 census, they were reported as a Scheduled Tribe, designating them as highly disadvantaged. From the end of the nineteenth century through the first three decades of the twentieth century, there was a significant movement of social mobility among the Kurmi-Mahato communities. This upward mobility is often characterised by what M. N. Srinivas conceptualised as "Sanskritization." This is a process whereby the great Brahmanical tradition of Vedic social values, Vedic ritual forms, and practices absorb "local"

[25] Claire Smith, Heather Burke, and Graeme K. Ward, 'Globalisation and Indigenous Peoples: Threat or Empowerment?', *Indigenous Cultures in an Interconnected World*, eds Claire Smith and Graeme K. Ward (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 1–24.
[26] Herbert Hope Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal: Anthropometric Data* (Calcutta: Mukhopadhyay, 1891).
[27] Kirity Mahato, 'Kurmi Jati o Tar Itihas', in *Lokobhumi Manbhum* (Kolkata: Barnali, 2015), pp. 46–64.

traditions of ritual and ideology.[28] It is rooted in the tendency to develop a Hindu tradition by creating syncretism among all existing religio-cultural practices and thus forming a Pan-Indianism where Brahminical ideology will be the overarching framework of national identity. This was perhaps an attempt of the then ongoing tendency to include themselves within the ongoing pan-Indianisation fed by traditional Hindu philosophy. Under this social movement, there was an attempt to establish a higher status in the traditional Hindu system. The process started around the 1890s, through which this community was able to change its status. Consequently, a section of the tribals of India like Kurmi-Mahatos wanted to elevate their socio-political status in the social hierarchy system.[29]

The study of Joheb Islam suggests a cross-cultural exchange between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peasants during the colonial phase. It results in the development of "settled agriculture as the primary mode of livelihood."[30] The colonial phase marks a significant departure of the tribal peoples from their communities to include themselves in the mainstream partly because of colonial legislation in India during British rule, collectively called the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA). This act was used to criminalise entire communities. Under this act, several ethnic communities of India were brought under jurisdiction as "habitual criminals." Adult males of the groups were forced to report weekly to local police and had restrictions on their movement imposed. This process was accentuated in the colonial phase as waves of peasants moved into tribal areas. At the turn of the century, there was also another movement that seemed to have precipitated this movement.

In the early part of the twentieth century, there was an attempt to construct a singular Indian national identity, particularly through the representation of Hindu mainstream culture and heritage. This body of narrative was created by many eminent literary scholars such as Ananda Coomaraswamy and Rabindranath Tagore.[31] This linear narrative of the tradition was often represented through dancing figure of Shiva Nataraja. and

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[28] Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas, 'A Note on Sanskritization and Westernization', *The Journal of Asian Studies,* vol. 15, no. 4 (1956), pp. 481–496.

[29] Joheb Islam, 'Social Mobility Movement of Kudmi-Mahato in Jhargram District of West Bengal: A Sociological Case Study', *International Journal of Research on Social and Natural Sciences,* vol. 5, no, 1 (2020), pp. 1-10.

[30] Islam, 'Social Mobility Movement of Kudmi-Mahato in Jhargram District of West Bengal', p. 5.

[31] Pallabi Chakravorty and Nilanjana Gupta, *Dance Matters: Performing India* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2012), p. 7.

through the motto of unity in diversity, where an overarching classical tradition fed by Hindu culture and philosophy unites as well as defines 'in essence' the diverse ethnicities of the nation. This homogenic, elitist artistic, linear narrative that conceptualises of a classical tradition lured many ethnic and non-Hindu communities to attach themselves with the part of the tradition that they felt was far superior and aristocratic. Therefore, the processes like 'Sanskritization' or 'tribal absorption in Hindu' became relatively easy for both parties; one aspiring for vertical mobility, and the other busy constructing a homogenic national identity based on Indic civilisation and heritage to be brought before European civilisation. Along with this, colonial treatment of different Indigenous communities resulted in a threat to the control of their land, resources and nature. The subsequent loss of land, resources, and rights on the part of these ethnic minorities and Indigenous communities were responded to by tribal uprisings in India.

It is widely believed among the members of Kurmi-Mahato communities that *they* were originally the inhabitants of Kudum river and Kudum mountain, which are associated with Karakorum Mountain and a branch of Sindhu River.[32] Herbert Hope Risley identifies Kurmi-Mahato as the 'tribal peasant of Chotanagpur plate'.[33] Currently, members of *Kurmi* community reside in parts of Chotanagpur and the adjoining regions of West Bengal and Orissa. Here, Mahatos have co-existed with tribal communities. Influenced by the wave of Hinduism from plainsmen of West Bengal, the Mahatos of Chotanagpur emerged as a sturdy peasantry and spread Hindu beliefs and customs in many parts of Chotanagpur.

Bhagna Purohit

The following episode of Chhau dance was performed by the troop of Sufal Mahato of Agnisikha Chow Nritya Party. It was one of the few emerging performances of Chhau dance that took issue with the current trends in society. One thing to note here is that there are numerous versions of this particular pala performed by different troops. These social performances of Chhau dance usually address changing scenarios and also occasionally respond to the changes laden with the sense of a nostalgic past. Some of the

[32] Islam, 'Social Mobility Movement of Kudmi-Mahato in Jhargram District of West Bengal: A Sociological Case Study', p. 9.
[33] Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, p. 40.

social palas are *Betar Bihai Bhot Bhoti Libo*[34] (based on a criticism of the dowry system in society); *Sabdhane Chalao Jibon Bachao* (based on safe drive save life campaign); *Santhal Bidroho* (based on the santhal rebellion); *Coronasur Vadh*[35] (based on the impact of COVID-19); and *Rokte Jhora Kargil*[36] (based on the Kargil war). The performance under analysis in this article is based on one of the age-old community beliefs and traditions of the Kurmi-Mahato community known as Bhagna Purohit, which dictates *Bhagna* (sister's son) as *Purohit*, or the priest class in the *Kurmi* community. However, as eminent Chhau researcher Shaktipada Kumar notes, contrary to the Kurmi community belief, bhagna has always been positioned as a superior status, even among the other communities of Manbhum region.[37] Thus this bhagna priestly system, whether it was once exclusive to a particular community or not, remains open for discussion.

Figure 1: A Chhau dancer of the Chhau dance troop of Sufal Mahato preparing to perform. Photograph by the author.

This particular episode starts with a sense of loss. In its literal sense, two poverty-ridden brothers of Kurmi-Mahato community have recently lost

[34] Its literal translation would be: "On the Occasion of my Son's Marriage, I'll ask for a motorcycle from the bride's family."
[35] The literal translation is: "Killing of Demon Coronasura."
[36] Translation: "Blood-Soaked Kargil."
[37] Shaktipada Kumar, *Reconfiguring Performative Traditions: A Mnemocultural Inquiry into the Chhau Dance of Purulia* (Hyderabad: English and Foreign Language University, 2018), p. 417.

their mother and now have no financial support to perform the appropriate funeral. It is interesting to note that the funeral they talk about at the outset is prescribed by Brahminic scriptures. On the other hand, the Kurmi-Mahato communities are shown as separated from their cultural beliefs and traditions. Thus, they are now inclined more than ever toward mainstream cultural traditions and ritualistic practices, which are usually endorsed and nourished by Brahminic thought practices. The time frame, as shown in this pala*, was* in the Bengali month of *Bhadra* (usually August to September) which was also the month when one of the most awaited agricultural festivals of the Chota Nagpur Plateau, *Karam*, is performed. After the two bereaved brothers are consoled and assured of the financial support by the villagers, the scene shifts to the Karam festival where maiden girls dance. A *laya*[38] then plants the Karam branch in the soil. The specific pala recorded by Shaktipada Kumar presents a Brahmin priest, not a laya.[39] As the Karam ritual ends, there is a moment of crisis as the Brahmin priest does not come to the funeral because the brothers could not pay. Some of the relatives of the two brothers suggest that the funeral rituals can be performed by *Bhagna.* The performance reaches its climax as the cousins of the two brothers vehemently disagree with this decision because it goes against their 'tradition'.

To settle the matter, the laya mentioned previously narrates the historical background of this Bhagna Purohit tradition of the Kurmi community. He also briefly describes how Bhagna is positioned at a high standard in other rituals and traditions. Ultimately, the two cousins are convinced and agree to participate in the funeral ceremony. The pala ends

Figure 2: A still from the performance Bhagna Purohit*,* performed by Agnisikha Chow. Nritya Party. Recorded by Dipak Mahato.

[38] A *laya* performs priestly rituals in villages. He is a non-brahmin and usually belongs to marginalised communities.
[39] Kumar, *Reconfiguring Performative Traditions: A Mnemocultural Inquiry into the Chhou Dance of Purulia*, p. 418.

with the funeral ceremony being performed without any further interruption.

This episode seems relatively novel and divorced from the usual thematic context of Chhau dance. Chhau dance palas are usually based on puranic palas, which largely focus on the *Ramayana,* the *Mahabharata,* the *Puranas,* and numerous other extended folk myths. Even the non-puranic palas are grounded on either social disturbances or historical episodes.

Figure 3: Performance of a traditional Chhau episode *Mahisashur Mardini.*[40]
Photograph by the author.

Figure 4: A traditional Chhau mask, made by Chhau mask maker Ajay Pal.[41]
Photograph by the author.

[40] *Mahisasura Mardini* or *Killing of Demon Mahisasura* is one of the most popular *Chhau* dance performances where Mahisasura is killed by Goddess Durga. The story is based on Hindu Puranic story and emanates *Vir rasa* among other rasas.

[41] In the district of Purulia of West Bengal, *Chhau* masks are crafted in a village named Charida where around 150 families are involved in this profession. Masks are now made of *papier-mache*, making it lighter and easier to perform. Ajay Pal was one of the participants during my field visit.

Thus, thematically this is a break free from a notion of cultural authenticity that has been encumbered upon Chhau dance. Unlike 'typical' dance, the pala does not use *Vir rasa*,[42] as the theme does not consist of any war-related scene, does not have any larger-than-life character, and masks are not as decorated and vigorous as are commonly used in Chhau dance. The characters presented here are normal villagers and poverty-stricken peasants who go through utter penury in the month of Bhadra. Dialogues used in this pala, unlike a 'typical' Chhau performance, are neither heroic nor dramatic. Ratjer, it is replete with simple day-to-day conversations in Manbhum dialect that could take place in any village of Purulia. Apart from presenting a cultural tradition, the pala is also embedded with a vivid depiction of the ground reality at a grassroot level: peasantry, poverty, hierarchy, and community bonding.

In the context of the mobility movement of different communities and particularly of *Kurmi-Mahatos*, this pala is one of the many cultural products in the long run of the social movements with which the community has long been involved. As stated earlier, these social movements through identity formation have always been part of the communities since the colonial period. As a form of protest, Kurmi communities have long identified themselves as parts of tribal communities, with their own Indigenous nature of cultural and ritualistic practices and traditions. At present they are classified as Other Backward Caste (OBC). In the episode itself, the *Sutradhar* (commentators at the background who also play the dialogue of the performers) invites the communities for the revitalisation of their old traditions. As mentioned above, the pala starts with a lost sense of a community's cultural beliefs and practices. Again, the pala not only presents the cultural traditions that Kurmi communities claim to be exclusive of their own, but it also projects an image of a society where poverty-stricken brothers cannot pay the Brahmin priest for their mother's funeral, problematising the idea of class/caste. For quite some time, breaking free from a traditional mainstream tradition has been a consistent theme across Kurmi-Mahato communities. They believe that cultural traditions of the marginalizsd are being dominated, engulfed, and altered by the mainstream

[42] In Indian aesthetic theory *Veer* or *Vir* rasa is one of the eight primary components of aesthetic flavour in any performative tradition: visual or aural. *Veer rasa* emanates heroism which is seen as one of the primary components of traditional *Chhau* dance. This *rasa* theory was first formulated by Bharatamuni who lived between the first century BCE and the third century CE.

thoughts, which are nourished by Brahminic thoughts. Chhau dance, as a form of popular cultural expression, has become a tool for revitalising tradition, a tie-up with a past cut out by colonial and neo-colonial experience. The performance is a re-enactment of the lost moments of cultural amnesia that the communities have gone through since colonisation, Brahminic domination, and now through impacts of cultural globalisation.

Shaktipada Kumar, on the other hand, raises considerable concern over the impact of this particular pala among the other communities and audiences who participate in Chhau dance regularly. For him, the popularity of this one type of dance might create a hegemonic nature of performance and could pose a threat to other communities. Chhau dance, for him, might become a community-centric performance where the contribution of other communities could be neglected. He also questions the authenticity of the claim of the Kurmi-Mahato community's tradition of Bhagna Purohit. He cites traditions of several other communities of this area where Bhagna is given a superior status.[43]

Conclusion

For Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, cultural memory is the result of human beings' impetus to perpetuate specific knowledge through generations.[44] Thus cultural memories fixate certain 'fateful' events of the past, and are then stabilised through cultural expressions.[45] John Emigh reiterates a similar concept of Indigenous performance in the context of masked performances in the theatres of New Guinea. These also concern the bringing of images of the past into the present: a re-enactment of a moment of crisis embedded in a community's collective memory is central to the aesthetic concerns in many performative practices.[46] This past does not always have to be an authentic historical past; but could be a past embedded in a community's cultural and mythical beliefs. In the performances of Chhau, a past is re-enacted. This is not an 'authentic' past, validated through puranic scriptures, but one that has been altered, expanded, reconstructed, and embedded in community beliefs and memory. For Emigh, this is not a mere re-enactment

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[43] Kumar, *Reconfiguring Performative Traditions*, p. 421.
[44] Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', *New German Critique*, vol. 65 (1995), pp. 125–133.
[45] Assmann and Czaplicka, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', pp. 130-131.
[46] John Emigh, 'Masking and Playing: Observations on Masked Performance in New Guinea', *The World of Music*, vol. 23, no. 3 (1981), pp. 5–25.

for the community; it is a reclamation of their past, history, and identity.[47] A performance of Bhagna Purohit could also be a reactivation and reclamation of a forgotten past, an oblivious tradition that once belonged to community beliefs that have suffered cultural amnesia. This reclamation can only be done through re-consolidating the group identity, which has been under threat since the colonial period. This specific pala thus constantly enunciates and invites all audiences, irrespective of their differences, to revitalise their community traditions through re-actualisation of the past and enlivening the moments of crises. This is how they reclaim their past and build resistance against the hegemonic power structure of the prevailing mainstream tradition and the assimilating attitude of globalisation that reappropriates tradition according to the capitalist market economy.

[47] Emigh, 'Masking and Playing: Observations on Masked Performance in New Guinea', pp. 23.