



# NACHNI: THE OUTCAST ENTERTAINERS, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO POSTOBALA DEVI KARMAKAR

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## ABSTRACT

West Bengal is the store house of many rich cultures and traditions. Purulia is famous for two unique art forms, Chhau Nach and Nachni Nach. Chhau Nach originates in the Purulia district in West Bengal and draws inspiration from martial arts and combative training. This form of dance is a means to portray stories to the audience, which is why elaborate masks and headgear associated with battle and war are worn during the performance. The story itself revolves around the two great epics of Indian Mythology – Ramayana and Mahabharata. Women are the practitioners of Nachni Nach. 'The Nachnis are the marginalized socially excluded second sex. Society approves the life of the Nachnis as sub women. They belong to lower socio-economic status. Economic and various social forces push the Nachnis to be marginalized in the social system. This marginalized community is gradually endangered as people now-a-days people are not much interested in Nachni Nach.' But presently Nachni Nach is on the verge of decline. It is losing its popularity day by day. The Nachni dancers generally dance on Jhumur songs. The men who sing the songs are called 'rasik'. The Nachnis are not generally married. It is because most of them are generally sold in their childhoods. They have to live their lives with their rasiks. They have to live the life of outcasts for being great entertainers of the society. They are unable to lead a daily healthy life. They have to engage in other professions outside of Nachni nach. This is the reason that most Nachni dancers are multi-professionals. But, whatever may be the obstacles, they are trying their best to preserve Nachni Nach.

**KEYWORDS-** Nachni, Nach, Culture, Outcasts, Entertainers.

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## INTRODUCTION

'The Nachnis are the marginalized socially excluded second sex. Society approves the life of the Nachnis as sub women. They belong to lower socio-economic status. Economic and various social forces push the Nachnis to be marginalized in the social system. This marginalized community is gradually endangered as people now-a-days people are not much

interested in Nachni Nach.' They are considered outcasts, even though they are the greatest entertainers of the society. They are the source of entertainment. But, society is not ready to accept them. They are deprived of their basic human rights. They are not allowed to live inside a village as they are considered outcast. They are not given the opportunity to get elementary education. Their lower socio-economic status doesn't allow them to fulfill their daily needs. Still they are the preserver of one of the ancient dances of Purulia.

## AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this paper is to analyze the ancient practice Nachni Nach, one of the intangible heritages of Purulia. Through this research I want to unfold the socio-economic conditions of the Nachnis. The time of performance is also important as it will tell something about their social condition. I want to know the reasons behind considering the Nachni artists outcasts. My aim



is to make people aware about the Nachnis and their beliefs. Recognition is necessary for preservation. I want to keep this ancient dance form alive for our coming generations. I also want to talk about the future of Nachni Nach and the reasons behind its celebration in Purulia district in particular.

### **SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

- a) To explore the socio-economic conditions of the Nachnis in Purulia District.
- b) To find out the reasons behind considering the Nachni artists outcasts.
- c) To make people aware about the Nachnis.
- d) To seek the reasons for the celebration of Nachni Nach in Purulia.
- e) To know something about the future of Nachni Nach.

### **METHODOLOGY**

In preparing this paper I have taken the help of a few research papers, short essays and articles related to Nachni Nach and the culture of Purulia. I collected essays and articles from various sources. In order to get authentic information about the art Nachni, I contacted Postobala Devi Karmakar, one of the prominent Nachni artists of Purulia. She suggested that one day I must visit Manbhum Lok Sanskriti and Nachni Unnayan Samity. Then I did go to Surulia, the place Manbhum Lok Sanskriti and Nachni Unnayan Samity was located to gather information about this art and the artists. There I met a few Nachni dancers including Postobala Devi Karmakar. I took the help of a questionnaire for the collection of the data. I prepared thirty questions related to their socio-economic condition, the reason behind considering them outcasts, the future of Nachni etc. Basic questions were asked to extract their point of view. Finally, I analyzed the data.

### **ORIGIN OF NACHNI NACH**

Mahasweta Devi had written a lot about the origin of Nachni Nach in her article "Fundamental Human Rights for the Nautch Girls of Purulia." To quote her:

"Not a lot is known about the origin of the Nachni dance. According to Dipak Barpanda of 'Durbar', a leading sex workers organization, the custom of keeping dancing and singing girls can be traced to 12th Century Bengal. But today the Nachni dancers and the Jhumur singers are found mainly in Purulia."

"The origin of Nachni Dance can be traced to Ayodhya Prasad Singdeo of a small feudal estate of Baghmundi, and his descendants. After the Permanent Settlement — 1793 was enacted by Lord Cornwallis. Baghmundi was one of the many feudatory estates in Purulia."

"According to Subodh Basu Roy, a rare scholar and a Purulia based field-researcher, Nachni dance is an illogical outcome of the tradition of tribal folk-dancers. To the tribal people, dance and song are part of their life."

### **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

**Socio-economic condition of the Nachni artists:** Nachnis in Purulia generally come from the Dalit and tribal society. They are a deprived community both socially and economically. They are not generally married. They are not accepted by society. The Nachnis, in most of the times, become mothers through their rasiks. They have to live the life of abandonment, if they are deserted by their rasiks. Their income is very low, approximately 20000-40000 per year. It is not sufficient to fulfill their daily needs. This is the reason that they are multi-professionals. They are helped a little by the state government with the pension of RS-1000 per month. This is their only pillar of help in their old age. Even now they are considered outcasts and have to live outside of their villages. Most of the Nachni dancers start their dancing career at a very early age. Actually, it is poverty which led them to do so.

**Educational status of the Nachni artists:** None of the Nachni dancers takes their higher education. Most of them can't even write their name. They have been deprived of their elementary education. They don't get any opportunity to go to school. Their parents don't let them go to school. Many of them are sold in their childhood to their Rasiks. And their Rasiks don't let them go to school. Among all the Nachnis, Postobala Devi Karmakar was the one and only who could write and read her name. Education is enlightenment. So, their deprivation can be the result of their illiteracy. They would have questioned their poverty, if they were educated. We all know that knowledge is power. Power comes through knowledge and knowledge comes through education. So, if the Nachnis are to change their fortune, then they must promote higher education to their coming generations.

**Time of performance:** Nachni Nach is performed throughout the year. But, in spring and autumn the artists get most of their shows. Nachni Nach in Purulia is a part of people's celebration. People enjoy the dance in their free times. The seasons of spring and autumn are the seasons of festivals. And people are probably



free from their works of cultivation. This is the reason that in spring and autumn people enjoy Nachni Nach the most.

**The reasons behind considering the Nachnis outcasts:** According to the Nachni artists, traditional mindset can be one of the reasons behind considering them outcasts. People simply cannot come out of their traditional values and value the real art. People just take it as a form of entertainment, not as an art. People don't know that Nachni Nach is one of the ancient dance forms of India. It is a unique art form, not just a form of entertainment. But most of the people take it as a source of entertainment. This is the reason that they are unable to see the unique things in Nachni Nach. Postobala Devi opines that there is a purpose behind considering them outcasts. People enjoy their dance and love to see the Nachnis on the stage. But people hate them so that they are not imitated. If the dancers are liked by the society, then they may be imitated. But society doesn't want that. Society pretends to hate them so that they are not imitated.

**The reasons behind the celebration of Nachni Nach in Purulia:** Purulia is a neglected and poverty-stricken part of West Bengal. It continues to remain the target of the state government's cruel indifference. Nachni Nach is very popular in Purulia. It has developed its own history. Nachni Nach always depicted the hard realities of Purulia. The songs of the Nachnis were original and touched the heart of Purulians. So, it is one of the few things through which Purulians were entertained from very ancient times. This is the reason that even now Nachni Nach is very close to the heart of the Purulians. Though, it can be said that Westernization is trying its level best to change the entire scenario.

**Future of Nachni Nach:** There are various opinions on the future of Nachni Nach. Some dancers think that Nachni Nach is losing its popularity day by day. The young generation is not taking interest in Nachni Nach as now-a-days there are various sources of entertainment. Some think that its future is glorious. Government has taken initiatives to promote Nachni Nach. The dancers are less hated now. Society has probably accepted them. The fact is that society has to embrace them unconditionally. Otherwise, it can be that there will be no Nachnis in future. We will read about Nachni Nach in books only.

## POSTOBALA DEVI KARMAKAR AND HER ACHIEVEMENTS

'Pastubala devi Karmakar is a Nachni of 50 years of age. She lives at Purulia, near Deer Park. She can just read and write her name and belongs to Hindu

general caste. She has spent her childhood at Karmatari village at Purulia with her parents.'

She is one of the prominent Nachni dancers of Purulia. She is doing her best to preserve this most ancient dance form. This is the reason that she was awarded with Lalan Puraskar in 2018 for her great contribution to Indian dance. She is the present president of Manbhumi Lok Sanskriti and Nachni Unnayan Samity.

Her childhood was very traumatic. Her father died when she was a child. She had to get married at a very young age. She was not allowed to get her elementary education. She had to marry an aged person, though she was twelve at that time. She was accepted by the society as her mother was also a Nachni dancer. She was looked at with indignation even by her in-laws. She had a very unhappy married life. She was tricked to make a ligation operation. Even after the operation she was unaware of what had happened. Finally, she had to come to the world of Nachnis. Her master was Sarala Devi, a famous Nachni artist.

Finally, she eloped with her rasik Bijoy Karmakar. Both of them love each other very much. They got married and now live together in their new home in Surulia, near Deer Park. They have no children. Now Shilpi Vata is helping them very much.

Postobala Devi Karmakar is the winner of many prestigious awards including Lalan Puraskar. She was given Manush Somman Puraskar in Manush Mela in 2016. She was given an honorary award by R Plus News for her contribution in preserving Nachni Nach and Jhumor. Barsamangal Kobita Utsav Committee called Postobala Devi and accepted her great contribution in Indian dance. They also gave her an honorary award. She was invited on the famous TV show Didi No 1. But, perhaps, the greatest of her contributions is Lalan Puraskar which she received in the year 2018.

## CONCLUSION

The main objective of any research or survey is to get better knowledge. We must have knowledge about Nachni Nach as it is a part of the culture of Purulia. We learn a few new things about their lives. Most of the dancers came in this field to sustain themselves. It is very sad that none of them get any opportunity to get their elementary education. They all are socially deprived. They started their Nachni career to get rid of poverty, but eventually loved the dance. The steps used in Nachni Nach are not everybody's cup of tea as it takes more than two years to become a perfect Nachni artist. After their retirement they have to lead a miserable life. The irony is when they are not



entertainers, they are outcasts. But whatever may be those obstacles, they are very much passionate about their dance. They know that life means to be optimistic.

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