

The Chhau Dance of Mayurbhanj: I

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Chhau dance is prevalent in a contiguous tribal belt of Orissa (Mayurbhanj), Bihar (Seraikella) and West Bengal (Purulia) in three distinctive styles. The Purulia Chhau is a folkish dance, full of vigorous movements. In Seraikella and Mayurbhanj, on the other hand, this dance has developed into an art of great sophistication and expressiveness, through years of cultivation under royal patronage. While the Seraikella and Purulia styles use elaborate masks, the Mayurbhanj style has dispensed with them.

Various opinions have been expressed explaining the origins of Chhau dance, and indeed its name. In Seraikella it is said that Chhau takes its name from the Sanskrit words *chhāyā* (shadow) and *chhadma* (False, simulatary) because of the masks used in the dance. Sunil Kothari writing in *Marg* (Vol. XXII, 1968) opines that *chhadma* rather than *chhāyā* is likely to be the source of 'Chhau' since in Assam dance-masks are called *chhau*, and the Assamese word is derived from *chhadma*. In Mayurbhanj the interpretation is that 'Chhau' derives from *chhāuni* — military camp—because the dance is related to martial arts which were practised in military camps. Ashutosh Bhattacharya in his book *Chhow Dance of Purulia* (Rabindra Bharati University, Calcutta) opines that the word derives from *sang* (late Sanskrit)—one who dresses to represent another person, or a clown. P. P. Mahto in an article writes that 'Chhau' comes from *chho*, an Austric word meaning gesture or movement imitating verbal and non-verbal signs ('Whose Chho Is it Anyway?', *The Telegraph*, Calcutta, 31 January 1992). Some scholars of Mayurbhanj claim that the word combines *chha* *tabka* (six gaits) and *uphli*, the basic techniques of Chhau dance (*chha* + *u*). On the other hand Girish Chandra Mahanta, a Chhau activist of Bamanghati subdivision of Mayurbhanj (who organizes an annual Chhau dance festival at Rairangpur), believes that 'Chhau' is simply from the Oriya word for six. There are six basic movements or divisions in Chhau: *chāl* (gaits), *chakkar* (circling movement), *digbāji* (vault), *ghurā* (whirling movement), *uphli* (jump) and *rangbāji* (costume and make-up).

These arguments seem untenable and unnecessary when we note the meaning of the Oriya word *chhau* as well as words etymologically related to it. Chhau is a pure colloquial word in Oriya meaning skill, dexterity, as well as crouching, pouncing, etc., as recorded in the *Purnachandra Oriya Bhasakosh* (Vol. 3) and

Pramod Abhidhan (Vol. 2), the two most authentic Oriya lexicons. Words and phrases related to *chhau* are: *chhau mariba*, to pounce upon prey; *chhauri*, armour, coat of mail; *chhauka*, clever, cunning, dextrous; *chhāuni*, military camp. As these words are connected with martial practice, it can be said with some degree of certainty that 'chhau' connoted skill and dexterity in battle, referring to the martial arts of the communities of the region from which the dance has sprung.

Pharikhanda and Sādhana

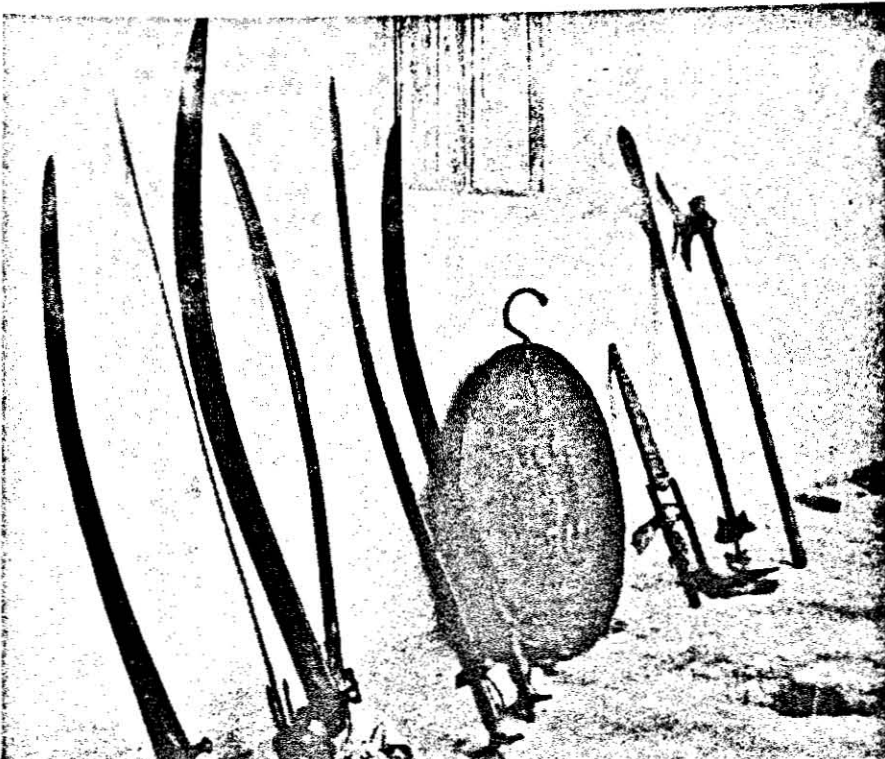
According to the princely chronicle *Bhanjavamsamālikā*, there were twenty-two feudatory chiefs under the ruler of Mayurbhanj, which is corroborated by the following extract from a letter dated 24 September 1803 from Mr Earnst, one of the Commissioners of Cuttack, to the Chief Secretary to the Government: "It appears that the Zamindari of Mayurbhanj consists of twenty-two Estates, the proprietors of which pay tribute to the Rajah and are bound to afford him military aid whenever he may require it." These twenty-two 'estates' were under the control of chiefs of the Bhuiyan, Bathudi and Gond tribes who were the earliest settlers of Mayurbhanj. The first two are the most hinduized tribes of the region; Oriya is their mother tongue. The Gonds, also known as Dharuas, and the Bathudis, mainly made up the militia of Mayurbhanj. The chiefs (*sardārs*) of these tribes maintained combat forces. In the first three decades of this century there was also large-scale immigration of Santhal, Bhumij, Kol and other tribes to this territory from neighbouring areas; eventually the immigrants came to constitute the majority of the tribal population.

The census report of Mayurbhanj for 1931 (Vol. I), published in 1937, records that the Bathudis had a number of honorific titles given by the rulers of the state for their prowess in battle. Occupational titles, military and civil, are also recorded in the report. Some of these titles are: *Jāmdālia*, i.e., wearer of blackberry foliage in token of victory; *Kusumālia*, winner of laurels; *Bāghjuria*, one who yokes a tiger (a title for bravery); *Bāgh*, tiger; *Biswāl*, hero of tall stature; *Dalabehera*, headman of troop; *Dandasena*, court-martial officer; *Parihal* or *Padhial*, army camp-maker; *Khandei*, swordsman; *Pātra*, steward; *Bāgh Chāmpia*, one who attacks like a tiger; *Sandhān Gharia*, military intelligence officer; *Phudkār*, army leader; *Ranasingha*, trumpet-blower; *Singha*, lion. Similarly the Gonds had titles like *Mohāpātra* (zamindar), *Phudkār*, *Dalei*, *Dandāpat*, *Ajambar*, *Khandāpātra*, *Ranabāj*, *Dhauniā*, etc.

These men serving in the Mayurbhanj forces had their centres, called *akhādā*, for physical culture and swordplay. The physical culture was known as *sādhana* and swordplay *pharikhanda* (literally, shield and sword). Both *sādhana* and



Left : Swordsmanship (Pharikhanda) on Chaitra Parva; note the designs on the performer's arms and legs. Below : A display of arms.



Pharikhanda — with heroic dance movements — were performed with intense drumming of the Dhol and Dhumsa, which are still the basic percussion instruments of Chhau, played by drummers of the Dom community. On the occasion of Makar Sankranti (in late January) the Bathudis of villages neighbouring Baripada, the capital of Mayurbhanj, converged at the palace to demonstrate their art and pay their respects to the Maharaja, who used to reward them with money. Likewise, the Dharuas would perform Pharikhanda before the king in the month of October.

Soliders adept in Pharikhanda were given the title of Sardār (chief or leader) by the rulers of Mayurbhanj. The names of Gulam Sardar and Lula Sardar of Jamda village, and Matei Sardar, Madhav Sardar and Munda Sardar of Manbir village are still mentioned. In the second half of the nineteenth century there were two great *ustāds* (teachers), Harihar Dhaunia and Dhananjay Ranabāj, who used to impart intensive training in Pharikhanda to village youths.

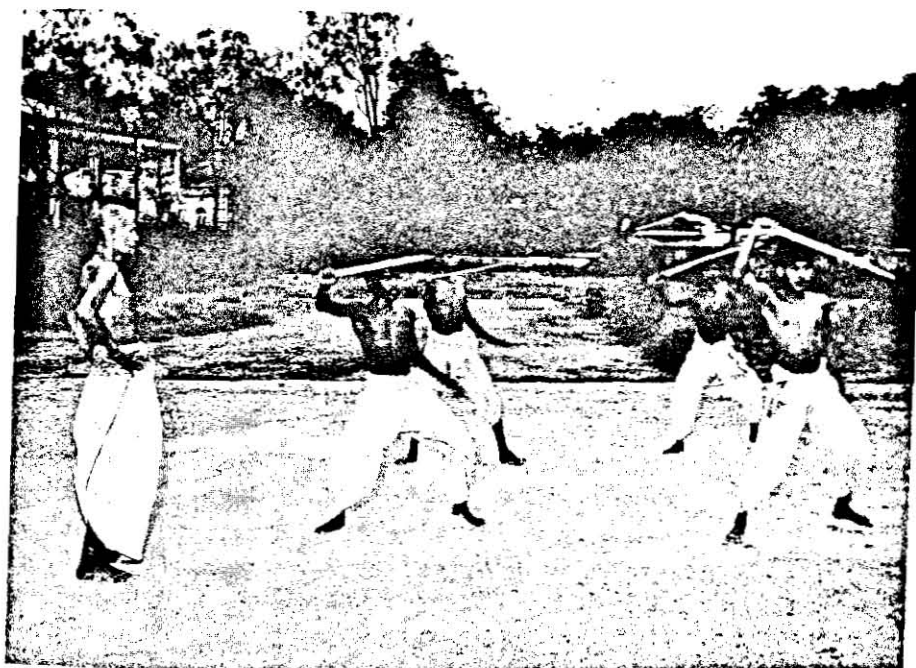
Pharikhanda has a repertoire of one hundred and eight varieties of gaits, movements and jumps. The initial sword-practice is with sticks; when the learners attain a degree of proficiency they are given the sword and the shield. The rhythmic accompaniment is provided by the Dhumsa and Tibtibi (a small kettledrum played with two lean sticks); the Singa, Bheri and Kahali are the wind instruments used. The Pharikhanda akhādā generally starts in October. The students first pay their obeisance to Bhairav, Hanuman and guru Dron. The village deity is then propitiated with the sacrifice of a bird or animal, usually a male goat.

Pāik Akhādā

In this preliminary account of the origins of Chhau dance one must also take into account the influence of the Pāik akhādā, the gymnasium and the martial art of the Paik soldiers who made up the armies of the kings of Orissa in their conquest of Jharkhand, and eventually settled there.

(Jharkhand, the vast stretch of hilly terrain along the Chhotanagpur plateau, was originally inhabited by various tribes. The Gajapati kings of Orissa annexed this territory in the 14th century and eventually various Oriya chieftains established their 'kingdoms' here. These rulers — the Maharajas of Mayurbhanj, Seraikella, Chhotanagpur, and the Rajas of Dhalbhum, Manbhum (Purulia), Kharsuan, Kashipur, etc. — were feudatories of the king of Orissa, who for that reason assumed the title of 'Jharkhand Pātisha', as corroborated by Madala Panji, the chronicle of the temple of Jagannath at Puri.)

'Pāik' is derived from the Sanskrit *padātik*—infantry or foot-soldier. The Pāiks were the peasant militia of the Orissa kings and belonged to the Khandāyat caste (*khandā*, sword). In peacetime they used to cultivate lands given to them free for



Above : Swordplay at a Mayurbhanj akhādā. Below : Rituals of the bhaktas on Chaitra Parva.



rendering hereditary military service. At the same time they kept themselves ready for combat through physical exercises, swordplay and other martial arts cultivated in the Pāik akhādā.

The Pāiks were divided into three categories. In the first category were the Pahādi (*pahād*, mountain), soldiers who defended forts, palaces and military camps. Their weapons were the sword and shield. In the second category were the Bānua (one who uses *bāna*, the ammunition). Their weapons were bows and arrows, sword and shield, the *bajratamta* (javelin), *trishul* (trident) and *shakti* (club). The Bānua were the infantry, and were at the forefront of battle. The third category of Pāiks were the Dhenkiā, who guarded important places and also fought in wars. Their weapons were swords and shields of smaller size.

We have more information on the Paik tradition of Orissa from a 1622 text titled *Pāik Khedā* by Kanhai Champatiray, where he mentions that though generally the hereditary Pāiks were Khandāyats, Pāiks also came to be recruited from all castes except the Brahmins. Pāiks were recruited by a recruiting officer known as Bhoimula, who was also in charge of the Pāik akhādās of four villages. The minimum age of recruitment was twenty, and the retirement age was forty. These retired soldiers were in charge of training young recruits in the village akhādās. The only son of a family or a newly married man was never recruited as a Pāik.

The last recruitment of Pāiks in Mayurbhanj was made by Maharaja Krishna Chandra Bhanja in the 1870s: he recruited nine hundred Paiks and six hundred Dalais (group leaders). Their descendants still bear Pāik titles such as Palta Singh, Bagh Singh, Balbir Singh, Dagara Samantaray Malla, Bahubalendra, etc.

Though swords and shields, and bows and arrows, became obsolete with the introduction of guns in warfare, the Pāik akhādās remained a living tradition in Orissa, and thrived in Mayurbhanj and Seraikella where the Pāiks had settled. The martial art gradually took root in this new soil.

The daily training in an akhādā is divided into four categories of exercises: *danda* (ground exercises), which are of twenty-five varieties; *sunā*, (aerial) acrobatic exercises; *kusti-kasrat* (wrestling and weightlifting); and *khela* (play with weapons).

Sunā includes various exercises like *mānkadchiti* (front capriole), *Hanumān uli* (back capriole), *sun chiti* (somersault in the air), *nāga-phāsa* (literally, serpent's noose), etc. In the latter exercise the performer holds three cane rings joined together, takes a quick somersault, and puts his head and legs into the rings. In the exercise called *mundi*, two persons lock themselves at the waist and

perform caprioles. Various sizes of human pyramids are also formed, from the top of which a performer takes a vault.

In *kusti* and *kasrat* the trainees lift heavy round stones, heavy iron chains (*nizām*) and iron balls, and work with *mudgars*, wooden clubs.

The last category of exercises, *khela*, is play with sticks and swords. Various techniques of wielding the sword and stick are taught. To gain control and precision in handling a weapon there are exercises such as cutting a green banana with a single stroke of the sword placed on the abdomen of a person lying on the ground, breaking a coconut placed on the head of a person with a single stroke of a big stick (*lāthi*) or an axe, and breaking a stone placed on the chest with a single strike of a hammer. These and other exercises with weapons are performed with dance movements and the utterance of rhythmic syllables.

If we closely study the techniques of Chhau dance and compare them with the exercises and movements of the Pāik akhādā, it is easy to see the relation between the two. The Hanumān ulṭi and mānkadchiti of the Pāik akhādā are the two important acrobatic stunts of Purulia Chhau. The *paintārās* (sideways movements) of performers when they confront each other have also been adopted from the Pāik tradition. The *paltās* (turns and flings) and *hana* (action of killing with a sword) movements of the Pāik akhādā are two important movements in Mayurbhanj Chhau. Moreover, the basic gaits and movements (*tabka* and *uphli*) are practised with sword and shield in both traditions, and the movements with weapons are called *hātiar-dharā* (holding arms). The place of practice of Chhau is called akhādā after the Paiks' gymnasium and the teacher is not called guru, but *ustād*, after the teacher at a Pāik akhādā.

All the pāik akhādā exercises—gymnastics, swordplay, mock-fighting, acrobatics—are performed with intense drumming of the Dhol which is the basic percussion instrument of all the styles of Chhau dance. The Dhumsa is essentially a war-drum which is again used in all the three forms of Chhau. (It should be mentioned that the Pāiks also have their own dance, Pāikali, which is performed with Jhoomar music and bears a resemblance to Chhau; it is still prevalent in Singbhum, Ranchi and Purulia districts. The dancers, dressed in traditional costume, perform with swords and shields in their hands.)

In the old days the Pāiks used to worship the terrific aspects of gods and goddesses—Mahadav, Kali, Chandi, Durga—and even now they pay their obeisance to the mother goddess before practice. They worshipped their arms on Dussera day. Likewise in Mayurbhanj Chhau the dancers worship Bhairav, the terrific aspect of Shiva, and Ambika, the mother goddess. In Seraikella the dancers worship Bhairav as well as goddess Paudi, a female tribal deity of the

Bhuiyans. Only Purulia Chhau, which is a later variant of Chhau dance, is not associated with the worship of any deity.

Once the akhādā became a part of the social milieu of Mayurbhanj and Seraikella, the indigenous dance and music of the region began to be cultivated there. Physical culture and dance made an ideal combination, because the martial art had elements of dance. Gradually the martial exercises transformed into dance movements, freely borrowing from folk dances like Jhoomar, Natuā, Nāchni, Kathinat, Changunat, etc. Through this process of assimilation, Chhau emerged as a distinct dance style.

Dibakar Bhanj Babu, a Chhau guru who published a report on the Chhau dance of Mayurbhanj ('*Mayurbhanjare Chhua-natar Bibaran*') in *Bhanja Pradeep* (Aswin 1347, 1934 A.D.), a literary magazine, gives us a great deal of useful information on the growth and development of Chhau at Mayurbhanj. He writes that during the rule of Maharaja Krishna Chandra Bhanja one Ramhari Jeet Bebartā went to Seraikella where he chanced to see Chhau dance. On his return he approached the Maharaja and requested him to introduce the dance in Mayurbhanj. The Maharaja agreed and appointed Upendra Biswal, a guru from Seraikella, in the Uttar Sahi Akhādā. He was given a land grant. After two or three years another guru from Seraikella, Banamali Das, was appointed in the Dakshin Sahi Akhādā. He too was given land in Mayurbhanj. At that time Brundavan Chandra Bhanja, the Maharaja's brother, was in charge of Uttar Sahi. He was a guru as well as dancer. Gokul Chandra Bhanja, another brother, was in charge of Dakshin Sahi. He too was a proficient guru and dancer. During this period the dancers in Mayurbhanj wore masks. But while Seraikella refined the mask as a means of expression, developing exquisite artistry in the making of masks, it would seem Mayurbhanj dropped the mask and came to lean more heavily on the martial arts.

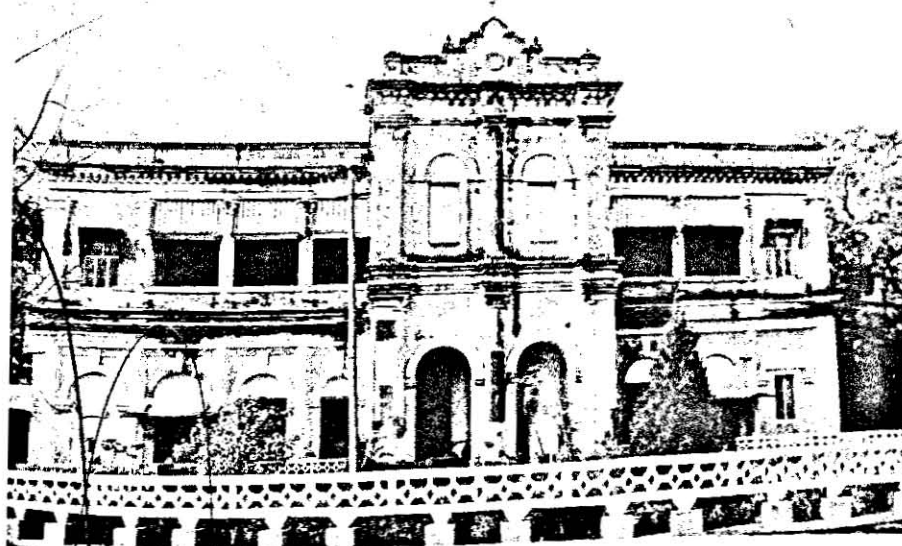
The Chhau of Purulia is rustic in character—a village art—and has a single performance standard. But in Seraikella and Mayurbhanj the dance has been cultivated at two levels—the rural standard of village amateurs, and the highly sophisticated art of professional dancers under royal patronage. After royal patronage ceased, professional dancers have sought audiences outside the Chhau region.

Chaitra Parva

Chhau in its rudimentary forms was never associated with Chaitra Parva. Rather, it had a religious and ceremonial association with the Dussera festival. Even now, when young boys are initiated into Chhau dance, the sacred-thread



Above : Young boys demonstrate their art. Below : The palace at Baripada.



ceremony (*nādā bāndhā*) is held on Dussera day. Barring Seraikella, Baripada in Mayurbhanj, and Bonai, Chhau is still rarely performed during Chaitra Parva. But in these three erstwhile princely states, the dance is closely associated with the festival.

Chaitra Parva is celebrated on the last three days of the month of Chaitra (the first half of the month of April) in Seraikella, Mayurbhanj and Bonai. In the past Chhau dance used to be presented in the palace premises under the patronage of the rulers of these states, together with the rituals of devotees (*bhaktas*) in the daytime. On the three nights of the festival, the gates of the palaces opened to the public. Besides Chhau there were also arrangements to provide all-night entertainment to the people on the streets: Pālā, Dāskāthiā, Suāng, Jātrā, Gotipūā dance, etc. But Chhau was the most prestigious entertainment during Chaitra Parva as it was performed on the palace grounds in the presence of the rulers, the royal families and guests. When royal patronage ceased, the entertainment on Chaitra Parva also stopped—all except for Chhau, which is still performed during the festival under the patronage of the State Governments of Bihar and Orissa.

Chaitra Parva was originally a festival of the tribal people, especially the Bhuiyans, Bathudis and Dharua Gonds, the early settlers of the region, who inevitably influenced the other migrant tribes. On this day the tribespeople of Mayurbhanj and neighbouring areas propitiate their village deities in the *jāhirā*, a grove where the deity is represented by a stone, perform animal sacrifices, and arrange feasts in which the whole village participates. In other places too, for example in the tribal district of Koraput (Koraput, Nabarangpur, Malkangiri and Rayagada) where there is no Chhau dance, Chaitra Parva is a month-long festival celebrated by all the tribal communities. People wear new clothes, propitiate village deities by sacrificing animals and birds, go out hunting, and celebrate with drinking, feasting, singing and dancing. In Rayagada, a small town of Koraput district, Chaitra Parva is the occasion to honour Majhighariāni. There is a huge congregation of tribal people to propitiate the deity.

Āmdāliā-Jāmdāliā, Sādhā, Pāikali, and various mask-dances are performed on the occasion of Chaitra Parva. Āmdāliā-Jāmdāliā is a dance of jubilant soldiers, the performers holding bunches of green leaves in both hands which conceal indigenously prepared gunpowder. When they dance, waving their hands, the gunpowder is ignited by a cloth wick, producing fiery sparks. The dance is generally performed in the night.

Sādhā or Phārikhanda is swordplay with dance movements. In Pāikali straight double-edged Pāik swords and shields are used. Special turbans are worn and the body of the performer smeared with white clay; geometrical designs are then

drawn with the fingertips. This heroic dance is in various formations which are quite similar to Chhau: *dulā*, *bāgh-tabkā*, *bāgh-dumkā*, *hanumat-pānikhiā*, etc.

Lastly, the mask-dances are performed, some of them associated with Shiva: As the rulers of Mayurbhanj were Shaivites, the tribes of the region also came to worship Shiva. Earlier, elaborate masks of Shiva carved in wood were used in these dances; now the masks are made of clay and cloth. Before wearing the mask, which has no holes for the eyes and ears, the dancer swathes his head with a piece of cloth. Flags of coloured cloth or paper are fixed on the mask. He is thus unable to see, and is sometimes guided by a dancer in the role of a Brahmin. In some villages, Narada, holding a staff, also joins the dance. People throng around Shiva, shouting 'Har Har Mahadev'. The traditional Dom musicians and drummers provide the music for these dances. The instruments are the same as for Chhau—the Dhol, Dhumsa, Chadchadi and Mahuri.

Dandanta and the Bhakta Rituals

When the Bhanja rulers established their rule in Mayurbhanj, they were based in Khichingakotta. Later, they moved their capital to Haripur, and finally to Baripada. As this was mainly a tribal area, no Hindu festivals were observed there. So the rulers gradually introduced them by recruiting Oriyas from coastal areas. Thus Danda Nata and its associated rituals performed by *danduas* or *bhaktas* were popularized by people from coastal Orissa, who were given land grants in Mayurbhanj.

Before the introduction of Chhau dance in Mayurbhanj, there were performances of Danda Nata during the Chaitra festival there. Danda Nata had a rich repertory and its performance too was an all-night affair. But it is not known how many items of the repertory were performed in Baripada. Only the mask-dances of Paravā and Chadayā finally survived. Chadaya in later years developed into a full-fledged folk-play which became immensely popular, not only in Mayurbhanj but also in the neighbouring districts of Balasore, Singbhum and Midnapore. When Chhau dance took its place as the royal performance, Chadaya became extinct in the region: Danda Nata couldn't thrive in Mayurbhanj as it was not the dance of the soil and was only grafted there. Only the rituals remained, which the bhaktas performed hereditarily as a condition for enjoying land grants.

While Chhau replaced Danda Nata as the 'official' dance for Chaitra Parva, it was not organically connected with the rituals of the bhaktas performed on that occasion. For this reason the Chhau dancers themselves are not the bhaktas as in the case of Danda Nata. They do not observe fasting or any other religious austerity, rather they rejoice with meat and wine. The rituals are public affairs;

there are no rituals in the homes of the bhaktas.

Other Chaitra Festivities

Chaitra is the last month of the Hindu new year, and the second month of spring. In this month many of the folk-dances of Orissa are performed, and most of them are associated with the Shaiva and Shakta faiths. For example Danda Nata, which propitiates Shiva, is performed in various parts of Orissa (though not in Mayurbhanj) together with rituals and austere observances of the bhaktas. Ghantā Patuās attached to the Shakti shrines of Orissa move out of the temples for the whole month of Chaitra to dance in the village streets balancing the *ghatā* (holy pitcher) on their heads. They also dance on stilts, balancing the pitcher in various yogic postures. The dance is accompanied by the playing of the Ghantā, a brass gong. The dance of the Patuās ends on the first day of the new year, and so does Danda Nata. The closing festival is called Meru.

Performances of Chaitighodā, the dummy-horse dance of the fishermen's community, start on the full-moon day of Chaitra and go on up to the full-moon day of Baisakh. By this dance the fishermen propitiate the horse-headed goddess Bauli. The Bathudi tribe also propitiates this deity in Chaitra.

These dances associated with the religious culture of Orissa are practised mainly by low-caste Hindus and the hinduized tribes. This is explained by the fact that under the spell of Tantrism, Hinduism became more liberal and the cult of Shiva and Shakti developed as a mass religious culture. This cult also assimilated the rituals of tribal communities to expand its base. These dances are therefore a synthesis of various belief systems prevalent in the region. □

(This is the first part of a three-part article.)