

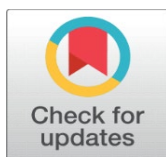
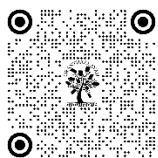
## CULTURES OF ORALITY AND PERFORMATIVITY IN THE PERFORMING ART TRADITION OF PURULIA *CHHAU*

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## ABSTRACT

Purulia *Chhau*, a folk, tribal, martial, masked dance-drama form of Eastern India, is performed over generations orally. Having no written performance text available, all the actions of Purulia *Chhau*, such as gestures, postures, dance movements and so on are materialized through the various performative utterances by the vocalist, who provide the storyline of the *Chhau* repertoires; musicians, who bring musical tempo into dance movements; and the dancers, who are dressed in big headgear masks and dynamic costumes enact the actual *Chhau* performances. Referring to the social and cultural perspectives and employing a qualitative approach as the primary methodological tool, the present paper, at the first level, seeks to explore how the cultures of orality exists in Purulia *Chhau* tradition and critically evaluates three *Chhau* repertoires with their contextual significance. It also examines how this folk-dance form manifests cultural values, shared beliefs and customs, and represents a unique cultural identity among the concerned people. At the second level, the paper analyses how the idea of performativity works on its reflexive level in Purulia *Chhau* and creates meaning to the audience. It also emphasizes on the performative procedure invoked and executed by all the performers correctly and completely.

**Keywords:** Performance, Orality, Performativity, Purulia *Chhau*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Oral tradition, an intangible form of human communication and a representation of shared beliefs, is expressed in community ideals and embodied in material forms, such as dance and music. For ages, the indigenous modes of communication, created and transformed in and through the cultures of orality and

other symbolic forms, have kept a better expression of human existence alive. Before the written word came into existence, as Elizabeth Bell rightly pointed out, “the information was stored in bodies, in cultural memories, and oral traditions” Bell (2008), p. 57 and enacted in the forms of performances. These performances are commonly associated with means of orally transmitted cultures and are constituted in and through the folkloric tradition. According to Alan Dundes, folklore can refer to “any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor...traditions which help the group have a sense of group identity” (1965, p. 2). Folklore depends upon the criterion of oral transmission and generally reflects history, human fantasy, objective reality, and psychological reality Dundes (1965). Folklore includes myths, legends, folktales, jokes, proverbs, riddles, chants, folk costumes, folk dances, folk drama, folk art, folk belief, folk medicine, folk songs, and so on. One such folklore tradition of oral expression realized in performance is the performing art tradition of Purulia *Chhau*, a tribal, martial, masked dance-drama form of Eastern India. India, with its various races and conditions, has been a veritable treasure house of dance forms for centuries, and the folk dance of Purulia *Chhau* is not an exception. In a pamphlet on *Folk Dances of India*, published by the Publication Division of India, it has been asserted that “the Indian folk dance is simple without being naive, for behind its simplicity lie both a profundity of conception and a directness of expression which are of a great value” (1965, p. 3). Similarly, the folk dance of Purulia *Chhau* is woven into the lives of the people who invariably derive their primary inspiration from the movements associated with the performance of daily tasks and the physical environment, which, by and large guides their development and provides the fitting stage for their performances.

Within this context, since primeval times, Purulia *Chhau* has been transmitted orally over generations, and it has remained the same in the present times. Having no written performance text available, all the actions of Purulia *Chhau*, such as gestures, postures, dance movements, and so on, are materialized through the various performative utterances by the vocalist, who provide the storyline of the *Chhau* repertoires; musicians, who bring musical tempo into dance movements; and the dancers, who are dressed in big headgear masks and dynamic costumes enact the actual *Chhau* performances. Referring to the social and cultural perspectives and employing a qualitative approach as the primary methodological tool, the present paper, at the first level, seeks to explore how the cultures of orality are handed down in Purulia *Chhau* from one generation to the other through the *Guru-Shishya-Parampara* (succession of teachers and disciples) and discusses the *Chhau* repertoires enacted during the actual performances. It also examines how this folk-dance form manifests cultural values, shared beliefs, and customs and creates a cultural identity for the concerned people. At the second level, this paper analyses how the idea of performativity works on its reflexive level in Purulia *Chhau* and creates meaning for the audiences. It also emphasizes the performative procedure invoked and executed by all the performers wholly and correctly.

## 2. CULTURES OF ORALITY

Oral cultures, whose thoughts and experiences are based on oral traditions, are believed to be as old as humanity. Oral traditions/expressions are created by people or communities, associated with rituals and social events, and handed down from our ancestors through word of mouth. Oral traditions generally include songs, tales, dance, chant, riddles, proverbs, etc., which work as the connecting thread of history, knowledge, traditions, rituals, medicines, world views, and so on. Since orality is defined as the thought and verbal expressions in a society, remembered

mnemonically, and performed by the people collectively, they do not have single authorship. Ong (1982) in his famous book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982) discusses quite a few unique aspects of orality- (i) oral cultures follow additive patterns to memorize and recall the narrative, (ii) oral societies rely on general aggregative formula to describe the characters or events in a performance, (iii) oral narratives use repetition and use epithets and adjective phrases to describe a person and to remember the storylines, (iv) oral communities tend to be conservative and traditional in order to preserve the tune and put new words into the tune, (v) oral narratives are closely related to the human lifeworld and its elements are drawn from the milieu of the people who are part of the custom, knowledge, and the environment, (vi) orality is agnostically toned which situates knowledge within a context struggle, (vii) oral cultures are empathetic and participatory as they are closely linked to the community, represent communal voices, subjective in nature, identify themselves with the communities, find elements in cultural practices, and reflect certain food habit or ritual of a community, (viii) oral societies are homeostatic in nature and thus we find happy resolution at the end in almost all oral narratives which establishes an equilibrium, (ix) oral thoughts are situational rather than abstract and that is why they are drawn from the life and environment of the communities. Ong has also detailed three kinds of thought or consciousness tied to cultural knowledge- mnemonic thought based on memory, chirographic thought based on handwriting, and typographic thought based on print and the production of writing through mechanical means. Ong also anticipated the fourth consciousness that he called 'post-typography: electronics' or the electronic transformation of verbal expression through television, radio, and sound recordings.

Within this framework, in this paper, we propose to contextualize the performing art tradition of Purulia *Chhau*, which is entirely based on mnemonic thought. Purulia *Chhau*, over the years, almost as old as 150 years, has been passed on through *guru-shishya Parampara* or the master-disciple tradition. This folk-dance tradition has the oral characteristics of being collective, having auditory experiences, being engaged and stored through contextualized impersonal dynamics, being primarily communal and participatory, having a folk style of composition and practice, being associated with performance, having rituals and ceremonies, and based on the temporal nature termed as events. In its primeval times, this folk-dance form was primarily performed by the scheduled tribes and castes; among those, the Bhumij, the Mura, the Santal, and the Kurmi were the crucial stakeholders Bhattacharyya (1972). However, in contemporary times, Purulia *Chhau* has been performed by various 'jatis or biocultural formations of communities' Rao (2020) through mnemonic thought. Venkat Rao has specified mnemocultural affirmations into two distinct technics of memory: lithic and alithic (2015, p. 25). On the one hand, "lithic technic prefers inscribing articulated memories in external retentional systems", and on the other hand, "alithic memories perennially nurture and retain memory in the complex apparatus of the body in which they emerge" Rao (2015), p. 25. Within these mnemocultural affirmations, the Purulia *Chhau* tradition falls under the alithic modes, which embody and enact memories through acoustic and gestural performative technics. Having no written literature available, Purulia *Chhau* mainly relies on the art of storytelling (see Figure 1). In its primaeval times, no particular themes were assigned to performing *Chhau*. However, with the emergence of Hinduism, Purulia *Chhau* adopted its themes from the Hindu epics of *The Ramayana* or the story of the prince Rama and his wife Sita, and their quest to defeat the demon king Ravana; *The Mahabharata* or the epic poem that covers a wide range of subjects, including the history of the world, the

adventures of great heroes, and the morality of war; and *The Puranas* or the Hindu folktales that are centered around the gods and goddesses of Hinduism and characterized by their use of divine characters and supernatural events Pillai (2023). It is worth mentioning that manifold contemporary themes have also become an integral part of Purulia *Chhau*'s repertoires for non-event performance calls.

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1** The Dancers of Maldi Village While Practicing Purulia Chhau Tradition Via Various Mnemocultural Aids. March 2021.

**Image Courtesy** Maheshwar Kumar.

This mnemocultural form of Purulia *Chhau* is mainly characterized by its improvisational nature, with the storyteller often adapting the story to suit the audience and the situation. There are quite a few mnemonic devices used in the form of musical instruments, such as *dhol*, *dhumsha*, *shehnai*, modern synthesizer, and so on. However, as the faces of the dancers are attired with big headgear masks, they cannot speak any dialogue during performances. Therefore, they communicate all the meanings through their richly adorned gestures, postures, and various body movements. The dancers are actively driven by the storyteller in Purulia *Chhau*, known as the *Jhumuria* or the *Jhumur* singer, who, during a performance, recites the storyline to the audience and sings the folk song of *Jhumur*. *Jhumur* is an integral part of Purulia *Chhau* as it serves as an essential means of passing down every day cultural values and beliefs from one generation to the other. One such *Jhumur* song composition used during the beginning of any performances of Purulia *Chhau* named as *Sabha Bandana* or welcome song is mentioned below:

*"Suno suno sovajone*  
*Sobe kori nibedon he*  
*Nibedon sovar majhare he*  
*Aar apnader amantrone*  
*Amra eikhane korechi agomon he*  
*Suno suno sovajon"*

(Our request to all the attendees of the meeting)

We are here at your invitation

To serve our dances)

The characters of Purulia *Chhau* are mainly divided into gods and goddesses, who serve as powerful and benevolent forces; demons and monsters, who serve as the means of exploring the darker side of human nature and represent the forces of evil; birds and animals, who are often depicted as anthropomorphic and possessing human-like qualities and abilities; and the recent interventions of contemporary heroes and heroines, who are depicted as brave, resourceful, and virtuous, serving as examples of best qualities of human nature. Moreover, the Purulia *Chhau* repertoires of Hindu epics and contemporary tales are characterized by their grand and heroic representations, often centered around adventures and struggles, and explore important themes such as love, loyalty, courage, determination, and so on. In due course of performing *Chhau*, this tradition brings to life the essence of our culture, collecting from the Hindu epics of *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Puranas*, and contemporary themes, which we shall address by analyzing one repertoire of Purulia *Chhau* from each category in the following sections. The below analysis of repertoires is important because they formulate the main plot of the *Chhau* performances and work as performance text, and also drive the performers to enact the theatrical language through gestures, postures, and dance movements.

## **2.1. SITAHARAN OR ABDUCTION OF SITA (COLLECTED FROM THE RAMAYANA)**

### **1) The Precise Story:**

Sita is the daughter of King Janak of Mithila and the wife of Ram Chandra. Immediately after marriage, to respect his father Dashrath's promises, Lord Ram, his wife Sita, and his brother Lakshman had to go into exile for fourteen years. They moved from one place to another in the forest and finally reached Panchavati, located on the banks of river Godavari, where they built their hut to live along the riverside, having pleasant surroundings and greenery. One day, the demon Shurpanakha, sister of Ravana, was struck by the adorable looks of Ram and Lakshman in the forest, and she immediately fell in love. She first approached Ram and requested to marry her, but Ram informed her about his wife, Sita. She then approached Lakshman, who rejected her, and out of jealousy, she pounced upon Sita. Seeing this, Lakshman angrily drew out his sword and cut off Shurpanakha's nose. Shurpanakha flew to Lanka to seek protection from his brother, Ravana and pleaded to him for revenge.

### **2) Main Storyline:**

Ravana, desperate to avenge the insult of his sister, Shurpanakha, reached out to demon Maricha, the master of disguise. Maricha, disguising himself as a golden deer, started roaming in front of Sita, who asked Ram to catch it for her. Ram ran after the deer, who led him deep into the forest and was finally struck by an arrow of Ram. Maricha, then, according to Ravana's plan, screamed, imitating Ram and asking for help from Sita and Lakshman. Hearing the scream, Sita got tensed and requested Lakshman to look after his brother, Ram. Anxious for the safety of Sita, Lakshman drew a line across Sita and asked her not to cross it until he returned. From a distance, Ravana watched all this, and as soon as Lakshman left the hut in search of Ram, Ravana disguised himself as a hermit and approached Sita, asking for food. Ravana cleverly insisted Sita to come out of the Lakshman's *rekha* (safety line) and offer him the food. Before Sita could realize the truth, as soon as she came out of the line, Ravana transformed into his original form, abducted Sita, and took

her in his chariot towards Lanka. Sita screamed for help. The great eagle, Jatayu, fought with Ravana to save her, but Ravana mercilessly cut Jatayu off his wing. Sita made all sorts of attempts to escape, but all went in vain. She took off her jewelry and threw it down, hoping that her husband Ram may see it and come to save her from Ravana's abduction.

## **2.2. ABHIMANYU *BADH* OR KILLING OF ABHIMANYU (COLLECTED FROM THE MAHABHARATA)**

### **1) The Precise Story:**

Abhimanyu is the son of great Arjuna and Subhadra. While in his mother's womb, Abhimanyu learned to enter *chakravyuha*, or a circular battle formation, while Arjuna discussed this with Subhadra. However, after listening to it, Subhadra dozed to sleep, and Arjuna stopped telling the technique of escaping from the *chakravyuha*. Therefore, the baby in the womb, Abhimanyu, remained unlearned from the escape route of *chakravyuha*. Gradually, Arjuna was grown up and trained under Pradyumna and his father and was brought up under Lord Krishna's guidance. Unlike his father, Abhimanyu was considered a courageous and dashing warrior with incredible prodigious feats. As a warrior, he had killed important personalities in the war of Mahabharata and showed great valor. On the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the Mahabharat war, the Kauravas challenged the Pandavas to break *chakravyuha*, which they accepted, knowing that Krishna and Arjuna knew to empower it.

### **2) Main Storyline:**

On the battle day of *chakravyuha* during the Mahabharata war, Krishna and Arjuna were dragged into fighting a war with the Samsaptaka army on another front. Finding no respite, the Pandavas, having accepted the challenge, had to use young Abhimanyu's knowledge of breaking *chakravyuha*. This *chakravyuha* was tactically designed by Dronacharya, the royal preceptor, by building a maze with thousands of soldiers to trap Abhimanyu. Abhimanyu was successful in breaking the *chakravyuha*. However, the other Pandavas who came to assist Abhimanyu were effectively cut off by the Kauravas. Thus, only Abhimanyu was left to fend for himself against the entire army of the Kauravas. Before he began fighting with the Kauravas, Dronacharya requested Abhimanyu to rethink about his decision. The 16-year-old fearless Abhimanyu charged up with his bravery, invited the Kauravas to fight with him. Abhimanyu valiantly fought single-handedly with the *saptarathi*, or the seven warriors, including Dronacharya, Duryadhan, Dussasan, Aswathama, Joyadrath, Sakuni, and Karna. With relentless ferocity, the mighty battle that followed Abhimanyu, slaughtered the ordinary and mighty warriors of the Kauravas, including Dronacharya's son, Laxman. Upon witnessing the death of his beloved son, Dronacharya got furious and ordered the entire Kauravas to attack Abhimanyu. Beyond the ethics of warships, all the Kauravas simultaneously fought with Abhimanyu. Finally, Abhimanyu, who had the knowledge of entering the *chakravyuha* but not the knowledge to escape from *chakravyuha*, was killed by the Kauravas shortly after his skull was crushed with a mace.

## **2.3. SANTHAL *BIDROHA* OR SANTHAL REBELLION (COLLECTED FROM THE CONTEMPORARY THEMES)**

### **1) The Precise Story:**

The Santhal tribe is spread across three states- West Bengal, Jharkhand, and Odisha in India. They are mostly remembered for their first revolt against the British

and landlords for their right to live on their land without paying hefty taxes. Back in the nineteenth century, when the Santhal uprising began to emerge due to the fact that the tribe members were asked to leave their hills and the Britishers imposed huge taxes on land, the tribe members were treated as enslaved people. The united efforts of the British and the landlords snatched away the peaceful existence of the tribe members. The landlords provided them with high-interest loans and gradually caught them in a debt trap. Their land properties were confiscated as foreclosure and used by the landlords for their sheer benefit.

## 2) Main Storyline:

Two fiery leaders, namely Sidho and Kanho Murmu, hailed from the Santhal clan and led the movement of the Santhal rebellion against the landlords and British tax regime on June 30, 1855. They used their uniquely folded Sal leaves as their symbol of communication system and mobilized ten thousand people to begin their rebellion. Along with them joined their brothers Chand and Bhairab and sisters Phulo and Jhano Murmu, who inspired other women to join the rebellion against the Britishers. They installed their administration by denying to pay taxes to the Britishers and money to the landlords. The Santhals started getting support from other tribes and backward communities, intensifying their rebellion. The Britishers got furious to see its grave intensity and started arresting the Santhal leaders. Soon, the rebellion spread like wildfire as the Santhals refused to submit before the British rifles and artillery. Almost 60,000 people joined this rebellion, and over 10,000 Santhals were martyred. The Britishers even used elephants to destroy the huts of the tribal people. In response to it, Sidho and Kanho fought valiantly against all the odds till their last breath. Finally, the Britishers trapped Sidho and Kanho with their colonial powers, and were hanged publicly.

There are manifold repertoires present in the Purulia *Chhau* tradition. The above-discussed three repertoires are the exemplum of the themes mainly collected from the Hindu epics and the contemporary themes based on social, political, biodiversity, and cultural aspects. It is worth mentioning that both the *Chhau* performance artists and the audience are pretty familiar with those repertoires through the mnemocultural affirmations passed on through various modes of storytelling. Because of this familiarity, the audience generally does not face any difficulty in decoding meanings of the performances and socio-cultural messages inherent in a *Chhau* repertoires. These messages are mainly decoded in the forms of masks, costumes, gestures, postures, and the movements of the head, chest, hands, waist, and legs of the performers. Therefore, these mediums create the basic ideas of performativity among the performers and the audience. Moreover, how these ideas of performativity work at their reflexive level and generate meaning is what we shall critically analyze in the following sections of this paper.

## 3. CULTURES OF PERFORMATIVITY

The word 'performative' indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action. 'Performative' word was first coined by J. L. Austin in 1955 in his Harvard lectures published as *How to Do Things with Words* (1962). The term, in general, is used both as a noun and an adjective. However, its meaning in performance theory has been used adjectively "to denote the performance aspect of any object or practice under consideration" [Loxley \(2007\)](#), p. 140. It may be seen as a vast array of actions, ways of speaking and writing, simulations, fiction, and hyperrealities. Performative, a particular type of utterance in the Austinian sense, means "to say something is to do something; or in which by saying or in saying something we are doing something" [Austin \(1962\)](#), p. 12. Austin gives examples of

utterances such as, “I take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife”, or “I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth”, or “I give and bequeath my watch to my brother”, or “I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow” (1962, p. 5). In these examples, to utter sentences in appropriate circumstances is not just to describe the doings, but it is actually to do it- as uttered in the course of the marriage ceremony, as uttered when smashing the bottle against the stem, as occurring in a will, and so on. Therefore, performatives can be seen as a promise, command, create, contract, bet, deliver verdicts, christen ships, etc. Consequently, the allied term ‘performativity’ came into general use later for this more general application of the performative. However, it is worth mentioning that since the primary purpose of performativity was to do something, “its success had to be judged not on the basis of truth or falsity, as was the case with assertion, but on whether the intended act was in fact successfully achieved or not” [Carlson \(2018\)](#), p. 68. Moreover, performativity as a means of doing a performance or performing, as rightly pronounced by Simon Shepherd that “it is the assimilation of performativity to the activity of performing that prepares the ground for process by which everything can with apparent legitimacy be called ‘performance’” (2016, p. 197). Along with the emergence of performance studies, especially after the 1960s, performativity has become an important theoretical aspect of performance analysis to address questions of embodiment, social relations, ideological interpellation, emotional and political effects, etc. Even the tendency to see theatrical performance as merely the reiteration of dramatic text has significantly changed. Now, the text does not prescribe meanings of the performance rather, “it is the construction of the text within the specific apparatus of the ceremony that creates performative force” [Shepherd \(2016\)](#), p. 192. Within this theoretical framework, we critically look at the folk performances of Purulia *Chhau* as a performance text since there is no dramatic text available and how the performative utterances in the form of acting styles, directorial conventions, and scenography are created to do the performed activity or performativity.

#### 4. PERFORMING PERFORMATIVITY

In oral tradition cultures, the primary orality of speech is based on sound, and “the basic characteristic of sound which frames orality is movement” [Mahapatra \(1994\)](#), p. 77. The sound cannot be picturized in immobility, but they are performed in symbolic actions, materialization of objects, or variously loaded gestures and corresponding meanings. In the Purulia *Chhau* tradition, those meanings, in the form of sound, have been conveyed by the *Jhumuria* or the vocalist present during a live performance. The vocalist has the creative technique of making a tale alive through sound and sight and the active involvement of the dancers; *Chhau*'s repertoires take a meaningful form of dramatization. However, the repertoires of Purulia *Chhau*, mainly collected from the Hindu epics, are already well known to the public. In order to make a performance successful, the audience’s previous knowledge helps them enjoy the “renderings of various episodes, appreciate the innovations, and anticipate the thrills to come” [Vansina \(1985\)](#), p. 35. Still, performing a meaningful dance through various modes of gestures, postures, and body movements remains a performative challenge for the dancers. Therefore, to materialize all these challenges, the dancers had to adopt a lot of improvisations to bring the performative gist of performed actions.

In the process of creating performativity, the most significant role is played by the *Chhau* dancers, who could specialize in particular types of dancing. The dancers gain that knowledge from their ancestors mnemonically, and after years of practice, one becomes an expert. For example, the dance of Ganesha by Gopal Suri, the



monkey dance by Lal Mahato, the Shiva dance by Anil Mahato, the tiger dance by Nepal Mahto, the dance of Ravana by Patal Mahato, the Peacock dance by Chepa Bauri, the dance of Abhimanyu by Satish Mahato, and so on, are known for their dance expertise. The late Padmashree awardee, Gambhir Singh Mura from Charida village, had no formal teacher to teach him *Chhau*. He had learned the techniques of *Chhau* when he used to take the cows into the jungle to grease grass, where he witnessed real birds and animals and tried to imitate their gestural actions. However, the present generation of Purulia *Chhau* artists has the privilege to know the art of dancing *Chhau* from their masters or ancestors or even from the various *Chhau* dance academies. After receiving basic and advanced training in performing *Chhau*, the audience judges a dancer's efficiency during the full-fledged performance events. Purulia *Chhau*, for ages, is ceremonially performed during *Chaitra Parva* as a ritual dance form in front of a Shiva temple because Lord Shiva in Hindu mythology is considered the Lord of Dancers. Interestingly, *Chhau* has been performed throughout the year in religious and non-religious events with the advancement of time and space. However, how the dancers create a meaningful performance and generate performativity is what we shall analyze in the following sections, in sequences of *Chhau* repertoires.

To yield new information, various mnemonic devices are used as cues destined to recall a memory. Among those mnemonic aids, in the form of music, rhythm, and melody are the most important. In Purulia *Chhau*, the elements of melody are provided by *shehnai*, and rhythms are generated by *dhol* and *dhumsha*. Before the actual performances of *Chhau* begin, two *dhol* artists enter the dancing arena and invoke the performing landscape for the upcoming dance to happen. The *dhol* artists and their drum rhythms work as an invitation to the surrounding village audiences to come and witness *Chhau*. It is only through the *dhol* artists that the initial tonal language of the performance is set up and subsequently invites the characters to come forward in the dancing arena. After this inaugural setup, the vocalist begins his welcome address by uttering the names of the *Chhau* troupe and their village, the name of the *Chhau* repertoire to be performed, and the dancers and musicians who take part. Then, he invokes Lord Ganesha, asks for blessings for a successful performance, and finally invites the dancers to begin their performances. Immediately after, the *Chhau* dancers, according to their serials of role-playing, assemble at the entrance corridor, which leads to the main dancing arena. The vocalist then, in the form of *jhumur* songs, utters the story's backdrop and invites the first character to enact the performed actions. Thus, the utterances of the vocalist direct the dancers to enact particular dance movements. Simultaneously, on the one hand, the vocalist, with his tonal language, utters the main storyline. On the other hand, the dancers, by listening to those mnemonic aids, enact the gestural actions to create meaning for the performed acts. For example, when the vocalist gives cues for a battle, the *Chhau* dancers start fighting with one another, and the musicians provide a high-pitched tone to create the battle mood. When the storyline demands resolution among the characters, the dancers enact their head, chest, hands, waist, and various leg movements, and the *shehnai* and a modern synthesizer provide the musical tone for the atmosphere. Therefore, without any utterance from the dancer's side, they are actively channelized to do some performed actions when the vocalist, with his storyline, and the musicians, with their performative tempo, provide them cues for respective performances (see [Figure 2](#)). Moreover, the vocalist's performative utterances of plots in the form of *jhumur* songs lead to incidents in the act's performance in appropriate circumstances. For example, in the *Sitaharan* episode, when the vocalist utters that Laxman drew a safety line for Sita and leaves in search of Ram, Lakshman actually drew a line in the dancing arena and

warns Sita through his gestures and body movements not to come out of it at any cost. In the *Abhimanyu Badh* episode, when the vocalist utters that Abhimanyu's body was left unattended on the battlefield, the *Chhau* character playing the role of Abhimanyu actually lies in the dancing arena by simulating death. In the contemporary episode of *Santhal Bidroha*, simultaneous utterances of the vocalist about Sidho and Kanho's public hanging and the theatrical symbolic representations of the same are performed with a gloomy musical tonal language provided by the musicians. Thus, all performers in Purulia *Chhau* are not always doing the things they are merely playing at; they actually cry, laugh, feel sad, get angry, etc., in actual means. In such ways, the audience becomes aware of the plots of the *Chhau* repertoires and witnesses those stories enacted in the form of theatrical performances.

**Figure 2**



**Figure 2** One of the Excerpts from Purulia Chhau's Storyline Materialized Into Actual Performed Actions with Aids from the Vocalist and the Musicians. April 2019.

**Image Courtesy** Maheshwar Kumar.

To provide the performances with proper acting styles, directorial conventions, and scenography, the dancers are dressed up with big headgear masks and the desired costumes of the respective characters. Therefore, Ganesha enters the stage with an elephant-headed mask and two additional artificial hands, Shiva with his matted hair mask and trident in his hand, Kartika with his vehicle peacock, Durga with her ten hands and arms, and so on, which provides a proper scenography of the performed event in respective repertoires. This informs the audience of proper cues about the performing character's identity fixed within the *Chhau* masks. The vocalist and the musicians correctly communicate their theatrical directions as per the repertoires' requirements. Thus, the whole idea of performative utterance in Purulia *Chhau* lies behind the performance of an action or act. When we say something in order to do something, we do so by saying three kinds of acts as proposed by J. L. Austin:

Locutionary act, which is roughly equivalent to uttering certain sentence with a certain sense and reference... illocutionary acts such as informing, ordering, warning, undertaking, &c., i.e., utterances which have certain (conventional) force... perlocutionary acts: what we bring about or achieve by saying something, such as convincing, persuading, deterring, and even, say, surprising or misleading. (1962, p. 108)

These acts have different senses or dimensions of using utterances in a sentence or language, but all are simply actions. To describe it explicitly in the context of Purulia *Chhau*, the locutionary act can be the welcome address of the vocalist, which contains certain kinds of meaning to the audience about the *Chhau* troupe and their performance to be enacted. Illocutionary acts may contain the force behind the performative utterances of the vocalist and the solid musical ensemble, which actively drives the dancers to perform dance enactments. Finally, the perlocutionary act can be achieved when the audience witnesses the dancers' theatrical improvisations in the form of enacting the acts of realities of the imaginary and highlighting theatrical symbolic structures of the *Chhau* repertoire in question. Therefore, we may say that the collectively performed acts of the vocalist and musicians who create vocal and tonal utterances and the performed actions of the dancers are incidentally saying something as well as doing something. However, as Austin opines, "we may feel that they are not essentially true or false as statements are" (p. 139). Since communication is considered an intended meaning, "performative communication depends significantly on intentional meaning; it is structured on the basis of the presence of a speaking subject" Sirey (2009), p. 133. Therefore, we may say that performative utterances created by the vocalist, musicians, and dancers in the Purulia *Chhau* tradition do not describe or represent something; instead, they are public performances that do something by confirming a conventional procedure. N. D. (1956)

## 5. CONCLUSION

An oral tradition's key processes/experiences are mainly based on composition, transmission, and memory Finnegan (1992), p. 106. These experiences, in the Purulia *Chhau* tradition, are intellectualized mnemonically through years of practice, repetition, memory, and retention that only exist in performance. They do not have any written text, but the form of performance is "developed in and through improvisation, plans, action in flow, and repeated enactments" Bell (2008), p. 74, considering the whole culture of the respective community as an ensemble of texts. The tales of Purulia *Chhau*, collected from the Hindu epics, are related to myth and legend, based on the people's day-to-day life. At present, quite a few Purulia *Chhau* artists have started writing and composing their own *Chhau* repertoires, to name a few are- Bikal Rajak from Shitalpur, Nipen Sahis from Baligara, Baghambar Singh Mura from Gobindapur, Kartik Singh Mura from Charida, Shibcharan Mahato from Sindri, Kanchan Roy from Dumurdi, Brindaban Kumar from Kochahatu, Binadhar Kumar from Bamnia, Jagannath Choudhury from Maldi, Hem Chandra Mahato from Palma, Giasuddin Ansary from Palma, and so on. They write their self-innovative *Chhau* repertoires and practice it until they achieve close resemblance of the storylines in regards with its performed actions. Due to the ongoing demands of frequent event managements, those repertoires may vary in terms of the duration of the performances. Moreover, in Purulia *Chhau* repertoires, instead of the direct language of the Hindu epics, the "local lexicon is used to give it a local flavour so that the story becomes their own story" Kumar (2018), p. 251. The *jhumur* songs also aid these stories as the collective

memory of our forgotten past and glorious history and also deal with social life and everyday problems the people face. Concerning the relationship between human beings and nature and the socio-cultural and moral values of these tales, Anand Mahanand has rightly pointed out that:

The religious tales are told not to entertain the audience but to evoke a feeling of devotion and fear for the deities. These tales make the audience listen to the tales with attention and devotion and practice things they learn in everyday life. From these tales we come to know the relationship between humans and the supernatural. They tell us about the unlimited power and capabilities of God and goddesses and the miracles performed by them. Mahanand (2018), p. 56

On the other hand, the sense of performativity is created among the audience when they can decode the inherent symbolic meanings between a tale and its performed acts. They look at the stage like the spectator looking into the frame of a naturalistic, perspectival painting. On the other hand, the *Chhau* performers try their best to create lifelike representations of the mythological and contemporary characters, “inhabiting spaces configured to resemble those inhabited in real life. What one saw onstage, therefore, could be described as an ‘iconic sign’, a representation that resembled what it stood for” Loxley (2007), p. 146. In this line of thought, J. L. Austin’s idea of performativity has been very instrumental in understanding how saying or uttering something in the form of outlining the storyline, singing *jhumur*, and providing musical language leads to do something or what we may call the performed act of actions of the respective Purulia *Chhau* repertoire. Therefore, intersecting orality and performativity, the performance of Purulia *Chhau* is seen as a mode of communication or a way of speaking, which mnemonically brings various performative utterances to create a meaningful symbolic performance to the audience. Moreover, oral traditions, as a fundamental key to human action and culture, “always had and continue to have a deeper and more sensual awareness of our uncreated selves and its symbolisation through gestures and therein lies their continued relevance” Mahapatra (1994), p. 78.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.

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