

The Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre under the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, has taken up a unique and ambitious initiative for reviving and revitalizing performing folk art forms as means of sustainable livelihood. The project is supported by the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India. The Departments of Panchayat and Rural Development and Information and Cultural Affairs of the Government of West Bengal are also partners in this initiative. 134 folk artists of Manikchawk and Ratua areas of Malda have formed 10 self help groups (SHGs). The groups are again pursuing the folk art form with great fervor. They have started a new journey where they are striving to get wider acceptance of audience beyond their immediate territory. They are using their art form to as a tool for community education.



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Domni

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Domni is a form of folk drama popular in Malda district of West Bengal. The folk form originated in what is called the *Deeara* region in north western Malda lying along the banks of river Mahananda. People from Purnea, Bhagalpur, Mithila, Darbhanga, Gaya areas of Bihar, Santhal Parganas of present day Jharkhand have long settled in this area. The local dialect Khottai is a mix of Bengali, Bhojpuri, Maithili and Urdu. Domni artists speak and sing in Khottai. Local characteristics enrich folk art. Domni has been enriched by the multicultural demography of this area. It exemplifies how our social traditions have been enriched through assimilation of diverse communities, languages and culture.



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Domni is poor man's comedy. The performers are mostly uneducated and from backward communities. They use their art form for relaxation after a day of hard labour and at the same time to voice their joys and aspirations, woes and worries in a humourous way. Scripts are not used in Domni. The actors and actresses use extempore dialogue, songs and humour. Traditionally the dramas pertained to stories of mythology. The Domni artists also perform drama on social and political issues, stories of natural calamities etc. The drama begins with *Asar Vandana* or the overture followed by *Nachari* or *Lachari*, which is the main body of the drama. The overture starts with a tribute to all the Gods and Goddesses accompanied with musical instruments like harmonium, drums (*dhol and khol*) and percussions (*kartals*). The main body of the drama starts with song and dance of the *Chhokras*, who are male actors dressed as females. The drama in this section is made attractive with the introduction of characters like jesters and comedians with their poignant and satirical dialogues on social evils and inequalities.

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As technology reaches out to remote villages, avenues of entertainment are changing. This folk art form is thus moving towards oblivion. Many artists have out migrated in search of work. The younger generation is hardly interested to learn.



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