

Echoes of Identity and Resistance: A Comparative Study of Purulia Chhau and Malda's Gambhira Performance Traditions

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Abstract

This paper explores how two different folk performance practices from West Bengal express cultural identity, social memory, and everyday resistance. Purulia *Chhau* is famous for its energetic martial movements, striking masks, and mythological stories. *Gambhira* from Malda relies on dialogue, satire, and the wisdom shared between characters like the “Nana-Nati” duo. This study provides a comparative analysis to understand how both traditions shape community identity through embodiment, symbolism, and performance style. The paper looks at how Purulia *Chhau* expresses regional pride through its heroic themes, physical discipline, and the visual language of masks. It fosters a sense of belonging rooted in mythical time. In contrast, *Gambhira* serves as a platform for social critique, addressing contemporary issues like governance, morality, and cultural change. With its humour and conversational structure, *Gambhira* acts as a subtle form of resistance that empowers local voices. By examining choreography, narrative structures, material culture, and the social and historical contexts of both forms, the study shows how folk performances act as living records of community experiences. It argues that while *Chhau* preserves cultural memory through stylized heroism, *Gambhira* promotes resilience through critical thinking and satire. Together, these traditions demonstrate that folk arts are not just artistic expressions; they are active spaces where identity is created, challenged, and reaffirmed.

Keywords: culture, chhau, gambhira, folk, identity

Introduction

India's folk performance traditions are vibrant carriers of cultural memory, identity, and resistance. Among the myriad forms practiced across its diverse regions, Purulia *Chhau* and Malda's *Gambhira* stand out for their performative vigour, rootedness in local ethos, and their evolving role in socio-political discourse. While they differ in form and content—*Chhau* with its mythological dramatizations through masked martial dance and *Gambhira* with its satirical dialogues critiquing contemporary issues—both traditions reflect the lived realities, concerns, and aspirations of marginalized communities in Bengal.

This comparative study is anchored in the recognition that regional folk performances are not merely artistic endeavours but act as “symbolic actions through which communities negotiate their collective identity and position within a rapidly changing socio-political landscape” (Schechner 2002, 25). Examining Purulia *Chhau* and *Gambhira* in tandem allows for an exploration of how performance, identity, and resistance intersect within distinct, yet

complementary, cultural frameworks. Both traditions have functioned historically as more than entertainment—they are embodiments of resistance, cultural assertion, and community engagement.

The rationale behind this comparison lies in the need to map performative responses to cultural continuity and socio-political critique within Bengal's rural landscape. While mythic heroism and spiritual aesthetics of Purulia *Chhau* offer insight into a collective quest for valorisation and transcendence, *Gambhira*'s dialogic satire exposes ground-level concerns through everyday idioms. Together, they offer a layered understanding of performance as both preservation and intervention.

The scope of this study includes an investigation into the historical origins, narrative structures, performative elements, and evolving contexts of both traditions. It engages with theories from performance studies, folklore, and subaltern studies, positioning *Chhau* and *Gambhira* not only as cultural artefacts but also as dynamic modes of articulation. The analysis draws upon ethnographic accounts, archival research, and performance criticism to frame these traditions within larger discourses of cultural identity and social change.

The methodology is comparative and interdisciplinary. It combines qualitative content analysis of recorded performances, field reports, and critical literature, alongside close readings of thematic elements within selected performances. The approach is informed by Richard Schechner's theory of performance as "restored behaviour" (35), and James Scott's notion of "hidden transcripts," where subaltern voices find expression through symbolic acts (Scott 1990).

In tracing the evolution of *Chhau* and *Gambhira*, this chapter aims to contribute to ongoing discussions around the sustainability of indigenous art forms in an age of cultural commodification and political co-option. By foregrounding their unique performative vocabularies, this study asserts the continuing relevance of these traditions as living repositories of regional identity, collective memory, and dissent.

Historical and Cultural Context: Origins and Evolution of *Chhau* and *Gambhira*

Chhau: Martial Tradition and Mythic Symbolism

The *Chhau* dance of Purulia, a visually striking folk tradition of West Bengal, is a complex synthesis of dance, drama, and ritual, rooted in the martial culture of the region. The term *Chhau* is derived from the Sanskrit word *Chhaya*, which means shadow or image, referring to the masked nature of the performance that symbolizes the dual nature of the performer—both physical and spiritual. Masks are integral to the dance, each one embodying characters from Hindu epics and local mythology, further enhancing the symbolic power of the performance. *Chhau*'s evolution is often traced back to the medieval period, yet its roots are deeply entwined with tribal and martial practices, notably the Munda and Santhal tribes, who were skilled in martial arts and ritualistic dances.

As Utpal Kumar Banerjee notes, the *Chhau* dance form embodies the conflict between good and evil, a theme rooted in the Hindu epics, such as the Ramayana and

Mahabharata. However, this high narrative is localized with influences from Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and animist traditions, which reflect the region's diverse religious fabric. For example, the depiction of Shiva in the Purulia *Chhau*, often through the dramatic portrayal of his destructive and regenerative aspects, shows a deep resonance with the Shaivite worship tradition prevalent in the region.

The dance's vigorous choreography is drawn from martial training, with movements that resemble combat stances and defensive tactics. This martial element positions *Chhau* as both a cultural performance and a training ground for the young warriors of the region. The aesthetic intricacy of *Chhau* masks, often handcrafted in the village of Charida, reflects the high level of craftsmanship and local traditions passed down through generations, linking *Chhau* to both the social and artistic practices of the Purulia community.

Over time, *Chhau* has evolved from its martial roots to become an important cultural expression that incorporates modern elements, such as festival performances, national recognition, and the influence of contemporary theatre. However, its essential symbolism of valour and mythic conflict remains integral to its identity.

Gambhira: Devotional Satire and Civic Engagement

In stark contrast to the martial grandeur of *Chhau*, *Gambhira* is a ritualistic and satirical performance tradition that is deeply embedded in the socio-religious life of Malda district in West Bengal, extending into Bangladesh. Traditionally, *Gambhira* is performed during the Chaitra Sankranti, a festival that marks the end of the Bengali year and is often associated with devotional worship of Lord Shiva. Unlike *Chhau*, which is largely rooted in mythological and epic narratives, *Gambhira* offers a dialogic space for critique and social commentary.

Historically, *Gambhira* evolved from ritualistic devotion to satirical social criticism. The traditional structure of the performance involves a grandfather and grandson—two primary characters who engage in sharp, satirical dialogues, often aimed at local governance, moral decay, and social injustices. The grandfather figure represents divinity and wisdom, while the grandson embodies youthful rebellion and humour. This performance structure creates a dynamic tension between reverence and critique, where the voice of divine invocation is juxtaposed with civil and political mockery.

As Sukhbilas Barma observes, "The voice of the common people echoes through *Gambhira*, where divine invocation and civic criticism go hand in hand" (45). This statement encapsulates the core of *Gambhira*'s dual function: while it maintains devotional reverence for Lord Shiva, it also provides a space for the articulation of grievances related to social and political hierarchies. The satirical nature of *Gambhira* enables it to address pressing issues such as land distribution, feudalism, and economic exploitation in ways that resonate deeply with the local community. In a sense, *Gambhira* serves as a performative vehicle for protest, offering a counter-narrative to the dominant power structures.

Over time, *Gambhira* has adapted to social changes, incorporating new forms of satire to address contemporary issues, such as corruption, urbanization, and globalization. However,

its historical roots in Shaivite worship remain firmly in place, providing an avenue for the performance to both preserve and evolve as a cultural tradition.

Intersections and Divergences

Despite their differences, both *Chhau* and *Gambhira* share a common commitment to social relevance, whether through martial valour or satirical critique. Both forms operate as cultural mediums for resisting dominant power structures, offering marginalized communities a space to assert their identity and voice. Furthermore, both performances are rooted in the local—*Chhau* in its martial traditions and heroic depictions of gods and warriors, and *Gambhira* in its subversive commentary on the everyday struggles of the common people.

However, their approaches to resistance diverge. *Chhau*, with its focus on heroic myths, offers a narrative of empowerment and valorisation of the body as a vehicle of strength and mythic legacy. In contrast, *Gambhira* uses humour and satire as tools of cultural critique, creating a dialogue between devotion and dissent that highlights the complexity of social issues.

Both forms, however, have adapted to modern pressures, such as tourism, fertilization, and media influence. While these forces can rejuvenate and preserve these traditions, they also risk diluting their original socio-political content. The future of these folk traditions will likely depend on how they balance cultural preservation with innovation—retaining their authenticity while responding to contemporary aesthetic, social, and political changes.

Geographical and Socio-Political Background of *Chhau*: Purulia's Martial Legacy

Purulia, located in the westernmost part of West Bengal, lies at the intersection of cultures, where tribal and non-tribal communities coexist. Sharing borders with Jharkhand, this region is home to a significant tribal population, including the Santhal, Munda, and Kurmi communities, who have been the traditional custodians of the *Chhau* dance. The terrain of Purulia, which is characterized by rugged hills and forests, has played a pivotal role in shaping the martial nature of *Chhau*. The region's isolation from urban centres and its history as a frontier area during the colonial period have contributed to the preservation of tribal traditions and practices that are distinct from mainstream urban culture.

The martial and combative style of *Chhau* is deeply influenced by the militaristic culture of the region. Historically, Purulia was part of the Munda Kingdom, and the tribe's martial practices, designed to prepare warriors for defense and battle, were infused with ritual and religious significance. These traditions were transmitted through oral narratives and performances, with *Chhau* emerging as a central cultural activity that functioned not only as a ritual dance but as a means of cultural preservation.

Moreover, the *Chhau* dance serves as a symbol of community cohesion. For the Santhal, Munda, and other tribal communities in Purulia, *Chhau* is much more than a performance—it is an act of identity assertion. Given the pressures of modernization and cultural homogenization, *Chhau* becomes a vehicle for the community's resilience, helping preserve tribal mythologies, cosmologies, and traditional values. Through the narrative enactments of epic stories from Hindu mythology, the dance provides a space for the

reaffirmation of cultural roots and a connection to ancestral legacies. In this sense, *Chhau* becomes a cultural repository that transmits tribal histories across generations, reinforcing a sense of belonging and pride in the face of external cultural influences.

Geographical and Socio-Political Background of *Gambhira*: Malda's Cross-Cultural Heritage

Gambhira, performed primarily in the Malda district of West Bengal and parts of Bangladesh, operates within a distinct socio-political and cultural context. Malda, historically part of Gaur, the ancient capital of Bengal, is rich in Islamic and Hindu syncretism. This cultural amalgamation is reflected in *Gambhira*, which integrates both Hindu deities and Islamic motifs, drawing from the diverse religious traditions of the region. The region's mixed demographics, including Muslims and Hindus, give *Gambhira* a unique character as a cross-cultural performance tradition that transcends the boundaries of religious and ethnic divides.

The historical background of Malda as a former political epicentre under various rulers—Hindu kings, Muslim sultans, and later British colonial authorities—has influenced the evolution of *Gambhira*. The region's political volatility and the changing patterns of governance allowed *Gambhira* to emerge as a platform for resistance and social commentary. In this context, the satirical nature of *Gambhira* was not only a form of humour and entertainment but a means to critique the local political structure, governance, and societal norms. *Gambhira*'s critical tone was directed at both local rulers and colonial powers, as it gave voice to the frustrations of the common people.

Socio-Political Function of *Chhau* and *Gambhira*: Resistance and Civic Engagement

Both *Chhau* and *Gambhira* have a significant socio-political function within their respective communities, reflecting the evolving cultural dynamics in the face of external pressures like colonization, modernization, and globalization.

***Chhau*: Consolidating Community Identity**

In Purulia, where the influence of tribal traditions is strong, *Chhau* serves as a key cultural anchor for the tribal population. It plays an essential role in consolidating community identity in the face of modernization and the erosion of tribal culture. With the advent of industrialization and urbanization, tribal communities face the loss of their traditional way of life, and performances like *Chhau* become critical in preserving cultural autonomy. The dance acts as both a historical record and a means of collective expression, helping to assert tribal sovereignty and autonomy in a rapidly changing world.

Chhau also functions as a ritual of resistance, asserting the right of marginalized communities to maintain and showcase their own cultural heritage, even as it adapts to new forms of performance and modern fertilization. This dance serves as a non-verbal protest the forces of cultural assimilation and external domination, reaffirming the tribal community's right to self-representation.

***Gambhira*: A Grassroots Form of Civic Engagement**

Gambhira, with its satirical and critical nature, acts as a grassroots form of civic engagement that addresses the grievances and aspirations of the common people. Historically, *Gambhira* provided a platform for community-based resistance against local oppression, economic exploitation, and political mismanagement. The dialogic format of the performance, where the grandfather and grandson engage in a witty exchange, is not just about humour but about engaging with and critiquing the status quo. It's a performative mode of negotiation, where the community uses humour and satire to question both divine and earthly authority.

In today's context, while *Gambhira* retains its satirical tone, it also provides a space to discuss issues such as corruption, land reforms, and local governance, making it a living tradition that responds to contemporary political realities. The performance continues to serve as a vehicle for protest and civic engagement, especially in rural areas where the marginalized have limited access to traditional forms of political expression.

The geographical and socio-political contexts of Purulia and Malda shape *Chhau* and *Gambhira* into more than just performance traditions; they become cultural responses to marginalization, civic critiques, and ritualistic expressions of resistance. Both traditions continue to thrive in their local communities, adapting to changing political landscapes and global influences while maintaining their authenticity and resilience. The continuation of these performances in modern India reflects the dynamic interaction between cultural preservation and social change, positioning them as powerful forms of resistance in an ever-evolving socio-political environment.

Theoretical Framework

This study of *Chhau* and *Gambhira* draws upon a range of theoretical perspectives from Subaltern Studies, Performance Theory, and Cultural Studies to better understand the performative elements of these folk traditions and their role in representing marginalized voices in contemporary India.

Subaltern Studies and Cultural Identity

Drawing from Subaltern Studies, particularly Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of the subaltern, this paper argues that *Chhau* and *Gambhira* are forms of subaltern expression, providing a space for communities historically excluded from the elite cultural and political spheres to assert their identity. In Spivak's seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), she questions whether the subaltern can speak within the dominant discourse of power. *Chhau* and *Gambhira*, however, are performative articulations of subaltern voices, enabling a unique form of resistance that bypasses traditional channels of power and representation.

Both traditions give marginalized communities—particularly tribal and lower-caste populations—a performative platform to challenge their cultural invisibility. As Partha Chatterjee suggests in *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1993), folk traditions like *Chhau* serve as counter-hegemonic forces, offering alternative expressions of identity outside colonial and national narratives. These performances are not merely rituals or entertainments but powerful acts of self-representation in the face of exclusion.

Performance Theory: Restored Behaviour and Social Transformation

Richard Schechner's Performance Theory also provides a valuable framework for analyzing *Chhau* and *Gambhira* as "restored behavior"—rituals, myths, and gestures re-enacted within a contemporary context, gaining new meanings in the process. Schechner emphasizes that performances, particularly folk or traditional performances, do not merely repeat an original act but rather re-enact it, thus ensuring cultural continuity and transformation. *Chhau*, with its martial choreography and masks, and *Gambhira*, with its humorous dialogue and musicality, both acts as restored performances of resistance and survival, creating new spaces for the subaltern voice.

The dialogic format of *Gambhira* serves as a critique of social structures, using satire to engage with local and regional political issues. This mirrors Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, where the voice of the other (often marginalized or subjugated) enters conversation with mainstream power structures. By using humour, song, and drama, *Gambhira* reinterprets social hierarchies, offering alternative epistemologies of truth and justice.

Stuart Hall: Cultural Identity as a Site of Negotiation

In addition, Stuart Hall's ideas on cultural identity and representation further illuminate how *Chhau* and *Gambhira* are not fixed but negotiated forms. Hall's notion that cultural identity is not a stable, unchanging essence but a process of becoming (Hall, 1994) aligns well with how these performances adapt to changing socio-political climates while maintaining deep-rooted connections to indigenous histories and cultural practices. As these traditions evolve through fertilization, tourism, and media influence, they continue to assert cultural sovereignty while adapting to modern contexts.

Thus, by incorporating these theoretical frameworks—Subaltern Studies, Performance Theory, and Cultural Studies—this study highlights how *Chhau* and *Gambhira* are not merely folk performances, but sites of cultural negotiation, where marginalized communities reclaim agency, reinterpret histories, and resist dominant cultural narratives. These folk traditions illustrate the complex and dynamic nature of cultural expression in postcolonial India, where tradition is continually re-enacted and re-negotiated in response to social and political transformations.

Performative Elements Chhau: Masks, Martial Choreography, Mythic Themes

The *Chhau* dance of Purulia is marked by its powerful visual symbolism and stylized movements, manifesting in three distinct performative elements: masks, martial choreography, and mythic storytelling.

At the core of *Chhau*'s aesthetic is the use of vibrant masks, which serve not only as artistic expressions but also as transformative agents that depersonalize the performer and channel divine or mythological identities. Crafted in Charida, a village known for its mask-making tradition, these masks are elaborately painted and modeled to represent gods, demons, and animals. The act of donning the mask symbolizes a metamorphosis, allowing the dancer to transcend the mundane and embody cosmic forces.

As performance theorist Anurima Banerji explains, "The Chhau mask is not a prop but a performative tool that mediates the sacred and the spectacular, drawing the audience

into a ritual of transformation" (Banerji, Dancing Odissi, 2019). The martial roots of *Chhau* are evident in its choreography, which includes somersaults, high jumps, and vigorous body movements derived from *khel* (a form of local martial training). These dynamic actions are choreographed to the rhythms of *dhol*, *dhamsa*, *shehnai*, and *mohuri*, traditional percussion and wind instruments that accompany the performance. Mythic themes from epics like the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and the Puranas provide the narrative spine of the performances. Episodes such as *Mahishasura Mardini*, *Abhimanyu Badh*, or *Ravana Vadha* are enacted not just as stories but as symbolic enactments of moral and cosmic order.

***Gambhira*, Dialogic Format: A Vehicle for Socio-Political Discourse**

At the heart of *Gambhira* lies its dialogic structure, where a duo—typically a grandfather and grandson—engage in a verbal exchange that forms the narrative backbone of the performance. This intergenerational dialogue is symbolic of the passing of knowledge and values from the older to the younger generation, but it also becomes a site for critique and reflection on contemporary societal issues. Through their witty exchanges, the performers tackle a range of local and global issues—from corruption and misgovernance to environmental degradation and cultural decay.

The dialogic format is not just a simple back-and-forth conversation; it serves as a cultural commentary that brings public discourse into the public sphere. As both the grandfather and grandson take on their roles, they represent not only the individual voices of society but also the collective conscience. This exchange becomes a folk pedagogy, with the grandfather often embodying wisdom, authority, and tradition, while the grandson symbolizes youth, questioning, and a desire for reform. Their banter brings contemporary issues into focus through humour and irony, effectively bridging the old and the new, the sacred and the secular.

As folklorist Amit Dasgupta points out, *Gambhira* can be seen as a pedagogical tool, blending instruction, entertainment, and provocation. It is through this format that the performance not only entertains but also educates and challenges audiences, offering a space for reflection on the pressing issues of the day. *Gambhira* thus emerges as both social commentary and collective therapy, giving voice to the public's frustrations and hopes while using dialogue to critique established power structures.

Musicality: The Rhythmic and Emotional Appeal

The musicality of *Gambhira* is a key feature that intensifies the emotional and rhetorical impact of the performance. Unlike other folk forms that might rely on dance or purely visual elements, *Gambhira* weaves music and song into its narrative, making it a multi-sensory experience that appeals to both the intellect and the emotion of its audience. Traditional instruments like the *harmonium*, *dholak*, and *kartal* set the rhythmic and melodic foundation, supporting the verbal exchanges and underscoring the emotional weight of the satire.

Amit Dasgupta observes that the rhythmic cadences and melodic interludes in *Gambhira* heighten its emotional appeal, making it not just a performance but a communal act of reflection. The musical interludes serve to punctuate the dialogue, creating a rhythm

that mirrors the tension between critique and celebration in the performance. These songs, which often modify popular or classical tunes, are skilfully tailored to fit the theme of the performance, making them relevant to the context and allowing for cultural adaptation.

The music in *Gambhira* can also amplify the irony of the dialogue, where melodies that traditionally evoke solemnity or reverence are reinterpreted to bring out humour or satire. This combination of the sacred and profane creates a layered narrative that offers both emotional resonance and cognitive dissonance, drawing the audience into a deeply engaging experience.

Satire: A Revolutionary Folk Tool

Satire is perhaps the most distinctive and potent tool in the *Gambhira* tradition. The use of parody, exaggeration, and mimicry enables the performers to expose the absurdities of social and political life. Through humour, *Gambhira* critiques the hypocrisies of local governance, institutionalized corruption, and the moral decay that is perceived to plague society. These exaggerated depictions of political and social figures, often presented as caricatures, allow the audience to laugh at the contradictions inherent in their leaders and systems.

But the genius of *Gambhira*'s satire lies in its ability to balance reverence and resistance. While the performances often begin with a devotional invocation to Lord Shiva, they quickly shift to more earthly concerns, reflecting a tension between spiritual reverence and worldly critique. This balance between sacred and secular is central to the dual purpose of *Gambhira*: to entertain and to subvert. The use of satirical humour allows *Gambhira* to perform a form of resistance that does not simply oppose but rather questions the dominant power structures through laughter and wit.

In its capacity for subversive humour, *Gambhira* serves as a form of folk revolution, turning performance into a space for dissent, where the powerful are mocked, and the marginalized are given voice. Its satirical bite challenges not just the immediate social order but also the entire structure of governance and cultural norms, positioning *Gambhira* as an important form of social protest that functions through the tools of entertainment and reflection.

Through its dialogic structure, musicality, and satirical edge, *Gambhira* becomes more than just a folk performance—it is a living tradition of resistance that uses the tools of humour, dialogue, and music to both entertain and provoke. Its ability to balance devotion and critique, tradition and modernity, makes it a uniquely relevant form of public discourse. By engaging with the pressing socio-political issues of its time, *Gambhira* continues to provide a powerful, community-based platform for protest, reflection, and social change in contemporary Bengal.

Folk Performance as a Mode of Resistance

Both *Chhau* of Purulia and *Gambhira* of Malda function as cultural expressions rooted in marginalized, subaltern communities, and they resist dominant socio-political narratives

through performance. These forms are not mere entertainments; they are embodied archives of dissent, collective memory, and alternative epistemologies. By drawing from tribal, agrarian, and lower-caste traditions, they challenge the homogenizing cultural policies that often valorize elite aesthetics over grassroots creativity.

Chhau, primarily performed by Kurmi, Santhal, and other tribal communities, resists erasure by celebrating indigenous myths, martial prowess, and cosmologies. It becomes a performative assertion of identity against centuries of feudal exploitation and cultural marginalization. As cultural historian Partha Chatterjee emphasizes, “Folk traditions, especially martial dance forms like Chhau, assert a different temporality and authority—resisting the colonial and postcolonial state’s attempts at codification and containment” (Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 1993).

In the case of *Gambhira*, resistance takes a more discursive and dialogic shape, using wit and satire to subvert authority and expose class and caste injustices. *Gambhira* performances often critique bureaucratic inefficiencies, corruption, and the commodification of rural life—becoming a forum for social justice wrapped in humour and allegory.

Representations of Community Concerns, Caste, and Class

Both traditions foreground the lived realities of marginalized groups, especially in terms of caste and class hierarchies. *Chhau*’s mythological retellings often centre on marginalized deities or tribal reinterpretations of classical stories—reclaiming a place within what is otherwise a Brahminical mythosphere. The visual spectacle—especially masks and vigorous movement—serves as a counter-narrative to elite classical dance traditions like Bharatanatyam or Kathak, which have historically been inaccessible to lower castes and tribes.

Similarly, *Gambhira* speaks the language of the commoner, often employing regional dialects and idioms to highlight the struggles of farmers, labourers, and low-income workers. The recurring roles of the grandfather and grandson allow for an intergenerational negotiation of ethics, values, and politics. This dialogic format gives voice to the frustrations, aspirations, and resilience of rural Bengal’s underclass.

Folk theorist Ritwik Ghatak once wrote that, “The folk stage is where real politics happens—stripped of parliamentary performance, it tells the truth in fragments, jokes, and jibes” (Ghatak, *The Cinematic Folk*, 1974). *Gambhira* embodies this spirit by addressing issues like Dalit oppression, lack of education, and religious hypocrisy, turning the stage into a civic space where performance becomes pedagogy.

Thus, both *Chhau* and *Gambhira* act as grassroots cultural resistances—they articulate subaltern subjectivity, claim visibility for silenced histories, and confront the hegemonies of class, caste, and state with embodied defiance.

Modern Transformations

Festivalization, Media Influence, and Tourism

In recent decades, both *Chhau* and *Gambhira* have undergone significant transformations shaped by state-sponsored cultural policies, mass media, and the

commodification of tradition through tourism and festivals. These transformations, while offering visibility and survival, also pose critical questions about authenticity, appropriation, and agency.

One of the most visible changes is the festivalization of folk performance. *Chhau*, once embedded in village rituals and seasonal celebrations, is now a regular feature in urban cultural festivals like the Surajkund Mela or the National Folk Dance Festival. It has been recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, which has helped promote it globally but also led to its detachment from local socio-religious contexts.

As scholar D. Venkat Rao notes, “When folk becomes spectacle, it loses its subterranean voice and assumes a curated posture for the global gaze” (Rao, *Cultures of Memory in South Asia*, 2014). The masked warriors of *Chhau*, once invoking divine energies in village courtyards, now perform for cosmopolitan audiences under proscenium lights.

Gambhira, similarly, has moved from its ritualistic New Year origins to state-sponsored competitions, televised folk festivals, and cultural forums. While this has provided performers with platforms and livelihood, it has also led to a dilution of its critical edge, as politically sensitive themes are often sanitized for broader audiences.

The role of media and tourism in reshaping these forms is undeniable. With the spread of social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook, snippets of *Chhau* and *Gambhira* are circulated globally transforming them into cultural artifacts and entertainment content rather than living, breathing traditions. Additionally, cultural tourism in West Bengal has institutionalized *Chhau* performances in curated heritage circuits, often marginalizing grassroots practitioners in favour of more polished, commercialized troupes.

Shifts in Audience, Performance Space, and Meaning

These modern influences have led to a transformation in audience, both demographically and in terms of expectations. *Chhau* and *Gambhira* now cater to urban elites, cultural connoisseurs, and international tourists, many of whom lack the cultural fluency to decode the layered symbolism or dialectical nuances embedded in the performances. This shift has resulted in a flattening of meaning—where complexity is sacrificed for visual or musical appeal.

Moreover, the performance spaces have changed dramatically. *Chhau*, once performed in open village fields or temple premises, is increasingly staged in auditoriums and festival grounds with curated lighting and sound systems. *Gambhira*, traditionally performed on makeshift village stages with minimal props, is now often performed on television studios or municipal platforms, prompting alterations in dialogue delivery, musical arrangements, and even body language to suit the camera or formal setting.

These spatial shifts lead to a transformation in meaning. What was once a communal ritual or local critique now risks becoming a sanitized cultural product. The shift from participatory to presentational mode alters the political function of these forms, raising concerns over the erosion of their subversive core.

However, it is important to acknowledge that resistance and reinvention coexist. Many young artists from within the communities are using digital platforms to reclaim the narrative, experimenting with hybrid forms that blend folk idioms with contemporary themes—reviving relevance without losing root.

Conclusion

The comparative study of *Chhau* dance of Purulia and *Gambhira* performance of Malda reveals not only their rich aesthetic and cultural uniqueness but also their shared role as emissaries of marginalized voices within India's complex socio-political fabric. Though differing in form—*Chhau* as a visually spectacular, non-verbal dance-theatre, and *Gambhira* as a dialogue-based, musical folk play—both traditions embody the lived realities, resistances, and aspirations of subaltern communities in West Bengal.

Chhau's mythic and martial form celebrates tribal cosmology and valour, rooted in physical embodiment and ritual reenactment. *Gambhira*, in contrast, thrives on rhetoric, intergenerational dialogue, and satire, providing a democratic stage for social introspection. Yet, both challenge dominant discourses—be it through theatrical spectacle or verbal critique—revealing the intersections of caste, class, politics, and performance.

In contemporary India, these folk forms confront a paradox. On one hand, they are valorised as national heritage, celebrated in cultural festivals, and digitized for global consumption. On the other hand, they face systemic pressures of commodification, aesthetic dilution, and loss of contextual integrity. The very efforts that seek to preserve and popularize them often render them spectacles detached from their socio-cultural roots.

The future of folk traditions like *Chhau* and *Gambhira* will depend on sustainable models of preservation that are community-centric and ethically engaged. Empowering local artists, incorporating folk pedagogy into education, and promoting participatory modes of cultural expression can help ensure that these forms do not merely survive as museum pieces or entertainment exports, but thrive as evolving languages of resistance, creativity, and identity.

As performance studies scholar Richard Schechner asserts, “Tradition is not the opposite of change—it is the ground of experimentation” (Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 2003). In this spirit, the resilience of *Chhau* and *Gambhira* lies in their ability to adapt without erasure, evolve without alienation, and continue speaking for those at the margins of India's rapidly modernizing landscape.

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