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Research Paper

Storytelling and Subaltern Realities: Chau Dance as a Reflection of Lived Experiences and Cultural Resistance

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Abstract
This study examines the Chau dance of Purulia (West Bengal), Odisha, and Jharkhand as a critical cultural site where storytelling transforms into an act of resistance. Focusing on Chau's embodied narratives, the paper explores the performance asit reimagines subaltern histories through figures like Birsa Munda and articulates the interrelation between political memory and cultural survival. Grounded in decolonial and subaltern theory, this interdisciplinary research combines performance analysis, ethnographic interpretation, and textual engagement with oral poetry such as Swaraj Basu's Kala Gulab. The methodology centres on close readings of Chau performances and their historical-political symbolism, revealing the dance not merely as a folkloric expression but as an "embodied archive" that preserves and renegotiates subaltern memory. Through the kinetic language of gesture, myth, and rhythm, Chau communicates complex narratives of displacement, dignity, and indigenous resistance. The incorporation of historical episodes, such as the Santal Rebellion, and the integration of poetic texts deepen the form's counter-narrative power against hegemonic cultural discourses. By positioning Chau as a living archive of collective experience, the paper demonstrates how the art form becomes a dynamic site of cultural and political articulation. It reframes folk performance as a mode of historical testimony and resistance to cultural erasure, illuminating how local traditions challenge dominant narratives while sustaining indigenous identities. This study contributes to performance studies, subaltern historiography, and indigenous cultural preservation by asserting that traditional dance forms like Chau can shape contemporary dialogues on justice, identity, and memory. Ultimately, Chau emerges not only as an aesthetic practice but as a resilient, evolving narrative of survival and assertion—a kinetic text through which subaltern voices continue to speak against the silencing forces of history.

Keywords: Chau dance, subaltern studies, cultural resistance, performances

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the Indian folk traditions, the Chau dance of Purulia, Odisha, and Jharkhand emerges as a vibrant theatrical art form that is "as much a ritual offering as it is a performance" (Banerjee 74), drawing its dramatic power from the intersection of **oral folklore, mythological allegory**, and **embodied performance** to shape and assert the **social identity of marginalized communities**. Purulia's primitive landscape and historical evolution provide a crucial backdrop for understanding the development of Chau dance. The undulating terrain, the **red laterite soil, rugged hills, dense forests**, and seasonal climate of Purulia have historically nurtured a **semi-nomadic lifestyle** that forged a deep interdependence between human life and nature. These geographical features shaped the livelihoods and spiritual practices of the people, many of which are reflected in Chau performances.To quote **Ananda Lal in this context,** "natural environment of Purulia forms an active agent in its folk theatre, influencing not only the aesthetics but also the rhythms and themes of performance" (Lal 213). Chau performances often depict the **worship of natural elements** like mountains, rivers, forests, and animals—underscoring this **ecological intimacy**.

The performative texts of Chau are deeply influenced by the lived experiences of early settlers engaged in **agriculture, forest foraging, and hunting**. These material conditions shaped their **cosmological views and oral traditions**, now reflected in narratives that blend epic myth with local legend. According to **Gautam Chatterjee**, "Chau is more than dance; it is an articulation of community memory, an aesthetic reply to marginality" (Chatterjee 52). The elaborate **masks**, **martial choreography**, and **ritualistic drumming** serve not only as artistic elements but as symbolic vehicles of collective resilience. In resisting the imposed narratives of "development" and modernity, Chau offers a decolonial aesthetic, one that privileges cyclical temporality, community voice, and indigenous epistemes. Its stories do not merely entertain—they re-inscribe histories omitted from written records, making Chau "a performative archive of resistance" (Schechner 119). Thus, the Purulia Chau must be understood not merely as folk entertainment, but as a philosophical, ecological, and political expression, preserving the sacred relationship between land, community, and cultural survival.

The spectators of Chau do not merely watchthey *feel*, engaging in what **Susan Leigh Foster** describes as **"kinesthetic empathy,"** wherein "the audience connects with the dancer's emotional and physical experience through observation of movement" (Foster 5). In Chau, this empathy is heightened by the convergence of **myth, folklore, and legend**, where the **performer's body becomes a living text**, inscribing narratives of **labour, displacement, and protest**. Rooted in tribal traditions—especially those of the **Santhal, Mahato, Kurmi, Munda, and Bhumij**, Chau has long functioned as a **site of cultural survival**, resisting hegemonic erasure.

The voice of the people, often suppressed in state histories or mainstream narratives, finds liberation through the expressive arts. In this sense, Chau dance, like oral poetry, becomes a kinetic text—choreographed testimony to the historical wounds, communal aspirations, and political memory of indigenous and marginalized communities The inclusion of contemporary poetic texts such as Saraj Basu's *Kalagulab* deepens this discourse, as the poem itself becomes a vital lens to understand how Chau's socio-cultural space reflects and resists hegemonic definitions of progress, identity, and belonging.

While dominant frameworks have historically dismissed such traditions as *"primitive folklore"*, scholars like **Richard Schechner** argue that performance "is not just doing, but showing doing"—a gesture imbued with **historical and political agency** (Schechner 28). The **subaltern silence**, as **Gayatri Spivak** notes, is not absence but **a strategy of survival and resistance**, a repository of **pain, memory, and inherited wisdom** (Spivak 287). In this sense, Chau becomes a **counter-space** where **marginalized voices reassert their place in history**, outside the boundaries of written archives and dominant discourses. It is here that **postcolonial theory and performative epistemology** converge, illuminating Chau as both demonstration and transformation.

This paper aims to critically explore **Chau dance as a subaltern performative tradition** that articulates resistance, memory, and ecological consciousness through embodied storytelling. It seeks to analyse the performances, particularly in the Purulia region to extract the of Chau as a living archive for communities historically excluded from dominant historiographical narratives. Drawing on postcolonial, ecological, and performative theories, this study highlights Chau's relevance in contemporary cultural discourse and education, while emphasizing its role in reimagining mythology and asserting indigenous identity within both national and global frameworks.

II. Body

As Chau dance evolved, its thematic palette expanded beyond the epics of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* to include politically resonant and socially grounded narratives. The entry of female performers and subaltern choreographers has significantly redefined the performative space, transforming Chau into a medium of protest and identity assertion. These modern adaptations underscore a growing consciousness among marginalized communities, who utilize Chau not only as aesthetic practice but as cultural resistance against erasure and exclusion.

During the pre-colonial period, tribal and lower-caste communities lived in forest-based and agrarian economies, sustained by customary land rights and community governance. However, colonial interventions, particularly the **Permanent Settlement Act (1793)** and **Indian Forest Acts**disrupted these systems, leading to **economic disenfranchisement and cultural fragmentation**. The **Santal Hul (1855)** and the **Birsa Munda Uprising (1895–1900)** are pivotal markers of indigenous resistance. As Ranajit Guha notes, these movements "challenged not just colonial domination but internal structures of social hierarchy" (Guha 23). Yet their voices were suppressed, their legacies misrepresented or ignored in official historiography.

The marginalization of Chau performers today is rooted in this layered history. These communities, Mahato, Kurmi, Munda, Santal, Bhumijoften face structural barriers due to their Scheduled Caste/Tribe status, subsistence economies, and cultural stigmatization. Their animistic beliefs and oral traditions, long dismissed as "primitive," are in fact vital epistemologies that survive through performance. In this context, Chau becomes a site of cultural memory, where dance functions as archive, resistance, and revival.

Within this textured landscape, the poem *"Kala Gulab"* by Swaraj Basu unfurls like a wound that sings. Translated into the current inquiry, the poem becomes more than metaphor; it stands as a declaration of presence from a people long cast in the shadows of "development." Its verses remember Birsa Munda, Sidhu, and Kanhu — names that throb with the pulse of unfinished revolutions, roots tangled in soil that refuses to forget. In *Kalagulab*, Saraj Basu gives voice to the Chau community's lived experiences, challenging dominant narratives of "development" and "progress." Through evocative imagery, "We work as labours day in and day out like the bovine ox", the poet reclaims metaphors of subjugation, transforming them into emblems of resilience and dignity. The comparison to the ox signifies a deep-rooted, earth-bound existence, emphasizing connection to land, labor, and ritual. Rather than romanticizing hardship, Basu critiques capitalist exploitation "You take away all that we have and increase your popularity" highlights indigenous lives are commodified by mainstream narratives of progress.

Rituals like evening dances to the rhythm of *madol* and chants of *"Dhidhin tang dhitang"* assert cultural continuity as resistance. By invoking Birsa Munda, Sidhu, and Kanhu, the poem links present struggles to historic rebellions. The rhetorical query, "How did we develop then?" exposes the hypocrisy of development discourse that ignores sustainable indigenous practices. Importantly, the poet notes evolving gender roles "We are the same only learned to be presentable…" signifying a hybrid identity where modernity and tradition coexist. Basu's poem exemplifies what Martha Nussbaum terms "literary empathy," allowing readers to inhabit the Chau community's emotional world and reimagine subaltern resilience beyond imposed binaries of "primitive" and "civilized."

Despite stylistic distinctionsPurulia's martial masks, Mayurbhanj's lyrical subtlety, and Saraikela's courtly graceeach Chau form shares a unifying subaltern ethos. As Ananda Lal suggests, "Chau reclaims space for the rural voice through movement, embodying what the text omits" (Lal 215). Thus, Chau resists not only historical silencing but reasserts indigenous agency through performance.

The Chau performers often come from communities that are structurally marginalized due to their Caste and tribe affiliation (Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes), economic dependence on seasonal labour, subsistence farming, or artisan work, lack of access to education, healthcare, and land ownership, and cultural othering: Their ritual practices, animistic faith systems, and oral traditions were often dismissed as "primitive" by both colonial administrators and postcolonial nationalist discourses. Chau dance in its three stylized forms prominent regional styles, Purulia Chau (West Bengal) emphasizing martial vigour and the use of elaborate masks, Mayurbhanj Chau (Odisha) known for its subtlety and maskless expressions and Saraikela Chau (Jharkhand) incorporating refined gestures and courtly influences despite regional differences has a unifying thread in common, their deep association with subaltern communities.

The overall analysis positions Chau as a dynamic cultural performance that gives voice to subaltern narratives, often excluded from dominant historiographies. In the Gramscian and Subaltern Studies tradition (Guha, 1982; Spivak, 1988), the term "subaltern" refers to those who exist outside the circuits of hegemonic power. Chau, in this context, becomes a vernacular archive where marginalized communities, particularly tribal and agrarian groups who narrate histories of dispossession, resistance, and survival. Performers, many of whom come from the peripheries of caste and class hierarchies, embed themes of land alienation, ecological degradation, and socio-political marginalization in their movement, mask, and rhythm.

For instance, Sunita Mahato's scripting and performance of *SankhasurBadha* marks a significant feminist intervention. Her retelling critiques patriarchal and caste structures with mythological inversion, aligning with Spivak's (1988) argument that subaltern women are often doubly silenced, first by the structures of colonialism and second by indigenous patriarchy. In scripting myth from below, Mahato enacts what Saurabh Dube (2004) calls a "tangled temporality"where folk tradition and contemporary dissent converge. Her authorship becomes not just creative but insurgent, reclaiming narrative space through embodied resistance.

The figure of Birsa Munda (1875–1900), often neglected in nationalist metanarratives, has gained renewed cultural presence in Chau performances across Jharkhand and Purulia. Reinscribed through folk dramatization, Birsa's life is not merely remembered but restored. His story becomes a symbolic articulation of indigenous resistance against colonial rule and neoliberal exploitation. These performances resonate with the ideas of Edward Said (1978), who argues that reclaiming narrative space is central to decolonization. By portraying Birsa as a sacred ancestral figure, Chau resists domestication as a passive icon in state rhetoric, transforming him into a kinetic force of dissent.

The martial and ritualistic elements of Chau—such as the *madol* drum, acrobatic leaps, and the use of masks—further contribute to this resistance aesthetics. Drawing on Glotfelty and Fromm's (1996) ecocritical framework, one can argue that the dancing body in Chau is not only a political text but also an ecological signifier—defending indigenous symbiosis with land and community. In this sense, performance becomes protest; the stage becomes a battlefield where myth meets materiality, and folklore contests formal history.

As Tapati Mukherjee (2021) asserts, "the symbolism of Chau masks and choreography constructs a counter-narrative to erasures in national memory." The very act of re-performing Birsa's defiance becomes an act of survival and insurgency. It reflects what Partha Chatterjee (1993) calls the "fragmented nation," where

vernacular publics reclaim fractured identities through cultural means. Chau, thus, is more than folk art—it is a living, breathing grammar of subaltern resistance.

In the absence of written records or elite patronage, Chau dance has persisted as a people's artform, preserving subaltern cosmology, collective memory, and resistance. Drawing from oral narration, barefoot martial movements, and symbolic masks, Chau subverts dominant, textual Brahmanical traditions by asserting a vernacular, non-elite cultural identity (Spivak, 1988; Dube, 2004). This non-literate mode of transmission echoes Judith Butler's notion of the body as a "continual and incessant materializing of possibilities" (Butler, 1993), where performance becomes an act of both survival and authorship.

In recent decades, the rise of female performers like Shilpa Mahato, Sunita Mahato, and Kusum Soren from Purulia represents a growing feminist subaltern consciousness. Their choreographies integrate contemporary issues—land alienation, gender justice, and tribal pride—into Chau narratives, aligning with Ranajit Guha's call to recognize subaltern agency within cultural forms (Guha, 1982). Yet, systemic challenges like limited funding, urban-centric cultural policy, and institutional exclusion threaten the autonomy of these performers, reflecting Spivak's argument that the subaltern often "cannot speak" within dominant structures unless modes of cultural translation and recognition are transformed (Spivak, 1988).

Any meaningful analysis of Chau as an aesthetic-political form must situate it within the Natyashastra (c. 200 BCE–200 CE), the foundational Indian treatise on dramaturgy. The Natyashastra's concepts of *katha* (narrative), *bhava-rasa* (emotion-aesthetic synthesis), and performative gesture (*angika-abhinaya*) provide critical insight into Chau's modulation of affect and myth. While classical theatre declined during the medieval period, folk theatre like Chau flourished, particularly from the 15th and 16th centuries, as a medium of dramatic expression rooted in epics, folklore, and biographical legends (Satpathy, 2001). Chau thus became a dominant form of *lokanatyam* (people's theatre), enabling rural communities to articulate cultural and moral values through stylized embodiment.

The Chau performers performing in open-air settings, often on village groundsoffers an immersive form of storytelling where kinetic empathy bridges the gap between performer and audience. As Rustom Bharucha observes, "performance is a practice of remembering" (Bharucha, 1993, p. 90), and Chau becomes a site of *embodied historiography*, a term denoting the transmission of history through movement and gesture in the absence of written record. The acrobatics, mask-wearing, and musical rhythm (*madol* drum beats) serve as non-literate archival forms encoding inter-generational knowledge, trauma, and defiance.

Chau's narratives draw deeply from Indian epics—the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and *Devi Mahatmya*. For instance, performances like *Shiva Tandava*, *Arjuna's Battle*, and *Mahishasura Mardini* depict divine rage, warrior heroism, and feminine power. These stories, when rendered through the Chau idiom, move beyond religious retellings to embody *subaltern consciousness*, regional identity, and anti-colonial resistance (Guha, 1982; Banerjee, 2020). In Chau, *Shiva's Tandava*, drawn from the *Shiva Purana*, is portrayed using vigorous leaps, frenetic footwork, and a mask featuring a third eye, symbolizing both divine energy and protest. The mythic dance, performed barefoot on village soil, marks a rejection of Vedic elitism and aligns Shiva with tribal and marginalized communities (Dube, 2004). His refusal to acknowledge Daksha's sacrifice and caste ritualism in the myth is reimagined in Chau as a symbolic rupture from Brahmanical authority, an interpretation consistent with Spivak's (1988) notion of subaltern articulation through embodied forms.

Indian creation myths also find resonance in Chau storytelling. The NasadiyaSukta of the *Rig Veda* poetically explores the uncertainty of cosmic origins, while Hesiod's Theogony (700 BCE) traces the world's emergence from Chaos to structured divinity, and Egyptian cosmology narrates the solitary God Atumn rising from Nun's primordial waters to initiate creation. These mythic visions of cyclical time and elemental force find visual translation in Chau, particularly in dances like *Shiva Tandava*, which aligns with the idea of destruction as a path to regeneration. As seen in *Markandeya Purana* and *Linga Purana*, Shiva's dance in Chau is not merely spectacle—it is a cosmological argument performed through form.

Further, Chau's emotional arc is constructed using the principles of *rasa*, as outlined in the Natyashastra. Performances like *Mahishasura Mardini* balance *vira* (heroic) and *raudra* (furious) rasas to portray the goddess Durga not as a passive consort but as a fierce protector of dharma. Sushila Jain's (1990) analysis reinforces this interpretation: "Durga is not a victim but a warrior, a protector of truth and justice." These aesthetics of resistance are heightened through sound, costume, and barefoot movement, evoking what Bharucha (1993) terms "the political unconscious of performance."

The *NasadiyaSukta* from the *Rig Veda* explores the origins of the cosmos with poetic ambiguity, reflecting on the creation as an interconnected process. Hesiod's *Theogony* describes the emergence of the universe from *Chaos*, leading to the formation of Gaia (Earth) and Uranus (Sky) : Creation myths centre around the god Atum, who emerges from the chaotic waters of *Nun* to create the world.

A picture extracted from Shiv Tandava (a scene collected from youtube)

The portrayal of Arjuna's heroic narratives, the battle scenes often echoes the grandeur of Heracles' feats and the symbolic struggle of Horus. Stories of Arjuna is **The Kshatriya Ideal and Warrior Identity** from the *Mahabharata* epitomize duty and moral dilemmas.

"You grieve for those who should not be grieved for, and yet you speak words of wisdom. The wise grieve neither for the living nor the dead." (Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 2, Verse 11).

Arjuna's battlefield prowess is immortalized in the *Mahabharata*, particularly in the Kurukshetra war. His **duel with Karna and the Bhagavad Gita discourse** are two primary episodes depicted in Chau dance. The **warrior archetype in Chau dance** is characterized by exaggerated battle movements inspired by **martial techniques**, high-energy **weapon choreography** using wooden swords and shields, iconic moments like Arjuna **shooting the Pashupatastra**, represented through coordinated leaps and dramatic gestures. Mention subaltern elements

Unlike classical retellings that privilege Kshatriya ideals, Chau performances portray that Arjuna also **highlights the role of common foot soldiers**, the unseen warriors of the Mahabharata. As Chatterjee (1993) argues, folk narratives often **decentre elite protagonists**, bringing **ordinary warriors** to the forefront.

In Chau dance, Arjuna's quest for celestial weapons is dramatized with elaborate martial choreography. The labours of Heracles reflect themes of endurance and divine intervention. Both Arjuna and Heracles are archetypes of flawed but heroic individuals seeking purpose. Horus's battles against Seth, representing the struggle between order and chaos, mirror the moral and cosmic battles seen in Indian mythology.

"Sankhasur Badha," originally part of the oral performance repertoire in Purulia Chau, in the referred manuscript is scripted by **Sunita Mahato**, a female Chau artist from a rural community. The transition from **oral narrative to written script** marks a significant moment in subaltern literary history. Historically, Brahmanical and elite textual traditions have dominated Indian literature, often excluding voices from tribal, backward-caste, and rural women's spaces. By scripting a Chau pala traditionally preserved through memory, Sunita Mahato challenges this hegemony and **asserts the authority of the subaltern to narrate, document, and interpret their own stories**.

This movement from oral to written also implies agency. As **Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak** argues in "Can the Subaltern Speak?", the subaltern is often spoken for, not allowed to speak. Mahato's authorship and narration mark a **radical act of reclaiming authorship**, allowing the marginalized voice not only to perform but to inscribe itself into cultural memory.

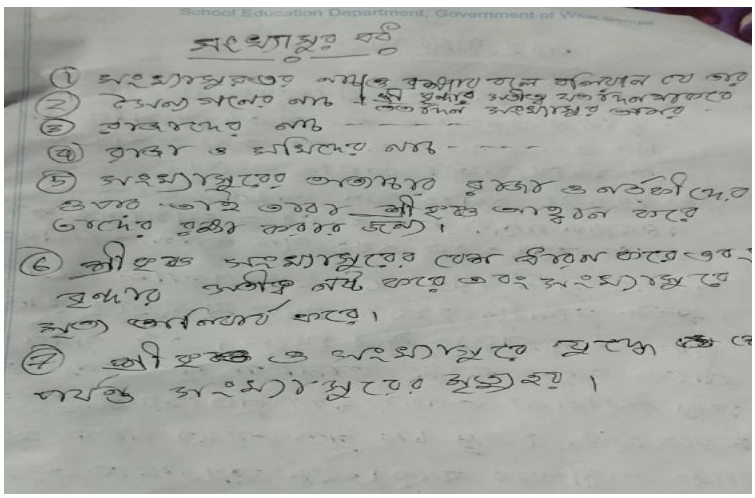
The process of creating any Chau pala particularly one led by a woman from a rural community is itself deeply subaltern. The **production of the script**, choreography, costumes, and music for *SankhasurBadha* involved, **collective labour** from local artisans and performers, often from economically vulnerable community., The use

of **indigenous materials**, local mythologies, and non-urban spaces of rehearsal and minimal access to institutional funding or elite cultural validation.

Oral texts, traditionally sidelined in literary canons, are now acknowledged for their **social impact** and narrative richness. As Walter J. Ong (1982) emphasizes in *Orality and Literacy*, oral traditions serve as living archives—encoding collective memory, resistance, and identity through performance. In **Chau dance**, oral storytelling transforms myth into a subaltern voice, preserving indigenous cosmologies while critiquing caste, gender, and colonial hierarchies (Spivak, 1988; Guha, 1982). These performances become crucial social tools for voicing injustice, reclaiming silenced histories, and resisting erasure.

Globally, this role of oral art resonates with literary works that address marginalization and cultural continuity. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck (1939) portrays the dispossessed as resilient agents of changea motif echoed in Chau's rural performers addressing land alienation and gender justice. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) shows memory as healing, mirroring Chau's community bonding through ritualistic dance. As Bharucha (1993) notes, "performance is a practice of remembering," where embodied storytelling bridges past and present.

Incorporating oral texts into mainstream literature democratizes cultural narratives, expanding beyond written hegemonies. Chau's oral performance texts, when viewed through this lens, emerge not just as folklore, but as potent literary and **sociopolitical expressions** that enrich both Indian and global literature.



An original oral script of " SankhasurBadha" passed on by a female Chau Dancer Sunita Mahato to me during her interview in Purulia .

Pala Sankhasur Badha: The Dramatic Defeat of the Demon

The Pala tradition of folk theatre as discussed, practiced in regions like Purulia, has long served as a repository for mythic narratives and social ideals. One notable performance in this tradition is *Sankhasur Badha*, the dramatic recounting of the defeat of the demon Sankhasur. This folk drama, transmitted orally through generations, captures the spirit of communal resistance against tyranny and the triumph of righteousness over evil. As defined by Taylor, folklore comprises "the material that is handed on by tradition either by word of mouth or by custom and practice" (Taylor, 1985, p. 12). In this performance, creative impulses and traditional learning converge to present a narrative that is both entertaining and didactic. A better understanding of the play is possible if we discuss the Pala from a critical perspective. The stage set up, use of language, dramatic themes and cultural significance,

Like other folk dramas, *SankhasurBadha* is characterized by a lack of formal staging and a reliance on local dialects, improvisation, and ritualistic invocation. The performance begins with an invocation akin to the *Asar Bandana*, an introductory segment that serves to bridge the gap between performers and the audience introduces the title of the play, invokes divine blessings from Gods, Goddesses, or Sufi saints (*Pirs*), and formally presents the performance troupe (Hollander, 2007). This ritualistic opening not only sets the thematic

tone but also aligns the performance with traditional beliefs and communal ethos. Chau performance begins with the ritualistic invocation like other Folk Dramas which serves to bridge the gap between performers and the audience. This establishes a sacred and communal connection between performers and spectators (Acharya, 2013). While specific terminologies like "Asar Bandana" are not explicitly mentioned in available sources, the practice of commencing with invocations is well-documented.

In *SankhasurBadha*, the language is both lyrical and forceful. The hero, whose identity is sometimes conflated with legendary warriors, confronts the demon with lines that have been preserved in oral tradition. As recorded in a critical edition of the performance (Dutta, 1987), the hero declares:

Hero: "O Sankhasur, you who have spread darkness over our land, your tyranny ends this very day! By the power of the sacred flame and the will of the people, I shall vanquish thee!" (Dutta, 1987, p. 34) In response, the demon Sankhasur retorts with defiance:

Sankhasur: "I fear no mortal, for my strength is eternal, and my wrath knows no bounds!" (Dutta, 1987, p. 35) Such dialogues are interspersed with musical interludes and vigorous dance movements.

The narrative of *SankhasurBadha* is steeped in moral and ethical symbolism. It is a tale that extols the virtues of bravery and righteousness while critiquing the forces of chaos and injustice. The defeat of Sankhasur is not merely a mythic event but serves as a metaphor for the subaltern community's struggle against oppression. The performance employs stark, memorable dialogues and rhythmic gestures, hallmarks of Chau grammar to evoke both awe and moral introspection among the audience.

Furthermore, the performance's reliance on oral tradition ensures that the language remains fluid and adaptive. The dialogues, though rooted in ancient texts, are reinterpreted by each generation of performers, thereby reinforcing the living nature of folk literature (Satpathy, 2001).

Pala SankhasurBadha exemplifies the enduring power of folk drama to convey complex moral narratives in an accessible and engaging form. Through its use of rhythmic dialogue, traditional music, and dynamic performance techniques, the drama not only preserves ancient myths but also offers contemporary audiences a reflection on the perennial struggle between good and evil.

It is to be noted that the tale of *Sankhasur Badha*, adapted from **indigenous mythology**, is rich in symbolic subaltern resistance. **Sankhasur**, the asura or demon, is not simply a villain but may be read as a **symbol of suppressed indigenous power**, a figure often demonised in classical Hindu narratives. The defeat of Sankhasur by a goddess (possibly an echo of Durga or a feminine divine force) can be reinterpreted through a **folk cosmology**, where local gods and spirits battle exploitative or alien forces. In subaltern discourse, this can be framed not as divine intervention but as a **metaphor for grassroots uprising** against feudal or colonial control. The moral codes, metaphors, and ethics in the script are **grounded in folk logic**not shastric Brahmanism—placing the values of local justice, retribution, and survival above dharmic duty. Moreover, the goddess in the narrative may be portrayed not as a remote ideal but as a **folk embodiment of female power**, resonating with tribal matriarchal traditions and **eco-feminist resistance**.

Chau is not simply a folk relic; it is a performative discourse of embodied memory, gendered resistance, and cosmic storytelling. It reflects the ecological, spiritual, and political consciousness of marginalised communities who continue to speak—not through the pen, but through dance.

III. RESEARCHFINDINGS

The analysis highlights key findings, focusing on Chau as a vehicle of subaltern expression, the rewriting of myths and histories through Birsa Munda on stage, the emergence of feminised subaltern narratives, and performance as protest and more grave issues, all of which reflect urgent socio-political concerns and cultural resistance relevant in today's context.

Chau as a vehicle of subaltern expression articulate their own stories, values, and resistances. Chau dance emerges as a **platform for subaltern communities** to Performers often come from tribal or marginalized agrarian backgrounds, and their narratives reflect **themes of land alienation, economic hardship, and cultural erasure**. The script of *Sankhasur Badha*, authored and performed by **Sunita Mahato**, reflects a **feminist subaltern perspective**. It critiques structural power through the retelling of myth while drawing parallels to contemporary gender and caste oppression. The process of scripting and performing by a rural woman constitutes a **radical reclamation of voice and authorship**.

The figure of **Birsa Munda** is increasingly incorporated into Chau performances, particularly in Purulia and Jharkhand. These Palas reframe him not as a distant rebel but as a **living ancestral force**, a spiritual and political icon. His story becomes a **symbolic resistance** to both colonial and contemporary injustice. The ritualistic and martial elements of Chaumask use, madol (drum) rhythms, and acrobatic dancebecome **aesthetic expressions of protest**. The **dancing body** encodes subaltern histories, challenges erasure, and offers **counter-narratives** to mainstream cultural discourse.

The oral texts and embodied stories in Chauincluding the retelling of Birsa Munda's legacy—contribute richly to **global literature and mythology studies** by asserting **subaltern narratives** into the mainstream. As **Gayatri Spivak** posits in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), dominant historiographies often silence marginal voices. Chau dance challenges this by re-encoding myth and history through movement, voice, rhythm, and communal memory.

In this context, **Birsa becomes both myth and memory**, a living archive of resistance akin to legendary figures in global mythology (e.g., Prometheus, Heracles, or Moses). This transforms Chau into a **non-canonical epic tradition**, akin to Homeric oral tradition or African griot storytelling.

The integration of dance as literature (akin to Morrison's *Beloved* or Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*) exemplifies ways in which embodied storytelling preserves collective trauma and aspiration, making the study globally relevant.

Crucially, this cultural discourse is not static. The inclusion of **female performers** such as **Shilpa Mahato**, **Sunita Mahato**, and **Kusum Soren**, marks a shift in authorship and visibility. Their choreographies not only reinterpret traditional tales but **infuse Chau with themes of gender justice, land alienation, and indigenous pride**. These women resist both **patriarchal norms and institutional gatekeeping**, offering a **counter-narrative to the masculinist, caste-dominant cultural paradigm**. Yet their work remains precariousundervalued in urban-centric policy frameworks and dependent on **inconsistent funding** and **folk-festival tokenism**.Thus, Chau dance today is not only **aesthetic performance** but **political practice**—a site where **movement becomes meaning**, and memory becomes a **form of resistance** against silencing.

"Without rasa, there is no art," states the *Natyashastra*—a foundational truth that finds renewed expression in Chau, where **narrative, movement, and emotion converge** to reflect the **lived experiences of subaltern communities**. Although composed between 2000 BCE and the 4th century CE, the *Natyashastra*'s principles of **bhava (emotion)** and **rasa (aesthetic essence)** remain embedded in the performative grammar of Chau. The stylized gestures (*mudras*), symbolic masks, and dynamic rhythm create a **multi-sensory engagement** that moves beyond entertainment into **social communication**.

Chau's evolution across centuries marks it as both **continuity and rupture**rooted in Sanskritic tradition but shaped profoundly by **oral, tribal, and non-Brahmanical epistemologies**. During the medieval period, while courtly arts flourished, **folk dramaturgy remained the voice of the people**, eventually solidifying in the 15th and 16th centuries as a dominant form of narrative performance in eastern India. As **Ananda Lal** argues, "Indian folk theatre is not a degenerated form of classical drama but an alternative tradition with its own aesthetic integrity" (Lal 98).

This aesthetic finds new ground in Chau, especially with the inclusion of contemporary themes, **displacement, ecological degradation, gender-based violence, and land alienation**—interpreted through **dance-as-resistance**. The emotional range in Chau, heightened by **kinesthetic empathy**, allows spectators to feel, not just see, the **realities of subaltern lives**.

Chau dance in **Purulia (West Bengal)**, **Mayurbhanj (Odisha)**, and **Saraikela (Jharkhand)** demonstrates a vibrant syncretism of **martial movement, stylized gestures, and mythic storytelling**. Its repertoire frequently draws from pan-Indian epics such as the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and *Devi Mahatmya*, yet these performances transcend mere religious retellings. In Chau, the stories of **Shiva's Tandava**, **Arjuna's battle scenes**, or **Durga's slaying of Mahishasura** become not only metaphysical or religious expressions but also **social allegories**, **vehicles for regional memory**, and acts of **subaltern reclamation**.

As **Ranajit Guha** suggests in *Subaltern Studies*, "folk traditions reflect the consciousness of those excluded from elite historiography" (Guha, 1982). Chau dancers, primarily from marginalized communities like the **Mahato, Kurmi, Bhumij, and Santhal**, reinterpret these mythic structures not just to affirm religious devotion but to express **regional identity**, **community resilience**, and **performative protest**. In this way, Chau becomes a **non-textual archive**, a living history where myth functions as metaphor for ongoing realities of oppression, survival, and spiritual endurance.

Rustom Bharucha's insight that "performance is a practice of remembering" (1993, p. 90) provides a crucial framework for analyzing Chau. Bharucha views traditional performance not as passive preservation of the past but as an **active re-inscription of cultural memory**. In Chau, **the body is the script**, and each movement becomes an act of historiography. This aligns with **Judith Butler's** claim that "the body is not merely matter but a continual and incessant materializing of possibilities" (Butler, 1993). Within this context, Chau's codified battle steps, ritual masks, and bodily discipline function as **vehicles of historical consciousness** in communities whose histories are otherwise **underrepresented or erased** from national archives.

A notable example is the Shiva Tandava performance. This tale, derived from the *Shiva Purana*, *Linga Purana*, and *Markandeya Purana*depicts Shiva's cosmic dance of destruction following the insult and death of Sati, his consort. In Chau, this is dramatized with acrobatic leaps, forceful stomps, and wide-mouthed, bulging-eyed masks, often featuring the third eye and matted locks of Shiva. The performance physically manifests cosmic equilibrium, suggesting that **destruction paves the way for regeneration**, a metaphor not lost on communities grappling with social erasure and displacement. As one Chau performer remarked during a field interview, "When I dance Shiva's Tandava, I am not only a god—I am my father's grief, my mother's silence, and my people's anger" (Mahato, 2024).

Chau thus functions within an **aesthetic system of rasa (emotive flavor)** and **bhava (expressed emotion)** as outlined in the *Natyashastra*, yet it transforms these classical paradigms through its **folk logic**. While *Natyashastra* discusses **katha (storytelling)** as central to drama, Chau reworks this principle through a **kinetic language**, favoring**bodily communication over verbal dialogue**. As **Ananda Lal** notes, "Folk theatre like Chau uses movement and rhythm to tell stories the text does not always permit" (Lal, 2004, p. 215).

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper not only contributes to the **mythopoetic reimagination of tribal history** through Chau, but bring into line through multiple foundational pillars. It promotes **Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS)** by foregrounding Chau tribal performance tradition deeply embedded in oral mythology and indigenous epistemology (Lal, 2004; Chatterjee, 2019). Emphasizing **multilingual and cultural education**, it gives space to Bhumij, Santhal, and Mahato voices. As **art-integrated learning**, Chau fosters experiential, embodied education across history and literature. Through the portrayal of Birsa Munda, the dance form nurtures **value-based and constitutional learning**, emphasizing justice and equity. Finally, by glorifying oral storytelling and performance, it enables **critical thinking** and **decolonial pedagogy**, reimagining curriculum and educational delivery.Therefore, Chau dance is more than a folkloric performance, it is an embodied historiography, a decolonial narrative strategy, and a repository of collective memory. It enables subaltern communities to perform their silenced truths, inscribe their cosmologies, and resist cultural hegemony. The divine becomes political, and mythology becomes a language of survival, articulated through sweat, breath, drum, and silence.

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