

## ПОЛЕВАЯ ЭТНОГРАФИЯ

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**NACHNIS AND RASIKS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF  
AN ARTISTIC COMMUNITY OF PURULIA DISTRICT,  
WEST BENGAL, INDIA**

*This paper is based on the study of nachnis, a dancing community in Purulia district of West Bengal, India. The community is still performing albeit in a different form than that has so far been projected in the popular perception and is very different from its past composition and practices. Preserving to some extent the traditional features of jajmani system, danseuses are mostly involved in the local entertainment sphere. In spite of the profound changes in the attitude to dance and music in India in general, nachnis' social status is still very low. A nachni is always involved in a dynamic relationship with her rasik – a man who fulfills functions of her teacher, manager, patron, lover, and often her children's father. There is a tendency towards forming stable family-like connections between a nachni and a rasik today. Although there is certain activity to unite all nachnis and promote their rights, this initiative is still unsuccessful due to strong professional rivalry and a lack of community feeling. The content of nachnis' dance repertoire demonstrates a blend of various styles, traditions, arranged in local ways and fitted for the popular taste of the audience.*

**Keywords:** *Nachni (danseuses), rasik, artistic communities, performance, Purulia, India*

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## НАЧНИ И РАСИК: ЭТНОГРАФИЧЕСКОЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ ХУДОЖЕСТВЕННОГО СООБЩЕСТВА ОКРУГА ПУРУЛИЯ, ЗАПАДНАЯ БЕНГАЛИЯ, ИНДИЯ\*

*Статья посвящена этнографическому исследованию начни – небольшому артистическому сообществу района Пурулия штата Западная Бенгалия, Индия. Это женщины, выступающие в сопровождении музыкантов-аккомпаниаторов на публике: на сельских праздниках, по индивидуальным и коллективным приглашениям. Они были ранее включены в систему традиционного кастового обмена услугами, джаджмани, исполняли песни и танцы направления джумур, а в настоящее время в основном вовлечены в местную развлекательную сферу. Их социальный статус очень низок. Начни всегда находится в постоянных и динамических отношениях со своим расиком – человеком, выполняющим целый ряд функций: учителя, менеджера, покровителя, любовника, нередко и отца ее детей. Сегодня наблюдается тенденция к формированию устойчивых семейных связей между начни и расиком. Хотя с 2005 г. начала проводиться некоторая деятельность по объединению всех начни и продвижению их прав, эта инициатива не получила успеха из-за сильного профессионального соперничества и отсутствия между танцовщицами чувства общности. Содержание танцевального репертуара начни демонстрирует эклектичное смешение различных стилей, отвечающих популярным вкусам публики, но в редких случаях отдельные талантливые артистки добиваются определенного признания и образованной аудитории.*

**Ключевые слова:** *начни (танцоры), расик, художественные сообщества, представления, Пурулия, Индия*

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Dance today is undoubtedly a cultural brand of India to represent “Indianness”. At both arrival and departure halls of Indira Gandhi International airport in Delhi, the very first and last things one can see are symbols of dance and music: huge bas-reliefs of hand positions (*hasta-mudras*), dancer’s figures, musical instruments. No Indian official events – from

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tiny local meetings to regional and national conferences could happen without dance and music programs at the end. Dancers and musicians win National awards.

Yet until quite recently, dance and dancers especially of traditional dancing communities were grossly marginal. In the middle of the 20th century, the social status of almost all of them was very low. A peculiar feature of Indian social set-up – prolonged coexistence of many types of communities and the caste system created conditions for reserving skills, crafts, and jobs including music, theatre, and dance to particular groups. Like any other job, dance used to be a socially inherited one, installed in the frame of exchange system (*jajmani*) between patrons and clients. Musicians and dancers – along with *dhobi* etc. sometimes – were not welcomed in some houses. At the same time, dancing – as well as shaving, for instance, and many more manipulations with the physical body – was and still is an important element for a number of Hindu rituals and festivities.

In a short period between the 1920s and 1950s dance went through a profound transformation: from predominantly low and dependent character, it got the status of high art, comparable to *yoga* and spiritual practice, *sadhana*. Dance became a part of secular society, a certain form of secularized Hinduism. Due to crucial changes in patronage and the emergence of the government institutions as main patrons, traditional artistic families were replaced by other forms of the social organization of art. As a result of important changes in the educational paradigm, the traditional system of *guru-shishya parampara* was replaced by college education; still an extremely disputable and problematic issue in cases of performing arts.

Since 1950s, when the dichotomy of “classical” and “folk” dance emerged, Indian cultural politics has played a crucial role in the definition and classification of the dance heritage in almost all of the newly established states of the Indian Republic (*Vatsyayan* 1972). This policy aimed to promote social acknowledgment of performing arts as a noble, respected activity and at the same time to reform the content of certain dance styles to make them more suitable for a vast, even pan-Indian contemporary audience. It is well-known now that the initiatives of reformers and pioneers, such as Rukmini Devi Arundale (1904–1986), looked quite controversial for some parts of society, particularly for the dancing communities, who apparently did not welcome all the changes in the performing arts. In a popularization and wide-scope teaching they suspected a certain competition; several books are written on those serious social and symbolic changes (*Allen* 1997; *Meduri* 1996; *Gaston* 1996; *O’Shea* 2005; *Soneji* 2012: 222–225).

The ideas of the ‘national’ and ‘classicism’ in dance and the idea of the modern, or ‘contemporariness’, all emerged and developed simultaneously in India. While certain segments of dance practice in each tradition were codified and even frozen, creating peculiar “museums of dance” or cultural heritage, other parts of dance practice continue to develop and are still under perpetual transformation. That creates phenomena of so to say “heritagisation” and “exotisation”, wiping out the cultural and social contexts of art and alienating it (*Vatsyan* 1995; *Shah* 2002).

During the late 19th century and the early 20th century, there was a revival of the traditional Indian dance forms attuned to the nationalist movement linked with identity. From the 1930s, there was a shift from temple patronized performance to the societal patronage led by the elites. State-sponsored dance festivals emerged in the early 1950s, but mostly after 1955 (*Shah* 2002). The study of dance in anthropology has also undergone significant development. The initial interest in the dance of the ethnic groups can be dated back to Franz Boas’

study in the 1940s. The descriptive studies on the dance practices were later transformed through more focused anthropological engagement, which considered dance a cultural system reflecting the whole way of life (Kurath 1977; Kaepler 2000). Kurath (1977) has advanced a universalistic principle behind dance forms which, according to him, was a kind of transformation and transfiguration



Fig. 1. Srimati Bimola Kumar. Purulia district, West Bengal, India (photo by Svetlana Ryzhakova, 2016).

of the human body according to the animal and moving universe around it. Samson (2014: 14) writes that: “The polarity of ‘classical’, ‘folk’ and ‘tribal’ derived from colonial discourse has resulted in the crystallization of the component of performing expression, purportedly of rural origin, and with its own political rationale, promotional mechanisms, marketing strategies, and managers, projecting a view of India consistent with the state’s assertion of ‘unity in diversity.’” Another line of argument was based on considering the dance in the backdrop of folk category. Buckland (1983) referring to Kennedy writes that “folk dance covers a variety of dance forms which survive as or are based on local or national tradition” (1983: 318). Kennedy linked it to pre-Christian religious and quasi-religious rites, maintained as country customs and more of a seasonal nature. Buckland presents a ‘popular-classical-folk’ triangle adopted from Green. In this model, he writes about the folk dance as having the following features: no written body of criticism and performance legislates, no formal institutions of learning and teaching, composer and performer is the same individual, no “divorce” between performer and audience, no formal institution of performance, patronage of wealthy elite is not vital to its performance. On the other hand, popular dance forms are associated with popular music and tend to innovate.

Concerning the foregoing discussion, it can be said that assigning the nachni performance to any of these categories is problematic. The dance has a root in folk, though it took elements of classical styles and tried to emulate, and later moved towards popular form. Thus, it represented folk, classical and popular styles. The subsequent discussion based on the findings from the field also indicated this constructivist argument with regard to *nachnis*. Kaepler says: “Dance is a multi-faceted phenomenon that includes, in addition to what we see and hear, the “invisible” underlying system, the processes that produce both the system and the product, and the socio-political context” (2000: 117). It is true even in the case of the *nachnis*. In this sense, the present study has followed more of the cultural studies genre of anthropological orientation that began in the mid-1990s (Morris 2009). This trend, rather than focusing on the universal approach to dance, is more relativistic in nature. It tries to ferret the multiple meanings that dance conveys (Samuel and David 2016).

Today the situation in various communities, social strata, ethnic groups etc. all over India, whose traditional job is connected with dance, music and theater, varies a lot. While some communities demonstrate some success and social mobility (some musical groups

from *Manganyar* and *Langa* communities of Rajasthan, for instance, are engaged in national and international festivals), others decline or even vanish.

It is argued here that despite the “order” created in Indian dance space in the middle of the 20th century within cultural nationalism, the actual inner life of dancing reality has never completely fitted into this order. That creates many conflicts in the evaluation and interpretation of actual dance practices. Exploring this “inner-life” of dancing India would allow us to understand how dance is looked upon by the more common masses living in the obscure villages and towns in India and comprehending dance beyond the classical forms in India.

The case of West Bengal is a special one, as there is no consensus yet on what can be described as a “classical dance form” representing Bengal, its regional culture, and identity. Some of the dancers, critics, writers, philosophers, and social thinkers back up the Kathak dance (thus linking Bengali culture with that of other regions of North and partly Central India). Another group of enthusiasts has created a brand-new *Gaudiya Nritya* style, an interesting experiment of combining historical and art research with dancing practice (Gaudiya Dance 2005).

One of the core issues that we should consider while discussing the social aspects of Indian dance is the dancer’s identity from several points of view: social, gender, religion, and his/her motivation for the dance. In the case of women dancers, we face a situation that can be roughly described as “women on their own” (*Khandelwal, Hausner, Gold* 2006). Various aspects of this situation are represented in many texts, from ancient Indian literature and *dharma-shastras* to historical narratives. There are many lifestyles, professions, and social positions for single women in Indian society; however, they can be roughly grouped into three major types: religious, artistic, and sex-worker; one can also observe an overlapping of the roles. A single woman can be a *sadhvi* (ascetic woman) in some Hindu or Jain sub-sects, a Buddhist nun, a prostitute of various statuses, or be in a profession as one of a danseuse, providing for herself with her dance performances.

There are many types of traditional danseuses in India (*Nevile* 1996). A general typology defines them by the functions of the art itself: there are temple dances as a part of *seva*, *puja*, *yatra* and other rituals, festival dances as a part of various *Utsavs*, calendar or family and domestic festivities, court dances for the entertainment of the higher classes (on various local and regional levels of power), *mela* and popular dances for a wide-range audience, performed on market occasions or ordered for private parties such like *patuani*, *pan-walli*, *khemta-walli* or *khemti* and so on. Some common general names are widespread in many parts of India, like *bai-jee*, *nautch*, *nachnis* etc. Their functions extend from religious, ritualistic to purely entertaining, which sometimes overlap. These dancers can be booked, just as musicians, singers, acrobats, storytellers, barbers, priests (*pujaris*), etc., which means they can appear as *praja* in the context of the traditional *jajmani* system. Norms and social practices related to both female dancer and her partner (whether he is a brother, a son, a lover, a bodyguard, or a manager) slightly vary in different regions and social strata of Indian society, but one can denote certain common patterns, for instance, a marginal and rather negative social perception of a single woman’s dance performed in public, on an open-air stage in particular.

### Nachnis' Dance

The dance tradition of *nachnis* that still survives in the most western part of West Bengal and some parts of Jharkhand (Singbhum, Ranchi, Seraikela-Kharsawan, earlier – also in Bokaro; according to Sunil Mahato in 2015, there are about 60 *nachnis* in Jharkhand) and Odisha (Mayurbhanj district) claims to be one of the core elements of all-Bengal dance heritage.

Dr. Urmimala Sarkar-Munshi, among the first academicians who wrote about *nachnis*, observes: “The tradition goes back to the days of local kings and big land-owners who used to patronize those artists. But now, with the disappearance of the traditional patronage of rich landlords and kings, the Nachni women perform at different fairs and rural festivals organized by the government and the local communities for a particular fee. There is no fixed dance movement in this form; the Nachni expresses the narratives of the songs in keeping with the requirements of the audience – that is, she performs sensuous, sometimes even lewd movements, which are appreciated by a crowd which is basically attracted by the female dances performing in public” (Sarkar-Munshi 2010: 35–36).

But what actually forms a social profile of a *nachni* and her patron/lover/bodyguard/manager etc. called *rasik*, their attitudes and communications? How is the ethnic aspect (many of the *nachnis* are of Bhumij using surname Singh Sardar, Bhumij, or Sardar) involved? What kind of dance do we observe in a *nachnis* performance?

Since January-February 2012 both authors independently conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the Purulia district of West Bengal, meeting from time to time in Kolkata and venues of the annual conference of the Indian Anthropological Society, discussing the subject, eager to find the answers to these questions. Svetlana Ryzhakova, who is also formally trained in Kathak dance apart from being an anthropologist, traveled to Purulia district four times from 2012 till 2018, doing an extensive observation in the remote villages, and enjoyed company of the wonderful people, very well informed in jhumur and nachnis matters, such as Pavitra Banerjee from Asansole and Sunil Kumar Mahato (who holds “Purulia Janabikash Manch, a registered organization for rural Development”) from Purulia; they helped a lot in moving around and meeting the informants. Sumahan Bandyopadhyay was working almost coeval to Ryzhakova and had visited Purulia in West Bengal and Seraikela in Jharkhand more than ten times up to 2019. His area of investigation was mainly confined to the south-western part of Purulia district in the administrative blocks like Jhalda, Baghmundi, Balarampur, Barabazar. The investigations were conducted in the villages like Hesahatu, Dubcharka, Namo Pirra, and Mathari where the *nachnis* and their *rasiks* were interviewed. The concerned people and social workers, namely Sunil Mahato, Gandhi Mahato, Prashanto Rakshit, who had been working among them, were also visited to inquire about the current state of the dance practice and their views on it. Our study identifies some aspects of the *nachni* performance tradition, which seem to be quite important.

First, it is the local aspect. There is a certain “borderline”, within which the distinct types of both dance presentation and social attitudes are being formed: it corresponds to the Manbhum or Rarh-Bengal cultural area<sup>1</sup>. Secondly, the *nachni* performance tradition has been

<sup>1</sup> Manbhum was one of the districts of East India during the British Raj. After India gained independence, the district became a part of Bihar state, and upon re-organization of the Indian states in the mid-1950s, it was turned into a part of the West Bengal. Present Purulia district was carved out of the Manbhum district. The Manbhum region has thick forests, is rich in mineral resources, and has a mixed demographic profile of people from different religious and social groups, including *adivasis*,



Fig. 2. Postubala and her rasik. Surulia, Purulia district, West Bengal, India (photo by Svetlana Ryzhakova, 2016).

musical instruments such as *madal* (*mardal*), *dhol*, and flute are played at *jhumur*, to accompany songs. A drum usually plays rhythm based on three beats – *takdhim-di-tan*, or *takadinna-takadinna*, in a staccato-like mode. According to Sunil Saha, it corresponds to a poetic metaphor such as “after rain the road is wet, and the minds of women are shak-

formed as a part of one distinct genre of local folklore called *jhumur*<sup>1</sup>. *Jhumur* has two dimensions: a vocal genre (an oral tradition passed down through generations) and a traditional dance form with the *jhumur* song.

The *jhumur* dance is performed by young girls, accompanied by male musicians, who maintain the rhythm with musical instruments and vocals. Men and women are singing and dancing together. The dance is performed by girls wearing jhumur make-up, jewelry, and traditional tribal costumes. Indigenous

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particularly the Santals. Rarh (or Radh; according to Sri Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar, the word originates from Proto-Austroasiatic \**Rār̥hā* or \**Rār̥ho* which means “land of red soil” or “land of laterite”, see: (Sarkar 2004)) is a toponym for an area that lies between the Chota Nagpur Plateau on the West and the Ganges Delta on the East. Although the boundaries of this region have been defined differently according to the various sources throughout history, today, it is mainly coextensive with the state of West Bengal while also comprising some parts of the state of Jharkhand and Bihar in India. According to the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Rarh is mainly the Murshidabad’s surrounding region, a high, undulating continuation of the Chota Nagpur plateau to the West, and the Bagri, a fertile, low-lying alluvial tract, part of the Ganga-Brahmaputra delta, to the East. It is crucial here that both Manbhum and Rarh are considered to be a meeting place of Austro-Asiatic and Indo-Aryan groups, with the peculiar cultural amalgam in local social set-up as a result.

<sup>1</sup> There are several versions regarding the etymology of the word “jhumur”. According to a Bengali folklorist professor Sunil Saha it may be related to the idea of shifting (compare jhum as a type of agricultural system, widespread in this area), of turning around (in Rajasthan, circular dance is known as *ghumar*), or the dance could get its name from the cluster of bells worn around the ankles, which make a clanging noise – “jhum-jhum” (Sunil Saha\_10 PF 31.02.2013). Jhumur dances belong to two distinct types. In a tribal culture, these dances can be performed throughout the year to mark all happy occasions and festivities of the rural and tribal communities of Bhumij, Santal, and Oraon. There are many variations of *jhumur*; it incorporates song and dialogue depicting the joys and sorrows, yearnings and aspirations of the everyday life of these people. One form of *jhumur* is *bhaduria*, performed as a thanksgiving for a bountiful monsoon. Sometimes it is performed as the ritual worship of gods and goddesses, sometimes as part of courting and lovemaking, and it can also be performed at a prayer for rainfall. Today jhumur is mainly related to Radha-Krishna topic. However, there are also songs with a description of *dehatattva* – parts of a body, which is aimed at deep self-realization, and is similar to Baul and Fakir (Phokir) tradition of undivided Bengal (Sunil\_Mahato\_04 PF 02.03.2019). Jhumur songs also have authorship, and some poets (who are also supposed to be holy persons) are known, such as Ramakrishna Ganguli, Aku Karmakar, Poresh Karmakar, Sistidhar Sing Mahato.

ing” (Sunil Saha\_10 PF 31.02.2013. Here and below: ethnographic materials from the personal archive collection of Dr. Svetlana Ryzhakova). The dance is mostly performed in open spaces. The male musicians wear the long traditional dresses and keep the rhythm with a few traditional instruments: usually, a drum, hung on shoulder, a flute and a pair of *taals*, metallic discs. Girls perform the dancing part, holding each other’s waists and moving hands and feet forward and backward synchronously, or the girls dance upon a chariot driven by bulls, and the group of male musicians, drummers, in particular, follows the chariot. In this case, *jhumur* can be described as a “folk” (tribal) dance, or using Mohan Khokar’s precise metaphor, “dancing for themselves” (Khokar 1987).

*Jhumur* dance can also be a part of a devotional performance, Radha-Krishna *kirtan*, performed both in groups and individually. Probably, this theme was created quite late, at the end of the 18th century, which was related to the cultural influences of higher castes. Music of *jhumur* then became more complex (Sunil Saha\_10 PF 31.02.2013). The lyrics of *jhumur* songs are composed in everyday language and mostly depict love, particularly the love and longing relationship of Krishna, who is depicted as a “Rasik”, and Radha as a dancer, “Nachni”. There is a legend that the *kirtan* tradition was spread here by Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu himself during his journeys along with his disciples from Puri to Mathura through this tribal forest area of Manbhum. Thus it is undoubtedly a spiritual practice, “dancing for God”. However, *nachni* dances are first and foremost addressed to the very simple audience, and usually, it is not performed without men’s support.

The *rasik* (literary means “one who is related to *rasa*”, an aesthetics essence of art) is known in Purulia district as a “bad boy from a good family”, but a connoisseur of arts; according to general virtue standards, his is considered to be low, but economically he can be relatively rich (not always, however). Engagement in art makes him seen as a spiritual person sometimes. As Urmimala Sarkar-Munshi states, “his keeping a *nachni* is regarded as an expression of an overt irrepressible artistic interest. The *nachni*, however, is seen as a fallen woman. The audience, which loves her performance, is afraid to cross her shadow for fear of becoming polluted. Her income as an entertainer makes her the principal breadwinner during lean seasons, her contribution as a working hand in the agricultural work of the *rasik*’s family is a must, her position in her own family of origin is non-existent, and her status in the *rasik*’s family and the society in general is that of a concubine. Thus, at the end of their lives, *nachnis* become economically ruined outcasts who live in the shadows of the society they have served for their whole lives” (Sarkar-Munshi 2010: 26-39).

The *nachni* used to stay with her *rasik* in his home, though separately if the *rasik* had his own legally married wife. If the *rasik* himself happened to be an expert music and dance teach-



Fig. 3. Shanti, young *nachni*. Purulia district, West Bengal, India (photo by Svetlana Ryzhakova, 2016).



er, he would train his *nachni*. Together with hired musicians, they formed a troupe that staged professional performances on different occasions in exchange for payments. The *nachni* was the center of attraction in such dancing troupes, and her earnings contributed to the income of *rasik*, who in this case was the master, partner, lover, consort, and team manager. So, in essence, *nachni*'s income was *rasik*'s income in exchange for which *nachni* would get shelter and support in this more or less stable relationship until and unless any untoward incidence such as death, separation, or desertion took place. Desertion of *nachni* by her *rasik* was not



Fig. 4. *Nachni Lila*: a typical posture of *Nachni*. Purulia district, West Bengal, India (photo by Svetlana Ryzhakova, 2016).

impossible; however not common since bringing up a *nachni* with proper training was not an easy or short-time task. It took a long period of training and hard work to become a *nachni*. In addition to this, joining the *nachni* profession by a girl or woman was not very frequent.

The relations of a *nachni* and her *rasik* have many dimensions; they can be classified in the following way. First, these are inter-caste and quite often also inter-ethnic relations. Very often, *nachnis* are of Bhumij origin, have tribal or mixed origin, but a *rasik* can be of different, often of higher caste and status; sometimes, they even claim to be Brahmins. Secondly, these are professional ties: both *rasik* and *nachni* must be trained in music, vocals and dance (*gana-bajana*), they can perform together, very often the *rasik* plays various musical instruments and sings while the *nachni* dances.

Third, there are educational aspects: a *rasik* can be a teacher (and is even supposed to be a Guru) for a *nachni* if he is older and more experienced, but it can also be quite otherwise when a young boy enters the *rasik* way of life, and quite often he leaves his family and joins the community of *nachni*, where he gets the musical education. If a girl is young and shy, she is taught (sometimes with the help of alcohol, smoking, etc.) to be more relaxed, natural, not afraid of the audience, and resist improper behavior. Fourth, usually, there is a sexual aspect of the *nachni-rasik* relations - they are lovers, she is his concubine, and this connection is described using Radha-Krishna's love model, which means that they are not husband and wife. At the same time, a *nachni* often wears the red vermillion dot on her parting of the hair, *mangal-sutra*, toe rings, and/or a set of red, white, and golden bangles – all are symbols of a married woman. At the same time, she considers herself just a Radha (hidden lover) tied to her *rasik* as a husband. All children of a *nachni* belong to her, and they usually never take the name of their father and can never inherit his property. Fifth, there is a delicate social and ritualistic connection: a *nachni* performs her *seva*, serving her *rasik* in many ways: he is both her patron and manager, he uses her body and her work, and he is supposed to protect her. According to one of the interpretations, *rasik* is a person who is doing a particular *sadhana* along with his female partner, a *nachni*, which means there is a certain tantric “flavor” in this tradition (Sunil\_Mahato\_04 PF 02.03.2019).

One can observe the different attitudes of *rasiks*' families towards them “keeping a *nachni*”. Sometimes it is regarded as anti-social behavior, which breaks the family, but

people also say that “keeping a *nachni* means cash flow”, for the properly organized performances can be a good source of income. Usually, the performances occur in winter, between agricultural works, after harvest, during the *melas*, and on the weekly organized markets in the *jhandi-mundi* (games places) or near wine shops.

All the *nachnis* who told us their personal life stories confessed that it was only the extreme poverty, loss of their parents, widowhood without any other financial and social support that made them enter the profession of a *nachni*. In some cases, they were even forced to become a *nachni*: a girl can be sold to a *rasik* by her parents or step-parents. A daughter of a *nachni* often becomes a *nachni* as well; however, mothers normally do not wish such a future for their daughters. They try to protect them from this path, and their ultimate wish is to marry them off successfully to a good husband. The huts of *nachnis* are usually situated at some distance from the village: *nachnis* are considered by the majority of villagers to be very low in the social hierarchy and ritualistic purity, they do not enjoy the customary funeral rites; even in the second part of the 20th century their corpses usually was transported by the buffalo cart to a distant forest place, which serves as a dustbin.

### Development of *Nachni* Dance

It is very difficult to pinpoint precisely the time of the origin of the *nachni* dance and what provoked it. Today, the *nachnis*' dance repertoire demonstrates a blend of various styles and traditions, arranged locally and to please the popular taste. It is safe to say that the dance form retains some preliminary movements of dancing evinced still among the primitive tribal communities in the region.

Another argument suggests that the *nachni* dance was rooted in the court entertainment of the local feudal lords. A clear devolution from that court culture to the present day *nachni* has been postulated by cultural experts such as Sunil Mahato of Purulia. For them, the *nachni* dance in the early stage was much more refined, ‘classicalist’. The local landlords or big *zamindars*, known as *rajas*, used to organize the *nachnis* performances in their courts. They would employ expert musicians and dance teachers (*ostads*) to train the female dancers or *nachnis*. Dance of *nachnis*, along with the tradition of Chhau and some other performances, was a matter of patronage; Bagmundi was a famous village where many dancers emerged. In Purulia, the Kashipur royal family was the center of authority and encouraged dance as such. There is a memory about a local queen (or, maybe rather a chieftain) Begunkudor, sometime in the 18th century, who is supposed to initiate the *nachni* tradition. According to Sunil Mahato's story, Borjuren Das was a *jhumur* poet in the 18th century. Being a devotee of Krishna, he conducted a pilgrimage to Vrindavan, where he saw a *raslila*. Coming back, he stayed for a few days in the court of Begunkudor, and described it to her; soon, a queen organized a *raslila* with the participation of some local girls. *Nachnis* of today believe they are descendants of the danseuses of the first *raslila* in Purulia (Sunil\_Mahato\_04 PF 02.03.2019).

The songs were mainly composed on the themes of *Radha-Krishna*, the epitome eternal love as per Hindu mythology. They were mainly *jhumur* but set in classical *that* and come to be known as *Darbari Jhumur*. The *nachni* emulated the dance forms practiced in the court of the ruler of the princely state. They used to wear *ghagra*-like dancing attire in the fashion of a *Kathak* dancer. There is a distinction between Dhumri *Nachni* – a *zamindari* dance, where a danseuse wears a long skirt, *lehenga*, and a blouse, *choli*, similar

to Rajasthani attire, sometimes a belt with mirrors *komor*, and musical instruments such as *dhor*, *dhumsa*, *nagri* and *shehnai* are used; and Bai Nach – a form, created according to Sunil Mahato by Sindubala, where a danseuse wears a sari and a blouse, and the orchestra contains a *madal*, a flute, a harmonium, a *jhuri-nagara* and a *kartal*.

Despite its light and entertaining character, a dance of *nachni* has certain rules. It is performed at the place called *akhra* – a round arena, and a performer is doing *akhra vandan* – greeting to the audience, as well as to Ganesha, Durga, Saraswati. Performance usually starts around 10 pm and ends at about 6 am. In the end, there is always something special represented. *Anyone can book Nachni's performance*, but there for certain occasions, such as Saraswati-puja, Lokhi [Lakshmi]-puja or marriage, the dance is mandatory.

Bitter criticism towards the dancing manner today was expressed by Mihil Lal Singh Deo (75 years old in 2013) of Rajput and the royal family of Kashipur. He received professional music training in Hindustani vocal from Prayag Sangeet Samiti, Allahabad, and other musical institutes. *Jhumur* is his main specialization. He does not enjoy the dance of *nachnis* today; it was much better earlier – both body movements and steps. The main problem of today's danseuses, according to him, is the lack of training and intention to learn. The *nachni* dance spread to the public arena and became a part of the regional popular culture. It turned into a common form of entertainment for the masses in any festival or fair-gathering.

There are some high-quality *nachni* dancers (late Malavati, Buton Devi, or Buntutamar in Singbhum, around 50 years old). For some observers, this might signify the emergence of an original style (*Nachni Nach*) at a preliminary stage – the issue is still controversial because one cannot depict a set of distinct features that could account for a distinct dance grammar.

### Case studies on the *nachnis*

#### *The case of Balika Mahato, Nachni of yesteryears*

Balika Mahata approaching seventy was *nachni* of Late Suchand Mahato of Dubcharka village of Purulia. She was Kumbhakar by caste. Her father worked in the Indian Railways. She was married off at the tender age of twelve to a man who was revealed to have mental defects. Then, her father took her to his home from her in-laws' house. Unfortunately, her father died in an accident. Then Suchand took her to his house almost forcefully. Suchand was known for his interest in *nachni* dance as he earlier had two *nachnis* who fled with a better offer with new *rasiks*. Suchand had his own family with a son and a daughter. The man became Balika's *rasik*, who trained her to sing and dance. She learned the craft, and they started performing together. In Suchand's house, she looked after his elder son Nilkamal whom she loved very much. Their *nachni* performance was stopped after the marriage of Suchand's daughter since his son-in-law imposed the condition that Suchand would have to stop this. In 1992, after Suchand's death, the hard days for Balika began. She was turned out of the house. Now she lived in a lone hut thatched and fenced with local plants and creepers away from the original house of her *rasik* with whom she had lived so many happy moments in that house.

*Parbati Bai and Falguni: Performing together*

Middle-aged *nachni* Parbati lived in Mathari village in Purulia district with her *rasik* Falguni Mahato, who is almost sixty. Parbati prefers to call herself Parbati Bai as she considers Bai a more respectable term than *nachni*. Bai is a shortened form of *Baizi*, a term reserved for the court-dancers of high repute. Parbati was born in a Kalindi caste (a low caste among the Hindus). Falguni's father was a kirtan singer, so he learned singing from him. Parbati belonged to the village of her in-laws, and she stayed in the same house with the family of Falguni Mahato. She came to this profession by choice as she loved it. She has a son with Falguni. They still go to stage shows together, mainly in Jharkhand, a neighboring state of West Bengal. Falguni has divided his property between his wife and Parbati.

*Never give up: Wife and Husband*

Nachni Lilabati and her husband Ramesh Bauri lived in Namu Pirra (or Pindra) village. She was born in a Brahmin family. Her father was a truck driver. When she was 2-3 years old, she lost her mother. Her father married again. The stepmother began torturing her. Then, her father left her in an Ashram in Ayadhya hills. The head of the Ashram, whom she called *baba* married her to Ramesh; they went through a ceremony of "social mass marriage". Ramesh was in Chhau dance troupe. Moreover, he could also sing *jhumur* playing a harmonium. One year after her marriage, Lilabati began to learn singing and dancing to stay in the same line with her husband and earn by performing together. Their Nachni troupe is called "Lila Devi Nachni Dal". They have nine accompanists. When they get a booking, they inform the accompanists who stay in the nearby villages. September to March is the main season. It is now more popular in Jharkhand since they get more bookings in this area than Purulia or other parts of Bengal.

*Matter of devotion: Saraswati Devi*

Saraswati Devi lives in a house in Purulia town. In 2012 she was 42 years old. Saraswati is doing all domestic chores with the minor help of occasional servants. She has three children. Her elder daughter is married off successfully and lives separately as a housewife, not dancing: the matter of pride for Saraswati. Another two live with the mother. Her *rasik*, some ten years older than her, hails from Bagmundi village – a known hub for Purulia Chhau tradition; his surname is Chakrabarti, i.e., Brahmin by caste. His wife stays in the village, but he spends his time mainly with Saraswati: "there, in the village, the life is ordinary", he says, "but here is the art! I am a devotee of art". Saraswati performs together with her *rasik*; this job is not very regular, yet it is a source of income for both.

*Art and passions: Pastubala*

Pastubala (she was forty years old in 2013) comes from Bhumij community in the village Kormatal (Puncha police station): her father's name was Manohar Singh Sardar; her mother was Bimola from Mudi community, which is – according to Sunil Mahato – similar to Oraon. Her mother was a danseuse, had many partners (Pastubala's father was her second husband, died when the girl was ten years old), and eventually left her daughter. Pastubala became a pupil of a famous *nachni* of Purulia, Late Sindubala. It is a breathtaking story of a love triangle between her, her partner, Bijoy Karmakar (he does not like to call himself "rasik", however, he was trained in music and doing a job as a musician), and his

wife. Having discovered her husband's love affair, the wife unsuccessfully wanted him back and then managed to put him to prison for a couple of years with a false accusation of robbery. When released, he left her completely and attached himself to Pastubala openly. They never had a proper marriage ceremony, yet Pastubala wears the symbols of a married woman and a *godna* – a tattoo of *rasik's* name, just as a husband's, on her hand. Eventually, Bijoy's wife became old and approached the couple to take her to live together, but they refused. Now both the *nachni* and the *rasik* stay in a half-built house in Surulia, which was initially constructed as a shared space for artists. There are certain arguments and non-satisfaction among acting *nachnis* about this house's status and future.

*Shanti Devi: a shy beauty*

This couple of a young *nachni*, Shanti Devi of 21 years old in 2013 and a man, Bharat Kalindi, 35, is married in the court only – as they say; no temple ceremony was done. They reside in a small house in the outskirts of village Chakirbon (block Purulia I), with predominantly schedule castes inhabitants (Dom, Kalindi, Vaidyakar, Kumbhakar, Chutar etc.). The love marriage was quite unwelcome for society. Her husband's status is quite unclear: a manager? A companion? Despite her performing as a danseuse, her social status in the caste hierarchy is higher than his, which is another reason for discomfort for the locals, however, eventually approved by local society. Shanti Devi comes from the Rai family, supposed to be Rajput, in a village Bogradi (p/s Muri). Her parents died when she was a baby, and her uncle brought her up. According to her, she had been voluntarily dancing since she was 14 years old. But it was Bharat who persuaded her to dance for a living; still, she does not look happy and definitely is not much interested in dance.

*Jogi family: Nachni dance as a business*

Sila Singh (about 30 years old in 2013) comes from Rajput community from Jharkhand. She was a *nachni*, and used to perform. She met her husband, Radheshyam Jogi, from a much lower social group, categorized by the government as OBC (Jogi here are artisans, making various items from sola grass, masks, and various decorations, yet wear a sacred thread – *paita*). He was interested in music and used to sing Hindi film songs and Tusu and Karma festival songs. Now they are married and live in a joint family of Radheshyam, in village Beliapatar (Pichasi p/o). Other male family members are engaged in performances, which are usually booked in advance. They have printed a list with the description of artistic offerings. This case can be described as a certain family business. A family replied generally and positively: everything is good in their household, there are no problems and nothing special to talk about. They also hire some musicians occasionally. Apart from art, the family does agricultural works. However, all-night performances – in January-February as these happen quite often – give an excellent additional income to the family.

*Frustrated and alienated: Tabooed from the common source of water*

This couple seemed to be the most pitiful among all we observed; both look very frustrated and sad about their current life and future. They reside in a tiny hut on the outskirts of the village and face a negative attitude towards them from the other residents. Young and beautiful *nachni*, whose name we could not extract during the conversation, held a baby boy of one year; she did not want to talk much. Her partner sat nearby and

lamented, revealing the misbehavior of several other *nachnis* and their teammates and various problems of day-to-day life in this surrounding: still, there are several taboos for *nachnis*, such as a restriction to use the public well.

*Bimola Kumar: a Nachni or a second wife*

Bimola Kumar is an elderly *nachni* (68 years old in 2015) of Satra village. She still exudes a certain charisma of a former danseuse: her gestures are refined, her facial expressions are artistic, and there is a natural shyness mixed with a flavor of strong stamina in her movements. When she was 17 years old, she was brought by her lover/ patron, Raghunandan Kumar of Haribolo caste, from her parental village near Khatra railway station in Bankura district to this house in Purulia, where his wife, Horidasi Kumar, resided with their children. It was an unusual and rare step, keeping both the wife and the *nachni* in the same house for years. Bimola gave birth to two sons, who became family members just as the elder ones. Now their husband is no more alive, and both Bimola and Horidasi, who is some ten years older than Bimola, and all their sons live together in the house. While describing the past years, Bimola sounds very polite and positive; she says she had not witnessed many problems in her life; all relations were just fine.

The case studies presented here portray the multiple layers of realities surrounding the *nachni*. It is not that the *nachnis* are always despised in the home that owed much of its running to her earnings. The *nachnis* leading a voiceless life in poverty are not always the case. In fact, the *nachni* invokes a number of meanings that are clear only with reference to the context. As a dance practice, it appears to convey a dance style, the dancer herself, and the characteristic jhumur songs sung in the accompaniment of *rasik* and musicians at the time of performance. The identity of a *nachni* is never complete without the *rasik*. It is shown that the dancer stayed with the *rasik* who trained her in the art and shared a relationship with her as a not legally married wife. They often used to have children. So, *rasik* was her husband, trainer, connoisseur, protector, and manager. Both the *nachni* and legally married wife could stay under the same roof. Polygamy was not debarred in the area; despite that, they would not marry formally. There are two versions of this phenomenon. One is that the *nachni* and *rasik* relationship is modeled after the eternal bond of love between Krishna and Radha of the Vaisnava tradition, who were not married. On the other hand, it is said that this relationship reflects the downgraded status of a *nachni* woman who cannot be equal with the social position of a married wife and has more or less a concubine status. Society also attested this since it practiced the disposal of the dead body of a *nachni* in a most inhuman manner. The *rasik* who kept *nachni* was regarded as a male idol who could maintain more women like the kings or *zamindars* used to keep *harem*. It was a local exposition of the manly power which the society admitted.

The induction into the *nachni* life generally followed some events that left a young girl helpless. The dancer usually would come from a lower caste than her *rasik*, for whom the *nachni* provided sustenance, art, love, and passion. The *rasik* spent most of his active hours with the *nachni*, and their venture was joint. The *nachni* performance had a special appeal to people representing the so-called 'low culture' until the dance caught the sophisticated urban imagination with state patronage. It was appropriated for the common public taste for the stage, while a more mundane epicurean version was still performed beyond government support. It gave rise to multiple versions of the dance practice. The drive for universal and uniform style as attempted by various volunteer bodies caused

frustration because the dance and dancers are internally segmented to serve different sections of society. It is also why the dancers are still frowned upon and feel alienated or tabooed. It also explains why the plight of the *nachnis*, in the end, remains to be a saga of tragic penurious existence.

### Social aspects of the *nachni* dance today

With the abolition of the *zamindari* system and the eclipse of the princely states, the *nachni* tradition declined. Now a wealthy landowner or connoisseur of the music and dance are the main patrons of the *nachnis*. The loss of constant local patronage caused a decline in the number of *nachnis*; however, as per data provided by Sunil Mahato in 2015, there are around 105 ladies supposed to be *nachnis* in both West Bengal and Jharkhand.

Anthropological studies and films about the *nachnis* from the 1970's ("The Nachni" by Ladly Mukhopadhyaya, for instance) show a certain evolution of the institution of *nachni-rasik* relations and performance during the 20 century. All our interviews show that despite the profound changes in the attitude to dance in India in general and that many *nachnis* today have received Indian National awards, their social status in villages is still very low. It appears that quite a few young girls continue to be involved in *nachni* profession. Sometimes a *nachni* marries her *rasik* and has a proper family – this seems to be a recent development. There is also a tendency towards forming stable family-like connections between a *nachni* and a *rasik* today.

Although there is certain activity (conferences, seminars) aimed at consolidating all *nachnis* and promoting their rights to highlight the social problems of *nachnis*, this initiative is still not successful due to strong professional rivalry and a lack of community feeling. Yet, some statements made in the press may cause certain anger, such as the one of a known filmmaker and journalist Ladli Mukhopadhyay. The statement was probably exaggerated or misunderstood by some *nachnis* as critical, but Saraswati Devi even wanted to demand compensation for abuse (Sunil\_Mahato\_08 PF 02.03.2013). "Nachni Unnayan Samiti", an organization aimed to unite danseuses (in 2013 there were 52 members, although, according to Sunil Mahato, in the beginning they were 72), was established in 2005 under the auspices of Mabhumi Lok Sanskriti, and as a part of Durbar Mohila Samiti (Sunil\_Mahato\_11 PF 03.03.2013).

One should take into consideration the highly marginal aspects of both the status and actual professional activity of this community. The dramatic aspect of this social role of *nachni* has been shown in a successful brand-new Bengali theatrical production, 2013, "Naachni" by Parthpratin Deb. This strongly corresponds with the interest to a figure of Lawani danseuse of Maharashtra in the contemporary Marathi theatre – from both artistic and social / gender perspectives, connecting dance with the context of rural India at large.

The *nachni*, when performing on stage, used to enjoy rousing reception, fame, and applause; but in terms of social status, their acceptability was marginal. Even if a *nachni* lived with her *rasik* as a wife and they had children, she was never given the status of a legal wife; her last days could become pitiful if her grown-up children did not take care of her. In death, the custom was to carry the dead body of a *nachni* outside the village to throw it away as a corpse of an animal, and carnivores tore and devoured it. So, the stigma attached to a *nachni* prohibited her from being approached by a common man who enjoyed her performance to take her away for a formal nuptial relationship.

Instead, a *nachni* modeled her relationship as the eternal bond between Radha and Krishna. Therefore, the *nachni* would stay in the house of her *rasik* and contribute to the family coffers. This form of *nachni-rasik* relationship existed until the recent past when a new campaign to improve the life of a *nachni* was started by a state organization.

The campaign was spearheaded by DMSC, a non-governmental organization initially aimed at empowering marginalized women engaged in prostitution. The organization attempted to bring a change in the abominable existence of the *nachni* and bolster her social security. Moreover, they insisted that no woman should be forced to become a *nachni*. Partly due to their sustained campaign and people's consciousness, a whiff of change began to percolate into the tradition of *nachni* dance. On the one hand, the *nachni* dance was projected as a characteristic folk performance of the region; on the other hand, a serious question was raised about the subhuman disposal and marginal status of the *nachni* women. The quality of artistic performances of some of the *nachnis* won them National Award. People of the region and state became more and more aware of them through the popular media representations of the *nachnis* in film, theatre, and literature. Again, several popular forms of entertainment flooded the region apart from *nachnis*. The *nachnis*, too, became aware of their condition. Thus, we see the new form of relationships: *nachni* performers who are legally married to their *rasiks*. The couple both own the troupe, which *rasik* manages. The *nachnis* are also getting government support and participating in governmental programs. This causes changes to the topics and presentation of the songs. After the decline from court patronization, when *nachni* performance became popular entertainment, the songs were considered vulgar and full of sexual innuendoes, as stated by the village gentry. Now the songs have become refined to suit the tastes of people of various social groups.

State intervention and work of volunteer organizations had an impact on wiping out some of the most inhuman treatment even after death. At the same time, we notice a shift from a 'dancer-connoisseur-trainer-lover-consort' model to a 'performer-manager' complex suited to the market. Here, the *nachni* as a formally married wife of the *rasik* ensures social security on the one hand, and on the other, responds to the growing market, which logo-centrally values the brand called *nachni*. In this way, the *nachni* is turning into a choreographed folk performance in its present form and gaining a status of a profession like any other similar profession.

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