With the arrival of Chaitra (March-April) the nature, so lush and rich in Mayurbhanj, is vibrant with new life; trees, creepers and orchids are in bloom, the air is fragrant with flowers; and birds songs reverberate through the hills and plains. The whole district comes under the magic spell of Chhau, the most colourful virile dance usually performed for three days during the Chaitra Parva (13th or 14th April) at Baripada, the district headquarters of Mayurbhanj. The vigorous war dances with swords and shields, the colourful, dignified yet intricate rhythmic pattern of other dances, the loud yet melodious sound of battle drums, such as Dhumsa, Nagra, Dhol and Chadchadi with Mahuri brings thunderous effect to make the audience spellbound.

Chhau, a martial dance form, found in three regions of India, Sareikala (Jharkhand), Purulia (West Bengal) and Mayurbhanj in Odisha each with its distinctive features has received a global reputation. Although the origin of Chhau is a bone of contention among the scholars and historians, Mayurbhanj School of the dance maintain that the term Chhau has been derived from ‘Chhauni’ i.e. military camp of ancient rulers. They hold this view due to martial character of the dance. It is obvious that the dance originated from the war-rehearsals of the Odia Paikas (Infaney) and gradually evolved as a cultural performance. Some scholars suggest that the word ‘Chhau’ is derived from the Sanskrit word ‘Chhaya’ which carries the meaning of facsimile or disguise. Since mask is used in Purulia and Sareikala Chhau, it is reasonable to name it as mask dance. Some scholars are of opinion that Chhau is an Odia word and its meaning according to Purna Chandra Bhasakosha is to attack stealthily and cunningly. It is needless to enter into an arid controversy as to its origin since evidence either documentary or collateral is extremely meagre. But even if its original source is military tradition, there is little doubt that there has been quite a lot of co-mingling of folk, tribal and religious traditions in the process of its evolution.

The Bhanja Kings of Mayurbhanj were great Patrons of art and culture. During the rule of Maharaj Jadunath Bhanj Deo (1822-1863 A.D) one kind of dance was being performed in the month of Chaitra, which was known as ‘Ram Navami Nata’. It is presumed that during this time it was in its early form i.e in rudimentary form, confined to the technique of ‘Sadhan’ and ‘Farikhela’. During the reign of Krushna Chandra Bhanj Deo (1868-1882) Chhau was first remodel in a new form and style. Ramaharjit Bebarta Babu, an aide of the Maharaja had witnessed the performance of Chhau dance of Sareikala and on his request for extending royal
patronage to Chhau dance in Mayurbhanj, Maharaj Krushna Chandra Bhanja Deo brought Mr. Upendra Biswal, a Chhau Ustad from Sareikala and appointed him to teach Chhau dancers of Uttar Sahi. Later on Mr. Banamali Das, another Ustad from Sareikala was appointed to train the Chhau dancers of Dakhina Sahi. Moreover, Sri Brundaban Chandra Bhanja Deo and Sri Gokul Chandra Bhanj Deo the two brothers of the king were incharge of Uttarsahi and Dakhinasahi dance parties respectively who took keen interest for its development. Thus, Maharaj Krushna Chandra Bhanjdeo laid the foundation of Chhau dance in Mayurbhanj and it was performed during Chaitra Parva in place of ‘Rama Navami Nata’. It is noteworthy to mention here that being profoundly influenced by the Sareikala Chhau, mask was also used in Mayurbhanj Chhau.

In the beginning the dance performance was confined to the exhibition of sword-play only. Most of the dance numbers were displayed on physical power, techniques of sword play etc. The dances exhibited by the dancers were without themes. Some of the dances, for instance were Sadhanmar (Strong among all), Maja Maloon (to teach a lesson), Singh (lion), Bajramaruri (Thunder bolt) etc. Some of the dance numbers were composed portraying heroic characters of Puranas, the Ramayan and the Mahabharata. Thus, during this time Chhau was limited to Rook-Mar Nacha (the dance of offense and defence).

Maharaja Krushna Chandra Bhanj Deo breathed his last on the 29th May 1882 when he was only 34 years old. At that time his eldest son Sriman Chandra Bhanj Deo was barely 11 years of age and hence, the State came under the administration of Court of Wards till he attained majority and assumed direct control of the State in 1890. He had deep love for this art form and so took keen interest for its development. He put all dancers, musicians, organizers of the locality into two groups namely, Uttarsahi and Dakhin sahi and started a competition of the dance on the occasion of the annual Chaitra Parva. At that time these two prominent parties were competing with each other and the winner party was being awarded a running cup known as ‘Talcher Cup’. The Maharaja kept his younger brothers Shyam Chandra Bhajan Deo and Sridam Chandra Bhanj Deo in charge of the sahis for training and performance of the dance with an annual grant of Rs.2000/- for each Sahi. Apart from this amount, each brother was to spend as much as Rs.15000/ every year for the training and development of Chhau dance. During this period the dance numbers created by the sahis were based on the themes of the epics like the Ramayan, the Mahabharat and other Puranas’ Episodes on Krishna legend introduced during this period slowed down the martial character of the dance. Therefore, the choreography of the dance as well as the music was changed. Jhumar music and Kirtan were also introduced in it. In some dance numbers vocal music were also added. The lyrics were of different languages such as Odia, Hindi, Bengali. Hitherto Chhau was totally non-verbal. Due to such experiments in the art form, a good number of classical items sprang up and gave a new charm to it. Nishitha Milan, Bansi Chari, Kalanka Bhajan, Baul Krishna, Tamudia Krushna, Kaliya Dalan, Makhan Chari were the products of the artistic endeavour made under the royal patronage of the time, the era of experimentation and excellence of the art.

In the year 1912 Maharaja Sriman Chandra Bhanj Deo presented a magnificent show of it in the form War Dance (Paika dance) to welcome the British Emperor George V and his Queen at Calcutta. Maharaja Sriman Chandra has spent a lot of money for its creation and presentation. This ‘War Dance’ consisting of 64
artists was essentially a mock-fight between two opposite groups holding swords and spears in their hands. The dancers were dressed in red or blue dhotties, turbans along with feather- garlands round the arm and waists. They painted their faces and bodies with ochre or red colour. Another significant feature of the dance was the abolition of mask hitherto prevalent in Mayurbhanj style like Purulia and Sariekala. Maharaja Sriram Chandra passed away on 22nd February, 1912. The appreciation of Chhau dance by the Emperor George V and Queen Mary was reflected on his condolence letter which had been sent two days after the sad demise. It says, “the Queen and I are grieved to hear of the death by an accident of the Maharaja of Mayurbhanj. Please convey to the Maharani our sincere condolences in her sorrow. We remember of course the important part taken by the Maharaja in connection with the Pageant on the maiden and our pleasure in seeing him on that occasion”.

Maharaja Purna Chandra Bhanj Deo, the son and successor of Maharaja Sriram Chandra Bhanjdeo was a minor and hence, Mayurbhanj once again came under the administration of Court of Wards. During this period Chhau suffered a lot in his kingdom. The annual grant of Rs.5000/- to each Sahi was stopped and only Rs.250/- to each Sahi was granted just to keep the tradition of annual celebration of Chaitra Parva alive. Maharaja Purna Chandra was formally installed on the Gadi on the 13th November 1920. Hereafter he gave special attention to revive the Chhau dance but it got a severe setback due to hypocrisy of some Chhau Ustads who were lured by the king of Dhenkanal for introduction of Chhau in his state. This incurred displeasure in the heart of Maharaja Purna Chandra and resulted in halting the Progress of Mayurbhanj Chhau for sometime. Maharaja Purna Chandra died on the 21st April 1928 of an early age of 29 years. He being childless, was succeeded by his younger brother Pratap Chandra Bhanj Deo.

The reign of Maharaja Pratap Chandra Bhanjdeo is marked as the golden era of Mayurbhanj Chhau. He initiated various experiments in Chhau dance with the help of talented Ustads and artists and established it to a marvelous art form. He increased the annual grant to Rs.5000/- for each Sahi and appointed a Manager to look after the proper training, rehearsal and presentation of the dance. Regular rehearsal for about six months beginning from the month of October till Chaitra Parva were carried on. During this Period a number of new dance themes were composed. Sri Keshab Das, the Kathakali dance teacher was appointed to train the Chhau dancers of the Sahis. In order to improve the dance performances and to increase the creative power of the Ustads & artists, they were sent to different parts of the country to witness the performance of the eminent dancers like Udayshankar, Amla Shankar etc. Several features from such dances were included in Chhau dance to improve its range and quality. During this period dances like Kaliya Dalana, Matru Puja, Maya Sabari, Banshi Chori, Meghadutta etc. were created by the Uttarsahi and Dakshina Sahi teams.

The dance which was brought up and developed with so much royal care and nourishment could not prosper further in the absence of royal patronage after the merger of the Mayurbhanj in Orissa on 01.01.1949. At this crucial juncture a group of dedicated Chhau artist of Dakshina Sahi under the able leadership of Sri Bhabani Kumar Das, the Manager of Dakshina Sahi and Ramesh Ch. Mahapatra came forward to keep alive the art form by organising a troupe named ‘Mayurbhanj Chhau Dance Organisation’. During the Pre-merger days the Chhau dance was confined to occasions like Chaitra Parva, visit of
royal guests etc. It was felt to draw the attention of various authorities and appeal for patronage. The commercial shows of Chhau were organized by the artists of the organization at different places. The Organization approached the District Magistrate, Mayurbhanj as well as the Chief Minister of Odisha, Sri Harekrushna Mahtab for financial assistance. It also presented a show before the Chief Minister to invite his attention for its upliftment. The Government sanctioned some funds for maintaining a Chhau troupe consisting of 16 dancers, 10 Ustads and 6 Musicians who were paid monthly salary of Rs.10/- to Rs.20/- as per the standard of the artists and it remained under the control of District Magistrate. During this period two shows were exhibited, one at Puri on 3rd December 1949 in the honour of the visit of His Excellency Shri Rajgopalchari, the then Governor-General of India and the other at Baripada on the Republic Day on 26th January 1950.

Towards the end of March 1950, the District Magistrate transferred the management of Chhau to the District Inspector of Schools, Mayurbhanj. During this period the organization presented two shows - one at Kathojodi Hostel premises (Cuttack) and another at Cuttack Police Club in aid of refugees. Due to financial crisis the artists could not get their salary from October 1950 to March 1951. The organization appealed to the Chief Minister of Odisha for removal of these difficulties. Taking into consideration of the appeal of the Organisation, the State Government sanctioned an annual grant of Rs.5000/- in favour of it. The grant was raised to Rs.10000/- by the State Government on the recommendation of the then Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru who was very much pleased to see the performance of Chhau dance on the occasion of the inauguration of the Hirakud Dam on 13.01.1957.

In 1959 Sri Ram Chandra Dash, the then I.G. of Odisha and also the Manager of Uttarsahi during the reign of Maharaja Pratap Chandra Bhanj Deo was deputed by the Government of Odisha to Baripada for revival of the old glory of the art form. As a result of his untiring efforts a new organization named ‘Mayurbhanj Chhau Nrutya Pratisthan’ was formed in 1960 and the previous Mayurbhanj Chhau Dance Organization was abolished. In 1961 the Pratisthan was registered under the Society Registration Act of 1960. With this the Mayurbhanj Chhau Nrutya Pratisthan emerged as the patronizing institution for Mayurbhanj Chhau Dance. Meanwhile, the involvement of Govt. officials was felt necessary in order to raise the status of the Institution.

The Executive Committee of the Pratisthan was formed with District Magistrate and Collector, as Ex-officio President and one Government Officer under control of Collector as the Secretary. Some other art lovers and old Gurus became its other members. The Pratisthan is getting financial assistance both from the Central Government and the Sangeet Natak Academy. It celebrates Chaitra Parva for three days each year at Baripada where Chhau dance is performed. Both the Eastern Zone Cultural Centre of India and the Cultural Department of Odisha are now encouraging to the Chhau dancers to improve the quality of the dance. Chhau in its present form is a fine blending of various systems - elements of martial, folk, traditional classical art having nicely woven into the grand mosaic of Chhau. It is high time to conduct thorough research to discover and unfold the internal aspects hidden to Chhau. This beautiful dance form needs attention of one and all to elevate it to a global platform at par with the classical dances of India.

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