

## Saraikella Chhau: In the perspective of theatrical performances

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### Abstract:

This research paper will delve into the captivating world of Chhau dance, a traditional folk-art form that plays a vital role in preserving the cultural heritage of India. I will highlight the origins of Chhau dance and its significance in maintaining the cultural, traditional, and historical identity of specific regions and the nation. My primary focus will be on the Chhau dance of the Saraikella district in Jharkhand.

I will illustrate how the people of Saraikella celebrate this vibrant dance form, identifying the specific month dedicated to its performance. Furthermore, I will examine the themes expressed in their performances and the musical styles that accompany them. Additionally, the paper will discuss the relevance of Chhau dance in contemporary training systems and its contributions to the realm of physical theatre.

Through this comprehensive analysis, my research will underline the importance of Chhau dance, particularly the Saraikella variety, as a vital cultural expression that enriches both local and national identity.

**Keywords:** Chhau dance, Saraikella chhau, martial art, folk art, Masks

### Introduction:

Chhau dance is one of the oldest folk dances in India, celebrated and performed in three states: West Bengal, Jharkhand, and Odisha. The exact origins of Chhau dance remain a topic of debate, and the specific period of its inception is not well-documented. One question that arises is where this folk dance originated: Purulia in West Bengal, Saraikela in Jharkhand, or Mayurbhanj in Odisha (Das 2020). While two of these states incorporate masks into their performances, Mayurbhanj in Odisha does not use masks. The masks, typically made from paper, are utilized to depict various characters such as demons and gods.

This research paper will delve into the captivating world of Chhau dance, a traditional folk-art form that plays a vital role in preserving the cultural heritage of India. I will highlight the origins of Chhau dance and its significance in maintaining the cultural, traditional, and historical identity of specific regions and the nation. This paper also deals with the theatrical elements of Saraikella chhau.

### Origin of Chhau dance

The word "Chhau" is believed to have military origins, coming from the Oriya language words "chhauka" (which means the quality of attacking stealthily), "chhauri" (meaning armour), and "chhauni" (referring to a military camp). Some suggest that "Chhau" may also derive from the

Sanskrit word "chhayi," which means shadow, image, or illusion. This connection highlights the use of masks in certain forms of Chhau, particularly in the town of Saraikella and the Purulia district of West Bengal (Reck 1972).

Some scholar also puts arguments that, 'The origin of the word Chhau is still obscure. Some scholar have found out an etymological meaning of the word Chhau (from Sanskrit word Chhāyā, meaning-Shade Mask) and claim that the dance bears the name Chhau for its use of the mask. (Which one locates in the Sareikal Chhau)' (Kumar Mallik 2023).

The vigorous steps and leaps of the Chhau dance, along with the frequent use of swords and shields and a focus on warlike themes and battles, suggest a military origin. The ritual plays of Chaitra Parva and tribal dances may have influenced this dance form. Chhau developed into a hybrid art form within the small princely states of Mayurbhanj and Saraikella, where it received patronage and guidance from local rajas.

The repertoire of Chhau includes a comprehensive theory and vocabulary of steps and movements, a wide range of dance themes, extensive influences from other dance forms (including elements of English ballroom dancing), as well as the incorporation of classical Oriya melodies in known ragas and talas, along with folk tunes (Reck 1972).

### **Saraikella Chhau:**

One of the most renowned forms of Chhau dance is performed in the Saraikella district of Jharkhand every year in April. This performance features elaborate masks and costumes that vividly represent different cultural characters. The dance is characterized by vigorous body movements and dynamic footwork, incorporating elements of martial arts and acrobatic stunts, resulting in a highly energetic and dramatic presentation. Saraikella Chhau typically tells stories from Hindu epics like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, focusing on themes of heroism that impart moral lessons. Live traditional music, including drums and other instruments, accompanies the performance, providing rhythmic support that enhances its dramatic effect. 'The most advanced artistic form of Chhau dance is Saraikella Chhau. This dance features a variety of short compositions based on numerous themes. One notable piece, titled "Ratri" or Night, is inspired by the Ratri Sukta, a verse from the Rig Veda that personifies night as a goddess. Night protects the world and its inhabitants from the threatening forces that may hide within her darkness' (Acharya).

### **How does Saraikella Chhau dance help in acting?**

Chhau is renowned for its dynamic movements, which include jumps, spins, and intricate footwork. Actors who practice Chhau develop better control over their bodies, enhancing their ability to convey emotions through movement. The precision and discipline required in Chhau allow actors to achieve more fluid and expressive physical performances (Gargi 1966).

Chhau dance demands that performers express a wide range of emotions, from joy to anger, fear, and sorrow. This makes it an excellent training tool for actors, helping them become more

attuned to their emotional states and express these feelings with clarity and intensity—an essential skill for powerful acting (Kumar Mallik 2023).

Although Chhau is primarily a physical dance form, it also places a strong emphasis on facial expressions, particularly the eyes, to convey meaning. Actors can learn to use their eyes effectively to communicate emotions and intentions, which is a crucial aspect of acting. Chhau often involves performances that narrate stories or myths, many of which are epic. By telling a story through dance, actors can gain a deeper understanding of narrative structure, character development, and pacing. Engaging with the storytelling elements of Chhau helps actors refine their skills in creating compelling characters and delivering captivating performances.

The stances and postures in Chhau, often inspired by martial arts, promote strength, balance, and poise. This training supports actors in maintaining strong, grounded performances, exuding authority and presence on stage or screen. Like any classical art form, Chhau requires dedication, concentration, and practice. This discipline can enhance an actor's focus and commitment to their craft, making them more attentive to detail and less susceptible to distractions.

Learning Chhau dance provides actors with a deeper understanding of Indian culture and tradition, enriching their ability to portray characters from diverse backgrounds with authenticity.

## **Benefits of Saraikella Chhau Dance for Acting**

Chhau dance is a physical art form that significantly aids in various acting techniques, including physical actions and expressive body gestures that convey emotions to the audience. Actors who practice Chhau dance gain confidence and develop a powerful stage presence. The dance is often showcased during numerous religious festivals across these regions and serves as a means to narrate epic stories from texts like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Chhau dance is gaining popularity worldwide, and performances are being held globally (Gargi 1966).

## **Saraikella Chhau Dance as Theatrical Performance**

Chhau dance is not just a performance; it is an immersive theatrical experience that combines dance, drama, and music. Some key elements contributing to its theatricality include:

1. **Physical Performance:** Chhau dancers showcase their extraordinary physical abilities through complex acrobatics and graceful movements (Mahato et al. 2023). These powerful expressions convey a range of emotions, from anger and aggression to love and devotion.
2. **Mask Display:** In Purulia and Saraikella Chhau, masks play a crucial role in expressing emotions and character. The intricate design and exaggeration characteristic of these masks enhance the dancers' expressiveness, allowing them to portray various roles, from gods and demons to heroes and villains. The narratives often adapt folklore and legends, interpreted through vibrant dance (Roy Biswas Janapada Sampada Division Indira Gandhi 2008).

3. Symbolism: Dancers utilize various symbols and gestures to convey ideas and reinforce the narrative. Many of these movements are derived from traditional martial arts, adding depth and richness to the performance. The rhythms created by the accompanying instruments energize the dancers. In some regions, singers accompany the dance with traditional songs and chants, further enhancing the emotional impact and contributing to the overall theatrical experience.

### **Chhau Dance and Its Influence on Theatre.**

Chhau dance has significantly influenced the evolution of Indian theatre. Its major contributions include:

1. Physical Theatre: The emphasis on storytelling through both movement and dialogue has inspired practitioners of physical theatre to explore new modes of expression.
2. Mask Theatre: The use of masks in Chhau dance has contributed to the development of modern theatre, where masks are employed to create powerful and engaging performances.
3. Folk Dance: The traditional roots of Chhau dance have been pivotal in preserving and reviving folk dance.

### **Conclusion:**

Chhau dance represents a unique fusion of physicality, narrative, and cultural heritage. Its dramatic features, characterized by rapid movements, expressive masks, and lively rhythms, have continued to captivate audiences for centuries. By gaining a deeper understanding of Chhau dance, we can appreciate its profound influence on the world of dance and its capacity to inspire generations of artists and performers. The Chhau dance has a significant influence on acting, particularly in the Indian method of acting, where performers must effectively use their bodies to deliver impactful performances. The movements of Chhau dance enhance actors' ability to execute all Abhinay and also contribute to building their confidence.

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