

Online Peer-reviewed
Multidisciplinary Journal

December 2023
Volume- 1, Issue- 1



Netaji Satabarshiki Mahavidyalaya, Ashoknagar,
North 24 Parganas, West Bengal- 743223



Chhau: The Pride of Eastern Indian Culture

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Abstract

The diversifying culture of India has not failed to provide a unified contribution to enrich the rich and highly varied cultural heritage of the country. Traditional art has been a sector of high infringement for the people concerned with Indian culture and heritage. India with its high degree of cultural difference among races and tribes is fortunately, home to many such traditional artwork. This 'Chhau Dance' which has its origin drawn from Orissa has been a great contributor to India's cultural heritage. It is a modified form of martial arts, and involves scenes of war, and mythological fights. The dance portrays various mythological characters, and the dress code has derived its unique feature from the handmade Chhau masks. However unfortunately, due to lack of patronage and publicity the culture is dying off gradually, though there are fair attempts from the government to restore its importance. We should be concerned enough to preserve these masterpieces of art, so that we could talk about the enriched heritage of India with proud.

Keywords: Chhau dance; Purulia Chhau; Martial arts; Mythological theme; Indian folk dance; Cultural heritage.

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Introduction

The Indian dance and dance drama traditions are the most perplexingly complex and varied theatrical cultures in the world. India's geographical vastness, ecological variety multiplicity of races and their languages, different religious beliefs and rituals, intricate social structure all have contributed a lot to creating its most colourful panorama of dance and dance drama traditions. In Indian dance forms, the mask dance 'Chhau' of Eastern India is quite unique.

There are three major forms of Chhau but it is difficult to ascertain the antiquity among them as it is of this region and probably one of the most arduous areas to penetrate by an outsider to go through the several ancient scriptures that were noted. The hostile tribes of this hilly region and thick forests are the inhabitants of this area, and they made it almost impossible for any trespassers. According to written records and incomplete historical evidence so far to our knowledge, we are compelled to accept some reconstructed notes that mention the local and few Hindu chieftains who gradually established their sovereignty within some small pockets of this region after the 12-14 century A.D (FOLK & CULTURE, Purulia District, Government of West Bengal | India, n.d.). who influenced the life and customs of the native tribals slowly. The mask dance Chhau is distributed into three adjoining states i.e., Bengal, Bihar and Orissa among their tribal belt, where the tribes and other common people perform this dance.

Chhau- its Meaning and Forms

The various forms of Chhau are named after the village or district where they are performed. In Bengal, it is known as

the Purulia Chhau, in Bihar, it is known as Seraikella Chhau whereas in Orissa, it is known as Mayurbhanj Chhau. Thus, the earlier writers have exercised to understand the origin of the word Chhau considerably, however they have surprisingly tried to establish the origin of the word Chhau from Sanskrit root word 'Chhaya'. Others have tried to justify Chhau's martial base, and they have suggested deriving the meaning of the word Chhau from the local dialect, which means an army camp. But the outcries of the performer or the drummers during performance were, however, overlooked by them. The singer drummer, particularly in Purulia Chhau, used to rush towards the new characters by shouting 'Chho.... Chho....Chho' before entrance into the dancing area with excitement, which seems to infuse the same enthusiasm among the dancers. Most likely, the word Chhau is associated with the earliest hunting occupations of the natives, which is now associated with their expression of joy and excitement through their dance.

Characteristic Features of Chhau

Purulia Chhau has observed very little development since its hunting or warfare origin, probably due to a lack of sustained patronage and guidance. Like other dance forms of India, Chhau didn't receive as much royal patronage, if it wasn't for some Hindu States of Seraikella, where it was admired, and did receive the likewise patronage. But, considerably, Chhau, in the modern days is inculcated and upheld by the Mahatos of rural purulia, who gave it a lifeline to come into the focus. Mahatos, and a few other related communities, bestowed their passion for this particular form of dance. The unique postures and stances, as seen in these respective sects, gave the ultimate cumulative form to the modern day Chhau (Bhattacharya, A. 1954 a). This Chhau is almost an antithesis of the sophisticated and stylized form of Seraikella Chhau, which was performed by the early inhabitants of this arid region (FOLK & CULTURE, Purulia District, Government of West Bengal | India, n.d.). It consists of powerful movements, kicks, leaps, and artistic acrobatics accompanied by somersaults. In its basic position, the dancer's legs form a square. In this highly open leg position, the dancers are able to proceed on the stage by moving the soles of their feet slightly sideways without lifting them from the ground (Chhau, Dances of Eastern India Derived from Martial Arts – Asian Traditional Theatre & Dance, n.d.). The dance performance is preceded by brief and simple rituals conducted in front of a Shiva temple or on the village grounds. The head of the village is the patron, who carries a brass pitcher on his head to his house, where his wife sprinkles the water of the pitcher on the newly harvested crops (FOLK & CULTURE, Purulia District, Government of West Bengal | India, n.d.). More elaborate rituals are offered to the God of the Sun later in the month of May, around the 14th. At this time, many devotees are observing austerities, including piercing their bodies with an iron hook. They are suspended on a high pole and also whirled around to suggest the progression of the Sun in various constellations throughout the year on the 'Chadak' festival. The Bagmudi rulers patronized these dancers and dance from till the early decades of the 20th Century. However, the rulers could hardly provide them necessary support due to unproductive land and scanty rainfall year after year. So, these performers, too, were compelled to migrate to nearby urban cities to manage their living. The noble and heroic characters like Rama, Sita, Hanuman, Ravana, etc., are depicted with forceful gestures. The first dancer expresses himself in front of the audience as Lord Ganesha, and this ritual for the Chhau has been followed from the early days of its origin. A specially shaped dancing area is prepared during the time of the festival, where several dancing parties assemble to perform. The dance groups are accompanied by two or more 'Dhamsa' or kettle drum players, Sehnaï, and another kind of drummer. A bo-like wind instrument called 'Marui' is played during the performance. According to famous Chhau artist Bhagaban Das Kumar of Purulia, Chhau was imported from Seraikella. He referred to a person named Banamali Goswami who learned this Chhau dance from the Raj palace of Seraikella because, in the earlier periods, only Seraikella possessed Chhau parties. He adapted this dance form and performed the Chhau dance in Purulia for the first time. At that time, Chhau was a solo dance done by one single artist. It is said that Jipa Sing, the father of Chhau artist Gambhir Sing Mura, learned his dance forms under the supervision of Banamali Goswami. It is true that in its childhood, Chhau was devoid of any religious influence.

A small village in the Purulia district named Chorida provides some of the best kinds of masks throughout the Chhau season. Almost every house and every member of the household is associated with mask-making or assembling decorative materials for headgear of the dancers. The Chhau masks of Purulia are a little bit heavier than the Chhau masks of Seraikella. Thick layers of clay, paper and mud are used in making Chhau masks of Purulia. However, the process of mask making is nearly the same. The eyes drawn on these masks are wide open, whereas the air passage of the nostrils is very narrow. Knitted eyebrows and thick hair growth are made by pasting coloured jute fibers to ascertain demonic nature of a character.

Importance of Chhau as an Art Form

Chhau ranges from simple folk to highly developed styles, and all the styles of Chhau dance are called Chhau. So, Chhau seems to be a generic name of a group of stylistic variations of dances. Thus, it is inevitable to use an epithet to distinguish one dance form from another. Under the patronage of few respective feudal nobility, the three most popular styles of Chhau were developed, and thus, the styles have their epithets according to the names of the places where they developed. They are known as Seraikella Chhau, Mayurbhanj Chhau and Purulia Chhau. These three styles of Chhau are named after the degree of sophistication they acquired in the feudal codes as stated in the descending order. Also, the names of the respective dances follow the area of their upbringing. Stylistically, these three forms differ from one another, but they also have many similarities. All the three dance forms are simply called by their generic name, 'Chhau', and it is the most important and significant similarity among them. Practically, the epithets are given for our convenience. Usually, a generic name points out the root character of the class to which it belongs. If the three styles of Chhau are analysed, we can easily understand that they all have martial strains. The character, even having any degree of development, remains an integral part of that class either overtly or as an underlying base. The word Chhau is also meant to attack stealthily. The Seraikella and Mayurbhanj styles of Chhau are practiced by holding a sword and a shield. The rudimentary dance styles are known as 'ruk-maar-naacha', which means the dance of attack and defense in Mayurbhanj. While in Seraikella, it is known as 'Phari-khandaa-khela', which means the play with sword and shield. It can be unmistakably concluded that the mother of Chhau dance exists in the style of 'Paaikaali' dance, which is still performed in Asanapaat village in Orissa. The leg extensions of 'Paaikaali' dance are exactly like that of Chhau, and a kind of attack and defense dance almost like 'ruk-maar-naacha' is performed by them. Even if the use of musical instruments in 'Paaikaali' is exactly the same as those of Chhau. Nachni dance also played an important role in Purulia Chhau to make its present identity (Chhau, Dances of Eastern India Derived from Martial Arts – Asian Traditional Theatre & Dance, n.d.). "Thematically, many of the Santal dance share some of the traits of Chhau dances" Chhau was not only a war dance but also a ritual meant for spiritual preparation at its formative stage, and at the same time, it is a dance culture to conquer fear through the anticipation of victory.

The three styles of developed Chhau have many similarities because of the connection of religious associations and rituals. All these three styles have another very significant similarity, the dance, as well as the rituals connected with them culminates in a festival which ends on the last date of the month of Chaitra (FOLK & CULTURE, Purulia District, Government of West Bengal | India, n.d.). In these religious rituals, the deities of Lord Shiva and Shakti are worshipped, which leads us to believe that the Trantrik culture had a great influence on Chhau at its formative stage. The female gaits and movements of the Chhau dance were borrowed from the Nachni dance almost exclusively. Some researchers opined that the female dance elements in Chhau introduced the aspects of Lasya Bhava from the Natya Shastra that brought elegance, sensuality, and beauty to the dance form, whereas the aggressive male dance movement is attributed to the Shiva's Tandava style of dance. But, according to Dr. Ashutosh Bhattacharya the characters in Chhau are mainly male, even if sometimes female characters are noticed, but they're played by men. And it's quite interesting that, female characters are quite influenced by the masculine act of aggression, even body movements signify manly characteristics. Often, the

character of Goddess Durga is portrayed in Chhau, but in that case too, the masculine movements and aggression is seen, where it's quite difficult to distinguish the body language of Asura and the Goddess. So, the feminine elegance, the touch of beauty and character of warmth is quite missing in Chhau. As it stands, Chhau seems to be more influenced by the manly nature of aggression and endeavour (Bhattacharya, A. 1954 b). However, each style has its own charm and aesthetic appeal without having a feeling of superiority over others. In their own way, they are all fascinating, and all together, this dance form enriches the performing art heritage of our country.

Recognitions

1. Chhau dance was recognized in the UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Culture Heritage of Humanity in 2010.
2. In 1960, the Government of Orissa established the Government Chhau Dance Centre in Seraikella.
3. The Mayurbhanj Chhau Nritya Pratisthan was established at Baripada in 1962.
4. In 2017, the Indian Government issued a stamp so as to portray the heritage and culture that was induced by Chhau dance in the Indian art and culture. The stamp consisted of a Chhau mask depicting a Goddess, probably, and it was named 'Chhau Mask'.
5. The National Centre for Chhau Dance was established by the Sangeet Natak Akademi at Baripada Orissa.

These institutions engage in training involving local gurus, artists, patrons and representatives of Chhau institutions and sponsor performances. The government of Orissa also sponsors Chaitra Parva festival for the performance of the Chhau dance. These institutions engage in training involving local gurus, artists, patrons and representatives of Chhau institutions and sponsor performances.

In Popular Culture

Chhau dance performances have been used in many cinemas. Ritwick Ghatak, the eminent film director, had improvised Chhau dance in many of his famous films, to incarnate the message of the screenplay, for the audience. Even today's hit movies 'Barfi' and 'Gunday', have also displayed several scenes of Chhau's dance performance during its playtime.

Conclusion

Chhau became renowned both nationally and internationally at the end of the 20th century. Now, it is often included in festival programmes; however, it has been removed from its original context today. Its powerful technique has also been used as a basis for contemporary choreographies. However, this art form should be considered as part of the National Cultural Heritage of Eastern India.

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