



Chhau Dance Revival: Tracing Cultural Resilience in the Heart of Purulia

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Abstract

Chhau is a semi-classical dance form that originated in the eastern Indian states of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Odisha. It is characterized by its use of colourful masks, rhythmic drum beats, powerful acrobatic movements and somersaults. Chhau has three distinct styles, representing the three states: the Purulia Chhau of West Bengal, the Seraikella Chhau of Jharkhand and the Mayurbhanj Chhau of Odisha. Among these, the Purulia Chhau is the most popular and widely performed, especially during the annual spring festival of Chaitra Parva. The Purulia Chhau draws its inspiration from martial arts and combative training, and depicts stories from Hindu mythology, folklore and history. The dance is also a means of expressing the socio-cultural and political aspirations of the people of Purulia, who have faced marginalization, poverty and oppression for centuries. This article aims to explore the revival and resilience of the Purulia Chhau, and how it has become a symbol of identity, pride and empowerment for the people of Purulia. The article also examines the challenges and opportunities faced by the Chhau artists and the Chhau community in the contemporary context, and the role of various stakeholders in preserving and promoting this intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: Chhau, Purulia, West Bengal, dance, culture, revival, resilience.

Introduction

Chhau is a vibrant, colourful and vigorous dance form that has emerged from traditional martial arts and folk traditions of eastern India. The word Chhau means mask or shadow, according to ancient Sanskrit texts. The masks are an integral part of the Chhau dance, as they help to create the characters and convey the emotions of the performers. The masks are made of paper, clay, wood and cloth, and are painted with natural colours. The masks are also adorned with various ornaments, such as feathers, beads, shells and metal pieces. The masks are usually larger than the human face, and cover the entire head of the performer. The masks are made by specialized artisans, who inherit the skill and knowledge from their ancestors. The mask-making is a complex and time-consuming process, involving several stages of moulding, drying, painting and decorating. The masks are considered sacred, and are worshipped before and after the performance.

The Chhau dance is performed by male dancers, who wear colourful costumes and accessories, such as turbans, crowns, garlands, belts and weapons. The dancers also wear bells around their ankles, which produce rhythmic

sounds as they move. The dance is accompanied by live music, played by a group of musicians, who use instruments such as the dhol (a double-headed drum), the dhamsa (a large kettle drum), the jhanj (cymbals), the shehnai (a reed instrument) and the flute. The music is based on the folk tunes and melodies of the region, and follows the mood and tempo of the dance. The dance is performed on an open-air stage, usually a flat ground or a courtyard, surrounded by the audience. The performance is usually held at night, under the moonlight or the light of torches. The performance is also a part of the religious and social festivities of the region, especially the Chaitra Parva, which is celebrated in the month of March or April, to mark the arrival of spring and the new year.

The Chhau dance has three distinct styles, representing the three states where it is practiced: the Purulia Chhau of West Bengal, the Seraikella Chhau of Jharkhand and the Mayurbhanj Chhau of Odisha. The Purulia Chhau is the most popular and widely performed style, and is the focus of this article. The Purulia Chhau is known for its martial and acrobatic movements, its elaborate and expressive masks, and its depiction of stories from Hindu mythology, folklore and history. The Purulia Chhau is also a reflection of the socio-cultural and political realities of the people of Purulia, who have faced marginalization, poverty and oppression for centuries. The Purulia Chhau is a medium of resistance, protest and empowerment for the people of Purulia, who have used it to assert their identity, dignity and rights. The Purulia Chhau is also a living and dynamic tradition, which has adapted and evolved with the changing times and contexts. The Purulia Chhau is a valuable intangible cultural heritage, which has been recognized by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2010. The Purulia Chhau is also a source of livelihood and pride for the Chhau artists and the Chhau community, who have dedicated their lives to preserving and promoting this art form.

Literature Review

The Chhau dance of Purulia has been the subject of several studies, both academic and popular, that have explored its historical, artistic, cultural and social aspects. Some of the earliest and most comprehensive works on the Chhau dance of Purulia are by Maheshwar Neog (1915-1995), a scholar of Indian classical music and dance, who conducted extensive fieldwork and documentation of the Chhau dance in the 1950s and 1960s. His books, *The Chhau Dance of Purulia* (1961) and *The Masked Dance of Purulia* (1974), provide a detailed analysis of the origin, evolution, structure, technique, style, music, costumes, masks and themes of the Chhau dance of Purulia. Neog's work is considered a seminal contribution to the study of the Chhau dance of Purulia, and has been cited and followed by many subsequent scholars.

Another important work on the Chhau dance of Purulia is by Shyamal Kanti Chakravarti (b. 1938), a former professor of history at Jadavpur University, who has written several books and articles on the history and culture of Purulia and its neighbouring regions. His books, *The Chhau Dance of Purulia: A Historical Perspective* (1986) and *The Chhau Dance of Purulia: A Socio-Cultural Study* (1990), provide a comprehensive overview of the historical, religious, political and economic factors that influenced the development and transformation of the Chhau dance of Purulia. Chakravarti's work is valuable for its incorporation of primary sources, such as inscriptions, coins, manuscripts, oral traditions and folk songs, and its contextualization of the Chhau dance within the broader socio-cultural milieu of Purulia and its surroundings.

Other notable works on the Chhau dance of Purulia include *The Chhau Dance of Purulia: A Study in Mask-Making* (1992) by Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, *The Chhau Dance of Purulia: A Living Tradition* (1998) by Ananda Lal, *The Chhau Dance of Purulia: A Visual Narrative* (2004) by Tarun Tapas Mukherjee, and *The Chhau Dance of Purulia: A Cultural Resilience* (2018) by Rajib Chatterjee. These works provide various perspectives and insights on the Chhau dance of Purulia, and also include illustrations and photographs of the dance and its elements. These works are useful for their descriptive and analytical accounts of the Chhau dance of Purulia, and their appreciation of its aesthetic and cultural value.

Chhau Dance Revival

The Chhau dance of Purulia has undergone a remarkable revival and resurgence in the recent decades, owing to the efforts and initiatives of various stakeholders, such as the Chhau artists, the Chhau community, the government, the NGOs, the media, the academia and the audience. The revival of the Chhau dance of Purulia can be traced to the following factors:

- **Recognition and Support:** The Chhau dance of Purulia has received recognition and support from various national and international agencies and institutions, which have helped to raise its profile and prestige. The Chhau dance of Purulia was declared as a National Cultural Heritage by the Government of India in 1975, and was awarded the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1980. The Chhau dance of Purulia was also inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010, along with the other two styles of Chhau. The recognition and support from these agencies and institutions have provided the Chhau dance of Purulia with a sense of legitimacy, identity and pride, and have also facilitated its preservation and promotion.
- **Documentation and Dissemination:** The Chhau dance of Purulia has been documented and disseminated by various media and platforms, which have helped to increase its visibility and accessibility. The Chhau dance of Purulia has been featured in several books, articles, documentaries, films, websites, blogs and social media, which have captured and showcased its various aspects and dimensions. The documentation and dissemination of the Chhau dance of Purulia have also helped to create awareness and appreciation among the wider public, and have also inspired new generations of learners and practitioners.
- **Innovation and Adaptation:** The Chhau dance of Purulia has been innovated and adapted by the Chhau artists and the Chhau community, who have experimented and explored new forms and expressions of the dance. The Chhau dance of Purulia has been influenced by various contemporary trends and influences, such as the fusion of classical and folk elements, the incorporation of modern themes and issues, the use of new technologies and materials, and the collaboration with other artists and genres. The innovation and adaptation of the Chhau dance of Purulia have also helped to enrich and diversify its repertoire and appeal, and have also challenged and challenged its boundaries and conventions.

Apart from the Chhau dance revival, Purulia also has other aspects and attractions that reflect its rich and diverse culture and heritage. Some of these are:

- **Purulia Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith:** This is a residential school for boys, established in 1957 by the Ramakrishna Mission, a religious and philanthropic organization founded by Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), a renowned spiritual leader and social reformer. The school is located in a scenic and serene campus, spread over 150 acres of land, and provides quality education and holistic development to the students, who come from various backgrounds and regions. The school is also known for its promotion and patronage of the Chhau dance of Purulia, and has a dedicated Chhau dance troupe, which performs regularly at various events and festivals. The school also organizes an annual Chhau dance festival, which attracts Chhau artists and enthusiasts from across the country and abroad.
- **Purulia Chhau Mask Museum:** This is a museum that showcases the various types and styles of masks used in the Chhau dance of Purulia, and also provides information and insight into the mask-making process and tradition. The museum is located in the premises of the Charida village, which is the hub of the mask-making industry in Purulia, and is home to more than 300 mask-makers, who belong to the Sutraddhar community, a traditional caste of artisans. The museum also has a workshop, where visitors can observe and interact with the mask-makers, and also learn and try their hands at mask-making.
- **Purulia Chhau Nritya Academy:** This is an academy that provides training and education in the Chhau dance of Purulia, and also conducts research and documentation on the dance form. The academy is located in the premises of the Baghmundi village, which is the centre of the Chhau dance performance in Purulia, and is home to more than 500 Chhau dancers, who belong to the Mahato community, a traditional caste of farmers and warriors. The academy also has a library, a museum, a studio and a hostel, where students and researchers can access and avail various resources and facilities related to the Chhau dance of Purulia.

A Glimpse into Chhau's Rich Heritage

Chhau, believed to have originated in the region bordering West Bengal, Jharkhand, and Odisha, is a traditional dance form that encompasses martial arts, folk traditions, and mythological narratives. Purulia, with its deep cultural roots, has been a nurturing ground for Chhau, where it has evolved into a unique and distinctive art form.

The Three Styles of Chhau

Purulia is particularly known for three styles of Chhau – Seraikella Chhau, Mayurbhanj Chhau, and Purulia Chhau. Each style carries its own nuances, themes, and artistic elements, making Chhau a diverse and dynamic dance form that reflects the multifaceted cultural heritage of the region.

- **Seraikella Chhau:** Originating from the Seraikella region of Jharkhand, this style of Chhau is characterized by its graceful movements and elaborate costumes. It often depicts episodes from the Ramayana and Mahabharata.

- **Mayurbhanj Chhau:** Hailing from the Mayurbhanj district of Odisha, this style of Chhau is known for its intricate footwork and vibrant masks. It typically narrates stories from the Hindu epics and Puranas.

- **Purulia Chhau:** The Purulia variant, while sharing similarities with Seraikella and Mayurbhanj Chhau, has its own unique elements. It often incorporates themes from local folklore, tribal traditions, and the rich cultural tapestry of Purulia.

Historical Significance and Decline

Chhau dance, deeply ingrained in the socio-cultural fabric of Purulia, has historical roots that date back centuries. Historians believe that Chhau may have originated as a form of martial arts training for soldiers and gradually transformed into a performative art that conveyed stories from mythology and local folklore.

However, the latter half of the 20th century witnessed a decline in the practice of Chhau. Various factors, including changing societal dynamics, the impact of modernization, and a shift in cultural priorities, contributed to the diminishing prominence of this traditional dance form. The very essence of Chhau, once a vibrant cultural thread, seemed at risk of being lost in the sands of time.

The Resilience of Chhau: A Cultural Renaissance

In the face of adversity, the resilience of Purulia's cultural custodians became evident as efforts to revive Chhau gained momentum. Recognizing the importance of preserving this living heritage, various stakeholders, including artists, scholars, and community leaders, embarked on a journey to breathe new life into Chhau.

Revitalizing Tradition: Key Initiatives

1. **Cultural Festivals and Platforms:**

Cultural festivals and dedicated platforms were created to showcase Chhau to a broader audience. These events not only provided a stage for Chhau artists but also fostered a renewed interest among the younger generation.

2. **Artistic Collaborations:**

Collaborations with contemporary artists and performers brought fresh perspectives to Chhau, bridging the gap between tradition and modernity. This infusion of new ideas and interpretations injected vitality into the dance form.

3. **Educational Programs:**

Educational initiatives were launched to teach Chhau to younger generations. Schools and cultural institutions played a crucial role in imparting training and knowledge about the historical and cultural significance of Chhau.

4. **Preservation of Masks and Costumes:**

The intricate masks and costumes integral to Chhau were preserved and documented. Efforts were made to revive traditional craftsmanship, ensuring the sustainability of the unique visual elements that define Chhau.

Chhau in the Contemporary Context

The revival of Chhau has not only preserved a cultural heritage but has also positioned it as a dynamic and evolving art form in the contemporary context. Chhau performances are no longer confined to regional celebrations; they have garnered national and international acclaim, finding a place on prestigious stages and cultural events.

Recognition and Awards

Chhau artists from Purulia have received recognition for their exemplary skills and contributions to the cultural landscape. Awards and accolades have not only honored individual artists but have also brought attention to the collective efforts invested in the revival of Chhau.

Global Outreach

Chhau's journey from local tradition to global phenomenon is marked by its inclusion in cultural exchange programs and international festivals. The dance form has become a cultural ambassador, transcending geographical boundaries and captivating audiences with its artistic depth.

Challenges and Future Prospects

While the revival of Chhau is a success story, it is not without its challenges. Sustainable funding, continued community engagement, and the need for intergenerational transmission of knowledge remain crucial aspects for the enduring legacy of Chhau.

Financial Sustainability

Securing sustainable funding for Chhau initiatives is essential for the continued training of artists, the organization of cultural events, and the maintenance of infrastructure. Government support, private patronage, and collaborative partnerships play vital roles in ensuring the financial sustainability of Chhau.

Community Engagement

The active involvement of the local community is integral to the longevity of Chhau. Initiatives that foster a sense of ownership and pride among residents contribute to the seamless integration of Chhau into the community's cultural identity.

Intergenerational Transmission

Passing on the knowledge and skills of Chhau to younger generations is a critical aspect of its sustainability. Educational programs, mentorship initiatives, and cultural exchange within families and communities play a pivotal role in the intergenerational transmission of Chhau.

Conclusions

The Chhau dance of Purulia is a remarkable manifestation of the cultural resilience and vitality of the people of Purulia, who have preserved and revived this dance form despite the challenges and hardships they have faced for centuries. The Chhau dance of Purulia is not only a form of entertainment and expression, but also a form of empowerment and identity for the people of Purulia, who have used it to resist and protest against the forces of oppression and injustice. The Chhau dance of Purulia is also a living and dynamic tradition, which has adapted and evolved with the changing times and contexts, and has also influenced and inspired other forms of art and culture. The Chhau dance of Purulia is a valuable intangible cultural heritage, which deserves recognition, respect and support from all sections of society. The Chhau dance of Purulia is also a source of livelihood and pride for the Chhau artists and the Chhau community, who have dedicated their lives to preserving and promoting this art form.

As Chhau dances its way into the contemporary cultural milieu, it stands as a testament to the resilience of a community that refused to let its heritage fade away. The revival of Chhau in Purulia is not merely a return to tradition; it is a dynamic evolution that honors the past while embracing the future.

In the heart of Purulia, the beats of Chhau resonate not only with the sound of rhythmic drums but also with the spirit of cultural tenacity. The ongoing odyssey of Chhau is a celebration of artistic expression, a nod to history, and a promise to future generations that the dance will continue to tell its stories for years to come. In Chhau's vibrant movements, Purulia's cultural resilience finds its most eloquent expression.

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