



## The Chhau Dance of Mayurbhanj : Its Growth and Royal Patronage

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The district of Mayurbhanj is famous in the cultural history of Orissa, because of its festival Chaitra Parva, which is celebrated as the annual Chhau dance festival. Chhau of Mayurbhanj is ever magnificent and memorable. Mayurbhanj Chhau has been generally accepted as one of the three traditions of the Chhau dance widely distributed in this part of Eastern India, where three present States of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa meet. Like all art forms of India, the origin and growth of Chhau dance may be traced to the popular religious beliefs and practices prevalent in the area of Chhotanagpur Plateau comprising of Purulia and Midnapur districts of West Bengal, Singhbhum, Dhalbhum, Birbhum, Saraikela and Kharasuan of undivided Bihar and Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Nilagiri, Bonai, Talcher and other Garjat areas of Orissa.

Originally Chhau dance was practised by the Paikas and has evolved as a cultural performance. The name Chhau is derived from the word Chhauni, which means military camp. A little scrutiny would indicate that this view had been arrived at a trifle too hastily, apparently from the similar sound of the two words Chhau and Chhauni. Another view is that the word Chhau is derived from such words as Chhabi (picturesque), Chhai or Chhatak (clowning) and Chhaya (shadow or mask). The

Chhau dance is one of the rarest art forms with an exciting past. Over the decades it is acting as a potential medium of communication of our rich artistic tradition and heritage. It acquired distinct position in the cultural history of Orissa because of its special features with regard to *Bhangis*, *Mudras*, Music and Rhythm. The Chhau dance of Mayurbhanj has got its own style. There is no written document regarding the origin as well as, music and composition of the dance. The technique and style of the dance is composed by the Ustads and the dance continues from the past by the instruction of the teacher who is working in hereditary basis.

The Bhanja rulers were great patrons of art and culture. Under the patronage of the rulers of Mayurbhanj, Chhau dance was systematically organized and flourished into a better form, and was performed by the artists in a disciplined manner. Prior to the rule of Maharaja Jadunath Bhanja (1823-1863) the Chhau dance in Mayurbhanj as is understood today, was not known. During the reign of Maharaja Jadunath Bhanja the Rama Navami festival was celebrated in the month of Chaitra and Rama Leela dance was performed during that festival. After some years Madan Singh Babu came to Baripada from Dhalbhum and added Chhau music in the Rama Leela dance. Thus

the musical instruments of Chhau dance came into existence. Most probably the Rama Leela dance was transformed into Chhau dance during this period. During this time the Rama Leela dancers were using masks. The Chhau dancers of Mayurbhanj also used masks when it began and later on they abandoned masks and gave more emphasis on facial expression.

During the reign of Maharaja Krushna Chandra Bhanja Deo (1868-1882) the Chhau dance became very popular in Mayurbhanj. Ramahari Bebartta Babu, a faithful aid of Maharaja Krushna Chandra Bhanja witnessed the Chhau dance of Saraikela and requested Maharaja for the development of Chhau dance of Mayurbhanj. Upendra Biswal, the Ustad of Chhau was first brought from Saraikela by Maharaja Krushna Chandra Bhanja and he was appointed as the dance teacher of Uttarsahi and was given a rent free (*Lakharaj*) land grant. After two or three years Banamali Das, another Chhau Ustad, also brought from Saraikela, was appointed as the dance teacher of Dakshinsahi. These *Lakharaj* lands are still being enjoyed by the successors of the two original Ustads, Upendra Biswal and Banamali Das, who should rightly be reckoned as the original preceptors (*Adi Gurus*) of the Mayurbhanj Chhau.

During this period Brundaban Chandra Bhanja Deo, the then Chhotrai Saheb was in charge of Uttarsahi and the then Routra Saheb Gokul Chandra Bhanja Deo was in charge of Dakshinsahi. They both also had assumed the responsibility of training and performance, including personal participation in the Chhau dance festival. During this stage of growth the dancers used a type of facial mask known as *Muhunda* and wore a sort of halo (*Prabha*) made of bamboo strips strapped to their back

at the time of dance. It means, during this period the Maharaja was giving importance to the use of masks. Till about a couple of decades ago, this type of halo as well as the masks were also worn by Chhau dancers of Singla, Kostha, Rairangpur, Chitrada and many other villages of Mayurbhanj. Masks went out of use from the Baripada Chhau dance about five or six decades ago. The performance in Chhau dance was confined to four types, i.e. solo, duet, dance of four persons, and *tila* dance. The dance form was developed to some extent during the reign of Krushna Chandra Bhanja Deo. He laid the foundation on which his son Maharaja Sriram Chandra Bhanja Deo raised the Chhau edifice of the State.

After the death of Maharaja Krushna Chandra Bhanja Deo in 1882, and during the minority of Sriram Chandra Bhanja Deo, the Chhau dance was performed for two days and sweets were distributed among both parties who danced in the palace during the Chaitra Parva only to keep the festival alive.

Maharaja Sriram Chandra Bhanj Deo took over the charge of the administration of the State in 1892. During *Durbar* days the annual performances of Chhau dance was presented inside the Palace for three days before the Chaitra-Sankranti roughly from 11th April to 13th April. Two prominent parties were then competing with one another and the winning party was being awarded a running cup known as Talcher Cup. Maharaja Sriram Chandra Bhanja Deo's younger brother Chhotrai Saheb Shyam Chandra Bhanja, the adopted ruler of Nilagiri and Routra Saheb Sreedam Chandra Bhanja took charge of the training and performance of the Uttarsahi and Dakshinsahi Chhau dances respectively, with an annual grant of Rs.2,000/- for each sahi.

Besides this amount, each brother used to spend as much as Rs.15,000/- every year for the training and development of Chhau dance. These two brothers Shyam Chandra Bhanja and Sreedam Chandra Bhanja personally participated in the actual dance performances. They used to supervise the daily food of the Chhau dancers. The training was going on throughout the year. During this period many new dances were introduced. The following dance forms were practised by the two sahis, i.e. Uphuli, Basipaiti, Dhana Pachuda, Jhunta maja, Govara Gala, Bidya Sundara, Tamulia Krishna, Hindustani, etc.

It may be noted that the substantial classical modes which provide such an obvious attraction of the Chhau was the consequence of a deliberate policy on the part of the then rulers of Mayurbhanj in associating Ustads of known talent and calibre like the venerable late Jadunath Roy and late Narendranath Pal. Among others, these two Ustads had handsomely contributed to the choreography and music of the Chhau and had improved it to the permanent classical flavour.

The Chhau dance was developed and occupied an unique place among the folk dances of Orissa during the royal patronage of Maharaja Sriram Chandra Bhanja Deo. In 1912 the Maharaja took special care for the reformation and development of the Chhau dance. With the help of his brother Routra Saheb and his cousin Bada Lal Saheb, he innovated a new dance, which was famous as 'War Dance'; a lot of money was spent for the creation of this special dance. The dance was performed for the first time outside Orissa at Calcutta to welcome the British Emperor George-V and Queen Mary in 1912. This dance is basically a mock-fight between two parties

holding swords and spears in their hands. The dancers are clad in red or blue dhotis, dressed in turbans along with feather-garlands round the arms and waists and faces and bodies painted with ochre or red. About sixty four boys participated in this dance. The beautiful performance of the dancers was very much appreciated by the Emperor George-V and Queen Mary. Their appreciation was testified by the condolence letter, which he had sent after the death of the Maharaja Sriram Chandra Bhanja Deo. The British Emperor George-V wrote; "The Queen and I are grieved to hear of the death of Maharaja of Mayurbhanj. Please convey to Maharani our sincere condolences with her in her sorrow. We remember of course the important part taken by the Maharaja in connection with the pageant on the maidan and our pleasure in seeing him on that occasion."

After the death of Maharaja Sriram Chandra Bhanja in 1912 the Chhau dance unfortunately suffered a partial eclipse. During the minority of Maharaja Purna Chandra Bhanja Deo an annual grant of Rs.250/- was sanctioned to each sahi for the purpose of keeping up the ceremony. During this period the dancers practised for one or two months before the Chaitra Parva and during the Chaitra festival it was performed for three days. After the accession of Maharaja Purna Chandra Bhanja, again the Chhau dance was revived. But due to some conflict with the dance teachers the dance was stopped again.

Maharaja Purna Chandra Bhanja Deo died childless in 1928. He was succeeded by his younger brother Maharaja Pratapa Chandra Bhanja Deo, who took keen interest and effective measures for the revival of the Chhau dance of Mayurbhanj. He sanctioned an annual grant of Rs.5,000/- to each sahi. A committee

was formed for each sahi and was put under the leadership of a Manager. The committee was taking proper care for the training of the dancers and presentation of the dance by them during the Chaitra Parva festival. This period of revival witnessed the introduction of new dance themes presented by solo, duet, as well as by group dances. During this period a new era started in the field of Chhau dance. The dance teachers were sent to different places to observe the performances of Udayasankar, Amalanandi, Simike and other top exponents of Indian dances. Many new features from such dances were incorporated in the Chhau dance to enhance its variety and depth. The dance performance again started every year during Chaitra Parva. It became more attractive than the Chhau dance of Saraikela. During this period Maharaja Pratapa Chandra Bhanja Deo introduced classical Hindustani music in Chhau dance. The king also appointed the Kathakali dance teacher Sri Keshab Das to train the dancers.

Maharaja Pratap Chandra Bhanja Deo added foreign musical instruments with traditional Chhau musical instruments. But later on he abolished the English style of dance and music in Chhau dance. During this period the best of the *talas*, music and dances of the *Odisi* or *Gotipua* school of dance in Orissa were carefully studied and incorporated in the Chhau. An interesting and fruitful union was also achieved to the extent that dances were set to *Jhumar* music with remarkable success. Maharaja also instructed the Ustads that the dance to be formed in *Desi* form or in the style of Kolha, Mahanta, Santal, Bengali and Oriya music. Dances are to be strongly emphasised.

At the same time under Maharaja's guidance many new and refined group dance

themes were introduced by both the sahis. Uttarsahi composed the dances like; Kaliya Dalan, Matru Puja, Premika-Premika, Megha Duta, Samudra Manthan, Kela Keluni, Garuda Vahana, Nataraja, etc. Similarly Dakshinsahi presented the dances like; Giri Gobardhan, Maya Sabari, Holi, Niladree Bijee, Bastra Chori, Ras Leela, Kirat Arjuna and Banshi Chori, etc.

The Chhau dance flourished and attained high standard during the rule of Maharaja Pratap Chandra Bhanja Deo. This was the glorious period of the Chhau dance of Mayurbhanj, when it attained its zenith. It goes to the credit of Sri Bhabani Kumar Das (a former member of Dakshinsahi) that, after the merger of Mayurbhanj in Orissa in 1949 he could somehow manage with the help of some old Ustads and artists to organize a group which kept the dance alive till the official patronage and grants made it possible to be revived to its present shape. They presented special shows before Sri Rajgopalachari, the first Governor General of India and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the Prime Minister of India.

The State Government extended its patronage to Chhau dance in 1951-52, when Dr. H.K. Mahatab became the Chief Minister of Orissa. An annual grant of Rs.5,000/- was made to reorganise the Chhau dance. As there were several Chhau dance parties in the district the grant was subsequently increased to Rs.10,000/- in 1954-55. At present the subsidy is paid through the Sangeet Natak Academy of Orissa to an organised body known as Mayurbhanj Chhau Nrutya Pratisthan, which fosters the art of dancing and conducts annual functions. The body has been registered under the Societies Act which is consisting of the President (District Collector), Vice-President

(A.D.M.), Secretary (an O.A.S. Officer) and some important persons from both the sahīs.

Mayurbhanj Chhau Nrutya Pratisthan was made for the growth and proper function of the dance. Now-a-days, the Chaitra Parva continues for three days in Mayurbhanj. The Pratisthan is getting money from the Central Government and from the Sangeet Natak Academy. The Cultural Department of Orissa and the Eastern Zone Cultural Centre of India are now encouraging the Chhau dancers. In 1980 the Chhau Dance-Training Centre was established. At Baripada another Chhau Dance Training Centre is also opened. Despite growth and development of the Chhau, now-a-days there is an imperative need to promote this dance form.

To conclude, the dance was the grand finale of a series of religious observances and celebrations deemed to be of intense and vital significance to the Raja's family for the happiness and well-being of the family and for the people. It is true that in the past the ruling houses of Mayurbhanj evinced such an apparently unusual interest in Chhau when there were literary scores of other dances performed in Mayurbhanj to which no attention whatsoever was paid. The reason being all that it signified including music and other aspect, was of a devotional nature implying an element of compulsion to dance as a form of worship. The foregoing facts is a brief but authentic account of the growth of Mayurbhanj Chhau free from any hearsay or similar unreliable evidence. As may be seen the antiquity of this dance form does not go beyond 100 years and its evolution and growth has gone through many ups and downs.

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