



# **Sociological Interpretation Of The Problem And Challenges Associated With Chhau Dancer Of Purulia, W.B**

**Dr. Sujay Sain**Assistant Professor in Sociology  
H.O.D., Department of Sociology

Chhatna Chandidas Mahavidyalaya, Bankura, West Bengal, India, 722132

Affiliated to Bankura University, Bankura, West Bengal, India

**Abstract**

Chhau dance of Purulia has had the history of performing arts based on traditional culture of Bengal. It is a popular dance culture performed on traditional Hindu religious themes. It is originated in ancient time and developed on Hindu cultural values and religious traditions. The tradition of Chhau dance was evolved through different stages. However wearing mask at the time of performance is quite normal and it is the tradition which has separated them from other dance culture. From time immemorial Chhau dance has got importance in rural Bengal but in contemporary society it becomes a popular folk culture which attracts people of different regions. In the present study I have tried to find out problems and challenges of Chhau dancer of rural Chhau artists of Purulia and their socio-economic conditions. Qualitative methodology has been applied in the study for in-depth understanding of the subject. Various tools and techniques of qualitative research have been applied throughout the research as and when necessary. Study reveals that Chhau dancers are coming from lower stratum of the society and struggling as artists due to their economic conditions, illiteracy and backwardness.

**Keywords:** Chhau Dancer, Hindu religion, Folk Culture, Social Backwardness, Art, Primitive culture, Agility, Indigenous, Tribal Dance.

**I. INTRODUCTION**

Dance is the expression of emotions and joy of human being. It has various forms and cultural decorations. Dance is performed with sign language attached to different kinds of symbolic gestures. Gestures are used in different dance performance and it varies on the basis of context and cultural construction as well as it takes different forms of dance. Gestures being used by artists through different parts of their body such as hand, face, eyes, and head which is termed as 'Mudra'. Mudra depends on the gesture of body and other parts of body. Uses of hands are very significant in dance performance which makes the dance decorative; however it is not only the decorative part of dance rather symbolic meaning is also attached with hand Mudras through visual language for communication with audience. It can be performed by one hand or by both hands as per the requirement and producing meaning to convey.

In this study, I have selected Chhau dance of Purulia for analysing the evolution and origin of this dance-culture along with the socio economic status of Chhau dancer in the state. Chhau dance is a part of folk culture of India. It is basically a semi classical dance tradition which is very popular to general people. In India there are three traditions of Chhau dance found which are associated with three states namely Jharkhand, Odisha and West Bengal. In Odisha division, this tradition is named as Mayurbhanj Chhau and for Jharkhand it is renowned as Seraikella Chhau. Chhau dance of Purulia is famous for its decorative presentation and real drama like performance. It involves gymnastic as well as semi classical performance

attached with traditional values, festive themes and religious themes. In Purulia various mythological stories are performed live by a group of Chhau dancer wearing vibrant colourful dresses in open stage with live dialogue.

It is a primitive type dance performance which is based on athletic agility and physical exercise. It is not very easy to perform because of excessive physical exercise involved in such dance performance. It requires physical fitness for every participant who is performing such old and traditional dance practices. Not only they are wearing vibrant colourful dress but also they are wearing mask of men, animal and deity for whom he is playing the role. Traditionally Chhau dance is performed only by male artists. Sometimes it is known as classical Hindu dance because of close connection with Hindu religion in the story line of their performance. Hindu epic such as Ramayana, Mahabharata, Purana etc are being played in their dance performance along with mythological stories of Lord Shiva, Durga, Bishnu, Ganesh etc. It is not a simple dance only rather it is a dance drama (Nritya natya) where dance is the main concern but the whole dance performance is based on a particular story along with folk songs. Hindu mythological stories are preferred in most of the Chhau dance in Purulia district.

Chhau dance has the similarly to the dance of primitive type because here also dance of worshipping God and Goddess are attached with their performance. From ancient times it is found that people do perform dance in order to worship their God and Goddess. In primitive era it was nature worship celebrated through dance and thereafter the tradition of such dance continues in idolatry stage also. Scientific reasons of various natural changes were unknown to human being and therefore they were fully dependent on religious perspectives. Primitive men were very much attracted on animism, animatism where nature was considered as god. For natural calamities including drought, flood, famine even for thunder, heavy rain, earthquake they had no reason to clarify this kind of natural calamities ; only they had the option to take shelter of the god and prayer before the god and goddess. Natural calamities and natural changes were explained as the expressive aspect of the creator or almighty. That's why primitive men tried to satisfy the almighty by doing prayer in the form of dance which they think was more accepted by god and goddess. It was thought that everything was controlled by the almighty and every positive aspect were blessings of God. Primitive people express their gratitude towards their almighty in the form of dance which was also quite natural and spontaneous but religiocentric. The origin of festivals in different time and in different context was also created by human being who has close relationship with religion for prayer and sacrifice towards God. It was manifested through various types of dance performance and created separate culture of dance for different society also. In primitive time dance was very much spontaneous and it was moreover the expression of happiness also but at the same time it is also true that dance was performed to kill the evil effect or evil forces active within the society. It was part of our civilization which was originated in primitive time but evolved and changed over time through change of culture and societal norms. With the advent of modernity reason and rationality was also found in the evolution of dance and aesthetic sense was attached gradually.

In Hindu culture dance is very much attached with worshipping different god and goddess. Apart from worshipping god and goddess, traditional dance was also associated with celebration of festivals and other occasions. But above all it is quite natural that people do perform dance when they are in festive mood and to express their inner joy, happiness, and pleasure. In monarchy, victory in the battle was also celebrated through dance performance and that dance was also the sign of triumph. In modern times also we do find that people celebrate their win with dance performance. From sports to politics dance is found everywhere as an activity towards celebration for their win. In contemporary society ethnic and traditional dance performance is commonly observed in various occasions and festivals. Traditional and tribal dance has got importance in recent times as their performance is unique and able to create different image of culture.

Chhau dance is a kind of natural dance performed and carried out by few specific people of particular cultural from ancient times. Within this dance performance we do find some feature of ancient dance performance and wild dance activity including agility and athlete. Although it has close connection with ancient dance performance but today we have observed the refined form of this dance culture where complete grammatical mixture of rhythms, beats and tempo is found with specific tune. It is one of the ancient form of dance but in contemporary society it has changed its style and form according to the need of the society and audience. Today we observe elegance as well as polished form of Chhau dance which has aesthetic texture also. It is the kind of folk dance where we do find social and cultural ethos as well as their lifestyle and life movement is also included within their dance performance. In accordance with the movement of body, steps and behaviour of human being and animal, Chhau dance takes different forms like Sabar Chhau, Machuya Chhau, Bagalya Chhau, Babu Chhau etc. Apart from that on the basis of movement of body we do also find difference in the dance movement like animal stepping, Bird stepping or wildlife stepping. Impact of religion and Purans' also found in Chhau dance where dancers have followed stepping

of The God and the demon (Asura). In West Bengal traditional Chhau dance is closely linked with religious traditions where they have performed this dance to welcome rain and to prevent drought. That's why it was naturally performed in Bengali month of mid Chaitra to late Joistho ( mid March to late May) every year. People believe that their prayer in the form of dance bring rain and make this earth green. Today Ganesh Chhau is very much popular which is a kind of scripted dance performance combined with storytelling collaborative effort, devotional songs and music , spiritual discourse focusing of specific Hindu mythological themes involving singing praises of deities along with narrative of spiritual discourse. Apart from that other spiritual discourses have also been performed through Chhau dance in West Bengal.

## II. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this study is to explore problems and challenges associated with Chhau dance and to find out the future of this dance culture in this post modern era. Socio economic status of Chhau dance artists have also been taken up as an important objective of this research.

## III. METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methodology has been applied throughout the study. Various tools and techniques associated with qualitative methodology have been given proper weightage in this research. Case study method, Focused Group Discussion and in-depth interviews have been given priority for collecting raw data from the field but at the same time observation technique were also applied to collect critical and hidden information from respondents. Observation technique was also used to find out observed regularities about the dance performance at the floor.

## IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To understand the subject matter of the study, researcher has set four separate but interrelated research questions.

1. What kind of problems and challenges are associated with Chhau dance and Chhau dance artists? Is there any dissatisfaction from performers' point of view?
2. What are the main sources of earning of Chhau dance artists? Did they earn satisfactorily and enjoyed with their profession?
3. Is there any close connection between their socio-economic and socio- cultural condition with this profession as Chhau dancer?
4. What will be the future of Chhau dance? What about views of next generation in this occupational dance? Do they feel attachment with Chhau dance? Do Chhau dance artist have any feeling of survival problem of this dance?

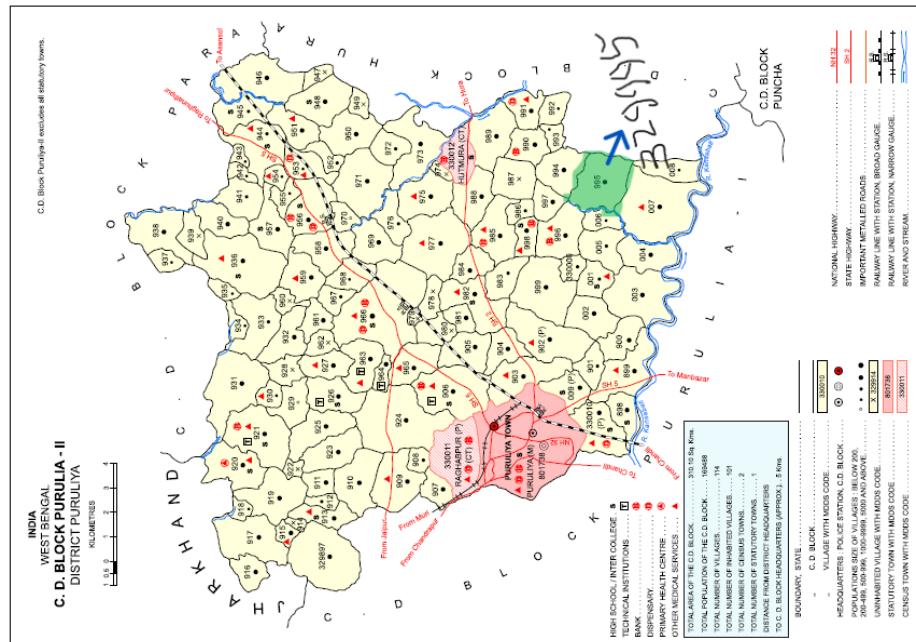
All these research questions are integral part of the present study to find out the basic problem associated with Chhau dance in Bengal and answer of these questions may lead to produce the basic outline regarding the future of Chhau dance in Bengal.

## V. AREA OF RESEARCH

In this study I have selected Baligara village of Purulia purposively for collecting raw data from Chhau dance artists. It is comparatively a small village falls under administrative jurisdiction of Purulia II Community Development Block. People living in this village are mostly backward sections of society both economically and socially. Maximum people of this village are daily labourers working in agriculture and only few people have their own agricultural land. Only twenty seven families are attached with Chhau dance who belongs to Mahato community actually came from Kurmi samaj.

Village - Baligara ( 329995), Block - Purulia II, Dist – Purulia (Census 2011)

Household 341, Total population 1731, Male 874, Female 857, population SC 79, ST 278, Literate 1059, Male literate 658, Female literate 401, Population illiterate 672, Male 216, Female 456, Total Marginal workers 534, Total main workers 183, total workers 717, Non workers 1014 – Census 2011(<https://censusindia.gov.in/nada/index.php/catalog/1354>)



## VI. FINDING OF THE STUDY

Study reveals that socio- economic background of Chhau dance artists is the main source of all problems associated with Chhau dance in Bengal. Families which have taken Chhau dance as their profession are socially and economically backward and unstable. Mostly illiterate or semiliterate people of this village are connected with Chhau dance and doing this dance drama occasionally. In most of the time these Chhau dance artists are engaged in either agriculture or construction work as daily labourers because they are illiterate and have no other skills to do productive work. These poor marginal and backward people occasionally engaged in Chhau dance because these poor people are in hand to mouth condition and couldn't be able to depend on this profession for their livelihood. Earning from Chhau dance is uncertain and seasonal due to its low demand in the market. Although they are very professional in their dance performance but their performance varies from time, space and context.

Study also reveals that the main source of dissatisfaction of Chhau dance artists is their identity crisis. In Chhau dance artists wear mask and costume designed on the basis of their dance theme and it is performed live by dance artist where identities of those artists are hidden. It is a group performance where large numbers of artists play their role and in most of the cases they are identified by their group performance and group name.

It is observed from the study that all family members are not involved directly or indirectly in this dance profession because some sort of skill and agility is required to perform in such dance drama. Apart from that athletic qualities are also important to participate in Chhau dance which is achieved through rigorous practices. Chhau artists have ascribed the skill of this dance culture from generation however practice is also very much important for perfection in their dance performance. Study unveils that there is no such training or formal dance school which can provide basic training and disseminate proper knowledge about Chhau dance. This may be the basic problem of Chhau dance in the process of their evolution. As they are identified by their team name or group name Chhau artists don't have any scope to create their own identity and public image. Only few popular and extraordinary Chhau artists have able to create their own identity that have legendary contribution in this dance performance. It is also informed that managers of Chhau dance team are more likely acceptable to the outsider as an important contact of Chhau dance and they play pivotal role in such business but main actors remain in the back region under the dance costume and mask.

It is revealed from the study that the economic status of these Chhau dance artists is not very conducive to make them stable in this profession. As they are economic unstable they are also unable to perform independently and they have to depend on the manager who is providing costume and mask for the team. In this dance performance there is no such division of region in the stage where this dance drama is played because Chhau dance is basically performed in an open stage or open platform in a simple ground where musical instrument players and other supporting drama players occupy little space to make the dance performance more attractive and acceptable which may be considered as back stage of the performance. However, preparing themes and costume for the dance is a separate segment of this dance performance

where few people work in backend and prepare attractive design dress with vivid colour for different characters according to their role including dress of different animals.

Earnings from Chhau dance is very low from individual point of view although it is very much popular in recent times and one of the leading business in Purulia district as tourists and visitors coming from other state and other districts of Bengal prefer to test Chhau dance. Purulia is famous for Chhau dance and it is one of the major tourist attractions because it is the local popular culture which has close adherence to folk culture of this district. Demand of Chhau dance is high in autumn, winter and in spring season when more tourists come to visit natural beauty of Purulia especially the western part of Ayodhya hills. Therefore these Chhau dance artists have high probability to get employment opportunities in dance performance for maximum six months. However continuity is another problem for them because dance performance is solely depends on the demand of their dance which may varies from time to time. Therefore dance artists are facing continuous earning from this profession which is one of the main source dissatisfaction for the future generation and the culture of Chhau dance is also under threat.

For survival, these Chhau dance artists also work as daily labourers when there is no such demand, Chhau dancer and other supporting staff of Chhau dance are also engaged in different labour activities for regular income along with other members of their family. It is also informed that they are being exploited in terms of economic opportunities and creation of their individual identity by the team manager because of their illiteracy or lack of formal knowledge. These Chhau dance artists are being hired by big dance team and they have to perform with low price. Due to lack of capital it is difficult for them to create their own dance group and another problem is lack of contact with various tourist houses, hotels, resorts, homestay etc. Therefore these Chhau artists are dependent on few middle men who digest maximum portion of the earning and give them very low price for their performance.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Chhau dance of Purulia is one of the famous dance drama has got popularity worldwide in recent times. It is one of the best traditional folk culture of Purulia embodies the rich and famous dance performance which has close linkage with indigenous tribal dance tradition and mythological culture of the country. Although it has gained huge momentum in recent times, economic condition of Chhau artists remain same and they have to take other options to maximise their income all through the year. Study reveals that Chhau artists of Purulia are engaged in dance performance for maximum six months in a calendar year and rest of the time they have to take other occupations of their choice and as per availability. In most of the cases they are engaged as manual labourers or daily labourers in agriculture. Illiteracy and lack of capital are the main obstacles in the development of Chhau dance at rural areas of Purulia district. This dance culture exists in rural villages of Purulia as an important tradition practiced in every year with various customs and cultural ethos. To encourage Chhau artist government has taken various initiatives and incentive schemes for economic support to the family of Chhau artists and nowadays they are enjoying artists allowance also. However this traditional dance culture is not in a emerging condition in contemporary society because it has lost its popularity as a profession to the next generation for low level of income generation. Tourism industry has given this traditional dance a reincarnation by unveiling new forms of Chhau dance and demand increased by leaps and bounds. Chhau artists are also looking for the new edge of Chhau dance and everyone is eagerly waiting with their hope for the arrival of new time where they can perform independently and earn satisfactorily.

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