

Rupkatha Journal

On Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities

An Online Open Access Journal

ISSN 0975-2935

www.rupkatha.com

Volume V, Number 2, 2013

Special Issue on Performance Studies

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Aestheticizing without Agenda: A Counter-Reading of the Western Approach to *Chhau* Dance

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The Argument

In an article titled “A Crisis of Culture” published in *The Hindu* (May 07, 2006), T. M. Krishna observes:

We are in a modern world, don't we need to modernise everything? What's modernisation? Have the arts not always moved with the times? Do we sing or dance the way it was done 200 years ago? Don't we experiment with all our artistic traditions? Don't we address contemporary issues through dance? Don't we package our music differently today? (2)¹

The crux of this paper is to raise similar issues with regard to the popular folk dance form of Eastern India- *Chhau*. The *Chhau* of Odisha, West Bengal and Jharkhand has been included in the UNESCO list of Intangible Heritage. The western perception on this essentially folk art form has been quite problematic. There is a constant attempt by the western researchers to categorize *Chhau* as a classical dance form and the ostensible reason behind it has been the royal involvement in terms of performance and choreography particularly in Seraikella and Mayurbhanj. However, the purely folk origin of the Purulia *Chhau* of West Bengal is left out of the ambit of discussion. But it has not been taken into consideration that after the independence and the abolition of monarchy in various Indian states, this paradigm of nobility controlling the art form of *Chhau* has been done away with. Instead, various state governments and their agencies have undertaken a string of democratic measures to preserve and promote this rich indigenous art form. This paper attempts to confront and counter the traditional readings of the western scholars with regard to this folk dance form. The recalcitrant approach to search for a “pure” form as *Chhau* is incorrectly projected as a classical dance form. There is a sardonic reaction at any deviation from the so-called “purity” of form as sheer exhibitionism with regard to the western audience and a downright rejection of political patronage as an ignoble way of promoting tourism industry. Such misconceived criticisms are taken up for discussion in this paper. With first-hand knowledge of the ground reality and close interaction with the folk artistes, the paper aims to correct the western approach to standardize an essentially fluid and vibrant art form that imbibes the best of western influences and blends it impeccably with the indigenous tradition to produce an organic unity of impression. The paper begins with an outline of this dance form.

About *Chhau*

In Eastern India, in the states of Odisha, West Bengal and Jharkhand there exists three styles of *Chhau* called Mayurbhanj *Chhau*, Purulia *Chhau* and Seraikella *Chhau*. The main difference among the three styles of *Chhau* is in the use of masks. While Seraikella *Chhau* of Jharkhand and Purulia *Chhau* of West Bengal use masks, the Mayurbhanj *Chhau* of Odisha does not have the masks thereby adding facial expression with body movement and gesture. The Mayurbhanj *Chhau* and Seraikella styles of *Chhau* are highly evolved with classical elements whereas the Purulia *Chhau* is less evolved yet highly dramatic and the most vigorous of all styles of *Chhau*. The rhythm in all the three styles is created by Dhol, Dhumsa, Chadchadi and Mahuri. The vigorous war dances with swords and shields, the colourful, dignified and intricate rhythmic pattern of other items of *Chhau* dances, the boisterous yet melodious sound of battle drums bring thunderous effect to make the audience spellbound.



The difference in the style of presentation gets quite obvious as we look into some very popular presentations in each school of *Chhau* dance. 'Dandi Mahabharat' is a popular presentation of the Mayurbhanj *Chhau* troupe. As per the epic written by Sarala Das, the main game-planner and conspirator was 'Shakuni' and not Lord Krishna as portrayed by 'Vyasa' in his script. He explains how 'Shakuni' took a silent vow to eliminate the entire 'Kuru kula' to avenge the death of his brothers and family members at the hands of 'Duryodhana', who imprisoned all and let them die without food or water. Such adaptations from the Mahabharata are presented with facial expressions and artistic body movement without any use of masks. In another composition, 'Shradhanjali' the artistes depict the evolution of *Chhau* dance starting with Rukmar Nach (War Dance). This is marked for its rhythmic complexities. Then the dance is developed on

different mythical characters like Shiva and Krishna followed by some social and imaginary episodes. It is a tribute to the Gurus and the royal personalities who contributed for the promotion of *Chhau* dance.

The most highly evolved artistic *Chhau* dance form is Seraikella *Chhau*. Here we find many short compositions on myriad themes. 'Ratri' or Night is conceived from the Ratri Sukta, a verse in the Rig Veda that personifies night into a goddess. Night is a goddess that protects the world and its beings from the threatening forces that may lurk in her darkness. The second composition titled 'Mayur' captures the dance movement of the bird. Its dance at the sight of rain-laden clouds and the spreading of its resplendent plumage epitomizes an almost divine grace. The third composition 'Hansa' depicts the beauty of the stately swan as it swims in its natural habitat of water. The gliding movements of its graceful flight, the preening of its feathers are a visual treat. Another remarkable composition is 'Radha Krishna'. The eternal love of Radha-Krishna, a metaphor of the union between the supreme and human consciousness is a common motif that finds abundant representations in Indian art. In this particular dance composition Krishna's mellifluous flute that forms an intrinsic part of their love imagery becomes the centre of focus.

Compared to the two *Chhau* forms described above, Purulia *Chhau* displays athletic skill to an amazing degree. Here the performers exude raw energy and sheer acrobatic skill to entertain the spectators. One popular composition is 'Mahisasura Badha'. Shattered by the oppressions and exploitations of Mahisasura the gods appeared before Lord Brahma with the appeal to save them and his creation from the demon Mahisasura. Arrayed with the most powerful weapons in her ten hands, Goddess Durga on the back of the lion fought with Mahisasura and killed him. Another popular composition, 'Ravana Badha' has been adapted from the great epic 'Ramayana'. The dance begins with this 'Akal Bodhan' Durga Puja. In this episode Ravan and Ram are engaged in fierce battle which ultimately ends with the death of Ravan. Very high decibel sound, resplendent masks, vigorous body movements and natural rhythm mark the essence of Purulia *Chhau*.²

Debate over Compromise with the Indigenous Aesthetic of Performance

In the final chapter of her book *Indian Folk Theatres* (2007), Julia Hollander opens up a new issue of alienation for the urban theatre enthusiasts in India. At the outset, she humbly admits her outsider status in approaching the vast spectacle of folk theatre in rural India. She recounts her experiences of being a British citizen in India and the resultant feeling of otherness. As she elaborates on this idea of being a foreigner to the Indian soil, she moves swiftly into a different domain of perception and identifies the global consumerism as a more potent force than erstwhile British colonial legacy. As soon as she enters into the discourse of global village she includes the urban populace of India as the practitioners of a global

consumerist culture and identifies them as “cultural outsiders” in terms of indigenous theatrical traditions of rural India. In a very interesting manner she equates her racial outsider status with the cultural outsider status of urban Indians. She goes on expanding the list of multinational brands in the fields of garment, food and beverage, entertainment and others to show how the urban India has adapted itself to this imported culture in course of time. As a result, they have been segregated from their folk roots and allied cultural practices. Now, this is selling half-truth at the expense of an equally vibrant urban culture that embraces folk as an alternative way of life. In India, the entertainment industry has made it fashionable to include folk as part of a greater strategy to re-connect with the roots. Be it fusion music and the emerging bands that dole out heavy doses of folk tunes or recent releases in the domain of parallel cinema where folk song-and-dance sequences find an eloquent expression. One may remember Satyajit Ray’s film ‘Agantuk’ where folk performance provides much-needed cathartic experience to the main protagonist. Even in the world of fashion and jewellery ethnic ornaments and garments have their sway in the recent times. Such spontaneous experimentations with various folk elements in the domain of mainstream urban culture cannot be dismissed as insincere frolicking with indigenous cultural materials by the so-called urban cultural “outsiders”. If such charges of a “resident alien” status of urban theatre enthusiasts are leveled a counter-charge of failure to understand the cultural nuances of a composite society may also surface quite pertinently. What became particularly disturbing was the attempt of a British folk researcher to project the folk performers in very poor light and that too, out of a misconceived notion. She quotes from the observation of a very famous British playwright, John Arden, during his visit to Purulia in the 1970s. The statement was directed against the overindulgence of the academia in certain folk performing art forms like Chhau and the resultant multiplication of ineffectual academic research works at the expense of serious conservationist approaches. The *Chhau* performers were not the target of his attack. Their innate hospitable nature prompted them to modify the mode of presentation in such a manner so as to pay greater attention to the guest spectators like John Arden. It was not a compromise on the format of dance- rather cosmetic changes to facilitate the viewing of a distinguished group of foreign spectators. Such conciliatory gestures were quite frequent during the days of kings and emperors who were self-styled patrons of folk art forms. Unfortunately, such extempore improvisations on the dance craft were mistaken by scholars as an attempt to dilute the ‘purity’ of form to keep the well-off foreigners in good humour for future opportunities to perform abroad. Let us have a look at what Arden observed regarding the Purulia *Chhau* performers.

Instead of dancing ‘in the round’ for the benefit of all the audience, they imperceptibly metamorphosed their act into a proscenium arch display, pointing everything at the academics – maybe they didn’t even realize they were doing it. The academics recorded and recorded. The archives will now be stuffed, the doctoral theses already lying on the publishers’ shelves.

Arden 1977, p.149

It seems difficult to accept Julia's description of the *Chhau* performance as 'artificial' and meant solely for the academics. Next, the most artistic and scholarly version of *Chhau* in the Indian subcontinent, Seraikella *Chhau*, has also been described with certain misconceived notions. Hollander admits the basic mode of presentation like the 1970s version where Seraikella *Chhau* is presented front on. But it seems she is not comfortable with the greater presence of modern commercial accoutrements- the microphone, the light, the cameras. Even the arrival of the Chief Minister to inaugurate the dance festival is viewed sardonically by Hollander. She fails to appreciate the use of Hindi by the Chief Minister as the main language of communication amongst several tribal language communities. What she expects as "people's language" ultimately turns out to be "people's languages". Jharkhand has more than thirty tribal languages and it is impossible for any Chief Minister to use all the tribal languages in his speech. Jharkhandi politicians' tourism initiative through *Chhau* dance festival is strongly disapproved by foreign scholars like Julia Hollander. But such festivals are a major means of subsistence for the not so well-to-do *Chhau* performers. Festivals boost rural economy to a large extent. The Government of Odisha established a Government *Chhau* Dance Centre in 1960 in Seraikella and the Mayurbhanj *Chhau* Nritya Pratisthan at Baripada in 1962 since the abolition of princely states made it difficult for the local communities to sustain these traditions. These institutions engage in training involving local gurus, artists, patrons and representatives of *Chhau* institutions and sponsor performances. The Chaitra Parva festival, significant to the *Chhau* Dance, is also funded by the state government. It is the best form of mask dance. For safeguarding *Chhau* Dance the Sangeet Natak Akademi has taken up specific measures including grants to cultural institutions and the establishment of a National Centre for *Chhau* Dance at Baripada, Odisha.

Hollander and her ilk search for real, live theatre and are dead against any experimentation with the pure art form. This notion of purity is classical and logocentric. In a folk art form like *Chhau* this hardcore notion of purity is a misplaced idea. Hollander may argue that the *Chhau* form of Seraikella had been given great patronage and wide publicity by the kings of that region. It is true that the kings used to participate in the *Chhau* dance performances to encourage the young artistes to join the dance troupe and also to popularize the folk art form among the villagers of that region. In the contemporary socio-political scenario the role of patrons for *Chhau* performances is being played by the influential politicians. The charges of corruption in the pure art form, lack of interest among the village community members during the performances and creation of two clearly demarcated types of *Chhau*- one for the foreigners and another for the indigenous audience during festive rituals- are ill-formed keeping in mind the vibrant tradition of *Chhau* even after the passage of so many years. In reality, folk performers are attempting to go global in the true sense of the term. They have imbibed the best folk tradition of the western theatre and are trying to sensitize

their own village community about the complete nature of theatre to be brought out by a skillful *mélange* of the best of eastern and western traditions.

Surprisingly, the large body of literature that describes the esoteric meaning of the Chhau dances in English, and the *Chhau* maestro J. B. Singh Deo's lyrical English language descriptions are straightway dismissed by western critics like Julia Hollander as incomprehensible to most of the audience. What they term as "intellectual package" for "naïve foreigners" could also be explained as the true attempt at globalization for this rich folk dance form. What's the problem if the presentation is a bit dazzling and smart? In the name of purity do we want the folk artistes to remain in the infernal darkness of poverty? Isn't it a holier-than-thou agenda to deny global access to the traditionally rich folk forms like *Chhau*? Do we feel uneasy if a great *Chhau* performer like Guru Shashadhar Acharya is invited to reputed universities abroad for lecturing and conducting workshops?

The inflexible mindset of a western critic like Julia Hollander is made explicit when she makes an adverse comment on the present "degeneration" of *Chhau* art form and shows the reason for this "fall from grace" by referring to the absence of a controlling British cultural policy,

We watch the palace courtyard shows as the last vestiges of community theatre, our liberal sensibilities gratified that they contain both tribal and royal influences. But here is a troubling colonial legacy – our literature informs us that the royal heritage is intertwined with the period of British colonial power. **Were it not for the Brits, the Maharajas would never have been able to develop the Chhau form. And their cultural interest was broader, more cosmopolitan than they might nowadays like to admit.** We know Bijoy Pratap Singh Deo brought European ballet and even possibly Manipuri dance, via the Bengali Tagore, to his dance aesthetic.

Hollander 2007, pp.182-183

Lure of the lucre had always been a driving motif for many of the so-called celebrity artistes. Poverty has been an eternal companion to the rural performers. Now, with the advent of globalization and free market economy, the artistes get exposed to media and in some cases film industry in Mumbai. But it will be highly unfair to claim that the *Chhau* artistes are serious only in front of the camera where a rich booty has been promised. Of course, a fat purse brings along with it additional responsibility of delivering it perfectly. However, it does not mean that they are lax and perfunctory in their other performances. They are after all fallible human beings like us. They get tired due to a very hectic schedule and it has to be understood with sympathy for the artist community. Another grave misconception about *Chhau* of Seraikella among the western critics is that the foreign tourists and theatre enthusiasts are chiefly responsible for the preservation of the dance form. If this is true how the purely folk origin of Purulia *Chhau* and relatively scant attention of the foreign visitors for its promotion and preservation made it survive against all odds? It is really unfortunate if foreign entrepreneurs of folk theatre

impose condition of an “unspoilt” art form for visiting India and paying for the survival of art forms like *Chhau*. With the passage of time and the influx of heterogeneous theatrical influences, it is quite obvious that the learned section of the folk artistes would take up the good aspects of other dance forms and try to enrich their own indigenous art form. There is another possibility of mainstream young performers eager to learn *Chhau* dance and represent this form to the other countries of the world. If the foreign admirers of this folk dance think that as they have been paying for such performances they will have absolute control over the dynamics of performance- this is once again a not-so-tolerant mindset with certain fixed ideas about controlling other agencies.

Conclusion:

It is interesting to note how folk researchers like Julia Hollander end their commentaries with notes of optimism completely dissonant with their main argument. They depict a rosy picture for India in 2050 and cite Goldman Sachs as evidence. The overall economic condition will improve and it will make village folk artistes a little well-off. Their argument is that such prosperity will bring new opportunities to the folk performers to perform in town and subsequently settle there. They will learn to adapt to the new cosmopolitan environment of Indian urban space. It will also put great stress on their indigenous art and compel it to change and adapt in course of time. The paradigm of “purity” will fall into disuse then. Such critics often voice their anxiety regarding the danger inherent in the process of urban settlement of the folk performers. They might face humiliation of various kinds and perhaps be forced to lead an ignoble life. Even there is an open call to include such unpleasant experiences into the format of their performance to stay relevant to the urban theatrical circle.

All said and done, the flip side of the folk performers’ life in the village has not been addressed by the western theatre analysts. It was a rare opportunity for me to meet Guru Shashadhar Acharya, a leading *Chhau* artiste of India, in Bhubaneswar, Odisha on the fringes of the National *Chhau* Dance Festival on 30th May 2013. In a long interview Guru Acharya talked about a grave crisis in the moral life of the young and upcoming *Chhau* performers. I think an excerpt of that interview could be very relevant to the main argument of this paper.

I feel the problem that has spread like cancer amongst the young generation of *Chhau* artistes is addiction to liquor and drugs. The influx of hard cash has spoiled the moral nature of these young people. There is an urgent need to build awareness for the prevention of such evil practices. Otherwise, we’ll lose a large number of talented young artistes in near future. I feel they should receive proper education or else their life will definitely be ruined by the lure of filthy lucre and its attendant vices. Today, we live in metropolitan cities. Our commitment to the indigenous folk art

form has been recognized by the government. We've received many facilities and honours. I've visited many foreign universities to conduct workshops and deliver lectures on *Chhau* dance form. But I feel anxious when I find there is lack of excellence in terms of coping with the limelight that will hog a successful performer once he carves a niche in the professional circuit. Who will continue this glorious tradition after us? Who will represent this art form to the international audience? These are some of the disturbing questions that haunt me. I've set up schools in Seraikella and New Delhi to sensitize the upcoming folk artistes for performing at the highest level. I've also accepted women from the mainstream to join our troupe and continue the tradition. Growing beyond the sobriquet of martial dance, we've incorporated many artistic nuances into our traditional form. We produce a *mélange* that will survive the onslaught of commercially viable popular dance forms.³

This excerpt shows the complex form of *Chhau* that has evolved over the years by accepting the challenge of alien art forms. If it had got stuck in the western notion of 'purity' perhaps there could have a slow but sure movement towards oblivion. Hence, the mindset has to change and the so-called deviations from an imaginary ideal should be interpreted as bold acceptance of a new kind of reality to survive and flourish.

Notes

1. The article was published in the Sunday magazine of The Hindu. It was a soul-stirring commentary on the downward slide of many eminent folk art forms. The author suggests that the crisis has deepened in the case of many indigenous art forms due to the inability to adapt with the challenges of the new era.
2. The information provided on the content and classification of *Chhau* dance was borrowed to some extent from the brochure of the National *Chhau* Dance Festival organized by Odisha Sangeet Natak Akademi. I am indebted to Mr Chitta Ranjan Mallia, Secretary, Odisha Sangeet Natak Akademi.
3. This excerpt is part of a memorable interview. It was held at Odisha Pantha Nivas, Bhubaneswar in the morning of 30th May 2013. I took the interview with two other field investigators- Suchismita Pattnaik and Koutuk Dutta.

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