# Purulia Chhou

## Tradition, Transformation, and Contemporary Trends

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Chhou is a popular dance tradition of Eastern India known for its acrobatic bodily movements. This dance form is recognized by UNESCO as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. It blends elements of martial arts, classical dance traditions, and storytelling to narrate local folklore and mythological tales. Chhou is the most popular dance of Eastern India, with three distinct styles: Purulia chhou in West Bengal, Mayurbhanj chhou in Odisha, and Seraikella chhou in Jharkhand. These forms of chhou have similarities and dissimilarities. Purulia chhou and Seraikella chhou use masks, while Mayurbhanj chhou does not. In Seraikella and Mayurbhanj chhou, both men and women perform, but up until around the early 2000s only males performed Purulia chhou. Today, Purulia chhou is expanding the possibilities for women; there are a few chhou troupes of female performers. Purulia chhou has four different subcategories within the district, which are named after localities: Bagmundi chhou, Jhalda chhou, Arsha chhou, and Bandowan chhou.

Purulia chhou is traditionally associated with rain and is performed from April to June, before the rainy season, during the Gājan festival (also known as Charak Puja, held during the Bengali

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months of Chaitra, Baishākh, and Jaistha).[1] In this tropical area, these months before the rains come are extremely stressful because of the extreme heat and the alarming shortage of water. By performing chhou, people in ancient times invoked the sun god, Shiva, to bring rain. During the Gājan *parab* (festival), rituals associated with chhou such as *bhogtā loton*[2] (rolling on the ground), *dondo dewa*[3] (crawling on the ground), *bhogtā ghurā*[4] (spinning in the air), and *kāpjhāmp*[5] (mimicking) are performed to bring rain (figs. 1–5).

Having been born and raised in Phasko, a village in Purulia, I have witnessed these intricate rituals surrounding chhou. I observed chhou from my childhood, and this early exposure sparked a deepening interest that developed further when I began fieldwork for my PhD on Purulia chhou and later managed a chhou troupe.

Chhou is not an individual, discrete genre but an assemblage of rituals and performative traditions. The dance is composed of *pālās* (episodes) that usually run for 60 to 90 minutes. Although most chhou pālās are focused on war, valor, and killing, there are pālās free of these. The heterogeneity of the chhou repertory is little known outside Purulia. In Purulia, the death of the god Mahiṣāsura is mourned by the Santal community on Dānshāi,[6] a few days before Durgā Puja, the annual festival celebrating the Hindu goddess Durgā. Although the killing of Mahiṣāsura by

1. The Gājan festival is an ancient Hindu celebration predominantly observed in the Indian states of West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Assam, Odisha, and certain regions of Bangladesh. It is usually observed in the months of April to June, during the Bengali months of Chaitra, Baishākh, and Jaistha. The festival is dedicated to Lord Shiva and is celebrated with great fervor and enthusiasm by devotees.
2. The word *bhogtā* comes from the Bengali word *bhokta* which comes from the Sanskrit word *bhakt*, meaning devotee. During the Chaitra festival, devotees (bhogtās) of Lord Shiva participate in the ritual known as *bhogtā loton*. This ritual involves devotees taking a bath in a pond, after which, from a distance of approximately 500–800 meters, they begin rolling their bodies on the ground towards the temple, and circumambulating it once they enter the temple area. The *bhogtās*, participants of this ritual, are exclusively male.
3. *Dondo dewa* is a ritual similar to bhogtā loton but open to anyone (not only to the devotees). Participants of all ages and genders, particularly women and children, engage in this practice. They start by bathing in a pond and then proceed to the temple by crawling on the ground. Upon reaching the temple, they perform three rounds around it, all while still crawling.
4. For *bhogtā ghurā*, devotees are pierced through their flesh with two sharp hooks connected to thick ropes, securing them to a tall T-shaped wooden structure called the *bhogtā dang.* Then the devotees circumambulate the Shiva temple. After this, they engage in aerial spinning while their bodies are suspended from the bhogtā dang.
5. In Purulia's dialectal Bengali, "kāp" means to imitate. During the ritual of *kāpjhāmp*, participants camouflage themselves and mimic the appearance, gestures, and postures of mythical characters and animals. Some also cover their bodies with ash and mud, wear unique costumes, and paint their bodies and faces.
6. Before Durgā Puja, male members of the Santal community participate in Dānshāi, a ritual where they dress as women and visit nearby villages to collect items like rice, wheat, and money. They perform traditional songs and dances, accompanied by instruments such as the *dhol*, *dhāmsa*, and *vuāng*. This ritual, where men search for their god Mahiṣāsurā, culminates on the final day of Durgā Puja, referred to as "Hundur Durgā" by the Santals, celebrating Mahiṣāsurā rather than the Hindu festival of Vijayādashami.

*Figure 1. (facing page)* Bhogtā dānge chorā: *Devotee climbing for aerial spinning during the Gājan festival. Nunia village, Purulia, 2014. (Photo by Shaktipada Kumar)*

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*Figure 2.* Bhogtā loton*, an essential ritual of the Gājan festival associated with the chhou performance. Phasko village, Purulia, 2023. (Photo by Shaktipada Kumar)*

the goddess Durgā is the most well-known episode in Purulia chhou, it is not the only episode. Emphasizing it leads outsiders to conclude that the sole focus of Purulia chhou is the slaying of Mahiṣāsura by Durgā. As a result, Purulia chhou troupes are frequently hired by Durgā Puja committees in Kolkata and its suburbs to perform the *Mahiṣāsura Vadh Pālā*.[7] This misconception diverges significantly from the actual roots of the dance form, which are only minimally associated with Durgā Puja. Mahiṣāsura pālā begins with a *jhumur* song, also known as *sobhā vandanā* (invocation to the stage and audience). Each character enters with a jhumur song, but there is no fixed song for any chhou character. Sometimes there are several songs for a single character, such as Ganesha, Krishna, Kartika, Asura, and *sakhi* (female dancer). After the inaugural song, Ganesha, the elephant-headed god and a son of Shiva, enters the stage and dances to the refrain of a jhumur song that is typically dedicated to Lord Ganesha.

> *Sinduro barana anga musiko vāhana*
> *Mātā jaro Pārvati pitā Panchānan*[8]
> (Vermilion-hued body whose vehicle is a mouse
> His mother is Parvati and father, Panchānan)[9]

As he runs through the spectators onto the stage, Ganesha performs electrifying jumps and whirls, moving around the stage with dynamic energy. He showcases two or three types of *jhāmp*

7. *Mahiṣāsura Vadh Pālā* is the most predominant chhou pālā that deals with the killing of the demon Mahiṣāsura by Goddess Durgā.
8. Panchānan is the angry form of Shiva and even though his anger is not signified in this jhumur song, the name is used by the composer for the sake of rhyme and rhythm.
9. All verses are from the recorded chhou episode from my personal archive and the translation of these verses, and all other quotes from Bengali to English, are mine.



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*Figure 3.* Dondo dewā: *Circumambulation through crawling, performed during the Gājan festival. Phasko village, Purulia, 2018. (Photo by Shaktipada Kumar)*

(whirling), the most spectacular being the *tin pāk jhāmp*, three whirls in midair. Ganesha's solo lasts around five minutes. A crescendo of high-tempo music concludes his performance, setting the stage for performances by Nandi and Bhingi.

Nandi and Bhingi, the gatekeepers of Shiva, follow with acrobatic movements. After that, Kartika (Ganesha's brother) and his friends showcase a dynamic gait, somersaults, and whirls. This dance serves as training for the junior performers who accompany Kartika. The performance shifts from *vīr* to *śṛṅgāra rasa* as Kartika dances to amorous songs.[10] Ganesh, Kartika, Nandi, and Bhingi dance together, joined by *nartakis* (female dancers) in a śṛṅgāra-themed jhumur song. The rasa transitions to vīr rasa as Mahiṣāsura's arrival brings a fierce battle with Durgā. The performance concludes with Ganesha, Kartika, Lakshmi, Saraswati, and others standing in a formation worshipping Durgā, chanting the Durgā Puja mantra (fig. 6). This episode is the most traditional and frequently enacted chhou pālā. However, there are numerous other episodes that are performed.

10. Bharata Muni, in his seminal *Nāṭyaśāstra*, defines *rasa* as the essence or flavor of a dramatic performance, commonly translated as "mood" or "sentiment." Rasa holds a central place in the aesthetics of Indian classical dance and theatre. Among the eight rasas discussed in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, *vīr* rasa evokes feelings of bravery, courage, heroism, and determination. Vīr rasa is portrayed through characters who demonstrate acts of bravery and fearlessness.



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*Figure 4.* Bhogtā ghurā: *Devotee spinning in the air, performed during the Gājan festival. Nunia village, Purulia, 2014. (Photo by Shaktipada Kumar)*

## Diverging Stories

One of the ancient sites of the chhou performances is Phasko village. I recorded a chhou pālā on 15 April 2014 on the occasion of the Gājan festival.[11] The Harishchandra pālā unfolds under the shade of a banyan and a peepal (sacred fig) tree. These trees are nearly 500 years old. Between these sacred trees there is a natural coolness. The audience gathers under the banyan tree, sitting on jute or plastic bags, eagerly awaiting the chhou performance. The Harishchandra pālā, about a legendary king, begins with jhumur songs, creating a mood that complements the performance. Although not directly connected to the storyline, these songs enhance the overall atmosphere and frame the pālā.

The narrative diverges significantly from the written version in the Mahābhārata. In the chhou performance, the narrative starts with Harishchandra and his soldiers going on a hunting expedition in a dense forest. The performance is rooted in regional oral and performance traditions like nāchni dance and jhumur dance. Harishchandra loses his kingdom and becomes a beggar, highlighting his desperate struggle to fulfil his debt to the sage Vishwāmitra. The emotional depth is amplified through the theatrics of the *sutradhar* (narrator), songs, vigorous dancing, makeup, and masks.

11. The spring Gājan festival is held at the end of the Bengali month of Chaitra—mid-April on the Western calendar. Also known as *charak puja*, *chait parab*, and other names, the festival is the context of chhou dance's origin. Before chhou was commercialized, the chhou dance was only performed during this festival.



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*Figure 5. Shiva's* anuchar*: Amidst the kāpjhāmp ritual, a participant, smeared with mud to appear like Shiva's follower. Kadampur village, Purulia, 2014. (Photo by Shaktipada Kumar)*

For instance, when Vishwāmitra Muni enters the stage, his appearance—characterized by makeup, a mask featuring matted hair, and the *lotā-kalash* (a brass metal pot for holy water) in his left hand—perfectly embodies the image of a sage (fig. 7).

In Purulia chhou, masks are vital to the performance. They allow performers to visually and symbolically communicate the identities of their characters, providing instant recognition and connection between the performers and the audience. Without these visual cues, it would be harder for the performers to convey, and for the audience to grasp, each character's distinct identity, making the effectiveness of the character portrayal more difficult.

In another scene, Harishchandra's and his wife's masks feature unkempt hair, resembling street beggars. These masks are intentionally dull in color, lacking sophistication, to match the somber circumstances of Harishchandra's plight (fig. 8). When Harishchandra leaves his kingdom as a beggar, he wears a black dhoti with his upper body bare, while his wife is in a worn sari and his son in a yellow dhoti. The sorrow and pity of the *karuna* rasa is evoked through their movements, makeup, masks, and the interplay of jhumur songs, which are predominately melancholic tunes.[12]

Towards the end of this performance, Harishchandra is free of sage Vishwāmitra's debt—a feeling of freedom reflected in the chhou performance:

12. Karuna rasa, often referred to as "pathos," is one of the nine primary rasas (emotional flavors) in Indian aesthetics, particularly in the context of Indian theatre, dance, and literature. It embodies feelings of sorrow, sympathy, and empathy, and is often evoked in narratives that involve loss, suffering, or emotional struggles. In chhou performance, karuna rasa is expressed through a combination of theatrics, body language, vocal tone, and poignant storytelling.



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*Figure 6.* Dhunuchi nāch *at the end of* Mahiṣāsura Vadh pālā. *Phasko village, Purulia, 2016. (Photo by Shaktipada Kumar)*

> The person, who was walking very gently and delicately, suddenly metamorphoses into a transcendental state as if some energy booster has been infused into him. The tempo of the music gets fast. He starts laughing and jumping dynamically out of sheer delight. (Kumar and Bera 2023)

The pālā is dominated by karuna rasa; the fusion of music, movements, and masks conveys the characters' emotions vividly, transcending the textual narrative. Chhou dance's adaptation of Rājā Harishchandra's story emphasizes local traditions, character portrayal through masks and movements, and evokes strong emotions from the audience through voice modulation and storytelling techniques. For instance, when Harishchandra speaks, his voice carries such humility that it resembles crying, conveying a distinct tone of acknowledging a grave error and earnestly seeking forgiveness, skillfully portrayed by the sutradhar through intonation. Through its dynamic blend of body movements, music, voice modulations, and narration, chhou creates a strong connection between performers and the audience. For example, when Vishwāmitra's character experiences anger, the tone of the sutradhar shifts dramatically, matched by precise movements of the dancer that highlight the emotional intensity of the character. This seamless integration of dialog with expressive choreography ensures that each gesture resonates with the character's feelings, making the story more impactful and inviting the audience to become fully engaged.

Another chhou performance where the dominant rasa is not vīr rasa is a pālā of one of the greatest love stories of the Mahābhārata, that of Nol and Damayanti, chronicled in the *Vana Parva* (exile into the forest), the third book of the epic. In the chhou rendition, the narrative is presented with a blend of poignancy and comic relief, facilitated by the incorporation of local popular songs and supplementary characters. The storyline, while not strictly adhering to the Bengali rendition of the Mahābhārata by Kashiram Das, occasionally draws direct quotes from it.

Nol and Damayanti's story unfolds in a 66-minute pālā that begins, like all other chhou performances, with a jhumur song featuring the dynamics of love and marriage:

*Bondhu shuniyā korlā ki?*
*Bondhu janiyā korlā ki?*
*Jwāliyā dile moner āgun*
*Nibhāiya dile nā*



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*Figure 7. Vishwāmitra Muni's appearance in Rājā Harishchandra's episode. Phasko village, Purulia 2014. (Photo by Shaktipada Kumar)*

*Ei chukāi āilo bāpe rāji hoy*
*nāi āmi*
*Ār churuvuku mone lāge nāi*
*swāmi*
*O bāp kāndbi boise bihār dine*
*hey*
*Āmār dekhā āche bor*
*Tākā diyāi hobek tor*
*Āmi boli nāi āchhi mon gumāne*
*hey*
*Āmi bihāin jābo binā pone hey*

(O friend, what have you
done after hearing?
O friend, what have you done
after knowing?
You kindled the fire of love
You do not know how to
extinguish it

Father has fixed my marriage, but I have disagreed
I did not like the groom who is short and not smart
Oh father! You will cry on the day of my marriage
I have already chosen my husband
The dowry you plan to give to your chosen groom will serve no purpose
I will not reveal the secret information to anyone
I will get married without your dowry)

The songs in chhou reflect complex aspects of Indian society, especially marriage practices prevalent in rural areas. In this first song, Damayanti laments her father's choice for her arranged marriage, vowing to marry her choice for a husband, even without her dowry. Another song emphasizes that marriage unites not just two individuals but two families. While the Mahābhārata's Nol-Damayanti episode and its chhou rendition do not explicitly address marriage practices, the songs subtly critique arranged marriages and dowries, still practiced the rural areas of India, even in the 21st century.

Newer chhou narratives, reflecting shifting attitudes, show daughters rejecting marriage traditions and independently choosing their own partners. Since 2010, new pālās have been introduced that address issues like dowries and child brides, aligning with the efforts of the government to discourage both practices. These new pālās show the transformative potential of chhou.

The story of Nol and Damayanti begins with the *swayambhar sabhā* (the bride choosing her groom herself from among many suitors). Maharājā Vimā, king of Bidarva Nagar, calls a swayamvar sabhā for Damayanti, his adult daughter. Many gods and kings are invited to attend, including Indra,[13] Vaiśvānara,[14] Shaman,[15] and Varun.[16] They enter the stage dancing to a jhumur song:

13. In Hinduism, Indra reigns as the deity of rain and storms. Ancient worshippers revered him as the bravest among gods, attributing to him the power to bring forth rains.
14. Vaiśvānara, depicted as a hermit in the Mahābhārata's sabhā *Parva*, resides within Indra's palace. He embodies the god of warfare and is commonly depicted as a warrior king.
15. Shaman, an alternate name for Yamraj, represents the Hindu deity governing death and justice. He oversees the enforcement of law and the punishment of wrongdoers in his realm, Naraka.
16. In the Vedic era of Hindu mythology, Varuna emerges as the divine ruler, embodying supreme authority. He is linked with the sky, oceans, and water, serving as the guardian of both cosmic order and moral law.





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*Figure 8. Rājā Harishchandra with his wife and son after losing the kingdom. Phasko village, Purulia 2014. (Photo by Shaktipada Kumar)*

*Āsha roilo ogo shyāmer gole mālā dite*
*Āmār sādh roilo mone*
*Ārāle royechho sokhā*
[...]
*Tomār āmār vālobāsā vulibo kemone bhāi*
*Opore ki jāne bhāi*

*Aa ha aa ha ār mone nāi ki boilechhili*
*bondhu kāne kāne*
*Ei kātibo jibon sukhe premālāpone*
*Sādher jibon brithāi gelo okāron bondhu bine*
*Prem kothā ki diye bujhābo re dhon*
*Premer lāgi dehotyāgi e mon*
*choile jāi go e jibon*
*Prem kothā ki diye bujhabo re dhon*

(I wish to offer a garland to my beloved
My wishes remain unfulfilled
You remain hidden
[...]
How can I forget our love
No one knows of our relationship

Oh beloved I can't recall what I whispered in your ears
We'll live happily in love,
This life is meaningless without my beloved,
Oh beloved how do I convey love's language to you?
I'd sacrifice this life for love,
Life carries on,
Oh beloved how do I convey love's language to you?)



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Because Damayanti has already chosen Nol as her husband, the gods tell Nol there is no need for him to go to the swayamvar sabhā. They give him blessings and return to heaven. Rājā Nol returns to Damayanti and marries her. On their way back to heaven, they meet Dwāpar and Kali[17] and inform them about what happened in the swayamvar sabhā. After this, the chhou rendition deviates from the written version. Nol and Damayanti become the target of Dwāpar and Kali's rage because Damayanti has married a human being instead of a god. This painful story incorporates some comic characters, clowns locally known as *chedi mātāls*. These extra elf-like characters, used for narrative digression, introduce local stories and connect the performance with the daily lives of the people.

In Kashiram Das's Mahābhārata, Damayanti encounters wild animals in the jungle when Nol leaves her there. But in the chhou rendition, she faces human beings who are more ferocious and wicked than the wild animals. In the chhou version, Damayanti, exhausted by her prolonged search for her husband, tries to find respite in the jungle. A group of chedi mātāls spot the beautiful woman and want to make her their wife. Amidst their conflict over who will claim her, they attempt to convince Damayanti to join them. Their initial respectful request becomes increasingly violent. In the midst of this, Vyādha, a powerful hunter, intervenes and effortlessly defeats the chedi mātāls. He then wants to take Damayanti home. Damayanti refuses. When Vyādha insists, Damayanti curses him and he drops dead. Finally, Nol and Damayanti are reunited. In the chhou pālā, the action involving the chedi mātāls and the deceased body of Vyādha infuse humor into the story, elaborating the plot and extending the pālā in performance by 15 minutes. This final segment of the pālā is a completely new addition to the preexisting narrative.

## Tradition and Change

Chhou is performed without a raised stage, on a rectangular earthen stage area prepared before each performance. The dance is traditionally performed in front of the Shiva temple from Chaitra Sankranti (the last day of the Bengali month of Chaitra, usually mid-April) to the 13th day of the Bengali month of Jaistha (usually mid-May). Ten to twelve musicians on diverse instruments[18] play an integral role, with drummers occasionally joining the dancers onstage. Since the early years of the 21st century, there have been extensive changes in the use of light and other modern technologies, driven by the imperative to adapt in order to remain relevant in a rapidly developing society. Changes include enacting and adapting traditional stories, and adding choreography, lighting, stage design, music, masks, and costumes. Furthermore, transportation is sometimes provided for performers and efforts are made to increase community engagement.

New pālās adapt to contemporary demands, raising awareness and advocating for social change. Narratives like *Murshid Quli Khan* (first performed in 1995 by Ustad Bhuban Chandra Kumar),[19] *Santal Rebellion* (first performed in 1989 by Ustad Bhuban Chandra Kumar),[20] *Kargil War* (first performed in 2000 by Ustad Bhuban Chandra Kumar),[21] and *Coronasur Vadh* (about the Covid pandemic; 2020) delve into historical events and contemporary issues. *Kanyashree Prakalpa o Balyabibaha*

17. In Hindu mythology, Dwāpar and Kali are the names of the last two of the four Yugas (world ages), but in the chhou performance, they are depicted as deities wishing to participate in Damayanti's swayamvar sabha. Dwāpar and Kali feel offended when Damayanti selects a mortal as her husband instead of a deity.
18. Two big drums (*dhol*), two big kettle drums (*dhāmsa*), one or two small kettle drums (*cherpeti*), one synthesizer, two *shehnai* (somewhat like an oboe), and two trumpets. In traditional chhou only the shehnai and drums were used.
19. Murshid Quli Khan, also known as Mohammad Hadi and born as Surya Narayan Mishra, was the first Nawab of Bengal, serving from 1717 to 1727. The chhou episode basically depicts the reign of Murshid Quli Khan.
20. The Santhal rebellion took place from 1855–1856 in Jharkhand and West Bengal, led by the Santhals against the East India Company, the zamindari land revenue tax system, and exploitative usury practices. This rebellion aimed to challenge colonial oppression driven by a corrupt revenue system enforced by local zamindars, police, and the British East India Company courts.
21. Chhou performers incorporated the real-life Kargil conflict, a war fought between India and Pakistan from May to July 1999 in the Kargil district of Jammu and Kashmir and along the Line of Control (LoC), into their performance narrative. They choreographed a war episode depicting the intense conflict and featuring replicas of modern weapons such as rifles, handguns, and grenades.



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*Pratirodh* (2014) focuses on the Kanyashree project of the West Bengal government, which supports the well-being and empowerment of girls, including preventing child marriages. *Ādibashi Kudmi Somaj* (performed in 2016 by Ambarish Mahato) highlights the cultural heritage and identity of the Kudmi community of Purulia, as well as some parts of Jharkhand, Odisha, and Assam. While this particular pālā highlights the role of the Kudmi community in local social reform, the episode's exclusive focus on this single community detracts from the broader appeal of chhou, which resonates with audiences from heterogenous communities. The episode emphasizes the contribution of the people of the Kudmi but overlooks the contribution of other communities to the chhou tradition. For example, the Dom jāti are primarily the musicians in chhou dance; the Muchi jāti make musical instruments; and the Chhuthar jāti make the masks. This collective effort has shaped the present-day chhou tradition. A chhou episode focused solely on the issues and contributions of a single community risks undermining the inclusive nature of chhou, which is traditionally performed by a diverse range of communities.

Overall, these new pālās demonstrate chhou's dynamic nature: its ability to evolve and incorporate changes. By embracing diverse themes and narratives, chhou continues to captivate audiences while serving as a medium for artistic expression, cultural preservation, and social activism.

## Lighting

The most noticeable change in chhou has been the use of lighting. Traditionally chhou was performed late at night, typically starting at 11:00 p.m., with many rituals held throughout the day prior. The earliest lighting for chhou was *mashāl*: rags tied on top of a scythe, dipped in oil derived from seeds (known as *reditel* or *endri tel*), and then ignited. Because there was no proper electricity in Purulia until the 1990s, every house used *dibu*, or *lampha* (small kerosene lamps), which were also used for chhou. Electric generators were used prior to the advent of power lines. This kind of electricity introduced a significant shift. Various tube lights, mercury lights, and 100W–250W bulbs provide sufficient light for the overnight performances. While generators are still employed during power cuts, chhou now embraces a diverse array of modern lighting options.

## Sound

Microphones and speakers were incorporated into chhou in the late '90s. Before the advent of electronic sound sources and amplification, the primary source of sound was the *dhāmsa*, a kettle drum crafted from a large wooden log that projected sound over long distances. Today there are aluminium electric horn loudspeakers as well as large speakers with more bass that have very different acoustic properties and can better amplify the sounds of traditional instruments like *dhol* and dhāmsa (types of drums), and *shehnai* (wind instrument).

Also adding to the variety of sounds (from the 1990s onwards) are synthesizers, which locals refer to as "casios," after a popular, less expensive brand of synthesizers. Interestingly, the term "synthesizer" itself is not widely recognized or used in the area.

Using "crackers" (firecrackers) to make explosive sounds is another contemporary development. Crackers are particularly prominent in Jhalda, a municipality in Purulia that is a modernized area with a rail station and some industry.

## Motorized Vehicles

During my interviews with several veteran chhou and jhumur performers, including Bhuban Chandra Kumar and Kishore Kumar Gupta, and local researcher Kiriti Mahato, transportation was highlighted as another crucial factor that has undergone significant change. Before automobiles, performers walked to the performance venue. David Reck describes how the artists used to arrive for a dance performance:

> At about dusk the masks began to arrive: masks carried by groups of villagers—tribals who had walked five or ten or twenty miles down the roads and paths because they could not



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*Figure 9. Chhou performers arriving in a vehicle. Kudagara village, Purulia, 2018. (Photo by Shaktipada Kumar)*

> afford busfare, walking in informal processions to the music of drums (dhols, dhāmsas) and double-reed pipes (mahuris) to the area set up at the forestry station, hoping for a chance to perform. Each group of from fifteen to thirty dancers and musicians was promised a fee of twenty rupees. (1972:11)

Masks were hung on a ladder or similar wooden structure. Two performers shouldered the ends of the ladder. Musical instruments were slung from the performers' necks, and the costumes were toted in sacks. The whole thing created a unique procession on foot.

The advent of the bicycle in 1960s–'70s marked a significant development in Purulia chhou. Performers, all men during this period, ingeniously adapted to this new mode of transportation. Each artist wore a mask positioned at the back of his head. The costumes were packed inside jute sacks, suspended on either side of the handlebars of bicycles. Two performers shared a single bicycle, with one cycling and the other seated at the back. Occasionally, the copassenger would assist with pedaling, especially on uneven terrain or when a faster pace was required. En route, they'd sing jhumur songs, and their rhythmic cadence created a lively procession. Groups of 10 to 15 bicycles, each with two performers, embarked on their journey to the venue of the performance. Nowadays, all-terrain vehicles are used (fig. 9).

## Costumes

Costumes in each of the three forms of chhou differ from one another. There is a huge change in the chhou costumes used before and after the 1990s. An insightful glimpse into the earlier Purulia chhou costumes can be found in Ritwik Ghatak's films, *Puruliar Chhau* (1970) and *Jukti Takko Aar Gappo* (1974); in the latter, part of the movie is devoted to Purulia chhou (fig. 10). Most of the





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*Figure 10. Chhou performers in 1974. Still from* Jukti Takko Aar Goppo*, documentary by Ritwik Ghatak; https://youtu.be/vSmuHca03JE?feature=shared. (Screenshot by Shaktipada Kumar)*

performers wore knee-length dhotis over shorts in the film, with their upper bodies bare; only the main characters covered their upper bodies. The dancers secured the dhotis around their waists with a piece of cloth locally known as *komorbandhni*, or waist-wrapper. Some characters wore ankle bells. They covered the soles of their feet with ankle socks and these continue to be part of the chhou attire. Performers used colorful cloth strips, masks, and wooden limbs to create an array of human, animal, and supernatural characters: tigers, lions, cows, buffalos, horses, monkeys, peacocks, elephants, and more. Such characterizations demanded intricate makeup and synchronized movements. For instance, the portrayal of a single buffalo required the coordination of two dancers.

Asutosh Bhattacharyya, in his *Chhau Dance of Purulia*, writes about the costumes of chhou performers, which is to date the only book-length scholarly study of chhou:

> It is likely that it was a bare body dance and no regular costumes were used in this dance during its pre-mask period or during, the period when the masks had not been introduced in Chhau dance. The masks necessitated a regular set of costumes which must have undergone changes from age to age and from earlier circumstances to new circumstances. More than half a century ago, when the Bagmundi Raj family used to hold the annual dance festivals, the members of the family used to supply costumes themselves to the dancers and thus a model of costumes for this purpose was set by them. According to statements received from the old people of the village, they were very simple and were mostly made of unstitched cloth of diverse colour, and not as complex as it is to-day. (1972:63)

According to Bhattacharyya, the main characters (both divine and demonic) wore embroidered jackets:

> There are beautiful designs at the back and at the two sides of the front or the breast. The designs have no religious or symbolic significance, but they display graceful artistic motifs. The arms of the jackets extend upto the elbow only, and, from the elbow to the wrist of a dancer remain exposed. But in order to cover the dark skin and to match with the colour of the face of the mask and the jacket, the dancers wrap a glazing ribbon around each hand upto the limit of the wrist, resembling the practice of wrapping of lace of leather around the feet upto the knees by the ancient Greek and Roman soldiers. Though by this practice the skin is not wholly covered, yet this is very common among the dancers throughout the district. (1972:65–66)

Bhattacharyya then compares chhou with Barong and Kris dance traditions of Bali, which are also mask dance traditions. He writes that "in order to give more realistic and graceful appearance to the gods and goddesses the dark-skinned aboriginals and semi-aboriginals adopted masks later on" (96). Contrary to what Bhattacharyya writes, the use of masks has never been an attempt to conceal a performer's skin tone or to conform to any racial beauty standards. His opinion reflects a lack of



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*Figure 11. Lord Krishna captivates the audience in his contemporary attire, accompanied by a large speaker in the background. Bamnia village, Purulia, 2013. (Photo by Shaktipada Kumar)*

appreciation for the deep cultural and symbolic significance of chhou masks and perhaps his own regional biases.

Today's costumes are different from those Bhattacharyya saw (fig. 11). Now the costumes cover most parts of the body and resemble those worn by performers of jatra, a traditional theatre form of West Bengal. The use of ankle bells and bells on other body parts are not as vibrant as they used to be. In fact, such bells in Purulia chhou are almost gone. Performers commonly hold colorful handkerchiefs in both hands, a practice reminiscent of traditions like *nachni* dance and jhumur or *dainr* dance. Performers often embellish themselves with multiple colorful ribbons wrapped around their hands, along with elaborate chest covers adorned with small plastic beads and large colored mica sequins. Though there are no hard and fast rules, demonic characters usually wear black dhotis while the characters representing gods wear dhotis of different colors, but never black. Incarnations of demons wear tight leggings and a skintight full-sleeve T-shirt.

## Movements

Earlier there were only a few movements in chhou dance, including *ulfa*, *digbaji*, and *jhaap*, described by D. Venkat Rao:

> There are at least three distinct types of jump that markedly spread across in each performance: (i) *ulfa*—somersault where the jump takes place without allowing the head to touch the ground; this is of two kinds: frontal (*aglia*) and reversed (*pichlia*) [...] (ii) the second type of jump is called *digbaji*; this is yet another kind of somersault that lets the head touch the ground. (iii) The third and most difficult jump is a swirl in the air called *jhaap dewa*. This



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*Figure 12.* Bhuluke āgliyā *(front somersault of a new kind). Bamnia village, Purulia, 2013. (Photo by Shaktipada Kumar)*

> pirouetting in the air and landing perfectly in a standing or sitting position on the ground is performed often with ease by the performers. (Rao 2021:187)

Many new movements have been introduced into chhou but because most of these are not defined there are no specific names for such movements. One new movement known as *bhuluke āgliyā* is a front somersault over the backs of bent performers and between the legs of other performers standing on the bent ones (fig. 12). *Ārliyā ulfā* is one of the recent movements added to chhou dance. This precise movement is very difficult for most chhou artists. It is a combination of both front and back somersault. This ārliyā ulfā starts the way a back somersault starts and ends in the manner of a frontal somersault; so, in the middle of this movement, in a fraction of a second, the dancers twist their bodies. This is also known as *mochoida ulfa*, which means a twisted somersault.

## Film and Theatre

The interplay between Bollywood cinema and chhou dance is evident, with each influencing the other. Nonetheless, integrating local art and culture into mainstream cinema is increasingly common. Numerous films feature chhou dance, ranging from documentaries solely focused on the artform to Bollywood productions that incorporate it in part: *Jukti Takko Aar Gappo* (1977), a documentary, and *Puruliar Chhau* (1970), both by Ritwik Ghatak; *Mrigayaa* (1976) by Mrinal Sen; *Barfi!* (2012) by Anurag Basu; *Gunday* (2014) by Ali Abbas Zafar; *ABCD: Any Body Can Dance* (2013) and *Lal Pahare'r Katha* (2007), both by Remo D'Souza; and *Goliyon Ki Raasleela Ram-Leela* (2013) by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. Through these films, chhou's traditional roots are adapted for cinematic appeal, reflecting the fluid nature of chhou but often reducing its cultural depth to a martial stereotype, overlooking its nuanced storytelling traditions and ritualistic significance in Purulia.



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*Jukti Takko Aar Gappo* (Reason, Debate, and Story) is Ritwik Ghatak's final film, released in 1974. While not exclusively about Purulia chhou dance, it features a significant portrayal of the form. Ghatak's film explores the Purulia region and the artists whose identity is inseparable from performance. The essence of their existence lies in the embodiment of their art, as emphasized by the maskmaker in the film. Cultural forms like chhou survive not in static display but through active performance. Ghatak criticizes the archival impulse, advocating for the continuation of tradition through practice. By filming live performances he unveils the cultural context of Purulia chhou. Ghatak's perspective isn't nostalgic about traditional forms; he affirms the ongoing practices of practitioners maintaining their heritage.

In contemporary films that incorporate chhou, the focus is often on the dynamic and energetic body movements of the performers, commonly seen in trailers—for instance movies like *Goliyon Ki Raasleela Ram-Leela*, *Gunday*, *Barfi!*, and others. Vikrant Kishore rightly pointed out the use of Purulia chhou in the highly commercial *Goliyon Ki Raasleela Ram-Leela*:

> Purulia Chhau is utilised merely as a prop and as an element that lends itself to the formation of a spectacle of a huge cultural procession led by the protagonist Ram (Ranvir Singh), head of the Rājādi clan to burn the effigy or Ravan during the Dusshera celebration. The use of Purulia Chhau is simply to provide a colourful and exotic feel to the whole scene. There are brief close-ups and mid-shots of the Chhau performers focusing mainly on their elaborate masks and colourful costumes. (2014:200)

## Women in Chhou

Traditionally, and for many years, Purulia chhou was practiced, preserved, and disseminated by men. Even today, far fewer women participate in chhou than men. The reasons for this disparity are deeply rooted in sociopolitical, cultural, and economic problems. There is a long oral debate and sometimes through social and print media over who was the first female chhou dancer. Mousumi Chowdhury maintains she is the first female chhou dancer in her community and has inspired other girls and young women to follow in her footsteps since 2010.[22] The US Consulate General in Kolkata affirms that the young performer is the first female chhou performer of Purulia:

> Mousumi Choudhury, a young Chau dancer from Purulia, is a one-woman revolution in this male domain characterized by stunts and acrobatic movements. This traditional art form was challenged and changed by Mousumi when she was only in her early teens. Born and brought up amongst the Chau dancers, Mousumi as a child always wondered why women were excluded. Little Mousumi used to wear her father's costume and tried to dance. Her father supported and trained her to become the first Chau dancer in her community. Mousumi feels that she took a huge leap not only for herself but also for all the little girls whose dreams and ambitions might not match those set up by society. Congratulations to Mousumi for winning the grand prize in the category of young practitioner in the 2019 Asia-Pacific Storytelling Contest! (USCG 2021)

Women progressively participated as performers in the three forms of chhou. In Mayurbhanj, women began dancing chhou in the 1960s, soon followed by Seraikella chhou. In Purulia, this transition began in 1985 when Ustad (the honorific for a renowned dance teacher) Chandra Mohan Mahato from Tumbajhalda village of Arsha locality brought women dancers into his troupe. The female performers were exclusively engaged as dancers, showcasing their talent and skills solely through dance. The male performers, however, were also engaged to set up the stage, arrange the musical instruments, and handle other technical aspects like stage lighting and sound management.

22. There are, however, instances of women taking part in chhou since 1985.



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The late Ustad Anil Patra from Tamajuri village incorporated women into his troupe from 1995. Towards the end of the 1990s, in Jiling village, Chandra Mohan Mahato's troupe showcased performances by female artists. Under the guidance of Purulia's district magistrate Dev Prasad Jana, renowned Ustad Durgacharan Mahato (known as DC Mahato) and his son Malay Mahato produced an extraordinary performance that featured characters like Lord Krishna and Radha, the latter performed by a woman. In the late 1990s, a three-day competition held at Sadhu Ashram featured female artists, marking a pivotal moment in the evolution of chhou. Since 2010/2011, several chhou troupes have emerged with all-female performers.

## Chhou as a Commercial Genre

In the 21st century, chhou has evolved beyond its traditional contexts and timeframe of the Gājan festival to become a sought-after commercial performance throughout the year. Chhou troupes are in high demand during various festivals such as Durgā Puja, Kali Puja, Ganesh Chaturthi, and Jagadhatri Puja, from August to November. In addition to its widespread commercialization during festivals and cultural events, chhou is also featured prominently in various entertainment media, including reality TV shows, soap operas, and web series. In the recent Bollywood films listed above, as well as in such Bengali films as *Karna Subarner Guptodhon*, chhou dance is used to portray an "authentic" Indian village and enhance the rustic charm of the storyline for the urban audience. The colorful masks and energetic movements are presented as emblematic of rural West Bengal's cultural wealth. However, there is little context provided regarding the cultural significance of the dance or the performers. Chhou troupes are also hired by various organizations for performances worldwide. In February 2024, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations extended an invitation to a chhou dance troupe of Purulia to participate in the 11th Aswan International Festival in Aswan, Egypt. In 2018, chhou dance was performed at the National Palace Museum in Taipei City, Taiwan, as part of collaborative efforts to enhance cultural exchanges between Taiwan and South Asian nations, facilitated by the National Palace Museum and the India-Taipei Association. A chhou dance troupe from West Bengal also participated in a three-day chhou dance festival held in Singapore in April 2023. This collaborative effort was spearheaded by the Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises department of the West Bengal government and UNESCO as part of the Rural Craft and Cultural Hub project. Every chhou troupe of Purulia typically has one or two managers who are residents of the same village as the troupe. They often serve as the primary contacts for bookings. Additionally, in some cases, certain dancers within the troupe take on managerial responsibilities.

Chhou performances typically involve around 30 to 35 members, combining live music, drama, and intricate choreography. However, when performed outside Purulia, budget constraints often necessitate a significant reduction in team size, impacting the complexity of the performance. Additionally, the stages provided for such performances are often ill-suited for chhou, being smaller and less accommodating for its acrobatic and martial elements. Moreover, linguistic differences pose challenges, as the narration of chhou pālās is typically done in the Bengali dialect of Purulia, which differs from the standard Bangla and may not be well received in certain regions. This linguistic barrier often leads to requests (sometimes made during the booking of chhou performances outside Purulia) for chhou troupes to perform solely with the music, omitting the essential narration and dialog. This can create tension within chhou troupes; diluting the art form by eliminating the traditional storytelling means that the sutradhar and the singers will not be hired for these jobs. If such shortcuts persist, they may contribute to the decline of traditional chhou.

Transportation presents another hurdle, especially for Purulia chhou with its large masks and props. Transporting these items can lead to damage, adding to the financial strain on performers. Additionally, the limited performance time allocated outside Purulia often necessitates truncating pālās. Audiences outside Purulia rarely complain when chhou pālās are shortened, as they primarily



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attend to witness the visual splendor of the performance—the masks, dynamic choreography, and energetic movements. Since they are generally less familiar with the full narrative structure, they are often unaware that the pālās have been truncated. Event organizers outside Purulia frequently set constraints on the number of performers and the duration of performances, as well as on budgets, which necessitate these adjustments. Consequently, the focus shifts to showcasing chhou's visual appeal rather than the complete narrative.

I used to manage a chhou troupe in my village Phasko in Purulia. In 2015, my chhou troupe was invited for the National Dance Festival in Shimoga, Karnataka. The organizers requested a performance with a maximum of five members, but it was impossible to perform with such a small team. After negotiation, a team of 11 members was formed. However, selecting these 11 from a group of 35 posed considerable challenges. The payment for the performance was only Rs. 30,000 (US$357), with no travel allowance provided. The round-trip journey from the village of the performers to Shimoga cost approximately Rs. 22–25,000 ($217–297). After eight days of travel and performances, which included three days of train travel from Purulia to Karnataka and another three days to return, plus a two-day stay at the venue, they were left with only around Rs. 5,000 ($60). This amounted to approximately Rs. 500 ($6) per person for the 11 members, including the orchestra, dancers, and management. They returned home with the equivalent of what they would make in a local show. Typically, when chhou is performed in nearby villages, each performer earns about Rs. 500–1000 ($6–12) for each performance, without having to spend a week traveling or leave their daily agricultural chores. With the limited resources, dancers usually take on double or triple roles in a single episode, adding to the already hectic schedule.

Moreover, outsiders often link chhou solely with the traditional Mahiṣāsura Vadh pālā, limiting their understanding of the art form. Outsiders are unaware of the diverse range of chhou pālās, including those based on historical events, government projects, and literary works. Initiatives such as government support and broadcasting could help showcase this lesser known side of chhou to a broader audience and provide economic assistance to artists. The Purulia chhou persists independently without substantial support from either the state or central government. In 2013, Purulia's chhou dance won the first prize for the state's republic day tableau. The West Bengal government introduced a monthly artists' allowance known as shilpi bhātā of Rs. 1,000 ($12) to those artists who are recognized as artists by the Government of West Bengal; however, the selection process is flawed, as only 8 to 10 members out of a typical 30-member chhou troupe are selected for this allowance by the government. Banglanatak.com, a social enterprise working across India with a mission to foster inclusive and sustainable development using culture-based approaches, has innovatively created an international-level platform for local artists through the annual chhou utsav, a festival of chhou performance usually held in December since 2010. This event allows troupes to perform in their entirety, showcasing their talents to diverse audiences with substantial media coverage. Although local performances are crucial for maintaining authenticity, only a few chhou troupes from Purulia are selected to participate due to the large number of competing groups. Each participating troupe is allocated approximately 45 minutes for their performance, differing from traditional longer performances of about 60 to 90 minutes held during April–June.

## Scholarship

Despite the richness of its traditions and the variety of its contemporary enactments, there is little scholarship on Purulia chhou. Most writers—including Asutosh Bhattacharyya, Indrani Dutta Satpathy, Kapila Vatsyayan—inadequately address the rituals such as bhogtā loton, dondo dewā, and bhogtā ghurā (as described above) associated with chhou. These rituals have been described in detail in the first 14 minutes of my documentary, *Chhou Dance of Purulia* (Kumar 2022:00:00 to 14:00).



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One of the earliest articles on Purulia chhou in any language is playwright John Arden's "The Chhau Dancers of Purulia" in *TDR* (1971). Arden effectively describes what he, an outsider, saw—the movements, music, masks. Arden also addresses the role that Asutosh Bhattacharyya played in reviving the chhou dance tradition, describing Bhattacharyya's "discovery" and "supervision" and noting its coloniality. Arden concludes: "The precise recording and archiving of the dance by foreign academics I hold to be dangerous nonsense" (74).

Aside from Bhattacharyya, scholars do not go beyond characterizing Purulia chhou as a vigorous martial dance originating in the tribal communities of the Chhota Nagpur plateau. Generally they note that chhou performances revolve around the vīr rasa, with the narratives consistently portraying heroic episodes. This oversimplification ignores the diverse layers of meaning and cultural significance embedded within chhou dance.

Bhattacharyya lists 68 pālās, all drawn from the *Ramayana*, the Mahābhārata, and the *Purānas.* However, as an outsider, he excludes chhou's other pālās that explore local life, literature, and sociopolitical themes. He also had his own biases, but still he was one of the earliest researchers who made chhou popular in India and other parts of the world. His descriptions are excellent with regard to what chhou was at the time he wrote his book, but his analysis is neocolonial at best. In brief, Bhattacharyya's book, already more than 50 years old, is out of date.

In *Between Theater and Anthropology* (1985), Richard Schechner offered a crucial critique of Bhattacharyya:

> [Bhattacharyya] guesses that the drummers, the Dom, an outcaste group, originated Chhau, for the Dom were at one time a "highly sophisticated community, [...] brave soldiers in the infantry of the local feudal Chiefs" (1972:24). Thrown out of work when the British pacified the region in the eighteenth century, failing to farm because of what Bhattacharyya calls the "vanity of their past tradition of warriors," they were reduced to their present untouchable status: workers of hides, drummers. But their war dance lives on as Chhau. Revealing biases sparkle from Bhattacharyya's account. Aboriginal peoples have no developed aesthetic sense; high-caste dancers are transformed into low-caste drummers after passing on their war dance because they are too proud to farm. (Why didn't they use their swords to steal land and become landlords?) (1985:70)

Schechner notes, as did Arden, how Bhattacharyya controlled and influenced Chhau:

> During the dancing he sat behind a desk, where two petromax lanterns made him the best-lit figure of the event; next to him were his university assistants. All night he watched and wrote. One by one the villages appeared before him on the morrow. I listened to what he said. He warned one party not to use story elements not found in the Hindu classics. He chided another for not wearing the standard basic costume of short skirt over leggings decorated in rings of white, red, and black. Bhattacharyya selected this basic costume from one village and made it general. When I asked him about it he said that the costumes he chose were the most authentic, the least Westernized. In a word, Bhattacharyya oversaw every aspect of Purulia Chhau: training, dance themes, music, costuming, steps.
>
> In January 1983 I attended a non-Bhattacharyya Chhau performance in a town near Calcutta [now Kolkata]. There I saw energetic dancing of stories from the Mahābhārata. This same group of village dancers, while performing for performers and scholars assembled for a conference in Calcutta, sang at least one song that Bhattacharyya would have disapproved of. [...] Bhattacharyya believes he saved a form otherwise doomed, but at the expense of stirring jealousies and rivalries and generating irreversible changes [...]. These changes can be traced back to Bhattacharyya. He is the big Chhau man, and his authority is rarely questioned. [...] But he hardly mentions his own role in restoring the dance. Rather, he speaks of himself as "discovering" it. This "discovery"—along with similar discoveries of the other forms of



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> Chhau—will have lasting effects on the form, continuing the process of modernization. [...] In 1983, when [Brown University scholar John] Emigh returned to the Purulia district during the Chhau season (April–June), he saw children practicing steps, spins, and jumps: the dance is alive and well—and probably was even when Bhattacharyya came upon it. But it is also probably much different now because of Bhattacharyya's influence. (Schechner 1985:72–73)

Bhattacharyya toured various countries with chhou artists but his treatment of the artists was less than favorable, especially financially. Upon their return from these international tours, Bhattacharyya did not maintain regular contact with the performers. Anil Sutradhar, a member and manager of the foreign chhou troupe led by the renowned chhou artist Gambhir Singh Mura offered details:

> When Asutosh Bhattacharyya first took us to London, Paris, Holland, and Spain in 1972 we were paid a meagre amount of Rs. 2,200 [$26] per head after performing continuously for one and half months. Then we went to New York, Los Angeles, Honolulu, and several other big cities in the USA, 22–24 cities. When we came back from America, we were given Rs. 3,400 per head after a month. But when the Central Government sent us to Paris for the India Festival, Asutosh Bhattacharyya was not there and we were paid Rs. 12,000–14,000 per head. Then we went to Osaka for the India Festival in Japan in 1991 and were paid fairly well i.e., Rs. 10,000–12,000 per head by the Government but the number of performers were only 10. [...] After coming back from the foreign countries Asutosh Bhattacharyya did not provide us our passports as he said, "What will you do with the passports?" (Sutradhar 2014)

Despite being underpaid, chhou performers continue their devotion to the form. Many young enthusiasts of Purulia are raising awareness through social media, helping to keep their heritage alive and accessible to a global audience. Purulia alone is home to over 500 chhou troupes, each contributing to the vibrancy of the art form. While chhou pālās embrace contemporary trends, the chhou tradition remains deeply rooted in its heritage. This is evident through the persistent practice of traditional rituals, music, and dance movements. Embracing the contemporary while preserving the traditional highlights the resilience and enduring significance of the chhou performative tradition.

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