# 'Religious and Cultural Confluence of Eastern and Western India: Revisiting of the Folk Philosophy

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**Abstract**:

Language has been conceived to be the most effective medium for communicating one's ideas and emotions to others . The journey of any language in order to earn recognition undergoes rigorous changes and testing through ages . Language of any particular place

or region which is popularly known as the "Dialect" takes the form of a complete expression only after it becomes customary to the lives of the people. The process of getting accustomed in the social order includes its travel through the folk literature, indigenous tales and the travelogues native to their places. This work would accentuate how the folklores in the provinces of Jharkhand and West Bengal , inspite of being geographically divided hold on to have some common features . Their similar historical backgrounds have laid the foundation for many local dialects to not only thrive and develop but to maintain its strong roots till today.

**Keywords***: Tribes, Dialect, Folklore, Mythos, Philosophies.*

# Introduction

The cultural confluence and the abundance of India in terms of various languages enables it to secure a distinct place for itself in the world map. It is placed at a high rank when we take a sneak look at the old records regarding the contributions made by the country to enrich its rich cultural heritage. One such convergence we come to know about , when we find out the similitude that exists in the culture of the two distinct states of India ,that is Jharkhand and West Bengal. Inspite of being separated by geographical conditions yet the anthropological elements existing in the states, has managed to hold a sense of commonness. As we know that , humans have tried to demonstrate the various process of the universe through their interpretation of cosmic tales. It was them, who held the believe of God being omnipresent at all places . Where such trust becomes concrete under the influence of attaining more knowledge about the creation of the world and its inhabitants, then he starts incarnating God in various forms of nature. When groups which are well known to carry their cosmological mythos becomes apparent , then the names those gets enlisted are the Santhal and the Oraon groups. These are the tribes belonging to the eastern part of the tribal community of our country . Most of the traditional categories are

known to bore along with them the trails of their particular faiths about the origination of the world and the other beings residing in them. The Santhals also have their special and unique kind of religion , which is based on animist philosophies. As per an proficient anthropologist, P. C. Biswas , while expressing his regards for the heritage of the Santhals in his book " Primitive Religion, Social Organization Law and Government among the Santal (1935) , he had mentioned that "If there is any culture which still carries on the impress of the underlying philosophic speculation and order of the thought that was widespread in India prior to the rise of the Dravidian culture, it was very likely the belief and social order of pre-Dravidian Santal... Stand in the limelight. So in the pre-Aryan and pre-Dravidian culture of India the Santal…Stand in the limelight". Another interesting feature which gets accentuated if we follow the religious tradition of a particular community which glorifies the incorporation of Hinduism amongst Buddhism. Just like, Buddhism which conceives Lord Buddha to be the ultimate or their prime Godhead. But along with that, the other Hindu deities ,like, Yama, Shiva, Vishnu, Kartik or Ganesha , have also been considered to be an important factor in constituting the Dharmapalas . The Dharmapãlas are known to safeguard the Buddhist tenet , therefore, they are usually in the form of paintings or carvings at the walls of the sacred sanctams. In the same manner, the Santhal tribe considers the "Mãrãng Buru" to be their supreme God. Lord Shiva is worshipped by them in the form of Mãrãng Buru. Other than this , Lord Ganesha is known by the name of "Gõsãfé or Ãbgé Bongã" (God of Fortune) ), Kartik is Kätri, and Lakshmi is Ofãh Bongã. But , amidst all other Gods and Goddess, Lord Shiva is offered prayers at the first and foremost. Another interesting story of the creation of universe as per the Santhals gets featured in one of their mythological tales, where Baba Ishwar or the Supreme Father, after finding that the Earth is slowly getting engulfed into sin , destructed it out of his wrath. After this incident took place, the whole Earth was simply transformed into a huge stretch of water, with no left traces of humans anywhere. He in order to restore everything back

to its previous state, held up long consultations with other Gods for a period of twelve years. When the Has(Drake) and Hãsli (Duck) went to God weeping and seeking a sketch of land. It was at that juncture, Baba Ishwar asked Marang Buru to get a tortoise. As the tortoise felt for an inclination for obtaining land and women. Therefore , the tortoise was penalized and was taken as a captive. His four limbs was attached along with chains in the four different directions: Vãyu, Ishãn, Nairrit and Agni or the north-west, north- east , south-west and south- east, accordingly. The movement of the creature was completely restricted but Marang Buru, took some mercy on it , considering to move its limbs only one time in a span of twelve years. According to the Santhals, the movement of the tortoise caused earthquakes . Therefore, a snake was put on above the shell of the tortoise. After this , a golden plate was placed over the serpent. Then a lobster was given an invitation from the south by trying to persuade it with same fascination. But ,as it was attempting to dig out some portion of the earth, it got washed away. Then came the crab from the north. The earth scooped up by him too got wiped away. A earthworm was also brought from the western part of the planet. The earthworm consumed some portion of the earth and crawled upto the plate on which it excreted. The procedure kept continuing for a long time and then finally the "Manchapuri" or the planet Earth took the final shape. Thereupon after the creation of the planet, Marang Buru was being ordered by the Supreme to carry plantation. Thereupon, Durba grass , Chorkäta (the seeds of which are eaten mostly by the Santal) and Kendu etc were cultivated. Hãs and Hãsli were the selected ones to continue the process of creating new life. Out of the eggs laid by them, two humans were born. Following the instructions of the Ishwar, Marang Buru arranged for some sheltered places and some eateries needed for their sustenance. Out of the two newly developed humans, the male was named as Pilchu Hãjãm, and the female was called by the name of Pilchu Bufhï. (Hãfãm means old man, and Bufhï means old woman). However , the folk tales of the Santhals , comprises of two other versions.

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               North
    Vayu        Crab        Ishan
                 |
                 ?                      Pilchu Haram ?
West      Earthworm——? Tortoise?——Humankind ? ——     +
          + Earth      + Snake                  Pilchu Burhi ?      East
                 ?
                 |
    Nairrit      Lobster     Agni
                South
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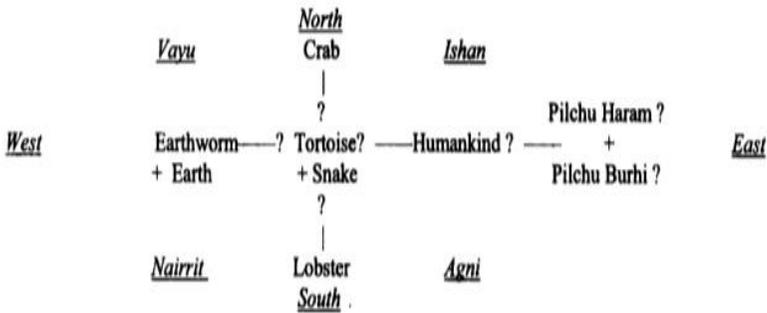
Fig 1 - The Santhal Cosmogony

(Mukherji & Mukherji, 2006). Other than this, the tales from the rural Bengal were also compiled by Sri Dakshina Ranjan Mitra-Majumdar in the form of "Thakur Mar Jhuli" and " Thakur Dadar Jhuli". Dr. D.C Sen had also contributed his research activities drawing out similarities between the tales orginated from the rural Bengal and collections of stories from the Aesop's tales. They in turn were found to have imprints from the Panchatantras's. (Upadhyaya ,1961). Before the advent of television, one of the popular systems in which the stories related to the "Ramayana" were delivered orally . This oral deliverance was accompanied with the "Patua" songs ,along with the scenic descriptions from the scrolls , in order to narrate the stories sung by them . The Patua's are generally the painters who intends to create long narratives related to various mythological histories or folk literature, through their paintings. These Patua songs were also collaborated with various presentation like "Ramila Jhumur (folk strains), "Panchali" (dramatic portrayal), "Yatra"(plays), "Chhau" (dance performances) and puppet shows. These paintings played a revolutionary role in making the folk or indigenous cultural background as indispensible aspect for political and cultural colloquy prior independent India. Such artistic vibes created inspiration not only amongst the creators who were willing to form latest art related to patriotism. This in turn helped in gaining attention of the government officials to distinguish that particular place in terms of its cultural specialties.

Abanindranath Tagore gave an elevated and different dimension to the conventional art theories , thereby introducing it in the Government Art College, Calcutta . He explained art in terms of emotions or feelings , that is "Bhava" and "Rasa". Jamini Roy(artist, creator of Jamini Painting) also emphasized the patua culture from his hometown, Bankura( West Bengal).
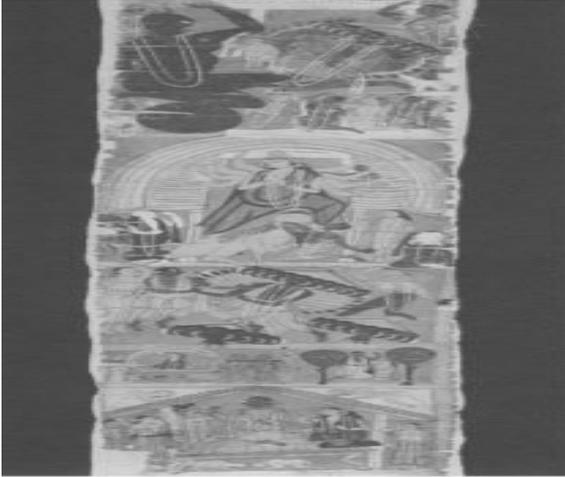


Fig 2- Ramayana scroll, third piece, late nineteenth century, Birbhum, West Bengal, 13'9"x1 '6.5". Anonymous donation. Formerly identified as Shakti Pat by curator Stella Kramrisch. Photo: Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Fig 3- Patua Gurupada Chitrakar painting a scroll for sale at Champaknagari, a temporary installation of Bengal art, part of the North American Bengali Conference, Valley Forge Convention Center, King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, 1997. Photo: Pika Ghosh.(Ghosh,2000).

## 2. Unison of Culture Amidst the Distinction of Geography

The states of western provinces of Bengal , popularly known as the West Bengal, share common cultural backgrounds with the state of Jharkhand. It is interesting to note two completely different states , with difference in their languages , have so commonalities. One of such aspect is the traditional dance style which is called "Chhau" in Bengal while it is popular with the name of "Sareikella Chhau" in Jharkhand. Sareikela or Seraikella is now one of the districts of Jharkhand. In one of the articles, which essentially deals with the talks of the author,called, Suresh Awasthi, that he had with Guru Kedar Nath Sahoo. Kedar Nath Sahoo had mentioned how the

Chhau dance form had originated from the "Parikhanda", where the word "Pari" means shield and "Khanda" meant sword. Therefore, it is essentially a form of exercise or it carries a martial origination. The masks , he mentioned, has a special emphasis as it is character based. The themes of Chhau dance consists of large variations starting from the stories of , affection, vengeance, malediction and good luck. Unlike other classical art forms, there is no direct implication of phrases –actions associations. There is use of either old songs or Oriya poems.



Fig 4- Swan Mask. ( Through the use of mask , the performer tries to portray the character's personality on stage)

He also added that there is no clear historic references about the Chhau dance but according to him, the use of masks on the stage was a simultaneous process along with the origination of the dance form. During the earlier times, masks were carved out of bamboos and thereafter painted with different colours. But, then they were replaced with masks made from clay and mashed papers.

Fig 5- Mayur( Peacock). Kacha- Devayani , is a tale from the Mahabharata ; Ramashok or the Sorrow of Rama is a part from Ramayana. The third group includes the dance styles which represents the different qualities of nature like the , Ratri or Night, Sagar or Ocean , Hans or Swan and Mayur or Peacock. (Awasthi ,1979).Now, when we come to discuss about the Chhau Dance form of Bengal , then first and foremost , we come across the name of the place called " Purulia". Purulia is known to be one of the hilly regions of West Bengal, close to the western borders of Bihar regions( presently Jharkhand). People staying at these places mostly speak in a western dialect of Bengali , known as the " Kurmali". Therefore, people residing at those places is known as "Kurmis". The masks used by Chhau dancers in West Bengal , were decorated with gaudy designs done with beautiful wires and chunks of beads. The Kurmis wearing these huge masks transformed entire personality from a normal worker to a fearful looking devil. Both the male and female masks mostly resembled each other, expect the presence of beards which helped in differentiating between the two gender. Some who performed as a Peacock , wore a white mask, resembling humans, along with a head of a peacock and a neck like

structure arising from his waistline and a movable tale , made with peacock feathers. Those who played the role of Demon, made use of blue colours rather than clothes. People playing the role of God, used bright coloured sarees. There feet remained exposed but were adorned with anklets. They also carry with them different armaments . All the dance performances which were conducted during the Chhau festive season were themed on various incidences of Hindu Mythology.



Fig 6- Goddess Durga fighting with the demon, along with her lion, embellished Chhau decors.

The tribe who were intricately involved with the Chhau performances, generally earned their livelihood by hunting , although they were asked to forcefully give up their job of huntsmanship and take up agriculture as their prime work. But, now since all the forest areas comes under direct jurisdiction of the government, therefore, any act of hunting done by them would be taken to be a crime. It is interesting to note that most of the steps used in this Chhau performances were essentially adapted or similar

movements were created as to those people do while hunting . The Chhau dances generally continues all throughout the night , till the break of a new day.



Fig 7- A scene of Chhau performance in a village ( From an informatory leaflet published by the West Bengal Research Institute of Folk-Culture).

(Arden, 1971). But, when we discuss about the distinction between the Chhau culture of Bengal and Jharkhand . Then we get to see that there is only a very thin line of difference between the two, based on the type of masks they use. The masks used in West Bengal (Purulia) is very conventionalized while those performers of Jharkhand use masks of smaller size.

Fig 8- Chhau Mask used in West Bengal ( Picture Courtesy-Soumita Mitra, Garh Panchkot( Located at the foot of the Panchet Hill, Purulia)

## 3. Conclusion

The folk lore of a place not only determines the cultural richness of a place but it also enables the young minds to travel through different places , thereby helping to develop an amalgamation. Through the stories they can become a part of the journey, either of rich or of a downtrodden , to feel and think about their miseries and reflect accordingly. This helps in developing the child to be a broadminded person, in near future. The customs of storytelling is a part of our social structure since a long time . During the early times, when most of the people were not well educated , then stories related to common man , the incidences which they faced in day-to-day started getting transferred from one to the others. They used to pass their evening time sharing various stories related to usual house chores. The part of the story- teller was generally taken by the head members of the family or the group, like the grandma. This allowed the child to have general idea about his family background and the other people living at his close proximity.( Boyd ,1949).The growth of folk literature in India took place due to two main trends. Firstly , when individuals concerned with anthropological findings, after completing their education from foreign countries, started including stories of folk origin in their areas of interest. Though they refrained the inclusion of folk stories directly from Hinduism. The attentiveness for these categories was started initially by the philologist and by individuals who are proficient in analyzing the linguistic origination of a language. Therefore , the primary initiation of highlighting the emphasis of indigenous tradition of our country was done by those from the western world.( Jason, 1983). But, though the beginning of the folk culture is considered to have been commenced from the west yet its actual essence not only thrived but actually blossomed well in soil of its own country, that is India. Whether we consider either the folk tales or the traditional

visual art forms in the form of Chhau. Each one has contributed immensely in their own way. The tradition of Chhau dance form can be considered to one such concept of the folk India which not only unites the two different states but it can be considered to be a matter of national pride. Similarly , the stories or the culture followed by different communities living in these states had played a major role in building the distinct identification attached to them. As India is a large country , divided into twenty- states, therefore the presence of such distinct and unique culture has enabled states in attaining recognition due to its rich cultural heritage. According to the French sociologists, social factual are determined by their common features, the rate at which they get spread or communicated from one age-group to other and their essential nature, makes it an essential ingredient of every society(p'Bitek, 1962).

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