

Chhau Dance of Mayurbhanj

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Tribals of North-Eastern Orissa have a special martial dance form known as Chhau. At the leisure hours of their life they were performing and enjoying this dance, which was perhaps first practised during battles at nights and was therefore named "Chhauni Nrutya". But it was subsequently adopted by the relatives of Maharajas in a sophisticated style to serve the purpose of elites. The rife-torn lives of Maharajas could get solace from this dance, which was mostly performed at the time of 'Chaitra Parva', a festival of the ex-states of Mayurbhanj, Kharsuan and Sareikala being patronised by the rulers. A number of ex-ruler states before their merger in Orissa state were practising Chhau dance and some prominent among them are : Chhau of Baripada in Mayurbhanj, Asanpal in Keonjhar, Nilgiri in Balasore, Arnopal in Bhadrak, Bonei in Sundargarh, Talcher in Angul, Balaramprasad in Dhenkanal, Bhubaneswar in Khurda district. Traditional Mayurbhanj Chhau has lived through Uttarsahi and Dakshinsahi since time immemorial. Dancers of both these segments worshipped Bhairava, an aspect of angry mood of Lord Shiva and perform during Chaitra festival, every year which also signifies the Oriya new year i.e., April 14, Panasankranti. The dance was at first performed with masks but Mayurbhanj adopted these dances without masks. This gave scope for transformation of the erstwhile tribal dance to a semi-classical dance form, and with the passage of time it has now enriched itself to be called a classical dance, the glory it richly deserves.

The Chhau festival of Chaitra Parva also comprises two other rituals i.e. Bhaktas and Udajatra which signal the completion of Chhau festival. The unique association of Bhakta Nata, with Chhau Nata is usually presented in one stage in honour of Lord Bhairava and Shiva respectively. The devotees of Lord Shiva maintain strict discipline by fasting and devotees of Bhairava offer sacrifice of goat for having extra-energy for the martial Chhau dance.

The basic structure and the style of Chhau get itself modified in course of time according to distinct style of its own with its religious culture and local environment. Prof. D.K. Sarangi opines, "Chhau is undoubtedly a tribal Orissan Art. This famous art form not only originated in a predominantly tribal belt but that the basic posture, the accompanying music and the asthetic mood of the Chhau quite often resemble different dances and songs of these tribes."

Mayurbhanj Chhau is performed in solo, duet and group. The subject matter has been brought thematically and substantially from the Ramayan, Mahabharat, Krishna Cult and the Purans. In the beginning probably it had no themes but subsequently a thematic base was provided to this dance form. Chhau in its present form is a fine blending of various systems. "Elements of martial, folk, traditional and classical art have been nicely woven into the grand mosaic of Chhau." But elements of martial art is absent from Odissi. *Vatsayan opines* "Thus the dance style is folk

from the point of milieu and environment but is classical from the point of view of body techniques and its internal structuring."

In Mayurbhanj Chhau, there are uses of Hindustani, Odissi, Chaupadi, Chhanda, Champu etc. and the old forms i.e. tribal and Jhumaras. "There has been such a beautiful and fine assimilation of classical Jhumar and Western music in Mayurbhanj Chhau that while enhancing its grandeur, beauty and performance, it has maintained its individual distinctive style without any deterioration. Rather the dance has become more attractive and enjoyable. There is no extensive and wide use of songs in Mayurbhanj Chhau, but the limited use of songs, have come down from generation to generation without any knowledge of the composers."

A close look reveals that the Chhau dancer builds movements from a variation of Tribhanga. This posture of Tribhanga and Chauka (square), the open grand pile or Mandalasthana, are quite akin to those motifs of Odissi dance. "*Sanjukta Panigrahi mentions that the Tribhanga of this dance which is absent in other Indian classical dances, has been imitated from daily life of Oriya women folk and not from any shastras. This is what happens in case of Mayurbhanj Chhau in respect of movements.*"

The facial expression of Chhau dancer of Mayurbhanj Chhau where mask is not used, is not so much important as in other Indian classical dances. Even the hands and fingers do not play a major role. One can notice identical "Mudras" and "Karanas" in both Odissi and Chhau dance under different titles. In both the dances one can also observe same intricacy of foot work, walks, poise, gait, whirr and jumps. The artistic composition, music and graceful performance in Nishith Milan, Maya Savari, Garuda Bhana, Card dance of Mayurbhanj Chhau can be noticed in their basic stances, Chauka and Tribhanga.

Mayurbhanj Chhau is the cultural heritage of Orissa for its stylistic movements and colourful dance items. According to some, Chhau comes from the word Chhauni i.e. army regiment, Chhai-Chhatak, i.e., dance forms and Mudras. Mayurbhanj chhau style is different from Sareikala and Purulia Chhau dance. Mayurbhanj Chhau has various movements of eyes, face, body and legs and in the dance item artists use various Mudras, Abhinaya and Navaras etc. It has the classical elements, but till now it has not yet been recognised as a classical dance form.

Mayurbhanj chhau has six Tabka, thirtysix Ufuli and two hundred sixteen Upa-Ufuli. The dance is learnt in a guru-shishya parampara for six years to complete the training in all aspects. It has also adopted some other dance styles and forms by intimating kathak, Bharat Natyam, Kathakali, Phar Khanda kela, Amdalia Jamdalia dance, Jhumar and Udaya Shankar oriental dance forms. In the 18th century the Chhau dance was modified by late Krushna Chandra Bhanjdeo.

Mayurbhanj Chhau does possess not only classical Raga and Ragini but also definite Tal and Laya. One finds extensive use of Tals like Kaharba, Ektal, Trital, Dadra, Rupak, Jhampatal of Hindusthani classical music. The classical dance numbers like Kailash Leela, Kirat Arjuna etc. are based on classical music.

The use of techniques like Topaka, Ufli and use of Mudras in Mayurbhanj Chhau take the dance form on the road of classicality. In the words of Dr. Kapil Vatsayan, "Once we enter into the dance style itself we find that it has shed almost all the features of tribal, folk and village dance and has acquired a distinctive stylisation which is a characteristic feature of the dance forms commonly termed as classical."

The musical instruments like Dhol, Mahuri, Chadachadi, Dhumsa are the main musical instruments used in Chhau. These musical instruments are primarily used by the tribal people

in their dances. The music of Chhau at the nataki stage i.e. final stage is that of Jhumar, which is a folk music. The vocal songs at times used in Mayurbhanj Chhau is also written in folk lyrics. It is clearly known that Mayurbhanj chhau has acquired dance styles of different dance forms, some of which are tribal dance forms. The dance has freely imbibed the techniques of prevailing folk dances such as Chadheia, Patna, Kathi, Changu Nacha etc. Mayurbhanj chhau is a unique combination of the characteristics of both folk and classical dances.

The Chhau dance of Mayurbhanj is not at all inferior to any classical dance of India, and no doubt it is similar to Odissi dance. From the comparative study of both the dances one may draw conclusion that Odissi and Chhau are only dance styles of India; which without being too much sophisticated still retain a unique prestige, simplicity combined with graceful posture and ritual sanctity. The only difference between the two is that, Odissi represents the unmutated form of "Lasya" dance, where as the Chhau represents a form of martial art. The style, posture, gesture, dress arrangement, presentation, musical tone and rhythm etc. are highly excellent and entertaining in both the dances of Odissi and Mayurbhanj Chhau.

The following suggestions may be made in order to sustain the survival of Chhau dance in Mayurbhanj district - (i) the health care, social security of the old artistes and gurus has to be assured. (ii) there should be identification of Akhras, Gurus and artists. Document is to be prepared for ready reference. (iii) their needs be redressed at door step by autonomous organisations. (iv) the artists be given regular diets, health check up and medical treatment and secured means of livelihood. (v) Yoga Mudra are to be taught and practised by the dancers daily. (vi) performance of dance timing may be made from 7 P.M. to 10 P.M. (vii) health care be provided at regular intervals and use of liquor and

intoxicants be forbidden (viii) Like the incentives provided to the sportsmen under the policy decision of the Govt. of India, Department of cultural affairs should give scope and privilege to Chhau artists such as reservation in government services and other facilities.

Now that national and international attentions have been drawn to this dance, it should get its recognition it deserves. The government, general public and the administration must change their attitude in this regard, so that this valuable art can survive in the age of Information Technology and Audio-Visual Media. These thrust areas are to be thought upon and touched. The approval of Univesity and Government are needed for institutionalising it. The act of copyright is also necessary from protecting it from plagiarists, so that Chhau could survive as a traditional martial art in the district of Mayurbhanj in Orissa.

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