

Chhau

The Dance of Masks and Myths



“Movement never lies. It is a barometer telling the state of the soul’s weather to all who can read it”

Martha Graham

Roots to Prosperity

‘Roots to Prosperity’ is a transformative journey led by Contact Base and supported by Axis Bank Foundation. The initiative aspires to empower traditional cultural practitioners as confident cultural entrepreneurs, while strengthening the ecosystem of heritage-based tourism. It works across the districts of Koraput and Mayurbhanj in Odisha, and Seraikela–Kharsawan in Jharkhand—regions endowed with natural beauty and deep reservoirs of indigenous artistry and living traditions.

Across these culturally rich landscapes, the project walks alongside more than 5,500 rural creative practitioners. It supports them to refine skills, access markets directly, build strong community-led enterprises, and shape vibrant cultural tourism experiences. At its core, the initiative recognises that culture is more than memory—it is identity, dignity, and possibility.

By strengthening grassroots creative economies, Roots to Prosperity fosters inclusive growth, sustainable livelihoods, and resilient communities. The initiative seeks to affirm culture as a pathway to empowerment – where inherited wisdom nurtures confidence, resilience, and a more secure future for communities.

This brochure presents Chhau Dance, the sustainable performing art tradition that highlights the exquisite skills and gesture of the artists of Seraikela Kharsawan of Jharkhand and Mayurbhanj of Odisha.



Chhau

The Dance of Masks and Myths

Chhau is a dynamic martial dance tradition of eastern India that brings myth and folklore to life through movements. Recognised by UNESCO as the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010, it thrives in three main genres: Seraikela Chhau of Jharkhand with small, refined masks; Purulia Chhau of West Bengal (also known as Manbhum Chhau in Jharkhand) known for large, dramatic masks and acrobatic energy; and Mayurbhanj Chhau of Odisha performed without masks, marked by painted bodies. Alongside them, the Kharsawan Chhau tradition of Jharkhand offers another maskless, expressive style shaped by regional exchange. Today, Chhau endures as a living heritage, sustained by the communities who continue to teach, perform, and celebrate it across generations.



Chhau: A Living Heritage of Eastern India

Emerging from the cultural heart of the Chotanagpur Plateau, Chhau reflects the rhythm, resilience, and spirit of eastern India's indigenous communities. Its martial movements, expressive footwork, and narrative depth are shaped by the region's rolling hills, forested terrain, and agrarian cycles, echoing local combat traditions and village rituals.

Today, the tradition flourishes across Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Odisha, nurtured by vibrant practitioner hubs. Seraikela Chhau thrives in Jharkhand, major hubs include Seraikela Town, Gamharia, Kita, Rangpur, Bhandarisai, and Kotarichara. Manbhum Chhau is rooted in Jamdih, Kushputul, Raghunathpur, Sima, Bhangat, Choga, in Jharkhand. Kharsawan Chhau continues its legacy in Maranghatu, Beheridi in Jharkhand. Mayurbhanj Chhau is sustained by communities in Rangamatia, Uperbera, Talapati in Odisha. Together, these hubs keep alive the diverse, dynamic world of Chhau.



Seraikela Chhau

Seraikela Chhau, nurtured under the patronage of Maharaja Aditya Pratap Singh Deo, Kumar Bijoy Pratap Singh Deo, and Rajkumar Suddhendra Narayan Singh Deo, follows the guiding principles of Natyashastra and blends martial precision with semi-classical grace. Performed with small, expressive masks depicting Navrasas, it portrays divine and mythic characters, sustained today by about 30 active troupes in Seraikela Kharsawan of Jharkhand.



Seraikela Chhau rests on refined technicalities: Parikhanda (ritual warm-up), Uphlei (springing footwork), Up-Uphlei (sharper elevated jumps), Topka (torso-initiated pure-dance), Chali (stylised walking), Gati (animal and nature gaits), and Bhramari (controlled turns). Classical Bhangis and movement clusters shape each Pala, while masked dancers convey emotion through Shirobheda (codified head movements) and Gribabheda (expressive neck movements). Its Palas draw on nature, poetry, and mythology—Surjo Sagarika, Ratri, Meghdoot, Krishna Leela, and Puranic stories—creating performances that are subtle, lyrical, and deeply evocative.



Mayurbhanj Chhau

Mayurbhanj Chhau, developed under the royal patronage of Mayurbhanj rulers, is a maskless form rooted in the martial art of Pharikhanda (combat techniques of foot soldiers). With painted faces and agile, acrobatic movements, dancers narrate stories from mythology, nature, and daily life. Today, it remains a vibrant expression of Odisha's living heritage.



Mayurbhanj Chhau is rooted in martial discipline, beginning with Rookmar Nacha (mock combat with sword and shield). Its vocabulary draws from Parikhanda techniques and three expressive modes—Hatiar Dhara (heroic/combat), Kalibhanga (gentle/lyrical), and Kalikata (a balanced blend). The form features topkas (torso-led pure-dance moves), uphleis (springing jumps inspired by nature and daily life), and bhangis (clusters of topkas and uhleis expressing narrative moods). Strong acrobatics coexist with graceful pauses like tribhanga (three-body-bend posture). Its Palas span mythology, cosmology, and social life—Akodonto, Dashavatar, Nabagraha, Chandrakalank, and Muliya—blending martial vigour with divine storytelling and community realities. Powerful rhythmic accompaniment and explosive yet controlled phrasing define the signature energy of the Mayurbhanj style.



Kharsawan Chhau

Closely resembling the painted-body aesthetic of Mayurbhanj, Kharsawan Chhau is rooted in strong tribal traditions. Performed without masks, it uses expressive faces, vivid body paint, and movements drawn from hunting, farming, and ritual life. Raw, earthy, and community-centred, it is sustained by 25–30 troupes who keep this powerful Jharkhand heritage alive.



Kharsawan Chhau, shaped by vibrant tribal aesthetics, relies on spontaneous grammar, energetic footwork, and painted bodies to mirror the rhythms of community life. Its Palas portray hunting, cultivation, and ritual moments, blending everyday vitality with mythological themes drawn from Puranic lore. Grounded, raw, and deeply communal, these narratives embody the organic spirit and pulse of nature that define this distinctive tribal tradition.



Manbhum Chhau

Manbhum Chhau, the Jharkhand form of Purulia Chhau, features large masks, vibrant costumes, and high-energy acrobatics that depict episodes from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and local legends. With expressions carried through dynamic movement, it remains a bold living heritage sustained by nearly 100 active troupes across the region.



Manbhum Chhau is marked by vigorous chalis (codified step sequences), soaring uphlei (springing jumps), and dramatic topkas (torso-initiated pure-dance) and ulfas (somersaults), forming a dynamic vocabulary rooted in martial discipline and folk vitality. Elaborate costumes and stylised gestures animate gods, demons, animals, and everyday figures across 48 chalis. Its Palas draw from epics and mythology—Mahishasur Mardini, Abhimanyu Badh, Ghatotkach Badh, Kirat Arjun, Nrisingha Badh—uniting devotion, drama, and heroic force. Today, Manbhum Chhau also portrays social themes, evolving while preserving its narrative core.





Manbhum Chhau Mask

The masks of Manbhum Chhau, crafted in the mask making village of Charida in Purulia of West Bengal, are the most defining feature of this vibrant tradition. Made from clay and paper pulp, these large, elaborate masks depict a wide range of characters—gods, demons, animals, and mythological heroes. Richly painted and adorned with tinsel, brocade, and ornate headgear, they amplify the dramatic intensity and physical dynamism of the dance. Each mask transforms the performer into a larger-than-life figure, enhancing the theatrical power of Manbhum Chhau's epic storytelling. Today, Charida's hereditary mask-makers continue to uphold this celebrated craft, blending artistry, devotion, and community heritage.





Seraikela Chhau Mask

The masks of Seraikela Chhau, made in Seraikela Kharsawan of Jharkhand, embody subtlety and refinement. Crafted from clay and paper pulp, these minimalist masks portray gods, demons, and animals with elegant restraint, often adorned with delicate headgear. Their design allows for nuanced emotional expression—the slight tilt of the eyes or curve of the lips conveys the Navarasas or nine emotions, from joy and love to anger and sorrow. Reflecting the dance's stylized grace and disciplined rhythm, these masks serve not just as costume elements but as instruments of expression, revealing depth through quiet simplicity.





Painted Identities: The Aesthetics of Mayurbhanj and Kharsawan Chhau

Mayurbhanj and Kharsawan Chhau traditions are defined by powerful maskless styles, where intricate body and facial paintings replace masks to shape character and emotion. Here, the painted body itself becomes the costume, transforming the dancer into the living image of the narrative.



Music and Rhythm in Chhau

Chhau's musical foundation is built on powerful percussion—dhol, dhamsa, tasha, and nagara—paired with the sharp melodic lead of the shehnai or mohuri. In Seraikela Chhau, the addition of the flute enriches the melodic layer, creating a refined balance between rhythm and tune essential to its lyrical style.



Costumes & Accessories: Crafting the Visual Soul of Chhau





Festival

Annual Chhau festivals bring communities together to celebrate heritage through vibrant performances, traditional music, and inter-village gatherings. These festivals not only showcase the stylistic richness of Seraikela, Mayurbhanj, Manbhum, and Kharsawan forms, but also sustain living traditions by training young dancers, revitalising craft practices, and strengthening the cultural identity of the region.



Chhau Festival

छऊ महोत्सव

Three Rhythms, One Soul

Seraikella | Kharasowan | Mayurbhanj

सरैयाकेला | खरसावा |

28-30 March

Nimdh, Odisha

Seraikella




Join the Movement

We invite researchers, dancers, cultural enthusiasts, and creative practitioners to step into the world of Chhau — not just as observers, but as collaborators. Come learn from master artists, immerse yourself in their living traditions, and co-create new expressions through residencies, workshops, and artistic exchanges. Together, let us celebrate knowledge, share skills, and build bridges between traditional cultural heritage and contemporary imagination — ensuring that this vibrant art form continues to inspire, innovate, and thrive.



Roots to Prosperity

Contact Base has partnered with Axis Bank Foundation on the “Roots to Prosperity” project to enhance culture-based livelihoods of artists in Jharkhand & Odisha.

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