

Chhau Dance, Origin, Style, Music, Recognition, Chhau Mask

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Chhau Dance is a vibrant semi classical dance form from eastern India that blends martial traditions with folk and tribal elements. It originated in the Kalinga region and is practiced mainly in Odisha, Jharkhand and West Bengal. The dance enacts stories from the Mahabharata, Ramayana, local folklore and abstract themes. It was traditionally performed by male artists. It reflects community life, cultural identity and is closely linked to festivals like Chaitra Parva.

Chhau Dance Features

Chhau Dance combines martial arts, storytelling and folk traditions, creating a powerful visual and rhythmic performance deeply rooted in community celebrations.

- **Origin:** Chhau is a semi **classical Indian dance** that evolved from indigenous martial practices and tribal traditions of eastern India, especially the Kalinga region, blending combat techniques with artistic expression.
- **Regional Styles:** It exists in three main styles: Purulia Chhau of West Bengal, Seraikella Chhau of Jharkhand and Mayurbhanj Chhau of Odisha, each differing in technique, costume and presentation.

- **Themes and Narratives:** The dance portrays episodes from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas, local folklore and abstract concepts, along with natural themes like Sarpa Nritya and Mayur Nritya.
- **Festival:** Chhau is closely linked to the spring festival Chaitra Parva, usually lasting around 13 days, where entire communities participate in performances and celebrations.
- **Performance:** It is performed at night in open spaces called akhada or asar, where dancers use body movements rather than facial expressions to convey emotions and stories.
- **Martial Elements:** The dance includes mock combat techniques known as khel, stylized movements of birds and animals like chalis and topkas and daily life inspired gestures called uflis.
- **Music and Instruments:** Performances are accompanied by traditional instruments like mohuri and shehnai, along with drums such as dhol, dhumsa and kharka, creating strong rhythmic beats.
- **Participation:** Traditionally performed by male dancers from local communities or artist families, though recent developments include participation by women, such as the Mitali Chhau Maldi troupe.
- **Movement Style:** The dance combines the energetic tandava style associated with Shiva and the graceful lasya elements derived from Nachni dance, adding both power and elegance.
- **Cultural Significance:** Chhau acts as a unifying force, bringing together diverse communities across social and linguistic backgrounds, though modern challenges like industrialization are reducing participation.

Chhau Mask

Chhau Masks are a defining feature of the dance, especially in Purulia and Seraikella styles, adding dramatic identity to characters and enhancing visual storytelling.

- **Mask Usage:** Masks are used in Purulia and Seraikella styles to depict characters, while Mayurbhanj Chhau does not use masks, relying instead on facial expressions and body movements.
- **Symbolic Role:** Masks represent gods, animals, demons and mythological figures, helping dancers portray roles effectively since their faces remain expressionless during performance.
- **Crafting Community:** These masks are traditionally made by artisans from the Sutradhar community, who specialize in clay based artistic creations of deities and cultural figures.
- **Making Process:** The process involves layering 8-10 sheets of paper with glue on a clay mould, adding clay features, applying cloth and mud layers, drying, polishing and final decoration.
- **Decoration Style:** Masks are painted in bright colours and decorated with materials like shola, making them visually striking and suitable for theatrical representation of mythological themes.
- **Geographical Indication:** The Purulia Chhau Mask has received **Geographical Indication** (GI) status, recognizing its uniqueness and traditional craftsmanship linked to the region.
- **Cultural Identity:** Masks not only enhance performance aesthetics but also preserve traditional knowledge passed orally across generations, making them integral to Chhau's cultural heritage.

Chhau Dance Recognitions

Chhau Dance has received national and international recognition for its cultural significance, artistic value and role in preserving traditional heritage.

- **UNESCO Recognition:** In 2010, Chhau Dance was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the **Intangible Cultural Heritage** of Humanity, highlighting its global cultural importance.
- **Institutional Support:** The Government of Odisha established institutions like the Mayurbhanj Chhau Nritya Pratisthan in Baripada to promote training, preservation and performance of this art form.
- **Cultural Promotion:** The **Sangeet Natak Akademi** has set up a National Centre for Chhau Dance (Chhau Kendra) in Bokaro Jharkhand, supporting research, documentation and dissemination of this traditional dance.
- **Popularity:** Chhau gained wider recognition through its appearance in the Hindi film Barfi!, where Purulia Chhau performances were featured prominently.

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