



THREE REGIONS OF EASTERN INDIA SHOW EXPERTISE IN SEMI CLASSICAL CHHAU DANCE

¹Dr. Dhrubo Jyoti Sen, ^{2}Dr. Viral A. Prajapati, ²Harsh Sharma, ³Dipak G. Garachh¹School of Pharmacy, Techno India University, Sector-V, Salt Lake City, EM: 4/1, Kolkata-700091, West Bengal, India.²Shree Swaminarayan Sanskar Pharmacy College, Zundal, Near Zundal Circle, S. P. Ring Road, Between Chandkheda-Adalaj, Zundal, Gandhinagar- 382421, Gujarat, India.³Arihant School of Pharmacy, Opposite IFFCO, Near ONGC Plant, Bhoyan-Rathod Village, Gandhinagar, Gujarat- 382421, India.***Corresponding Author: Dr. Dhrubo Jyoti Sen**School of Pharmacy, Techno India University, Sector-V, Salt Lake City, EM: 4/1, Kolkata-700091, West Bengal, India. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17421441>**How to cite this Article:** *Dr. Dhrubo Jyoti Sen, *Dr. Viral A. Prajapati, Harsh Sharma, Dipak G. Garachh. (2025). Three Regions of Eastern India Show Expertise In Semi Classical Chhau Dance. World Journal of Pharmaceutical and Life Science, 11(10), 241–248.

This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license.

Article Received on 30/08/2025

Article Revised on 20/09/2025

Article Published on 01/10/2025

ABSTRACT Chhau is a semi-classical Indian dance form from eastern India that combines martial arts, acrobatics, and folk traditions, often depicting episodes from the Ramayana and Mahabharata. It has three distinct styles—Seraikela, Purulia, and Mayurbhanj—from the states of Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Odisha, respectively. Purulia and Seraikela styles are known for using elaborate masks, while Mayurbhanj is performed without them.

Characteristics of Chhau dance:

Styles: Each of the three main styles has unique characteristics:

Purulia Chhau: Performed in West Bengal, this style uses elaborate, colorful masks made from clay, paper, and cloth to represent characters.

Seraikela Chhau: Hailing from Jharkhand, this style also utilizes masks, but they are often more delicate and subtle than those in Purulia.

Mayurbhanj Chhau: From Odisha, this mask-less style is considered the most vigorous and its techniques are drawn from military practices.

Themes: Dancers enact stories from Hindu epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, as well as local folklore and abstract themes.

Movements: The dance form is a blend of martial arts, acrobatics, and athletics, with energetic and rhythmic movements.

Music: Performances are accompanied by traditional folk music played on instruments like the mohuri (a type of reed pipe), shehnai, and drums.

Origins: The word "Chhau" is believed to come from the Sanskrit word for "shadow" (Chhaya), or from the military camps (Chhauni) where the movements originated.

Recognition: Chhau dance was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010.

KEYWORDS: chhau, semi-classical dance, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, mask, Purulia, Seraikela, Mayurbhanj, Drums, Percussion, Dhol, Dhamsa, Nagada, Kharkai/Chad-chadi, Jhanj, Melodic and Wind Instruments, Mohuri, Shehnai, Turi-Bheri.

INTRODUCTION

Chau or Chhau is a semi-classical Indian dance with martial, tribal, and folk origins from Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and West Bengal. Chhau is a semi-classical Indian dance form from eastern India that blends martial arts, folk traditions, and tribal elements. It

is performed at night in open spaces by all-male troupes, often wearing masks and elaborate costumes to depict stories from epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata. The dance is known for its vibrant, energetic movements, including acrobatics and stylized movements inspired by birds and animals.

Origin: Eastern India, primarily in the states of **Jharkhand, Odisha, and West Bengal.**

Styles: There are three main styles, named after their regions

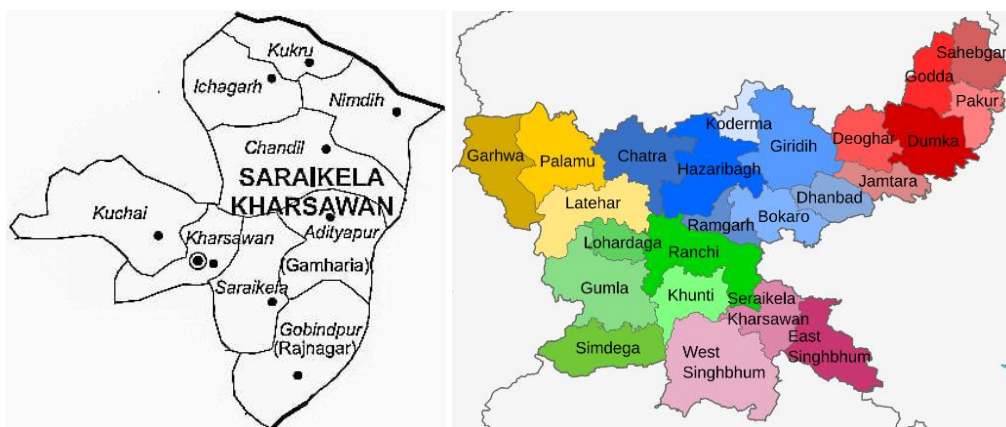


Figure-1: Saraikela of Jharkhand.

Seraikela Chhau: From Jharkhand; uses symbolic masks.

Purulia Chhau: From West Bengal; also uses masks.

Mayurbhanj Chhau: From Odisha; does not use masks.

Themes: Enacts episodes from the Mahabharata and Ramayana, local folklore, and abstract themes.

Performance: Traditionally an all-male performance in open spaces, often during religious festivals.

Movement: Features acrobatic movements, martial arts techniques, and stylized gaits of animals and birds.

The Chhau mask is a traditional cultural heritage of Purulia in the Indian state of West Bengal. The Chhau mask of Purulia is registered on the List of Geographical

Indications. As the basic difference of Purulia Chhau the mask is unique and traditional. It is the mask which differentiates the Purulia Chhau from its other two significant branches: the Seraikella Chhau of Jharkhand and the Mayurbhanj Chhau of Odisha. The Jharkhand counterpart does involve masks but they are rather simpler, small and evocative, without any of the pompous vibrancy of the Purulia variants. While the Mayurbhanj type is an unmasked form. It is the Purulia form only that uses large evocative masks along with elaborate costumes that intensify the energetic performance, despite the challenges to physicalization.

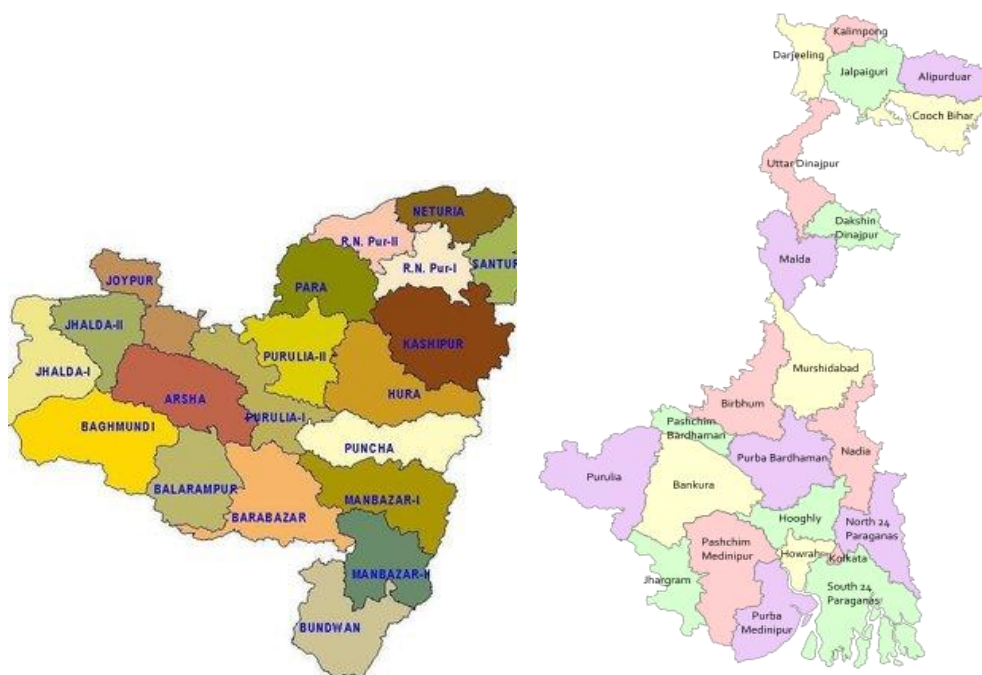


Figure-2: Purulia of West Bengal.

Chhau, also spelled Chhou, is a semi classical Indian dance with martial and folk traditions. It is found in three styles named after the location where they are performed,

i.e. the Purulia Chhau of West Bengal, the Seraikella Chhau of Jharkhand and the Mayurbhanj Chhau of Odisha. The dance ranges from celebrating martial arts,

acrobatics and athletics performed in festive themes of a folk dance, to a structured dance with religious themes found in Shaivism, Shaktism and Vaishnavism. The costumes vary between the styles, with Purulia and Serakeilla using masks to identify the character. The stories enacted by Chhau dancers include those from the Hindu epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the Puranas and other Indian literature. The dance is traditionally an all males troupe, regionally celebrated particularly during spring every year, and may be a syncretic dance form that emerged from a fusion of classical Hindu dances and the traditions of ancient regional tribes. The dance brings together people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds in a festive and religious spirit. Chhau dance is important for its cultural significance as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity recognized by UNESCO, its role in preserving regional traditions and mythology, and its function as a vibrant form of artistic and martial expression.

It is a unique blend of folk traditions, martial arts, and storytelling that is central to the identity and community life of its regions in Eastern India (West Bengal, Jharkhand, and Odisha). The dance is also important for its elaborate craftsmanship, especially the creation of colorful masks used in the performances. Chhau is an ancient dance form that originated from the rhythmic mock fights of the Oriya Paikas (warriors) in Odisha, Bihar, and West Bengal. Initially performed to appease the Sun God, it has evolved into a ritualistic dance, celebrated during various festivals. It is performed during festivals such as Chaitra Parva (spring festival) and the sun festival. Due to the association of this craft with the traditional dance, Chhau masks are an iconic symbol of craftsmanship and culture in West Bengal. The Purulia Chhau Mask was awarded the Geographical Indication (GI) tag in 2018. Women do not traditionally perform Chhau dance; it is performed exclusively by male artists in its traditional form.



Figure-3: Mayurbhanj of Odisha.

Chhau dance has been recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage, highlighting its cultural significance. Unlike many other classical Indian dance forms, Chhau does not use vocal music during performances. The music accompanying Chhau performances is primarily instrumental and consists of traditional Indian instruments such as dhol, dhamsa, and shehnai. The Chhau dance finds its roots in the tribal regions of Eastern India, primarily in the states of West

Bengal, Jharkhand, and Odisha. This martial dance form is a unique blend of folk traditions, mythology, and martial arts, often depicting stories from Indian epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana. Firstly, the intricate movements foster body balance and coordination, bolstering proprioception and reducing the risk of falls and injuries. Secondly, the rigorous practice routines enhance stamina and endurance, translating into improved energy levels and resilience in daily activities.



Figure-4: Chhau dance mask.

Chhau dance is not dedicated to a single god but is rooted in the worship of Hindu deities, particularly Lord Shiva and Shakti, and is associated with the Chaitra Parva festival, which celebrates them in their **Ardhanarishwara** form. Other deities, such as Lord Ganesha and Lord Kartikeya, are also invoked and featured in performances. The Chhau mask is a traditional cultural heritage of Purulia in the Indian state of West Bengal. The Chhau mask of Purulia is registered on the List of Geographical Indications. As the basic difference of Purulia Chhau the mask is unique and traditional. It is the mask which differentiates the Purulia Chhau from its other two significant branches: the Seraikella Chhau of Jharkhand and the Mayurbhanj Chhau of Odisha. The Jharkhand counterpart does involve masks but they are rather simpler, small and evocative, without any of the pompous vibrancy of the Purulia variants. While the Mayurbhanj type is an unmasked form. It is the Purulia form only that uses large evocative masks along with elaborate costumes that intensify the energetic performance, despite the challenges to physicalization. The mask allows the artists to morph into the character — therefore it is noted that when an artist wears a particular mask, he or she “gets into character immediately, transforming into mellow Kartik, fierce Ravana, or Durga’s ferocious lion”. Chhau artist Anil Mahato says, “Shiva danced the tandava: wearing his mask brings in that frisson for me.” One could perhaps imagine the centrality of the mask to Chhau dance with the Thalia or the Melpomene masks used in Greek Comedy and Tragedy theatres respectively, or perhaps the masks used in mystery plays during the middle ages.

Shiva and Shakti: The dance is a ritualistic dance connected to the Chaitra Parva festival, which honors Lord Shiva and Shakti, particularly in the Ardhanarishwara form.

Ganesha: Performances often begin with an invocation to Lord Ganesha, the Hindu god of success, to ensure a favorable start to the dance, according.

Kartikeya: Lord Kartikeya, the Hindu god of war, is also a prominent character sometimes impersonated by dancers.

Other Deities and Themes: Depending on the region and the story, dancers may impersonate other gods, demons, animals, birds, or even natural phenomena.

Chhau masks and costumes are made from a combination of natural materials, including clay, paper pulp, cotton fabric, jute, and paint. The masks are created by layering paper pulp and fabric strips over a clay or cane mold, which is then dried, painted, and decorated with materials like acrylic wool and zari. Costumes typically use a variety of fabrics for their vibrant, traditional designs. "Chau" can mean different things depending on the language and context, including the number four in Hindi, "goodbye" in Spanish and Italian, and "pearl" in Vietnamese. The word is also used as a surname, particularly of Chinese origin. Hindi: Four: "Chau" is an allomorph of the word for "four" and is used at the beginning of compound words. For example, chau-kona means "quadrangular," and chau-masa refers to a "four-month rainy season". Spanish, Italian, and other Romance languages: Goodbye: "Chau" is a very common way to say "goodbye" or "bye" in Spanish, particularly in Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay, and it comes from the Italian word "ciao". Vietnamese: Pearl: As a Vietnamese name, "Chau" means "pearl" and is associated with qualities like purity, prosperity, and wisdom. Other meanings: Surname: "Chau" is a Chinese surname. Chowder: In some contexts, the word "chau" might be a phonetic spelling of the English word "chowder," though this is less common.



Figure-5: Chhau performance and mask preparation.

Materials for Chhau masks

Base: A mold is initially created from clay, which is often layered over a base of cane or wood.

Reinforcement: After the initial clay mold is dried, it is covered with layers of paper pulp (papier-mâché) and

cotton fabric strips, often mixed with a diluted glue.

Decoration: Once the basic structure is dry, the mask is painted with vibrant colors and decorated with details like facial hair made from jute or acrylic wool. Zari, a gold or silver thread, is also used for embellishment.

Materials for costumes

Fabric: The vibrant costumes are made from various fabrics, with the specific type and color depending on the character being portrayed.

Other embellishments: These may include additional decorative elements to create the elaborate and traditional look of the Chhau dance costumes.

Chhau dance is accompanied by indigenous drums like

the **Dhol**, **Dhamsa**, and **Nagada**, along with reed instruments like the **Mohuri** and **Shehnai**. Other instruments include the **Kharkai or chad-chadi**, the **Turi-Bheri**, and **Jhanj** (cymbals). The powerful and rhythmic music creates an intense atmosphere for the dance, which often depicts mythological themes and martial arts.



Figure-6: Sequins of Chhau.

Sequins are used extensively to decorate the elaborate masks and headdresses of Chhau dancers, particularly in the Purulia style of Chhau. These sparkling embellishments, along with beads, foils, and feathers, enhance the theatrical presence of the mythical characters being portrayed.

Characters and symbolism: Sequins add a dazzling effect that helps bring the characters to life, whether they are deities, demons, or animals. For example, wire halos on masks, which signify celestial beings or powerful demons, are often adorned with colored beads and sequins.

Construction process: Sequins are part of the final, decorative stage of mask-making. The mask itself is

constructed from a clay mold and layers of papier-mâché, with adornments added after the mask is painted.

Artisanal communities: Artisans from the Sutradhar community, particularly in the village of Charida, are known for this intricate craft. They use traditional materials like paper, clay, and cloth, and source decorative elements like sequins and beads from local markets.

Vibrancy and aesthetic: The embellishments, including sequins, add to the vibrancy and dramatic effect of the masks, which are known for their spectacular appearance. The elaborate headgear, in particular, is often heavily decorated.



Figure-7: Chhau instruments.

Drums and Percussion

Dhol: A large, double-headed drum that provides the main rhythm.

Dhamsa: A deep, resonant kettle drum that adds a powerful rhythmic beat.

Nagada: A kettledrum used for dramatic intensity, especially during war scenes.

Kharkai/Chad-chadi: A drum or cymbals that provide rhythmic accents.

Jhanj: Cymbals that enhance the musical interplay.

Melodic and Wind Instruments

Mohuri: A reed pipe that provides a melodic structure and plays the main melody.

Shehnai: A shehnai or reed instrument that adds a divine, spiritual quality and melody to the performance.

Turi-Bheri: A traditional wind instrument that adds dynamism to the performance.

The three types of Chhau dance are Purulia Chhau (from West Bengal), Seraikella Chhau (from Jharkhand), and Mayurbhanj Chhau (from Odisha). These styles are distinguished by their regional origins and characteristics, with Purulia and Seraikella using masks, while Mayurbhanj does not.

Purulia Chhau: This style from West Bengal is known for its acrobatic and dynamic movements, including high jumps and flips. Dancers wear elaborate masks made of clay that represent various characters from mythology.

Seraikella Chhau: From Jharkhand, this style is characterized by its graceful, more feminine style of

dance with expressive hand gestures and deft footwork. The masks used have a neutral expression and become expressive through the dancer's body language.

Mayurbhanj Chhau: This is the oldest and most traditional style, originating from Odisha. It is known for its strong and masculine movements and does not use masks. The most prominent difference among the three subgenres is regarding the use of masks. While, the Seraikella and Purulia subgenres of Chhau use masks during the dance, the Mayurbhanj Chhau uses none.

Chhau and Kathakali are two distinct Indian dance forms with different origins, styles, and performance elements. Chhau is a semi-classical dance with martial roots from eastern India, while Kathakali is a highly stylized classical dance-drama from Kerala.

Some famous Chhau dancers include **Gopal Prasad Dubey; Padma Shri** [25 June 1957 – 14 November 2022], **Sadashiva Pradhan; Sangeet Natak Akademi Award-2015** [3rd February 1956], and **Guru Shashadhar Acharya; Padma Shri-2020** [May 1960] who are all known for their expertise in specific styles of this traditional Indian dance form. Other notable dancers are Kedar Nath Sahoo, a pioneer of the Seraikella style, and **Guru Shyama Charan Pati** [1940 – 29 October 2020], who played a significant role in introducing women to the dance. **Gambhir Singh Mura** (1930 – 9 November 2002) was an Indian tribal dancer known for his contributions to the tribal martial dance of Chhau.



Figure-8: Gopal Prasad Dubey, Sadashiva Pradhan, Guru Shashadhar Acharya, Guru Shyama Charan Pati and Gambhir Singh Mura [notable persons of chhau dance].

Gopal Prasad Dubey: A renowned exponent of the Seraikela style of Chhau, originating from Jharkhand. He was a Padma Shri awardee who trained many Chhau dancers.

Sadashiva Pradhan: Known for his mastery of the Mayurbhanj style of Chhau from Odisha. He is a Sangeet Natak Akademi Award recipient who has contributed to the dance's preservation and promotion.

Guru Shashadhar Acharya: A pivotal figure in the dance tradition, recognized for his dedication to teaching

and artistic innovation. He is a Padma Shri awardee.

Kedar Nath Sahoo: A leading exponent of the Seraikella tradition. He founded the Government Chhau Dance Centre in Jharkhand.

Guru Shyama Charan Pati: A Padma Shri awardee who was a key figure in bringing female dancers to the Chhau stage. He was an accomplished performer and teacher of the Seraikala lineage.

Table 1: Difference between Chhau & Kathakali.

Feature	Chhau	Kathakali
Origin	Originates from eastern India, with three main styles named after their regions: Seraikella (Jharkhand), Purulia (West Bengal), and Mayurbhanj (Odisha).	A classical dance form that evolved in the 17th century in the southwestern state of Kerala.
Roots	Derived from martial arts, folk, and tribal traditions. Its movements include mock combat techniques and stylized animal walks.	Rooted in temple and court art forms, with influences from ancient martial arts like Kalaripayattu and older dance-dramas such as Krishnanattam.
Classification	Classified as a semi-classical dance form.	Recognized as one of India's eight classical dance forms.
Masks	Dancers in the Seraikella and Purulia styles wear elaborate masks representing characters. The Mayurbhanj style does not use masks.	Performers use vivid, intricate face makeup (theppu) and a white, sculpted facial outline called chutti that gives a mask-like appearance. Only a few specific characters wear full masks.
Make-up and Costumes	Costumes and headgear vary by regional style but are often associated with battle and war. The makeup is less prominent than in Kathakali.	Features intensely stylized and colorful facial make-up, elaborate headgear, and bulky costumes. The make-up colors signify character traits: green for noble heroes, red streaks on a green base for anti-heroes, and black for evil.
Expression	Narrates stories primarily through full-body movements and robust martial techniques.	Relays stories through highly refined facial expressions (abhinaya), intricate hand gestures (mudras), and distinct eye movements.
Music	Accompanied by drums, including the dhol and dhumsa, and wind instruments like the shehnai or mohuri.	Features a percussion ensemble, including the chenda and maddalam. Two singers, a main (ponnani) and a sub (shinkidi), narrate the story.
Themes	Draws from Hindu epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana, as well as local folklore and nature themes, such as the peacock or serpent dance.	Primarily depicts stories from Hindu epics and Puranas, presenting a narrative of good versus evil.
Performers	Traditionally performed by male dancers, though all-women troupes have emerged in recent times.	Historically performed exclusively by male actors, though women are now also a part of performances.
Performance Setting	Often performed at night in open, community spaces called akhadas or asars, particularly during the spring festival of Chaitra Parva.	Originally performed in temples and courts over the course of a night, modern performances are adapted for shorter durations.

Chhau mask weight varies significantly based on material and size, with lighter decorative masks weighing as little as 30grams while performance masks can weigh around 350grams to 1.6kg or more for larger,

heavier wood/lacquer versions. The typical performance mask is made from clay, paper, and cloth, while elaborate wooden masks for certain dance styles are much heavier.



Figure-9: Chhau dance art.

Decorative wall masks: *Weight:* Around 30grams according to Hearts and Crafts. *Description:* Lightweight, smaller versions made from paper pulp and clay, suitable for display. **Purulia Chhau performance masks:** *Weight:* Typically around 350grams to 500grams. *Description:* Made from clay, paper, glue, and cloth, they are designed for performance and are relatively lightweight for dancers. **Large wooden masks:** *Weight:* Can range from 1kg to 1.6kg. *Description:* Heavier masks, some made of wood and lacquer, are often used for specific dance forms or decorative pieces. **Headdresses for performance masks:** *Weight:* Can weigh up to five kilograms, as they are elaborate and can include decorative elements like beads and sequins. *Description:* These are separate from the mask itself and add to the overall weight of the performer's costume. As the basic difference of Purulia Chhau the mask is unique and traditional. Clay, soft paper, diluted glue, cloth, mud, fine ash powder etc. It is the mask which differentiates the Purulia Chhau from its other two significant branches: the Seraikella Chhau of Jharkhand and the Mayurbhanj Chhau of Odisha. Mask making begins by using a rough stone mold, shaped like a face, over which a layer of clay is spread. Two sheets of paper, usually from a used school notebook, are pasted together with gum and smoothed over the clay form. Another slightly thicker layer of clay is then added and smoothed over again.

CONCLUSION

Chhau dance is traditionally performed at night in an open space. The performance is often held in a village courtyard, also called an akhada or asar, with the audience sitting around the performers. Torches

traditionally provided the illumination. The dance is particularly associated with festivals held in the springtime, such as Chaitra Parva, which marks the new harvest season. Other festivals like Durga Puja, Holi, and Diwali may also feature Chhau performances.

Chhau originated in the eastern states of India—specifically Odisha, Jharkhand, and West Bengal—and blends martial arts, folk traditions, and tribal rituals. The dance is traditionally performed by men, though all-women troupes have also been formed in recent years. Chau or Chhau is a semi-classical Indian dance with martial, tribal, and folk origins from Orissa, Jharkhand, and West Bengal. There are three subtypes of this dance form: Purulia Chhau-West Bengal; Saraikella Chhau-Jharkhand & Mayurbhanj Chhau-Odisha. Chhau dance movement is characterized by vigorous, acrobatic, and energetic movements, blending martial arts, folk dance, and athletic movements. The movement vocabulary includes mock combat, stylized gaits of animals, and movements modeled after daily chores. Its movements are performed with great concentration and a powerful release of energy. A dance costume is the clothing worn by a dancer when performing before an audience. A dance costume may be custom designed for use in a specific dance work, or it may have a traditional design, such as those used in some ceremonial and folk dances.

REFERENCES

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chhau_dance