

CHHAU

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SAREIKELA AND MAYURBHANJ FORMS

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Deep in the past, before guns thundered the age-old weapons off the stage, men-at-arms used to parade, rhythmically, their mastery over weighty weapons like the sword, shield, club, spear or bow. To keep up the mastery they also held a sort of mock-fight in which, to the beat of the huge war-drums, one group used to attack the other or defend themselves in turn. This gave rise to a form of martial dance named *Rookmar Nacha* or *Phari-khanda Khela*. The *Chhau* of today gradually took shape out of this basic war-dance and grew to classical heights with elaborate stylisation and developed a grammar of its own.

Under royal patronage of the different princely states of Orissa, *Chhau* was nurtured and developed. In the course of stylisation of the costumes of *Chhau* and the use of the mask, it branched off into two schools. The school of *Chhau* led by the Sareikela princely state used masks for each of the dancing characters and the other led by Mayurbhanj, masked none. This singular difference made an appreciable angle of divergence since the aesthetic appeal of each rested at different poles with this change. The two arms of the angle of divergence grew with time and subsequent stylisation. Now the similarity between the two lies buried so deep in each form that it may escape notice if one does not look for it.

The first and immediate similarity between the two is that both of them are called *Chhau Nacha*. Those who have limited their considerations to only the Sareikela School of *Chhau* and have ignored and Mayurbhanj School, surmise that the word *chhau* has been derived from the Sanskrit etymon *chhaya*. This not only appears far-fetched but philologically

incongruous since *chhaya* means shadow and stretched rhetorically it may come to mean a mask. Besides, the natural derivative of *chhaya* in colloquial Oriya is *chhayi*. So, logically *Chhayi Nacha*, instead of *Chhau Nacha*, should have been the name were it required to mean a masked form of dance. In fact *chhau* is an independent colloquial Oriya word. It means, as can be seen in *Promode Abhidhan*, the most authoritative Oriya lexicon, to hunt or attack stealthily. The word *chhau* has, on the other hand, three colloquial Oriya derivatives; *chhauri*, meaning the armour; *chhauni*, meaning the military camp and *chhauka*, meaning the quality of attacking stealthily. All these derivatives as well as the root word *chhau* have unmistakable reference to war. Therefore, *Chhau Nacha* in all probability and rationality does mean war-dance, not masked dance.

This is further borne out by the similarities in the *nritya* aspect of both the schools of dance. The basic steps and gaits from which the dance stems are called *Topkas* and *Uflis* in both the schools and are always performed formally with a sword in the right and shield in the left hand. These are modified forms of physical exercises which, in ancient times, were practised by the soldiers to tune up their bodies to play the hand-held weapons with the agility of lightning. Even the casual eye cannot miss the martial spirit that exudes from these basic steps and gaits when being rightly performed whether in the Mayurbhanj or in Sareikela dance. When the basic elements of a dance form are undoubtedly martial in nature it is but logical to infer that *Chhau Nacha* always meant war-dance and not mask-dance.

In naming and performing the said *Topkas* and *Uflis* dissimilarity is however seen in the two schools of *Chhau*.

Mayurbhanj *Chhau* has six types of *Topka* and thirty six types of *Ufli*, but Sunil Kothari in *Chhau* Special number of "Marg" has listed nine types of *Topka* and twenty-three types of *Uflis* in Sareikela *Chhau*.

<i>Topkas in Mayurbhanj Chhau</i>	<i>Topkas in Sareikela Chhau</i>
1. <i>Sada Topka</i> (simple locomotion)	1. <i>Sur Gati</i> (gait of a god)
2. <i>Lahara Topka</i> (rippling locomotion as in a rivulet)	2. <i>Bagh Dumka</i> (leap of a tiger)
3. <i>Dhen Topka</i> (wavy locomotion as in a sea)	3. <i>Bagh Gati</i> (gait of a tiger)
4. <i>Moda Topka</i> (wiggling locomotion)	4. <i>Hansagati</i> (gait of a swan)
5. <i>Dooba Topka</i> (diving locomotion)	5. <i>Kasa Gati</i> (gait of a demon)
6. <i>Uska Topka</i> (leaping locomotion)	6. <i>Sagar Gati</i> (waves of the sea)
	7. <i>Hasti Gati</i> (gait of an elephant)
	8. <i>Mayur Gati</i> (gait of a peacock)
	9. <i>Jhunka</i> (swinging locomotion)

Imagery inspiring *Topkas* in Sareikela *Chhau*, as can be seen, are all different from those of Mayurbhanj *Chhau* except *Sagar Gati* which is somewhat similar to *Dhen Topka*.

More similarity is, however, noticed in the two schools of *Chhau* when *Uflis* are taken into consideration. *Uflis* which are common to both the schools are listed below:

<i>Ufli of Mayurbhanj Chhau</i>	<i>Ufli of Sareikela Chhau</i>	<i>Imagery inspiring Ufli</i>
1. <i>Gobargola</i>	<i>Gobargola</i>	mixing cowdung in water
2. <i>Gobarkudha</i>	<i>Gutikudha</i>	picking cowdung from ground
3. <i>Chhada dia</i>	<i>Chhada dia</i>	sprinkling the cowdung
4. <i>Haldibata</i>	<i>Pithou bata</i>	grinding on a stone-slab
5. <i>Jhoontia maja</i>	<i>Edimaja</i>	cleaning the toe-ring with the heel.
6. <i>Gadhia</i>	<i>Swan</i>	bathing
7. <i>Sindoor pindha</i>	<i>Sindoor-tika</i>	putting a dot of vermilion on the forehead.
8. <i>Dhankuta</i>	<i>Dhankuta</i>	pounding paddy
9. <i>Dhan pachhuda</i>	<i>Kula pachuda</i>	winnowing the dehusked rice.
10. <i>Jhoontidia</i>	<i>Jhoonti dia</i>	drawing decorative motifs on the floor
11. <i>Kantakata</i>	<i>Pasari hana</i>	cutting down thorny shrubs.
12. <i>Bata-chira</i>	<i>Batachira</i>	splitting a bamboo in two.
13. <i>Untamoda</i>	<i>Untamoda</i>	to kill by trampling on the abdomen.
14. <i>Harindian</i>	<i>Harindian</i>	leaping gait of a deer.
15. <i>Chheli dian</i>	<i>Cheeli dian</i>	a kid jumping playfully.
16. <i>Baga topka</i>	<i>Baga topka</i>	a stalking crane.
17. <i>Bagha panikhia</i>	<i>Bagha panikhia</i>	a tiger drinking water.

Some of the *Uflis* practised in Mayurbhanj *Chhau* but not in Sareikela which are rich with powerful imagery, are

1. *Chingdichhitka* — flashy jerks of a lobster when it is pulled out of water.
2. *Baga-machha khoja* — a crane searching for a fish.
3. *Hanuman panikhia* — a monkey drinking water.
4. *Mankadchiti* — a monkey somersaulting.

Topka may be defined as the style of gait or locomotion in which the imagery suggested by the name is conjured up mainly through the flexions of the body and the footwork follows perfectly in consonance with it. But in *Ufli*, the legs become eloquent in conjuring up the inspiring imagery and the body moves obediently in agreement.

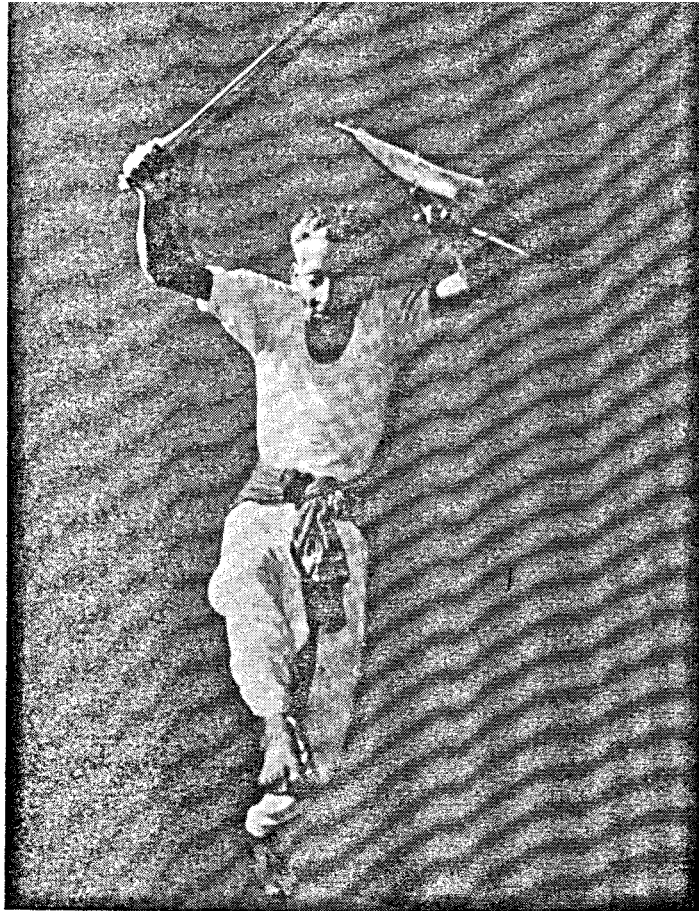
Uflis and *Topkas* are the alphabet of *Chhau*. When these are purposefully woven into a phrase it becomes a *Bhangi*, that is, a dance-unit. *Uflis* and *Topkas* independently, like the letters of the alphabet, have no communicative power, but a *Bhangi* has. So, *Bhangis* properly syntaxed delineate the theme of the dance, build up drama and give meaning to the rhythmic movements. Neither of the schools of *Chhau* have *hasta-mudras* in its grammar. This is so because at the formative stage the movement of hands was restricted by holding some weapon or other. Therefore, it is through cadences of movement spelled by foot-work and body-flexions that the *Chhau* dancer communicates. Delineation in *Chhau* is accomplished not by gestural interpretation but by a sort of kinetic suggestion.

The most important difference between the two schools of *Chhau* lies in the mode of *Bhangi*-formation. The face, that mirrors the subtle emotions like *Lajja* (shame), *Ananda* (ecstasy), *Pratishodh* (vengeance) etc. since is masked in Sareikela *Chhau*, it is through movements of body and positioning the mask in relation to the movement, that the expressions are communicated. There are set *Bhangis* in the grammar of Sareikela *Chhau* to express symbolically conflicting emotions. The mask thus not only stands at the focal point of the dance but also conditions the formation of *Bhangis*. This takes the aspect of *angikabhinaya* (expression through the body-movements) of Sareikela *Chhau* to a height that is not touched by any school of Indian dance. It is so unique, so symbolic and so expressive that without *vachikabhinaya* and *mukhabhinaya* the transfer of *Bhava* is complete and aesthetically most satisfying.

The formation of *Bhangis* in Mayurbhanj *Chhau* does not suffer from the limitation imposed by the mask as in the case of Sareikela *Chhau*. So it is richer in variety, choreographic excellence, and the original virility of *Chhau*. *Vachikabhinaya* is, so to say, absent in Mayurbhanj *Chhau* also. The rich poetry of movement compensates it amply. The movement of hands is less important and is subordinated to the foot-work which is so eloquent that it is hard to find a parallel.

Illustrations: P. 39. The jubilant Shabar Toka (young hunter) takes a leap into the air — Mayurbhanj. 40. Above: Guru demonstrating Mayurbhanj *ufli* called Boga Topka (crane stalking). Below: Mayurbhanj is usually a group-dance — young boys impersonating female characters.









There are a number of set *Bhangis* in the vocabulary of Mayurbhanj *Chhau*. New *Bhangis* are, however, formed by juxtaposing different *Uflis* and *Topkas* as required for the delineation of the theme of a dance. For example, a *Bhangi* can be formed by coupling the locomotion of *Lahara Topka* with the first part of *Gobargola* and last part of *Jhoontidia*. The formation and imaginative interlacing of *Bhangis* always depends on the aesthetic mood and the rhythmic pattern.

The rituals connected with the annual festival of *Chhau* in both the schools are strikingly similar in content and the slight difference is only superficial.

Annual Festival of *Chhau* is called Chaitra Parva and is held on Chaitra Samkrantic corresponding roughly to April 13. Thirteen days before the Samkrantic a series of rituals begin. Thirteen devotees, called *bhagata* and drawn from different castes that are considered lower than Brahmin in social prestige, perform daily some religious rites. They wear deep red *dhotis* and like the Brahmin wear the sacred thread. The *bhagatas* on the day of initiation assemble near a Shiva temple and are first converted to *Shiva-gotra* (clan of Lord Shiva). They remain as the clansmen of Lord Shiva for the thirteen successive days. Each of these days they go to the temple and perform a ritualistic dance to a typical tune and rhythm. On the 26th day of Chaitra, they bring out *Jatra Ghata* to herald the beginning of the festival. An earthen pitcher, painted crimson with vermilion and filled with holy water to its brim, is sanctified by *mantras*. This is the *ghata* and the holy water in it represents Maha-Shakti. This *Ghata* is placed on the head of a particular *bhagata*. The exposed parts of his body, such as face, hands, neck etc; are painted red like the *ghata*. The musicians then strike the typical Jatra-Ghata note. The *ghata* bearer soon falls into a trance and goes dancing all the way. The *ghata* is taken to the temple and kept there for four days till the dance festival is over.

On the final day of the Festival, after midnight, comes another *ghata* called *Kamana Ghata*. It is also known as *Kalika Ghata* or *Nishi Ghata*. It is just like the *Jatra Ghata*, but the *ghata* as well as its bearer is painted black. The holy water in it represents the human desires and the deity worshipped is goddess Kalika. This *ghata* is taken to the temple and is kept buried there till the next year.

All these rituals have symbolic significance as per the Hindu scriptures. There is no apparent relationship between the dance and these rituals but it exists at a much deeper level.

P. 41. The boatman and his wife. *Seraikela* is either a duet or solo-dance. 42. Left: The Peacock. Right: The Fisherman. *Seraikela* masks are symbolic, rather than descriptive, of the character played.

Besides the rituals, the two schools of *Chhau* bear a lot of similarity in music and formation of *Tala* — the rhythmic pattern, which is a very complicated and specialised art peculiar to *Chhau*. In both the schools instrumental accompaniment is provided by the following instruments:

1. *Dhol* — a barrel shaped drum played with the palm and fingers of the left hand and a blunt stick in the right;
2. *Tikra* or *Nagara* — a small hemispherical drum played with two thin sticks;
3. *Chadihadi* — a short cylindrical drum played with two lean sticks;
4. *Dhumsa* — a huge bowl-shaped kettle-drum played with two heavy blunt sticks;
5. *Mahoori* — An indigenous wind instrument very much like *Shehnai*.

Dhol leads the drums, but the reverberating beats of *dhumsa* flash through the body of a *Chhau* dancer as *chamaks*. The *bol*, that is, the verbal notation of the rhythmic pattern is composed of the sound of the *dhol* and *chadehadi* or *nagara*.

In order to illustrate the peculiarity of formation of rhythmic pattern in *Chhau* let an example be taken. A tune played in the dance *Dandi* of Mayurbhanj *Chhau* is set to *Dhamar tala* of 14 matras according to Hindustani Classical music. This *tala* may be played on *tabla* in the following manner as one bar:

Ka dhi ta dhi ta dga x ka ti ta ti ta ta x

In *Chhau* four such bars have been taken as one and the pattern of the unit is designed as follows:

da den da den da tadhan x x den da den da tadhin
x x den da den da tadhin x da den da tadhin
gr gr gr gr ta den da den da tadhin x x khiti
Khiti ta x x khiti khiti ta x x take tiki take
tiki ta gr gr gr gr repeat from the beginning.

(each of the strokes represents one *matra* and under it the x sign denotes silence for that *matra*).

The choreography of Mayurbhanj *Chhau* is more complicated and artistic than the *Chhau* of Sareikela. Due to the limitation imposed by the mask group dances with choreographic excellence is almost absent in Sareikela *Chhau*, which is quite rich in solos and duets. There is no dearth of solos and duets in the repertoire of Mayurbhanj *Chhau*, but its distinctive character is best displayed in the group dances.

To sum up the comparison: use of mask in Sareikela *Chhau* necessitated a different type of stylisation in which the movements had to be more symbolic than virile. Solos and duets out-numbered the group dances with rare imaginative beauty. Use of hands and positioning the body in relation to the mask claimed equal, if not more, attention than the foot-work. The art of preparing masks rose to great aesthetic heights. With masks the Sareikela *Chhau* takes fantasy to the summit of poetry, where beauty is distilled from a world of magnificent dream.

Without masks the Mayurbhanj *Chhau* developed a stylisation that retained the original virility of movement as well as the martial strain. Stylised thus, solos, duets, and specially the group dances excel in choreography. In Mayurbhanj *Chhau*, it is the movement alone that becomes visual poetry of stormy passion gestured in a style that is free, intense, fluent, dynamic and melodious.

Jivan Pani, a well-known Oriya poet and writer, has also taken an active interest in the cultural life of his State. He is an authority on both traditional and classical forms of dance in Orissa. He has written and lectured widely on these subjects. Several of his poems in Oriya have been published. At present he is working as Education Officer in the Dept. of Education, Orissa.