



THE *NACHNI*: UNVEILING THE DIVERSE DANCE FORMS AND STYLES

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Abstract: *Nachni* here symbolizes a dancer as well as dance. The *Nachni* dancer mostly with her male companion *Rasik* and the musician play the *Nachni* nach. *Nachni* Nach is very popular in Purulia and the border areas of West Bengal. *Nachni* dance is a part of the special culture of Purulia and the adjoining regions like Jharkhand. This dance is performed with the addition of dhamsa, madal, tabla, and harmonium. There is a touch of obscenity in the word *Nachni*. None of them looks good in society; they are treated as prostitutes. *Nachni* has a special vital role in the cultural life of Purulia. Those who serve their bodies in front of the audience and dance to song rhythms create an atmosphere of entertainment. To know the *Nachnis'* various forms, dress, and musical instruments used, but it was changed over time, so this paper tries to unveil these things. The present study is based on the qualitative method, where Traditional anthropological tools were employed to collect the primary and secondary data.

Index Terms - Folk dance, *Nachni*, *Rasik*, *Jhumur*, Purulia.

1. Introduction

The history of female dancers and dance in India it's rooted in the religious and social context, which evolved from the temple rituals to folk, classical, and present theatrical dance. The Devadasi of the famous South Indian temple dances as an offering to the deities. Gradually, like other temple dances, transformed into classical dances and folk dances. Few dances were transformed into the Royal Patronage over time till the freedom of India. After Independence, so many royal patronage dances were freed from their court and came to the public domain.

Nachni is a popular name in the Manbhum and Chhotanagpur traditional culture. The name '*Nachni*' has two meanings: one refers to the dance form or art, and the other refers to female dancers. It is the female dancer's performance that lights up the stage at night on various occasions. However, the *Nachnis* are still not acknowledged these days. People who are excited to meet them at night do not even converse with them during the day. They don't even allow them to use water from the well or pond; they've been socially isolated for a long time; their male partners (*Rasiks*) support their families with money, but the *Nachnis* did not receive anything. They are not well-educated, and the majority of them are illiterate. Their lives are dominated by their male partners (*Rasiks*).

Purulia is a land with numerous indigenous ethnic groups. There are several Scheduled Tribes and scheduled caste groups in both the countryside as well as cities. They follow their cultural traditions. This region has a variety of folk songs and dances. One popular dance among them is the *Nachni* dance, which is the main focus of this research. *Nachni* is a traditional performance that is a unique folk culture of Purulia. It appears to be receding in the minds of our intellectuals, scholars, and a segment of conservatives and moralists, who perceive nothing worthy of art in this specific kind of dancing. The explanation for this might be that it represents a class

of women who did not receive social acknowledgment or acceptability from society. It is exceedingly terrible and remarkable that a dancing art with a lengthy history that started in faraway villages of West Bengal could not find a place in the discourse of historians while writing about India's folk history and West Bengal's folk dance. Many prominent scholars do not refer to or even casually mention the *Nachni* dance in their reflective works, which is regarded as an intrinsic element of Indian and West Bengal folk dances. In recent years, novels and plays have been created on them that appear shallow and do not motivate us to regard them as factual proof. When references to *Nachni* are proven to be accidental or simply an inevitable coincidence, Jhumur-gaan (song) takes on significant relevance in academic discussions.

2. OBJECTIVES

- I. To analyse the influence of local folk traditions, music, and instruments on the *Nachni* dance.
- II. To find out the changes in the art over the years and the associated causes.

3. Methodology

Present research is based on an empirical study among the *Nachnis* of Purulia and their male partner. Traditional anthropological tools like observation, interview, focus group discussion, and purposive sampling were employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the performance of the *Nachni* dance. The researcher attended several *Nachni* performances, both in community settings and public events, documenting key aspects such as choreography, costume, musical accompaniments, and audience interaction. Detailed notes and recordings were made during these events.

Through semi-structured scheduled and their consent, 10 *Nachnis* and 5 *Rasik* were interviewed with current and former dancers on their problems, adventures, and views on the evolving dance discipline. Cultural specialists and local historians discuss the dance's history, social background, and regional variations. Focus group discussions with community people who watch and support the dance illuminate *Nachni*'s reception, perception, and significance.

3.1 Study Area

Purulia District is the westernmost part of West Bengal. Here, a total of 58 registered *Nachnis* are residing in different places in the Purulia district. As per their consent, we took 10 *Nachnis* and 5 *Rasik* (Male partners) for the present research. Here is the list of *Nachni* along with their male partner *Rasik* and their residence area.

Table 1: *Nachni*, *Rasik* and the Study Area (n=15)

Sl.No	<i>Nachni</i> Dancer	<i>Rasik</i>	Area
1	Arati Mahato	Chaitan Mahato	Kenda
2	Joshoda Majhi	-	Kenda
3	Furuk Mahato	Govinda Mahato	Barabazar
4	Kajal Singh Sardar	-	Barabazar
5	Chapala Goswami	Budhan Goswami	Barabazar
6	Manjura Bauri	-	Chakoltor
7	Astami Mahato	-	Balarampur
8	Balika Karmakar	Pashupati Karmakar,	Puncha
9	Kalla Kalindi	-	Maguria
10	Postubala Devi	Bijoy Karmakar,	Balrampur

4. Major Findings and Discussion

Several folk or cultural dances are performed in Purulia based on Jhumur. Among them, a dance style popularly among the people of Purulia is '*Nachni* Nach'. Among local people, it is also known as '*Lachuni* Lach'. Those who perform this dance are known as '*Nachni*'. *Nachni* Dancers are not recognized as socially acceptable wives. Those with whom they live as husband and wife and who trained them in dancing and singing are known as '*Rasiks*', the male companion. *Nachni* dancers are undesirable in the so-called society. The status of a wife does not reach their foreheads, nor does society give them the status of a proper dancer. Jolly Bagchi in her book '*Purulia Nachni* and *Nachni* Nach' says, "In the patronage of kings and zamindars. *Nachni* dance in the Manbhum-Singbhum region is a rural decadent form of Baiji dance which was established in various parts of India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries." Performed with Jhumur songs, a form of royally patronized dance is difficult to say exactly when it originated. Presumably, a secular style of this dance was present in the society at that time, which later received royal patronage. The female dancers of the

said dance usually belong to the Kurmi (Mahato), Brahmins, Bhumi, Karmakar, Dom, Ghasi, Bauri, Mal, Mudi, etc. communities. Along with the royal family, the popularity and attractiveness of the *Nachni* dance created a tendency to keep *Nachni* even among the relatively affluent. It can be called a secular form of the noble Baiji dance. The small zamindars, landlords, and chieftains who did not have the power to keep Baiji took the dance with the women of the local community as their main means of entertainment. On the other hand, kings used to patronize Baijis as well as *Nachnis*.

These local dancers used to perform at various royal festivals and to entertain the kings. At that time, two forms of *Nachni* dance were seen, 'Dhumri' and 'Zamindari'. The dance has evolved and is now known as the 'Baishaliya' dance. Here, the term *Nachni* is applied to artists in three forms or genres, 'Dhumri', 'Zamindari', 'Bai'. The term *Nachni* has been applied to artists in three forms or genres.

In the Purulia district, the word 'dhumri' is used in a metaphorical sense. For example, 'Dhumra Magi', 'Dhumra Mia', 'Dhumri' etc. Women with a large body shape are called by this address. However, it is considered a disrespectful word. In the dictionary, the word 'Dhumri' means a stout Vaishnavi. Although this word has nothing to do with Dhumri dance, it may be related to the physical shape of the artists. Dhumri dances were held at any time of the day or night, starting from home, fairgrounds, and local market (Haat). Dhumri dance was reserved for any joyous event. The performance of this dance is accompanied by Jhumur song. Dhol, dhamsa, and sanai (sanai) were used as main musical instruments. Also, musical instruments such as cymbals were seen in some events. From the field study, it is known that when the dhumri dance was performed in the market, the audience formed a circle around the dhumri artist. This dance event was organized on one side of the market. *Rasik* used to help in singing along with Dhumri. *Rasik* is *Nachni*'s mail companion and trainer. Although there is no social recognition of *Nachni* as a *Rasik*'s wife. *Rasik* teaches *Nachni* dance, songs, and becomes her companion in the world of music. But not only the *Rasiks*, but also if any of the audience knew one or two stanzas of Jhumur, they could also participate in the event with that Jhumur. Dhumri dance was in high demand at weddings. Dhumri artists used to dance along with the groom on the occasion. This would increase the respect of the groom in the bride's house. This is the standard of nobility. In the Dhumri dance, all Jhumur songs were sung. Radha-Krishna centric Jhumur got more attention. This dance is also known as 'Ekdholiya Naach'. Its other name is 'Ekdholiya' as this dance was probably performed with a dancer, a dhol, nagra, sayna (sahnai), and cymbals.

The dance of 'Zamindari style' can be considered the best version of Ekdholiya dance. Both the dances are motatal (the *Nachni* dance performed with dhol-nagra is called motatalnach) dance i.e., dhol, nagra dance, and the songs of both dances are the same, but some differences are observed in the movement and rhythm of the song. The Jhumur of Zamindari dance is slow, and the Jhumur of Dhumri dance is fast. Variations can be seen in the zamindari dance style, but the Dhumri dance continues in the same vein. In the undivided Manbhum district, Baghmundi, Tamar, Silli, Patkum, etc., had a special practice of zamindari dance. The king, the zamindars used to keep *Nachnis* on a monthly basis. All those artists were called while entertaining at the festival. In the case of 'Zamindari' dance style, several changes are observed from the presentation to the rhythm of the song, taal, dance, music, etc.

4.1 Musical instruments played for the *Nachni* Dance are

This dance was performed with dhol, dhamsa, sayna (sahnai), dhak, cherpeti, singa, and jhumka. Several artists performed dances at the event. Along with them, a *Rasik* dressed as Krishna used to participate in the Asar (stage). In this context, Professor Subodh Basu Roy in his article 'Virdi's Ramakrishna Ganguly' said, "The main subject of Zamindari dance style is Krishna Leela. Underlying all its appeals is a veiled metaphor. The *rasakya* is Krishnanagar, the principal dancer is Radha, and the other dancers are Sakhivrinda. *Rasik*krishna is the consumer; he is the motivation, the unseen driver. In Dhumri or Ekdholiya *Nachni*, a Dhumri dances with her *Rasik*, etc. accompanied by musical instruments like dhol, nagra, sanai Kartal, Kedkedi. On the other hand, Zamindari *Nachni* dance consisted of multiple dancers (three to nine) who performed dances with a *Rasik* accompanied by multiple musical instruments like dhol, nagra, sanai, cherpeti, and kartal. This dance was performed in the form of rasalila. Both dances were accompanied by Jhumur songs. The songs were inspired by Radhakrishna thought of sentiments. This dance was performed on the dhol-nagra and is also known as the 'motatal' dance. Sindhubala began her career as an artist with a single drum dance. *Rasik* used to play an important role in the zamindari dance style. Along with the *Nachnis*, *Rasik* also performed both songs and dances in the gathering. It was only because of the *Rasik* that the audience used to overflow.

4.2 Dress Pattern

Dhumri and Zamindari dance style artists had a special type of dress. They used to wear Ghaghra. Below the ghaghara was a pajama, a waist band, a blouse slightly larger than the top, which was called a 'jacket'. A veil-like cloth that hangs from the waist over both shoulders like a veil. A colourful handkerchief in one hand and a dove on the leg. After making up the face, the neck, ears, hands, hair, and hair were adorned with ornaments as much as possible. Many times they used to sew artificial flowers with their own hands to decorate the braid. Dhumri's *Rasik* wear dhoti, vests, and a red shawl or towel around their waist. In the Zamindari *Nachni* dance, the dancers wore the same clothes. But in the zamindari dance style, *Rasik* Krishna used to dress up. An important part of the zamindari dance *Rasik*'s outfit was his turban. It is heard that it took two to three hours to tie this turban. To beautify the turban, a peacock fan was placed on top of it. They used to wear dhoti, vests or panjabi, tilak on the forehead, flower garland around the neck, and colourful cloth tied around the waist.

After the 'Dhumri' and 'Zamindari' dance style, this dance took another form known as 'Baishaliya Dance'. Bai dance artists presented themselves in a completely new form. Leaving the ghagras, their limbs are adorned in sarees. Radical changes occur not only in clothing but also in equipment. Tabla, Madal took the place of dhol, nagra. However, in whose hands this transformation has occurred, two facts have emerged in the field survey. One is that this change was achieved by the hand of dance artist Sindhubala at the order of the king of Kashipur. The other is the change through the hands of Bajra zamindar and *Rasik* Vrindavan Singh alias Charubabu, his two dancers, Peli and Sugandha. Although the information about the change by Sidhubala is widely known, this new information that has emerged in the field survey is not to be ignored. Mihirlal Singh Deo, a famous Darbari Jhumur artist living in Rajnowagarh of Purulia, also said in an interview that he asked Sindhubala on his way back from Calcutta because of his doubts, who is the real initiator of the new style of dance with harmonium, tabla and madal? Sindhubala mentions Brindaban Singh alias Charubabu of Bajra village of Barabazar police station.

5. Conclusion

Throughout this article, the rich cultural heritage and artistic expression embodied in the *Nachni* tradition are explored. This research explores the various forms and styles of dance integral to dance performance, highlighting the cultural significance of this art in preserving traditional narratives and social values. Diverse choreography, music, and costume elements are analysed, revealing how they evolved in response to changing social and cultural landscapes. By tracing the origins and development of *Nachni* dance, the challenges faced by practitioners in contemporary times can also be identified, particularly issues of marginalization and the struggle for recognition as legitimate artists.

Ultimately, *Nachni* is not just a dance style but a dynamic cultural tradition that reflects the complexity of the lives of the people of this region. Efforts to preserve and promote this heritage are essential to maintain the cultural diversity and richness of the region. Continued study of *Nachni* will ensure that this unique art form can be preserved for future generations.

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