

Chhau: A dance drama of Mayurbhanj, Odisha

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Odisha possessed a rich tradition on Dance-Drama–song- music before second century B.C. The inscription narrates that Kharavela organised and patronised “*Samaaj*”(Folk Play) along with *Geeta- Vadya- Nrutya*” for entertainment of his subjects. He had also constructed an open air pendal and auditorium in a scientific way; the reminiscence of the style of such construction can be traced in *Natya Shatra* of Bharata Muni in first century AD Odia sculpture has immortalized the art of dance, Drama and music through the stone relics of the caves of Khandagiri and Udaygiri of Bhubaneswar, base paintings of Sitabinji of Keonjhar , sculpture of Mukteswar temple and Rajarani temple of Bhubaneswar, stone images of Sun temple of Puri.

Theorists are finding out two different theories about culture- the idealistic and the materialistic. But there is no historical evidence regarding the origin of Mayurbhanj *Chhau*. Primarily ‘*Chhau*’ is a Folk dance theatre or Dance Drama(*Nrutyaavinaya*) form of Eastern India. Mainly it was derived from martial art form of this region. Mayurbhanj *Chhau* is one of the most unique art form which has given Mayurbhanj worldwide popularity. As far as the origin of this style of dance and music is concerned there are many theories, historical anecdotes. Some say it has come from the word ‘*Chhatak*’ and some say it has been derived from the word ‘*Chhauni*’. Whatever may be the origin, *Chhua* is an excellent medium of art for its vibrant moves and music and the indigenous religious practices attached to it. Currently involved with the Chhau, Guru Dillip Kumar Mishra has said “The word Chhau consists of two letters ‘Chha’ and ‘U’ . In odia ‘Chha’ means six. It indicates that Chhau composed with six Topka (Style of Walking) and six music component (Dhumasa, Dhola, Chadchadi, Mohuri, Bonsi and Harmoniam). Therefore, probably the word Chhau has coined from a antiquity for this very reason. Though all these years Mayurbhanj *Chhau* has been through many alleys, some stiff and some smooth, but its voyage goes on....it continues to attract artist, art lovers from all over the world who become mesmerised with its inherent vigon. It has a long tradition of changes with the time needed. Now *Chhau* refers to three types of dance forms performed in the present states like Odisha, West Bengal and Jharkhand. The etymology of the term ‘*Chhau*’ is not clear. Some researcher opine it is derived from a word meaning MASK while other reckon has it come from a word meaning a

‘Military Camp’. It is also said that the word ‘*Chhau*’ is derived from the Sanskrit word ‘*Chhaya*’ which means shadow or image. The word ‘*Chhai*’ is very close to action or imitation theory of Drama. In Odia ‘*Chhauka*’ means ability to make a sudden unexpected attack. Perhaps *Chhau* dance originated from the martial dance *Phari Khanda Khela*(Playing with the sword and the shield) Among all the ancient dance drama forms, *Chhau* is popular everywhere as the one featuring the ancient martial skills. Going by its other name ‘*Paika Nrutya*’ the art or action vividly brings up the olden memories of rule by powerful ruler of odisha Ganga and Gajapati. ‘*Paika Akhada*’ or village gymnasiums exist in every part. The local youth assemble in the evening to do traditional physical exercises and dance with the sword to the accompaniment of music from drum. The dance drama form holds in its various poise and movements the delicate art of building physical excitement in the bodies of fighters that leads them to spirited fight in the battle.

Before ubiquitous song, music, dance and folk theatre (*Sama*) were abundant in the ancient society of Odisha and grew with the royal patronage of the local kings and rulers. After that the addition of of mythological, historical and social theme of this dance may be identified as drama. Due course of time this dance came to be known as drama. Therefore also the *Danda Nacha*, *Chadeya Nacha*, *Ghoda Nacha* came to be known as *Danda Nata*, *Chadeya Nata*, *Ghoda Nata*. So the ‘*Chhau*’ dance in this way transformed *Chhau* into a dance drama. If we look at the history or evolution of this dance, we can realize how *Chhau* dance developed into a drama form. In the beginning *Chhau* was purely in a dance form. Song, music mythological tale etc were added to it and the flavour of it promoted this form into a kind of drama. *Chhau* as a group dance purely depended upon this theme. *Gita*, *Kirata*, *Nishitha Milan*, *Bonshichori*, *Maya shobari*, *Pachupandava*, *Nataraja*, *Chakravyua*, *Goruda Bahana*, *Tamudia Krushna*, *Mohakali* (Mythological theme based), *Keuta-Keutuni*, *Mulia*, *Adibasi*, *Mundare jhala Tundare Hosa* (Social theme based) etc are full of this kind of dramatic qualities. Even if a solo dance portrays single character it has the charm and flavour of all the dramatic qualities. In a solo dance like ‘*Sabar Toka*’ (Hunter man) the emotion displayed with bodily action through sharpening of weapons, preparing for hunting , taking out of tobacco from waist and putting into the mouth, difficult path in a jungle, expedition of hunting, quenching of thirst by drinking sweet fountain water, following the footsteps of tiger, to combating the tiger and killing it, joyful carrying of

the hunted in his shoulder etc . So through a careful study of this artistic dance form, we can derive of the conclusion that in order to make it more artistic and enjoyable, dramatic elements are undependable. But in modern time there is a difference between the written drama and folk form of this kind of dance drama of Chhau.

As a matter of fact late Maharaja Jadunath Bhanjdeo introduced 'Ram Navami Nata' which used to be performed in the month of Chaitra. After him, 'Ram Navami Nata' was replaced by 'Chhau Nata'. Late Maharaja Krushna Chandra Bhanjdeo ushered in the stylistic approach of the Nata by bringing two experts from sareikala who were in charge of two Sahis named Dakshina Sahi (South Part of the ward) and Uttara Sahi (North part of the ward). Then there has been regular staging of Chhau during 'Chaitra' (Fall in April) named "Chaitra Parva" in which the said two sahis of Mayurbhanj Chhau Nrutya Pratisthan and after few years along with Rural chhau troupes take part with own interest. Out of many tribals of this area mainly Mahanto's are participation in dance and other Schedule caste people are participating as traditional musician. Now most Blocks are participating in the rural Chhau officially and taking care and are subsequently honored by the local government. This was gaining popularity during the patronage of Maharajas and was appreciated worldwide. However, soon after the merger of the state with Orissa (Now Odisha), the Chhau dance of Mayurbhanj, though it lost royal patronage, was nourished under the care of Mayurbhanj Chhau Dance Organization, newly formed by the dedicated Chhau artists of Baripada. Later in 1960, the Mayurbhanj Chhau Nrutya Pratisthan was formed to take care of chhau dance as the apex body to look after the refinement, training and dissemination of the art form under the patronage of the collector of Mayurbhanj. This performing art was so widely acclaimed that even foreign artistes like Sharon Lowen and Ileana Citaristi have performed *Chhau*. Their involvement provides and impetus encouragement to the new women performs to take interest in the fast receding art form.

One Odia folk poets were sung on Chhau for their craziness and entertainment. The first lyrics is –“*Sanja Godigola Nagara Bajila / Baripada Chhau Nata / Ratisara ethi loko thela theli/ dishu nahin bataghata*” and the another lyrics is “ *Dhumu Dhumu Dhumu Nagara Bajila / Rajaghora Chhau Nata / Loka thelatheli loka pelapeli/ dishu nahin bataghata*”. In both lyrics the folk poets choosen a word regarding of Chhau as 'Chhau Nata' that's why if we discuss Chhau is a purely dance , we deny the most important side of Chhau that contains elements of drama like plot,

character, action, suspense, conflict ect. Most of character presents their creative action like mime without throwing dialogues. In drama perspective this is called mono acting or mono action or mono drama. So this dances includes dance and drama style from very beginning. Mayurbhanj Chhau is a dance drama form of unique nature in view of its inherent characteristics. Dr Sitakanta Mohapatra aptly remarks- “It is a unique combination of local ritual, folk theatre and dance. It combines lyricism and grace with vigour and pulsating energy. It reconciles the raw vitality of the folk with sophistication of developed performing art” (Souvenir- 2000).

According to scholars Chhau has the following characteristics:

1. It is based on an ancient tradition.
2. It has a religion background.
3. It is accompanied by music composed with definite and prescribed notations, ragas and raginis.
4. It is possess its own Bhangi and Mudra.
5. It possesses a dress style exclusively of its own. (Souvenir - 2000)

The use of techniques like *Topka*, *Ufli* and use of *Mudras* in Mayurbhanj *Chhau* take this form on the road of classicality. In the words of Dr. Kapila Vatsayan “Once we enter into the *Chhau* style itself we find that it has shed almost all the features of tribal, folk act and has acquired a distinctive stylization which is a characteristic feature of the dance drama forms commonly termed as classical. Mayurbhanj *Chhau* has a highly evolved grammar of its own. It has six *Topkas*, thirtysix *Ufli* and two hundred sixteen *Upa-Uflis*. All topka, Ufli and Upa-Ufli are initiated from the nature, martial arts, feminine activity, birds and animals. It is also clearly known that the Mayurbhanj *Chhau* has acquired dance style from different tribal dance form. The dance freely imbibed the techniques of the prevailing folk dance such as chadheia , Patua, Kathi, Changu Nata etc. The techniques of the Mayurbhanj chhau such as chali, ufli, topka act are derived from the day to day activities of human beings and animals which indirectly speak of the influence of folk culture.”

Chhau is a semi classical Indian dance drama which was grown by the tribal and folk tradition of the time. The dance ranges from celebrating martial arts, acrobatics and athletics performed in the festive themes of folk dance, to structured dance with religious themes found in shaivism and

Vaishnavism mainly. The costumes vary between the style with Purulia and Serakeilla than Mayurbhanj. Using of mask is the identity of Purulia and without mask the dance of Mayurbhanj has been identifies. Therefore the artists have scope to present facial actions and represent Bhava and Rasa. This dance was traditionally done with all males troupe and it was celebrated regionally during spring every year. This is egalitarian and brings together people from diverse socio-economic background in a festive and religious spirit. Chhau is an ancient dance drama form. It originated in the mock fights of the Odia paikas (warrior) who fought rhythmically to the accompaniments. Maharaja Krushna Chandra Bhanj Deo (1847-1872) was its greatest patron is discussed earlier. . According to history Mayurbhnanj Chhau was patronized by royal funding. The music accompaniment is made up of a large kettledrum called Nagara, a barred drum called Dhol, and double need iboe called Shanai, all instruments used in the ritual music of the Chaitra parva or spring festival. The melodic ragas used in in classical Indian music are now included for its times requirements.

Mayurbhanj chhau dance form has a long history. Originally it was a tribal dance, which originated from the forest of Mayurbhanj in the 18th century. It got the status of a martial art form in the 19th century. Slowly and steadily Mayurbhanj chhau left its martial character and mellowed. Under the royal patronage it received proper attention and direction and manifests its potential and utmost perfection as a dance of excellent style in the field of eastern art and culture of India. Mayurbhanj Chhau has highly evolved techniques of its own for which it differentiates itself from other form of dance .These techniques of Mayurbhanj Chhau are based on various body moments. Finally we may consider that Chhau is a indigenous martial dance. In the beginnings solely it was performed by the male dancers. This folk theatre consists of powerful movement, reverse of jump and kick. It is not only themed on martial but also it take social elements and hunting postures. Almost state wise theatre form of Chhau is extremely open leg position, while the dancers are able to proceed on the open stage by moving the soles of their feet slightly sideways without lifting from the ground. Although they are all known as Chhau, their style differs considerably in terms of their cultural background and their dance characteristics. The complexity and fascination of this tradition lies in the way that it represents that folk classical continuum.

The following dances contain most of drama style, Poise and *Mudras* reflects thereby the theme and the mono actions are the important part of the dance. The brief description of this dances are:

Nataraja

In the Hindu mythology Lord Siva is described as the god of destruction. But in south Indian temples, art and literature, Lord Siva is known as the cosmic dancer. In three phases, the performer shows the *pancha tatva* through *karanas*, *Angharas*, *Drishti Bhedas* and *griva bhedas* of *Natya Shastra*. Medeval odia writer Sarala Das introduces a new character Nagarjuna in his Mahabharata. He is the son of *Arjuna* and *Nagakanya Ulupi*. He wants to seek lord shiva's blessings. Lord Shiva appears as a ferocious Rhino and attacks him to test his devotion, courage and concentration, Nagarjuna fights Rhino and defeats of. Lord shiva than appears and blesses him.

Chakravyaha

Chakravyuha is an ancient war strategy framed by Guru Dranacharya in the battle field to defeat pandavas. Only Abhimanyu, Arjuna's son defeats all experienced warriors one by one, and enters into the Vyuha. It is an insult to Dranacharya that one of his disciples was able to stop him. So the seven Rathi's including Guru Dranacharya decide to kill Abhimanyu when he is bare hand. They kill Abhimanyu but later on they repent and salute his soul.

Time to time scholars and academician are taking steps and organizing workshop, for documentation of Chhau. As per a Report, "It was in 1981 that two groups of the East Indian Mask dance drama called Chhau were invited to Japan to join the programme of the "Asian Traditional Performing Art" (ATPA) project sponsored by the Japan foundation. Asian Traditional Performing Art is a series of intercultural events aiming to encourage the understanding of the shared yet diverse cultural heritage of Asian traditional performing arts through joint performances, lectures- demonstrations, seminars and various form of academic documentation. The first event in this series was held in 1976, the second in 1978 and the third in 1981, when the above mentioned two Chhau groups of Purulia (West Bengal) and Sareikala(Bihar) joined the programme along with *Yakshagana* from Karnataka, South India and *Mahakali Pyakhan* from Nepal."(International seminar workshop on Chhau dance traditions:

1983-1984- Prof Konishi Masatashi, This report was first published in Asian Folklore studies, Vol. XLIV)

B Prasad has discussed on the topic “Sociological Analysis of Chhau Dance” He said, “*Art and literature cannot be imagined without society. By nature man is a social being. He creates social thought and sentiments. Art is not for arts sake only, but it is closely related to human life and society. In 1866 the principle of “La Art Par La Art” was prevented on France. Croce was the originator of this principle, but he did not opine that the art is free from social limitations. The famous critic I A Richards in his book Principle of literary criticism has accepted the truth that communication of sentiments and feelings of art and literature to human heart and mind of the society is very important.*” Tolstoy has rightly said in his thoughtful essay “What is art” and above all it is not pleasure, but it is means of union among men, joining them together in the same feelings and indispensable for the life and progress, towards well being of individuals and humanity”. The situation of art like ‘Chhau dance’ a dance drama of Jharkhand , Odisha and West Bengal is not of all kinds of art and literature are the same , i.e the very investigation of beauty and source of feeling of *Rasas.*” All the feelings and sentiments like love and pathos are similarly expressed in all artistic and literary forms. But the drama and dance drama are more dynamic and effective than any other literary and artistic form. They have more power to attract the society. So, it is aptly expressed “ *Kavyashu Nataka Ramyam*”.

The sense of bravery and hero worship has inspired the society of Jharkhand and Odisha to search the unending sources of cultural elements in the great Indian epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The stories attack and self define from the stories of *Rama, Krishna, Arjuna, Bhima* and other heroic characters have influenced need Chhau. Many items of Chhau are based on the sense of victory of truth and good over untruth bad. The stories of war between *Rama* and *Ravana, Duryadhana Urubhanga, Kalia Daman, Mahisha Mardhini* etc are themes of Chhau items which have inspired our society till now. The sense of eternal love is the most vital force to join the hearts of different societies. The Chhau items like love of *Radha- Krushna, Hara-Gauri Parinaya, Rishya Shringa, Meghaduta, Chadrabhaga, Dushmana-Shakuntala, Purutaba-Urbarshi* etc have and ability to build our society with good bonding of human emotions.

A close look reveals that the chhau artist builds movements from a variation of *Tribhanga*, This posture of *Tribhanga* and *Chauka* (Square). The open grand pile or *mandala sthana* are quite akin to those motifs of other odia dance. Sanjukta Panigrahi mentions that the ‘*Tribhangi*’ of this dance which is absent in other Indian classical dances, has been imitated from day to day life of odia women folk and not from any *shastra*. The facial expression of Chhau is evident where mask is not used. In this dance drama one can also observe some intricacy of foot work, walks, poise, gait and jumps. The artistic composition, music and graceful performance in *Nishitha milana*, *Maya Savari*, *Goruda Bahano*, *Card Dance* of Mayurbhanj Chhau can be noticed is the basic action includes *Chhuka* and *Tribangas*.

Now Chhau has become renowned worldwide. It also often included several new themes and techniques. By the initiative of district administration Mayurbhanj is striving to revive the lost glory of Mayurbhanj Chhau. This is an idea of facilitating the artistes of Mayurbhanj Chhau with an apt scope of training and subsequent performance leading to a respectable livelihood. So hopefully, Chhau as a Dance Drama is anticipated to survive for a thousand years and beyond, thereby preserving its primitive element and glory as per the need of the hour.

References

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