

From Stage to Stigma: The Untold Story of Nachni

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Abstract

West Bengal is a treasure trove of folk culture, and Purulia is one of the anthropologically rich districts especially known for two art forms—Chhau Nach and Nachni Nach. While Chhau Nach draws from martial traditions and epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, Nachni, the dance, is performed by women dancers, who are accompanied by male partners known as Rasiks and musicians singing Jhumur songs, one of the prominent folk forms of song from the land of red soil. Despite its cultural depth and aesthetic value, Nachni Nach has long been shadowed by social stigma and marginalization. Nachnis are often regarded as “sub-women” and excluded from mainstream society. Belonging largely to lower socio-economic groups, many women enter this tradition through poverty, abandonment, or childhood trafficking, and their relationships with Rasiks—lacking social legitimacy—are predominantly about their outcast status. Over time, society has unfairly associated Nachnis with obscenity and prostitution, deepening their vulnerability and eroding the community’s willingness to pass down the tradition to younger generations. Drawing from gender studies and theories of marginalization, this paper situates Nachnis within the broader spectrum of women’s exclusion from cultural recognition. The study highlights the paradox of a tradition that enriches Bengal’s cultural heritage yet leaves its women practitioners socially and economically vulnerable. The analysis underscores and examines the urgent need for cultural rehabilitation, gender-sensitive policy support, and alternative livelihood opportunities to safeguard both the dignity of Nachni women and the continuity of their endangered art form.

Keywords: Nachni, Rasik, Folk Dance, Jhumur, Purulia, Cultural Stigma, Marginalization

Introduction

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 in mainstream society. The Nachnis of Purulia are women folk dancers who perform to the lively beats of Jhumur, a well-loved musical tradition of rural Bengal. Usually performing with their male partners, called Rasiks, the Nachnis have been an important part of village fairs, festivals, and gatherings for many generations. Their dance is not only a form of entertainment but also a reflection of the cultural identity of Purulia and the larger Rarh Bengal region. However, despite their cultural contribution, the Nachnis are rarely given respect. Society often treats them as outcasts. People who enjoy their performances at night do not interact with them during the day. They are socially excluded—even denied simple rights like using public wells or ponds. Most Nachnis are not educated, and their lives are controlled by their Rasiks, who handle money and decision-making. Purulia itself is land rich in traditions, home to many tribal communities with vibrant folk songs and

dances. Among these, the Nachni dance stands out as a unique cultural practice. Yet, it has not received the recognition it deserves. Many intellectuals, scholars, and moralists dismiss it as lacking artistic value, mainly because the dancers belong to marginalized groups of women. As a result, Nachni has been left out of most histories of Indian or Bengali folk dance, even though it has existed for centuries. It is unfortunate that this folk art, which once thrived in villages, has almost disappeared from serious cultural studies. While some novels and plays have been written about Nachni in recent times, they often fail to capture the real struggles and realities of these women. In this context, Jhumur gaan—the songs performed along with the dance—has gained more attention in academic discussions than the dancers themselves. This study, therefore, seeks to highlight the cultural value of Nachni dance, the lives of its performers, and the reasons behind their continued social neglect. simple sentences.



Pic Courtesy: Abhijit Chakraborty

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Theory

Feminist scholars argue that performance can both empower and marginalize women. Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity provides a useful lens: Nachni women gain visibility on stage through embodied expression but remain socially invisible offstage. Their exclusion from marriage and kinship systems reflects patriarchal structures that deny women cultural legitimacy.

Subaltern Studies

Spivak's (1988) provocative question—*Can the Subaltern Speak?*—resonates with the Nachni experience. Nachni women speak through dance and song, yet their voices are silenced in broader social discourse. They embody what Manna et al. (2016) call the “marginalized second sex,” simultaneously admired and ostracized.

Performance Studies

Schechner's (2003) framework views performance as both aesthetic expression and cultural process. Nachni performances not only entertain but also reflect and reproduce gendered power relations. The structural role of the Rasik, positioned as leader and organizer, underscores male dominance within the tradition, even as the Nachni is the central performer.

Together, these frameworks reveal Nachni as both an art form and a social negotiation of power, gender, and subalternity.

Historical and Cultural Context

The evolution of Nachni dance is quite challenging to determine exactly when the nachni dance first appeared and what sparked it. Today, the nachnis' dance repertoire demonstrates a blend of various styles and traditions, arranged locally and to please the popular taste of the commoners. It is safe to say that the dance form retains some preliminary movements of dancing predominantly found among the primitive tribal communities in this 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 classically bent and can be termed as 'classicist.' In the past, nachni performances were held in the courts of local landlords, called rajas or zamindars. These landlords hired expert musicians and dance teachers, known as ostads, in order to train the nachnis in singing and dancing. Dance of nachnis, along with the tradition of Chhau and some other performances, was a matter of patronage. In Purulia, the Kashipur royal family played a pivotal role in promoting dance, and historical accounts suggest that a local queen or chieftain of Begunkudor initiated the Nachni tradition in the 18th century. According to Sunil Mahato (2019), Borjuren Das, a Jhumur poet and devotee of Krishna, witnessed a *rasleela* performance during a pilgrimage to Vrindavan and, upon returning, recounted it to the queen. Inspired by his description, she organized a local raslila featuring young girls, from whom contemporary Nachnis consider themselves descended. Subsequently, the Nachni tradition became associated with itinerant folk troupes that combined Jhumur songs, dance, and narrative storytelling, performing across Purulia, Bankura, and Jharkhand in village squares, fairs, and festivals. Within these performances, the Rasik functioned as singer, accompanist, and troupe manager, while the Nachni conveyed the expressive dimension of the performance through dance and gestures. (Ryzhakova & Bandyopadhyay, 2022).

The cultural significance of Nachni lies in its ability to narrate mythological tales, devotional songs, and social satire, providing both entertainment and moral reflection for rural audiences. However, as Panda (2025) argues in *Dancers of Bengal*, the erosion of feudal patronage and the advent of modern entertainment diminished the prestige of folk arts like Nachni. Today, performances are often relegated to cultural festivals, where the form is showcased as heritage, but the women themselves remain socially marginalized.

Performance Practices and Costumes

Nachni performances usually take place in village fairs, festivals, and local gatherings. The Nachni, a female dancer, performs to the tunes of Jhumur songs, which are sung by her male partner, called the Rasik. Traditional instruments like the dhamsa, madal, harmonium, and tabla are used to provide rhythm and music. The dance movements are lively, graceful, and expressive, often telling stories of love, devotion, or social life. On stage, the Rasik sings and interacts with the Nachni, creating playful and dramatic moments. The Nachni uses gestures, facial expressions, and body movements to bring out the meaning of the song. Although audiences admire their talent during performances, Nachnis face neglect and stigma in everyday life. The Nachni performance is characterized by expressive improvisation rather than rigid choreography. Dancers use exaggerated gestures, eye movements, and body postures to

dramatize narratives of love, devotion, or humor. Costumes are essential to this process: Nachnis typically wear a lot of jewelry and brightly colored saris, and their makeup highlights facial expressions that are crucial for narrating stories. Rasiks, by contrast, usually wear simpler dhotis or kurtas, though sometimes with symbolic ornaments reflecting their status within the troupe (Ryzhakova & Bandyopadhyay, 2022). Unlike classical forms such as Bharatanatyam or Odissi, Nachni is rooted in rural aesthetics and prioritizes audience engagement. Over time, influences from **Jatra** and Indian cinema have entered the repertoire, introducing hybridized performance styles (Manna et al., 2016).



Credit: Gurvinder Singh

Gender, Marginality, and Stigma

The most pressing issue within the Nachni tradition is the social marginalization of its women performers, who often live outside normative kinship structures. Since their partnerships with Rasiks rarely receive recognition as legitimate marriages, Nachni women are excluded from the social identities of wives, mothers, or respectable community members (Manna, 2017). According to ethnographic accounts, Nachnis are positioned as a “marginalized second sex” torn between being a celebrated performer and being shunned in real life (Manna et al., 2016). This stigma is intensified by conservative discourses that conflate women’s performance with obscenity and immorality (Ryzhakova & Bandyopadhyay, 2022). The Rasik–Nachni relationship, at once professional and personal, further complicates this situation. Emotional intimacy often develops due to their close association in practice and performance, but dependence and hierarchy define the bond, with Nachnis relying on Rasiks for logistical support, patronage, and access to performance opportunities, while Rasiks benefit from the Nachnis’ talent and visibility to gain income and reputation (Manna, 2017). These dynamics reveal underlying gendered power structures, where Rasiks, or male patrons may exert significant control over the careers, earnings, and personal lives of Nachnis. While this partnership could foster mutual reliance, it also opened space for exploitation. Culturally, the Rasik embodies the male gaze and authority, while the Nachni represents female resilience, artistry, and vulnerability within a patriarchal framework. Their on-stage interactions—playful, seductive, and theatrical—thus become symbolic of broader negotiations of desire, gender, and societal constraint in rural Bengal (Manna et al., 2016; Ryzhakova & Bandyopadhyay, 2022).



Rasik Bijoy Karmakar with Nachni Postubala Debi
Pic Courtesy: Abhijit Chakraborty

Transformation and Contemporary Challenges

In contemporary times, the Nachni tradition of Purulia faces multiple challenges that threaten both the sustainability of the art form and the well-being of its women performers. Traditionally, Nachni performances thrived in village fairs, community gatherings, and local rituals, supported by rural audiences who valued live folk entertainment. Over the decades, with the migration of rural populations to urban centers and the rise of mass entertainment such as television, cinema, and digital media, the traditional spaces for Nachni performances have significantly diminished. This erosion of patronage has directly affected the economic stability of Nachni women, leaving many performers dependent on occasional festival performances or private gatherings for livelihood (Panda, 2025; Ryzhakova & Bandyopadhyay, 2022).

Modern cultural festivals increasingly present Nachni performances as a visual spectacle for urban audiences, emphasizing entertainment value over cultural depth. While this has increased visibility, it has also diverted attention from the social and cultural realities of the performers. Nachni women, already marginalized and stigmatized, often remain invisible behind the glamour of the stage. As Panda (2025) notes, such commercialization reduces the dance to a commodified form of entertainment, neglecting its historical significance, narrative richness, and the socio-economic struggles of the performers.

Despite its historical and cultural importance, Nachni has not received formal recognition under frameworks such as UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list, nor has it been adequately supported by state-level initiatives for cultural preservation. The lack of institutional recognition limits opportunities for formal training, funding, and social welfare schemes, leaving performers vulnerable to economic insecurity and social neglect (Manna, 2017; Ryzhakova & Bandyopadhyay, 2022).

Some NGOs, cultural activists, and researchers are striving to create platforms for Nachni women to reclaim dignity, preserve cultural identity, and secure livelihoods. These efforts include organizing folk festivals, documenting performances, providing training, and advocating for the recognition of Nachni as a significant cultural heritage. However, these initiatives remain fragmented, underfunded, and localized, preventing a comprehensive solution to the systemic marginalization of Nachni performers. For the tradition to survive and thrive, coordinated efforts involving community engagement, policy support, cultural recognition, and economic incentives are essential (Panda, 2025; Manna et al., 2016).



Pic Courtesy: Abhijit Chakraborty

Conclusion

The Nachni tradition of Purulia embodies both the richness of India's folk heritage and the vulnerabilities of marginalized performers. While the art form sustains itself through music, dance, and storytelling, its women practitioners are excluded from social legitimacy and institutional recognition. Safeguarding the tradition requires not only cultural preservation but also structural reform to ensure the dignity, economic stability, and rights of Nachni women. As Panda (2025) emphasizes, acknowledging the contributions of marginalized performers is essential for sustaining India's pluralistic heritage.

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