

When Folk Meets Digital: A Study of Purulia Chhau and the Mediatization of Religion

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Abstract

The paper is based on an ethnographic inquiry into how the artists associated with *Purulia Chhau*, a traditional masked dance theatre form in the Purulia district of West Bengal, India, are innovating new ways of reaching out to a wider audience through online measures and how such a fusion of technology and tradition is transforming the art form itself. Based on an immersive inductive-iterative approach, in-depth interviews of performers and community elders were carried out intermittently over 127 days. The digital presence of the artists was also examined. The study reveals the role of small media technologies such as smart phones and the use of online platforms not just in the revival and transformation of their indigenous medium but also in the mediatization of their religion. Furthermore, given that the traditional role of Purulia Chhau as a ritualistic meaning-making conduit has been to disseminate mythological narratives, the study brings to fore how attempts in converging the traditional art form with new digital media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook over the past decade has effectuated a considerable alteration to the underlying rhetoric and message being conveyed. This, in turn has remoulded the traditional context of its primary intertwined ritual, the *Shiv Gaajan*, as identified. Apart from mediatization, the logic of the digital technologies and their audiences necessitating a drastic shift in both form and content of the traditional expression also underscores the theory of technological determinism at play. The paper argues that despite considerable compromise on the original narratives and associated rituals, accommodating new technologies has ensured the visibility, outreach, and economic sustenance of Purulia Chhau and its artists.

Key words: Purulia Chhau, folk media, religion, digital adaptations, mediatization

Introduction

A representation of the religious and cultural landscape of societies, the folk expressions of India have endured a significant relationship with indigenous rituals. Performance based repositories of traditional knowledge and culture, apart from typically disseminating an underlying rhetoric, these conduits uphold a genuine role to communicate, establish and amplify the context of these festive events. Combining the *Jhumur* and *Bhadu* musical traditions with the *Nachni* and *Pata naanch* dance traditions, the *Paikali* and *Parikhanda* martial art forms along with the *Natya* and *Jatra* folk theatre forms – ‘*Chhau*’ of Purulia is a composite art representing the everyday life of the indigenous people. As a munificent conduit bearing a large magnitude of heritage, it has flourished beyond Bengal into one of India’s most prominent folk expressions. One of three regional variants¹, Ashutosh Bhattacharya (1972) referred to Purulia Chhau as a typical ‘masked dance theatre’ of the tribal regions of West Bengal.

Although the trajectory of the evolution of Purulia Chhau has emanated over a century, there has been a significant/ radical transformation over the past decade. The influences that have contributed to this can be largely categorized as social, cultural, religious, political, economic and technological. In the context of Chhau and these other categories, it must be noted that the relationships are not mutually exclusive though. The influences are not discrete but overlapping. Furthermore, all these relationships and influences have also accentuated the meaning-making role of Purulia

¹ Although referred to as ‘Chhau’ – the three regional variants; Purulia Chhau (West Bengal), Seraikella Chhau (Jharkhand) and Mayurbhanj Chhau (Odisha) have distinctly separate characteristics and origin. See Awasthi (1979); Banerjee (1991).

Chhau in terms of the rhetoric being upheld. Originating as a meaning-making medium upheld during the Shiv Gaajan ritual every year, although Purulia Chhau performances have spilled over to associate itself with other events such as 'Durga Puja' and other religious as well as non-religious activities held throughout the year - its' role as a conduit for 'contextualization conduit' has genuinely remained intact. Its message has diversified though. Thus, as per the requirements of each specific event, the narratives, overall presentation style, music, choreography, and organizational structure have considerably changed. In fact, strikingly, these recently accumulated commercial elements pertaining to the context of other events, have made their way back into the enactments during the Shiv Gaajan; the ritual of its origin. Has this depreciated the effectiveness of Purulia Chhau in setting the context of the ritual of its origin? What affected these changes? Who initiated these? How has this transformed Purulia Chhau? How has this in turn influenced the primary religious ritual (Shiv Gaajan) it was associated with?

Advancing within the purview of 'traditional religion' (Campbell, 2010) - the objective of this research was to comparatively understand as to how religion had played out in the earlier non-technological folk media environment of Purulia Chhau - in contrast to how religion is rendered in the present contemporary form that has undergone a major transformation (commodification, secularization, digitization; amongst others). Given that the concept of religion itself has undergone creative shifts in media-religion studies in recent times (Das, 2015), the possibility of an ongoing 'mediatization' of religion in Purulia, effectuated by the commodification and secularization of Purulia Chhau, through the digital innovations of the troupes/performers, has thus been explored in this study.

To achieve this, using the ethnographic approach of 'writing up' (O'Reilly, 2012) based on an immersive inductive-iterative approach - in-depth interviews of relevant

village-based performers, eminent artists and community elders were extensively conducted over 127 days in the villages of Purulia spread out over the ritualistic itinerary (timeline) of 2021. The digital presence of the artists was also examined by inquiring upon the case of Debashis Das, a Purulia Chhau artist from Anai Jambad village having 1,16,000 subscribers on YouTube. The commercial sale of Purulia Chhau masks by the artisans of Charida through e-commerce platforms such as 'Amazon,' 'Flipkart,' amongst others, were also examined. Identifying the respondents and cases for study as per their relevance to the objective of this research, the selection was steered by an initial formative study² by one of the researchers. This had revealed that amongst the large number of Chhau troupes spread around the 20 block divisions in Purulia district – Baghmundi, Barabajar, Balarampur; amongst others – some had retained the orthodox format preserving the religious narratives (55 troupes; 40% approx.) whereas others had embraced innovations to resonate more with contemporary times (82 troupes; 60% approx.). This categorization was achieved by interviewing the *dala netas* (leaders) of each of the 137 Purulia Chhau troupes registered with the Directorate of Information and Cultural Affairs, Purulia, Govt. of West Bengal. Furthermore, it was found that amongst the troupes that had incorporated major innovations, some had retained an infused religious base whilst some had completely moved away from it.

Given that the present study was focused on digital innovations and the partial disenchantment/ resultant effect on religion – the analysis (ethnographic) showcases the transformation of Purulia Chhau not just as a chronicle of its flexibility to change over time, but also as to 'why' these changes were initiated and 'what' it has led to.

² An earlier formative study was conducted by one of the researchers (Arkaprava) in June 2017. Having spent two weeks in Palma, a village in the Barabazar sub-division, the researcher interacted with various Chhau artists. A second visit to Purulia in January 2020 was specific to this study and the interactions with the government officials, local NGO workers, Chhau troupe leaders, community elders and other key respondents in this regard, established a basic framework of the problem at hand and an understanding of the significant issues and relevant respondents to be studied.

Furthermore, apart from revealing as to ‘how’ the changes were maneuvered – the question of how this manifests not just the evolution of life in Purulia, but also the ‘mediatization’ of their religion altogether, has been answered in this study. Whereas the role of media as agents of social and cultural change and its effects (mediatization) has been identified to affect politics, social life, religion, and various other central and peripheral aspects (Hjavard, 2013) - its impact in Purulia through an unusual embrace of media variants (digital media and folk media) is a critical issue that required a focused study. Especially at a localized level. However, although mediatization-based research has significantly provided an underlying theoretical framework for this study, it was essential to map the overlying academic strands from a broader perspective to address the overall phenomenon.

Mapping the field

As Rojek (2007) affirmed, “anthropological studies of comparative religion and shamanism demonstrate that all cultures possess rites, myths, divine forms, sacred/venerated objects, symbols, consecrated men and sacred places” (as cited in Stout, 2012, p. 3). Drawing a similar reference to accentuate the relationship between Purulia Chhau, its associated ritual of origin (Shiv Gaajan) and the everyday life of the locals, this study also resonates with Durkhiem’s (1912/1995) *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* that establishes ‘collective consciousness’ as the shared way of understanding the world. As scholars have significantly adopted notions of communion, congregation, values, morals and beliefs, from a functionalist perspective, Couldry’s (2003) effort to segregate them as post Durkheimian and neo Durkhiemian (as cited in Das, 2022, p. 34) have gained significant momentum. As Durkhiem’s concepts of religion as a social phenomenon, emotional security (attained through social life), collective conscience, value consensus, amongst others, were

considerably deliberated upon further by scholars studying diverse media variants (Rothenbuhler, 2005; Lukes, 1975; Bellah, 1968; amongst others), apart from Lynch's (2012) *The Sacred in the Modern World*, Hepp and Couldry's (2017) *The Mediated Construction of Reality* significantly established the role of the media in contributing towards the social construct from the context of media-religion studies. A media-centric re-valuation of Berger & Luckmann's (1966) classic, *The Social Construction of Reality*.

Reflective extensions, nonetheless, as Hoover (2005) observed anthropological perspectives within media-religion studies to have also spread out over different media variants, these have inspired various inter-disciplinary inquiries (Ginsberg, Abu-Lughod & Larkin, 2002; Appadurai, 1996; amongst others). However, even though studies on the relationship between religion and the global media system have major contributions (De Vries, 2001, amongst others), unfortunately 'folk media' amongst the various media variants, have escaped the focus of such inquiries. There are various studies on folk media within other domains though. While folklorists have been studying the history, origin, and development of folk media (Gabbert, 2018; Korom, 2017; Pani, 2000; Bapat, 1994; Handoo, 1987; Dorson, 1976; amongst others), major studies also emerged in terms of their adaptations (Vatsyayan, 2016; Wang & Dissanayake, 1984; Bharucha, 1984; amongst others) and its employability in social development (Baruah, 2017; Das, 2013; Prasad, 2013; Sandgren, 2010; amongst others). Various scholars have also inquired into Purulia Chhau from these perspectives (Bhattacharya, 1972; Arden, 1971; Bhattacharya, 2011; Kishore, 2016; Chatterjee, 2019; amongst others). But then, from the context of folk media, mediatization and the media-religion relationship, there is gap of knowledge. Pursuant towards contributing towards this area with focus on Purulia Chhau, apart from implementing certain aspects of the Lynch's (2012) 'mediation of sacred forms'

approach and Hoover's (2005) 'mediation of meaning' approach - McLuhan's (1964) 'technological determinism' approach and the 'mediatization of religion' approach; emphasized by Stig Hjavard (2013) has been majorly adopted for this study.

Purulia Chhau and religion: The connections

As community elder Moloy Chowdhury of Purulia town described, the overall presentation, core message and objectives of Purulia Chhau has undergone a major transformation over the last decade. As he has been attending Purulia Chhau performances since his childhood along with his father and elder brothers - drawing from his personal experiences and those of his parents he underscores that whereas the Panchakot Raj royals's (Singh Deos of Purulia; 1901-54) love for Purulia Chhau was evident through myths surrounding Purulia Chhau performances sponsored by these Baghmundi royals - their patronage had majorly contributed towards the establishment of Purulia Chhau emerging from entertainment based tomfoolery (a recreational affair that was devoid of rhetoric) taking shape into an institutionalized/structured conduit, disseminating narratives from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas and the Vedas. The royals from the neighboring princely states of Kashipur and Joypur as well as various *Zamindars* (feudal lords) of the region such as the Singh Deos of Rajnarayangarh, were also major contributors to this. Strikingly, analyzing the transitory variables effectuated by them, the guiding objective that seemed to be at the core of their initiatives, was to utilize the popular expression as a conduit for the dissemination of the religious philosophy of their choice; Hinduism. A vindication of its impactful influence and effectiveness. Given that the tribal subjects occupying the region were largely animistic in their beliefs, this was perhaps a conscious effort at proselytization; nonetheless.

As Moloy further elucidated, although the origins of Purulia Chhau are somewhat vague before the intervention of the royals, whereas traces of various other indigenous expressions of the region (some of which are now obsolete or nearing obsolescence) can still be identified within the Chhau presentations despite the recent commercial overhauls - strikingly, the common context/ factor that has somewhat been preserved throughout its evolutionary journey has been 'religion'. Moloy stresses that although presently performed during harvest celebrations, *melas* (fairs), and other casual events - traditionally Purulia Chhau performances have been ritualistically intertwined with the Shiv Gaajan festival and was performed only during this time. In fact, it was not just an entertainment-based contributor in earlier times, but a crucial element of the holy process observed in the month of April every year.

Shiv Gaajan: The core ritual

Ever since its inception at least two hundred years ago, the Shiv Gaajan involves various ritualistic elements such as *Upvas*, *Bhokta naanch*, *Latan*, *Charak*; amongst others. Along with these, Purulia Chhau performances have always been an integral meaning-making element/ communication conduit, setting the context of the ritual. Presenting the heroic narratives of Shiva and his village avatars through its narratives, the performers/ performances were expected to prompt, motivate, inspire and all in all contribute towards creating an aura of spirituality and devotion, amongst the people. In an effort by the village folk to invoke Shiva and his various localized village avatars (*goram devtas*)³ – Shiv Gaajan is fuelled through 'devotion' and its agonizing showcase. Inflicting pain upon themselves as an avenue to this end, legends/ rumors of the *naraboli* (human sacrifices) conducted in the past, also exist.

³ Localized/ indigenous avatars of Shiva such as *Buro Baba*, *Durgeshwar*; amongst others. *Goram* literally translates to 'village'. Every village in Purulia has a designated village deity referred to as Goram Devta, which has been worshipped for generations.

As Kshitij Chandra Mahato, a community elder from Dakshin Bohal village in Purulia - 2 pointed out, these performances are 'crucial'. Not just in establishing the context of Shiv Gaajan, but also in amplifying the devout sentiments of the people, essential during this time. The devotees engaging in the painful practices may give up, otherwise. As each narrative that is performed during these times revolves around Shiva, the villagers' devotion is gradually rekindled and effectively revitalized. They are not just reminded of the significance of Shiva in their lives, but also of the importance of their engagement and contribution towards his appeasement as benefit for the community.

As Kshitij further explained, completing the Shiv Gaajan is a very difficult task for the *bhoktas*, (disciples executing the ritual). Whilst engaged in their role, after consuming a highly nutritious meal (mangoes, jiggery, lentils and grams) on the first day, not only must they fast over the next four days (*bar-upvas*), but also be deprived of sleep throughout the period. Given the extreme pain that they bear as penance as their bodies are pierced with hooks and nails and strung up and hung from the central *Charak* pole - the Purulia Chhau performances of the night are integral for the *bhoktas*, to keep them motivated and reminded of the greatness of Shiva. A conduit that mentally prepares them for the pain that they incur. In fact, the performances enhance the devotion of not just the *bhoktas*, but also the gathered audiences. This was validated by various other community elders from various other villages in the region such as Baidyanath Mahato (Bodhgara village), Budhev Kumar Panday (Chirka village), Amulya Mahato (Dumdumi village), Manoranjan Kumar (Sattra village) and Moley Chowdhury. Every evening during Shiv Gaajan, as the *bhoktas* engage in *bhokta naanch* and *latan* (rolling over on the ground) circumambulating the temple, the stage for the Purulia Chhau performances is set up at the central *akkharas*. The Purulia Chhau performances are held all night ensuring a devoted gaze from all quarters.

The digital innovations

Whereas under-currents such as the religious, political and socio-cultural negotiations, inter-caste/ inter-tribe intermingling, acculturation, urbanization, etc., influencing Purulia Chhau were also significantly identified - this study focuses on the role of the technological innovations (a recent contributor, absent at earlier times) maneuvering the transformation over the past decade. With the advent of the internet penetration in the villages, as the people gradually started using smart phones, their utility in regard to marketing and outreach was aptly recognized by the Chhau performers. Realizing its potential to reach out to urban audiences, various Chhau troupes started posting their performance videos recorded on their mobile phones on platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. As the regular influx of tourists had earlier set the stage for shorter commercial performances of five to ten minutes length, these shortened enactments were consciously designed to attract urban viewers. Whereas these short renditions were laden with acrobatic displays, sensational choreography, kinesics and music, the significance of the storytelling process was majorly distracted/diminished. Short scenes were enacted and uploaded rather than the entire narrative. But then, their motive was not to disseminate narratives anymore, as is the case in the villages. It was to be contacted for performances (both urban and rural), sell Chhau memorabilia and all in all, enhance the popularity of their art form as a commodity.

As Sen, Chattopadhyay & Chakravarty's (2017) survey indicates, owing to the digital revolution, as the price of smartphones and data packs were reduced, most people in Purulia could afford to access the Internet on smartphones, which were easily available in the market. Now accustomed with the use of Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube, most users spend between 2 to 4 hours on the internet every day. The study, based on the responses/ survey of a representative sample of 200 respondents

in the Purulia district, is an indication of the mounting digital habits of inhabitants. Thus, utilizing the digital revolution in the past decade, Purulia Chhau has now been shaped into an industry - providing the troupes themselves, an organized support structure. Along with these digital and organizational opportunities, as the financial considerations/ initiatives of NGOs/ Govt. agencies provided substantial leverage to the artists - the upcoming generation of performers now consider Chhau as a robust livelihood that commands respect, rather than deserting their aspirations like earlier times. This is evident from the numerous Chhau schools and workshops that are being attended in large numbers by the children of Purulia, encouraged by their parents.

In fact, there are various schools dedicated to teaching the Chhau art form in Seraikella in Jharkhand as well as in Mayurbhanj (the other regional variants of Chhau, apart from Purulia) catering to their respective styles. Whereas most of the prominent Chhau troupes of Purulia had ensured these not just as an avenue for income but also to ensure the progress of their tradition – the RCCH (Rural Craft and Cultural Hub) initiative by ‘Banglanatak.com’⁴ in association with Jagannath Chowdhury’s troupe has been immensely popular amongst the youth of Purulia. As Jagannath revealed, the sponsored workshops regularly feature Chhau icons from across Purulia such as Binoydhar Kumar (Bamunia village), Gaissuddin Amsari (Polma village) and Baghambar Singh Mura (Govindapur village).

The commercial sale of Chhau memorabilia has also been initiated online by the *sutradhar* (carpenter/ mask-maker) community who are most commonly settled in and around the Baghmundi sub-division of Purulia. The central village Charida has in fact also emerged to become a significant tourist destination in the past decade, lined with shops selling Purulia Chhau masks of various sizes, as collectibles. Although

⁴ A popular website/ NGO/ social enterprise dedicated to fostering sustainable development through cultural approaches.

traditionally engaged in producing the masks as per the orders presented by the Chhau troupes spread out across the Purulia district, they are over-booked with orders received online on portals such as 'amazon.in', 'flipkart.com', 'gitagged.com' and 'shoppingcart24.com'. Implementing their accumulating online experience, these cultural collectibles (sometimes GI tagged)⁵ are being professionally marketed on digital platforms presenting the background, history and novelty of Purulia Chhau to the consumers to generate their interest. At present, there exists a 'Sutradhar Committee' in Charida to regulate the production and sale in the interest of preserving this as a livelihood.

Case Study

To derive a frame of reference to the digital innovations of the Purulia Chhau artists and the resultant impact, the researcher identified that although sporadic efforts have been made to reach out to larger audiences utilizing digital platforms, a powerful digital node has emerged from these - the YouTube channel of Debashis Das; a Chhau artist and the troupe leader of 'New Star Chhau Dance Group', from Anai Jambad village in Purulia. A channel dedicated not only to showcasing the performances of his own Chhau troupe, the entire fraternity of the Chhau artists of Purulia have benefitted from his outreach. An artist dedicated to his purpose for the past 10 years; directing the religious scripts through unique treatments and choreography, he has himself enacted the role of Shiva and Krishna on various occasions. But in recent times, he has become an extremely popular icon owing to his capacity to innovate and transcend into the digital realm. A Purulia Chhau based digital media correspondent with the capacity to feature other artists and enhance their artistic livelihood through mass

⁵ A geographical indication (GI) is a sign used on products that have a specific geographical origin and possess qualities or a reputation that are due to that origin.

outreach and visibility. Achieving considerable headway in utilizing online opportunities - up until February 2022, his eponymous YouTube channel had 1,16,000 subscribers, accumulating an overall number of 50,125,424 views of his uploaded videos since 2014. These numbers are rising every day.

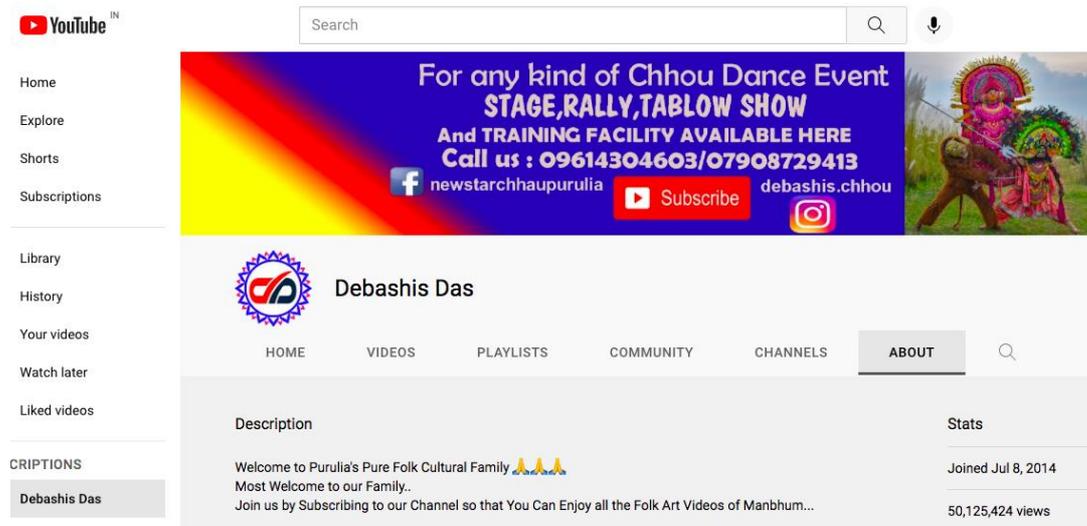


Figure 1: Showcasing the YouTube Channel of Debashis Das

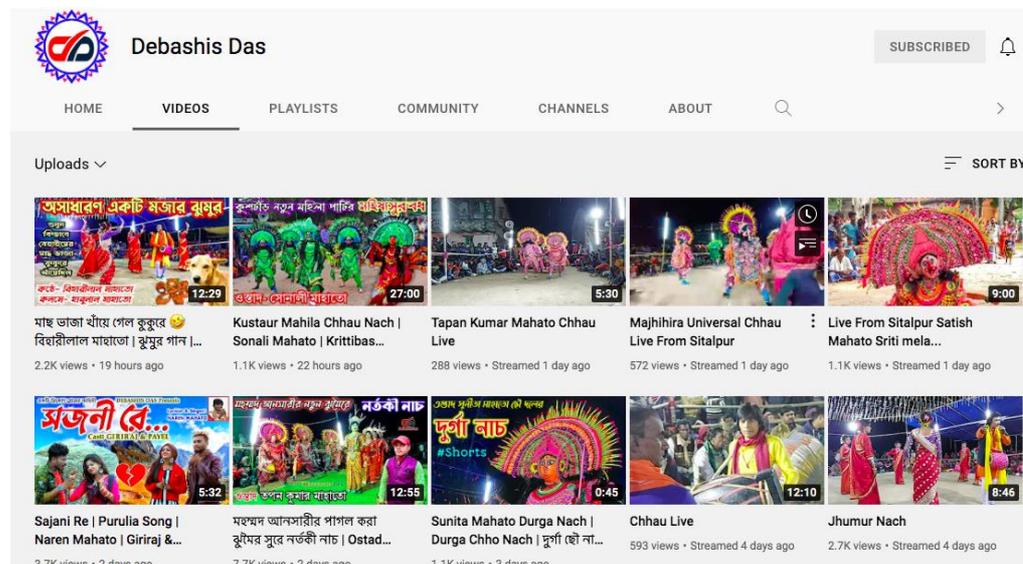


Figure 2: Showcasing the recent videos on Debashis Das' YouTube Channel

As Debashis laments though, despite the exponential growth in the number of subscribers, the performances going viral are a commercial representation of Purulia Chhau. Not the original thing. Gauging from the success of certain videos that he uploaded and the failure of some, he has noted that the type of performances that go viral are those that are laced with comedy and high-flying acrobatics. Lengthy performances based on the entire religious narrative (orthodox renditions) do not garner even half as many views in comparison. But then, he and his troupe have become extremely popular amongst the audiences in and beyond Purulia. He is now a well-known name amongst event managers and organizers in Kolkata and other urban centers of Bengal. He has performed in Delhi and Mumbai as well; amongst others. Given the requisite regularity of upload, he also posts the performance videos of various other troupes in the region. In fact, this has popularized not just his own troupe, but also various others. His YouTube channel has thus emerged as a platform for various other troupes that have been contacted for shows via this digital outreach. Furthermore, he also posts the performances of the eminent artists and troupes of Purulia to generate traffic and mobilize the locals online.

For Debashis, his YouTube channel has genuinely emerged as a lucrative source of income. Not just through the performances that he gets contacted for, but also through the content-creator remuneration provided by YouTube. He has earned approximately Rs 14 lakhs/- over the last five years, as compensation for the number of views incurred on his channel. He became eligible for this after achieving the initial requisite of 1000 subscribers in 2017. Although recently accused of allegedly demanding/ accepting money from the other troupes for covering their performances and uploading on his channel with a large subscriber base, Debashis maintains that

his objective is to showcase/ promote the culture of Purulia to the world. Nothing more. As he does not own any DSLR camera or isn't adept with editing software, the performances uploaded are captured on his smart phone, which has a good quality camera. The videos uploaded are unedited and thus a representation of the real situation in the villages, as and how the performances happen. For themselves, by themselves, a presentation from within. But then, as he realizes the importance of uploading short and commercial videos, he captures only the most dramatic parts and uploads these. Not the entire performances. Having gradually developed an understanding of the YouTube algorithms of virulence, he is compelled to even instruct the troupes in focus to tailor-make performances to suit the requirements of the digital based audiences such as short time frames, aggressive bursts, and sensationalism. He thus influences the performances, empowered by his digital might.

There are now various others such as Debashis who have also garnered a large number of followers on social media platforms. Apart from Buddheshwar Mahato (Barabajar village), Swapan Kumar Mahato (Bodoldi village), Pramod Rai (Jhalda block) and Kaifuddin Ansari (Polma village) - NGOs such as Banglanatak.com have also ensured a vast presence of Purulia Chhau, online. But then, the videos uploaded by Debashis and the other artists themselves are grass-root representations; very different from the packaged and edited renditions uploaded by Banglanatak.com and other such organizations providing them support. But as validated by all of these innovators, apart from becoming a repository of the culture of Purulia, these digital showcases have genuinely ensured economic stability and a revival of Purulia Chhau. Artists performing other art-forms (*Jhumur, Bhadu Gaan, Nachni*, etc) have also adopted these measures, from various other districts. In fact, the recent virulence of folk songs such as 'Kaccha Badam' by Bhuban Badyakar of Birbhum district (West

Bengal) is in fact a vindication of how well tribal folk artists are embracing digital measures to reach out to the entire world.

Reflections

Whereas digital innovations have ensured sustenance, growth and a source of livelihood for the Purulia Chhau artists, the general content that they themselves consume at other times from the internet has in turn influenced them though. Earlier, the source for ideas in regard to Purulia Chhau narratives performed had emerged from philosophical/ religious contexts. Their present access to issues such as current affairs, politics and commercial entertainment has provoked them to innovate on these lines as well. Whereas the earlier urban influence through the influx of tourists had already ensured a considerable yet limited influence, regular access to digital environments has in fact opened the floodgates in this regard. This rapidly changing phase of Purulia Chhau has had a significant impact on the rituals with which it is intertwined. As the performers gradually suited into the commercial performance formats, their success during performances at urban settings gradually motivated them to experiment with the treatment during ritualistic performances as well. Thus, whereas the performances during the Shiv Gaajan have also accommodated Bollywood based music tracks to support the Shiva based narratives; the performances during Durga Puja were laden with Rabindra Sangeet and other popular songs. The new electronic instruments have also been accommodated into the fray. The shorter performances conceived for digital audiences are also performed at ritual venues. A diversion from the core context, nonetheless. And given that this has transformed the once devout environment (ritual venues) into one that is festive/ celebratory, this has not just led to a partial secularization of the events, but also an avenue for entertainment; allowing

the use of alcohol, gambling, and marijuana. An overlap between the 'sacred' and the 'profane.'

Although Stig Hjavard (2013) is credited with popularizing the discourse on mediatization, Hoover observes that the complexities of the mediating practices in religious cultures have led to a metamorphosis of the nature of religion and spirituality itself (as cited in Lundby, 2013, p.229); mediatization as an outcome of the mediation. But then, as Hjavard (2013) established, the influence of media exists in its changing relationship with other socio-cultural spheres; "the boundaries between what is 'sacred' and 'profane' are constantly changing" (p.2). It was observed by the researcher that although a case of ritualistic folk media-based communication, it is evident from the modern innovations and commercial initiatives within Purulia Chhau, that the negotiations between the 'sacred' and 'profane' have various implications both positive and negative. Although constantly overlapping, this has brought forth the peripheral narratives of Hinduism to the forefront in the form of Hjavard (2013) refers to as 'banal religion'⁶. In fact, given the present experimental approach, narratives of the *Goram Devtas*, *Manasha* and other local deities are now being frequently revisited. In an effort to diversify from the age-old, repetitive projections, these new narratives majorly allude to the local cultural setting and although peripheral compared to the meta-narratives - they effectively compliment the localized context in regard to religious sentiments. The mainstream narratives of Shiva are yet upheld though, accommodating the new approaches. Strikingly, the 'profane' variables are considered an extension of the localized culture of the marginalized. Nothing more. Thus, although Hjavard (2013) lays stress upon secularization of religion due to mediatization, Jeremy Stolow (2005) not only questions secularization, but also establishes that media [folk or otherwise] plays a major role in strengthening religion as an institution. Thus, although the present

⁶ Peripheral religious concepts that are not institutionalized.

study resonates with Hjavard's (2013) concepts of overlapping boundaries in regard to the sacred and profane, the emergence of a banal form of Hinduism adopting an indigenous context has additionally been revealed.

Conclusion

In the course of its evolution, whereas its flexibility has enhanced its relevance as per the changing times and popularized it beyond borders – the preservation of its religious core has ensured its ritualistic reverence and alacrity amongst the locals. As the innovations/ modifications have been more accommodative than diminishing, most of the people of Purulia have been included into the pool that harbor sentimental value towards it. Unlike classical expressions that are more institutionalized and rigid, Purulia Chhau has showcased the capacity to preserve and yet transcend as per the needs of the evolving times. Thus, despite representing a society that is heterogeneous and diverse, the rhetoric of the expression genuinely reveals the cultural imagination of the indigenous Purulia landscape, framed upon its convergent religious identity. Not only have the Hindu rituals/ narratives been represented - the animistic/ anthropomorphic accentuations have also been ensured a sacred space in embrace. The profane has been provided space as well.

The modern adoptions have not just accommodated the new though. These have also amplified the reach and impact of the original message, without interfering beyond a certain point. Apart from the need for survivability in the present competitive market characterized by an increasing number of troupes, various influences and negotiations have contributed to the transformation. Given the consistent social, cultural, economic and political influences from the perspective of tourism, urban culture and the emerging culture industry – it is evident that a lure towards commercialization has considerably influenced some of the artists. But then most

prominently, it is the diffusion of technology, internet penetration in the villages, the utilization of smart phones; amongst others, which has ensured a modern-day overhaul of the mindset of the tribal performers who constitute the Purulia Chhau troupes. A giant leap, nonetheless. As life in the region changed, so did their folk expression. Having accommodated the socio-political influences, cultural synthesis, inter-religious conflicts, and intra-religious undercurrents - the context of Purulia Chhau transformed with relevance to the daily lives of the people as well as the region, thus manifesting the sacred socio-religious character of Purulia as a region, in a contemporary avatar. The identity of indigenous people yet remains well framed. Although it transformed, it continues to represent the people and their indigenous culture. Moreover, the communities have accepted the modern innovations (the use of social media, videography, digital marketing, etc.) adopted by the troupes to strengthen their livelihood and reach out to international audiences – as it is beneficial/ glorious for not just their own identity, but also that of their Gods.

Providing a premise to this recent synergy, whereas an inter-cultural infusion between the tribal and non-tribal had ensued in the past, the infusion of rural and urban culture has been a major contributor over the past decade. Given the increasing/ regular influx of tourists - the exposure of the indigenous inhabitants to Bollywood music, western attire, empowered and educated women; amongst others, had a major impact. Furthermore, apart from foreign thespians (Robert Maegher; amongst others) initiating artistic infusions with Chhau, the indigenous performers travelling to the urban centers of India and abroad have accelerated the re-molding. Whereas the economic negotiations based on livelihood ensured various innovations so as to commercialize, sell and 'commodify' - the technological negotiations have amplified the efforts of the artists to ensure enhanced visibility, networking, packaging and impact. Whereas

many such folk media forms have declined, Purulia Chhau remains an integral part of the everyday lives of the people. A powerful heritage revived.

Although prescribed as an 'intangible' cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2010), transformations such as these have proved to be essential to its sustainability and growth. Ever since its inception, as the trajectory of the development of Purulia Chhau into a seminal representation comprehensively reflected the evolution of the socio-cultural and religious milieu of the people of Purulia, it was not just the inter-religious/intra-religious negotiations, cultural infusions, enculturation, and acculturation that were echoed, but also the transitions, strife, revolutions, and class struggles. As the tribal society transcended into a digital world, these repercussions too were echoed through their folk-art form. Accommodative at its core as evident from the past, the technological maneuverings have somehow effectuated an embrace between the orthodox and the contemporary - the sacred and profane – the rural and urban – the indigenous and mainstream. Yet preserving its meaning-making purpose at rituals, the capacity of Purulia Chhau to mediatize the projected religion even in marginalized rural settings is an example of the progressive nature of not just the art form, but also that of the artists. A vindication of the power of folk media altogether.

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