

The Seraikella Chhau Dance

Text and Photographs
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If the one-time princely state of Seraikella is known to the outside world, it is mainly because of the Chhau dance. For centuries the people here—rulers and commoners alike—have cherished and preserved this extraordinarily stylised and aesthetically rich form of art. Dance traditions bearing the same name, Chhau, also obtain in nearby Mayurbhanj, in Orissa, and Purulia, in West Bengal, and certain parallel characteristics suggest a common origin for the three. Broadly, however, the Chhau of Seraikella can be said to be poetic and evocative, that of Mayurbhanj earthy and vibrant, and of Purulia robust and virile.



Hara-Parvati.

Seraikella lies in the heart of the Singhbhum district, formerly of Orissa and now of Bihar. Girdled as it is by the rolling Saranda and Bangriposi hills, it has for centuries maintained its own peculiar religious and cultural traditions, immune to influence from without. And these traditions find their fullest flowering once every year, at the time of *Chaitra Parva*, the Spring Festival. Preceded by elaborate ceremonies and rituals, the Chhau is performed for four or five nights and witnessed by thousands from the city and around.

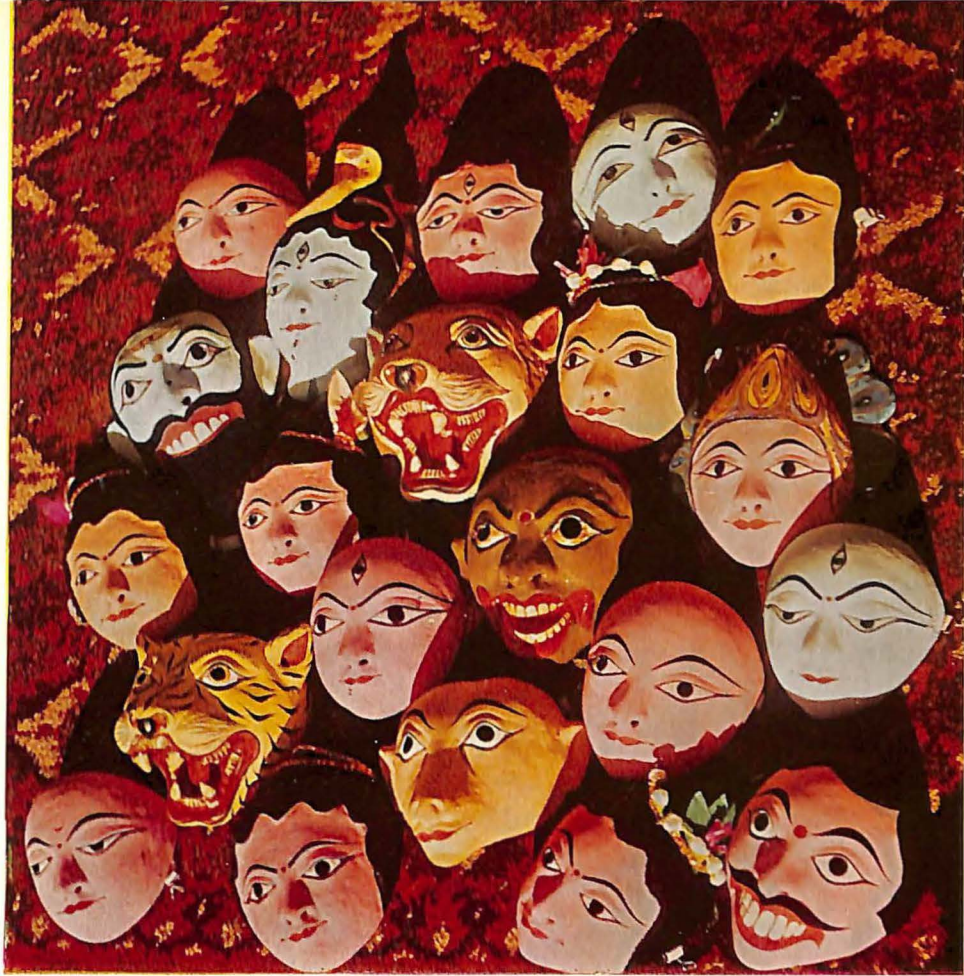
The technique of the Chhau dance stems from the *parikhanda* system of exercise, an important part of the training of the *sipahis*, or warriors, of Seraikella. *Pari* means shield and *khanda* sword, and in the *parikhanda* the performers all hold swords and shields in their hands when doing the exercises. The *parikhanda* is generally performed in the early hours of the morning and, traditionally, only at one place — a stretch of raised land on the bank of the Kharkai river, known as Bhairavsal. The place is consecrated to Lord Shiva and it has seven stone *lingas* before each of which the *parikhanda* performers prostrate themselves before commencing their routine every morning. The exercise generally lasts about three hours, after which the performers take a dip in the Kharkai and then proceed with the day's work.

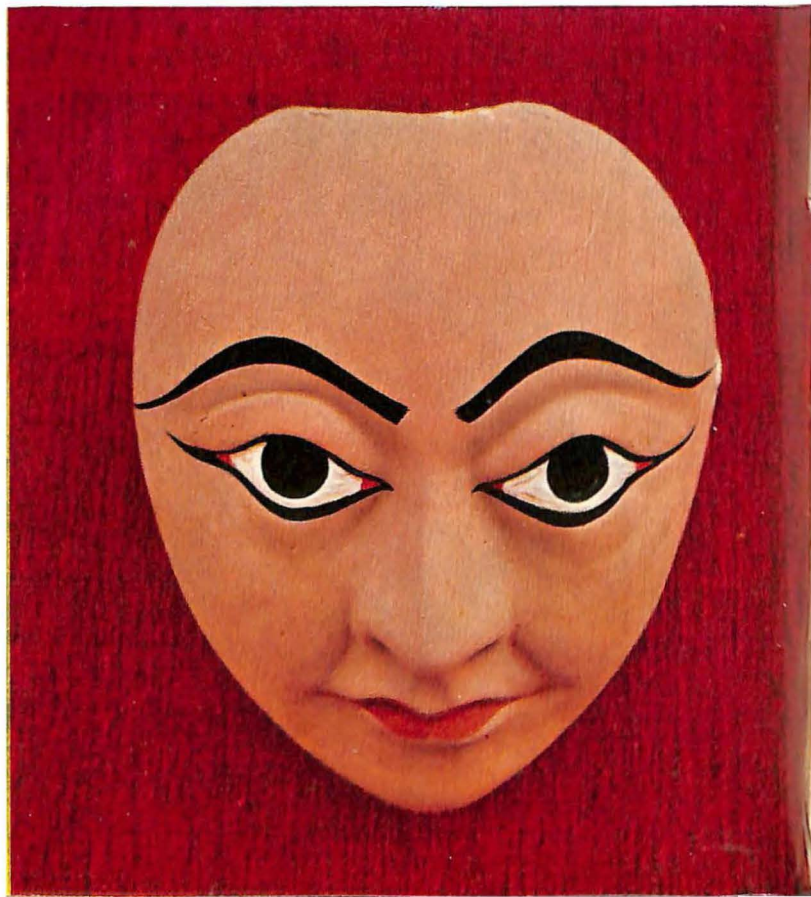


Parikhanda exercises









The *parikhanda* is always performed in the presence of a guru. The participants wear white dhotis and keep the upper body bare and stand in a row, facing the guru. The exercises have a set order which is strictly adhered to, and at the time of performance the guru as well as the participants keep reciting mnemonic syllables which guide the rhythm of the various steps and movements. The routine commences with a set of *chalis*, or stylised gaits, which are performed to the front, to the back and to the sides, in single, double and quadruple tempi. Most of the *chalis* are named after the manner in which the steps are taken; thus, *arhichali*, crosswise steps, and *teenparhichali*, three steps at a time. But there are also *chalis* which are based on actual gaits, such as *bugchali*, crane walk, and *gaumutrachali*, the walk of a cow after she has passed urine. The *chalis* are followed by *upalayas* or combined steps and movements which are suggestive of various actions. Example of *upalayas* are *gutti-koorha*, lifting a pebble with the toes, *gobar-goola*, mixing cow-dung with water, *kulapachra*, husking paddy, and *bota-cheera*, splitting a bamboo. It is said that formerly there were over 100 *upalayas* but at present not even half of them are performed or remembered.

The Seraikella Chhau is so called because the *chhau*, or mask, is an essential feature of this art. The etymology of the word *chhau* is generally traced



Prasanna Kumar, a veteran mask maker of Seraikella

to the Sanskrit root *chhaya*, shade, but some believe that the word is derived from *chhauni*, or cantonment, which is where the *parikhanda sipahis* mostly stayed. The Chhau is performed only by men and boys and the items are never more than seven to ten minutes each, for it is difficult to dance longer wearing a mask. The musical accompaniment is provided mainly by the *nagra*, a huge kettle-drum, *dhol*, a cylindrical drum, and *shehnais*, or reed-pipes. The same instruments, incidentally, are used in the various processions connected with the *Chaitra Parva* rituals. Besides, whenever there is a performance of Chhau, it is absolutely binding to begin it with a rendering of the music used for *Jatra Ghat*, an important ritual of the Festival.



Ardhanarishwara, the composite form of Shiva and Parvati.

The tunes used in Chhau are in many cases based on the *ragas* of Hindustani music; in some cases they are borrowed from the compositions of outstanding Oriya poets of the past, such as Upendra Bhanja, Kabi Surya and Uddita Narayana, while there are also items which use folk melodies. Usually at least two distinct airs are used in a dance item, and when the melody changes so does the rhythm of the dance. The steps of the dance are governed by patterns of rhythmic syllables played on the drums, and any change of tempo is prefaced with a *katan*, a rhythmic flourish played three times in succession. The items of Chhau have a set choreographic framework, but the number of times particular sequences are to be rendered in a presentation is governed by the exigencies of time and space; for this reason, it is a part of the Chhau technique that whenever the dancer desires to change from one sequence to the next, he indicates this to the musicians through a subtle nod or some similar discreet cue.

The themes of the Chhau dance are taken from mythology, everyday life, aspects of nature, and, at times, the dance is simply the delineation of a mood, state or condition. In Chhau the mask is the focal point of the dance, for in it is concentrated the quintessence of the particular mood or theme. When the mask is worn the dancer loses the most sensitive and potent instrument of expression, the face, and so the onus of creating and projecting moods and emotions is transferred to the body. The mask mirrors the basic, dominant *rasa* of a dance; the body qualifies it. The totality of feeling or emotion pertinent to a theme is crystallised in the mask; the body gives it animation. The mask wears a static expression, but in the magic of the Chhau every flexion and every thrust of the head, coupled with total body dynamics, contributes to create a form of mime that adds a new dimension to the concept of *abhinaya* as it is generally understood.

The making of Chhau masks involves much more than mere workmanship. Each mask is first visualised by studying the character it is to represent, and then given shape and substance. Almost all masks are painted a flat pastel shade, and in some cases the colour is chosen to augment the overall effect of the disguise. The stylised contours of the eyebrows, eyes and mouth are painstakingly painted, for they bring into vivid relief the distinctive character with which a particular mask is associated. Thus, in *Ratri*, (Night) the mask has half-closed eyes, heavy with sleep, and in *Banavidha* (The Injured Deer) the eyebrows are knotted in anguish. To really appreciate the mimetic potentiality of the Chhau mask one has to enter the world of this dance, for it is a world in which the human face is capable of absorbing and mirroring the innate urges and passions of all living beings. In Chhau the mask has a human face, but it can, when necessary, take on the salient characteristics of any living being, as visualised in the theme of a particular dance. For this reason in dances like *Mayura* (Peacock) and *Hansa* (Swan), though the masks have human features, the modelling is stylised to suggest the visage; at times even the emotional make-up of the creatures is represented.

The repertoire of the Chhau dance, broadly speaking, falls into three categories. Firstly, there are the simplest dances, like *Hare-Vishnu*, *Madana Gopala* and *Krishna-Balarama*, generally performed by children in which the



Banabiddha, the wounded deer

choreography has little, if anything, to do with the themes of these dances. The steps and movements, at best, touch upon the rudiments of the Chhau technique, and the dances are invariably performed without masks. To the second category belong dances such as *Arati* (Offering of Light), *Dheebar* (Fisherman), *Astradanda* (Sword-Play), and *Sabara* (Hunter). In these, the theme is literally followed through in the choreography: there is very little extraneous movement or mime to detract from the actual narrative. In the third category are what one may call the sophisticated and intriguing compositions of the Chhau repertory.

Here, in every dance, there are two specific aspects: the outward, and apparent kinaesthetic expression; and the inner, esoteric, allegorical, even philosophic, interpretation. *Mayura*, *Banaviddha*, *Nabik* and *Chandrabhaga* are perfect examples of this.

Mayura is the dance of the peacock, but it is so highly stylised that it bears very little resemblance to the natural traits and mannerisms associated with the bird. It can be called a choreographic fantasy, for, apart from etching a few movements characteristic of the peacock, the dancer exploits to the fullest the qualities of vainglory and self-adultation and uses these as a springboard to project his own personality. By employing, for example, a startling contraction and release of the lower torso, an almost primitive pelvic impulse, a very primeval element is brought into focus: *Mayura* might be a bird or man in his most exuberant, sensuous mood. *Banaviddha* tells the simple story of a deer shot through the heart by an arrow. The movements of the dance project the sprightliness of the animal, but a palpable undertone of pain permeates the whole composition. Allegorically, one can read into it the remorse of a being unwilling to give up life, or the tragedy of unrequited love, or even a bitter commentary on the hunt and a subtle plea for *ahimsa*.

Nabik has the simple theme of a man and woman setting out in a boat, getting caught in a storm, and surviving it. For one who can perceive deeper, the philosophical implications in this dance are many. The boat, for example, stands for security, and when they are caught in the storm, it is as if they are dragged into the very vortex of life, and this brings out woman's innate desire to yield and submit to man, and her dependence on man whose duty and privilege it is to protect her. *Chandrabhaga* is the story of a maiden pursued by the Sun God. It has the quality of an epic tragedy, and is considered the *piece de resistance* of the Chhau repertoire. Chandrabhaga is bathing in the ocean and is caught unawares by the Sun God; he makes odious advances to her which seem so repugnant that Chandrabhaga is left with no other alternative but to plunge into the ocean and commit suicide. The sacrifice of Chandrabhaga glorifies the virtue of chastity which cannot be violated even by the gods.

Though the Chhau is a dance that has been in existence for centuries, it owes its present form and repertory almost entirely to one man: Bijoy Pratap Singh Deo. A younger brother of Aditya Pratap Singh Deo, who, till his death in 1969, was the Maharaja of Seraikella, Bijoy can be ranked as one of the truly great choreographers in Indian classical dance. He was not a performing artiste, but practically all the compositions used in Chhau today are his creations. Next to Bijoy, the most substantial contribution to the Chhau art has been by Maharaja Aditya Pratap Singh Deo and his three sons, Suvendra, Brijendra and Suddhendra. As long as he was alive, the Maharaja was the arbiter of taste in all matters connected with the Chhau dance and many of the masks which are in existence today were designed and given finishing touches by him. Suvendra and Brijendra were virtuoso dancers and among the finest in the Chhau tradition. Both of them, unfortunately, died very young.

Bijoy, Suvendra, Brijendra and Maharaja Aditya are now names of the past, but they have left the legacy of their pooled talent and genius to Rajkumar



Nabik, the boatman and his wife caught in a storm.

Suddhendra. Not only is he a brilliant dancer but also a choreographer and teacher of considerable merit and the only one so far to have been given the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for Seraikella Chhau. The best of the past in the Chhau tradition is in Rajkumar Suddhendra's blood; the burden of the future, too, is on his shoulders. Will he live up to it?