Breaking barriers: How Purulia Chhau artistes came together to reimagine Tagore for our times

Chhau, Tagore and free thinking in the age of algorithms – by Arundhati Chakravarty

Tasher Desh performance by Purulia Chhau artistes. Photo courtesy Sagar Kuiry

Are we slaves to a system that controls our lives? Are our choices dictated by artificial intelligence? How can we break free and think independently? These are some of the issues that came to mind when a group of 17-odd artistes in Purulia presented a dance drama in the idiom of Chhau.

Penned close to a century ago, **Rabindranath Tagore**'s musical drama **Tasher Desh** (Kingdom of Cards) may be an uncomplicated take on the freedom of thought, but it resonates deeply with

the challenges of our times. However, Chhau and Tagore – two eminences in the cultural landscape of Bengal – rarely share a stage. So the artistes were on uncharted territory when they decided to present their unique rendition of Tasher Desh.

The signature jumps and somersaults, flamboyant masks and dholak and dhamsa beats of **Purulia Chhau** – usually used to depict stories of battle and heroism – now told the story of the liberation of the card kingdom from its rules-bound existence.

“In the current geopolitical scenario – be it in West Bengal or India or other countries – regimes are getting stronger. Tasher Desh talks about liberating your mind from a particular regime or system. Moreover, we are slaves of our gadgets, controlled by artificial intelligence and algorithms. Tasher Desh is all about thinking independently,” said author and journalist Suvam Pal, one of the three key persons behind the project.

China and Chhau

Sometimes, inspiration comes from the unlikeliest of sources. Like a cross-border connection that brought together Chhau and Tagore.

Pal said he hit upon the idea while working in China. “I saw how China promoted Peking opera, Sichuan opera and Tibetan Cham dance. These are forms of masked dance and theatre. Chhau is also a masked dance, but it has many more elements like acrobatic movements, unique musical instruments and a style of narration. The mask itself is an art. India’s representation of performing arts abroad has been limited. It struck me that Chhau has a wide appeal and should be showcased better,” he told the writer over phone.

He envisaged the project as an attempt to bring Chhau – a dance form with folk and martial elements mainly prevalent in eastern India – into the mainstream of Indian cultural

discourse and empower the artistes.

But why Tasher Desh? “I had hosted a Rabindra Jayanti event last year, in which Chhau dancers performed to a Tagore song. One China-born scholar who had studied Tagore’s drama suggested a staging of Tasher Desh with Chhau dancers. That got me thinking,” Pal, who has had a long association with Santiniketan, explained.

Tasher Desh was written as an exhortation to break the shackles of regimentation and celebrate the power of creativity, and the Chhau artistes did just that through their unique adaptation. Curiously, just as the initiative was sparked by a foreign connection, in Tagore’s drama, too, it is the ‘bideshi’ (foreigners) who brought about the air of change in the kingdom of cards.

Chhau is a UNESCO-listed Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, Pal pointed out. “Unfortunately, it is largely limited to Purulia district, with little innovation in thematic content. On the other hand, the study of Tagore is often confined to a group of puritanical scholars. So we decided to break the mould by blending Tagore’s theatre and Chhau. One should not be confined to any particular regime or diktat or system.”

Tagore and Chhau

Pal teamed up with Dr Naba Gopal Roy and Dr Sudip Bhui, faculty members of Purulia’s Sidho Kanho Birsha University, which incidentally is the only university that teaches Chhau, to work on the project. The effort, however, came with its fair share of challenges, the foremost being the amalgamation of the distinctive elements of Chhau with Tagore’s drama.

“I come from a family of Chhau artistes. We usually depict stories from the epics and Puranas. I enjoyed playing a new role in Tasher Desh. It called for a new kind of thinking and performing,” said Karna Karmakar, who played the role of the

prince.

Rabindranath Kumar, another member of the troupe, agreed, “Departing from our traditional repertoire of mythological stories was an entirely different experience.”

Workshops and training sessions were held for the dancers, who had limited expertise in theatre and were used to dancing to drumbeats and not dialogues.

Dr Bhui oversaw the elements of Chhau in the production while Dr Roy oversaw the nuances of staging a Tagore play. Keeping its intent and character intact, the play was shortened to suit the Chhau convention of short depictions of twenty-odd minutes. A single narrator delivered all the dialogues in keeping with the Chhau convention.

Tagore’s songs were unchanged. They were sung by local **Jhumur** and **Tushu** singers. Musical instruments like dhamsa, shanai and dholok added to the local flavour. The masks were specially designed by the mask-makers of **Charida** village in Baghmundi block.

The month and a half of preparation was fraught with tension, recalled Bhui, as Chhau season had begun in Purulia and the artistes had a busy schedule. “Getting hold of the main artiste was itself a huge challenge. We had to wait outside his house and threaten that we wouldn’t leave without him. Some artistes went without food the whole day because they were too busy practising.”

Chhau season starts in April, along with the Charak festival, and continues into June, with shows lined up every night. The troupes travel across towns and villages, depicting episodes from the Puranas, Ramayana and Mahabharata and local folklore.

The shows follow a pattern of sorts. Around 10 pm two ensembles arrive in the village and proceed to the venue, a flat open ground called akhada where the spectators settle

down in a circle. After refreshments and some rest, an ‘akhada bandana’ marks the beginning of the festivities. The group that arrived in the village first takes the stage as the dhol, shehnai and dhamsa reverberate along with cheers from the audience. Ganesha strides in, followed by other gods and demons and the mythical stories of love, valour and revenge unfold. The two groups take turns on the stage and the show continues till early morning.

The season accounts for bulk of the artistes’ annual earnings. After a pandemic-induced lull of two years, programmes picked up again this year and the artistes had their hands full. So did the residents of Charida, where hundreds of families make the large and vibrant masks, the most characteristic feature of Purulia Chhau. The clay and paper masks are painted and embellished with tinsel, jute and zari. The process can take up to a week, and the larger masks weigh up to 7 kilos. Each dancer’s mask is unique, made according to the face measurements. Some of the masks are used for performances, while others are sold as souvenirs and artwork.

The masks of Charida received the GI tag in 2018. The village also hosts a statue of Gambhir Singh Mura, a Purulia Chhau exponent from a nearby village who was awarded the Padma Shri in 1981.

Exposure and empowerment

The Tasher Desh team. Photo courtesy Sagar Kuiry.

Encouraged by the response to performances of Tasher Desh in Kolkata and **Santiniketan** last month, the team is making efforts to organize shows in other parts of West Bengal, Delhi and Mumbai and abroad. With exposure comes empowerment, and that is what Pal and his team hope will ensure the survival and evolution of this regional art form.

“I have been involved in initiatives to build social awareness through Chhau. These have boosted our confidence. We would love to innovate more if we get better opportunities and funding,” said Bhui.

Purulia Chhau is a vibrant living tradition at the grassroots, but it did not go through the process of regeneration to the extent that the two other **gharanas** of Chhau – Saraikela and Mayurbhanj – did. Royal patronage and government support helped Saraikela and Mayurbhanj Chhau adapt faster to changing audiences and tastes, while the Purulia variation retained most of its traditional formats and themes and remained inextricably linked with the local community.

“Lack of royal involvement and political empowerment are

factors behind the under-representation of Purulia Chhau at the national level," summed up Bhui.

Most of the performers are not full-time artistes but engaged in other professions for most of the year. "We earn from shows during Chhau season, but it is hardly commensurate with the effort we put in," said Karmakar, who works as an ironsmith.

Despite the meagre returns, Chhau is an integral part of Karmakar's life. He learnt the art from his father, who learnt it from his father.

Purulia is a land of contrasts, with abundant natural beauty and considerable mineral resources on one hand and rough weather and soil on the other. Given its rich cultural heritage, tourism is a backbone of the local economy. The pandemic dealt a body blow to the sector, affecting not just the Chhau performers and their families but also those who earn their livelihood making the masks and costumes.

"I saw the economic hardship there after the lockdowns. So I wanted to promote Chhau to empower the artistes. They are reluctant to accept donations or charity, but they accept honorariums for performing," Pal said.

Karmakar's troupe had a packed schedule again this year, and he is thankful for that. "Covid made things very difficult for us financially. Shows have picked up this year. We look forward to better opportunities," he said.