



Review Article

DOI: 10.58966/JCM20232211

## Folk Media and Social Development: A Study on Bhaona and Chhau Performing Arts

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### ARTICLE INFO

**Article history:**

Received: 18 April 2023

Revised: 13 May, 2023

Accepted: 05 June, 2023

Published: 25 June, 2023

**Keywords:**

Bhaona, Chhau, Performing Art, Folk Media, Society, Development, Culture

### ABSTRACT

With a major share of the world's population residing in developing countries and about 70% of it residing in rural areas, mass media always had a wide scope to participate in and enhance social development and welfare programs. However, high illiteracy rate, poverty and limited access to mass media, etc. have posed a big challenge for mass media to permeate through lower strata of society. Numerous studies reveal that these media do not have the necessary influence in terms of inspiring change and development. However, folk media has demonstrated its superiority in forging ties and fostering affinities in the communities as evident from studies done across the globe.

This study aims to study the impact of two performing art styles- Bhaona and Chhau- on social development. The ritualistic theatrical performances- Bhaona and Chhau, both having roots in Indian Mythology and folklore- are integral to the social construct of the Assamese and tribal communities of West Bengal and Odisha, respectively. This study attempts to explore the cultural facets of the Bhaona and Chhau through a variety of aesthetic fields. And further, analyze how these folk media disciplines helped shape the societies in the past and how they may be preserved and applied to help a specific region grow in the future.

### INTRODUCTION

With its prevailing social demands and challenges, the rural community has developed traditional folk media. Alternatively, traditional folk media can be characterized as passing information and wisdom from one generation to another (W.W Manoj Pushpa Kumara Jinadasa, 2011). Over centuries, the framework of folk performing art has constantly changed to adapt to the demands of shifting circumstances and thus become more relevant to society. In traditional communities, art is an essential component of everyday life. Prehistoric societies don't have much separation between art and life. They view folk media as integral to their daily existence (Yathish.L. Kodavath, 2015). Therefore, folklore, folk music, and folk dance play a crucial role in disseminating information to marginalized groups. Since its inception, the folk performing arts have been used as vehicles for meeting

moral, religious, and socio-political goals. However, it would be incorrect to consider folk media only as a means of pure entertainment. Despite lacking literature or grammar, folk media are developed through functional and oral sources. Folk media is personal, easily relatable and credible because of its very nature and therefore, any critical information passed through folk performing arts to the masses proves to be more effective.

Today, policymakers, especially with reference to third-world economies, consider folk media as an effective form of communication to communicate their development initiatives for marginalized groups. The marginalized groups are marred with poverty, lower literacy rates and limited access to mainstream media. As a result, the mainstream media fails to deliver the messages to them successfully. UNESCO has been paying more attention on the integration of folk media with mass media for

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**Relevant conflicts of interest/financial disclosures:** The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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the development of the underprivileged. For example, the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) considers folk media an important medium to disseminate information to various audiences, thereby ensuring a better environment for mankind to flourish. In the Indian context, in 1953 the Government emphasized the role of folk communication in development in its First Five Year Plan document in the following way: "A widespread understanding of the Plan is an essential stage in its fulfillment. Understanding the priorities of the Plan will enable each person to relate his or her role to the larger purposes of the nation as a whole. All available methods of communication have to be developed and the people approached through the folk media, then after that written and spoken word no less than through radio, film, song and drama".

### **Bhaona**

In 15th Century the great Vaishnavite saint and leader, Srimanta Sankardev started a religion-cultural movement in Assam and had created Ankiya Naat and Bhaona. Ankiya Naat are one-act play while Bhaona is the performance of these acts. A form of folk performing arts, Bhaona is the combination of acting, music and musical instruments. Bhaona always carried a spiritual message, and their performance demonstrated the triumph of good over evil. A classic genre of theatre Bhaona depicts the victory of truth and tells tales of legendary characters from the Bhagavata Purana and the epic Ramayana (Indranee Phookan Borooah, 2014).

Bhaona are colorful orchestrated presentations mainly comprised of Gaayan (singers) and Baayan (instrumentalists). Gaayan and Baayan are clad in pristine white attires, and the demons and animals are presented as fanciful effigies. In contrast, king and queen characters are portrayed by actors wearing elaborate glittering costumes. One of the most prominent elements of Bhaona performance is the Masks. The actors portray different characters of gods, goddesses, demons, and animals, etc. wearing large, colorful masks of the related character. These masks are visually elaborate, large in size, covering the performer's till waist giving a majestic look to the performance. The actors portray their characters with the help of mask movements that convey their position and stature, adding more credibility to the storytelling. A light-filled archway called "Agni Garh" serves as the entrance for the performers. Along with the Gaayan-Baayan, there is also a "Sutradhar" who serves as the play's narrator and serves to introduce it. In order for the audience to comprehend the enactment, the "Sutradhar" continues to narrate the story while the orchestra plays between acts of the play.

### **Chhau**

Declared by UNSECO in the list of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity, Chhau is an ancient source of dance,

drama, music, stage play, facial expressions and a rural extension of Bharat Muni's Natyashastra. One of the oldest surviving folk-dance forms of eastern India, Chhau is a unique dance form that uses ancient Indian mythology tales accompanied with rhythms, body movements, and masks to tell compelling stories. A metaphorical tool – Masks used in Chhau portray the characters like Lord Shiva, Ganesha, Arjuna, Kartika etc. with pronounced facial expressions. The performance is enhanced with the use of Dhol, Dhamsa, Kharki, and melody of Mahuri and Shehnai making the dance entertaining for the masses. Chhau dance uses mythological tales to illustrate moral lessons to the audience and teach them about the triumph of good over evil. (Bhattacharya Asutosh, 1993). NavaRasah is an integral aspect of Chhau dance but it often primarily celebrate Veer Rasah in the performances. Performed during Indian festivals like Navratri, Chaitra Parva, etc. Chhau performance portrays the mythological tales from Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas, etc. and themes of Shaivism, Vaisnavism, and Shaktism form an integral part of it (Chatterji R, 2009). Seraikela Chhau, Mayurbhanj Chhau, and Purulia Chhau are the three representative Chhau styles that bear the names of the locations where they were born. The three schools share a great deal in common, particularly in their martial bent and consistently in their musical and religious practices but they are theatrical and have different story sources and different stylistic nuances. Having their own aesthetic appeal and charm, the usage of masks is the most noticeable feature that separates the three styles from each other. Seraikela and Purulia Chhau make use of masks whereas Mayurbhanj Chhau does not.

## **OBJECTIVES**

- To explore the relationship between folk media and social development.
- To assess the impact of performing arts- Bhaona and Chhau on social development of marginalized groups.
- To study the role of folk media in social development of marginalized groups and scope for meeting future challenges.

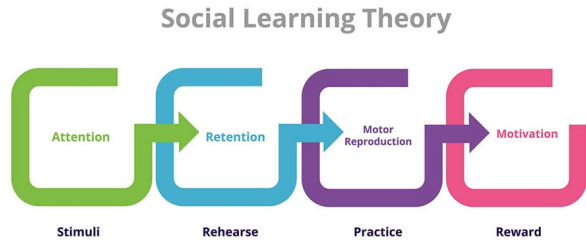
## **METHODOLOGY**

The study is based on secondary data. The secondary data was collected from various books, journals, newspapers etc.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Bandura's social cognitive theory of human functioning states that self-belief plays a crucial role in human motivation, behavior, and cognition. According to social cognitive theory, people have a self-system that allows them to have some degree of control over their ideas, feelings, and behaviors. Folk media's purpose is in line with Bandura's social learning (cognition) hypothesis,

which holds that most behaviors are picked up through imitation (Figure 1). According to this notion, observing others' attitudes and behaviors can be used to inform one's own. In addition to watching role models in daily life, such as those in films and television shows, Bandura claimed that people learn new things outside of the classroom.



**Figure 1:**Diagram showing how the behaviors are learned through modeling of Social Learning Theory [Bandura, A. (1977)]

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### Socio-Economic and Demographic status of Assam

With 86% of its total population residing in rural areas, Assam is predominantly a rural-based state. Studies suggest that the socio-economic condition of the rural masses is not parred with the masses of urban area and all India figures. In fact, rural poverty is found to be twice than that of urban poverty. According to Assam's population growth, the absolute number of the poor has rarely changed over time.

### Bhaona and Its Impact on the Socio-Cultural Life of marginalized groups of Assam

Bhaona performances usually occur in open spaces of villages' Namghars (prayer hall). In addition to serving as a source of mass entertainment, these performances have origins in the original Assamese culture and were ingrained in local identity and social values. It benefited the Assamese society by providing native means of interpersonal, inter-group, and inter-village communication for change (Mishra, K. & Tamuli, P, 2022).

Between 1518 and 1568, five acts are drawn from the Bhagavata Purana and the sixth from the Ramayana. Saint Sankardev used Bhaona as a means to acquaint the masses with the greatness and the antics of lord Krishna and propagate Neo-Vaisnavism. An in-depth analysis of these acts further reveals that some moral values are found imbedded. For example, one such act composed by Srimanta Sankardev- 'Vipra Patni-Prasada' narrates the tale of the Brahmanas (vipra) who fail to earn religious merit by the performance of elaborate sacrifices (yajna). Whereas the wives of those Vipras were able to earn religious merit as they were truly devoted to and loved young Krishna. This act carries a very important message emphasizing the power of love for the divine in comparison to sacrifice. Further it also depicts the negative outcome of arrogance stemming from knowledge as shown by

the Vipras and looking down upon children. The Vipras conducted the yajna to appease the Gods and did not feed the children any food contrary to their wives. From this act one can learn the benefit of denunciation of one's arrogance, the importance of support and sustenance of those in need; and significantly the victory of the good and righteous over evil.

### Socio-Economic and Demographic status of Mayurbhanj, Seraikela, and Purulia districts in Odisha, Jharkhand, and West Bengal

Similarly, compared to national figures, the Mayurbhanj, Seraikela, and Purulia districts in Odisha, Jharkhand, and West Bengal have poor socio-economic conditions and majorly tribal-dominated population-wise. According to Government data in all these three districts an average of 57% of their total population falls under the Below Poverty Line. The literacy rates in these three districts are much lower than national figures. Literature review suggests that the population of these three districts is mostly comprised of communities of tribal origin who have very little to no access to main stream media. Therefore, folk media, especially Chhau performing art plays a crucial role not just in the entertainment sense but also as an agent of social change.

### Chhau and Its impact on the Socio-Cultural Life of Marginalized groups of Odisha, Jharkhand, and West Bengal

Chhau performance is really a type of tribal martial art form that dates back to when tribal people relied on hunting and other natural resources for their existence. The Chhau performers' movements and steps mimic those of people trying to hunt or catch animals. This performing art form can be seen as an artistic representation of human social interaction and conduct with others, especially our surroundings. Chhau performance imitates different aspects of daily life, such as Sombre (hunter) style, Dhabor (fisherman) style, or Nabik (boatman) style and represents the socio-cultural sphere of everyday life that tries to portray a better way of living. Performed as a ritual, Chhau imitates God or some stories that are told orally and passed on from generation to generation. The performance is based on the original gestures and movements created by social and cultural norms. (Kunwer, S. 2021). For example, Saraikela Chhau dance performer Carolina Prada in her experience writes, "The body language, sometimes broad and sometimes contained revealed the mood of the character, the tala (rhythm) flowing with calm dhol (drum) beats and then suddenly with vigorous strokes, enlivened him and gave me a very strong feeling of that which is not shown, but can be seen; which is not said but can be heard. The dancer in a mask conveyed more than any other facial expression because his message came from the inside."

Therefore, one can infer that both Bhaona and Chhau

are an account of legendary tales that are presented while being intermingled with song, dance, and storytelling. Together, they create a wonderful portrayal that captures the audience's interest and transports them to a world filled with sensory experiences while telling morally significant tales. As a result, these lectures offer valuable opportunities for direct instruction in and observation of moral behavior. By empathizing with the Hero or other prominent virtuous characters who defeat evil and personify "goodness," moral principles may subsequently arise.

## CONCLUSION

According to the study we can say that there is a very important relationship between folk media and social development because for the circulation of development related information among marginalized group Folk media can play a very effective role. According to Ranganath (1980), folk media are "living expressions of the life style and culture of the people", and the Government and its institution can use it to achieve development goals.

It is also found in the study that there are very important impact of performing arts- Bhaona and Chhau on social development of marginalized groups of Assam, Odisha, Jharkhand, and West Bengal because these art forms are still very popular, especially among the marginalized group of rural area of these states. They still depend on it for learning and entertainment. Actually these, these art forms have been a part of their society and culture for years, so the information received through them has a very important impact on them. Folk media contain pertinent symbolic acts that express and communicate the ethos (social, cultural, political, environmental, and economic) of the society that produced it. Because it is ingrained and structured in the socio-cultural context of the culture where it is practiced, the folk media is consequently a powerful mode of communication in a particular cultural space.

The study also explored the importance of these art forms in development related future initiatives by the Government and other institutions. The Government can use these art forms to communicate development-related information, especially in these states' marginalized groups, to get better results and achieve development-related goals.

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**HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:** Tamuli, P., Mishra, K. (2023). Folk Media and Social Development: A Study on Bhaona and Chhau Performing Arts. *Journal of Communication and Management*, 2(2), 135-138. DOI: 10.58966/JCM20232211

