

**PERFORMING *CHHAU*:  
REFLECTIONS ON  
MEDIATION AND  
TRADITION**

SUJAAN MUKHERJEE

**PROJECTS / PROCESSES**





# PROJECTS / PROCESSES VOLUME I

Series Editor: Senjuti Mukherjee

**Performing *Chhau*: Reflections on  
Mediation and Tradition**

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# **Tridhara**

***Curated by*** Leela Samson

***Venue*** DB Ground

## Curatorial Note

**Artists** *Arpan Mukherjee, Bikas Kumar, Debasish Mahato, Dhiraj Kumar Mohanta, Dilip Chandra Mahato, Govind Mahato, Gunjan Joshi, Guru Shashadhar Acharya, Jivan Kumar Patra, Kanahai bandra, Kartik Chandra Mahato, Kartik Mahato, Laxmi Dhar Ghunia, Manasaram Mahato, Niroj Kumar Mohanta, Phudan Majhi, Rajkapur Mohanta, Rampada Kalindi, Ranjit Kumar Acharya, Sapan Kumar Acharya, Shachin Mahato, Shankar Sing Mura, Shubham Acharya, Siddharth Dal Behera, Sukant Kumar Acharya, Surendra Nath Soren, Triclochan Mandal, Veena Choudhary, Yogesh Kumar Shankar*

**Light Design** *Sai Venkatesh*

**Curator** *Leela Samson*

A comprehensive presentation of three forms of Chhau: Seraikella, Mayurbhanj and Purulia. Each style is distinct, drawing from the rich traditions and history of their respective regions of origin and practice, deeply rooted in their varied contexts yet representative of formal properties of the the form. Audiences will experience the diverse spectrum of Chhau forms and styles, discovering variations and confluences in performance.

*Note: Due to an ongoing railway disruption at the time, the Mayurbhanj group was unable to perform at the Serendipity Arts Festival. The performance took place on December 21, 2019 at DB Ground, Panaji. All images have been shot by the Lumiere Project for Serendipity Arts Festival 2019.*

## Performing *Chhau*: Reflections on Mediation and Tradition

SUJAAN MUKHERJEE

### THE STAGING

A few weeks before Serendipity Arts Festival 2019 began, I found myself on the lawns of Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata, witnessing a staging of *Mahisasurmardini*—a canonical performance text—by Agomani Chhau Nritya Dal of Purulia. The spectators sat in a semi-circle, demarcating the space for performance, with an opening at one end for entry and exit, and the musicians at the other. Photographers tried to find angles between their shoulders, with only a few blatantly disregarding the performers' personal space. The Chhau performer, of course, is no stranger to such practices. They are used to performing in spaces where the absence of a proscenium is misconstrued as a free-for-all. Meanwhile, a man wearing an extra pair of wooden arms on his shoulders and an elephant mask on his head, had quietly made his way across the landscaped hedges and seated himself at the periphery of the spectator-circle. With Kolkata's newest high-rise, the 268 metre-tall 42, shooting skyward in the background, the contrast between the tinsel-haloed divinity and the surrounding cityscape—including the marble dome of the Victoria Memorial Hall—bordered on the surreal.

The opening was a warm-up. Ganesh, with his elephant head and protruding wooden arms, turned a couple of standing somersaults and fell in rhythm with the *shehnai* and drums. Each character was introduced separately with their own specific gaits, or *chala*. Apart from a South Korean visitor, who was seeking explanations from strangers and trusting the rest to Google Translate (Bangla



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to Korean), most of the spectators knew the story that was about to unfold inside out. The sons of Durga would be introduced. They would regale the spectators with their astonishing acrobatics before being outshone by the *asura* (capable of even more outrageous feats). The loop-hole in Brahma's boon to the *asura*—that no man could harm him—would lead to the rise of Durga, who, after crowd-sourcing her armoury, confronts the demon and vanquishes him.

Typically, the stories represented in Chhau are well-known, being predominantly mythological retellings. Very rarely do performers add new scripts to their repertoire: as Roma Chatterji notes, in the late '70s one of Gambhir Singh Mura's disciples, Nepal Mahato, had staged a performance of the Santhal Rebellion of 1855, which failed to garner popular support. While the familiar narrative offers cohesiveness to the performance—giving it, in a sense, a beginning, a middle and an end—the focus is on how the artist performs their physicality. The tension that is produced through the extreme movements of the dancers operating with a microscopic margin of error stands in for the absolute lack of unpredictability of the plot, devoid of turns and narrative tension. Besides, who can resist the enigma of the masks and the sparkling draw of tinsel?

Chhau may have its origins in martial traditions, as historians have claimed, but its present form seems to suggest that a display of pure physical agility and strength in a non-agonistic context would probably not hold an audience unless framed by a narrative. Of course, there is a lot more to Chhau than being simply a show of physical ability with masks. The genius of the performer lies precisely in their ability to portray a range of emotions through their postures and rhythms despite the restriction imposed by the mask. This relationship varies across the different schools: Mayurbhanj Chhau (originally from Odisha), which is performed without masks, continues to carry traces of its martial origin but is not as acrobatic as its Purulia (Bengal) counterpart. Like Purulia Chhau, the Saraikella school (from present-day Jharkhand) uses masks but leans more towards “classical” dance movements and rhythm. (We return to the

question of terminology later.) The narratives, consequently, are also less reliant on physical action and more on the portrayal of interpersonal relationships between the characters through dance and music.

At Serendipity, the Chhau performance titled *Tridhara* began with a helpful preview, which allowed the audience a glimpse into the practice sessions and the mask-making in Saraikella, the home town of one of the leading performers, Shashadhar Acharya. *Tridhara* refers to the three traditions: Saraikella (Jharkhand), Mayurbhanj (Odisha) and Purulia (West Bengal), which constitute the different schools of Chhau. The cultural geography of the tradition transcends the boundaries of the modern state, leading some scholars to speculate on the implications of a previously unified regional cultural identity. Owing to on-going railway disruptions, the Mayurbhanj team had not been able to make it to the festival, which essentially left the stage to the Saraikella and Purulia groups, forcing last-minute improvisations and additions to their original performance design. These were admirably executed.

After an initial introduction by a member of the festival organising team, the musicians took the stage. The proscenium theatre is not the traditional home of Chhau performances but by now most performers are used to them. According to the performance curator, Leela Samson, the groups required minimal assistance in making this transition. The dimensions of the proscenium stage were about as large as the usual performance area for traditional Chhau, which meant that very little adjustment had to be made in terms of composition, or indeed the scale of physical movement. A turn and leap could be executed in exactly the same amount of space in which it had been practised. However, certain changes were in order. For instance, as with proscenium stagings, the performers had to consciously face the audience, who sat at the front, as opposed to traditional performances where audiences stand or sit in a circle surrounding the dancers.

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Although a common occurrence today, there is a certain loss in the dynamism and room for improvisation that exists in the traditional setting. (In a performance of the story of *Mahisasurmardini*, which I had seen previously, the actor playing the lion had picked out a child in the audience, who let out squeals of joy every time he would go up to her and growl.) The spectacle on stage makes up for the loss in the sheer physicality of the traditional performance to a certain extent with the use of dramatic lighting, background projections and well-balanced music. But in the traditional form there are other factors besides the spectacle: seated closer to the dancers one can hear the strain of performing—grunting and panting occasionally—or even have to guard themselves against a cloud of dust during a particularly vigorous dance move. The large projections here, however, offered close-up views of the performers. Although their faces were covered with the mask, these screens afforded a closer view of the smaller dramatic moments being played out between characters.

The opening act was one of Saraikella Chhau's classics, the *Ratri Sukta*, leading to a delicate exchange between veiled Night, clothed in black and gold, and the Moon, wearing a white mask and gold crown with a shining crescent on his shoulders. The second of their five acts was *Krishna Lila*, which depicted the age-old playfulness—with the usual sexist overtones that remain disturbing despite their claims of tradition—between human and divine love, and the ludic indifference of the latter. The third act was an unusually acrobatic one, similar in terms of its relationship between action and narrative: it was the death of Abhimanyu (a passage in the Mahabharata that used to move me more than any other as a child) inside the *chakravyuha*. The penultimate act was the Swan's Flight, a mellifluous performance to the tune of the flute (predominantly) and shehnai, and it ended with an adaptation of the myth of Chandrabhaga. Chandrabhaga is also the most significant exception to the general rule of performing mythological texts in terms of its history of textual transmission. Its history also sheds light on the politics of patronage which governed Chhau for centuries, and takes us back to a time when its canon was still permeable: therefore, a minor digression.

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Mid-19th century Odisha saw a concerted attempt to replace Odia as the language of primary instruction in schools with Bengali. Naturally, Odia writers and educationists resisted this linguistic imperialism, thus paving the way for a literary resurgence. Radhanath Ray (1848-1908), who was a school teacher by profession and later an officer in the Education Department, realised the importance of countering the allegation that it was an impoverished language. He wrote in a wide range of genres, among which were nine kavyas, which were mostly romantic adventures between women and men. *Chandrabhaga* (1886), one of his earlier ventures, was written under the patronage of Maharaja Basudev Sudhala Deva, ruler of the feudatory state of Bamra. Like some other poets of his time, for whom the idea of literary prestige was often classicist, Ray turned to Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. He recast the story of Daphne and Adonis in a local context, turning it into a fable of Surya, the sun god's, lust for Chandrabhaga, daughter of Saint Sumanyu and an *apsara*. Cursed by the Hindu god of love, Madan, Surya stalks Chandrabhaga, in the toxic masculinist manner of the deities of ancient religions. Chandrabhaga flees from her and ultimately takes her own life by drowning in the sea. Here, Ray connects this myth symbolically with the decline of Odia culture: in his retelling, Sumanyu curses Surya, which causes his abode—the sun temple at Konark—to collapse. The text probably entered the Chhau canon through the adaptation by Kumar Bijay Pratap Singh Deo of Saraikella, who led and patronised a Chhau troop. Most Chhau performers today distil the mythical elements of the story and re-enact the pursuit followed by the belated lamentations of the sun god about his “mistake.” This also begs another question about performances that are caught in this flux between tradition and modernity: does the appeal to “tradition” necessarily excuse the uncritical portrayal of predatory sexual behaviour on the part of divine beings? Surely, even without altering the stories themselves, they can be re-framed within a more contemporary understanding of such gendered power relations.

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Perhaps because this was within a couple of months of Durga Puja, the obvious choice for the Purulia group was the enactment of *Mahisasurmardini*. It was evident, however, that it was a smaller cast than usual. There was no *mahis*, one of the most attractive characters in their usual *dramatis personae*: nor were there Lakshmi and Saraswati in the main sequences. At the end, when the tableau representing the defining moment of the combat was composed on stage, two of the asura quickly changed their masks and filled in for these two daughters of Durga. The performances were energetic, and while the production suffered for not being able to represent all three schools of Chhau, the performances in themselves were evidently very well-coordinated and intelligently arranged. The Saraikella acts had their own crescendo in the middle with Abhimanyu's story, but taken as a whole, their subtlety and classical underpinnings were able to create the desired contrast with the relatively martial final act of the Purulia group.

This article is an attempt to understand two problems in the light of this production and interviews with Shashadhar Acharya and curator, Leela Samson: firstly, the question of mediation—be it through the figure of the (re)discoverer or the curator—who claims authority to interpret a local, usually endangered tradition, for different publics; and allied to that, the question of stylistic purity. I also refer to the parallel but different trajectory of another “folk” form, Raibenshe, which I encountered during my research into the physical cultures of Bengal. In terms of the terminology, the Sangeet Natak Academy has made a clear (and welcome) declaration of intent by promoting the term “Major Traditions” of theatre, music and dance, over the orthodox distinction between “folk” and “classical.” In the literature on Chhau, however, the trajectory has been similar to what we see in the cases of other folk traditions and their passage into mainstreams.

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### INTERVIEW WITH SHASHADHAR ACHARYA

In the following interview with Shashadhar Acharya, I asked him to share his views with some of my concerns. What comes through is a voice that is profoundly self-conscious of his position with respect to the Sangeet Natak Academy, although we see a delightful irreverence towards the textual historiography of the traditions of Chhau.

***The performance at Serendipity was curated by Leela Samson.***

***What role do you see a curator playing?***

We are very grateful that they approached us to perform. She is a renowned Bharatnatyam artist and I felt privileged to be invited. I was in Goa on a Goa Kala Academy project the year before last when I saw Serendipity. I wanted to be a part of it. So it was like a dream-come-true when we were called in this year.

Our brief was simple: I was told to put up a show that would represent all the different traditions of Chhau. I have always maintained contact with Mayurbhanj and Purulia groups, so it was just a matter of asking them all to come together.

***Did you work directly with Leela Samson?***

Not really. What's the Bengali word for "curator"?

***I don't think there is one. No literal translation, at least.***

Exactly. "Curator" is not an Indian concept. It's a Western idea. Usually it refers to a post within a museum. Someone who knows where and how to keep an article. How do the objects tell stories – that's the curator's job. I prefer to think of this as "designer." Someone who designs a part of a festival: how it's going to look, etc.

***But eventually we didn't get all three styles at Serendipity, right?***

No, we didn't. I had gotten in touch with Dilip Chandra Mahato – or Jagru Mahato as I call him – from Purulia and Bibhutibhushan Mohanka from Odisha. I was representing Saraikella. We had been working on Sangeet Natak Academy projects for quite some time now. I think it's been twenty years! But there was some trouble,

which disrupted the railways and the Mayurbhanj group could not eventually make it.

***How did you manage?***

The Purulia group stay in Baghmundi. They came to Ranchi. Then came to Goa via Mumbai. I brought my boys from Ranchi to Delhi and took the train to Goa. We have to think of our budget also. We bring a smaller contingent than what you see at home. This is difficult to adapt but we have all learnt to both play the music and to dance. We can swap roles seamlessly. It's necessary if you have a small group – but they are very committed to their training, so that's good.

***As I understand, Chhau is traditionally not a proscenium performance? Do you have to adapt?***

No, it's not. We have to adapt it a little bit but it's not too difficult. It's an open air dance, which is performed in a space which has three open sides and one closed side. On the proscenium, it's three closed and one open. Besides, you are not allowed to turn your back on the spectators. So we tweak the entries and exits and remain conscious of facing one side only.

***How long have you been associated with Chhau?***

For many generations. I am the fifth generation of Chhau performers in our family. My son is the sixth generation. We understand Chhau as something that is part of our family. It is handed down from one generation to the next and whether we are interested in it or not, we consider it our responsibility to carry on the tradition. By hook or by crook.

In India that is how things used to be. People would pass on their skills to the next generation. Crafts developed within families, who considered it their duty to their forefathers to take the craft forward. I see ourselves as stakeholders. Chhau has such a rich tradition: it is the same tradition but each generation has done something new, brought in some new influence. The current form of Chhau is largely the work of my grand-uncle, Kalicharan Acharya. Because he was like a creator, the Maharaja gave him the title of Brahma. So he came to be known as

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Kali Brahma.

After me, I would want my son to take it forward. *Yeh hamari haq hai*. I have done nothing else in my life. I travel between Delhi and Saraikella. I perform at various places with my troupe. I have quit 3 jobs because of this! I cannot survive without this. I wanted to do an MA, but we were hard up. People ask me why I came into this line, and I have just one answer. *Yeh karna hi hoga*.

[*In the interview which appears in The Face behind the Mask (2015), he recalls sleeping on railway platforms and washing dishes at hotels to earn his keep in the initial years after leaving home. He was one of seven siblings. Gradually he found his calling and never looked back.*]

***But you can't ignore the economic conditions, right? If someone feels they can earn a better living somewhere...?***

That's the difference now. This is a problem all three styles of Chhau are facing right now. Jagru Mahato never questioned that he was to be a Chhau dancer. His father was a Chhau dancer, so it was imperative that he too is a Chhau dancer. Same with me. I had to do it. Did we find it easy? No. The struggle was long and hard. The problem now is that there are too many distractions. Our future generation is not as patient. They want to earn a quick buck somewhere. That's not how you keep a tradition alive, you know. It requires commitment. It requires you to identify with the tradition and to take pride in being its stakeholder.

***Like you said, your ancestors have left their marks on the tradition of Chhau. Do you think there is an "ideal form," which is "corrupted" by Classical influence, as some people say?***

Absolutely not. You see, Chhau began in 1205 AD in Singhbhoom under Raja Bikram Singh. It has spread over the centuries across 46 different kingdoms. This territory existed before the states we know today were born. Many forms of martial dance are derived out of the traditions that developed here. Children of these places are born into traditions – like languages, like lifestyles, dance is also a way of life specific to each community, and our children learn that. It becomes

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their own.

Now people say there is a difference between the classical and the folk. That we have borrowed from classical dances. Now you tell me, which comes first: practical or scriptural?

### ***Practical?***

Yes. In Chhau the physique is the main thing. No other dance in India is as physical as Chhau. None of the great masters of Chhau bothered much with Bharata's *Natyashastra*. Gambhir Singh Mura, who won the Padma Shri, probably never read the text. Now where would he find this influence from?

It is true that Chhau shares certain features with classical dances: our varied kinds of *gati* exist also in classical forms. The *chari mandala* likewise. But the point is that, Bharata was also looking at something and writing about it. He wasn't laying down the law based on abstract ideas. So I like to think that we too have taken similar lessons by looking at things.

What we also need to remember is that the knowledge of Chhau has never been written down. It has passed from one generation to the next orally. I'd also like to point out that the Sangeet Natak Academy has done away with the distinction between "classical" and "folk." We are currently categorised under "major traditions," which includes not just dance but also theatre and music.

***I'm very happy to hear that. But it's more than just an oral tradition, isn't it? There's more to Chhau than the physicality – the masks, for instance.***

Yes, of course. The masks are an essential part of Saraikella and Purulia Chhau. The Mayurbhanj tradition does not use masks.

***In urban centres more people have seen the masks than performances. Does this seem strange?***

Well, there are different types of masks. In Saraikella, one type is for performance, another is for decoration. They are made by other makers.



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***How are they different?***

The material is different. The expressions – in performance, we have four kinds of expressions – are also different.

The mask, in fact, defines the relationship between the performer and the character he is playing. Earlier, the masks used to have ears and necks. Nowadays, they are just the face and the headgear. The neck movement is also very important in Chhau. The relationship between the performer's body and the face depends on the movement of the neck.

What I have realised is that when I put on the mask, something remarkable happens. I lose my sense identity. That is what Chhau is about in Saraikella. I lose my identity and become someone completely different. When you watch a Chhau performance, you don't say "That's Shashadhar Acharya playing Bhim." You say, "That's Bhim." How I physically interpret the character is up to me, of course, but the spectator can forget about the human actors.

***Sir, thank you for taking the time to explain these points to me.***

Thank you. Please ask me if you have any other questions.

**FIELD NOTES**

My engagement with "folk" cultures has largely been through voluntary work with the Save Gurusaday Museum project, which is an effort a few of us undertook in early 2018 to help the Kolkata-based museum after its central government funding lapsed. Mine is not a disciplined, methodical engagement with folk studies and I have always chosen to err on the side of caution, in an effort to be as unobtrusive as possible in my interactions with practitioners who occasionally work at the museum and traditions. The one significant question I have grappled with continuously, informing myself through the work of Roma Chatterji and Frank Korom in particular in the meanwhile, is to do with the seemingly perennial claim made by urban mediators of "discovering" or "rediscovering" folk traditions from the brink of mass cultural amnesia. But let me share an anecdote about an image that I recall from my first uninformed forays into documenting

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endangered cultures.

In early 2013, I was volunteering for a research project at the School of Cultural Texts and Records, Jadavpur University, which aimed to document and study the physical cultures of Bengal, i.e. living traditions of martial and bodily practice that existed since before organised sport. While doing our initial survey, we had come across a slim volume on a martial dance form of Bengal, titled *Banglar Bir Joddha Raibenshe* [The brave warriors of Bengal: Raibenshe] written by Gurusaday Dutt. A distinguished member of the Indian Civil Services, Dutt had been at the forefront of undivided Bengal's "folk revival" between the 1920s and '40s, when he had ample opportunity to travel through the districts collecting samples of art and handicrafts. In most cases, these were living traditions, which had continued to flourish in places that remained relatively immune to colonial market forces.

If at all these traditions were "forgotten," as Dutt claimed, or indeed in danger of being forgotten, it was only in the consciousness of the urban elite, usually upper-class and Western educated. Despite the problematic cultural position of this revivalist movement, Dutt did succeed in archiving rare samples of textile—particularly *kantha*-s, or hand-embroidered sheets usually made of used material, *patachitra*, or scroll paintings that accompanied the songs sung by itinerant performers, designs of ritual wall and floor decorations, stone and clay moulds for making sweetmeats, terracotta tiles from temples, and various other objects. In addition, Dutt also claimed to have "discovered" a number of dance forms, which include Jhumur, Dhali and Raibenshe. He was an exceptionally sensitive archivist for his time, quite often noting the names of the persons who produced the works of art and recording them for posterity, and even offering them roles in shaping his Bratachari movement (Bengal's response to the Boy Scouts).

It was, however, in his revaluation of the living traditions that Dutt's cultural politics became starkly evident. His "discovery" of the

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Raibenshe—a form he had heard of and read about—happened during “folk dance” *mela* that had been organised in his honour in Birbhum in the early 1930s. When their turn came, the Raibenshe performers, dressed in elaborate costumes, danced as they were wont to—Dutt repeatedly uses adjectives that are synonymous with “sensual” and “effeminate” to describe the experience. Angered by this apparently diluted form of what was supposed to be a martial tradition, Dutt is said to have cracked his whip on the red earth of Birbhum and ordered the performers to show him the “real” Raibenshe. As most of the dancers cowered, Ramapada Pramanik, set aside his costume and started the whirlwind, or *palosh*. When the cloud dust raised by his *tandav* had settled, Gurusaday Dutt exclaimed, “This! This is the real Raibenshe.” He later gave Ramapada Pramanik the title of Professor (at the time a commonplace for physical culturists in Britain as well), and went about writing a martial history of the Raibenshe, which had all but disappeared under populist adaptations of costume and make-up, only to be remembered by this one true bearer of the noble legacy.

When we met Madhab Pramanik, Ramapada Pramanik’s grandson, we wanted to learn the real story of the Raibenshe. We expected this narrative would exist as subtext, as part of community memory as opposed to written historical record, and it was up to us (literature students turned amateur ethno-historians) to tease it out through the cracks. We asked Madhab-da if he remembers his early days or stories that his elders may have shared. “Yes, of course,” he replied. “I’ll tell you all about it.” He left the *dalaan*, where he had seated us, went into his room and came out with a laminated copy of Gurusaday Dutt’s *Banglar Bir Joddha Raibenshe* and started reading from the section that spoke of the author’s “discovery” of Ramapada Pramanik. That image of his triumphant reappearance with the book in hand made my heart sink at first, but later I realised that for better or for worse, these “forgotten” traditions continue to live and breathe despite absorbing many such urban interventions that have tried to mould the peripheral narratives in accordance with the centre’s cultural aspirations.

## THE USES OF TRADITION

In theory, the practice of a performance tradition and the literature on it could remain separate and insular. The practice of the form continues through a community's embodied tradition and memory, unaffected by what is written about it. It does not necessarily become static, since it can evolve through internal and external influences without verbal mediation. But in fact, this insularity is non-existent. The literature on a "folk" form usually emerges at a point when the tradition encounters more mainstream cultural and economic forces. The writers and mediators who help contextualise the form are representatives of these hegemonic institutions, appropriating the narratives of the Other in order to further specific political agendas that they may have. They may be self-aware of being part of broader projects—such as Gurusaday Dutt's position as a proponent of a regional identity (Bengali) within the rubric of the broader nationalist movement—or they could see themselves as disinterested cultural historians and activists who are, nonetheless, able to produce a verbal and historical discourse.

Many of these forms are supposed to have received royal patronage in times gone by, falling on difficult times due to the modern economic transformations that accompanied colonialism. Unable to enter new forms of patronage or, indeed, an anonymous marketplace for performative arts, they develop only by responding to local cultural aspirations as opposed to urban tastes. Consequently, they enter into a cycle of being perpetually "discovered" by the cultural elite (usually Savarna mediators) and being remembered afresh each time for the values and traditions they embody, uncorrupted by urban influences. This was true of Chhau when Ashutosh Bhattacharya started writing about them in the mid-twentieth century, and it has continued by and large to the present day.

In the late 1960s and '70s the Films Division produced a series of documentaries, which continued in the same vein as Bhattacharya: "But alas! It is tending to slip away from its creative moorings and



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is being swamped by the waves of vulgarity,” laments the narrator of *Chhau Dance of Mayurbhanj* (1968). “It needs to be protected and nourished.” The anxiety about corruption accompanies this saviour complex as it almost invariably fails to distinguish between insidious ways in which cultural mediators influence performance histories and the decisions made by the performing communities voluntarily. The literature speaks of them in the third person, denying them agency. In 1971 playwright John Arden had witnessed a Chhau performance in Purulia, where he noted that “for the benefit of all the audience, they [the performers] imperceptibly metamorphosed their act into a proscenium arch display, pointing everything at the academics—maybe they didn’t even realise they were doing it.”

Julie Hollander, writing in 2007, referred to this perceptive yet symptomatic passage, to add that when she witnessed a Saraikella Chhau performance, the Chief Minister of Jharkhand had assured them in Hindi that they were witnessing a tribal dance form. She remarks on the irony of using Hindi as opposed on of the regional languages and notes: “Yet when we take a walk through the crowd, we discover the tribal people busy admiring Yamaha motorbikes and watching television soaps.” Once again, we see an oddly static idea of what “tribal” means in contemporary India, and a somewhat lazy cultural criticism of adaptations (and indeed political affiliations) of Chhau which are, perhaps, necessary for their survival. This problematises the curator’s position considerably because given the cultural valuation of the role, it is next to impossible to stand outside this politically fraught tradition of the cultural mediator. Even if they consciously shed the connotation of being the caretaker or custodian of an artwork or form, the implication of being someone in charge of selecting a set of performances, also implies an act of mediation, where someone with an deep understanding of a tradition can represent for a wider audience what they consider are the most appropriate, if not best, examples. In most cases, it falls upon an established performer usually from a “major” tradition to curate another “major” or a “minor” tradition. Can we hope for a time when the reverse becomes equally prevalent? Perhaps. During her tenure as



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Chairperson of Sangeet Natak Akademi, Leela Samson promoted the use of the terms “major” and “minor” traditions, as “a way of getting out of the superior claim made by the classical and folk.” In recent years, scholars (such as Chatterji), activists and organisations (such as Banglanatak dot com) working with performance traditions are more sensitive of the implications of these encounters and are careful to avoid the trap of exoticising traditions and narrativising them from outsiders’ points-of-view. In specific cases it would appear the subaltern is finding a space to articulate their own histories (Bankim Mahato writing in the late ’70s was an exception), not as preservers of authentic and static practices but as practitioners of evolving traditions.

A similar argument in favour of the traditional view is often expressed about the selective commodification of “folk” forms. The scroll paintings of the Patachitra tradition, which are only a part of a story-telling performance, or the masks of Chhau, often find their places in the living rooms of the urban middle and upper-middle classes as metonymic symbols of their association with “folk” cultures. While it is important to remember that they evolved with performance traditions—story telling, dance, or theatre—it is difficult to argue against this practice, given their relationship vis-à-vis the market. Many artists continue to earn their livelihood simply by making masks that cater to the different sizes of shelves and showcases in urban households. Perhaps, like the masks of the Italian Commedia dell’arte, they will remain as isolated but independent traditions, burdened with the silent memory of endangered or extinct traditions, detached from their roots.

## AFTERWORD

Given the troubled relationship between the “folk” arts (starting with its very nomenclature), the history of cultural mediation, valuation of art forms, and the market, it is important to remain alert to the power dynamics that come into play during any performance. The showcasing of “minor” traditions at national and international art festivals must surely be a step in the right direction, given the implausibility of recovering the organic totalities that have been lost. When I spoke to Samson, she rightly pointed out that it is not a binary relationship between what used to be known as “folk” and “classical.” “What about the martial arts, the ritualistic forms, the tribal, the religious etc?,” she asks. “I see no problem in contemplating a democratic order.” Even though she expresses her preference for a brilliant Kalbelia performance over a mediocre Bharatanatyam recital, Samson maintains that traditions are “differently coded” in terms of “depth, nuance, and philosophy.” “It is a journey,” she says wistfully, “an ongoing one that only artists can themselves eschew and re-name, if you like.”

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