

# The Platformisation of Performance Traditions: Archiving Nachni Performances on Digital Platforms and the Parallel Economy of YouTubers in Purulia, West Bengal

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## Abstract

This article explores the parallel economy of YouTubers in Purulia, West Bengal, which has emerged alongside the platformisation of the nachni performance tradition. An internet revolution unfolded in rural India following Jio's introduction of cheap data packs in 2016, alongside the increasing availability of low-budget smartphones with cameras and access to video-browsing applications such as YouTube. In the years that followed, young men in Purulia began engaging with the internet and embarked on their journeys as content creators. Their motivation was to record, edit and upload videos of nachni performances, along with other 'folk' traditions of Purulia, to preserve the region's cultural heritage. However, this motivation was not merely archival but was also driven by aspirations for alternative digital careers in a space previously monopolised by urban, educated actors. Based on ethnographic research among the nachnis and the YouTubers, who travel with them to local night-time performances, this article examines how village YouTubers, as part of the platform economy, mediate cultural heritage through the framework of gaze, digital labour and vernacular aesthetics.

## Keywords

Nachni, performance, YouTube, platform economy, platformisation, vernacular aesthetics

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## Introduction

As I waited under the Sal tree on a secluded green field in Majerdhi village, with Rasik Jagadish and his nachni, Tara Debi, a blue Hero Honda Splendour drove in. The first thing that caught my eye was the ‘Sundari Purulia Jhumur’ sticker on the front fork of the motorcycle, along with the YouTube logo and an image of Goddess Manasa.<sup>1</sup> The motorcyclist introduced himself as Ganesh Chandra Pramanik, the proud owner of the YouTube channel—‘Sundari Purulia Jhumur’. Jagadish had arranged for me to interview Ganesh in a single room on the field, where some musicians from the *Bau*<sup>2</sup> and *Jhumur*<sup>3</sup> musical traditions meet regularly in the evenings to ‘jam’. Ganesh is one such musician from their group who is a professional *Jhumur* singer. However, since 2020, he has added another identity to his portfolio, that of a YouTuber documenting and circulating the cultural world he has been a part of since childhood. Ganesh’s channel boasts 36,300 subscribers and 593 videos uploaded over the last 5 years. He told me that they would regularly practice and jam in the *baithak* of a musician’s home—*amra baithak e program kortam* (we performed jhumur in the baithak)—also known as *baithak jhumur*<sup>4</sup>—when Yudhishtir babu, the poet or *kabi* in the group, suggested that Ganesh, a relatively younger musician in the group, record the practice sessions and upload them on YouTube. Programmes were fewer in number at the time due to the pandemic. The purpose of starting the channel was to archive *nachni naach* and *jhumur*, but the bigger concerns were marketing and promoting themselves to gain popularity, increase bookings and improve livelihoods. The first time I had witnessed a nachni performance was also on YouTube. The thumbnail of the video boasted of bright colours clashing in the background, bold fonts layered unevenly and the nachni’s image placed in the middle holding the microphone. The video was 11 min long and comprised a *Jhumur* song named *pothe ghate dekha hole, bolbi mukhe kotha* (if we meet on the road or by the riverbank/ghat, speak with me). The video had over 70,000 views, underscoring the performances’ immense popularity. It was intriguing to observe how a 5-h-long all-night performance was broken into several songs, each a few minutes long, and circulated on YouTube via smartphone video recordings of average quality resolution. An internet revolution unfolded in rural India following the introduction of cheap data packs by Jio in 2016, alongside the increasing availability of low-budget smartphones with cameras and access to video-browsing applications, such as YouTube. In the years that followed, young men in Purulia began engaging with the internet and embarked on their journeys as content creators. Their motivation was to record, edit and upload videos of nachni performances, along with other ‘folk’ traditions of Purulia, to preserve the region’s cultural heritage. However, this motivation was not solely archival but was also driven by aspirations for alternative digital careers in a space previously monopolised by urban, educated actors.

Existing scholarship on digital media practices in the peripheries (rural settings, towns and non-metropolitan contexts) lays the groundwork for the ongoing emergence of vernacular cultures. The discussion can be traced to the rise of regional film industries such as Bhojpuri films (Kumar, 2021), Malegaon cinema

or Maliwood (Tiwary, 2015), Manbhum cinema (Mukherjee, 2022), Ladakhi and Manipuri films (Kuotsu, 2010) in India as well as transnational cases, such as Nollywood in Nigeria (Haynes, 2007) and Lollywood in Pakistan (Aslam, 2015; Siddiqua, 2025). Tiwary (2015) argues that the Malegaon film industry in Maharashtra, popularly known as Maliwood, known for its spoof of Bollywood and Hollywood films, was a platform for local creativity. Responding to the region's dire socio-economic conditions, the industry thrived despite minimal infrastructure and resources. It worked with directors, writers and actors from the region itself, allowing the audience a chance at relatability that mainstream Bombay cinema never could. Similarly, the Manbhum<sup>5</sup> video and film industry in the early 2000s portrayed a vernacular aesthetic that emerged in the margins of Bengal (Mukherjee, 2022). These spaces created by the people of the region offered an opportunity to experiment and create vernacular content in the digital sphere, opening up a realm of 'democratic promise' (Srinivas, 2003). Nollywood, or the Nigerian film industry, also emerged as a response to the economic collapse, social insecurity and the lack of representation of Africa in mainstream Hollywood (Haynes, 2007). With the development of digital media and the internet entering the lives of rural Indians, platforms like TikTok and YouTube gained popularity for their short-form videos (Mazumdar, 2022; Nayaka et al., 2025). These platforms brought visibility to marginalised and geographically peripheral cultures through the rural digital creators. Purulia, as part of Manbhum, already had a rich history of participation in regional media cultures in the form of the Manbhum video industry. YouTubers emerged as the newer intermediaries of this in the rapid digitalisation of the country, including its performance traditions. Purulia's location at the border of West Bengal makes it a melting pot of hybrid cultures and one of the most poverty-stricken districts of the state. The presence of a digital media industry in the region is owing to a demand for local, relatable content and representation that mainstream Bengali cinema, or Tollywood, was unable to include, an escape from drudgery, and the presence of marginalised cultures with hybrid identities living away from the region's core.

With only five young nachnis still actively performing in Purulia, the art seemed on the verge of fading away. Yet, its popularity grew in parallel in the digital space. Initially, it seemed like an attempt to archive the region's cultural heritage. Gradually, it also became clear that what has emerged is a platform economy in which performers and their visibility are increasingly mediated by the YouTuber, YouTube's algorithm, the number of subscribers and the monetisation of the videos. The local audience is no longer the only one watching the nachni perform; it is now also mediated and circulated through YouTube and Facebook videos. The camera, algorithm and the digital audience have created a new regime of gaze. This brings me to the central question on which this article will shed light: How has nachni's profession led to the creation of a parallel livelihood for YouTubers within the platform economy? The purpose of this study is to examine how the rise of the platform economy in rural areas brings vernacular aesthetics, such as the recordings of nachni performance, into the digital space. This inclusion in the digital sphere not only ensures the archival of a stigmatised vernacular form but also actively restructures the aesthetic value attached to the form alongside the

gendered visibility and economic value emphasised by the cultural mediation of YouTubers and the algorithmic logics of the platform. I have tried to elucidate these points through the narratives of the YouTubers I interacted with in Purulia. The creators' narratives give readers insight into the motivations behind becoming YouTubers and into how they train themselves and sustain digital labour, which is intrinsically precarious. This work is intended for scholars interested in media and cultural studies, South Asian studies, digital anthropology, platform economies and the changing patterns of folk traditions in contemporary India. The article is divided into the following sections.

### *Who Are the Nachnis?: A Social Biography*

Nachnis are female 'folk' performers whose origins and present inhabitation are traced to Purulia, one of the 23 districts of West Bengal in eastern India. Sengupta and Narasimhan (2020) describe the nachni as a female folk dancer who performs night-long with her male partner, the rasik, at village melas and festivals held during Shiv Ratri or the onset of Spring. Nachni nach, locally known as *nachni shailya jhumur*, was historically patronised by landlords in the Manbhum region, later known as Purulia. Sengupta and Narasimhan trace the emergence of the form to the 17th century, when the Mallarajas of Vishnupur converted to Vaishnavism, and Vaishnav literature gained popularity in the region, particularly songs centred on Radha–Krishna devotion. Local zamindars and court poets invested economic and cultural capital in nurturing this musical tradition, giving rise to what came to be known as jhumur. Singers, lyricists, composers and dancers performed jhumur in zamindari courts, while rasiks trained performers in music and dance. The nachnis, on the other hand, functioned as court dancers and were often kept as concubines or mistresses by zamindars.

Following the introduction of the Permanent Settlement<sup>6</sup> in the 18th century, and until its abolition in the 19th century, nachnis and rasiks continued to enjoy elite patronage. The subsequent period was marked by attacks from colonial and nationalist social reformers on nautch dancers, leading to a gradual decline in support from the courts. While a few nachnis, such as Sindhubala Debi, who performed in the court of the king of Kashipur, continued to receive patronage, most performers shifted to entertaining village audiences across Purulia. For much of this period, the rasik remained the sole patron and mediator of the nachni's livelihood. From the 2000s onwards, the Government of West Bengal began introducing welfare schemes aimed at improving the living conditions of nachnis, though these initiatives often remain inadequately implemented. In the present, nachnis perform at local village fairs as well as at state-sponsored events. These performance spaces are intrinsically different. At village fairs, nachnis perform through the night for predominantly drunk male audiences; movements are exaggerated and sensuous, costumes brighter and make-up louder to hold the audience's gaze. In contrast, state programmes demand restraint: nachnis sing more, dance less and present themselves as respectable cultural representatives. They constantly struggle with stigma meted out for their cohabitation patterns, caste and profession.

Nachnis cohabit with their rasiks in ‘quasi-conjugal’ relationships marked by long-term companionship but also vulnerability and exploitation. Nachni is not a caste category but a performance identity; the form is variously called *bai nach*, *nachni nach* or *nachni shailya jhumur*. Performers primarily come from poor, lower-caste backgrounds such as Kalindi, Bauri, Shohish, Murra while rasiks, often Mahato or Karmakar, occupy relatively higher caste positions. Caste hierarchies deeply structure everyday life. Instances of untouchability, exclusion from domestic spaces and intra-nachni caste discrimination emerged repeatedly in conversations, revealing how stigma is both externally imposed and internally reproduced. Entry into the profession usually occurs in adolescence, when a rasik brings a girl into his household and begins training her. There is no formal recruitment; training unfolds through intimacy, cohabitation and labour. This training encompasses not only singing and dancing but also the cultivation of public femininity and respectability. Nachnis perform with male musician groups known as *nachni* or *bai parties*. Their comprising sequined sarees, belt, garland and jewellery individually curated to attract audience attention. While nachnis are revered as custodians of jhumur, their caste-marked bodies, public visibility, non-marital domestic arrangements and lack of codified performance norms continue to render them objects of enduring stigma. While the number of nachni performances is dwindling amid the growing popularity of other forms of entertainment easily accessible on mobile phones, a few young men in Purulia have taken responsibility for archiving and reviving the performance tradition through digitalisation.

### *Fieldwork Across Performance and Platform*

This article is based on fieldwork conducted in the Purulia district of West Bengal from December 2022 to December 2024, spread over 11 months. The region is located in the north-western part of the state. Bhattacharya (2014) writes that Purulia is renowned for hosting various marginalised populations and for its linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity. For example, the majority of people in the district belong to various backward communities, such as Mahato, Bagdi, Mali, Sahis and Domhad; Adivasis include Santhals, Bhumij, Karmali, Munda, Ho, Parhaiy, Shabar, Birhor, Kharia, Bedia and Bede. The nachnis comprise a heterogeneous community with surnames like Mahato, Kalindi, Sohish and Bauri while the rasiks are usually from relatively upper castes such as Mahato and Karmakar. The YouTubers I interacted with held positions similar to those of the rasiks. The region is also marked by extreme poverty, with agriculture as the primary means of subsistence. Nachni performances are mainly limited to the district, barring a few that take place in the neighbouring state of Jharkhand. My fieldwork amongst the nachnis involved not only travelling with nachnis during their performances but also engaging with them in their everyday lives, observing their relationships with rasiks, audiences, patrons, state institutions and the digital world of YouTubers. It was at one such late-night performance where I met one of the first YouTubers I interviewed—Lakkhikanta Mahato. Thereafter, using snowball sampling, I was able to contact and eventually meet with four more YouTubers, all spread out across the various blocks of Purulia. Interactions with the YouTubers

occurred in different places as and when the opportunity arose. While planned semi-structured interviews were held with all five respondents, I also learned much about their lives as YouTubers and content creators through informal conversations during nachni performances. The conversations and interviews were centred around their life stories, the motivation behind creating a YouTube channel, their technical training in recording and editing videos and their aspirations as digital labourers. Apart from primary data collection, this article also engages with secondary data collected by extensively studying YouTube channels started by young men (no women) in Purulia. I came across 18 YouTube channels that regularly posted content about Purulia's performances. Three of these channels solely posted nachni videos while the rest were a mixture of art forms like Chhau, Sohrai music, Jatra pala, Ahira geet, Jhumur songs, Nartaki dance, Kurmali songs and others. Most of these channels were launched in 2016 and 2017, indicating the period when affordable smartphones became popular in rural India, alongside increased mobile data access following Jio's launch in 2016. Given the proliferation of YouTube videos of nachnis, I began studying the various characteristics of these videos, such as the number of subscribers, likes, comment nature, thumbnails, cover pictures and textual motifs. Thus, digital ethnography and analysis have partially guided my work with the nachnis and the YouTubers of Purulia.

### *Platformisation and Parallel Livelihoods*

I first met Lakkhikanta at one of Postobala's programmes. While I knew all the musicians at the party, this was a new face. I observed him helping Bapon da<sup>7</sup> and Sailesh da tune the harmonium backstage. Soon enough, he took out a tripod stand from his backpack and began searching for a suitable place to set it up. That was when Postobala told me, *o YouTube e amader video chare* (he uploads our videos on YouTube). As the performance began, I observed Lakkhi da remain stationed near the tripod, zooming in and out, attaching his smartphone to a power bank when it ran out of charge and singing along to the jhumur that Postobala performed. Lakkhi da later informed me that there is no monetary exchange between the performers and the YouTuber. He explained that through his videos, performers gain visibility on social media, leading committees to book them for shows and their popularity to grow. The bai<sup>8</sup> party only asks him to mention their contact number in the caption for future bookings. Over several conversations in the following months, Lakkhi da shared how he began his journey as a YouTuber, his earlier profession, his earnings and his concerns about sustaining this livelihood as nachni performances diminished. His narrative revealed how nachni performances have enabled the growth of a parallel economy, making the two mutually dependent. This marks a moment where traditional performance economies intersect with the digital logics of platform economies, leading to the platformisation of cultural practices.

Helmond (2015) defines platformisation as the interaction between platforms and cultural producers. It refers to the 'penetration of digital platforms ... economic, infrastructural, and governmental extensions into the cultural industries, and the organisation of cultural practices of labour, creativity, and democracy

around these platforms' (Poell et al., 2022, p. 5). Social media platforms like YouTube operate as institutions that offer 'frictionless entry' and enable users to participate easily in value creation (Parker et al., 2016, p. 25). Such platforms create 'multisided markets' connecting users with institutions and businesses (Evans & Schmalensee, 2016). However, like other labour markets, platform economies are marked by precarity and inequalities based on gender, caste, race and ethnicity. While this project focuses on cultural producers, the term 'prosumer' (Toffler, 1980) complicates this category. The term enmeshes the characteristics of a producer and a consumer. Cultural producers (YouTubers), like Lakkhikanta, Ganesh and Dipak, are also consumers of YouTube content. All three learned recording, editing and uploading through DIY (Do It Yourself) videos on the platform, enabling an 'informal mentorship' (Chau, 2011, p. 69). Chau (2011, p. 68) attributes YouTube's popularity to its intuitive interface and instructional content, which allowed self-taught creators from Purulia to experiment within the digital space. With portable smart devices, internet access became easier in villages across Purulia. Rural youth began exploring digital platforms and aspiring towards careers that seemed achievable with smartphones and social media applications. Mazumdar (2022) argues that India's platform economy grew through the localisation of global platforms like YouTube and Facebook. Unlike linear technological transitions in the Global North, India and China witnessed accelerated adoption of the internet and smartphones (Flitsch, 2008; Nayaka & Reddy, 2022), bringing rural populations into the digital fold. Platforms like YouTube and TikTok became spaces for expressing creativity, understood here as 'everyday cultural production' linked to access, literacy and self-representation (Mazumdar, 2022, p. 343).

Optimistic narratives frame platform creativity as 'voluntary work' and 'productive leisure' (Burgess, 2006), while political-economic critiques highlight its precarity and unpaid nature (Casilli, 2017; Dyer-Witheford, 2015; Huws, 2014). Bainotti (2025, p. 33) notes that small creators often work under opaque conditions and continue free labour in the hope of future stability, leading to 'composite careers', that is, a number of simultaneous professions or careers. Lakkhikanta migrated to Benaras in 2007 and worked in bakery factories before returning to Purulia. In 2017, while still employed, he purchased a Vivo smartphone, began recording nachni performances and started his channel *Rukhamati*. After monetisation in 2018, he left his factory job, though he continues to farm. He earns between ₹10,000 and ₹12,000 per month from YouTube. Another YouTuber, Dipak Kumar Mahato, a BSc Agriculture graduate, works as an agriculturist in Purulia and has earned approximately 22 lakhs through YouTube. Unlike Lakkhikanta, YouTube remains a passion project for Dipak. Both thus sustain composite careers, combining digital labour with agriculture. Such creators collectively sustain, formalise and professionalise their DIY vernacular media practices (Nayaka et al., 2025, p. 186). The media practices of YouTubers in Purulia resemble an informal startup culture marked by creativity, experimentation, flexibility and entrepreneurship. Gupta (2024) situates this within 'experimental times', where work, social life and identities are shaped through everyday experimentation. This infrastructure of precarity, anxiety and hope promises pleasurable and creative work while demanding continuous engagement. Lakkhi da

emphasised that he no longer reports to a boss and can take breaks, though he must continue to make regular uploads to satisfy the algorithm. He continues to upskill in filming, editing and monetisation, waiting for virality and recognition. As Poell et al. (2022) note, low entry barriers produce speculative hope alongside precarity. The convergence of platformisation, informal startup culture and digital labour thus reorganises rural economies, producing parallel livelihoods alongside the performance economy that has long sustained Purulia's cultural life.

### *Digital Labour and the YouTube Gaze*

Ganesh Chandra Pramanik, the owner of the 'Sundari Purulia Jhumur' channel has built a network over the years, comprising performers from nachni parties as well as other YouTubers. Ganesh also keeps a tiny notebook in which he records the dates of performances as and when he learns about them. He is part of a WhatsApp group of YouTubers in the region, where the programme organisers share information, in the form of pamphlets, about upcoming local programmes. As I sat through the night observing Jyotsna Debi, a nachni from Kantardih, I also watched Ganesh's movements. While the musicians tuned their instruments, Ganesh unfolded the tripod stand and positioned it on the ground, adjusting its legs to dig into the uneven soil. There is no front or back side of the stage, since the nachni performs in circles, showing herself to every member of the audience seated in a circle around the *ashor*.<sup>9</sup> Hence, the tripod's position is determined by available space and the area with fewer people. Ganesh then wiped the lens of his phone with the *gamcha*<sup>10</sup> wrapped around his neck, checked the battery level and set the phone on the stand, adjusting the frame to capture the dancer and her surroundings for the next 5 h till dawn. He fixed the frame for the time being but kept zooming in and out throughout the performance to capture specific movements and gestures with greater focus. Ganesh also seemed to be acquainted not only with the nachni and the musicians but also with the program organisers, since he had been to the same venue several times to record performances of other nachnis. The nachni and the musicians share this workspace with Ganesh and other YouTubers. While the nachni's labour is embodied in her gestures, movements and singing, the YouTuber's labour is embodied in media technologies and platforms. This mediated labour is performed, circulated and valued through technological intermediaries such as cameras, algorithms, screens and a digital audience.

Bhattacharyya (2022) argues that 'with changes in the communications landscape, what is also changing is the way information is being recorded, preserved and transmitted' (p. 2). With the advent of platforms under web 2.0, such as YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and so on, there has not only been a democratisation of information dissemination, but for various marginalised sections of society, it has offered an opportunity for archiving their stories, everyday experience, art, performance and other aspects of life. In Purulia, the nachnis have gained popularity through their growing presence on social media, and a few men from the region who grew up watching these performances have joined the digital labour force as content creators by recording, editing and uploading nachnis

and other performances unique to the district. Digital labour falls under the purview of immaterial labour, which comprises immaterial products such as information, social relations and knowledge (Hardt & Negri, 2004). Fuchs and Sevignani (2013) conceptualise digital labour as the creation of content that builds relationships with consumers, the commodification and surveillance of users' data, targeted advertisements based on user activity and the organisation and flow of information through algorithms. Williams (1980) describes communication media as means of production—'indispensable elements both of the productive forces and the relations of production' (p. 50). However, he does not address the practices of subjects within this process or the question of whether communication itself constitutes 'a form of work' (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013, p. 251). The YouTubers of Purulia associate their labour with the labour of the *nachni* and have attempted to monetise the performance, but it is more than a question of livelihood. Labour and livelihood in this case are intricately intertwined with nostalgia, pride in one's culture and region, the desire to earn by commodifying crucial parts of one's life and sharing them with a global audience, and, as already argued, archiving a dance that is dying. The YouTuber's gaze is guided by these factors, which are intermeshed in the digital labour process. The labour is further mediated by the algorithmic gaze of YouTube and the audience gaze as well. The algorithmic gaze transforms the YouTuber's affective gaze of nostalgia and local identity into data and content that can be monetised. The *nachni*, on the other hand, performs in tandem with both the YouTuber's gaze and the algorithmic gaze as she looks back at the camera, which archives and commodifies her. What has emerged is a triad of gazes: the *nachni*, the YouTuber and the YouTube algorithm. The platformisation of *nachni* performance also reproduces gendered hierarchies of labour. While *nachnis* continue to perform and embody the spectacle, it is predominantly young men who occupy the role of digital mediators—recording, editing and monetising their performances on YouTube. This shift carries the patriarchal gaze and the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) of the *ashor* to the digital space where men retain control over the technologies of circulation and visibility. At the same time, women remain the visible bodies upon which attention and profit depend.

YouTube's algorithmic gaze is also guided by the digital audience gaze that views, likes and comments on the *nachni* videos. The likes on these videos range from 1,000 to 80,000, and the comment section usually has 20–30 comments, depending on the YouTuber's popularity. I will discuss a few comments from five *nachni* videos uploaded by three different channels—Rukhamati, Aamar Sundari Manbhum and Sundari Purulia. I have divided these comments into a few categories thematically, like appreciative comments, derogatory comments and moralistic comments. The majority of comments can be grouped into the appreciative category, in which viewers use one-word adjectives such as *shundor* (beautiful) and *chomotkar* (amazing). There are also longer comments like 'দারুণ দিদি খুব সুন্দর গান। তোমরা তো পুরুলিয়া লোক সংস্কৃতি বাঁচিয়ে রেখেছো।' (Amazing Didi. Very beautiful song. You have kept the folk culture of Purulia alive). This comment considers *nachni* performance a crucial part of the 'folk' culture of Purulia and believes that contemporary performers have kept the tradition alive. Another similar comment was made in a video of a popular *nachni*, Pabita Kalindi. It said,

‘প্রণাম ॥ বাঁচাও রাখ মানভূমের মান’ (*Pranam. Keep the pride of Manbhum alive*). This viewer views the nachni’s art as the pride of Manbhum. Certain comments seem appreciative at the outset, but it is difficult to understand purely from the text what the commentator meant. Examples of such comments are—*Khub sundor aami tuma ke bhalo bashi* (very beautiful I love you) and ‘ইনার ফোন নম্বরটা থাকলে কেউ জানাবেন প্লিজ!’ (please let me know if someone has her phone number). The latter can have two meanings. The commentator, who from the display picture seems to be a man, might have asked for nachni’s phone number to book her for a performance, even though the number is always mentioned in the description box by the YouTuber. However, we can also interpret the text to mean that the man is asking for the nachni’s contact due to other reasons since nachnis have often also been associated with sex work. Another comment that I believe can fall into the appreciative category is ‘কবি গোলক দাদা সাথে যোগাযোগ করতে পারেন?’ (Can you help me get in touch with poet Golok Dada?). This comment was with reference to the video of Bijali Debi, wherein she sang a jhumur song written by Golok Mahato. The YouTuber, Lakkhikanta Mahato, responded to this comment saying ‘7908\*\*\*\*\* এই নাম্বারে যোগাযোগ করুন’ (7908\*\*\*\*\* you may contact him on this number). Unlike the appreciative comments that are present in quite a large number, where viewers take pride in the nachni’s performance tradition and art despite its stigmatisation, there are also a few derogatory and moralistic comments that caught my eye. One such comment was ‘*a gulo ki*’, which literally translates to ‘what are these’. However, when said in a certain tone or context (like under a nachni video), it carries a disapproving, dismissive or moralising connotation—something like ‘What on earth is this?’ Another similar derogatory comment was ‘এ কেমন ঝুমুর বিক্রিত করতে করতে যা তা অবস্থা জীবনের করেছে’, which translates to ‘What kind of jhumur is this? By commercialising it, they have turned life into a complete mess’. This is a comment that many in Purulia will resonate with, that the style of performance of the nachni has destroyed the authentic jhumur. Other similar comments are, *Ganer sur bhalo, kintu bhasa sud-dhi karte habe* (the voice of the performer is good, but the language needs to be purified). Thus, the digital audience also includes self-proclaimed ‘experts’ of the art whose gaze is evaluative and moralising, often policing what they perceive as deviations from the ‘authentic’ form of jhumur. The comments, thus, reveal the various kinds of gaze with which the digital audience views the nachni. These gazes are often conflicting in nature. They range from a sense of nostalgia and pride in one’s local roots and culture to moral judgment and aesthetic critique. The YouTube gaze is anonymous and fragmented, unlike the gaze of the live audience. Yet, this gaze continues to regulate the visibility of the nachni in the digital space.

## The YouTubers of Purulia as Cultural Mediators

Founded in 2005 by three PayPal employees and acquired by Google 2 years later (Arthurs et al., 2018), YouTube has grown into one of the most significant repositories of popular culture. The platform hosts a wide range of content genres, including

shopping, music, films and live videos. Over time, YouTube has emerged as a site of vernacular creativity in several countries, including India. Prior to the platform's rise, media production in India relied on 'accessible, low-cost, portable media technologies to produce, circulate and consume media content' (Nayaka et al., 2025, p. 187). India has long sustained a thriving low-cost media economy dependent on informal circuits and piracy, exemplified by industries such as Malegaon cinema, Mewati videos, Bhojpuri music videos and Manbhum videos. While grassroots media cultures have always existed, digital platforms like YouTube, Facebook and TikTok have increasingly formalised the production, circulation and consumption of cultural content (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). YouTube has, thus, enabled subcultures to thrive 'within the binaries of precarity and creativity, the global and the local, as well as the professional and amateur' (Kumar, 2016, p. 5608). Despite this precarity, the platform has given rise to several YouTubers in Purulia's rural hinterlands. I interacted with three such creators—Ganesh Chandra Pramanik, Lakkhikanta Mahato and Deepak Kumar Mahato. 'I wanted to preserve the tradition or legacy of Purulia', Lakkhikanta Mahato told me when I asked why he travelled night after night to record nachni performances.

Lakkhikanta began his channel in 2017, coinciding with the arrival of Jio's telecom services in his village, Sukurkuti, located around 10 km from Dhatkidi. The launch of cheap data packs led to a rapid rise in smartphone usage across India (Sengupta, 2017). Lakkhikanta recalled the excitement of accessing the internet for the first time on his mobile phone. Searching online for jhumur and nachni performances, he found little content available. This absence prompted him to digitise and upload songs from CDs and DVDs sourced from computer centres and cyber cafés, often accompanied by still images. As his videos garnered significant views, YouTube approached him for monetisation in 2018. When asked how he learnt to navigate the platform and keep pace with technological changes, he stated that YouTube itself was his teacher, workspace and source of income. Educated only up to the 10th grade, Lakkhi da had grown up watching jhumur performances and nachnis, such as Postobala, Butan, Balika and Bimala, often sneaking out as a child to attend night-long performances. He described jhumur as a form that, while unable to transform life circumstances, refreshed the mind and offered temporary relief from sadness—an affective pull that kept audiences at the *ashor* through the night. Lakkhi da's YouTube channel, *Rukhamati*, currently has over 50.5k subscribers and thousands of views per upload. The channel description states: 'This channel Published. Jhumar Music Song & Chhoudance and more Purulia Addibashi cultural Video song', urging viewers to subscribe for updates. While the description does not explicitly mention nachnis, the channel's cover image prominently features performers such as Postobala, Bijola, Pabita and Sheila. Text on the banner reads 'Purulia Nachni nach, jhumur gaan, music channel', followed by contact details. Through these textual and visual motifs, the channel positions itself as a platform for promoting and preserving *adibashi*, or indigenous culture.

I argue that YouTubers like Lakkhikanta function as cultural mediators who translate the embodied, local performance traditions of the nachnis into content consumable by a broader digital audience. The strategic use of terms such as

*adibashi* appears to engage the platform's algorithm, equating Purulia's culture with indigeneity. Two other channels included in this analysis—*Aamar Sundari Manbhum* and *Aamar Sundari Purulia*—employ similar language, using terms like *oitijho* (tradition and heritage) and culture. The invocation of such terms is deeply tied to Purulia's sociocultural history and its long association with Santhal and other *adivasi* communities. Scholars across anthropology and cultural studies argue that tradition is actively curated and mobilised to assert identity and legitimacy. *Oitijho*, in this sense, is an active claim rather than a passive inheritance (Williams, 1977). Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) argue that traditions are often 'invented' to establish authority, continuity and cultural coherence, particularly where identities and resources are contested. Following this argument, YouTubers in Purulia can be seen as participants in a broader cultural project that curates nachni performances as symbols of regional pride in a district historically marked as backward. *Oitijho* here becomes a strategy for both belonging to and differentiating from the national cultural framework (Hall, 1990). The YouTuber curates elements of the nachni performance, a performance that is ephemeral. The YouTuber must adhere to the decreasing attention span of his digital viewers and upload edited parts of the entire 4–5 h-long stint, which the live audience sits patiently through, rather than enjoying themselves. I use the term 'cultural mediator' for the village YouTuber since he carefully selects the parts of the performance most polished and clear in his recordings, reinterprets them and attempts to legitimise a stigmatised performance style using categories like 'indigenous', 'heritage' and 'tradition'. After the night's performance, Lakkhikanta returns to his village on his motorcycle in the early hours of the morning. While the rest of the morning is spent getting some rest, he soon begins the other half of his work, that is, editing the raw recordings. Lakkhikanta told me that he has to sit through the entire footage and scout for parts of the recordings that have the clearest audio and video with minimal disruptions by the audience, programme organisers, children running around, a sudden halt due to a scuffle between drunk men, the nachni taking a break due to the immense exhaustion of continuously dancing and singing, the hawkers shouting over each other's voices to invite customers and so on. While all these 'disruptions' embody the ephemerality of the nachni performance, YouTubers make efforts to cut them out in an effort to meet a standardised sense of aesthetics seen in the digital space, which they believe disruptions will hinder. Continuity is considered more palatable than disruptions, much like a classical dance recital on the proscenium. YouTubers as cultural mediators wish to popularise the nachni art and save this *oitijho* from complete erasure. Many of the YouTubers like Ganesh are musicians and artists themselves and, hence, members of the community they are culturally mediating. Yet, the politics of cultural mediation becomes a point of contention that must not be overlooked, especially as we try to understand the nature of mediation and how it contributes to nachni's performance repertoire as a continuum. The performance has never been static; it is always in a state of 'becoming'. Its recording and presence in the digital sphere are a part of this continuum. Dietze (2018) contends that 'cultural mediators do not merely operate between different cultures, but that they also engage in a diversity of spatial arrangements and carve out arenas of action in which new cultural

practices and boundaries are produced'. They act as a mode of communication between different parties and contexts. With its long history of colonial occupation, cultural mediators in contemporary times play a complex role in society, going beyond the binaries of coloniser/colonised and oppressor/oppressed. They facilitate 'cultural encounters' (Bentley, 1993). 'Mediation does not merely mean transporting something from sender to receiver, or from one culture to another; it also includes actively shaping and redirecting the transaction' (Dietze, 2018). The interaction between the triad—the cultural mediator, in this case, the YouTuber, the content, that is, the nachni performance, and the digital platform, that is, YouTube, can transform the substance which is mediated (Mersch, 2016). What happens to ephemerality then? Does the performance change when delivered digitally? The nachni's space of performance has always been confined to the *ashor*. The *ashor* is not limited to the materiality of the stage (in the case of the nachnis, the stage is merely a rug on the ground) but includes the entire scene around the stage. The men in the audience hooting, screaming, shouting out sexual remarks, whistling, dancing and lost in the sensuous connotations of the jhumur or Bhojpuri song the nachni is singing and moving her hips and breasts to. It resonates somewhat with Prakash's description of the environment at an orchestra or *arkestra* performance. He says, 'The scene is sensational. The response is visceral. It is made of vibes, whistles and voices. In the local language, they call it *lahar* (sensation) that sets the arkestra stage on fire' (Prakash, 2023, p. 2). The *ashor* also includes the musicians who sit around the nachni as guards of her honour, who share jokes amongst themselves and whisper forgotten lyrics to the nachni. The *ashor* is a charged, affective space. The nachni's body commands the *ashor* as it leaps, swirls and walks voluptuously, capturing the gaze of the audience. All these elements come together to create the visceral experience of the *ashor*. I argue the nachni's performance is ephemeral. One has to be present in the moment to not just view the performance but feel it. Cultural mediation in the digital sphere at the outset, takes away this element of ephemerality. However, as already discussed, the performance is also a continuum that cannot be defined in a single way. The digital mediation contributes to the continuum of shaping and reshaping the performance as it moves from the *ashor* to the smartphone screen.

Postcolonial nationalism in India relied on cultural homogeneity, wherein dance and music became sites of moral authority and national identity (Chatterjee, 1993). As Chakravorty (1998) demonstrates classical dance forms such as Bharatanatyam and Odissi were elevated through elite nationalist projects, while other forms were relegated to categories of folk, popular, ritual or stigmatised performance. Performers such as devdasis, tawaifs, tamasha artists, cabaret dancers and nachnis were marked as vulgar and morally suspect, their bodies unsettling nationalist ideals of womanhood. Putcha (2021) identifies this as a failure 'to complete the transition from colonial subject to national citizen' (p. 131). Despite such marginalisation, nachnis have remained culturally popular in Purulia and its neighbouring regions. I argue that YouTubers, like Lakkhi da, Ganesh and Deepak, are instrumental in repositioning nachni performances as *otijjho*. This cultural form demands recognition and negotiates its place within regional and national hierarchies.

### *Vernacular Aesthetics*

Before the proliferation of YouTube videos, the demand for vernacular, informal and local aesthetics was fulfilled by video industries that had mushroomed across the margins of Indian states and cities, including small districts like Purulia. Mukherjee (2022) writes about ‘sub-regional’ video productions in the context of the informal video industry located in Purulia district, locally referred to as ‘Manbhum videos’. Characterised by song and dance sequences, these productions typically operate on minimal budgets of ₹20,000–₹40,000, employing local talent, locally sourced costumes and on-location shoots, with videos recorded on semi-professional cameras and edited in makeshift studios using free software. The circulation of Manbhum videos began around 2003–2004 and gradually gained popularity. Every month, two to three videos circulated through tea shops, markets and television screens in long-distance buses. However, with the rise of smartphones and YouTube channels in rural areas, the circulation of these videos in their traditional VCD format began to decline. Mukherjee argues that the Manbhum and Purulia regions have historically been politically volatile and culturally marginalised. The stories of the people of this region have often been neglected in dominant Bengali narratives or ‘presented as exotic locales’ (2022, p. 66). Consequently, Manbhum videos have served as a platform for underrepresented people—administratively classified into various castes and tribes—to present themselves audaciously. Through her analysis of several Manbhum videos, Mukherjee argues that the content and environment of the ‘Manbhum terrain’ (p. 67) depicted in them are largely absent from mainstream popular cinema, whether Tollywood or Bollywood. Speaking of similar Bhojpuri videos, Tripathy (2007) connects their popularity to aspirations for social mobility and the portrayal of fantasies within vernacular contexts. He suggests that the discontinuities between Bombay cinema and Bhojpuri videos should encourage researchers to explore the relatively understudied terrain of vernacular aesthetics, understood as people carving out a cultural space for themselves after being historically excluded from national discourse. This became evident during my fieldwork when I asked Dipak Mahato, a local YouTuber, ‘Who do you think predominantly watches your YouTube videos and comments on them?’ He smirked and replied, ‘You surely do not think bhadrals of Kolkata or the Brahmins watch these videos. The performances of our region have never appealed to them unless packaged in a certain manner’. His remark refers to the exoticised packaging through which performances such as Santhal dance or Chhau have often been consumed by the Bengali middle class. Vernacular aesthetics, therefore, existed long before YouTube and even prior to Manbhum videos, although these forms continuously transform and contemporise themselves. I argue that vernacular aesthetics should be understood as lived, embodied and technologically evolving while remaining rooted in sub-regional histories, video production practices and the politics of representation. The low-resolution, improvisational and affective qualities of Manbhum and Bhojpuri videos exemplify a cultural form that privileges familiarity and resonance over polish or technical perfection. With the emergence of digital platforms such as YouTube, this aesthetic has not disappeared; instead, it has found new

mediators. The rise of village YouTubers in Purulia marks the latest phase in this vernacular media continuum, where local creators equipped with smartphones and affordable data connectivity reconfigure older vernacular sensibilities within the algorithmic logics of the digital world.

Nayaka et al.'s (2025) recent work on the rise of village YouTubers provides an important contribution to the study of the platformisation of cultural production in the Global South and the creator experiences it entails. Based on fieldwork conducted in Lambadipally village in Telangana—where one of the earliest village-based YouTube channels, MVS, emerged—the authors demonstrate ‘how small-town creators have emerged as platform-dependent entrepreneurs and entrepreneur-dependent creators’ (2025, p. 189). ‘MVS platforms satire, spoof and comedy pieces produced by a set of aspiring village artistes from Lambadipally village (Karimnagar District, Telangana)’ (p. 190). What began as a vlog in 2012 evolved into a media collective and eventually a digital media company named Village Show Private Limited with nearly 3 million subscribers and collective labour organised around scriptwriting, shooting and editing. Channels like MVS, as well as others such as the Village Cooking Channel from Tamil Nadu, focus on village life while engaging with broader social themes. Nayaka et al. argue that the digital spaces created by these YouTubers constitute ‘vernacular creative publics where the identities of rural communities undergo online construction, curation and circulation’ (p. 192). The channel owners informed the researchers that their goal was to represent local culture and lifestyle, particularly in response to urban misconceptions that portray villagers as illiterate, ignorant or culturally inferior. I encountered similar sentiments among the YouTubers I interacted with during fieldwork. They expressed pride in their local traditions and *oitijho*, which they felt were gradually fading due to the region’s marginalised social position. Dipak voiced this concern when he remarked that ordinary artists from Kolkata often receive recognition and fame, while highly skilled performers from Purulia remain forgotten. Vernacular aesthetics can, therefore, be interpreted as a form of resistance that challenges entrenched class and caste hierarchies. While such resistance is not entirely new, platformisation has amplified its possibilities by allowing local creators to share their stories on global platforms. Guha and Kapoor (2021) argue that metropolitan centres have historically maintained hegemony over social media platforms, but the rise of village content creators is beginning to challenge these hierarchies as power structures shift. They note that such content gains popularity through its ‘untamed rusticity and realistic portrayal of everyday life devoid of pretence’, where minimal editing, homely settings and familiar props create an immediate sense of connection and nostalgia. Social media platforms, such as YouTube and TikTok, have thus contributed to the democratisation of cultural visibility by enabling diverse communities to showcase their everyday lives, traditions and artistic practices while also generating income. The emergence of creators like Lakkhikanta, Dipak and the MVS collective demonstrates how local creators are reclaiming spaces historically dominated by upper-class and upper-caste actors. Their videos challenge aesthetic hierarchies through affective elements such as nostalgia and pride in local culture, resisting the urban gaze that has frequently exoticised or appropriated vernacular

creativity. Despite the algorithmic and capitalist structures underlying platform economies, these digital spaces have enabled new modes of self-representation and assertion. Contemporary village YouTubers of Purulia thus carry forward the legacy of the Manbhum video industry, as vernacular aesthetics become mediated through the platform economy, where visibility itself functions as a form of cultural assertion and resistance against caste and class hegemonies.

## Conclusion

Purulia has always been known for its performative traditions, such as the more popular Chhau dance and the lesser-known but stigmatised Nachni form. With the internet revolution, the need emerged to archive the nachnis' performances, whose popularity was dwindling. Village YouTubers took this opportunity not only to record and preserve the art in a digital space, but also to create a parallel livelihood for themselves. This article provides an inquiry into the nature of digital labour, the rise of the parallel livelihood of YouTubers in Purulia and how the village YouTubers have emerged as the new cultural mediators in the 'vernacular media continuum'. I argue that vernacular media is not a new phenomenon in Purulia, where the Manbhum video industry once thrived. The YouTubers are an addition to the digital vernacular media, which I understand as a continuum. Observing the nachnis and speaking at length with YouTubers as well as analysing YouTube channels, it became clear that digital platforms like YouTube not only archive a fading performance but give it new meaning and sustain it. The nachni performance, which was once predominantly under the patronage of local zamindars and rasiks, is now being circulated on digital platforms and engaging with digital metrics such as views, likes, subscriptions and comments. The emerging digital dynamics in Purulia resonate with the scholarship on rural digital creators in other parts of India, such as the village YouTubers of Tamil Nadu. In both cases, digital platforms have encouraged and facilitated the visibility of vernacular creative publics beyond core metropolitan centres. However, this article has argued for the platformisation of the distinct trajectory of a stigmatised performance and body of the nachni. Unlike many village YouTubers that create a scripted performance for online viewing, Purulia's YouTubers mediate a pre-existing performance economy in the form that it is presented to the live audience, and yet, only certain elements of the live performance are presented to the digital audience. This cultural mediation of the nachni performance is, thus, politically charged. The YouTuber selects the recordings with the clearest audio and video with minimal disruptions by the audience and others at the *ashor*. Thereafter, they attempt to legitimise a stigmatised performance style by using categories such as 'indigenous', 'heritage' and 'tradition' to attract more viewers by invoking nostalgia, belonging and regional identity. While the ephemerality of the performance is lost in the process of digitalisation, the YouTubers are able to preserve and gain an audience beyond the *ashor* for the almost-extinct nachni performance. They are also able to imagine an alternative life for themselves as digital creators, a new profession filled with precarity but with the scope for mobility, learning valuable

skills and an exciting life working for oneself with the flexibility of time and space. Further research in this area can examine how the platformisation of vernacular performance traditions, such as the nachnis, creates new practices of digital gaze and digital labour. While this article focused on the motivations and lives of Purulia's YouTubers and how they have become cultural mediators of the performance in the digital space, it also raises questions about how algorithms and platform metrics shape the circulation of the performance in the digital space. The latter is something I believe must be explored and better understood. This will enable a deeper understanding of the layers of gaze that structure the digital afterlives of the nachnis. Lastly, comparative analysis of other regions of India where similar phenomena might be taking place will become important to understand how rural digital creators negotiate the precarity of digital labour and culturally assert themselves in the platform economy.

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### **Notes**

1. Manasa puja is marked to worship Manasa devi, the protector from snakebites and the Goddess of fertility and health. The puja takes place during the Ashar/Shravan (monsoon) months in the Bengali calendar and is celebrated across Bengal, Jharkhand, Assam and parts of Odisha (Britannica Editors, 2019).
2. Bauls are a community of minstrels from Bengal whose music boasts of elements of Vaishnavism, tantra and Sufism. Their belief go against structures of organised religion, the caste system and focus on the inner divinity of the body (Capwell, 1986).
3. Jhumur is a musical tradition that has emerged out of the Rarh Bengal area or better recognised as the Chotanagpur plateau. The songs are inspired by the eternal love between the Gods, Radha and Krishna. This was enhanced under Vaishnavite influence in the area. Thereafter, local landlords accepted it as their court music and 'darbari jhumur' or 'court jhumur' was born. The tradition is associated with the tribals of the region and has become a part of various folk festivals as well (Chakraborty & Mandal, 2013).
4. Baithak refers to a space right outside the house where men in rural parts of India often gather to chat. Baithak jhumur is an intimate session in which jhumur musicians gather at a patron or poet's home to sing together, accompanied by instruments. This usually takes place within the home or an area (baithak) right outside the inner premises.

5. In 1833, the erstwhile Jangal Mahal district was divided, and a new district, Manbhum, was constituted with headquarters in Manbazar. The district was very large in size and included parts of Bankura, Burdwan of present West Bengal, and Dhanbad, Dhalbhum, Saraikela and Kharsawan of present states of Jharkhand and Odisha. In 1838, the district headquarters were transferred to Purulia. Finally, in 1956, Manbhum district was partitioned between Bihar and West Bengal under the State's Reorganisation Act and the Bihar and West Bengal (Transfer of Territories) Act 1956. The present district of Purulia was born on 1 November 1956. Purulia is still considered to embody the Manbhuiya culture (culture of Manbhum), even though the erstwhile Manbhum no longer exists.
6. The Permanent Settlement of Bengal was a land revenue system enforced by the British East India Company in 1793. It was a system in which zamindars, who were made the hereditary owners of land, had to collect taxes from peasants and pay a fixed revenue to the British (Guha, 1982).
7. Da is a term of endearment used by Bengalis. It is short for 'dada' which translates to elder brother.
8. Nachni party is more popularly called bai party in Purulia. The word 'bai' literally translates to 'woman', and 'party' is a replacement for the word 'group'. 'Bai' is also used for a 'baiji' or a courtesan. In recent times, 'baiji' has been used in a derogatory manner to refer to a promiscuous woman. Many nachnis no longer wish to be referred to as bai or baiji since it further stigmatises them.
9. *Ashor* refers to the space of performance of the nachni. It is not a proscenium but a rug placed on the ground on which the nachni performs surrounded by the musicians.
10. *Gamcha* is a lightweight, rectangular, cotton cloth prevalent across eastern and northern regions of India. It comes in a variety of colours and designs. The cloth is used as a towel, a scarf around the neck or head to protect from the sun and even for religious rituals in certain cultures.

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