

# Purulia Chhau, Mayurbhanj Chhau, and Saraikella Chhau: A Comparative Study

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## Abstract

This research aims to understand the folk arts form known as Chhau, a traditional dance and drama art form performed in various regions of Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Odisha. A comparative approach is employed to analyze the similarities and differences among the various Chhau forms in these regions. The findings reveal numerous similarities, including the use of masks, similar costumes, and makeup styles.

**Keywords:** Chhau, Folk Dance, Folk Music, Martial Art, Drama, Purulia Chhau, Mayurbhanj Chhau, Saraikella Chhau

## Introduction

The word 'Chhau', apparently has a military origin, deriving from the Oriya language words, chhauka (the quality of attacking stealthily), chhauri (armour), and chhauni (military camp). Chhau, derives from the Sanskrit, chhayi (shadow, image, illusion), because of the use of masks in some form of Chhau, namely at the town of Saraikella and in the Purulia district of West Bengal (Reck, 1972).

Chhau developed into hybrid form in the small princely states of Mayurbhanj and Saraikella under the patronage and the supervision of the rajas. The repertoire includes an elaborate theory and alphabet of steps and movements, a wide variety of dance themes, extensive borrowing from other forms of dance (even including English ballroom dancing), and utilization of classical Oriya melodies is known ragas and talas, as well as folk tales.

Chhau is a traditional and vibrant dance-drama form that originates from India, particularly from the eastern regions of West Bengal, Jharkhand, and Odisha (Acharya, n.d.). It developed during the medieval period, around the 18th century, and has since become more formalized and organized. Over time, it has evolved into different forms according to the region.

## Seraikella Chhau (Jharkhand)

The Seraikella Chhau is a traditional Indian dance originating from the Seraikella region of Jharkhand, India. Primarily performed during festivals and celebrations, particularly during the annual spring festival, this dance form is characterized by elaborate costumes and representations of various characters, including gods, demons, and animals (Das, 2020). The performances incorporate drumming to showcase martial and dramatic techniques, often narrating mythological or historical tales through movement. This dance gained recognition during the 1930s under the patronage of the royal family, particularly Kumar Bijay Pratap Singh, who modernized and introduced it to an international audience. Seraikella Chhau is a dramatic dance form that portrays powerful and mythological stories from Hindu epics, local folklore, and historical events. It emphasizes martial movements, elegance, and expressive gestures, bringing to life narratives of gods, heroes, warriors, and cosmic battles.

The predominant theme in Seraikella Chhau revolves around the epic battles between deities, demons, and heroes. Notable examples include the Mahabharata and Ramayana, which depict various battle narratives from different Puranas. Additionally, stories encompassing the conflict between gods and demons are frequently performed, with the popular Samudra Manthan showcasing the triumph of good over evil (Kumar Mallik, 2023). Similarly, heroic tales of kings and warriors, as well as the creation and destruction of the universe, are presented through these performances. Each story incorporates specific themes that captivate the audience and enhance their engagement with the narratives.

The Seraikella Chhau dance form has its origins in martial arts, and as such, the costumes used in its early stages were relatively simple. However, as the art form evolved and was incorporated into theatrical performances in the royal courts of Seraikella, the costumes became more elaborate. The costumes include chest armors, shoulder plates, and arm guards, which were traditionally worn by gods, heroes, and warriors (Roy Biswas Janapada Sampada Division Indira Gandhi, 2008). These protective elements were crafted from metals and leather, serving both practical and symbolic purposes. They provided physical protection during combat and symbolized strength and power. Gods and warriors are often depicted wearing headgears or crowns, which represent their royalty, divinity, and spiritual authority. Dancers perform barefoot to establish a stronger connection with the earth and to execute precise foot movements. However, those portraying warriors wear leather sandals for added protection. Jewelry, such as armbands, necklaces, and rings, is incorporated into the costumes to reflect the wealth and status of the characters being portrayed. Performers representing gods wear necklaces made of flowers and beads, symbolizing purity and spirituality. Body paints are also used to enhance the dancers' body postures and facial expressions. Kumkum and sandalwood are commonly used for facial makeup, adding to the overall aesthetic and symbolic significance of the costumes. In addition, the facial makeup involves the application of thick layers of vibrant colors to depict various characters. For instance, red and orange tones are employed for heroic figures such as kings and warriors, while yellow and green tones are reserved for divine beings like gods. Conversely, black and blue tones are utilized for villainous and demonic characters. The masks used in Saraikella Chhau are used during the Chhau dance festival, which is celebrated annually in the month of Chaitra (March-April) in honour of Lord Shiva, and also during festival of spring. This is a month long programme in Saraikella, when rich and poor all join together to enjoy the innermost feeling of cosmic joy.

Music plays a pivotal role in the Saraikella Chhau art form, as it does in most traditional dance-drama performances. The music primarily incorporates the Dhols, Nagara, flute, sitar, and sarod to enhance the musical experience. Fast-paced rhythms are employed for battle and heroic scenes, generating a sense of excitement, while slow and meditative rhythms are utilized for spiritual scenes to evoke feelings of peace and devotion (Mahato et al., 2023). Additionally, vocal music holds great significance in this art form, with singers employing powerful tones to depict the story and performing Chhau Geet that synchronize with the dancers' movements.

While the form has ancient roots and is associated with local royal and tribal communities, it is currently practiced and preserved by various cultural groups, local troupes, and institutions. Notable among these are the Saraikella Chhau Mandal, Jharkhand Kala Vikas Sangh, Chhau Dance Academy, and Raghuvanshi Chhau Dance Academy.

### **Purulia Chhau (West Bengal)**

Purulia Chhau is a very distinctive and vibrant art form of West Bengal. It originated from the Purulia district of West Bengal. It consists of the folk arts form including drama, dance, portraying different mythological stories like Ramayana and Mahabharata etc (Cardinale, 2015). This art form consists of gods, demons and animals. Purulia art form consists of various artistic features which consists of mask work, very vibrant makeup and costumes and specially the music which enhance the art form. Martial art is the key feature of this art where performers do spins, jumps and other body movements. Purulia Chhau is the traditional art form of the rural area of West Bengal (Mahata & Doreswamy, n.d.).

The genesis of Purulia Chhau can be traced back to the tribal communities, notably the Munda, Santhal, and bhumi tribes. The energetic movements of this art form are believed to be influenced by the martial dance of Rajputs and the martial art form of Southern India. Traditionally, this art form was performed during festivals like Chhau Parab, ceremonies, community gatherings, and harvesting festivals. However, over time, Chhau became more structured, and performers began to depict stories from Hindu mythology, such as Ramayana and Mahabharata (Kumar et al., 2024). During the 18th and 19th centuries, this art form gained recognition among royal families, particularly in the Bengal region and neighbouring Bihar. However, during the British period, this art form faced suppression. Despite these challenges, the tribal people ensured the continuation of this art form to the present day.

In reference to the Purulia Chhau art form, the most renowned narrative is the Ramayana, where artists portray the heroic battle between Rama and the demon Ravana. Key scenes depicted include the exile of Rama and the abduction of Sita. Another prominent story is the Mahabharata, which showcases the conflict between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. These stories incorporate mask performances, utilizing majestic masks to represent

the divinity of gods and terrifying masks to symbolize the malevolent nature of demons, thereby enhancing the overall performance (Mahato et al., 2023).

The costumes and makeup employed in Purulia Chhau play a pivotal role in enhancing the visual impact and theatrical expression of the performance. These elements add a sense of grandeur, drama, and mysticism to the overall presentation. The costumes are meticulously designed to be visually striking, featuring vibrant colors that amplify the dramatic nature of the storytelling. They consist of heavy dresses adorned with elaborate jewelry, including necklaces, rings, headgears, and crowns. The artists are adorned in large and brightly colored garments crafted from luxurious fabrics such as silk, cotton, or satin. Furthermore, the costumes are embellished with intricate embroidery, beads, and ribbons, further enhancing their visual appeal during the performance. Masks, a crucial element in Purulia Chhau, are meticulously crafted from papier-mâché, wood, or clay and carefully molded to achieve the desired expressions. For the preparation of mask, firstly, a mould is made and a sticky paste of clay is prepared to put a coating of clay. Striped cloth pieces are soaked in sticky paste of clay and applied on the surface of the clay coating. Then, the colour coat is applied accordingly, eyes, lips, eye brows, hairs, etc. In addition to the costumes and masks, makeup also enhanced the grace of the performance (Arden, 1971). Different colors were used to distinguish various characters. Makeup was particularly dramatic, especially the eye makeup. Heavy makeup was applied, including thick eyeliners, colored eyelashes, and dramatic eyebrows to accentuate the characters' appearances. Footwear was also an integral part of the costume, primarily consisting of simple leather sandals. However, in certain performances, artists portraying divine roles performed barefoot to symbolize purity and divinity.

The music of Purulia Chhau is an integral component of the entire performance. It incorporates various rhythms and beats that elevate the performance to different levels. Multiple instruments are utilized during the performance, including the dhol, flute, dhamsa, and madal (a small drum) (Acharya, n.d.). Chhau performances also feature vocal chanting and songs performed by vocalists and narrators to intensify the role. Furthermore, different rhythms are employed for different scenes, such as fast rhythms (teen tal or ek tal) for intense scenes like battles and slow rhythms (rupak tal or jhaptal) for spiritual scenes, enhancing the overall impact of the scene. Despite the challenges faced in the modern era, numerous groups and communities continue to preserve and promote this art form. These include Purulia Chhau Dance Troupes, Kolkata-based cultural institutions like Sahitya Akademi, West Bengal Academy of Dance Drama Music and Visual Arts, etc. Additionally, various NGOs and government funds provide support to artists and masters, enabling the growth and sustenance of this art form in contemporary times.

### Mayurbhanj Chhau (Odisha)

Mayurbhanj Chhau is a traditional and vibrant dance and drama form originating from the Mayurbhanj district in northeastern Odisha. It encompasses various martial art forms, acrobatics, storytelling, and realistic dance. The roots of Mayurbhanj Chhau date back to the 16th century, but it gained prominence in the 18th century during the reign of the Bhanja kings of Mayurbhanj. Initially known solely for its martial arts techniques, it evolved to include theatrical performances that captivated audiences. The key features of this art form include its unique martial arts techniques, elaborate and dramatic costumes and makeup that enhance character portrayal, distinct music rhythms, dance techniques, and thematic stories that add depth and complexity to the art form (Kumar Mallik, 2023). Furthermore, Mayurbhanj Chhau holds cultural significance as it is traditionally performed during special occasions such as festivals, ceremonies, religious rituals, and social gatherings.

The origin of Mayurbhanj Chhau can be traced back to the 16th century, when it was primarily utilized as a martial art to train soldiers. It is believed that this art form was initially influenced by the martial practices and combat techniques of the Kshatriya (warrior) class in Odisha. The prominence of Mayurbhanj Chhau was refined under the patronage of the Bhanja dynasty, which ruled over the Mayurbhanj district during the 17th to 18th centuries. Over time, this art form transitioned from a martial art to a more structured and framed art form of dance and drama, where stories from various Puranas began to be depicted before audiences (Orissa Review \*, 2008). Even in the 20th century, this art form continues to thrive, particularly in the rural areas of Mayurbhanj in Odisha.

Mayurbhanj Chhau, a traditional art form, draws its narratives from Hindu mythology as depicted in various religious texts such as the Granths and Puranas. These narratives include the battle between Rama and Ravana, the abduction of Sita by Ravana, and the slaying of Kumbhakarana, all from the Ramayana. Additionally, they perform stories from the Mahabharata, such as the battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, the fall of

Bhishma, and the disrobing of Draupadi. Furthermore, they enact the dance of Shiva and Parvati. The artists also incorporate stories from local folklore into their performances. These performances seamlessly blend martial arts, dance, and theatrical expressions.

The costumes employed in the Mayurbhanj Chhau dance are meticulously crafted to serve both aesthetic and functional purposes, vividly representing the roles of the characters. The fundamental components of the attire comprise dhotis for male performers and saris or skirts for their female counterparts. To further enhance the character portrayal, various ornaments such as necklaces, anklets, headgears, and crowns are adorned. Warrior costumes incorporate armor or protective elements crafted from leather or metals, while the attire of demons like Ravana features spiked armlets, horns, or elaborate collars. These costumes often employ dark and vibrant colors like red, black, or purple to convey the malevolent nature of the characters. Performers portraying gods or goddesses are adorned with garlands of flowers, ornate crowns, and decorative belts, symbolizing their divine status. Makeup plays a crucial role in accentuating the facial expressions of the characters, aligning with their respective roles.

Music plays a crucial role in Mayurbhanj Chhau, serving as a medium to convey the emotional aspects of the narrative and foster a connection with the audience. Various percussion instruments, such as the dhol, mardala, shehnai, and flute, are employed to enhance the intensity of different scenes. Thundering beats accompany battleground sequences, while slow, melodic flute music underscores divine interventions, creating a sense of spiritual transcendence. Depicted before the audience and to connect them with the story. Different percussion instruments used to intensify the scenes like dhol, mardala, shehnai, flute etc (Reck, 1972). to create a more rhythmic and lively atmosphere. Different rhythms and tempo used for different types of scenes like thundering beats are used for battleground scenes and slow, melodic flute music used for divine interventions to create a sense of spiritual transcendence.

Over time, these art forms are becoming extinct, but some groups and artists are working to ensure their survival. Artists such as Raghunath Ghosh, Sankar Ghosh, and Balaram Jena are making significant contributions to preserving this art form. Additionally, numerous NGOs and private cultural organizations, including Odisha Gana Kala Parishad and Kala Vikash Kendra, have contributed to the promotion of the Mayurbhanj Chhau art form. Furthermore, the Ministry of Culture under the Government of India provides substantial funding for the promotion of tribal art forms, including the Mayurbhanj Chhau art form of Odisha.

### Similarities between all the Three Types of Chhau Folk Art

All the three types of Chhau i.e., Saraikella Chhau, Purulia Chhau and Mayurbhanj Chhau has so many similarities which are as follows:

- 1) **Martial art influence:** All the three types of Chhau are influenced by martial arts. The dance movements are inspired by the different martial arts techniques which are known for their vigorous and dynamic movements.
- 2) **Costumes:** Costumes in all the three types are so vibrant and dramatic to enhance the characters and the jewelry consists of the headgears, armguards and anklebell to symbolize the power and nobility of the character.
- 3) **Themes:** Themes of all the types of Chhau are based on the hindi mythology which depict the stories from Ramayana, Mahabharata and other Puranas. These themes focus on the heroism and battle between the heroes and the evils.
- 4) **Rhythmic accompaniment:** All the three types consist of the percussion instruments like dhol, nagada and mardala that provides the different rhythms to the scenes to enhance them.

### Differences between all the three types of chhau folk art:

- 1) **Origin and Regional Identity:** All the three types of Chhau are originated from the different parts Saraikella Chhau was originated from the Saraikella district of Jharkhand, Purulia Chhau was originated from Purulia, a district in West Bengal and Mayurbhanj Chhau was originated from the Mayurbhanj district of Odisha.
- 2) **Movement style:** Movements in all the three types are different in Saraikella the movements are smooth and consists of the footwork to enhance the performance, Purulia Chhau known for its high energy and radiant performances and Mayurbhanj Chhau is known for the martial arts and classical movements in a graceful manner to intensify the story.

- 3) **Mask design:** Chhau masks are indeed unique and have significant impact on society. The making of these masks is a very specialized job. The ingredients of this art form are clay cloth and paper and classic mix of imagination which bring life in every mask they make (Roy Biswas Janapada Sampada Division Indira Gandhi, 2008). Mask designs are different in different types of Chhau in Seraikella Chhau the masks are highly stylized and finely crafted to elaborate the role of gods and goddesses, purulia Chhau consists of the large, expressive and very simplified in terms of details while in mayurbhanj Chhau masks are not used.
- 4) **Dance styles:** There are different dance styles in all the three forms seraikella Chhau has consist of classical dance style like odissi and kathakali, purulia Chhau consist of the folk tradition of the West Bengal and less influenced by the classical folk style. Mayurbhanj Chhau is consist of fusion of martial arts and classical dance form including elements of other dance forms.

## Conclusion

Although the three types share numerous similarities, they also exhibit distinct differences in terms of origin, theme, dance, and mask design, rendering each one unique in its own right. All three types have gained significant popularity and showcase diverse art forms, captivating audiences in distinct ways.

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