



Resilience Through Emancipatory Artforms: The Chhaliya Dancer Community

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Background



Across the country and other parts of the world, there are some traditional practices and customs followed by the people as per their belief system. India is the land of festivals. All these festivals originated from its native people and local folks to celebrate their beliefs. But after a while these practices become just ceremonial things for which particular groups of people are responsible for performing. This 2 month long study has been done with the Chhaliya community from Uttarakhand. Chhaliya Dance is the state symbol of cultural representation but the life of a Chhaliya Artist is not that easy. They are vulnerable to casteist exploitation, identity crisis and social boycotts or side lining from the mainstream communities and artforms. In this research I have tried to understand why people in this community are still performing the same practices though their social status is still considered to be low, which leads me to

question the motivations for them continuing this art form? I have also attempted to analyze the other social, economical and political reasons that influence the Chaliya community and their art form.

The Chaliya dance originated in the 10th century during the Katyuri and Chand Dynasties of Uttarakhand. This dance was performed to celebrate the victory of the king by the soldiers *according to my pilot study and conversation with community members*. The dance thus often depicts stories of wars won by the king with the form glorifying the king's victory through dance. Chaliya dancers use swords and spears and other war weapons to show their power and alpha masculine features. This dance started in the royal courtyards and later passed to the local people as a tradition that was performed during their rituals, traditional ceremonies, and social

gatherings. Later it became a symbol of pride, luxury, and status by having the performances of Chhaliya groups in marriages. To entertain the audience and guests, Chhaliya members started cross-dressing to substitute the absence of female characters and entertained the guests.

Today this particular dance belongs to the Chaliya community who is constituted by the Das caste who come under the SC marginalized community. Many Chhaliya dancers have been performing this dance for generations and they got the tag of Chhaliya. Today, due to the presence of social inequalities and marginalization attached to the lower castes, the Chhaliya community faces numerous stigmas and caste-based atrocities.

At present, people use Chhaliya as a derogatory term to abuse and defame the masculinity of a person who indulges in dance and singing, which is not acceptable according to the patriarchal norms of the community. It is also used to denote the particular lower caste community whose existence is not acceptable to the mainstream upper caste people.

However, some people continue in this tradition because they have been practicing it for generations. Some are also practicing it because they don't have any other livelihood option. Also, some are doing it because of their interest and liking. But in a broader frame, as is documented to be the case for several traditional art forms, many are forced to do this dance because of structural failures in terms of their education, health, livelihoods, housing, social-political liberties, etc., and finally of their perceptions of their agency.

Through my initial conversation with a few chaliya dancers, I have got a glance at the diversity of artists who are performing this dance. There seem to be a few dancers who are coming from totally different backgrounds: of power, class, caste, and gender and very enthusiastically willing to continue this dance. So interviews of these artists will also help understand the political economy and emancipatory aspects of the Chaliya dance.

Rationale

The rationale behind choosing this topic is primarily to understand the gender aspect in this dance form as in our country, mostly folk dances which are performed by local people during ceremonies are female orientated. I come from Madhya Pradesh, where Rai dance is performed by women, but almost all of these dancers are now indulged in prostitution. For which mainly two factors are responsible, first they belong to a lower caste community and other that they are women, which give them dual Marginality. So I was searching for the same things but what if these things are performed by men. How society reacts to the community, what is the social acceptance of male cross dresser person, How these people deal with the social and mental stigma and taboo, given by the society, and how they deal with the question raised on their Identity.

And apart from the gender the caste factor another prime aspect of this study this dance is traditionally performed by lower caste community only, but in my Pilot study I found that there is new generation of the dancers who are coming from the Upper Caste Brahmin Family and performing this dance, which also catch my attention to understand this factor in detail. Along with this, I am highly interested in traditional cultural artforms, though I have done Theater for a long time, I am very keen to explore such art forms especially folk art forms. And being a Development student I tried to connect the relationship between art and development. So what are the factors which are forcing these artist communities into marginalization is one of my major themes in this study. Along with what intervention by the government and civil society have been done for the betterment of the Chhaliya community, I wanted to understand through this research thus I chose this topic.

Significance of the study

This research can be useful to study the gender and caste aspects in the artforms, whereas it would be helpful for the community to get the literature upon them, so as an artist the community demanding some preference in policies can be addressed by this study.

Research questions

Given are the broad research questions I will try to address through this study:

1. What are the social and economic conditions of the dancers from the Chhaliya community?
 - a. What is the significance of caste in the lives of Chhaliya dancers?
 - b. What are some common perceptions about the Chhaliya dancers in the society?
 - c. Does crossdressing affect the identity of the male dancers in any way?
 - d. Are there any government support/schemes available to the dancers?

Methodology and challenges

Due to the Covid Pandemic this research carried out in the virtual mode whereas it was supposed to be done on field with the community. So there were some major changes we had made in the research methods.

I have done a qualitative study, with a semi structured interview questionnaire with 12 respondents. The questions tried to explore the major research questions related to the social, economic and political situation of the community. The detailed questionnaire is given in the annexure.

The data was analyzed through text analysis and major themes were identified.

It was difficult for me as well for the community to communicate over online platforms, my respondents were not familiar with the new communication applications. Also there is a huge technology gap and divide which was the main challenge for me. Along with it, I also faced some challenges related to the behavior of respondents which I would consider a communication gap due to the distance mode. It was a bit tough to convince the respondents for the research study. Also there were some misunderstandings coming from the respondents, which took more time to make them understand that I am just collecting the information from them and I am not an Official or Authority holder person. I contacted some first generation learners who were familiar with the online applications and able to access mobile and internet. Secondly, after time the respondents refused to give interviews and there was mismatching of timings so the coordination was not set up but somehow I convinced my respondents and took 12 interview views for the research.

Findings

I tried to cover all possible aspects which affect the life of the community in terms of social, economical, and political dimensions and my main focus was on the resilience of the artists and how they are using this artform as emancipation of their identity. After interacting with them I came across these major findings which are as follows:-

1. Social Backwardness

In all the interviews I have done all respondents informed me that as they belong to lower caste they have been isolated and side lined from the mainstream community. The traditional casteist hierarchy and practices have forced them on the edge of marginalization, poverty and illiteracy, by which they are bound to do it as their generational occupations, and due to the social and financial constraints they are forced to do the Chhaliya Dance. Mostly people from Das, Tamta, lohar, and Chhaliya communities come under it primarily in the region.

2. Poor Education

Most of the respondents are of the age of 18- 36, most of them were dropouts or not even completed their primary education, same as for the whole community and the other dancers as well dropouts or have very basic education.



3. Social status

As for the question of their social acceptance and identity, very commonly they answered that with the time and new platforms, their social acceptability has increased. As this dancer community belongs to a lower caste group the discrimination was also prevalent since the last few years, the community has behaved in a positive manner and appreciated their dance and performance.

4. Identity

The crossdressing dancers are still facing some major challenges and taboos which are associated with their identity but not all time. The place where they live and their surroundings, people respect them and have general behavior, which is the positive aspects for the dance form and the dancer community, because social media and government interventions are helpful to some extent.

5. Abuse and harassment

The Chhaliya dancers, especially the crossdressing persons, feel very unsafe while performing at night in rural areas, due to abuse by the organizers. The men of all ages try to abuse and molest them in public, which has been normalized in the community so no one takes them seriously, which affects the mental health of the Chhaliya dancers.

6. Positive Impact of Social Media

Because of the social media platforms, the new generation of the Chhaliya dancers has got very positive exposure in terms of their identity and social recognition. Most of the young Chhaliya dancers have their accounts on Youtube, Instagram, and Facebook where they are using it for the promotion of their performances, sharing their videos and other information related to their art. They are receiving very positive responses from the people and getting encouragement for performing it.

7. Positive Impact of Urbanisation

Every respondent admit the fact that they are the victims of caste based discrimination but also they mentioned the fact that in the Urban areas of Uttarakhand, people or the organizers behaves with them in very respectful manner, it is because they are in urban setup and open minded towards the class and caste factors , so they don't believe in such practice also give respect to the artists and their performances

8. Self Motivation

In the question of why are you still continuing this artform if you are facing the social taboos ? A respondent replied with “ Humko Dance Karna Bhot Pasand he” which indicated their heavy interest in the art form. Though there are some social and financial constraints which are also factors to indulge in this dance, there are people who come by themselves to perform this dance. They do this job because they love their culture and tradition for which they are serving and preserving it and taking it to a next level so self motivation is also one of the major factors to continuing this artform.

Discussion

Thus the above findings and the background of this topic is aligning with my hypothesis and question of research. My primary focus was on the search of the way of emancipation and resilience by the artform. Here we can see the situation as it was earlier and with the change of time it has changed but still the community is facing the social challenges in various hidden forms which has led to their social backwardness and marginalization. But still in this adverse situation some dancers found their way to move ahead and their dance or art form has become a tool of their resilience and emancipation. But still the larger community is facing various challenges for their existence. This social hierarchy , oppression and political and financial exploitation still exist which is barring the development of the community people. There is the larger negligence of the authorities and the civil societies for the advocacy or issue resolving for this community. Most of the Chhaliya dancers come from the rural background and don't have any permanent options of occupation or livelihoods.

According to the respondents there is very less or no land holdings that these people have, so they have to shift their occupation several times in year or while , mostly Chhaliya dancers are also the construction labor work , some works in hotel or other hospitality industries, or some used to migrate towards the Delhi or Gujrat in search of work. The Chhaliya dance is a seasonal dance which they used to perform mostly in wedding ceremonies which starts in April to June and then October to January in which they earn the very basic income in the whole season. Still these dancers are demanding recognition from the state and the community for their art work. I have found that there is no such state level or national level award such as Padma Award or Sangeet Natak Academy award given to any Chhaliya artist for contributing in Chhaliya art form, though its state dance of the Uttarakhand. The artist feels very appreciated when they perform on various platforms thus there is need of proper intervention in form of policy inclusion for the artist and artform.

Also the social media and the urbanization are the two factors which are helpful to retain the dignity of the art and artists it acting as a tool of resilience by which the artists are gaining the confidence to express their thoughts and talent and for which community is also encouraging them by doing the side lining of old traditional hierarchy based concepts and practices .

Therefore we can say that urbanized public understanding belonging to areas with the quality of education , sensitivity towards the caste ,class ,gender and the influence of modern thought are helpful in changing the mindset and creating more options and opportunities for the underprivileged communities which is led to development of community, development of art and development of artists as well.

Reflection

As the process of selecting the topic and theme for the research started I was very excited to do it, as I was very highly interested in art and cultural things. I started searching for such a topic which I could interlink with my learnings from the Development course and with my own perspective related to the art.

The initial pilot study was very interesting and I had gone through various social media accounts for the contacts of the community people. I got the contacts of some Chhaliya dancers over Youtube and Facebook. Later I developed good rapport with the community and informed them that I will come to their place to complete this project but due to the pandemic everything was shifted to an alternate medium , so new challenges also arose.

The technological divide , and communication gap was the main challenge for this project but also it could be more meaningful. I could have done it on field with the community. But still I was in touch with more than 50 respondents but due to online mode I have done 12 interviews which is a good experience for me with respect to learnings and future community engagements.

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Annexures

Questionnaire

1. What is your major occupation ?
2. Since when are you pursuing this profession?
3. Are your family members associated with this artform?
4. In what type of ceremonies do you perform this dance?
5. How does society and your local community look at you?
6. How do you face people while you perform by doing crossdressing.?
7. Do you face any social taboo for your art work?
8. How do you look at yourself as a Chhaliya dancer?
9. What is your social status in your community and village
10. Being a Chhaliya dancer, how do you see yourself in future?
11. Does this dance specifically belong to your community, if yes then why?
12. Do you have any recognition and awards by the government or local authorities and local community for your artwork?
13. What motivation do you have to continue this artform?
14. Do you have any alternative options for your livelihood apart from the Chhaliya dance?
15. Why do you think more people are joining this dance form?
16. Have you made any modifications to increase the acceptability of the dance?
17. Do you view this as just work or is it more to you? Is it a form of resistance, how?
18. What are the emancipatory aspects of the Chaliya dance?
19. As dancers have you found any means of resistance within it, and the factors contributing to the emergence of that resistance?