Who Says Only Boys Can Roar Like Tigers? Baghuni Tells the Story of a Young Girl Challenging Gender Barriers in Traditional Tiger Dance

> The Odia film celebrates courage, cultural identity and the freedom to pursue one's dreams

Goa, 21 November 2026

What if a little girl decided that some traditions were meant to be danced with, not simply followed? What if she dared to enter a world where the tiger's stripes were traditionally painted on men and asked, “Why not me?”

This is the story of Mini, an 11-year-old girl from a remote village in Odisha, who dreams of becoming a *Bagha Nacha* performer. A traditional tiger dance form long dominated by men, Bagha Nacha is a cultural practice that Mini wishes to embrace on her own terms. For her, the aspiration is not merely about performing a dance, but about having the freedom to dream, challenge conventions and pursue her passion.



Inspired by true events, *Baghuni* (Dance Like a Tiger), written and directed by National Award-winning filmmaker Jitendra Mishra, tells the story of a young girl's determination to challenge deep-rooted gender stereotypes. Set against the backdrop of Odisha's vibrant folk traditions, the film explores gender barriers, social conditioning, cultural identity and the courage to question established norms. The film held its gala premiere at the 57th International Film Festival of India (IFFI) in Goa on November 22, 2026.

Addressing the press conference, Jitendra Mishra described *Baghuni* as a deeply personal milestone, marking his directorial debut after nearly two decades in the film industry. Recalling his association with IFFI's Indian Panorama over the years, he expressed gratitude to IFFI, NFDC and the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting for their support.

Speaking about the film, Mishra said that while Bagha Nacha provides its cultural backdrop, the story ultimately celebrates gender equality, courage and the human spirit. Inspired by the seven remarkable women in his own family, he emphasised that girls, when given equal opportunities, can excel beyond expectations. Rooted in extensive research in Berhampur, Odisha, the film also features local children selected through auditions across the state and trained for several months alongside seasoned actor Sabyasachi Mishra.



Acclaimed Odia actor Sabyasachi Mishra described *Baghuni* as a refreshing blend of compelling storytelling and Odisha's rich cultural heritage. He highlighted the contrast between Bagha Nacha, the traditional tiger dance, and Baghuni, meaning tigress, as central to the narrative, adding depth and intrigue to the film.

Sharing his experience of portraying a traditional Bagha Nacha performer, Sabyasachi revealed that he shed 30 kilograms and underwent rigorous physical and spiritual preparation to bring authenticity to the role. He also spoke about the demanding rituals and hours of intricate body painting associated with the folk art, in which the performer is revered as an embodiment of Goddess Maa Bhagabati Budhi Thakurani. Expressing confidence in the film's global appeal, he said *Baghuni* has the potential to set a new benchmark for regional Odia cinema and urged the media to take its message to audiences worldwide.

Producer Partha Panda expressed gratitude to IFFI, NFDC and the Government of India for honouring *Baghuni* with a gala premiere and providing a platform to showcase Odisha's cultural heritage to an international audience.



Through Mini's journey, Baghuni brings a deeply rooted local tradition into a larger aqnd more global conversation about courage, identity and the freedom to challenge convention. In this spirit, the film resonates with the theme of IFFI 2026, 'Stories Without Borders', reaffirming how cinema can carry local voices to global audiences and make stories from one corner of the world meaningful to another.

The press conference was moderated by Smt. Nikhitha A. S.

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