



Nachi se Banchi: Art as Performance of Identity and Heritage

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ABSTRACT

The ethnic movements of eastern and Northeastern India heavily relied on the arts and crafts of different cultures and traditions to relocate, redefine and articulate thoughts and ideals of people. In its new meaning, dance forms recreated choreographies. Dances of different tribes were usually participatory in nature where both men and women joined. The concept of viewers was not distinguished in those performances. Rhythms and steps were similar for all performers and participation happened at the community level. The social history of art performance of the tribal people was maintained in the oral traditions. Culture as a learned and shared process passed on knowledge of artistic endeavor generation after generation. Those creative forms of traditions turn out to be representations of history and heritage in new meaning. The focus of performance has shifted. Dancing for joy, happiness, ecstasy, festivals and rituals extended its meaning to self-assertion. People's struggle transformed the 'form of taking part in dance' to 'join in to dance for existence, and gradually performing art manifested as visual text of identity'. At this backdrop, the present paper will discuss a few such creative culture traits and forms from the perspective of art identity and gender relations. The present study will locate the contemporary meaning of

'Bagurumba', 'Musanglangnai' of the Bodo and 'Adibasi' dances of Jharkhand.

INTRODUCTION

Post-colonial nation state experienced new expressions of art. The social history of tribal movements to establish their rights over 'Jal Jungle and Jamin' since the time of leaders like Sidhu, Kanhu, and Birsa Munda in the then Chotta Nagpur and which has culminated to a formation of state of Jharkhand, experienced long struggles. A pioneer intellectual from the place, such as Prof. Ramdayal Munda, former Vice Chancellor of Ranchi University, conceptualizes the whole situation of tribal living and says, "Nachi se Banchi"- Dance to survive. He informed his own people how this important medium of expression of participatory performance continued with people from time immemorial. He placed performing art as an alternative to understanding the oral history of the people. Northeast Indian hill states centering Shillong became seat of Blues, Rock, Jazz, Punk, and Heavy Metal music. The history of these music traditions are rooted in the movements of Blacks and Indigenous people of America connected ethnic groups and tribes. Tribal people of northeast India who were fighting for the rights of political self-determination in postcolonial India embraced this tradition. In this background I would refer experiences of youths of Indigenous people background who said how punk and metal helped them to construct voices, ideas of rebels in the context of articulating voices for Mapuche formations of self (Briones 2007:99-121).

While the hilly communities of northeast India were demanding for the right to establish political self-determination in the 50-60s, tribal and non-tribal peasants of the plains of Assam were engaged in share croppers' movements under the leadership of Revolutionary Communist Party (Sen Deka1993). India's People Theatre Agency (IPTA) composed revolutionary songs for peasants.¹

Mainstream dominant ideas of history considered written records of the past and conceptualized history of modern India. For ethnicities, who did not maintain written records, they abstracted 'culture' as 'history' and that process begun during the time of demanding rights to political self-determination by tribal and indigenous people. Dance as one of the oldest social attributes locates participation of both women

and men. Usually, different communities by participatory community dances share origin myths, world views, and indigenous knowledge during festivals. The Solung Ponung is one such example of the Adivasi of Arunachal Pradesh. In this way the knowledge of dance is traditionally transmitted from one generation to another. But in caste-based societies in India, such traditions (except in marriage ceremony) were replaced by classical dance traditions during the colonial and post situations. Indian dance tradition of mainstream Hindu society with special reference to Devadasi dance traditions rebuilt its institution as part of popular culture, and Nair (2008:544-551) observes that nearly hundred years back temple dance relocated the space of dance and in the process temple dance emerged as classical dance tradition. Hundred years back, the then civil society, reformists of the Madras, Bangalore and Mysore with the help of British administration, stopped the Devdasi dance tradition in temples and as a result many women lost their jobs in temples and migrated to Mumbai for other unskilled jobs (Nair, *ibid.*). Nair critically analyzed such acts and opined that as a result women lost their space in society because rich women temple dancers, and one of them was a member of the Madras municipality, must have been affected economically. Such decision weakened women's position in society. Moreover, it pushed women to economic uncertainty. Nair (*ibid.*) felt such decision was gender insensitive because it pushed economically self-dependent Devadasi women to joblessness. They lost the space in public sphere, too. But dance tradition did not die due to its rich heritage of aesthetics. It was cultivated by educated people later in independent India. But the people (a section of women) of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, who carried, learned, transmitted and enriched this tradition by practicing and innovating choreographies generation after generation, were detached from this due to modern patriarchal ideas consolidated in early twentieth century India. Hundred years back the tradition, which was banned in the temple space as a symbol of obscenity, at present popularly known as classical dance, and this performing art is presented in regular reviews in magazines, newspapers.²

Is dance as tradition marker of art and aesthetics alone? Or, it is social and political too? At least, construction of dance tradition of modern India is based on diversified experiences of people and social

movements. In a nutshell, it can be referred as the popular dance traditions of modern India, basically dances as performing art on stages transformed ideas of women and sexuality, created new meanings and alternative texts of traditions. Classical dance traditions are now a symbol of national culture and heritage while dance traditions of indigenous and tribal people in modern India are a curved out space, side by side. Prof. Ramdayal Munda perceived the community participatory dance traditions of tribes/Adivasi as a medium of communication of minorities for the establishment of rights and popularized the slogan 'Nachi se Banchi,' which means all must dance together to survive. He perceived this popular cultural trait of respective communities as a traditional way to unite people.

The present paper discusses new meanings of dance forms in the context of social movements in indigenous communities and particularly drawing examples of the Bagurumba, Musanglangnai dances of the Bodo and Paika, and Jhumur of the indigenous people of Jharkhand.

SOCIAL MOVEMENT AND PERFORMING ART IN POST-COLONIAL INDIA

During the post-colonial nation building process, performing art forms of different cultures were rejuvenated with new meanings. Social transformations, western political ideologies, and identity maintenance movements in India altered folk dance tradition as the dance of the masses and commoners, with new denotations in addition to choreographies; modern danseurs passionately inculcated the dance tradition as a medium of expressions of thoughts, ideas, feelings, rights, and identities. Cinema in Hindi and other Indian languages promoted another set of modern dance tradition of India, which is an example of fusion of Indian traditions with western music, popularly known as 'filmi dance'. For understanding of identity maintenance movements, ethnic and tribal dances are alternative text to understand social realities and culture. Dance traditions of marginal/minority communities being expressions of identity expanded its horizon beyond the world of entertainment. Dance in its new space has become holistic in approach. The concept of troupe in dance includes mass people working with political understanding. In modern India, most of the

accepted classical dance forms are usually 'solo' performances, although there are many accompanists that perform back stage. Folk and tribal dances are usually participated by groups of performers including accompanists. In tribal dances, accompanists have a vibrant presence as dancers. While, in contemporary traditions, classical dances are mostly textual, strictly maintain styles, rules, forms, symbols, rhythms and beats during training periods; apparently, folk and tribal forms follow verbalized rules that are lively in expression for a group of dancers. In folk and tribal forms, dancers perform multiple functions. They chorus songs while performs. Otherwise also, call and response is one of the very popular well-built traditions in tribal and folk dances. The concept of audience is different in tribal dance and classical dance. In classical dance, the audience is expected to appreciate the aesthetics of expressions of performing art. In tribal dance, the audience is also a performer. Any moment of time the audience is a performer and bears no burden as an expert of aesthetics. The audience is part of the performance while it is in cultural (community) endeavor.

Ethnic movements of the Indian tribes incorporated dance traditions to manifest the history of culture at the time of demanding political rights of people. The Adivasi movement of Jharkhand of more than one hundred years created different expressions of 'Jhumar' and relocated 'Paika' dance. The 'Jhumar' manifests subaltern identity of the indigenous mass of people in its last hundred years of history of present Jharkhand. Tea garden labourers of Assam carried this Jhumar tradition to Assam more than a hundred years back. At present it has emerged as one of the popular folk traditions of Assam (Jhumur). This participatory dance of men and women has created different forms like 'Jenana Jhumar,' 'Mordana Jhumar,' and 'Sadri Jhumar' during colonial and post-colonial period of present-day Jharkhand. Now in Jharkhand, Jhumar dance tradition is coming up as a professional dance tradition and one of the authorities is Mukund Nayak, whose troop improvised Mardana Jhumar to a very popular and aesthetic art form of Jharkhand. This team visits India and abroad. These dance forms today represent both 'Adivasi'² and 'Mulvasi'³ people of the state of Jharkhand. Barbiracki (1993: 207-230) writes about Sadana, age-old neighbours of the Mundas, who belonged to service caste groups and were of Indo-European linguistic origin. This author says

that Mundari and Sadan music share tunes and 'tals' (1993: 209). This author maintains that the difference between Mundari and Sadani song is vast than 'tal,' though at the village level similarities are noticed in tune (ibid., 215-216). This author observed that women songs of the Sadan and Munda are similar in nature; however, he feels that the Akhra concept for Sadan women might be a replica of the Munda tradition they learnt later (ibid., 216). Commercialization process popularized 'Rasik-Nachni' troops of Jhumars in mining belts during colonial time. But this form was confined to a few pockets of mining areas. Mass consciousness on ethnic identity identified the cultural attribute like dance traditions as important forms of expressions of the minorities' traditions and culture. So, participatory tradition of the tribal dance traditions is celebrated in social occasions.

The edited book, *Jharkhand Movement* by Prof. Ramdayal Munda and Sanjay Basu Mallick, in its cover page uses a photo on Paika dance, which is a dance of 'Resistance' in its new meaning. Dr. Walter Beck, Coordinator, Tribal and Customary Law, Central University of Jharkhand, Ranchi said: "Paika dance is performed during marriage by the members of Akhra in which both bride and bride groom side are represented. This dance was traditional manifestation of Martial Art and Roy (1914) referred this as War dance. Paika dance was presented in the courtyards of kings like Biru raja, Ratu raja during any occasion depicted gallantry of the warriors. These dance performances communicated attention of the warriors to the king's and safety of the kingdom. During ethnic movement Paika dance represented people's art form and is performed in the public gatherings. It has helped in articulation of people's voices to establish the right to political self-determination and went beyond traditional meaning" (dated 14.07.2016). The expression of fearlessness and courage was a central theme of 'Paika' dance that is revived in the identity manifestation of the ethnic groups of Jharkhand. Reconstruction of the form of Paika dance may be comparable with the productions of Indian Peoples' Theatre Association (IPTA), which was a national group for articulate voices of proletariats, minorities and people at grassroots during post-colonial situation. A good number of artists of popular films of Bollywood singers, dancers, script writers and theatre persons were from IPTA background. A few living giants are Javed

Akhtar and Gulzar from the Hindi movie world; at local levels many worker were there, who established a platform for future steps of people's art in post-colonial time. Peasants (share croppers of 1950s) and workers (in mining and railways) movements were immensely benefitted out of IPTA movements. IPTA tradition influenced tribal movements for the establishment of the political rights to self-determination. Bishnu Prasad Rabha was one such poet and singer, who immensely influenced the Adhier movement (share croppers movement) of Assam and later the movements of PTCA and Bodo (Deka 1993).

"Deben Kochari (1996: 65-71) writes that earlier the Bodo songs and dances were performed only during the religious festivals. But in the 1950s, the Bodos of north and south Goalpara started doing group performances on stage. Aniram Basumatory, an active member of Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), took the initiative to preserve folk songs and folk dances. He and some other Bodos (men) like Rameswar Boro, Kamaleswar Basumatory and Prasanna Kumar Basumatory visited remote places to make people aware of their cultural heritage." (Sen Chaudhuri 2004: 49). These attempts at documenting performing art as people's cultural heritage immensely helped assertion of identity as well as reconstruct the history of the people. Tarun Sen Deka (1993) wrote that Revolutionary Communist Party members Bishnu Prasad Rabha and his wife Mohini Rabha travelled to many villages of Nalbari and Kamrup districts of Assam and encouraged Boro, Mech and Rabha people to participate in mass songs and dances (Sen Chaudhuri, *ibid.*) during the Adhier movement (share croppers' movement).

During the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) movement (1987-1993), 'Bagurumba' and 'Musanglangnai' dances of the Bodo were performed as part of identity and heritage. In conferences and conventions of ABSU, those dance performances were part of cultural programmes. During the Bodo Sahitya Sabha Festival (1993), at Gorchuk, Guwahati, 'Musanglangnai' dance was presented to welcome VIPs and that time, the older generation member sitting in audience of the Bodos said to me that traditionally 'Musanglangnai' was performed to welcome warriors in the villages of the Bodo. Bramha et al. (2001) compiled photographs, documents, dates of events and

memorandum of settlements of the Bodo Autonomous Council. This book published photographs on dances performed (Table 1). Those photographic documents are testimonies of changing meaning of certain dance forms of the Bodos.

Table 1: Description of various dance performances during the Bodo Movement.

Event	Dance	Date	page
Cultural rally and procession with traditional Bodo dance and music as the 12th phase of ABSU movement in district levels	Musanglangnai Bagurumba	28th October 1987	25
Bashbari conference: ABSU President U.N. Bramha is leading procession rally and entering the venue. BPAC Chairman Karendranath Basumatary from the stage showing sign of victory and behind him on the stage women are performing dance	Musanglangnai	18-22 December 1988	44
Cultural groups of different communities demonstrated at Deborgaon air field before the union minister Ram Vilas Paswan during his visit to Kokrajhar to assess the situation and fisibility condition of the Bodo people for granting a separate state	Musanglangnai	21st October 1990	92
Bodo cultural programmes during the ceremonial declaration of Bodo Accord	Bagurumba	7th March 1993	122
31st Foundation Day celebration of ABSU – 31st Annual Conference of ABSU at Dotoma	Kherai	14-16th February 1999	155
Public meeting of ABSU	–	–	170
Rally of 33rd annual conference of ABSU	Kherai	13-16th February 2001	181

Source: Photographs of the book, *Bodoland Movement 1986-2001*. Photographs of dances could not be added with the text as it requires permission from the editor.

It is well known that 1987 was the year chosen for the Bodo movement, that is when the Bodo people were protesting

discrimination of dominant cultures, criticizing integrationists view, demanding separate homeland through slogans 'no Bodoland no rest', 'divide Assam fifty-fifty', sitting in *dharnas*, protesting police atrocities, picketing and blocking railways and national highways, besides participating in mass rallies. Alongside, dances established the concept of historical heritage for the Bodo, and traditional dance forms not only articulated people's voices but established the modern ethnic tradition of performing art forms as an essential part of history and heritage.

Republic day parades of India nowadays happen in New Delhi, which is probably one of the best examples to set to understand the depth of these cultural traditions. From IPTA to 'Dance India Dance', the latest television presentations have travelled a span of around fifty years. While IPTA articulated people's voices to establish rights of proletariats, public, and indigenous people through cultural performances, 'Dance India Dance' is testing levels of 'energy', 'creativity' of performers and their dance trainers. Performances are replicating and fusing traditions; commercial process is promoting amalgamation of traditions side by side.

FROM TRADITION TO IDENTITY PERFORMANCE: BAGURUMBA AND MUSANGLANGNAI OF THE BODO

'Bagurumba' is a folk dance of the Bodo. This dance was performed traditionally during Bodo New Year. It is also known as 'Bardwisikhla' dance. The dance is performed by women and while the instruments are played by men. The accompanied instruments are 'serja' (string instrument), 'sifung' (flute), 'tharkha' (Jews herp), and 'kham' (long drum made up of wood and goat skin). Traditionally, this dance is performed in garjashsali (place of community ritual). The dance is performed as part of the festival for welfare and prosperity. As per oral tradition of the Bodos, 'Musanglangnai' was a dance performed by women to welcome war heroes when they came back from victory. In its new meaning it became a welcome dance for leaders and VIPs during conferences and conventions. Kherai is a very important festival of the Bodos. In the rite performances of the kherai, women priest perform dance. There is use of symbols like sword and shield in Kherai. Kherai became a symbol of resistance. Any culture through words

and meanings identified 'dance' forms, relates relationship of human society with environment, natural attributes like seasons, rain, wind, water, soil, birds, animals, insects, plants, trees, hills, stones, and cultural attributes like habitats and work experiences metaphorically. Bagurumba due to its choreography is also known as butterfly dance.

During the ethnic movement all these dances invested the self with a new meaning. Bagurumba emerged as dance to celebrate events as well as one of the identity markers for the Bodo culture. Table 1 refers to a few photographs. Its rhythm is very bouncy and joyous. Choreographies resemble movements of a butterfly. In national mapping of dances of India Bagurumba is one of the most popular dances from the Bodos of Assam. In new performance, the dance form Musanglangnai is a welcome dance. 'Kherai' is metaphor of resistance and Table 1 locates kherai performers in the processions. For women, the costume comprises of 'Dhokna' and 'Aronai'. There are two types of 'Aronai' used in costumes. The 'Aronai' used as a waist strap is a remake of a particular concept of cloth. According to oral tradition, 'Aronai' was a comforter made for men warriors. The custom of making 'Aronai' was very secretive and as per rule either mother or wife was supposed to weave that cloth silently within one night. This piece of cloth was perceived as a protective shield from any harm. During the ethnic movement, Bodo young women activists were instructed by women organizations to weave 'Aronai' for the utility of gifts. In fact, 'Aronai' weaving has revitalized tradition during the movement and grew as an essential part of the costume for dance.

FROM TRADITION TO IDENTITY PERFORMANCE: PAIKA AND JHUMAR

The Adibasis of Jharkhand have a lot of community-specific songs and dances and from 1942 to 1946, Archar (2007) alone compiles 489 songs of the Santhal and which are classified by him under the following categories: forest, marriage, different festivals related songs, Bitlaha (a punitive mass gathering for major tribal offences), witch's song, annual hunt song, Bonga story song, mourning songs, etc. (ibid. 346-348). Archar, the then Deputy Commissioner in Santhal Pargana, in the preface of the book acknowledges a good number of Santhal men who helped him to enquire and translate Santhal poetries and

songs. But Archar (ibid.) did not mention songs of rebellion. Cultivation songs from Archar's (2007: 12) compilation reveal the genre of call and response, and one such is mentioned here to reveal the richness of the Santal songs.

1.

"Wealth, wealth
Where is your mother?
Where is your father?
My mother and father
Are wind and rain
My milk is water trickling."

2.

"Wealth, wealth
O mother wealth
Where is your birth?
I was born
In the splash of rain."

3.

"The paddy is weeping
The paddy is asking
When will be my wedding?
When the water of the sky
Drenches the earth
Then will be your wedding."

4.

"In our fields
In our lands
Is a house of wealth."

Gaunjhu (2015: 10-15) classifies the dances of Jharkhand into different types and forms that reveal the richness and closeness of the people with dance traditions. Otherwise, he says that themes of songs and dances are related to life and people are performers, which means there is actually no audience. These mass dance and folksong traditions

of the indigenous people of Jharkhand reflect livelihood, life experiences and social history of the people. Mahato (2010: 43-57) in the paper discusses history of the social movement of Indigenous People 1763-2007, and quotes a folksong on heroes who were killed by the then king and colonizers' police. He mentions one such folk song on the first Santhal rebellion (ibid.: 48):

“Sidhu Kanu khurkhurir upare
 Chand –Vairav lahare lahare
 Chanku Mahato, Rama Gope Lahare lahare,
 Challu Jolha lahare lahare”

In English rendering, it means: “Sidhu and Kanu (Heros of Santal rebellion) are on the palanquin/Chand and Vairav are looking at them/Chanku Mahato, Rama Gope are looking at them/Challu Jolha looking at them with respect.”

This song not only praises leaders of Sidhu-Kanhu movement of heroes—Sidhu and Knahu—but also refers social dynamics of the place by naming other members. Indeed, performing art is an alternative text of social history, and it holds moments, events of history, peoples' experiences in crystallized forms of songs, in the choreographies of dances and rhythms of percussions. Therefore, contents of performances accommodate new ideas and experiences constantly and communicate those to the languages of music, lyrics and choreographies.

PAIKA DANCE

Giridhari Ram Gonju in his book, *Jharkhand ka loksangit* (in Hindi), describes this dance as the popular folk dance form of tribes like Munda, Oraon Kharia, and of the Sadans (Gonju 2015: 7-18). The Sadans are not tribes and they introduce them as non-tribal indigenes of the state of Jharkahnd. Gonju (ibid.) describes this dance as men's dance. It expresses heroism and chivalry of men, which is the central theme of this dance form. Marriage by force as a way of acquiring mate was also connected with Paika. “Traditionally, the Munda community of Jharkhand performs Paika dance. It is a stylized representation of the rituals connected with preparations of war. The dancers hold bows, arrows, spears, swords, and shields and the dance is in fact a stylized

worship of arms. The martial character of the dance is retained by the use of shield and sword. The dancers display their skills in handling the swords and shields, and reach a climax with the fast beat of Madal. During Jharkhand movement, Paika dance became a symbol of resistance and performers participated in processions. In the present day, Paika dance is performed to welcome guests in the happy occasion of weddings, and during multicultural situations such as during celebration of Dussehra; in new situations, the dance is accompanied by instruments such as Dhol, Nagara, Shehnai, and Ranbheri.

Jhumar choreographies heavily relied upon participatory dance forms and on call and response. The languages of songs are Nagpuri, Sadri. During the time of cultivation and rainy season, women participate in Jhumar in maximum numbers and that is referred as Jenana Jhumar. Nowadays, during happy occasions the Jenana Jhumar is performed. Mordana Jhumar is performed after harvest and its expressions are closer to Paika. In changing situation, Mordana Jhumar expressed people's voices, problems and pains in public meetings. Sadri Jhumar is a popular form of dance expression of the tea garden labourers of Assam. In its expression it combines the rhythm and tune of 'Bihu' dance of Assam. Each of the forms of Jhumar expression is tuned with community's historical experiences. From the experience of migrated labourers to the resistance movement of the people of Jharkhand, there are different forms of Jhumar.

CONCLUSION

The art of the indigenous societies of India in contemporary time were influenced by their ethnic identity movements for establishing rights to self-determination. Reform movements in early part of the twentieth century liberated the art and aesthetics of Devadasi dance traditions of India. Feminist writings projected (Nair, *ibid.*) such endeavour from separate angles and maintained an opinion that with reference to temple dancers of Mysore and Madras (present Chennai), the economic self-dependence of women dancers was affected and the space of women in public spheres was attenuated hundred years back. In the twentieth century, Communist movements created space for people performing art and theatre through IPTA movements. Tribal identity

movements created space for tribal dances, which carried new experiences within and for outside the community. Those forms in new expressions are secular, ethnic, and symbols of identity and heritage. Those forms represented the history of tribes metaphorically, recreated new meaning and new space for performances. Shifting of space from open-air to stage focused traditions more than social-life. The spirit of tribal dance, its philosophy and participatory nature lies in incorporating larger gathering of performers transcending community boundaries.

NOTES

1. One of the very famous songs of that time was "Hei Samal ho (2)/Hei Samal ho Dhan ho, kaste ta dao shan ho/jan Kabul aar Man Kabul/aar debo na (2) Rakte bona dhan moder pran ho." The English rendering of this song is: "Let's be careful and sharpen our sickle, let's protect the paddy we produced, for the sake of our life and prestige, we won't allow men of black market to harvest the paddy we cultivate by our blood. In the 1950s, we sacrificed life due to famine, our sisters and mother(s) were raped, we know you my white enemy with black hands/for the sake of our life and prestige we won't allow anybody to harvest the paddy we cultivate by our blood. We know you very well that you are the white elephant of black market, for the sake of our life and prestige we won't allow anybody to harvest the paddy we cultivate by our blood."
2. The autochthones and tribal origin of present Jharkhand.
3. The non-tribal old inhabitants (Sadan) of present Jharkhand.

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