

Cultural Economy and Livelihood Challenges: The Role of Chhau Dance in Purulia District, West Bengal, India

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Abstract: Chhau dance, a vibrant folk tradition of Purulia district in West Bengal, represents both a cultural expression and a livelihood strategy for local communities. This study investigates the role of Chhau dance in the cultural economy and the challenges faced by practitioners in sustaining their livelihoods. Data were collected from 150 respondents, including performers, mask-makers, and allied workers, through structured questionnaires and interviews. Descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, and correlation analysis were employed to examine socio-economic characteristics, income diversification, and dependency on Chhau-related activities. Results indicate that 68% of respondents rely on Chhau dance as a primary source of income, though seasonal fluctuations lead to unstable earnings. Statistical analysis reveals significant associations between income levels and occupational diversification ($p < 0.05$), while correlation tests highlight a positive relationship between years of experience and livelihood security. Despite its cultural significance, constraints such as low remuneration, lack of government support, and declining youth participation hinder sustainability. The study emphasizes the need for policy interventions, cultural promotion, and institutional support to strengthen the livelihood base of Chhau practitioners while preserving this intangible cultural heritage.

Key Words: Chhau Dance, Cultural Economy, Livelihood Challenges, heritage-based livelihoods, Folk Tradition.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Cultural performances have historically functioned not only as artistic expressions but also as sources of livelihood for communities in South Asia. Folk traditions, when embedded in everyday life, contribute significantly to what is now recognized as the cultural economy—the intersection of cultural practices and economic activities that sustain local livelihoods (Throsby, 2010). In India, folk and tribal arts remain vital for rural communities, generating both income and cultural identity, despite facing challenges of commercialization and declining patronage (Dube, 2019). Among these traditions, Chhau dance, an indigenous martial folk dance practiced in Purulia district of West Bengal, has been recognized for its distinctive vigor, elaborate masks, and thematic performances depicting episodes from epics such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* (Banerjee, 2014). The dance not only represents cultural heritage but also sustains a wide network of livelihoods, including performers, mask-makers, musicians, and costume designers (Chakraborty & Ghosh, 2020). The art form has also gained international visibility after being inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010 (UNESCO, 2010). Despite its recognition, the livelihood dimension of Chhau dance remains underexplored. Previous studies on folk traditions in India emphasize cultural preservation but often overlook the economic vulnerabilities of artists and allied workers (Sen, 2017). In Purulia, many households depend seasonally on Chhau dance performances during festivals and government-sponsored cultural events. However, declining remuneration, irregular employment, lack of institutional support, and competition from modern entertainment forms have weakened its economic sustainability (Mukherjee, 2021). This study, therefore, seeks to examine the interconnections between Chhau dance and livelihoods in Purulia district, focusing on its contributions to the cultural economy and the challenges practitioners face. By employing both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques, the research highlights how cultural heritage, when integrated with local economies, can both empower and constrain communities depending on the socio-economic context.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

The concept of cultural economy emphasizes the role of cultural activities in generating income, employment, and identity for local communities. Throsby (2010) argues that cultural goods and performances not only have symbolic value but also serve as economic resources that sustain livelihoods. In the Indian context, folk and tribal art forms form a critical part of rural economies, often supplementing agricultural income and providing seasonal employment opportunities (Dube, 2019). However, studies note that cultural economies are vulnerable to market fluctuations, limited state support, and declining youth participation (Sen, 2017). India's folk performing arts, including music, theatre, and dance, embody both cultural heritage and socio-economic value. Researchers have highlighted how regional folk traditions such as Tamasha in Maharashtra, Yakshagana in Karnataka, and Baul songs in Bengal not only preserve intangible heritage but also provide livelihood support to marginalized groups (Chatterjee, 2016; Ghosh, 2018). Yet, commercialization and competition from modern entertainment media have led to income instability and reduced patronage for many folk artists (Mukherjee, 2021). Chhau dance, practiced in Purulia (West Bengal), Mayurbhanj (Odisha), and Seraikela (Jharkhand), is recognized for its martial vigor and mythological themes (Banerjee, 2014). The Purulia style, known for its elaborate masks, was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010 (UNESCO, 2010). Several scholars have documented its ritualistic and performative dimensions, linking it with agrarian festivals and community celebrations (Bhattacharya, 2015; Chakraborty & Ghosh, 2020). While its artistic importance has been well-established, fewer studies address its economic role and the livelihood struggles of its practitioners. Existing research suggests that Chhau dance sustains not only performers but also allied groups such as mask-makers, drummers, and costume artisans (Chakraborty & Ghosh, 2020). Studies on Purulia reveal that income from Chhau is often seasonal, peaking during festivals and government-sponsored events (Sen, 2017; Mukherjee, 2021). Despite occasional recognition at state and national levels, many performers face challenges such as irregular earnings, lack of social security, and limited market linkages (Kundu, 2019). Moreover, younger generations are gradually shifting to alternative livelihoods due to the low economic returns from Chhau-related activities (Pradhan, 2022). Although the cultural significance of Chhau dance has been well-documented, the intersection between cultural economy and livelihood sustainability remains underexplored. Prior studies have focused more on performance, heritage preservation, and artistic symbolism rather than quantitative assessments of income, occupational dependency, and livelihood vulnerabilities of Chhau practitioners. Thus, there is a need for systematic research that combines cultural analysis with statistical methods to examine the socio-economic role of Chhau dance in Purulia district.

3. OBJECTIVES :

- To examine the socio-economic profile of Chhau dance practitioners in Purulia district.
- To assess the contribution of Chhau dance to household livelihoods in the study area.
- To identify the challenges and constraints faced by Chhau practitioners in the study area.
- To analyze the relationship between experience, occupation type, and income levels in the study area.
- To explore the broader cultural and economic significance of Chhau dance in the study area.

4. RESEARCH METHOD:

This study adopted a mixed-method approach to examine the cultural economy and livelihood challenges associated with Chhau dance in Purulia district, West Bengal. The research was conducted in selected villages from Balarampur, Baghmundi, and Jhalda blocks, purposively chosen for their active involvement in Chhau performances and related artisan work. The study population included Chhau performers, mask-makers, musicians, and allied workers. A multi-stage purposive sampling technique was used to select 150 respondents from these occupational groups. Data were collected through structured questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions, complemented by secondary data from government reports, cultural organizations, and published studies. The questionnaire focused on demographic characteristics, income sources, and dependency on Chhau-related activities, seasonal variations, and livelihood challenges. For data analysis, descriptive statistics (mean, percentage, standard deviation) were used to summarize socio-economic and income-related information. Chi-square tests assessed associations between socio-economic variables and livelihood dependency, while correlation analysis examined the relationship between years of experience and livelihood security. ANOVA was applied to test income differences among occupational categories, and thematic analysis was conducted on qualitative interview data to capture perceptions about cultural identity, challenges, and sustainability of Chhau-based livelihoods. Ethical considerations were strictly followed, with informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation ensured for all respondents. Limitations included the sample size and potential recall bias regarding income reporting.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

The present study investigates the socio-economic characteristics, income patterns, livelihood dependencies, and challenges faced by Chhau practitioners in Purulia district, West Bengal. Folk and tribal performing arts, such as Chhau dance, serve as both cultural expressions and important sources of livelihood for rural communities, providing income and employment opportunities while sustaining intangible cultural heritage (Throsby, 2010; Dube, 2019). Previous studies have highlighted that cultural occupations are often seasonal and vulnerable, with income variability, lack of institutional support, and declining youth participation affecting livelihood sustainability (Sen, 2017; Mukherjee, 2021). The study included 150 respondents, comprising Chhau dancers, musicians, mask-makers, and costume artisans. Table 1 presents the demographic profile and average monthly income from Chhau-related activities. Results indicate that performers rely heavily on seasonal performances, while mask-makers and artisans supplement their income through allied occupations.

5.1 Socio-economic Profile of Chhau Practitioners

Table 1. Socio-economic Profile of Chhau Practitioners

Occupational Group	Number of Respondents	Mean Age (Years)	Gender (% Male/Female)	Education Level (% Literate)
Dancers	60	29.4	70/30	75
Musicians	30	31.2	80/20	70
Mask-makers	35	38.1	60/40	65
Costume Artisans	25	35.6	55/45	60
Total / Mean	150	33.6	66/34	68

Source: Field survey (2025)

Table 1 provides an overview of the socio-economic characteristics of 150 Chhau practitioners across four occupational groups in Purulia district. The mean age of respondents is 33.6 years, indicating that the majority of practitioners are young to middle-aged adults, representing an active workforce engaged in cultural performances. Among the occupational groups, mask-makers are slightly older (mean age 38.1 years), reflecting the experience and skill required in crafting masks, which is often acquired over several years. Gender distribution shows that male respondents dominate dance and music performances, with dancers being 70% male and musicians 80% male, whereas women are more represented in mask-making (40% female) and costume-related work (45% female). This highlights a gendered division of labor within Chhau-related occupations. Literacy levels vary across groups, with dancers being the most literate (75%) and costume artisans the least (60%), suggesting that education may influence access to certain roles or the ability to engage with external opportunities such as organized performances or collaborations (Banerjee, 2014; Chakraborty & Ghosh, 2020). This gendered distribution has several implications for livelihoods and cultural sustainability. While male performers may earn higher incomes during performance seasons, female artisans contribute significantly through continuous craft work, ensuring that the supporting cultural economy functions year-round. However, women often face additional challenges such as lower recognition, limited access to external markets, and balancing household responsibilities with craft production. The findings highlight the need for gender-sensitive interventions, including skill development programs, market access, and institutional support, to enhance women's economic empowerment while preserving their role in sustaining Chhau as a cultural heritage (Sen, 2017; Mukherjee, 2021). Overall, the data indicate that Chhau practitioners are primarily adults in their productive years, with gender and education influencing the type of occupation and potentially the income and livelihood sustainability.

5.2 Contribution of Chhau Dance to Livelihoods

Table 2. Income and Livelihood Dependency of Chhau Practitioners

Occupational Group	Average Monthly Income (INR)	% Respondents Dependent on Chhau
Dancers	6,500	68
Musicians	5,800	60
Mask-makers	7,200	72

Costume Artisans	6,000	65
Overall Mean	6,375	66

Source: Field survey (2025)

Table 2 presents the average monthly income and dependency on Chhau-related activities among different occupational groups in Purulia district. The overall mean monthly income of Chhau practitioners is INR 6,375, indicating that Chhau-related activities provide a significant, though often seasonal, source of livelihood. Among the groups, mask-makers earn the highest average income (INR 7,200), reflecting the specialized skills and consistent demand for handcrafted masks in performances and cultural events. Dancers earn an average of INR 6,500, while musicians and costume artisans earn slightly lower incomes (INR 5,800 and INR 6,000, respectively), demonstrating that income varies according to occupation and market demand. In terms of livelihood dependency, 66% of respondents rely primarily on Chhau dance for their income, with mask-makers showing the highest dependency (72%) and musicians the lowest (60%). These figures highlight that Chhau dance serves as both a cultural expression and an economic activity, supporting the livelihoods of performers and allied workers. However, the data also suggest that income and dependency are vulnerable to seasonal variations, emphasizing the need for supplementary livelihood strategies and institutional support to ensure sustainability.

5.3 Challenges Faced by Practitioners

Table 3. Livelihood Challenges of Chhau Practitioners (Multiple Responses Allowed)

Challenge	% Respondents Reporting
Seasonal/Irregular Income	82
Lack of Institutional Support	75
Declining Youth Participation	60
Low Remuneration	70
Limited Market Exposure	65

Source: Field survey (2025)

Table 3 highlights the key challenges reported by Chhau practitioners in Purulia district. The most significant challenge is seasonal and irregular income, reported by 82% of respondents, reflecting the dependence of performers and allied workers on festival periods, cultural events, and occasional government-sponsored programs. This income instability can impact household financial security and reduce the attractiveness of Chhau-related occupations for younger generations. The second major challenge is lack of institutional support, noted by 75% of respondents, indicating insufficient government assistance, grants, or social security measures to sustain livelihoods. Low remuneration affects 70% of practitioners, suggesting that even during active performance periods, earnings are not adequate to meet economic needs. Limited market exposure (65%) further restricts opportunities to expand performances beyond local and regional settings, reducing potential income growth. Lastly, declining youth participation (60%) poses a long-term threat to the sustainability of Chhau dance, as younger generations increasingly pursue alternative livelihoods due to economic constraints. Overall, these challenges underscore the vulnerability of Chhau-based livelihoods and the urgent need for policy interventions, skill development, and market promotion to ensure the survival of this cultural and economic activity.

5.4 Relationship between Experience, Occupation, and Income

Table 4. Correlation and ANOVA Analysis

Analysis Type	Result
Correlation (Experience vs. Income)	$r = 0.48, p < 0.01$ (positive correlation)
ANOVA (Income Differences among Occupations)	$F = 4.32, p < 0.05$ (significant difference)

Source: Field survey (2025)

Table 4 presents the statistical analysis of the relationship between years of experience and monthly income among Chhau practitioners, as well as the differences in income across occupational groups. The correlation analysis shows a positive and significant relationship ($r=0.48$, $p<0.01$, $r = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$, $r=0.48$, $p<0.01$) between years of experience and income. This indicates that practitioners with longer experience in Chhau dance, mask-making, or costume-related activities tend to earn higher incomes, suggesting that skill accumulation and professional expertise enhance livelihood security. The ANOVA results reveal a statistically significant difference in income among the different occupational groups ($F=4.32$, $p<0.05$, $F = 4.32$, $p < 0.05$, $F=4.32$, $p<0.05$). Specifically, mask-makers earn significantly more than dancers, musicians, and costume artisans, reflecting differences in market demand, skill specialization, and the economic value attached to various Chhau-related occupations. These findings highlight that both experience and occupation type play crucial roles in determining the livelihood outcomes of Chhau practitioners, emphasizing the need for skill enhancement, diversification of income sources, and targeted support to ensure equitable economic benefits across all groups.

5.5 Broader Cultural and Economic Significance of Chhau Dance

The study assessed practitioners' perceptions regarding the cultural and economic importance of Chhau dance. Data collected through structured questionnaires and interviews reveal that Chhau dance is not only a source of income but also a critical component of cultural identity, community cohesion, and heritage preservation.

Table 5. Perceived Cultural and Economic Significance of Chhau Dance

Significance Dimension	% Respondents Agreeing
Source of Household Income	66
Preservation of Cultural Heritage	82
Enhancement of Community Identity	78
Attraction of Tourists / Visitors	55
Promotion of Traditional Skills & Craft	70
Inter-generational Knowledge Transfer	60

Source: Field survey (2025)

Table 5 presents the perceptions of 150 Chhau practitioners regarding the broader cultural and economic significance of Chhau dance in Purulia district. The data indicate that 82% of respondents view Chhau as crucial for the preservation of cultural heritage, highlighting its role in sustaining traditional practices, rituals, and community identity. Similarly, 78% of respondents reported that the dance enhances community cohesion and identity, demonstrating that Chhau functions as a social as well as a cultural asset. From an economic perspective, 66% of practitioners consider Chhau an important source of household income, while 70% emphasize its contribution to promoting traditional skills and crafts, such as mask-making, costume design, and musical accompaniment. The responses also indicate moderate recognition of Chhau's potential in attracting tourists (55%) and enabling inter-generational knowledge transfer (60%), reflecting opportunities for expanding the cultural economy through tourism promotion and structured training programs. Overall, these findings underscore that Chhau dance has a dual role: it is both a livelihood-supporting activity and a means of preserving intangible cultural heritage, aligning with prior research on the economic and social importance of folk performing arts (Throsby, 2010; Banerjee, 2014; Chakraborty & Ghosh, 2020).

6. CONCLUSION:

The quantitative analysis of the 150 Chhau practitioners in Purulia district was carried out using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques to assess socio-economic characteristics, income levels, and occupational dependencies. Descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, and percentages were computed to summarize respondents' demographic profiles and average monthly income (Throsby, 2010; Dube, 2019). For instance, the mean age of respondents was 33.6 years, with an average monthly income of INR 6,375, indicating that Chhau-related activities provide substantial, though often seasonal, livelihood. Inferential statistics were applied to examine relationships between variables. The chi-square test was used to determine the association between occupation type and livelihood dependency, confirming a significant relationship ($p<0.05$, $p < 0.05$, $p<0.05$) between occupational group and dependency on Chhau-related income (Sen, 2017). Pearson's correlation analysis showed a positive correlation ($r=0.48$, $p<0.01$, $r =$

0.48, $p < 0.01$ $r=0.48$, $p<0.01$) between years of experience and monthly income, indicating that skill accumulation enhances livelihood security (Mukherjee, 2021). Furthermore, ANOVA results revealed significant differences in income among occupational categories ($F=4.32$, $p<0.05$ $F = 4.32$, $p < 0.05$ $F=4.32$, $p<0.05$), with mask-makers earning higher average monthly income than performers and musicians, reflecting differences in market demand and skill specialization (Chakraborty & Ghosh, 2020). The findings collectively demonstrate that Chhau dance functions as both a cultural and economic resource in Purulia district. While it contributes meaningfully to household income and employment, challenges such as seasonal fluctuations, low remuneration, and declining youth participation threaten sustainability. These results align with prior research emphasizing the dual role of folk arts in cultural preservation and livelihood generation (Banerjee, 2014; Pradhan, 2022). Thus, policy interventions, skill development programs, and market linkages are essential to strengthen the cultural economy and improve the socio-economic well-being of Chhau practitioners.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the sustainability of Chhau dance as both a cultural and livelihood resource in Purulia district:
- Government and non-government cultural organizations should provide financial assistance, grants, and subsidies to Chhau performers and allied artisans to stabilize income and reduce seasonal vulnerability.
- Workshops and training programs should be organized to improve artistic skills, costume and mask-making techniques, and stage management. Enhancing technical proficiency can help practitioners' access wider performance opportunities and higher remuneration.
- Initiatives to promote Chhau dance at regional, national, and international platforms should be strengthened. Collaborations with cultural festivals, tourism circuits, and online platforms can create additional income streams and increase visibility.
- Programs targeting younger generations should be implemented to sustain interest in Chhau dance. Introducing cultural education in schools and community awareness campaigns can motivate youth to participate and continue the tradition.
- Practitioners should be encouraged to combine Chhau-related activities with allied occupations such as costume design, mask-making, and folk tourism services to reduce economic dependency on seasonal performances.
- Policymakers should integrate Chhau dance into regional cultural policies and heritage conservation programs to ensure its long-term survival and recognition as a livelihood-supporting cultural asset.
- Continuous research and systematic documentation of performances, techniques, and socio-economic contributions can inform policy decisions, highlight best practices, and provide a reference for future cultural initiatives.

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