



RE-LOCATING MAYURBHANJ (ODISHA) CHHAU-NĀCHA: AN ICONIC REPRESENTATION FROM INDIGENOUS TO METROPOLITAN CONTEXT

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Abstract: This paper aims at enriching the debate on aesthetics properties on the *Chhau-Nācha* (dance) of Odisha. This traditional *Chhau-Nācha* mostly based on the *Rāsa* theory i.e., *Vira* (Heroic); and its old age tradition belonging to canons of *Nāṭyaśāstra* in rhythmic way. Man requires artistic skill to express his thought but proper modulation of artistic representation is necessary to make expressed thought precise and distinct. One performer could represent him/her in the way of demonstrate in the form of art i.e., dance or *Nācha/Nāta*. Dance consists of certain movements, certain prescribed gestures and postures of the body which are more capable of giving expression to human thought, than even language. Communication of thought through dance is even a better guide of human thought than through language. In Odisha the performance dance its related music, dramatic thought, is as old like its history. Numerous forms of histrionic arts which are deeply and intimately associated with the life of the people were evolved, natured and put into practice and then left to the posterity either to retain or forget. Through the passage of time many terms are must have perished away. All the form of art can survive only proper patronage but these are not possible every time and space. *Chhau* dance is basically a virile dance which demonstrates vim and vigour. It reflects a culture of strength with aesthetics.

Keywords: region, trend, practises, ritual, folk dance, anthropological methods, theory of *Rasa*

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Introduction

This paper aims at enriching the debate on aesthetics properties on the *Chhau-Nācha* (dance) of Odisha. This traditional *Chhau-Nācha* mostly based on the

*Rāsa*¹ theory i.e., *Vira* (Heroic)²; and its old age tradition belonging to canons of *Nāṭyaśāstra* in rhythmic way. In this text the ideas of *Rāsa*³ emerge by Bharata in his work and later on such theories are developed by Abhinavagupta in his commentary work *Abhinavabharati*. Such text played very important role in the field of art.⁴ Generally Indian art and particularly dance or *Nācha/Nāta* based on *Rāsas*⁵ theories. The *Rāsa* School stresses this experiential or subjective side of artistic meaning.⁶ This seems rather pointless, for ultimately everything is an experience, such as a colour, taste, or emotion, and can be known as it is in itself only through direct acquaintance. *Rāsa* is impersonal contemplative aspect of the self which by the appetitive part of it. As the contemplative self is striving and external necessity, it is blissful. This bliss is from the pleasure we derive in life from satisfaction of some need or passion.⁷ The main points of this *Rāsa* theory can be understood in the light of our generally held ideas about art. That art is an expression of emotions and that emotions are objectified and disinterestedly contemplated is widely believed. Aristotle⁸ seems to have held a similar view which we find out also in Hegel,⁹ Croce,¹⁰ and Bosanquet.¹¹

Man requires artistic skill to express his thought but proper modulation of artistic representation is necessary to make expressed thought precise and distinct. One performer could represent him/her in the way of demonstrate in the form of art i.e., dance or *Nācha/Nāta*. Dance consists of certain movements, certain prescribed gestures and postures of the body which are more capable of giving expression to human thought, than even language. Communication of thought through dance is even a better guide of human thought than through language. The old-age tradition of *Gūrū-sīshaya* have framed and codified definite rules to govern dance. In the case of Odisha some classical and non-classical dance governed by written and un-written canons or rules.

In Odisha the performance dance its related music, dramatic thought, is as old like its history. Numerous forms of histrionic arts which are deeply and intimately associated with the life of the people were evolved, natured and put into practice and then left to the posterity either to retain or forget. Through the passage of time many terms are must have perished away. All the form of art can survive only proper patronage but these are not possible every time and space. *Chhau* dance is basically a virile dance which demonstrates vim and vigour.¹² It reflects a culture of strength with aesthetics. In ancient times, the infantry was the main protective force of state. When this country was ruled by multiple feudatory rules, the hitch over their boundaries was the main issue over which constant vigilance was kept. The infantry men were known as *Paikas* or *Padatikas*. The *Paikas* did form the regular army. Cultivators

by profession, they received land grants for their maintenance and kept up their rigorous practice of warfare by regular physical exercises and rehearsals of battle scenes always ready to rise for any sudden occasion.¹³ The marital practices with musical accompaniments of war-drums and cries also offered entertainment for one and during times of peace, religious ceremonies and social occasions.

From themes of war to fantasy and mythology, the transformation of *Paika* dance into a regular dance-form, the *Chhau* dance was of course a matter of innovation and the result was manifold. As years passed by with no real battles to fight and companies disbanded, the institutions turned to remain institutions of art for art sake. On the wake of independence and the end of the feudatory system, the royal patronage automatically came to a halt and institutions pursuing these arts had to dwindle away. In the post-independence era, after the states merger, Sareikla was cut off from Odisha and it was only the *Chhau* dance of Mayurbhanj which remained to be known and popular because of the patronisation it received, however merger, from many quarter.¹⁴ But even till today besides the district of Mayurbhanja, *Chhau* dance still exists in other places as well as Kenojhar, Bonai, Niligiri, Talcher and Dhenkanal. Due to lack of patronisation these institutions have dwindled and faint existence is traceable only during the rituals at festival such as *Dusserah* and *Chaitra Praba*.

Origin

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*). In Mayurbhanj School of *Chhau* and other parts of Odisha mask not used by the *Chhau* dancers. Mostly people belonging to the Mayurbhanj School of *Chhau* dance maintain that the term *Chhau* has been derived from *Chhāūni*, i.e., 'Military encampment'. The latter view seems to be more credible, as it is commonly admitted that this dance originated from the war rehearsals of the Odia *Pāikas*. It is quite likely that is *Chhāūni Nācha*, in course of time, came to be called by the people as *Chhau Nācha*. *Chhau* dance originated in ancient Odisha and is an important cultural legacy of the state.¹⁵ The prevailing style of *Chhau* in the present Odisha is the Mayurbhanj *Chhau*, the tribal martial art form having the influence of classical and folk elements.

It has thrived under the direct supervision and patronage of the last four kings of Bhanja rulers of Mayurbhanj princely state (1868-1948). Maharaja

Sri Ramchandra Bhanja Deo had designed and directed new “war dance” or “*vira-nrūtya*” with new themes, which was highly appreciated by Emperor George-V and Queen Mary in 1911. The highly stylized *Chhau* dance of today has gradually evolved from a dance form which was essentially folks in character.¹⁶ This is also true in case of the major dances of India. According to Kapila Vastayana¹⁷ “Primitive dance was the foundation of folk dance, and folk dance was the foundation of the refined forms, Refined dance when degenerates re-enters the category of folk dance, just as folk dance with culture and development ascend to that of refined.”

***Chhau* and its Ancient- Shastrik (Textual) Tradition**

The *Chhau* dance follows the basic principles of the Hindu dance as embodied in the holy treaties of Bharat Muni’s *Natya Sastra* and Nandikeswara’s *Abhinaya Darpan*, though it has acquired much of its local concepts and technique to distinguish it as a distinct school of art. Like other Hindu dance is also deeply associated with religion and the *Chhau* dancers worship Siva and Parvati, the two presiding deities of the *Tāṇḍava* and the *Lāsya* style respectively.¹⁸ The dancers come to the stage after performing religious sacrifices. Young boys of seven or eight year picked up and given a systematic training for five to six years to acquire a through mastery over the basic techniques of *Chhau* dance. The new recruits are initiated to the dance in a simple religious ceremony performed in the Siva temple.

Their first course of training comprises *Chaukbandha*, i.e., placing the feet in slanting position with bent knees so that the legs form a square. The arms are stretched sideways with the right-angles at the elbow. After the trainees have acquired mastery over this basic pose of the *Chhau* dance, they are given sword and shield in their right and left hand respectively which is called *Dhārana*, and are taught various steps, walks and whirls keeping the basic pose intact from waist upwards.¹⁹ In *Bhārta Nātyam* or *Kathak*, after performing various dance items the dancer always comes back to a particular stylistic pose. In *Chhau*, the dancers while performing a dance number always come back to the *Chaukbandha* pose after whirling round thrice. There is a slight difference in this pose in *Sareikala Chhau*.

Various Movements, Gestures, Postures and Bodies Flexibilities

The *Chhau* dancers learn various *Topkas* (different modes of walk, gait and movement) and 36 principal *Uphils* or *Upalayas* without which they are not fit to participate in stage performances. Many of the *Uphils* of *Chhau* are taken

from the classical texts on Indian dance and despite their local nomenclature have much affinity with *Upalays* embodied in them. For example, like applying of vermillion (*Sindūra Pinḍhā*) and *Harīnaplutam* of the *Sāstras*.²⁰ Being a development of the ancient war dance *Chhau* is essentially virile, though much of its bellicosity has been toned down by the rigid rules of the classical dance art.

Still the dance items like *Aśtradaṇḍa*, *Danḍi*, *Jambeb* and *Siva-Tandava* are more physical feats and need tremendous physical exertion. Women are not allowed to participate in *Chhau* dance (because virile nature of the dance was not suitable for them) and the female roles are impersonated by men.²¹ But nowadays these taboos are phase of ignorance. This may change the future set-up of *Chhau*, and it may no longer remain purely a male prerogative.

Metropolitan Aesthetics Conception: Space, Shape, Energy and Motion

The dance is performed in open air on a raised earthen platform with moist and velvety surface, which is very suitable for such a dance with intricate foot-works. The platform is profusely lighted and on one side of it there is a chariot-shaped stage with velvet hangings.²² The musicians stand on one side of the platform and as the thundering sound of the big kettledrums reverberates the evening sky, men, women, and children pour in thousands and surround the three sides of the platform.²³ Spectators from miles and miles away come to see this dance during the *Chaitraparva* festival which is celebrated consecutively for three days during the month enduring *Chaitra* and sit for the whole night watching with interest their popular stories from the *Rāmāyana*, *Mahābhārata* and *Purānas* enacted on the stage.

With the beginning of the dance the music suddenly changes to a milder note and the dancers descend from the chariot-shaped stage with dignified heroic gait and stepping. The costume, headgear and other ornamental requisites of the dance are carefully selected to befit various dramatic characters and their splendid brocade with gold and silver embroidery produces highly colorful and dignified effect without being gaudy or over-ostentatious.²⁴ The dance programme consists of solo, duet and group performances, some of them lasting from twenty to thirty minutes. The stories of the dances are usually borrowed from the inexhaustible sources of Indian mythology and *Purānas*. There are also many original compositions of high imaginative skill like *Haimantikā* (Harvest-Dance), *Maru-Maya*, *Akal-Salami*, *Diamond Jubilee*, and *Card Dance*, etc.

Every year the master dancers compose new themes and set them to their peculiar *Rāga*, *Tāla* and technique base on the fundamentals of the *Chhau* art. In order to encourage the best composers and performers, in the past, the Ruling Chiefs of Mayurbhanj and some other ex-States of Odisha rewarded them in public during the *Chaitra-Parva* festival. The main contenders for the honor in Mayurbhanj were the 'Uttara Sāhi' and the 'Dakhin Sāhi' *Chhau* parties who have made major contributions to the development of *Chhau* dance in Odisha, and continue still to be the main centers where this dance art is cultivated with religious zeal under the expert advice and supervision of the old veterans of the art.

***Chhau* is a commixture-excogitation of Folk-Tribal Bequest...!**

In fact, the subject-matter of the *Chhau* dance is borrowed from the whole gamut of animate and inanimate nature. The hilly regions of the North-Eastern Odisha with a rich folk and tribal culture have left a profound influence on the music and the general pattern of *Chhau* dance. The Famous Peacock, Swan, Deer, Hunter and Deer dances depict the wild beauty and grace of the forest and have been universally appreciated for their high artistic representations and excellent choreography.

***Kāla O' Pātra* (Time and Character):**

The best dance items of *Sareikala* consists of solo or duet performances as the use of the mask does not allow any side-view necessary for bigger group dances. But in Mayurbhanj where mask has been given up the group dances are highly developed. Group dance numbers like *Nisitha Milana*, *Māya Savari*, *Garuda-Bāhana*, *Rāsa*, *Holi*, *Baula Krishna*, *Odia* and *Card* dance are some of the masterpieces of the Mayurbhanj School for their artistic composition, music and graceful performance.²⁵ These dances very often last from twenty to thirty minutes. Towards the close of the dance drama when the tilting music 'Nātiki' begins all the dancers of the group dance in unison and moving swiftly in circles, semicircles, and various other designs create a veritable wonderland of Elysian beauty and grandeur.

Some Recent Overview...Regarding Mayurbhanj *Chhau*

Chhau Nācha/Nāta is a phenomenal idea of Peasant-Militia/Peasant-Militia-Artistic Excellence. *Chhau* interlinked with other Classical dance form such as-Odishi, and also interlinked with semi-military dance form, such as- *Pāika-Ākhadā/Pāika-Nrutya*. Can we compare with the basic conception of *Jāga-ghara* in Puri, otherwise known as Ritual-Militia-Capabilities?



Figure 1: Annual Chhau Dance Performance



Figure 2: Performance of Heroic Posture by Group of Male Dancers



Figure 3: Heroic Performance from Mythology.



Figure 4: Traditional War & Erotic Scenes from Akhandaleshvara Temple, Prapatrudrapur, Odisha, India, 11th CE.



Figure 5: Heroic Posture, OSM, Bhubaneswar, (Kanasaha in Puri) 13th-14th CE.

Folk-Tribal-Militia-Artistic Group

Tribals of North-Eastern Odisha have a special martial dance form known as *Chhau*. At the leisure hours of their life they were performing and enjoying this dance, which was perhaps first practised during battles at nights and was therefore named “*Chhāuni Nrūtya*”. The basic structure and the style of *Chhau* get itself modified in course of time according to distinct style of its own with its religious culture and local environment.

D. K. Sarangi opines, “*Chhau* is undoubtedly a tribal Odishan Art. This famous art form not only originated in a predominantly tribal belt but that the basic posture, the accompanying music and the aesthetic mood of the *Chhau* quite often resemble different dances and songs of these tribes.”

Mayurbhanj *Chhau* is performed in solo, duet and group. The subject matter has been brought thematically and substantially from the *Rāmāyana*, *Mahābhārata*, Krishna Cult and the *Purāns*. In the beginning probably it had no themes but subsequently a thematic base was provided to this dance form.²⁶ *Chhau* in its present form is a fine blending of various systems. “Elements of martial, folk, traditional and classical art have been nicely woven into the grand mosaic of *Chhau*.” Vatsayan opines “Thus the dance style is folks from the point of milieu and environment but is classical from the point of view of body techniques and its internal structuring.” A close look reveals that the *Chhau* dancer builds movements from a variation of *Tribhanga*. This posture of *Tribhanga* and *Chauka* (square), the open grand pile or *Maṇḍalasthāna*, are quite akin to those motifs of *Odissi* dance. “*Sanjukta Panigrahi* mentions that the *Tribhanga* of this dance which is absent in other Indian classical dances, has been imitated from daily life of Odia women folk and not from any *shāstras*. This is what happens in case of Mayurbhanj *Chhau* in respect of movements.”

Notes

1. Indian art has obviously a religious intention and a metaphysical aim. At the same time it is not an adjunct of religion and metaphysics, but belongs in the traditional scheme of knowledge to the realm of Dance, Dramaturgy (*Natyasastra*), and Poetics (*Alamkdrasdstra*), revealing and communicating the major moods and emotions of man (*rasas*). According to the *Natyasastra* (dramaturgy) of Bharata (c. second century B.C.E to second century era.), defined to “*rasa* (literally, flavour, relish) is the seed and fruit of the arts.” The arts generate and consolidate moods, sentiments, and emotions (*rasa*), freed from the fluctuations of fleeting desires and impulses, focus and diffuse these in the minds and hearts of the people
2. *Vira Rāsa* is sentiment of people of superior nature and it is aroused by such determinants as presence of mind, perseverance, diplomacy, discipline, military strength, power,

reputation of might, influence, good conduct and the like. On the stage it is to be represented by such Consequents as firmness, patience, heroism, charity, sacrifice, diplomacy and similar feelings. The transitory psychological states associated with this sentiment are contentment, judgment, pride, agitation, indignation, remembrance, horrification and the like. In the opinion of Bharata, Brahma spoke of three kind's *vira*- those arising from making gifts (*dānavira*); from fulfilling their obligations (*Dharmavira*); and those become heroic by fighting (*Yuddhāvira*).

3. The aesthetic experience, which constitutes the quintessence of every performing art known as *Rasa*.
4. According to Oxford Dictionary the meaning of Art is the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power. In the sense of art could categorised- Visual Art, Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Theatre, Dance, Performing Arts, Literature, Music, Film, Other Media such as Interactive Media)
5. The doctrine that *rasa* is the essence of poetry starts from Bharata (first century CE) "No composition can proceed without *rasa*," said he in his famous work on dramaturgy, *Natyashastra*. *Abhinavagupta* (10th century), the most important thinker in Indian aesthetics, held this doctrine: "There is no poetry without *rasa*." (*Dhanyaloka Locana* 2.3. This book will be referred to as D.L.). Again, "The meaning of poetry is *rasa*; what is principally looked for is meaning." (*Abhinavabharati* (A.B.) 7.1). Visvanath (4th CE) wrote, "A composition touched with *rasa* is poetry." (*Sahityadarpana*.1.3).
6. See Bharata, *op. cit.*, 6.35; "Rasa is realization of one's own one's own consciousness as colored by emotions." Again, "Rasa and emotion cannot be expressed directly through words, their essence being immediate experience; so they can only be suggested by words." (D.L. 1.4). "Rasa is identical with the taste of one's own blissful self." Visvanath, *op. cit.*, 3.35.
7. It is said to be "like the relish of the ultimate reality" (*parabrahmadvadsachiva*). D.L. 2.4. Also "as the twin of this relish of Brahma" (*Sahityadarpana* 3.35). Brahma is the same as *Atma*, the highest self. In yoga this is realized in its purest form as an indeterminate spirit with no object confronting it, as it transcends all subject-object duality. But in poetic contemplation the self is a subject aware of emotions and their determinants and is self-aware through this awareness of objects. This mode of self-realization is accompanied by an extraordinary kind of delight, called *sadya-paranirvrtti*, immediate higher pleasure, by Mammata (11th CE), in *Kavyaparakasha* and *alaukika camatkdra*, extraordinary charm, by Abhinavagupta in D.L. 3.33. The pleasure in poetry, derived ultimately from relish of the higher self, must be different in quality from ordinary pleasure derived from satisfaction of the lower self, the practical ego, lost in and suffering emotions instead of contemplating them.
8. S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Arts* (4th ed.). The appeal of poetry said to be to the feelings of emotions of their egoistic elements and transformation of them into something pure and tranquil (pp. 254, 268).

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