

## The empowerment of rural women through masked dance theater: A study of Mitali Chhau Maldih Mahila Dal, India

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### Abstract

The Purulia district of West Bengal, India, is a rural region consistently recording high crime rates against women. Consequently, the women in this area are subjected to extreme forms of subjugation and repression. They are even restricted from actively participating in most cultural expressions and rituals, an embargo upheld for generations. Purulia *Chhau*, the district's century-old traditional masked dance theater expression, had thus never permitted women performers within its fold. However, with the dawn of urbanization and education, as life in Purulia gradually transformed over the past decade, some women started questioning and challenging their social suppression, using innovative means. Utilizing Purulia Chhau as an evocative conduit to disseminate their egalitarian contention, Mitali Chhau Maldih Mahila Dal is a first-of-its-kind women's performance troupe that has defied the archaic community norms that forbade women from participating in cultural events. Triangulating inductive-iterative methods of ethnography with social semiotics, this study traces the rebellious/ confrontational stance of these women performers, against the social conventions that forbid their involvement—as a statement of their non-conformity and protest not just against cultural exclusion, but in the larger context challenging their overall subjugation in various facets of everyday life. Furthermore, the study also identifies how, apart from defying the restrictions imposed on them, these women have also ensured utilizing the anecdotes of women's empowerment from within the mythological narratives of Goddess Durga and Kali to justify their desires. An innovative pitch ensuring religious logic is resourcefully framed to sensitize the devout male audiences otherwise engaged in *devi* worship. Moreover, apart from unearthing the struggles of these women performers in negotiating the coercion, threats, and other gender-based impediments, the role of Purulia Chhau as a potent communication medium empowering their dissent is also revealed through this study.

**Keywords:** gender, traditional masked dance, empowerment, Purulia, Bengal, Hinduism

## Introduction

The cultural landscape of India provides a diverse set of performance-based expressions that have transcended several generations. A manifestation of the social, cultural, economic, and religious verve of the people, they continue to resonate with the everyday life and struggles of the people. As the trajectory of their development consistently reflected the evolution of their mother society, it was not just the religious negotiations, cultural infusions, enculturation, and acculturation that were echoed but also the transitions, strife, revolutions, and class struggles. Having preserved a seminal space within the ritualistic itinerary of tribal societies, these expressions continue to exist as substantial meaning-making conduits enabling the hermeneutic and phenomenological processes that shape the distinct regional context, character, and identity of the local people.

Furthering Durkhiem's (1995) functionalist perspectives, which established "collective consciousness" as the shared way of understanding the world, James Carey, in his (2009) *Communication as Culture*, recognized commonness, communion, and community as the construction of a symbolic reality, which represents, maintains, adapts and shares the beliefs of society in time. Acknowledging "rituals" as the process that enables and enacts social transformation, Carey considerably upheld the acts of involvement, participation, association, and fellowship, thus ensuring the scope for various anthropological connotations. Reflecting this phenomenon, apart from the institutionalized classical arts of India, the numerous ritualistic "folk expressions" (dance, music, theatre, puppetry, paintings, amongst others) significantly represent the earthen spirit, diversity, and vibe of the regional communities at the grass-root level. Given the localized cultural settings (Geertz, 1973), they are varied as per regional contexts, though. Also, many of these have evolved into composite forms in the course of their advancement, infusing with each other either to survive or to express their narratives with greater power of significance. However, the common thread that binds most such expressions is "Hindu mythology," performed as per specific ritualistic itineraries.

*Chhau*<sup>1</sup> is one such prominent folk media form in the Adivasi areas in the Indian states of West Bengal, Jharkhand, and Odisha, bordering each other. Amongst the three corresponding regional variants (i.e., Purulia Chhau, Seraikella Chhau, and Mayurbhanj Chhau), Purulia Chhau stands out from the rest in its use of large evocative masks and elaborate costumes (Tsubaki & Richmond, 1990). In fact, the liberal use of masks of gods and demons, conversations between religious and anthropomorphic characters in the narrative, extensive use of imaginative colors, mythological overtones, and extravagant

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<sup>1</sup> Chhau is a semi classical Indian dance with martial and folk traditions.

imagery all add to the preponderance of the religious and sacred nature of the masked dance theatre (Figure 1).

*Figure1*

*Photograph of a Purulia Chhau performance in Palma village (Personal Collection, 2021)*



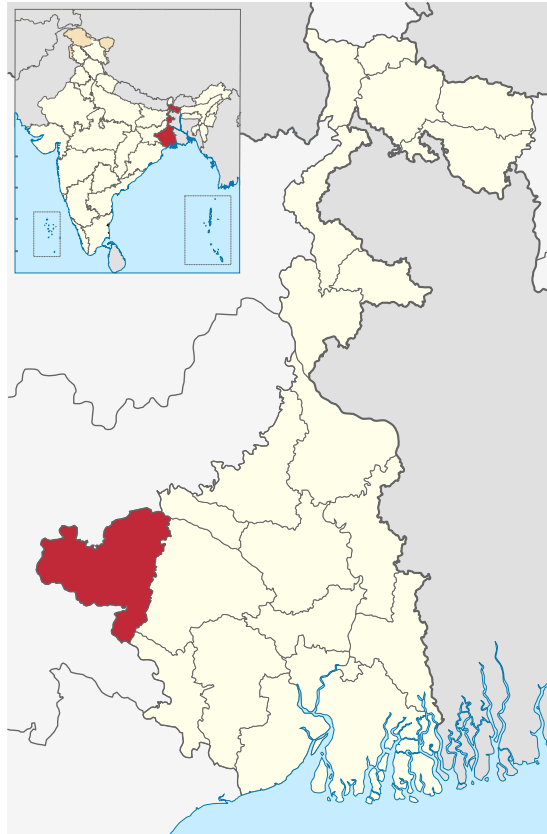
Over the past decade, though, apart from religious meaning-making, Purulia Chhau has also been utilized to disseminate social, political, development-centric, and even revolutionary narratives. Re-contextualizing the religious characters and scripts from the Ramayana, Mahabharata and other Hindu texts so as to enforce their contentions, Purulia Chhau has thus emerged to become an influential conduit not just mirroring the religious, but also the social-cultural negotiations affecting the everyday life of the local people. Now recognized as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity (UNESCO, 2010), Purulia Chhau, as the name suggests, is thus representative of the people of the rural district of Purulia in West Bengal, India, unlike the other variants.

Purulia is a rural region consistently recording high crime rates against women. As per NCRB data, in 2016, whereas West Bengal ranked second in India with 32,513 cases of crime against women accounting for 9.6% of all such cases in India (Singh, 2017), the Purulia district and its neighboring regions within the state contributed to around 10 per-

cent of all these crimes. Furthermore, given that 45% of the population of Purulia is constituted by marginalized tribal communities, low caste Hindus, and Muslims, the people here live in a situation outlined as Nurkse's (1953) "vicious circle of poverty" and Nelson's (1956) "low level equilibrium trap" (Daripa, 2018, p. 729).

**Figure 2**

*Location of Purulia in West Bengal (India) (Wikimedia Commons, 2021)*



As attested to by various scholars, violence against women has been a persistent problem in the state of West Bengal in India. As revealed by Biswas & Chatterjee's (2023) study that engaged in a logistical analysis of extensive data collected across Bengal over the past few years, 69.68% of all the study respondents (married women) have suffered some form of domestic violence in the course of their lifetime. Accentuating the socio-demographic, socio-cultural, and situational factors contributing to the violence and domestic abuse of the women, the traditional male-dominated structure of Bengal was found to be the core underlying cause of the problem. The works of Alam et al. (2021) in terms of the justification of wife beating in Bangladesh (603 kilometers from Purulia) also underscores the male-dominated social structure amongst Bengali communities in this regard. Furthermore, Ackerson and Subramanian's (2008) study in the context of malnutrition amongst women and children in India, as well as Golder's (2016) study on domestic violence based on National Family Health Surveys of India, considerably es-

tablished that the issue of gender-based discrimination, oppression, exploitation, and violence as major causes of concern, especially in rural India. Such structures are keenly enforced by the tribal community elders of Purulia, an area mostly inhabited by societies with predominantly patrilineal kinship and male dominance in the public spheres of life. Formal education being largely inaccessible in the region has further worsened the situation for the women here, who are subjected to extreme forms of subjugation and repression in their everyday lives. In this regard, the works of Sarkar (2010), as well as Biswas et al. (2022) surveying 1201 women in the rural areas of Bengal (including Purulia), have considerably deliberated upon the problem, its types, and causes.<sup>2</sup> Amongst various other discriminatory practices, the women of Purulia are restricted from actively participating in most cultural expressions and rituals in the region: an embargo upheld for generations. Purulia Chhau had thus never permitted women performers within its fold. Therefore, the establishment of Mitali Chhau Maldih Mahila Dal, a first-of-its-kind village-based women's Chhau performance troupe, was a striking development in 2014. Gradually emerging as icons resonating with the empowerment aspirations of numerous rural women across the region, the troupe had to defeat consistent dissuasions ever since.

Gender is not given, but it is always generated in a particular social and cultural environment (Strathern, 1991). Invoking socio-economic hierarchy and inequalities that intersect at various levels, gender-based inequality faced by women and girls generates various barriers in their everyday lives, such as lack of access to decision-making, restrictions on mobility, no access to education, and discriminatory attitudes of communities, amongst others, (World Health Organization, nd). Overcoming gender-biased impediments such as coercions, threats, and other violent repercussions, the women's troupe has genuinely delivered an iconoclastic voice to the suffering rural women, empowered by their gender identity itself (women). Apart from upholding a powerful statement of their dissent through defying the cultural restrictions on performance, they have also managed to utilize the anecdotes of women's empowerment from within the mythological narratives of Goddess Durga, Kali, and other folk goddesses of the region to effectively appeal to the spiritual/ ethical sense of the devout male-dominated audiences, otherwise engaged in devi (goddess) worship.

As there have been various studies in regard to folklore (Vatsyayan, 2016; Pani, 2000) and the use of "folk media for social development" (Das, 2013; Sandgren, 2010) in India,

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<sup>2</sup> The types of violence can be classified in six groups – 1) Verbal Abuse, 2) Threats, 3) Neglect, Isolation, Control and Spiritual Abuses, 4) Economic Exploitation, 5) Physical Assault and 6) Sexual Assault (Biswas et al., 2022).

considerable focus was provided upon Purulia Chhau (Bhattacharya, 2011; Chatterjee, 2004; Bhattacharya, 1972; Arden, 1971). Then, given the recent emergence of the aspect of Purulia Chhau as a conduit for “women’s empowerment,” an unexplored opportunity arrived. Recognized as a significant singularity during the engagements pursuant to my doctoral study, an inductive-iterative approach, as prescribed by O’Reilly (2012) ensured valuable insights. Triangulating inductive-iterative methods of ethnography with social semiotics, this study traces the rebellious/ confrontational stance framed by these women performers, deconstructs their statement of resistance in terms of social negotiations, and identifies the difficulties faced by them in the process.

### **The women Chhau artists of Maldih village: An ethnographic inquiry**

At the onset, it is important to mention that I am an ethnographer who has undertaken various research pursuits in Purulia over the past five years. I am fluent in the specific dialect spoken here, and I am authoring my Ph.D. thesis focused on the people of this region and their cultural expressions. Despite being past the liminal period of achieving acceptance amongst the locals, I have ensured a non-partisan and reflexive approach throughout the study. Thus, my interpretations are learned, experienced, and scientific, subject to the criterion of fallibility, as is the case of such qualitative studies.<sup>3</sup> Photographs I captured during my field visits are also showcased in this paper. In the course of the previous year-long fieldwork (five phases in 2020-21) adhering to the ritualistic calendar of the people of Purulia, 29 villages had been accessed within a 45 km radius around the centrally located Purulia town. Using a motorcycle to reach the interiors (villages located in the forest lands) guided by locals - a representative sample set encompassing performance troupes, eminent Chhau artists, community elders, and audiences had already been engaged with. Emerging from these discernments, it was notably unearthed that apart from the religious aspects, cultural negotiations, and other influencing factors – a revolutionary dimension of “women’s empowerment” had extraordinarily surfaced over the past decade as a significant facet that necessitated special attention. Gathering initial information with respect to the unusually popular/ infamous “women’s troupe” Mitali Chhau Maldih Mahila Dal that had arisen in defiance of the established male-oriented traditions in the region, I set out on a scholarly pursuit centered upon this issue. To provide an authentic manifest of this immersive, field-based,

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<sup>3</sup> Seale (1999) prescribes the criterion of fallibility, that the findings are true and reliable, as long as evidence to the contrary is not found (as cited in O’ Reilly, 2012, p. 226).

exploratory experience, the study has been descriptively presented in its entirety – the scholar’s diary.

To reach Maldih, the 30-km journey from Purulia town took around two hours due to the difficult off-road journey that had to be accessed about 20 minutes into the trip. Accompanied by community elder Moloy Chowdhury, I entered a winding road within the forests, deviating off National Highway 18 and bypassing a central village named Boro Urma on the way. Maldih is a village with a heterogeneous population of 400 comprising indigenous tribes such as Mura, Bhumij, and Adivasis, as well as Hindus of all castes. A lowland village, the fertile soil around this area ensured that most of the villagers were farmers following the harvest cycle in regard to their daily lives. As we reached the outskirts of the village, a forest grove appeared beside the adjoining Kumari River. From amidst the trees, the sounds of a drum playing an aggressive rhythm emerged. As we made our way through the numerous trees, the rhythm kept growing louder to finally reach a pulsating volume that seemed to resemble the sound of a thunderous storm (*kal baisakhi*), common in the region during the Bengali month of Baisakh (April 15 to May 14, as per the English calendar).

As we emerged into a clearing surrounded by the trees, we saw a group of young girls moving synchronically to the rhythm, in the gait of warriors brandishing spears and swords in their hands. Their motion was circumambulatory around a central woman who seemed to be battling with the rest of the group. Her face exuberated an ambitious/passionate vibe laced with melodramatic expressions of bravery and vigor; her enlarged eyes sincerely emanating the texture of a *devi* (goddess) as is described and depicted in the vast pantheon of goddesses in Hindu scriptures. She was Mousumi Chowdhury, the first female Purulia Chhau artist, and daughter of Chhau Guru<sup>4</sup> Jagannath Chowdhury. Apart from the actors, an old man with long white hair was playing a rusted blue *dham-sa*,<sup>5</sup> seated on a mat. Casually dressed in a shirt and dhoti, he was accompanied by a young man in similar attire playing a *rosun chowki*.<sup>6</sup> The loud thunderous sound of the *dham-sa* somehow failed to drown the high-pitched sound of the *rosun chowki* and was essentially complementary to each other in regards to their texture.

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<sup>4</sup> A Chhau Guru is an exponent and master with numerous disciples.

<sup>5</sup> Dham-sa is a drum-like instrument.

<sup>6</sup> A Dhoti is a traditional wrap-around cloth, covering the lower part of the body. A Rosun Chowki is a small sized bone-carved wind blown instrument with a rubber outer-coating. It resembles a miniature shehnai.

Given that most of my previous observations of Purulia Chhau had always been of characters wearing masks and costumes, the facial expressions of the actors beneath the masks warranted a considerable impact triggered by the histrionic efforts of these women. Despite the absence of the suggestive masks, it was evident from their facial expressions that the central character was depicting a goddess, whereas the antagonistic expressions of the surrounding others clenching their teeth were depicting demons. The actors were moving in the steps of an exaggerated military march with their arms held out to make their shoulders seem broad. The swords and spears were blunt props so as to avoid any injuries. The demonstration by the group took place in a circle of 18 children who watched the proceedings with a focused gaze. Boys and girls from neighboring villages aged between 10 and 20 years were attendees at the Chhau workshop (*karmashala*) being conducted. As we approached, Mousumi called for a break from the proceedings and was seated (center), surrounded by some of her teammates, students, and younger sister (also a performer in a yellow t-shirt), for our interaction (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

*Showcasing Mousumi with some of her teammates and students (Personal Collection, 2021)*



Mousumi introduced herself with a confident namaskar (respectful greeting gesture) and reaffirmed that she is a 24-year-old female Chhau artist who leads Mitali Chhau Maldih Mahila Dal, the first all-women Chhau troupe. A performance unit within her father's iconic Chhau group Mitali Chhau Maldih includes 15 female performers who enact the performances wearing masks and costumes. The musical instruments are, however, played by men. Although another female team (Jambad Pancha Mukhi Mahila Chhau Nritya Samiti, led by Aparna Mahato from Jambad village) had recently emerged



in Purulia as well, Mousumi's team was the pioneer in this regard. Since her first performance in 2014 at the Nimdih village in the neighboring state of Jharkhand, as Mousumi became a regular performer (over 200 shows) in the villages of Purulia, she and her family had to face various challenges and hardships. As the community elders raised questions about breaking the age-old norms that bar women from doing any form of theatre on stage, others raised questions in regard to their safety at the performance venues of the interior villages, especially since the audiences consume alcohol and the performances happen at night. Changing their clothes and putting on masks and costumes were also problematic issues due to the absence of any enclosed rooms for artists at the akharas.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, apart from being accused of religious blasphemy, political pressure echoing the public dissent also supervened. But then, despite the mounting pressures, she and her family remained adamant about their aspirations. As Mousumi proudly explained:

It is actually from a religious point of view that the audiences finally have come to realize that Goddess Durga is a mother who resides within women such as us. If Durga is to remain a symbol of women's empowerment, the women in the villages must be empowered. In any case, no man can ever emulate her feminine grace. It is only when girls like us enact the goddess that her true character/ soul is embedded and established. In the tradition of conducting *Kumari Puja*<sup>8</sup> on *Ash-tami*<sup>9</sup> during the *Durgotsav* (religious festival), a girl child is worshipped by senior monks as a manifestation of Goddess Durga. Can it ever be a boy who can be used instead of a little girl? Thus, in our case, the logic is similar. We have thus embodied the masked character of Goddess Durga as an authentic representation, even from a religious perspective.

Traditionally, even in other theatre forms of West Bengal, such as Jatra, it is the men who dress up as *sakhis*<sup>10</sup> to enact the female characters of the script. In the case of their group, the set of women actors not only enact the women characters such as Durga, Radha; amongst others, but also the male warrior characters such as Mahishasur and even Gods such as Krishna and Shiva: a role reversal within the male-dominated expression. In this regard, I asked her a question comparative to my conversation with the *Ustad* (expert) of

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<sup>7</sup> Akharas are centrally located elevated grounds in villages, evened out to host performances surrounded by seated audiences.

<sup>8</sup> Kumari Puja is the ritual of worshipping a little girl (above eight years old before she attains puberty) decorated as a manifestation of Goddess Durga.

<sup>9</sup> Ashtami is the eighth day of the Durga Puja festival.

<sup>10</sup> Sakis are cross-dressers ensuring effeminate kinesics.

another popular Chhau team (Polma Shakti Sangha Chhau Nritya Party) that I had earlier studied Giassuddin Ansari. As Ansari had revealed, when a masculine warrior-based character such as Mahishasur is enacted, a powerful thrust must be generated in terms of the *angikabhinaya* (kinesics). For example, every time Mahishasur puts down his leg, it should be with so much pressure that it makes the earth move beneath his feet, throwing dust into the air. How do you cope with the treatment of such vigorous male characters? Mousumi answered:

Under the guidance of my father, Jagannath, who was famous for his rendition of Mahishasur, and with rigorous practice, our rendition of the masculine demon is equally promising. We try to raise our legs higher so as to land on the ground harder. We actually jump to greater heights, given our lighter weight, and land on our knees. Earlier, it used to hurt, but now our bodies have become seasoned for this. Despite this, if our renditions are insufficient compared to male performers, we make up for it in our performances of female characters such as Goddess Durga, which the men could never match. When I perform with my father's troupe (Mitali Chhau Maldih), we women play female characters, whereas the men perform the male characters. This is ideal from a technical standpoint. But then, performing as an all-women team is a symbol of women's empowerment, a "statement" we want to depict and stand by. It is our priority to send this message to the people.

Mousumi then went on to describe that amongst the various *rasas* (emotions) expressed in Purulia Chhau, the *bir rasa* that depicts bravery and valor is most significant as per the popular performed narratives. Narratives such as Mahishasur Mardini and Tarakasur Bodh, amongst many, are totally based on this *bir rasa*. Given that the *rasa* can only be manifested if the actor actually feels the emotion (apart from their team training with swords and shields since their childhood and genuinely acquiring the skills associated with Purulia Chhau), the emotions of valor and bravery have considerably emerged from their real-life struggles against violence, discrimination, and subjugation; amongst others, she described. Given that the expressions of the masks are fixated, the *bhavas* (nonverbal expressions) must be depicted through the appropriate technique but sincerely emerging from within.

As the face is covered by the mask and cannot be used to express, the movement of every other part of the body must collaboratively depict the emotions and actions. For example, when Mahishasur enters the arena, his masculinity and power must exuberate from the sudden movements of the legs, hands, and shoul-

ders, as well as through acrobatic vaults (*baji*) and aerial rotations (*pak*). The actions of Goddess Durga must be graceful and feminine yet valiant and strong. Each character has its own set of *angikabhinaya* (kinesics). *Angabhangi* (body acting) also plays a critical role in Chhau compared to other performance forms because facial gestures, movement of the eyes, and face paintings are detached from this art.

Mousumi then went on to mention that she had learned the proper techniques not just from her father, Jaggannath Chowdhury, but also from other Chhau gurus such as Kartik Singh Mura (son of Padmashree Gambhir Singh Mura), Baghambar Singh and Binoydar Kumar. They regularly visit Maldih from their respective villages to conduct special classes for the workshops (*karmashalas*) organized by their team, funded by Banglanatak.com, a non-governmental organization supporting rural culture and livelihoods.

On being asked as to which are the palas (narratives) that their team usually performs and why, she said that amongst the various enactments such as Abhimanyu Bodh and Kirat Arjun, they are most popular for their rendition of Mahishasur Mardini in which she plays the goddess Durga. This is a narrative in which Durga, who is the mother goddess and wife of Lord Shiva, travels across realms to slay the powerful demon king Mahishasur, accompanied by her children Ganesha, Kartik, Saraswati, and Lakshmi, at the behest of all the other *devotas*.<sup>11</sup> In their case, this is the most relevant narrative that truly resonates with their cause of breaking free from the shackles of gender-based subjugation and the association of women with weakness. Furthermore, within the narratives, she has also enacted male characters such as Ganesha, Kartik, Abhimanyu, and Mahishasur, as and when required. Her favorite male character rendered is Krishna. Sometimes, she has even had to portray both male and female characters in the same narrative. She mentions:

In a performance in Norway in 2018, I had enacted Durga as well as Mahishasur in the same performance of the *pala*<sup>12</sup>—Mahishasur Mardini, in which Durga is the protagonist and Mahishasur the antagonist.

This also serves as an ideal example of the local belief that the good and evil dichotomy is existent within the same person and manifests as per circumstance. As to which narrative shall be performed at which venue is however, decided by her father. Usually in vil-

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<sup>11</sup> Devtas are the numerous Gods of the Hindu pantheon.

<sup>12</sup> Pala means narrative.

lage programs, three palas of approximately one hour each are performed overnight whereas in urban settings, only one pala is performed that is abridged within 30 minutes.

Although in tomorrow's performance in the neighboring Balarampur town, we shall perform the Mahishasur Mardini pala; in our next outstation program in the city of Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh, to be held next month, we are going to debut a short new pala named Bharat Mata in which I shall be depicting the devi in character.<sup>13</sup> It is a Pauranic pala weaved into a script by my father. In the villages of Purulia, the Pauranic palas (religion-based narratives, most of which are adopted from the Vedas, Puranas, etc.) are much more popular than the Samajik palas (narratives based on social issues).

Mousumi completed her master's degree in Bengali from the Sidhukano University, situated in Purulia town, and acknowledged that her enhanced knowledge of localized religious narratives, such as Manasha Mangal and Chandi Mangal, which were part of the syllabus, considerably inspired her to ideate narratives for her future Chhau endeavors. Apart from her education evidently empowering her personality, it helped shape her aspirations, she admits. After traveling 60 km on a bicycle every day to reach her university, attend her classes, and return, she would then engage in rehearsals and performances, a "work-study balance" that her father ensured that she upheld. Rehearsals were organized accordingly, and performances were canceled during her exams.

After Mousumi's marriage was arranged in January 2021, she now resides in the Raghunathpur block of Purulia district, around 60 km away, in her husband's village, Pahargora. Her husband is a dancer in Bollywood (Indian film) based music and runs a dance school called Gurukul in his village. Although not associated with the Chhau tradition, Mousumi's husband and his family have pledged to support Mousumi's ambitions and allow/encourage her to travel back to her father's village every weekend, attend practice with her Chhau team, and return the next day. Mousumi admits that earlier, she could have practiced much more with her team and was more involved in the inception of the new narratives. She was then yet to perform in the month after her marriage.

Also seated beside Mousumi during this interview was her younger sister, Shyamoli Chowdhury, 21 years of age. She explained that after Mousumi's marriage, as she left for her in-law's home, the bulk of the responsibilities in regard to their unit were now

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<sup>13</sup> Bharat Mata is a personified deification of the republic of India, referred to as Bharat Mata (mother) in ancient scriptures.

Shyamoli's: "It was always a team effort, and each team member was prepared to take on each other's responsibilities as and when required. We are all-rounders."

When Mousumi is unavailable, Shyamoli plays the role of Goddess Durga in Mahishasur Mardini. Although the team is engaged in practice almost every day, Mousumi has only joined them on weekends since her marriage. Shyamoli was happy that her sister had always encouraged her to take her place and guided her in many ways beyond Chhau. Also, it was always Mousumi who countered against any insults they had to face for being women Chhau artists on everybody's behalf.

Mousumi explained that she was happy that her little sister did not have to face the insults that she faced during her initial days. She said that when she used to practice in the riverside forest groves, the community elders and even other women would sarcastically pass comments saying, "Hatt; ai biti chela gula abar Chhau nachbe. Ei sob cheleder kaaj. Bir ras laage. Kon din haath paa bhangbe ei sob korte giye. Bari jaa" (Stop it! You are a frail woman. Stop trying to act like men. Chhau requires warrior-like strength and valor. You will break your arms and legs if you keep trying. Go home). She had also faced sexual comments and catcalls at village performance venues, as some people in the audience are invariably drunk. More of a vicious brunt, though, has had to be faced by her father, Jagannath, who was abused and ostracized on various occasions. He is still shamed from time to time for living out of his daughter's earnings. In fact, the family was punitively excluded within their own community for being Brahmins (high caste Hindus) engaged as Purulia Chhau performers, a societal role traditionally suited for tribal and lower caste Hindu men.

But then, as Shyamoli yearningly clarified, in recent times, she has sensed a considerable turnaround. Apart from receiving support and encouragement from the audiences, the overall public sentiment has evolved over the years into considering them as exalted real-life manifests of devis. As devout followers of the devis themselves, the carefully selected "women-centric" narratives genuinely intensified the performing women's aspirations, enabling a spiritual catharsis within them as well, apart from invigorating the impact of the empowerment statement upon audiences. An ardent religious disciple, Shyamoli recently received much appreciation for enacting Goddess Kali in the pala—Raktashur Bodh. Furthermore, in the course of their trip to Norway, facilitated by the efforts of Banglanatok.com, they have made their village proud, thus becoming celebrities across the Purulia district ever since.

Shyamoli contended that people who pass lewd comments and also find fault in their performance belong to an archaic mindset that just cannot accommodate women into

realms that were traditionally male-dominated. Their comments were painful and discouraging. But then, the love for performing Chhau, laced with passion for the cause, has considerably buoyed the girls forward. Mousumi avowed this by reaffirming that the greater the discouragement, the harder they worked. They have now learned to utilize sarcastic insinuations as a motivation to trounce the dissenters.

Earlier, some people in my village used to say that I wouldn't be accepted for marriage because of my extroverted Chhau interests. I thus made it a point to invite them as well to my recent marriage into a family that is supportive of my art.

Shyamoli was, however, sad that they had not performed in the village programs for some time now. After some untoward incidents of lewd comments being passed, their father decided not to engage the female unit in the village performances of the night. But then, she lamented that it was most exciting to perform in the villages. It was a familiar ambiance in which they could feel the soil of the *akhara*<sup>14</sup> underneath their feet rather than wooden stages. It was a comfortable vibe.

In the villages, it feels as if we are performing at home. And moreover, after the audience set aside their apprehensions and forget that we are actually women beneath the masks, their cheers emerge louder, sans inhibitions. Villagers genuinely perceive the akhara like a temple in which Gods and Goddesses (the masked characters) appear. Thus emotions run high.

As our interaction ended, Shyamoli introduced the team of women Chhau artists and the roles they enact: Sarala (the Mahishasur expert), Konika (the Shiva expert), Kabita (more inclined towards the female characters), Milee (usually plays Ganesha and Kartik), Seema, Anima, Manju and sisters Anna and Mangali. Most of them were titled *Mahato*, indicating that they were from the Kurmi indigenous tribe. Mousumi and Shyamoli were titled *Chowdhury*, indicating that they were Hindu Brahmins (high caste). Shyamoli also introduced the group of eighteen students (boys and girls) who had come to attend the Chhau workshop being held that day.

Shyamoli mentioned that conducting workshops had emerged as a great source of income for the team after the lean period suffered during the Covid pandemic when there were no shows for nine months, so as to avoid social gatherings. They now earn around Rs 500 each per weekly workshop engagement. After our interaction, the women regrouped for the final session of the workshop, as I keenly observed (see Figures 4 and 5).

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<sup>14</sup> Akhara is a central village square or field.

*Figure 4*

*Showcasing Mousumi and her team conducting a Chhau workshop (Personal Collection, 2021)*



*Figure 5*

*Showcasing Mousumi and her team conducting a Chhau workshop (Personal Collection, 2021)*



### **Observations from the workshop**

Mousumi was a good communicator. She first explained the narrative before practically enacting it. Mousumi underscored that the blunted weapons used as part of the performances were now to be their ornaments rather than the usual jewelry worn in daily life that women tend to crave. She commented that the girls must look like warriors even

without using the ornaments (weapons). She provided references of where she had come to know of the narratives she was describing, ensuring credibility. As the students asked questions, she was a patient listener and responded to the point. As she enacted the narrative that she described, she was serious in her rendition as if in performance. Without a mask on, the expressions on her face were resonant to the *bhava* (body movement) and complimentary to the *rasa* (emotion) she was portraying. She constantly stressed the importance of bringing out the *rasa* (emotion). She also stressed spreading out the shoulders and holding her head high. Some of the other team members were co-instructors. As Sarala, Kabita, and Konika moved around amongst the seated children, checking their postures, Shyamoli stood beside Mousumi, following her moves. Facing Mousumi and Shyamoli, the children then lined up with adequate distance between them and began to emulate the postures being shown by Mousumi, just like in a karate/dance class. As the students maintained their posture and emulated the shoulder spread of Mousumi, it was evident that her spirit inspired them. Upon casual observation, the children seemed to be very talented. She reiterated: "The facial expressions are also very important, even though the performance will be masked. It establishes the emotion from within."

As the rhythm of the dhamsa was initiated, the emotions seemed to become more intense. As the pace was increased, the movements also became more vigorous. Mousumi instructed the students to focus on the music, as it was the key that stitched together the performance of each individual into a synchronized group effort. She underscored that music, dance, and theatre are the three primary components of Purulia Chhau, achieved through a collaborative, team-based rendition. She tasked the children to "stomp" their feet on the ground as hard as they could but together. As the students constantly failed to synchronize, Mousumi asked them to keep trying. She even scolded a few students for being half-hearted in their stomping. It was only when the children focused on the musical rhythm of the dhamsa that their legs could stomp down together. The synchrony was referred to as *mel naanch* by Mousumi, who pointed out that it was the rhythm of the warring drums that enabled an army to march in tandem. Just as soldiers march to a rhythm, the students were instructed to match Mousumi in her character-based march-walk, adhering to the beats of the dhamsa. Everyone had to ensure that there was a *mel* (uniformity) between all. In the end, Mousumi asked all the students to inquire further about the story of Durga and Mahishasur amongst their peers at home, as this would be enacted as a narrative in the next session of the workshop.



## Interpreting the insights

As the day's engagements ended and the group dispersed, I excused myself to pensively wander across the riverside lining the village, organizing my thoughts and notes. Aided in my interpretations by my earlier conversations with community elder Moloy Cowdhury, the relevant underlying contexts and cultural settings were constantly taken into account. As Mushengyezi (2003) elucidates:

since culture shapes the environment within which a message is decoded, indigenous media forms such as very specific performances—dance, music, drama, drums and horns, village criers, orators and storytellers—continue to present themselves as effective channels for disseminating messages in predominantly rural societies. (p. 108)

Over the decades, the “hybridization” and “cross-fertilization” of ideas have further triggered diverse intercultural infusions and innovations (Mushengyezi, 2003). In the context of Purulia, it is evident that the constant influx of urban tourists had significantly influenced the indigenous people of the region. As the urban women intermingled with their rural counterparts, a new world was introduced to them: one where Hindu women were empowered and free. Enthused by their dominance/parity with men in their interactions, perhaps the rural women found this showcase of smartness, independence, and knowledge considerably inspiring. Amongst them, given that Mousumi had been fortunate to receive an education and was supported by her father to travel to Purulia town every day, her nature and attitude had been shaped into an infused manifest—a transitory bridge between the urban and rural scenarios, unique amongst her counterparts. As Mousumi traveled long distances every day to achieve her education, her daily sixty-kilometer commute was utilized as time spent in ideating her resolve: time spent in framing a way to challenge societal norms, time spent in applying her education to empower herself and others.

As Paulo Freire, in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000), observed, despite their difficulties and hardships, poor people always keep silent. However, once they start to communicate through their folk/indigenous expressions to initiate change, it empowers the communities to create knowledge together through the process of concentricization and thus rise from a state of silence to a state of activity.<sup>15</sup> Thus, although typically local and culture-specific, expressions such as Purulia Chhau occupy a significant space in the determinative landscape of societies. In the context of Mousumi, communicating her

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<sup>15</sup> Concentricization is the process of the development of a critical awareness of one's social reality through reflection and action (Freire, 2000).

discontent through Purulia Chhau emerged as the most logical opportunity: a “medium” that could establish and amplify her dissent, an avenue to vent out her suppressed emotions and resonate with others.

As Mousumi’s performances across India and abroad further enhanced her personality and confidence, the rural women of the region invariably resolved to derive considerable motivation from her actions, as was revealed during some of my previous interactions with Uma, Ruhi, Sneha and Puja of Polma village in the Barabazar block, as well as Shiuli, Pritha, Lakshmi and Promita of Charida village in Balarampur block; amongst various others. Notably, Ira, a septuagenarian woman from Charida who has spent her entire life within its perimeters, also upheld utmost respect for the young Mousumi’s courage. Thus, in her efforts, Mousumi unequivocally emerged as an icon to a large number of rural women who have yet to break the shackles of social subjugation and earnestly looked up to her as a role model. It can be noted here that a later reflexive study that I conducted in July 2021 significantly conformed to the data collected during this ethnographic exercise at Maldih, thus enhancing the strength and replicability of this study through cross-verification and data saturation.

As I headed back to the village, I realized that evenings in the village were very social as the people gathered at the central fields and temples in groups. Although some engaged in gambling, playing cards, and drinking (across all age groups)—most people engaged in the chanting of the excerpts of the Mahabharata, Ramayana, and the Bhagavad Gita (religious Hindu texts), led by priests or community elders. These were followed by question-answer sessions. Participating in one such gathering being held at the central temple courtyard, I realized that the interpretations were based on issues pertinent to their troubles and “day-to-day” situations. The examples cited were of regular villagers and their actions rather than those of famous kings and warriors, as is portrayed in the institutionalized epics. The locally relevant anecdotes were evidently woven in so as to ensure catharsis and spiritual contentment in regard to the everyday life of the locals. Very few women were at these gatherings, though, seated secluded, in distanced corners. Moloy said this has traditionally been the case.

The environment outside the premises was pitch dark. Apart from the few tungsten bulbs meagerly emanating light through the edges of closed doors, the frosty hue of the moonlight somewhat helped identify the pathways. As I was led to the courtyard of Mousumi’s home in the central part of the village, I was finally introduced to her father, Jagannath Chowdhury, who had returned from his engagements in Balarampur town, the venue for their performance the next day. After being treated to a sumptuous dinner,

I was provided a *khatiya* (bed made of bamboo and rope) to sleep in the courtyard, looking up at the clear night sky.

### **The performance at Registry Para**

The next day began early, attending their practice session as an observer, followed by an in-depth interview with Jagannath Chowdhury. Even during rehearsals, Mousumi was very proactive. She was so much of a perfectionist that she ensured that the actresses first rehearse without their masks, as she wanted to gauge their facial expressions and thus their spirit, which are otherwise concealed by the character's facades during performances. As Mousumi was multi-tasked as a director, production manager, and lead actress, her father Jagannath watched appreciatively, sparing a smile sometimes. As per the itinerary of the performance scheduled later that day, they rehearsed the Mahishasur Mardini pala (45 minutes) three times. One of these times, Shyamoli enacted the role of Goddess Durga so as to prepare a backup in case it is required. She was otherwise enacting the role of Ganesha—Durga's divine son. Mousumi mentioned that training to enact each other's roles was a regular exercise. It had happened before that one key performer (Milee) was beaten up and restricted at home at the last moment by her inebriated father on the day of a critical performance. These backup measures thus prepared them to maneuver around such challenges as and when they arise.

Having initiated his troupe in the early 1980s, Jagannath had faced many hardships. Although his talents were recognized on various occasions (a Folklore Academy award recipient, amongst others), it was nevertheless difficult to maintain this as a livelihood. Furthermore, given the caste-based struggles and hostilities he had faced, he was initially apprehensive of allowing Mousumi to perform. He feared that many people would find the idea of a female Chhau performer offensive from a social and religious standpoint. In reminiscence, he recounted:

But then, as I used to return home late at night after performances, my small-sized daughter Mousumi would wait for me and run out into the courtyard and imitatively stand enacting the *bir rasa*, the posture of Goddess Durga as she initiates her battle against Mahishasur. This inspired me to allow her to blossom as per her passion. In due course, the real Mahishasur in her life emerged to be the regressive male chauvinists whom she has now defeated. The techniques that I had learned as an ardent student of Chhau exponent Padmashree Nepal Mahato

have now been bestowed upon my daughter.<sup>16</sup> She has made a name for herself, not just because she is a woman. It is because she developed a strong foundation as a determined artist, as is evident from her spirited performances.

Despite a spiraling demand, Jagannath carefully selects the performances of his daughter's troupe based on the organizer and venue. Although they have been performed on various occasions in the interior villages, these programs are now mostly avoided due to the risk that comes with it. As people are usually inebriated at these venues, there have been incidents where people have entered the performing space and tried to grab hold of the women performers. Often, the religiosity/reverence associated with the masked gods or goddesses is forgotten due to drunkenness. Given that most people are uneducated, if one person becomes aggressive, many others join in and amplify the situation. As police stations are usually far away, the girls are not safe at such venues. Even though he had appointed some strong men to accompany the team to such places, they were vastly outnumbered, as hundreds usually throng the venues. Thus, Jagannath has decided against exposing his daughter to such perilous situations in the future. At the same time, village performances (such as the one that day) were accepted when organized by trusted sources such as political leaders, schools, NGOs, and the government.

### **Key observations from the performance**

After the lockdown due to the pandemic and then Mousumi's marriage, that evening's performance was their first in a while. Organized by the Ravidas Janma Jayanti Organizing Committee supported by the local Panchayat on the occasion of the birth centenary of Saint Ravidas, the performance was set to take place at the Registry Para neighborhood in the outskirts of Balarampur town, Purulia.<sup>17</sup> After an early lunch, Jagannath's truck was loaded with musical instruments, costumes, masks, and props as most of the performers boarded atop its roof. As it set off towards the performance venue, the residents of Maldih (especially youngsters) appeared at the junctures/ pathways to wave at the passing truck. I sat beside the truck driver throughout the journey. As the young performers seemed very excited about getting back to work after a long break, they acted as children do, during recess in between classes or on the school bus. Amidst the playful-

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<sup>16</sup> Padmashree is one of the highest civilian awards conferred upon Indian nationals.

<sup>17</sup> The Panchayat is a body of elected village representatives. Sant Ravidas is a 14th century poet, philosopher and religious saint of India, who distinctively propounded the "premise of equality" amongst all living beings irrespective of religion, gender, caste and class, during his time. His birth anniversary is celebrated every year on the auspicious "Maghe Purnima" (usually the 2nd full moon in February) as per the lunar calendar. It was celebrated on February 27 in 2021.

ness, laughter, and gossip, as we reached Balarampur town an hour later, the truck was parked beside the *akkhra*<sup>18</sup> where the performance was to ensue. As the male musicians set up their corner space, the crowds gathered and seated themselves on the tarpaulins laid on the surrounding area of the barricaded central space. The team was provided a room in the adjoining building to gear up and prepare. Strikingly, I noticed that as the performance approached, the girls readied themselves not just in terms of script, costumes, masks, etc., but also in regards to gathering a strong mental setup accounting for all of their struggles and causes. When it was finally time (4.30 pm), the performance was initiated with incredulous pomp and grandeur, accompanied by thunderous music, to signify that the heavens were parting for the Gods/ Goddesses to descend upon them (interpretative information based on previous interviews conducted). As an announcement of the arrival of the masked deities, the *bhasyakar* (vocalist/ narrator) amongst the musicians' setup a dramatic ode. The *pala* (narrative) being performed, *Mahishasur Mardini*, was thereby commenced

The narrative of *Mahishasur Mardini* is synonymous with the cultural history of Bengal. As the Durga Puja festival has been celebrated here for centuries, the audiences already knew the story of how the goddess Durga was created by the gods to defeat Mahishasur. Based on the mythological premise that Lord Brahma, impressed by his penance, granted special powers to this demon king Mahishasur that no man could ever defeat him, as the tyrannical Mahishasur could no longer be defeated by any of the Gods (as they were all men), Durga the all-powerful woman warrior was created through the blessings and contributions of all of them. Nonetheless, Durga, the savior of all the male gods in the wake of their inadequacies, can thus be considered the symbolic epitome of women's empowerment. But then, for all these years, as women were not allowed to perform, the character of Durga had always been portrayed by a masked man by all troupes. For the first time, a woman was empowered enough to challenge this and portray Durga, as was witnessed. As the women marched in depicting Durga and her divine family (see Figure 6), the crowds cheered in praise as well as religious subservience.

As I had experienced various performances by other famous troupes before this as well, I realized that Mousumi and her team were thorough professionals who adhered to a well-rehearsed script. They not only matched the capacities of their male counterparts but also surpassed them in various aspects. Even Sarala's enactment of the masculine character Mahishasur was vigorous and intimidating.

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<sup>18</sup> A place of practice with facilities for boarding, lodging and training.

*Figure 6*

*Showcasing Mitali Chhau Maldih Mahila Dal in performance (Personal Collection, 2021)*



The crowds were mesmerized. A visibly large presence of female audiences vehemently applauding a female protagonist and her women's team; the message of empowerment was unmistakable and ubiquitous before all to perceive. As I observed the sentiments of the audiences and interacted with some of them, they revealed their belief that Goddess Durga, being portrayed by a woman, genuinely immersed the divine feminine universal (Shakti) into the costumed character (see Figure 7) more effectively.

As revealed through the devout gestures and further post-event interactions, it was an auspicious resonance for most of the audiences, including men. The women's life struggles somehow permeated into the overall ambiance as a show of strength. Not just for the performers, for whom it was a matter of standing up for their rights through a passionate rendition, but also for the audiences (especially women) for whom it was an avenue for catharsis, aspiration, solidarity, and hope. The men were either intrigued by the novelty of the unique scenario (women performers) or in seeking blessings from the evermore-pervasive goddess Durga before them, now reinforced with the "soul" of an empowered woman (Mousumi). Amidst the celebrations, the voice of the scornful was altogether drowned, excommunicated beyond the emerging perimeters of egalitarianism and progressive social order.

*Figure 7*

*Showcasing Mousumi in her costume with the Durga Mask (Personal Collection, 2021)*



### **A brief insight on Purulia Chhau**

Studying the Trobriand people of the Kiriwina island chain, northeast of the island of New Guinea, Bronislaw Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) focused on not only their origins, characteristics, customs, and culture, amongst others, but also the indigenous expressions which mirror their existence. A plethora of other scholars has adhered to the same (Bogatyrev, 2008; Adorno & Horkenheimer, 2002; Wang, G & Disanayake, 1984), especially in the context of India (Burchett, 2019; Adhikary, 2012; Bapat, 1994; Bhattacharya, 1972). In the present case, delivering the local communities an avenue to achieve a sense of catharsis and contentment, Purulia Chhau has ameliorated the conflict in their lives, fantasizing about a resolution, nevertheless, through divine intervention. Thus, although laid over a metaphorical exposition of mainstream Hindu philosophy, the socio-cultural milieu of Purulia is intertwined, contextualized, and framed as per need within their Chhau expression.

Although a casual analysis of Purulia Chhau (the empowering tool) may seem to provide an accurate visage of the indigenous life it represents, these are sometimes synthetic/commercial/mechanical reproductions, especially when performed in urban settings. Over the decades, as new commercial dimensions/innovations were accommodated, many of its progressive aspects had unfortunately disintegrated into obsolescence. But then, through the efforts of these young women, its role as a platform to express resent-

ment, revolution, and resistance, amongst others, was yet again re-ignited to flourish, thereby amplifying the voice of the marginalized. Although Purulia Chhau is prescribed as an intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2010), transformations such as this symbolic statement of Mitali Chhau Maldih Mahila Dal that broke the barriers of chauvinism guarding the male dominion of culture can genuinely be considered as revolutionary leaps mirroring the sentiments, values and everyday life of “presently existing society”; rather than an archaic representation of history and the social structure of the past. What once was has changed. Purulia Chhau has, in fact, facilitated this and utilized it by the emboldened. Whereas the ontologically inclined may regard this innovation as an adulteration, but then from an epistemological standpoint, it is evident that the capacities of folk expressions are beyond just religious interpretation and entertainment. They possess the power to affect change.

## **Conclusion**

All in all, by identifying the empowerment of rural women through Purulia Chhau, the study has considerably traced the journey of Mitali Chhau Maldih Mahila Dal and how they challenged the oppressive social norms considered justified in the region. Amplifying their intended message/ statement, the potent opportunities to utilize folk media forms such as Purulia Chhau as powerful platforms for communication and impact were also underscored. Motivated and driven, the new generation of rural women in Purulia is, however, determined to resist social subjugation. As Mitali Chhau Maldih Mahila Dal was eventually accepted into the male domain of Purulia Chhau, it represented the fulfillment of the aspirations of many rural women rooting for Mousumi. Employing religious narratives to validate their messages, their negotiations for an egalitarian outreach were significantly well framed, resonating with the culture of the region itself.

Although historically conquered as the weaker section of society, rural women in India have been subjected to unimaginable social dogmas such as dowry, child marriage, polygamy, and even sati.<sup>19</sup> But then, as rural society advanced in terms of education, technology, and urbanization, these oppressed women developed a newfound courage to denounce their state of conformism and cultivate the idealism of empowerment and equality. Outpouring their repressed emotions through dramatic renditions, as Mitali Chhau Maldih Mahila Dal emerged as representative torchbearers for many women in

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<sup>19</sup> Sati is the ritual of “burning a widow alive”, by forcing her to sit upon the funeral pyre of her deceased husband so as she may accompany his soul even in death.



Purulia, they not just maneuvered themselves around the regressive chauvinistic dissenting voices but also “embraced their role”, setting an example for others. As the oppressors reappeared time and again, their aggressive methods of devaluing, discouraging, and even threatening dire consequences were genuinely resisted by the young women. Undeterred by the pressures, the way Mousumi and her team unrelentingly persisted with their spirited demand for assimilation, using non-violent, artistic perseverance, inspired others. As the troupe established themselves over the past decade, their statement of empowerment gradually gained momentum. They have now become a very powerful voice, having had a considerable impact on the overall regional mindset as well: one of *self-realization* amongst men and *liberation* amongst women.

It was not just the non-compliant measure and women-centric narratives chosen, though, but also the expression itself that contributed to the revolutionary mindset as well. As Chhau as an art form has evolved infusing most of the other art forms of Purulia such as Jhumur, Nachni, Jatra, Natya, Tusu, Bhadu, amongst others, it is a wholesome representation of the overall culture of Purulia (Chattopadhyay, 2023); an ideal conduit to accommodate the women’s defiant stance against their derogation of cultural exclusion. Contrary to the women’s predicament, given that the central character of the most popular mythological narrative Mahishasur Mardini that is depicted in Purulia Chhau is the goddess Durga, a symbol of women’s empowerment—her role being finally depicted by an iconoclastic woman, rather than a masked man, was a metaphorical testimonial of newfound authenticity. Also, Mahishasur Mardini literally means “death of Mahishasur”. As the demon king Mahishasur is synonymous with oppression and tyranny, his death at the hands of the empowered Durga is representational and emblematic. Thus, when the mythological narrative of women’s empowerment featuring Goddess Durga was performed, the parallel empowerment narrative of the artists themselves played out as an allegory. Furthermore, as the depiction of male characters such as Mahishasur, Raavan, and even Shiva were also elegantly upheld by these women, it reflected the initiation of a social metamorphosis, a role reversal that further amplified their resistance. Endowed at the helm behind the masks and costumes, the capacity of these women to proficiently enshrine the masculinity of Shiva, as well as the grace of Durga, was remarkable in itself. Apart from substantiating their statement of gender equality, it also reminded the audiences and even society as a whole that their goddess Durga is actually a mother/wife/daughter—as are the performers themselves and the women in the audiences. Thus, vindicated by religion itself, as the girls’ vivification towards the acceptance of women into the cultural stronghold of men gained momentum, the approach of most religious priests, political leaders, and community elders, amongst others, was ne-

gotiated to change. It was not just the actions of Mitali Chhau Maldih Mahila Dal that motivated them, but also the resonant voice of a large number of uprising women, including their own wives and daughters. Moreover, as an overpowering trend, various other female artists are now in line to step up and culturally participate, not just in Purulia Chhau but also in various other art forms in Purulia and its neighboring regions.

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## Izvleček

Okrožje Purulia v zahodni Bengaliji v Indiji je podeželski predel, kjer beležijo visoko stopnjo nasilja nad ženskami. Posledično so ženske na tem območju podvržene skrajnim oblikam podreditve in zatiranja. Omejeno je celo njihovo aktivno sodelovanje pri večini kulturnih procesov in obredov, prepoved, ki jo ohranjajo skozi generacije. Pri tradicionalnem, stoletje starem gledališkem plesu v maskah Purulia Chhau, ki je značilen za omenjeno okrožje, tako niso nikoli dovolili nastopanja žensk. Ko pa se je v zadnjem desetletju zaradi urbanizacije in izobraževanja življenje v Purulii postopoma spremenilo, so začele nekatere ženske na inovativne načine preizpraševati in izpodbijati njihovo družbeno zatiranje. Mitali Chhau Maldih Mahila Dal je prva ženska plesna zasedba, ki je kljubovala arhaičnim družbenim normam, ki so ženskam prepovedovale sodelovanje pri kulturnih dogodkih, in je Purulio Chhau uporabila kot evokativno sredstvo za širjenje enakosti med spoloma. Skozi preplet induktivno-iterativnih metod etnografije in družbene semiotike, ta članek spremlja uporniško/provokativno držo omenjenih izvajalk, ki s plesom aktivno nasprotujejo družbenim normam, ki prepovedujejo njihovo vključenost. Pri tem Purulio Chhau uporabijo kot izjavo in dejanje, s katerima ta ženska plesna skupina izraža nekonformizem in protest proti kulturni izključenosti in njihovi splošni podrejeni vlogi v vsakdanjem življenju. Vsebina članka pojasnjuje, kako se te ženske, poleg tega, da vztrajno kljubujejo splošnim družbenim oblikam podrejanja, oslanjajo na mitološke pripovedi o boginjah Durga in Kali, ki so pomembne v procesu njihovega opolnomočenja. Pri tem ugotavlja, da je verska logika spretno oblikovana za senzibilizacijo pobožnega moškega občinstva, ki je drugače vključeno v čaščenje boginje Devi. Prav tako pa članek razkriva, kako se te ženske spopadajo s prisilo, grožnjami in drugimi ovirami, povezanimi s spolom, ter nenazadnje vlogo Purulie Chhau kot močnega komunikacijskega medija, ki opolnomoči njihovo nestrinjanje.

**Ključne besede:** spol, tradicionalni ples v maskah, opolnomočenje, Purulia, Bengalija, hinduizem

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