

The Changing Stage: Chhau as an Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Abstract:

Performing Arts – especially dance- and its survival has been major foci of national policies in India, since the time when the nationalistic endeavors to formulate the structures of the soon to be independent nation were being formulated by the nation’s planners, in the last days of the colonial occupation. Keeping in mind the importance of generating a singular ‘Indian’ identity of a constructed “Unity in diversity”, and also the need to make ‘visible’ the cultural heritage that makes India a cultural heavy-weight in South Asia, Indian bureaucracy has designed the image of independent, secular, multi-cultural India with utmost care towards an ongoing process of cultural exhibition. This paper draws attention to the three factors (1) the culture/tradition, (2) the artist /producer/carrier of the knowledge and (3) the product, isolable and marketable with or without reference to historicity, cultural specificity or authorship that come within the purview of any planning or strategizing and how those come to be affected by the push and pull between heritage/tradition/ memory on one side and modernity/development/globalization/market on the other. The article uses the example of Chhau Dance, which has been included in the ‘Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity’ in 2010.

Keywords: dance, identity, agency, tradition, heritage.

Abstrak

Seni Persembahan – terutamanya tarian – dan kewujudannya telah menjadi agenda utama dasar-dasar kebangsaan di India, sejak zaman di mana kegiatan nasionalisme berusaha untuk menggubal struktur negara yang akan mencapai kemerdekaan yang digubal oleh perancang negara, di hari-hari- terakhir pendudukan kolonisme. Mengingati akan kepentingan dalam menjana seorang individu beridentitikan ‘India’ yang dibina melalui “Perpaduan dalam Kepelbagaian,” dan juga keperluan untuk memperlihatkan warisan budaya yang menjadikan India sebagai pemberatan budaya di Asia Selatan, birokrasi

India telah mereka imej yang merdeka, secular, India yang berbilang budaya dengan pendekatan yang sangat ke arah proses pameran kebudayaan yang berterusan. Kertas ini memberi perhatian kepada tiga faktor (1) budaya / tradisi, (2) artis / produser / para ilmuwan dan (3) produk, pengasingan dan pemasaran dengan atau tanpa rujukan persejarahan, spesifikasi kebudayaan atau pengurangan yang datang di kalangan antara persembahan yang terancang atau berstrategi dan bagaimana ianya dipengaruhi oleh desakan dan tarikan di antara warisan / tradisi / memori di satu sudut dan kemodenan / pembangunan / globalisasi / pasaran di satu sudut yang lain. Artikel ini menggunakan contoh Chhau Dance, yang telah dimasukkan ke dalam 'Senarai Perwakilan Budaya Warisan Tidak Ketara Kemanusiaan' pada tahun 2010.

Kata kunci: Tari, Identiti, Agensi, tradisi, warisan

INTRODUCTION

Performing Arts – especially dance- and its survival has been major foci of national policies in India, since the time when the nationalistic endeavors to formulate the structures of the soon to be independent nation were being formulated by the nation's planners, in the last days of the colonial occupation. Keeping in mind the importance of generating a singular 'Indian' identity of a constructed "Unity in diversity", and also the need to make 'visible' the cultural heritage that makes India a cultural heavy-weight in South Asia, Indian bureaucracy has designed the image of independent, secular, multi-cultural India with utmost care towards an ongoing process of cultural exhibition. This paper draws attention to the three factors (1) the culture/tradition, (2) the artist /producer/carrier of the knowledge and (3) the product, isolable and marketable with or without reference to historicity, cultural specificity or authorship that come within the purview of any planning or strategizing and how those come to be affected by the push and pull between heritage/tradition/ memory on one side and modernity/development/globalization/market on the other. The article uses the example of Chhau Dance, which has been included in the 'Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity' in 2010.

Chhau: A Common Name for Three Variant Dances from Adjacent Areas

As per the UNESCO site on Intangible Cultural Heritage

<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00011&RL=00337#identification>¹

Chhau dance is a tradition from eastern India that enacts episodes from epics including the Mahabharata and Ramayana, local folklore and abstract themes. Its three distinct styles hail from the regions of Seraikella, Purulia and Mayurbhanj, the first two using masks. Chhau dance is intimately connected to regional festivals, notably the spring festival Chaitra Parva. Its origin is traceable to indigenous forms of dance and martial practices. Its vocabulary of movement includes mock combat techniques, stylized gaits of birds and animals and movements modeled on the chores of village housewives. Chhau is taught to male dancers from families of traditional artists or from local communities. The dance is performed at night in an open space



A Group Dance Sequence During Chait Parab At Budhpur, Purulia

¹ Text of the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage.
Retrieved August 1, 2012, from:

<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00011&RL=00337#identification>, where one also finds videos, details and names of the forms that have been declared as the representative of intangible Cultural Heritage.

to traditional and folk melodies, played on the reed pipes mohuri and shehnai. The reverberating drumbeats of a variety of drums dominate the accompanying music ensemble. Chhau is an integral part of the culture of these communities. It binds together people from different social strata and ethnic background with diverse social practices, beliefs, professions and languages. However, increasing industrialization, economic pressures and new media are leading to a decrease in collective participation with communities becoming disconnected from their roots.

At the moment, the UNESCO has two lists under its Intangible Cultural Heritage Programme. The first one is the "Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity" comprising of "cultural expressions and practices which help demonstrate the diversity of this heritage and raise awareness about its importance." There is another shorter List of "Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding", which comprises of those cultural elements that are considered by the communities and countries concerned, to be in urgent need of safeguarding to keep them alive.

While acknowledging the elation that the Chhau performers feel at the inclusion, it is important to note that the above description is too generic to do justice to all three forms mentioned above – which are from neighbouring states of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Orissa. It also manufactures a singular uncomplicated history (precisely what it does not want to do), and takes away a huge chunk of history from each of the forms which have their independent movements systems, costumes, geo-political specificity, and background, not to mention their personal journeys to the hall of fame, which is the inclusion in the list of forms that are now representatives of intangible cultural heritage of humanity in the world.

Though for the current article I shall be concentrating on the Chhau dance form from Purulia (West Bengal), and not the other two forms from Mayurbhanj (Orissa) and Seraikella Kharsawan (Jharkhand), I would like to draw attention to the fact that the three forms are very different in their use of the body, their movement systems, and the kind of costumes that they use and also are from areas with three different linguistic groups. Seraikella Chhau is from the Seraikella Kharsawan district of the newly born state of Jharkhand in Eastern India. Proudly proclaiming its origin and development to the patronage of the local royal family, the form uses masks, though much smaller than those of the Purulia Chhau, and also has a set of grammars fashioned out of movements from daily lives, sometimes representative of daily chores in a household or agricultural activities. Seraikella Chhau uses smaller masks concealing the face partially or fully, and

body movements to create a complete expressive segment of communication, exclusive to this particular sub-genre.

Mayurbhanj Chhau is from Mayurbhanj District of Orissa and is performed without masks unlike Purulia or Seraikella forms. Having a large number of similarities in the movement systems and also in the theatrical and emotive movements with Seraikella Chhau, the most prominent difference Mayurbhanj Chhau has with the other two subgenres is the use of facial expressions and the innovative themes that have generated the form's constant interaction with creativity.

Chhau dance of Purulia, known for its huge masks and bold and martial movements have been ascribed the lowest place in the stratification between the three forms of Chhau on the basis of its 'earthiness' (Government website of Purulia)² and 'simple folk' character'. Of all the three forms that are called simply by the name Chhau, Purulia Chhau remains the one which is regarded as the least 'sophisticated', as the forms are put in competition with each other to be better entitled to be the UNESCO representative of intangible cultural heritage of humanity.

Purulia Chhau gained visibility in the late '60s through the writings of Ashutosh Bhattacharya, who "discovered" and then "presented" the form in Delhi. Bhattacharya (1975) writes

At the encouragement of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi, arrangement was also made for training of some artists at their villages. Since then the annual Chhau festival in Purulia during the middle of April has become a regular feature. Even Smt. Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India, has taken interest in the Annual Festival. It has been attended so far by a number of foreign dance-critics from almost every part of the world. Due mainly to their interest in the dance, invitation also came from far off countries. (pp. 2-3).

Since then Purulia Chhau has traveled a long distance. Big names associated with the Ministry of Culture in the Indian government as well as some impressed and overwhelmed critics tried their best to get Chhau recognized as a 'classical' dance. Due to the teaching centres already established in Delhi, Seraikella and

² Fairs and Festivals. Retrieved May 13, 2012, from: http://purulia.gov.in/distAdmin/departments/dico/chau_dance.html, where there is an anonymous article named "Famous Folk Dance Chhau" (Source: D.I.C.O, Purulia).

Mayurbhanj are finding more takers than Purulia Chhau. Purulia Chhau remains the most vigorous, using huge masks and being associated with the local festival of Chait Parab when it is performed in the festive spaces near the local Shiva temples in many villages and towns of Purulia, where the elaborate ritual of Charak (also known as Gajan) takes place. Ideally it is associated with Chait Parab and the festivities around it, as a form of performance which provides the entertainment for the crowd of devotees, who, as a part of the ritual involvement, need to keep awake all night. But at a communicative level, Chhau helps in oral transmission of myths and constructs the universe that the tribal and peasant communities of Purulia inhabit.

Chhau Dance in Purulia

Purulia Chhau is found in Purulia district of West Bengal, Singhbhum district of Jharkhand and some of the border areas of Bihar, specifically spatially characterized to be a masked form of dance with movements derived from martial arts practices.

The dance, with a strong historical connection to the local landlords for sustenance, consists a somewhat structured grammar which is learnt by the performers wanting to take up the practice and performance on a regular basis, during its peak season, as a full time or a part time occupation. The performers usually learn Chhau in their childhood as they see the expert practitioners' mastery over the form. For most of the performers Chhau remains a par-occupation, existing side by side with their principal occupation. The form has had several master teachers with some of them getting national or international fame.

The body training is specific, and requires athletic as well as martial skill along with limited theatrical ability. In Purulia Chhau the face is covered with huge masks sometimes extending up to a foot around the diameter of the face, and it is a special skill that has to be honed in order to negotiate forward and backward somersaults, turns and many other athletic movements wearing those masks. The body, especially the upper body takes on some of the responsibilities of the face in expressing the finer theatrical feelings as required.

The dance consists of sitting and standing poses, different stances and characteristic walks (specific for heroes, women, villains, gods etc), turns, somersaults, and complete movements, executed to drumming of specific rhythm cycles and songs. Nowadays it is also common to find continuous accompaniment of dramatic dialogues, somewhat in the lines of Jatra (Theatrical) performances accompanying the music.



Ganesha Is One of The Most Important Characters of Chhau Dance



A Chhau Dancer Performs A Somersault During A Rehearsal

In the official documents Chhau is sometimes mentioned as a dance, or a dance theatre, where Chhau occupies a conspicuous position presently in between classical and folk dances. Sarkar Munsri (2003) and Chatterji (2009) have discussed how Chhau stresses the social integration of the village community and allows it to experience the feeling of multi-ethnic togetherness.

It also brings into relief the structure of authority and stratification in the village. The Chhau performances in Purulia and its neighbourhood provide a network of multi-ethnic and multi-village level social and cultural communication.

Most communities around the world have depended on performances of different sorts for the transmission of traditional values, morals, world views, myths, codes of conducts for different age, sex and gender any many other informal educative processes. The moral code of good and bad is always the central theme of the traditional Chhau episodes. This dance also conveys the myths and metaphors of religious norms and codes which present propositions concerning expected behaviour between parents and children, leaders and followers, and male and female sexes in the context of community. The visual transmission of mythological stories and epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata to the population of whom a large number are illiterate, is also another very important function of Chhau. By watching these performances, even small children come to know of the stories of the mentioned literature in great detail.

Through exchange of troupes between villages during festivals, a strong bond develops between the villages, which is totally different from the bonds between members of the same caste or tribe, etc. The ethnic groups consisting of tribes like Bhumij, Munda and castes like Mahato, Kurmi, etc. lose their self-identity at the time of performance to become part of the peasant culture of the area as a whole.

A festival ground in Purulia is always a place of congregation for people walking from faraway villages to come and spend the day and night. The open ground becomes structured according to the needs of the specific requirements of the rituals primarily. The rest of the space is divided between stalls, performance arena(s), merry-go-rounds and small time vendors. Many fairs have Natua, Baul, Naachni, and even 'disco' (with female dancers doing a popular and imitation of Bollywood item dances) performances besides Chhau. Most of the times there is a separate elaborately constructed arena for Chhau Performances (since those are the major crowd pullers) from two or more troupes who usually start at midnight and go on till day break the next morning.

Here it becomes essential to analyze the journey that Chhau has undertaken from its community of orientation to its market of the present day. The festivals of India in France, Germany, England, Former USSR, USA and International events in India like the Asiad or Commonwealth games organized in Delhi, the regular seasonal festivals organized by the Government or other agencies and events like Republic Day Parade, have been places where Chhau dance (from either of the three places) get accommodated in urban centres. Besides, there are private patrons or even foreign organisations which invite Chhau dancers as a part of a display of spectacular elements of Indian culture. These festival spaces and the proscenium or the dance space specifically created for the performances, and even the short time (about 5-10 minutes at the most) allotted to the performances no longer manage to shock the performers, as they have become savvy in dealing with all these requirements and specificities, as they have extended their wings over the years. Chhau of Purulia captures the imagination of the urban audience in decontextualized space – with the athleticism, grandeur of the masks, and narratives from the epic texts.

Though clearly put in a category lower in expertise and sophistication below Chhau from Seraikella and Mayurbhanj, Purulia Chhau claims its place in the India shows in the festivals celebrating and displaying Indian culture all over the world and also within India because of its masks, which have become more and more colorful in recent years to give Purulia Chhau the added push to compete for a space in the display of 'Indian'ness wherever it may be.

Bharucha (1989)³ writes:

..... tradition can be invented in any number of ways, even though we may not be aware of it. The most conspicuous of "inventions" are "fabrications". such as the Republic Day Parade, where the diverse cultures of India are "unified" through a carefully choreographed spectacle. In recent years, this kind of "invention" has become increasingly virtuosic as is evident in the Festivals of India and the Utsavs of New Delhi. Here, through a conglomeration of effects, which could include songs, dances, tableaux, symbols, floats, fireworks, "informal" mingling between "native" performers and "foreign" spectators, selling of Indian food,

³ Bharucha, Rustom in the same article "Notes on the Invention of traditions"(1989) writes about the inevitable problems arising out of any cultural discourse focusing on Indian realities which ignore or evade the sheer depth of contradiction, if not confusion, that underlies different interpretations of 'Indian Culture' determined through differences in location, history, culture and language.

and other “indigenous” activities, an atmosphere is constructed whereby “the Indian tradition” is affirmed, not necessarily as people in India would understand it, but as our government would like to represent it to the world. (p. 1907).

Memory and the Living Tradition

Performing myths is about embodying memories which get transmitted from one generation to the other. The body itself becomes the repertoire of the lived memory of movement practices which are transmitted – not by structured learning of movement systems but by having been a part of the living tradition. According Buckland (2001) writes,

It can be argued that dance has a particular propensity to foreground cultural memory as embodied practice by virtue of its predominantly somatic modes of transmission. Indeed in traditional forms of danced display, it could be argued that longevity of human memory is publicly enacted, demonstrating the ethereality of human existence and the continuity of human experience, as successive generations re-present the dancing. (p. 1).

Cultural memory and transmission thereof are the major processes through which a community understands, generates claims and shares its agency in the structure and change in any performing art. In this context the word heritage itself empowers at least theoretically, the community to claim or reclaim their inheritance of the past cultural practices. This claim of inheritance of cultural practices is also an assertion of the identity that helps the community to reaffirm the social solidarity and to maintain the bonding between its members.

The complexities arising out of the clash of interest between the local identities versus that of the singular national one has been manifold in India, emerging out of the travel of a local performance to the national or global proscenium with the interventionist approach of the national agencies. The biggest challenge to a performing art is when it has to adapt to new audience, in a new setting of a decontextualized space, away from the social or ritual setting where the art is organically embedded. The other challenge is also when a few performers from the performance tradition are chosen as the representatives of the same and taken to the urban festivals in the metro cities within India or abroad to represent their dance-form, with the national patrons “working” on the presentation by helping the performing troupe acquire international standards of presentation by helping them with new elements in their costume, shortening of the time of each episode that is

performed according to the requirements of the international or national host etc. This chosen performer, who has, in the eyes of his community, gone one step ahead of the others, returns to his home community as the successful person, and becomes the epitome of all that is the formula to success, in the eyes of all those who were left back home. Thus the change brought about by such influences are never ever organic or generated by the performing community's own interaction to a changing environment or audience, but is actually influenced by a group of outsiders with little or no knowledge, and seldom with any respect or interest towards the continuance of the organic nature of the performance practice.

Bharucha (1989) speaks of such changes referring to them as "Environmental changes":

Still more problematic is the transportation of a traditional performance from its own environment to a proscenium-bound, air-conditioned theatre in New Delhi or a mela in Paris. This environmental change alters the very context of the performance. In some extravaganzas, the performers are merely "slotted" into a spectacle over which they have no control. Reduced to *exotica*, they resemble spots of colour without mind, body, or soul. How does one accept these changes in performances resulting from altered environments? (p. 1908).

Looking at a particular art practice or tradition as a marketable product from the perspective of the globalized market driven world, I would like to separate components of traditional art practices, in this case let us think of the world of dance, belonging principally to the knowledge bank of particular communities, on the basis of (1) the culture/tradition, (2) the performer/producer/carrier of the knowledge and (3) the product, isolable and marketable with or without reference to historicity, cultural specificity or authorship.

In the minds of the community to which the dance traditionally belongs, produces the art, there is no differentiation between the three mentioned components, as long as the particular art remains within the community. It is only when the artistic product (in this case specifically the performance of Chhau) is de-contextualized and produced for a market which is only interested in the final product, that the form becomes dissociated from the context and history, and also more important than the other two components because of its independent marketability. I say this, because it has been repeatedly seen that the products like Gotipua from Odissa, Chhau from Mayurbhanj, Seraikella or Purulia, Kathakali from Kerala and many more have been decontextualized and have become products and skills accessible to urban communities, hardly aware or interested

in the original forms and the communities these forms have belonged to. This is a natural process – and it happens very often to many art practices which try to find a way of surviving by finding new patrons.

For the agencies like the national government or even for an organization like the UNESCO, the focus is the form of art practice that needs to be given special protection as a cultural heritage, somewhere the community is compromised time and again, as the agencies shift hands and authorship loses property rights in the process of the artform's removal from its specific context.

UNESCO's Notion of Intangible Cultural Heritage

In opposition to the uniformization and classification/stratification policies of the Indian government, the UNESCO initiative to identify and safeguard the representative intangible cultural heritage of humanity seems to be taking into account, at least in its broad structural plan, the differences and variations of the different forms that it classifies as Representative of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Humanity. The forms that are identified as such have to be traditional, contemporary and living at the same time – not only representing “inherited traditions from the past but also contemporary rural and urban practices in which diverse cultural groups take part”⁴.

The basic characteristic of the selected art practices is that of being inclusive, to encourage and assimilate shared experience with other communities from the neighbouring village, “from a city on the opposite side of the world, or have been adapted by peoples who have migrated and settled in a different region. They all are intangible cultural heritage: they have been passed from one generation to another, have evolved in response to their environments and they contribute to giving us a sense of identity and continuity, providing a link from our past, through the present, and into our future. Intangible cultural heritage does not give rise to questions of whether or not certain practices are specific to a culture. It contributes to social cohesion, encouraging a sense of identity and responsibility which helps individuals to feel part of one or different communities and to feel part of society at large”⁵;

⁴ See <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00011&RL=00337#identification> for more details.

⁵ Ibid.

A performance tradition becomes Intangible cultural heritage, not only because of its exceptional value as a cultural product, but because it thrives on the depth of the knowledge of those who carry and transmit the knowledge of traditions, skills and customs to the rest of the community, from generation to generation, or to other communities. It can be heritage only if the community it belongs to, recognizes it as the representative form born out their own cultural tradition.

According to the UNESCO website,

the term 'cultural heritage' includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts.

While fragile, intangible cultural heritage is an important factor in maintaining cultural diversity in the face of growing globalization. An understanding of the intangible cultural heritage of different communities helps with intercultural dialogue, and encourages mutual respect for other ways of life.

The importance of intangible cultural heritage is not the cultural manifestation itself but rather the wealth of knowledge and skills that is transmitted through it from one generation to the next. The social and economic value of this transmission of knowledge is relevant for minority groups and for mainstream social groups within a State, and is as important for developing States as for developed ones.

The UNESCO website also defines Intangible Cultural heritage as:

1. The "intangible cultural heritage" means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. For the purposes of this Convention, consideration will be given solely to such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development.

As per the specifications and definitions of the UNESCO the “intangible cultural heritage” is manifested in the areas of:

- oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage;
- performing arts;
- social practices, rituals and festive events;
- knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe;
- traditional craftsmanship.

The measures to provide support and protection towards the representative form the intangible cultural heritage is suggested by the UNESCO through the process of “safeguarding” which is supposed to include “the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage”⁶.

Uneasiness in Anticipation of a New form of Universalization

Presently India has eight forms which have been enlisted in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. In the year 2008, Kutiyattam (Sanskrit theatre), Ramlila (the traditional performance of the Ramayana), and Tradition of Vedic chanting were the three that were enlisted. The following year saw the entry of two more forms. Novruz (also known as Nowrouz, Nooruz, Navruz, Nauroz, Nevruz) from seven countries, i.e. Azerbaijan, India, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Turkey, Uzbekistan was chosen along with Ramman (a form of religious festival and ritual theatre of the Garhwal Himalayas).

2010 saw the inclusion of Chhau (a dance form eastern India), Kalbelia (folk songs and dances of Rajasthan and Mudi yettu (ritual theatre and dance drama of Kerala).

The choice and inclusion of the eight above mentioned forms gives rise to several questions about the process of selection and also the universalization or simplification/standardization of the viewing and selecting procedure, which in its turn gives rise to serious concern about the effect these forms of selection might have on the practitioners and their art.

⁶ Ibid

India has an immense variety of performance traditions which fit the requirements of the UNESCO regarding the criteria for getting selected to be a representative of the intangible cultural heritage. Then why does the choice include only a few lucky ones like Chhau and Kalbelia and why not Lai Haraoba or Yakshagana or for that matter thousand other forms that seem to have failed to get the attention of the “experts” the selectors? More importantly, who gets attention and why? And finally what does it change for the practitioners, and who gets the benefits?

Let me just for an example, bring in the reference to another form that got into the premiere list with Chhau. Kalbelia, as noted by the UNESCO website⁷ is a community of snake charmers, originally from the deserts of Rajasthan. In recent times the community, like many other marginal communities, etches out a living by performing for tourists in the main tourist attractions of Rajasthan. Their women now perform some gymnastic and juggling feat and also incorporate some tricks like picking up a currency notes or rings or other pieces of jewelry with the eyelids, from the ground by bending over backward. Majority of Kalbelia performers (with varied levels of skill and engagement), seek to make a living by performing on contract for exploitative tourism agencies or hotel networks, regularly performing for the tourists, who want an encapsulated lived experience of ‘folk’ life in Rajasthan which is a popular tourist destination. Some of the lucky ones have made a name, and are called to perform at every possible cultural show for the Indian Government, the rest perform locally when they get a chance, and the others (sometimes even very small girls, from the age of three, with a musician father or uncle) spend their lives roaming the desert sand dunes in search of some fleeting patronage from tourists visiting the dunes for a camel ride, in the afternoon sun, in order to make a living.

In the UNESCO website⁸ the decision to include Kalbelia in the list is mentioned as

Decision 5.COM 6.16

⁷ Ibid. The website mentions the innovations and introduction of new costumes and movement practices as the “.... community’s attempt to revitalize its cultural heritage and adapt it to changing socioeconomic conditions.”

⁸ Ibid. The inclusion of “Kalbelia folk songs and dances of Rajasthan” is mentioned as “Inscribed in 2010 (5.COM) on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity Country(ies): India”.

The Committee (...) decides that [this element] satisfies the criteria for inscription on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, as follows:

R.1: Kalbelia folk songs and dances have been creatively adapted by their community of Rajasthani snake handlers to changing socio-economic circumstances, while maintaining continuity over time and providing them with a strong feeling of identity and pride;

R.2: The inscription of Kalbelia folk songs and dances on the Representative List could help to raise awareness about the importance of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage by offering an example of a marginalized community's adaptability and creativity;

R.3: The safeguarding measures proposed, in particular the creation of a Kalbelia Cultural Centre and Archive, aim at the documentation of Kalbelia folk songs and dances, their perpetuation as living traditions and their transmission to future generations;

R.4: The nomination process included leading Kalbelia performers, government authorities and non-governmental organizations; and the free, prior and informed consent of the tradition bearers is demonstrated;

R.5: Kalbelia folk songs and dances are included in the inventory of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, a national repository of Indian arts and culture under the Ministry of Culture.

This brings us to the important point where one has to assert that while these efforts a step in the direction of preservation and safeguarding the interest of the community performers and their art, it is essential to ensure the honesty and integrity of the states that are finally responsible for these communities. India has always had an attitude of unequal condescendence towards the performance practices that it chose to group under the category of 'folk' performances, relegating them to a category where (unlike the masterpieces that got reinvented as the neo-classical dances.⁹ While the classical dances and the masters thereof receive larger grants, visibility and governmental patronage, the lesser known forms are left to survive (or

⁹ See Sarkar Munsii, U. (2010). Another Time, Another space. In P. Chakravorty and N. Gupta (Eds), *Dance Matters* (pp. 26-39), USA UK and India: Routledge for more details on the process of classicization of dance forms.

not) largely on their own. More dangerous is the fact that for each of the forms there are some enterprising representatives, who usually have moved to urban spaces and therefore by the sheer act of being visible and keeping in touch through communication and personal public relations, have become the representative for the performing art category itself. Many such individuals or groups have access to information at the cost of thousands of unknown expert practitioners living, performing and dying in anonymity.

The Changing stage of Chhau

The name Chhau is common for the three sub-genres of dances that are known the world over now. But the practitioners as well as patrons are aware of the value judgment that the forms face from within India. It is well documented (as also in the official government website of Purulia)¹⁰ and also throughout Ashutosh Bhattacharya's writings on Chhau.¹¹ Purulia Chhau gets relegated to being a form without strong moneyed local patronage, being largely patronized by the community members. Ashutosh Bhattacharya takes credit in his book, of having discovered the form, and continues to say that this form seems the remnants of too grand a performance to be originally an art practice of such a backward community. Many writings compare Purulia Chhau as the poor and backward cousin of the other two sub-genres.

Even in the film that is available on the UNESCO website¹², one finds larger sections devoted to the two of the so-called more developed forms. While Purulia form is only shown for its grandeur and athletic movements, the technique and style of the other two are shown in great detail.

¹⁰ Famous Folk Dance "Chau". Retrieved May 13, 2012, from: http://purulia.gov.in/distAdmin/departments/dico/chau_dance.html mentions "Due to lack of sustained patronage and guidance, Purulia Chau shows very little involvement since its hunting or warfare origin. Performed by the early inhabitants of this arid region, it is almost an antithesis of sophisticated and stylized Seraikella form."

¹¹ Bhattacharya, in his book "Chhou Dance of Purulia" reiterated time and again his strong hunch about Chhou not being an indigenous cultural product of the community of mostly non-literate people. He also expressed his conviction about it having originated in some other 'higher' culture.

¹² UNESCO Dossier Video 'India Presents'. Retrieved March 10, 2012, from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u3YLq7CVavc> which shows more segments of performance and movement grammars from Seraikella and Mayurbhanj Chhau.

Given this attitude, the reflective hierarchic placement of the three genres have affected funding possibilities, visibilities and the frequency of selection of the Chhau sub-genres even before the UNESCO made its selection in 2010. The shifting stage for Purulia Chhau is still transitory. The performers come from backward classes largely made up of scheduled castes and tribes. Waiting for the season of Chhau to begin, the performers exist in poverty, practicing their vigorous dance form in the village meeting places or small club houses. The season brings a time of travel, for most within the locality and neighbourhood areas, and for a few lucky ones, beyond the regional or the national borders. This time is for celebrations, as travel means getting some remuneration, if one is lucky and/or really famous, and it also means receiving hospitality from the communities in whose locality the night performance is scheduled to take place.

As soon as the season is over, the masks go back on the walls as the performer struggles to make ends meet by working hard to make a living. Chhau has certainly become famous! People know of it, and many have seen its video, or have seen it being performed on some proscenium space, while the performers of the living tradition vie for attention and space in the world stage, where their performance is already on show!

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