



Chhau Dance

CHAITRA PARVA OF MAYURBHANJ DISTRICT

With the advent of April, Mayurbhanj comes under the magic spell of Chhau, Everybody, rich or poor, illiterate or intellectual, man or woman, young or old eagerly waits the arrival of 'Chaitra Parva' with a spirited heart. The whole land becomes rejuvenated.

Chaitra Parva is not just a festival. It is a heritage of Mayurbhanj. A conglomeration of tradition and culture. During this festival Lord Shiva and his divine consort were worshipped and prayed amidst dance and music for welfare and prosperity of the kind and kingdom. Every beat of Dhol and tune of Mohuri brings ecstatic pleasure and joy.

Although Chaitra Parva was primarily a religious festival in the remote past with the pace of time it has become an art festival. The performance of Chhau dance has become its prime attraction. In fact Chhau has glorified the Cultural heritage of the people of the area. It has become the identity of this land. Art is the core of Unity and amity among the people. It is the fountain of inspiration for the people.

The celebration of Chaitra Parva is an age old tradition. Mayurbhanj Chhau Nritya Pratisthan is proud of upholding the grandeur of this tradition by organising it since 1961.

CLASSICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF INDIAN CHHAU DANCE

Indian Chhau dance prevalent in the hilly and forest areas of Jharkhand, West Bengal and Orissa has gained its popularity in the international artistic world many years ago. It is originally based on martial art. It has attached it self with Hindu mythology, religion and culture. It has adopted the principles of 'Natyashastra' (and Nrityashastra) written by Acharya Bharat. Besides this the elements of folk dance and folk life are also included in its dance form. It has touched the highest peak of the dancing mode. What so ever great has been achieved by the Chhau dancers was promoted by the formerly princely estate of Sareikala, in Mayurbhanj and Purulia.

Often people unknowingly use to say that Chhau dance is a tribal dance or it is a folk dance. But they neglect the very gravity and rich artistic approach of the Chhau dance. No doubt a large tribal population is engaged in Chhau dance, but it does not mean that it is merely a tribal dance or a folk dance. It cannot be said that a folk dance or tribal dance does not have its own richness. But it should be tried to know the real facts and figures about the Chhau dance. It is necessary to investigate cautiously the technical and folk elements of this art.

Those Indian dances, which have followed the dancing principles of Bharat's 'Natyashastra' are called classical dances. On the basis of 'Natyashastra' Nandikeswar has also analysed the dancing principles in his famous book 'Bhartarnav'. The mixture of handgestures and footsteps is called 'Nrityakaran'. The combination of 'Hastamudras' and Padacharis has been vividly and extensively analysed in this book. The masters and dancers of many Indian dances have attached their dances with the principles of 'Nrityashastra'. As a result South Indian dances like Bharat Natyam, Kathakali and north Indian dances like Kathak have acquired this glory of classical dance. It is true that in its former stage every dance is developed from master to disciple in oral tradition. When this tradition became very old and the principles of dances were finally decided they have included in books and dances were performed accordingly, then they were called classical dances. But there are some dances which have many classical elements and technical situations. They are also traditionally

followed from Guru to disciples, but their principles are not written. So they are called traditional dances only. In this view classical dances are of two types.

1. Unwritten oral traditional classical dances.
2. Written classical dances.

There are many possibilities of omissions and commissions in the oral tradition of dances from Guru to disciple. But there is no scope to go out of the way when directed according to written techniques of the dances. But it does not mean that the oral tradition of dances do not maintain the laws and orders of their art. All changes and additions occur to give original form and shape of the dancing in course of time. The very situations of Chhau dance is like this. Being an oral traditional dance it has many systems of techniques in which as according to needs many amendments and additions take place to enhance the artistic merits and beauty of the dance.

Obviously Chhau dance has developed from martial art or art of war dance. It has the merits of 'Nritta' or nature of 'Tandav' as described by 'Natyashastra' of Bharat. All these developments are made in course of time. So Chhau dance has not achieved its classical position all of a sudden. It has its forms according to the regional characteristics. As a result two other styles were developed from the original style of Seraikella Chhau Dance : Mayurbhanj style and Purulia style. We can find the combination of folk and classical elements in these two styles also. But the Chhau dance of Sareikala has adorned itself with all characteristics of Tandav i.e. the martial art as well as the classical dancing. So classical analysis of the entire Chhau dance is needed here.

Chhau has covered a long distance from the folk art of 'Pharikhanda' (a dance of sword and shield) to the classical dance. Its inner style and form have been influenced by the spiritual, cultural and religious rituals. They also offer grave classical presentations. Since long this art of Jharkhand, West Bengal and Orissa was popular within limited areas. But after 1936 the western world visualised the greatness of this art and was attracted to it. It was about 1960 when after witnessing this dance the famous dancer Ragini Devi rightly uttered: "The debut of the Chhau Dancers of Sareikala brought to light an impressive form of Odissi dance, which for beauty of style and clearly defined technique, ranks with other forms of Indian classical dance." I Depicting the characteristics of the classical elements of Chhau dance she added that the Chhau dance technique is based upon 108 uplayas or postures and movements. Their gaits (Gati) leaps and Jumps (Utlavana), spiral movements, padachakra, all with a distinct classical tradition. Now it is clear from the comment of Ragini Devi that Chhau dance has taken its shape from handgestures and footsteps as depicted in the 'Natyashastra' of Acharya Bharat. The classical form of Chhau is not only certified by the 'Angahara' and Nrityakarana' of Natyashastra but other technical elements played a vital role to make it very attractive and beautiful.

'Aharyabhinaya' is a very important part of the Chhau dance. According to 'Bharat Acharya' (dress and ornaments) is an integral part of demonstrative art like dance and drama. Masks, dresses, ornaments, weapons and instruments are the subjects to be narrated in Natyashastra. The typical musical instruments and their techniques 'Tal-Chhanda-laya' have led the Chhau dance to the height of classical peak. After martial art when it started to take its classical shape it adopted the stories Ramayan, Mahabharata, Puranas and epics of Sanskrit language. Love, Pathos and other inner sentiments and emotions are found in these stories. According to its 'Tandav' nature, Chhau dances are demonstrated in open air stage. All these classical elements of Chhau are needed to be analysed.

Every acting and demonstration should have a stage of its own. Traditional Indian dances widespread from urban areas to rural region are used to be demonstrated at temporary stages in the open air field. Likewise Sareikala , Mayurbhanj and Purulia Chhau 'Yakshagan' of Karnatak in South India is also presented in the open field. Unlike Kathakali it is performed comparatively on upland. But the ground level is the same for both these dancers and the spectators. According to the original concept of the Indian traditional dancing the arrangement and form of stage for Chhau dance is like Yakshagan, Kuttiattam, Kuchipuri and Bhagawat mela in south India. All the methods and making of the stages correspond to the Natyashastra of Bharat.

Indian Chhau dance always adopted new subject matters and themes in course of time. Its concept of themes is more extensive than all Indian dances. Its subject matters are as extensive, grave and touching as that of Indian poetry. This is a great classical testimony of the Chhau dance. In view of themes poetry and dance are on the same footing.

The media of expressions create some differences. Because if we get delicate gestures in dance, we will find tenderness of hearty feelings and sentiments in poetry beautifully expressed in tender and sweet words. The artistic approach and expression can only differentiate the poetry and dance. Every item of the magical Chhau dance is fully charged with poetical sentiments.

Manifold stories and themes from books of Indian culture like Ramayana, Mahabharata, Purana etc. adopted by Indian Chhau dance certify the fact that it is not an ordinary dance. But it is a classical dance of special qualities. So the Chhau dance, widespread in the vast areas of Jharkhand, Orissa and West Bengal, is such a dance as has been enriched with classical elements and techniques. The stories of Chhau dance are not only taken from Ramayana, Mahabharata and Purana, but it has included the themes like national spirit, social problems, historical facts, natural beauty, Indian agricultural life, Sanskrit poetry and other important subjects. Here the most remarkable thing in Chhau dance is that all items are full of techniques.

In making of Chhau dance the word 'Chhaya' is very important. It carries the meaning of 'facsimile' so the Chhau dance is originally a mask dance. It is full of classical Natyacharya of 'Nayashastra'. Bharata has named it as 'Pratishirash' means mask or Mukhauta. The 23rd Chapter of Natyashastra fully, vividly and extensively narrates and explains manifold masks and their making processes. The masks of Sareikala and Purulia, Chhau are being prepared as directed by Bharata. The arrangement of dresses, costumes, ornaments, crown and other decorations are made according to the directives of Bharata Acharya. Therefore the classical qualities of Chhau dance is a very glorious thing in the history of Indian dancing art.

When spring season comes every year, human heart becomes full of tender sentiments and emotions. It is excited with boundless joy and happiness. At this time Hindus pray to Lord Shiva and show their great devotion. They wish to receive the grace of God. They dance in memory of Natraj Shiv. These actions reveal the great cultural tradition of Indian Chhau dance.

In view of the analysis of the Rasa infused in these stories and themes of the three styles of Indian Chhau dance we can say that the Veer Rasa is the main sentiment in these dances. Shrinagar Rasa or love and other sentiments come after this. The sentiments of bravery and love have been expressed well in Sareikala and Mayurbhanj Chhau dances. We can see them more clearly in the group dances of Mayurbhanj. But Sareikala Chhau specially indicates the artistic subtlety and gravity in the context of the expression of Rasas.

Chhau dance is such a dance drama in which vocal conversation does not exist. Here only handgestures, footsteps and body movements create language and conversation. Language exists from every part of the body. So every movement of the body is important in Chhau dance. But it totally depends upon the heart and mind which are charged with feeling and sentiments. If the mind is full of anger there will be vigorous forms of body movements. But if the mind is peaceful there will be sweet and gentle form of handgestures, footsteps and body movements. So one form is called 'Tandava' and another is 'lasya'.

Chhau dance-drama has adopted the body movements from the behaviour of folk life and the actions of the natural life of the birds and cattle according to its own convenience. Besides it the medium of expression is also found out in the elements of 'Nrityakarana' as narrated by 'Natyashastra'. Therefore, we can find here the beautiful and interesting combination of behaviours of folk life, nature and the code of law. We can feel difficulty to accept it as a pure code of law. But it is true that the folk elements have played such a vital role that they have become like code of law. They are inseparable. We cannot identify Chhau dance without them. The continuous and long use of folk elements has made them sharper than the code of law. Therefore, code of law is not wholly a proof for an art always and everywhere, but folk behaviour is also a powerful proof from where the code of law gets its birth.

We can find the combination of three units: 'Natya', 'Nritya' and 'Nritta' as narrated by Bharata in Chhau dance. By holding the mask on head, acting of other characters is very important in this art. The stories and themes with manifold sentiments are expressed by body movements. The existence of vocal tradition of dance from Guru to disciple is uncoded and unwritten. So there are many omissions and commissions in body movements, foot steps and handgestures. But the uncoded principles of Sareikala Chhau have proved themselves to be very solid and steady. The Chhau dance of Mayurbhanj and Purulia have made the inclusion of folk elements and they created very flexibility in their styles. There is a great possibility of the demonstration of Rasas and other sentiments, if it is free from code of laws. So it gets public respect. The Chhau dance expresses freely the beautiful contexts of the human sentiments within its border unwritten theories of dances. Other coded dances cannot perform like this.

The Chhau dance has not any hitch to take the folk-life elements in forming its code of laws. Due to this flexibility it is very active to maintain the directive of Bharata Muni. The combination of folk and code of law has added the very beautiful and golden chapters to Chhau dance and it achieved a wonderful success. Due to this reason the body movements, handgestures and footsteps of Chhau dance are very attractive. In this view it has surpassed the 'Natyashastra' and presented the modified forms of dance in certain contexts. This is the proof of the progressiveness and freedom of the Chhau dance. We can judge this merit in the performances of the Chhau dance items like Prajapati, Mayur, Sagar, and Ratri.

In fact we should see the 'Angikabhinaya' of Chhau dance in the natural actions of folk life and wild life of birds and cattle only. We can see it even in the principles of 'Nritya Karanas' where the similarity does not lead us to wonder.

According to its vigorous form and 'Tandav' nature Chhau dance has traditional musical instruments like Nagara, Dhol, Pakhawaj, Dhumasa, Turhi etc, by which vigorous and high sounds are created. The echo of these sounds placed the Chhau to the special height of the Indian dances. The musical sounds of war dance have been moulded in Indian musicology and music composition of Chhau dance has given them wonderful forms.

According to Indian musicology the arrangement of Laya, Tala and Chhanda is definite and necessary. All dances based on code of law own this arrangement and Chhau dance too. In an article Dr. Sunil Kothari has rightly accepted that the musical arrangements of Chhau dance is full of musical law. He said "The music employed in Chhau dances is of classical nature. The folk melodies though utilized are also given a character which has classical mould".

A master of music sitting nearby the Chhau dancers and pronouncing the grammars of Talas, produced from Dhol and Drum controls the whole situations of the motions of beatings. The dancers take of the Talas or beatings through their footsteps. They communicate them to hands and entire parts of the body. Thus the trembling produced from footsteps direct the whole body of the dancer. This is a bit complicated dramatic musical prelude of the Chhau dance on the basis of which manifold body images, beautiful ornamental movements of neck and other movements are developed. A Chhau dancer himself is very much cautious about the talas. Therefore, a Chhau dancer must have the perfect knowledge of Talas and control over them. Because a wrong footstep beyond a Tala Matra can create a ridiculous situation in the mind of learned spectators. So footsteps as according to talas are very important factors in Chhau dance.

Thus in its view of technical form, Chhau dance has got all to acquire the position of classical dances, with the adoption of footsteps and hand gestures of 'Natyashastra' all concepts of mask, crown, dress and other arrangements and designs of costumes are the dominating points to prove this art classical one. It has not only developed the code of laws, but it has also developed many dance techniques from the behaviours of folk life of the region. Now the use of Tobakas, Uflis and Bhangis has got classical ability. The form of arrangements of its music is externally of folk musical, but internally it is coded and well arranged. So there is a beautiful combination of classical and folk elements in the dance technique and musical arrangement of Indian Chhau Dance.

Source & courtesy :- Chaitra Parva Souvenir - 2002, Mayurbhanj Chhau Nritya Pratisthan, Baripada, Mayurbhanj.