

The Chhaw Dance of Bengal!

Dr. B. Basu¹, Ms. Laboni Banerjee²

¹-Adjunct faculty, SGGGS College of Engineering and Technology, Nanded.

²-Appeared in final year in Bachelor of Design course in Viswa Bharati University, Shantiniketan.

Email: bibekananda.basu1502@gmail.com, labani.asan@gmail.com

Introduction

India is the country of Art and Culture. In ancient days the dances used to be performed mainly of two types i.e. indoor and outdoor. The indoor dances used to be showed off by the sophisticated Artists in the King's Palaces for the entertainment purpose! In those days of Mahabharata, the dancing art was found that Arjuna used to perform dance at the Royal Court of Birat Raja as 'Brihannalla'. The outdoor dances used to be performed by the villagers during any festival, joy, ceremony, worshipping of Goddess and most of the dances were from noble mind and aspirations. It used to be the group dances participated by the one and all. Hence gradually the Folk dances and Tribal dances started arriving. Almost every state is having its own style of Folk Dances. This art form combines dance, music, drama, instrumental music, facial and body makeup, martial art and ritualistic functions, composed in a harmonizing manner. Tribal Dances in India are inspired by the tribal folklore. Each ethnic group has its own distinct combination of myths, legends, tales, proverbs, riddles, ballads, folk songs, folk dance, and folk music. India has a number of classical Indian dance forms, each of which can be traced to different parts of the country. Classical and folk-dance forms also emerged from Indian traditions, epics and mythology music. In West Bengal it is Chhaw, Santari, Jatra, Gazan. Classical dance of India has developed a type of dance-drama that is a form of a total theatre. The dancer acts out a story almost exclusively through gestures. Most of the classical dances of India enact stories from Hindu mythology. Each form represents the culture and ethos of a particular region or a group of people. The Sangeet Natak Akademi currently confers classical status on eight Indian classical dance styles, (i) Bharatanatyam (Tamil Nadu), (ii) Kathak (North, West and Central India), (iii) Kathakali (Kerala), (iv) Kuchipudi (Andhra Pradesh), (v) Odissi (Odisha), (vi) Manipuri (Manipur), (vii) Mohiniyattam (Kerala), and (viii) Sattriya (Assam). All classical dances of India have roots in Hindu arts and religious practices. The classical dances are rooted in Natya Shastra and are as old as 500BC. Chhaw - also spelled as Chau or Chhaw is a semi classical Indian dance with martial, tribal and folk origins with origins in the eastern Indian states of Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Odisha. It is found in three styles named after the location where they are performed, i.e. the Purulia Chau of Bengal, the Seraikella Chau of Jharkhand, and the Mayurbhanj Chau of Odisha. The performers wield weapons such as swords and shields while dancing. The costumes vary between the styles, with Purulia and Serakeilla using masks to identify the character. The stories enacted by Chhaw dancers include those from the Hindu epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the Puranas and other Indian literature. The styles of Chau differ from Purulia to Seraikella and that of from Mayurbhanj. The most prominent difference among the three subgenres is regarding the use of masks. While, the Seraikela and Purulia subgenres of Chhaw use masks during the dance, the Mayurbhanj Chhaw uses none. This paper has described only about the Chau Dance of Purulia District of West Bengal, about the artists, their life style, it's limitations and why up till now it is not as famous as other Classical Dances of India. The artists belong to the poor families, mostly low qualified, having poor ambitions and happy with this type of periphery of the culture. Except a few, most of them are not professionals. They get training by their group leaders, from their ancestral or just by viewing the dances. The authors have done exclusive surveys, interviewed and reacted with the concerned group leaders and Artists and then able to draw the conclusions with a view to make it more famous by maintaining the present theme and circumstances.



Mayurbhanj Chau



Seraikella Chau



Purulia Chau



Seraikella Chau

What is a Chhaw dance?

It is a semi classical Indian dance with martial, tribal and folk origins. The stories enacted by Chhaw dancers include those from the Hindu epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the Puranas and other Indian literature. In this dance the body languages are expressed through movements, Circling, vaulting, jumping by wearing mask and Costumes expressing the themes. This dance involves mainly four types of Artists (i) dancing Arts (ii) Mask manufacturers (iii) Costume manufacturer and (iv) Musicians who plays the Shanai, beat the drums etc. The dancers require heavy physical fitness too. It is mainly celebrated during Sun festival, which falls in the Chaitra month of Hindu calendar i.e. March-April as per the Gregorian calendar. However, it is not limited to the festival; the dance can be performed on other occasions too. The most popularly used themes (ragas) are Vira and Rudra, symbolizing power and strength.




The Origin

Purulia Chhaw" is a folk dance which is being done from 250 years by the locals of Purulia area of Bengal in the praise of Goddess Parvati. The energized dance by the Purulia artists enchanted the audience. By [FPJ Bureau](#) | Sep 28, 2014 01:44 am
The origin of the Chhaw Dance has many stories. Originated from the martial dance Phari Khanda Khela (playing with the sword and the shield), the Chhaw Dance had been of interest to many rulers of Odisha during the 18th and the 19th centuries. It is believed that the word 'Chhaw' is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Chhaya' meaning 'shadow or image'. Hence, it is performed to influence the Sun God. However, according to some, 'Chhaw' is a dialect that means six faces namely forehead, eyes, nose, cheeks, lips and chin. Ordinarily, 'Chhaw' means 'mask' because the dance is performed by using mask. Most of the new theories state that Chhaw is a pronunciation of the word 'Chhauni' which is a Military Barrack or Cantonment. The Raja of Bagmundi invented the technique of using masks and appointed the Hindu image-makers for the same. At its later and final stage, the themes of the Ramayana and Mahabharata were introduced. The dance hence, belongs to the Tandava form of Indian classical dance. There is also opinion that it is the combination of 6 dances i.e. 'bhakta', 'Panta', 'santhali', 'Nachani', 'Kirtana', 'Natua'.

The Recognition

In 2010 the Chhau dance was inscribed in the UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The Government of Odisha established a Government Chhau Dance Centre in 1960 in Seraikella and the Mayurbhanj Chhau Nritya Pratisthan at Baripada in 1962. These institutions engage in training involving local gurus, artists, patrons and representatives of Chhau institutions and sponsor performances. The Chaitra Parva festival, significant to the Chhau Dance, is also sponsored by the state government. The Sangeet NatakAkademi has established a National Centre for Chhau Dance at Baripada, Odisha. Purulia Chhau Dance is listed on UNESCO's world heritage list of dances in 2010. In 2014, its tableau portraying Chhau dance of Purulia, which is a popular genre of Indian tribal martial dance, had won the top prize. In recent years, this dance form has started gaining more recognition as people are again trying to associate themselves with their roots. Bollywood has tried to capture the beauty of Bengal in two of its movies, Barfi and Lootera, where they have shown this dance form in play. There are also numerous videos where glimpses of Chhau have been exhibited while framing Bengal. Several dance reality shows have eventually come to realize the importance of traditional dance forms and thus, Chhau has been performed many a times making it well-acquainted to the audience.

Sidho- Kanho – Birsha University in district Purulia.

	<p>Introduction of Diploma Course on Chhau: Diploma Course on Chhau has been introduced in this University for preservation and continuation of age old cultural heritage and to promote various researches on ethnomusicology. Syllabus has been prepared by external university professors and experts in the field. The vision of university on Chhau is not only to conserve the folk dance recognized as an <i>Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity</i> by UNESCO but to blossom it as an established Art discipline. 50 students have been selected out of total 200 applicants for this course which reflect the increasing demand of the course. A MoU with Back Class Welfare (BCW) Department is going to be signed for establishment of Chhau Academy on the land of BCW Department, Govt. of West Bengal. Our student share stages in various programme including Govt. programme.</p>
	<p>The Great Artist who lead the Chhaw dance and mass publicized, who is Padmashree Ganbhir Sing Muda. This Statue is situated at his areas of activities in village Chorida ,Dist: Purulia. He organised, developed the Art and spread the fame of this Chhaw Dance. He received Padmashree in the year 1981 and farther received Academic Award in the year 1982. He toured with his troop in London, Paris & Spain in the year 1972, N. America, New York, Los angles (1975), Paris & Europe (1986) and Japan, Osaka, Tokyo (1991).</p>
	<p>The Artist , the philosophar and creator is Mr. Malay Choudhury(age 69) at the middle who is encouraging and keeping alive this Art in this area by his continuous efforts . He is also creating syllabus and courses in the Sidho – Kanho-Birsha university , upgrading the Art of Dancing, Mask preparations and Musics .He is in touch with almost all the Artists of this area. The young lady is Ms.Mausumi Chaudhury(22) is not only a female dancer but also a trainer to the Females and encoraging the females to join in this group of Arts who are a very few in number . She performed dances at various parts of Bengal. The local troupes also visited several countries in the world after getting Sponsorship from the Ministry of Culture (ICCR).</p>

About the Artists

Almost all the dancers are from the humble families of the local areas and not professional like Bollywood dancers and Classical Dancers. They join the troupe just for the hobby or enjoyment. They learn dancing Art by following or by their Group leaders. Most of the other times they earn their bread by farming, working in the Agriculture lands, carpentry etc. There are about 10,000 – 12,000 dancers are available now a day and most of them are from the village Chorida of Dist Purulia. There are some small village of 500-600 inhabitants where all are engaged in this profession. Each troupe consists of about 30 people where apart from the dancers, dress maker (mainly 1 in a group), Musicians and Mask Makers headed by the group leader who form the group, train the dancers, lead the team, get contact in other cities for performing the dancing arts. There is no such strict compose, musical theme and inclination but mainly depend on the act of the group leader. There is no age limit for the dancers. They perform as long as their fitness allows. Among the whole group of 10-12 thousand artist, there is only about 30 female dancers who are taught by Mausumi Choudhury and her sister Shyamali Chaudhury inspired their father Shri Jagannath Chaudhury who is the pioneer in this Art. The main constrains are heavy mask, physical Fitness, malnutrition, orthodox family background etc. However, some Female Experts come from the Ravindra Bharati University to boost up the female Artists and hence it is gradually progressing. The remuneration during dance is limited to only Rs.350/- to 400/- per Artist but as it is taken

as hobby, they are satisfied with is amount. Some troupe also closed because of the loss of the interest by the Group leader or due to ill health.



The photo shows the Group leader Mr.Jagannath Chaudhury wearing Pink shirt, his daughter who is also a trainer cum performer, the author, the motivator Mr.Malay Chaudhury and the dancers.

The Mask Makers

The Mask identifies the character and to hide the face of the dancers. In the earlier days it used to be manufactured by wood but because of the heavy weight, it is converted in to light weight and prepared from paper pulp, piece of cloth and soil. It is usable for 3-4 years depending on the usage. Many Masks are manufactured that of the face of the Goddess and demon and sold in the market for the room decoration purpose. It comes under Handicraft Art. The selling cost varies from Rs.100/- to as high as Rs 5000/- depending on the size and decorative materials used. All the masks are manufactured by the skill of the Artists with hand. To bring the surface smoothness of the Masks, one tea spoon like equipment is used known as “Thapi”. At final stage they apply colour depending upon the Character. There are about 500 Mask makers who learn the process of Mask Making from their ancestral and traditional way. The present generation is maximum 11th standard educated and they like this ancestral business. Hardly a few of them leave this profession and join elsewhere. Rather the present generation brings the new ideas to enhance marketing. As per them the highest selling is the face of the Saraswati and Durga Mata. It goes up during tourist and festival seasons. In an average they earn Rs.6500/- to 7000/- per month. Most of them prepare small Masks for selling purpose used as show piece of the Drawing Rooms. They remain engaged with this Art all throughout the year and there is no age limit for this. Apart from the Mask making, they manufacture idols of Durga, Saraswati Mata as per the season and demands. All of them are satisfied with this Art and with humble life and none of them expressed any complaint against any one.



A Mask making under process



The Artist manufacturing Masks of Lord Shiva with his son

The Constrains

Although the Chhaw Dance is popular all over India and in the part of the world and well accepted by UNESCO, it is remained in the periphery within some localities in the dist of Purulia. Like other classical dances where both the Arts and Artists are considered to be at higher standard, the Chhaw dancers are yet to come to that upper standard of the society. It is because (i) The Artists themselves are happy with this humbleness. (ii) There is as such no thoughts or Research by the Organisers, Sidho-Kanho-Birsa University, ICCR (Indian Council of Cultural Research, Govt of India), Sangeet Natak Academy, Ministry of Culture (Govt of West Bengal) etc. However, the High-performer woman Trainer is coming to upgrade the skill of the Female dancers from the Ravindra Bharati University, Kolkata. The Legend of the Chhaw dance Mr. Malay Chaudhury accepts that certain unnecessary actions can be curtailed keeping the theme and some decorative arts can be added to make it more attractive. More and more topic can be added but they are afraid to take any risk. The internal rivalry among the troupes also discourages to go for the new innovations. They have their own cooperative group, but the activities are very poor. The influential groups only come in the touch of the higher authorities and get chances to visit other states and in the foreign countries. They do not get any support from the local MLA, MP, and Ministers for the financial help and publicity. There is also nepotism is playing main role. The Mask makers need advertisements, support from the Handicraft Board, and encouragement from the local bodies which are too low. Because of their humble background, poor representations, they remain within tradition arts.

Conclusion

Chhaw dance is a semi classical art of Purulia (W.B), Seraikella (Jharkhand) and Mayurbhanj (Odisha) where the performance art is differing state to state. It is as old as 250 years. They are mostly remaining in the small periphery of the states. Although they have the recognition from the UNESCO, and Purulia got the best performer award in the tableau of 2014, till they are not at par with other classical dances. The performers are from the very humble families of the villages and consider this as a hobby and are satisfied with the presence performance and remuneration. The Mask Makers are also from the humble families and earn bread from this handicraft Industries all throughout the year. In both the cases their education standard is up to 11th or 12th standard and hardly anyone leaves their ancestral and tradition profession. Their learning method is from their families or "ustaad" or neighbours. Although the Educational institutions are established in Purulia and in Odisha, the standard of the Chhaw dance is yet to come up. Poor support from the Govt Officials, Politicians and poor representations from the performers themselves the Chhaw dance is considered as a dance of unqualified people. Till it is growing slowly, the troupes are going abroad and visiting other states and we hope for a better future for them despite all the constraints!

Acknowledgements:

1. Shri Malay Choudhury for his support, established the links among the artists
2. Jagannath Choudhury, the troupe leader and his daughter Mausumi Choudhury.
3. Ms. Laboni Banerjee (co-author) who inspired and instigated to do this Research work.

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1. Internet Survey.
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3. Expert opinion.