

CHHAU DANCE: A SOCIO-CULTURAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC HERITAGE OF EASTERN INDIA

SAIKAT KUMAR BASU¹ AND SUPARNA SANYAL MUKHERJEE^{2*}

UNESCO declared that, Chhau dance is a tradition from eastern India that enacts episodes from epics including the Mahabharata and Ramayana, local folklore and abstract themes. Its three distinct styles hail from the regions of Seraikella, Purulia and Mayurbhanj, the first two using masks. Chhau has its direct effect in the Indian Classical Dance form. It is codified that the Chhau dance is a unique Indian social identification which can be considered as a semi classical dance form of India. The dance form has a rich history and cultural significance. Chau dance is characterized by its vibrant costumes, elaborate masks, and energetic movements. Chhau is a dance style originating from the regions of Eastern Region of Indian territory. It may have been derived from the Sanskrit word Châya (meaning 'shadow, image' or 'mask'). This dance form is predominantly seen in the states of Odisha, West Bengal and Jharkhand. The dance type has extended its wings from Odisha only. From the mythological point of view it collaborates with the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata. The study envisaged to explore traditional arts and culture; to visualize its economic aspects; and to restore it as a cultural heritage of India. The socio-cultural and socio-economical aspects should have been more and more counteracted, so that people may not suffer from economic loss. The present sequel was conducted in the Chorida Village of Purulia District of West Bengal: A multi ethnic village where Chhau dance is the main purpose of their economic benefit. The cost benefit of the dance practice and programs encourage their per capita income generations, strengthen socio-economic backbone along with socio-cultural enhancement to maintain cultural sustainability with the heritage fitness of the Eastern Indian society.

Introduction

The Indian cultural diversity is a high dimension phenomenon at present era. Unity in diversity also catches the eye of the people at large. Chhau has its direct effect in the Indian Classical Dance form. It is codified that the Chhau dance is a unique Indian social identification which can be considered as semi classical dance form of India. The dance form has a rich history and cultural significance. Chhau dance (Fig. 1) is

characterized by its vibrant costumes, elaborate masks, and energetic movements. The dancers wear colourful masks representing various characters, such as gods, goddesses, demons, animals, and mythological figures¹. The dance is basically based on masks. These masks are often made from clay, wood, or papier-mâché, and they are intricately designed and painted. The socio-cultural and socio-economic aspects of rural communities of various parts of India are amalgamated with this dance forms in relation to their ethno-linguistic cultural nomenclature. Chhau dance, also spelled as Chau or Chhau, is a semi classical Indian dance with martial, tribal and folk traditions; with its origins in eastern India¹⁻².

¹ PFS Lethbridge Alberta Canada.

² Department of Education, Seacom Skills University, Bolpur, Birbhum, West Bengal, India.

* Corresponding author: suparnasanyalmukherjee@gmail.com



Fig. 1: The Traditional Chhau Dance.

There are several dancers, artists, dramatists, choreographers have shown and emphasized on Chhau culture and traditions in accordance with economical outlooks, of which few are mentionable here. Prof. Amita Dutta 2023 mentioned in her write up that, Chhau is a very interesting and technically superior form of folk dance. Having its roots in the exercises practised in the indigenous marital traditions of the Singbhum-Manbhum area which falls in the regions of West Bengal, Odisha and Jharkhand, the area adjoining each other³. It's a fast developing its techniques and repertoire through research and adaptations from other classical traditions of India. Williams 2004, pp. 83–84, described that Chhau dance is a semi classical Indian dance with martial, tribal and folk origins. A Rs. 25 stamp was declared by the Government of India on Chhau dance was a great ideological orientation of the Chhau (Fig. 2). UNESCO also declared Chhau dance for recognition of the traditional dance of the West Bengal, Bihar and Odisha (Fig. 3).



Fig. 2: Stamp of Chhau declared by Government of India



Fig. 3: UNESCO declared Stamp of Chhau

The other major classical Indian dances are: Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kuchipudi, Kathakali, Odissi, Manipuri, Satriya, Yaksagana and Bhagavata Mela⁴⁻⁵. Mohan Khokar 1984 narrated in his book Traditions of Indian Classical Dance, that Chhau is a semi classical and traditional outlooks of Indian history and culture. UNESCO declared that, Chhau dance is a tradition from eastern India that enacts episodes from epics including the Mahabharata and Ramayana, local folklore and abstract themes. Its three distinct styles hail from the regions of Seraikella, Jharkhand, Purulia, West Bengal (Fig. 4) and Mayurbhanj, Odisha (Fig. 5), the first two using masks^{1,6}.



Fig. 4: Chhau Dance of Purulia, West Bengal

The main objectives of the present study pointed out that the socio-cultural connotations of the Chhau dance with local mass. The study envisaged to explore traditional arts and culture.

To visualize its economic aspects to restore cultural heritage of India. Socio-cultural and socio-economical aspects should have been more and more counteract, so that people may not suffer from economic loss.

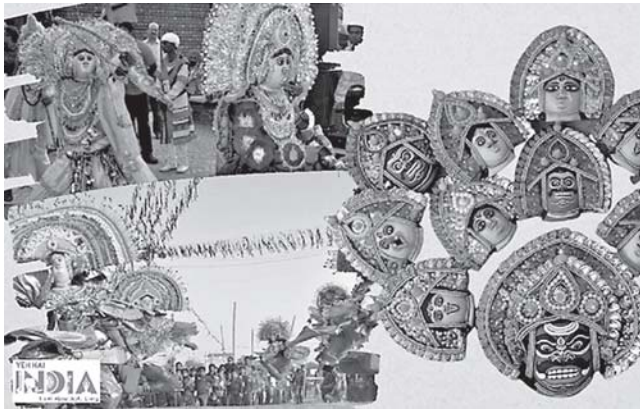


Fig. 5: Chhau Dance of Seraikella Bihar Chhau Dance of Mayurbhanj, Odisha

The present sequel was conducted in the Chorida Village of Purulia District of West Bengal; a multi ethnic village where Chhau dance is the main purpose of their economic benefits. The village people maintained their clustering dance performances with in a group formations. The traditional practice of dance create their socio-cultural and socio-economic transformation at modern era in a multi-cultural and multi-dimensional outlook. The cost benefit of the dance practice and programs encourage their per capita income generations, strengthen socio-economic backbone along with socio-cultural enhancement to maintain cultural sustainability with the heritage fitness of the Eastern Indian society⁴⁻⁸.

Etymology of Chhau

Chhau is a dance style originating from the regions of Eastern Region of Indian territory. It may have been derived from Sanskrit word the *Châya* (means shadow, image or mask). Another important link it to the Sanskrit root *Chadma* (disguise). Mr. Sitakant Mahapatra who suggested that the Chhau term may it is derived from *Chhauri* (military camp, armor, stealth) in Odia language¹⁻⁴. There are several persons put up their views about Chhau dance and its originations⁵. In all said and done it is quite evident that Chhau has its own nature and style. Mostly it emphasized on story telling part of the socio-cultural aspects of the martial, tribal folk culture and traditions⁶.

Background History of Chhau

The *Chhau* Dance is a popular form of tribal dance in India that incorporates elements of martial arts into its movements. This dance form is predominantly seen in the states of Odisha, West Bengal and Jharkhand. The dance type has been extended its wings from Odisha only. Mythological point of view it collaborates with the epics

of Ramayana and Mahabharata. In epic periods people always depends on folk culture. The facts and figures all were local peoples traditional belief oriented. At the same time There are three subtypes of this dance form; namely *Purulia Chhau*, *Mayurbhanj Chhau* and *Seraikella Chhau*. Differences between the three are dependent on their regions of origin⁴⁻⁶.

The *Chhau* Dance originates in the Purulia district in West Bengal and draws inspiration from martial arts and combative training. This form of dance is a means to portray stories to the audience, which is why elaborate masks and headgear associated with battle and war are worn during the performance⁶⁻⁸. The story itself revolves around the two great epics of Indian Mythology – Ramayana and Mahabharata. Over a century old, this dance form was widely endorsed by patrons belonging to the royal families, rich landlords and British governors in the region. These performances are predominantly put up during the *Gajan* Festival, which takes place to honour Lord Shiva¹⁻⁴.

Chhau Dance of Purulia

The traditions of Indian dance and dance dramas are among the most perplexingly complex and varied theatrical cultures of the world. The geographical vastness, different ecological conditions, multiplicity of races and their languages, the complex religious beliefs and ritual practices and equally intricate social structure have all contributed in creating the most colourful panorama of dance and dance drama traditions^{7,9}. Among the neo classical dance and dance dramas like Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kuchipudi, Odissi, Kathakali and a few more, Chau, the rare mask dances of eastern India are quite unique.

It is difficult to ascertain the antiquity of these three major forms of Chau but surely this region, as noted by several ancient scriptures, was one of the most arduous areas to penetrate by an outsider^{2,5}. The thick forests and the hilly region inhabited by the “hostile tribals” made it impossible for anyone to trespass. The near paucity of written record or incomplete historical account compels us to accept some ‘reconstructed’ notes that mention about the local and a few Hindu chieftains who gradually established their sovereignty within the small pockets of this region after 12-14 century A.D. and slowly influenced the life and customs of the native tribal. Today layers of these influences accumulated over centuries are discernible in the cultural activities of these tribal. Today layers of these influences accumulated over centuries are discernible in the cultural activities of these tribal. The tribal belt where

the tribals and other common people perform Chau dances is distributed into three adjoining states, Bengal, Bihar and Odisha, after the dissolution of the princely states in 1950⁶⁻⁸.

In Purulia, the singer drummer often rushes to the new characters “by shouting “*cho... cho...cho*” with excitement, before they enter into the arena. By doing this he infuses the same enthusiasm in the dancer. During the course of the performance also such excitement and outburst of joy are expressed by the singers and other members of orchestra. Similarly this author heard the same utterances by the hunters who assemble at a particular hill top during the annual hunting expeditions on the full moon day in the month of May. While chasing the game exclaim they exclaim “*cho... cho...cho*” (a broader pronunciation of Chhau) in order to frighten the animal or invoke the spirit of animal for easier gain of the game. Most likely it is this word associated with the natives’ earliest hunting occupation that is now associated with their dances to express joy and excitement¹⁻⁶.

The style and variety of the costume of the dancers largely depends on the characters being portrayed by them. Usually, there are three types of characters- Gods and Goddesses, Demons and Monsters. When depicting Gods and Goddesses, the colour red is a prominent aspect of the clothing, as is elaborate costume jewellery around the neck and the headgear. The costume for Gods and Goddesses can also include a few extra sets of arms along with trademark weapons that a particular God or Goddess was known for wielding. For instance, *Kali Ma* would be accompanied by a string of decapitated human heads⁵.

Demons, while also elaborately dressed, are most likely to have different coloured faces, for example, a blue face. Apart from this, the costume itself does not vary that much. For monsters and animals, suits made to depict an animal or monster along with appropriate masks are worn. For instance, while depicting a lion, a dancer will don a lion suit along with a lion mask. This may or may not be accompanied by a weapon such as a sword. Purulia *Chhau* costumes have been influenced to the extent of using more interesting clothes or fabrics to create the ensemble as well as using masks that are extremely creative. Over the years, it has become more and more acceptable to wear printed or embroidered costumes while performing this dance form instead of just bright, bold colours²⁻⁵.

Silk can be maintained by wrapping the costume in a muslin cloth or a soft cloth of any other type. It should

not be washed too often (it should ideally be dry-cleaned and not washed, however, if dry cleaning is not possible, the washing itself should be as limited as possible). It should also not be left in the sun to dry or the colours will begin to fade. The most interesting parts of the Purulia Chhau are that Purulia Chhau Dance is listed on UNESCO’s world heritage list of dances²⁻⁶.

- Apart from being influenced by military movements, this form of dance is also influenced by a combination of regional dances like *Nata*, *Nachni*, *Mahi* and *Juwaid*.
- As their faces are covered by masks, dancers must emote through body language.
- When foreign anthropologists first discovered this dance form, many dancers formed their own parties in order to gain a sponsored trip abroad.
- The costumes have been made jazzier over the years; however, their styles remain the same.

Seraikella Chhau Dance

Masks in Chhau are an integral part of Seraikella, Jharkhand. The rituals of the dance are often known for the celebrations during Chaitra Parva and are traditionally performed by male artists from families of indigenous communities. These artists are trained in martial arts and combatant arts under. These include (mock combat techniques. movements modelled around the daily chores of traditional indigenous women), and (stylized gaits of birds and animals). These marital customs and elements form an integral part of Chhau. The knowledge of this dance, mask making, costumes, and make-up is known to have been transmitted orally and is usually performed in an open space called *asar*³⁻⁴.

Paika, Nachni and Natua are the earliest known folk and martial art dances are known to have played an important identity to give Chhau its present-day form. The dancers usually perform a repertoire that explores a variety of subjects including legends and heroes, war sequences, folklore, and episodes from Ramayana and Mahabharata that include abstract themes^{1,3}. Historically, the major difference among the three subgenres is regarding the use of masks in the performances. While the Seraikella and Purulia subgenres of Chhau include the mandatory use of masks, Mayubhanj tradition does not. In Mayurbhanj Chhau, the performance usually does not include masks. The vibrant music of Chhau is characterized by the rhythm of indigenous drums like dhol, kharka and dhumsa along with the melodies of flute.

Mayurbhanj Chhau Dance

Mayurbhanj, located in the northern part of Odisha is famous for its Chhau dance (Fig. 6). The warriors in this dance dress in their traditional costumes and follow strict techniques of Chhau while performing the dance. It is in the Odia speaking regions where Chhau was prevalent in the past and is now being practised in the present. These are Mayurbhanj, Saraikela, Puruliya^{1,3}. In the past, these three regions were under one administration. In the early stage of Chhau dance, masks were used in all the three forms of the dance - Mayurbhanj, Seraikela, and Purulia. The masks were discarded by the Mayurbhanj Chhau later. In the beginning, this dance form was confined to swordplay, with a sword in one hand and the shield in the other. Most of the accompanying music was composed only to exhibit the physical powers, techniques of sword playing and acrobatic movements of the dancers^{2,4}. In Mayurbhanj Chhau, in order to make the body fit and flexible to learn all the techniques, the trainees have to practise their expressions by doing different types of exercises that stress on their body movements.

Dress, costumes, and makeup play an important role in all dance performances. Chhau is a dance drama, the characters portrayed in the dance are of Gods and Goddesses and sometimes animals. The dresses and costumes used in the dance depend on the theme and the characters portrayed. Dress items include dhoti gamcha, turban, and kamarband. Some of the ornaments are ghungroo and bajubandh. Swords, shields, lathi (stick), bow and arrow are some of the important props. The music (which is a combination of classical and folk music of Odisha) plays a prominent role. Dhol, Shehnai, Dhumsa, and Chad-chadi are some of the important instruments of this dance form^{1,3,5}.

Socio-cultural and Socio-economic Aspects of the Chhau Dance

It has been observed from the present study that, the three types of Chhau dance have been earmarked for the people especially the Charida village caste peasants. The people those communities also participated and counteract known as Mundas, Mahatos, Kalindis, Pattnaiks, Samals, Darogas, Mohantys, Acharyas, Bhols, Kars, Dubeys, and Sahoos. Musicians are from the communities known as



Fig. 6: Chhau Dance of Mayurbhanj, Odisha

Mukhis, Kalindis, Ghadheis, Dhada. They are also involved in the making of the instruments. Masks form an integral part of Chhau Dance in Purulia and Seraikella (Fig. 7). Not with standing, at present juncture it has been witnessed at Odisha in an international conference on stage show the performing artists were Tribal mass. Though there is no barrier for the Chhau tradition but tribal culture was not been incorporated since long but at present era tribes are incorporating the Chhau culture in their tradition to maintain their livelihood sustenance of their socio-economic and socio-cultural upliftment.

Chhau dance holds both cultural and economic significance across Eastern India, playing a vital role in the identity, economy, and social fabric of the communities where it is practiced. Chhau dance holds significant socio-cultural and socio-economic importance in Eastern India as discussed below:

Socio-cultural Significance:

Cultural heritage: Chhau dance is deeply rooted in the cultural traditions of eastern India, particularly in states



Fig. 7: Seraikella Chhau Dance Style

like Odisha, Jharkhand, and West Bengal. It reflects the rich heritage and artistic expressions of these regions.

Community cohesion: It serves as a platform for communities to come together and celebrate shared cultural practices, fostering a sense of unity and belonging among participants and spectators alike.

Preservation of traditions: Chhau dance plays a crucial role in preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge from one generation to another, helping to safeguard traditional art forms from being lost over time.

Artistic expression: Through intricate movements, vibrant costumes, and musical accompaniments, Chhau dance serves as a medium for artistic expression, allowing performers to convey stories, emotions, and themes to audiences.

Socio-economic Significance:

Tourism and cultural economy: Chhau dance often attracts tourists and visitors, contributing to the local economy through cultural tourism. It can generate income for performers, artisans, and others involved in its production and promotion.

Employment opportunities: The practice and promotion of Chhau dance create employment opportunities for dancers, musicians, costume designers, makeup artists, and other professionals in the cultural sector.

Cultural diplomacy: Chhau dance, when showcased at national and international events, serves as a form of cultural diplomacy, promoting cross-cultural understanding and exchange while also enhancing the region's global visibility and reputation.

Community development: Investments in Chhau dance infrastructure, such as training centres, performance venues, and cultural festivals, can contribute to community development by fostering cultural pride, enhancing social cohesion, and attracting investments in related industries.

The Village Charida

Charida (also referred to as Chorida, Chorda) is a village in the Bugmundi Community Development Block which is falling in the Jhalda Subdivision of the Purulia District in the state of West Bengal, India. Chorida is a multi-ethnic village located at foot hills of the Ajodhya Hills^{1,2}. Purulia district forms the lowest step of the Chotto Nagpur Plateau. The general scenario is undulating land with scattered hills. Jhalda Sub-division is located in the western part of the Purulia district, bordering with

Jharkhand. The river Subarnarekha flows along a short stretch of its western border. It is an overwhelmingly rural subdivision with 91.02% of the population living in the rural areas and 8.98% living in the urban areas. The map alongside shows some of the Ajodhya Hills always attracted tourists. The area is known as the home to Purulia Chhau Dance with spectacular masks made at Charida².

Socio-demographic Outlook

The 2011 Census report of India depicted that Chorda had a total population of 2,568, of which 1,353 (53%) were males and 1,215 (47%) were females. There were 385 persons in the age range of 0–6 years. The total number of literate persons in Chorda was 1,416 (64.86% of the population over 6 years).

Socio-cultural Point of View

Charida is famous for the Chhau Mask (Fig. 8) which is used in the Purulia Chhau Dance. Around 150 families are involved in mask-making. It involves five elaborate processes and depending on the intricacies involved it takes two to seven days to complete a mask. “The Chhau craft itself dates back 150 years, to the reign of King Madan Mohan Singh Deo of Baghmundi”. A Chhau mask festival is organised at Charida in January–February. Some of the craftsmen have travelled to far off places such as Japan and France “to showcase their work and popularise Chhau.”



Fig. 8: The classical Chhau mask used in traditional dancing.

The cultural aspects of Chhau always attracted people at large. “The Kirat-Kiratinavtar of Shiva and Durga is the inspiration” behind the Chhau mask (Fig. 9). Apart



Fig. 9: Manufacturing of Mask at Charida village, West Bengal, Purulia

from their traditional use in the Purulia Chhau dance, the masks have become a drawing room show piece.



Fig. 10: The Chhau dance team performing in the Purulia district of West Bengal

Traditionally, only people of lower castes were involved in mask making but the growing demand of the item is drawing in people from all castes into this profession⁴⁻⁶. Gambhir Singh Maura, Sanatan Mahato (Fig. 10) Bakul Bairagi, an outstanding Chhau dancer. Padma Shri awardee Mr. Gambhir Singh Maura belonged to the nearby village of Pitikiri Bamni. Now, his statue adorns Charida.

It is observed, the observed heads of the Charida people pointed out Medium Family Size is higher than the Small and Large.

Table 1: Population Distribution of Charida Village People

SN	NOTT	TP	Children 11-14 Yrs A				Adult 15-50 Yrs Age				Aged Above 60 Yrs A			
			M	T%	F	T%	M	T%	F	T%	M	%	F	T%
01	Charida people	156	29	18.59	15	09.62	37	23.78	29	18.59	19	12.18	27	17.35

- The Total Male 85 and Female 71
- The people having 29 (18.59%) Male children and 15 (09.62%) Female. The adult Male counts 37(23.78%), Female depicts 29 (18.59%). The aged scores 19 (12.18%) Male and 27 (17.35%) Female out of 156 total Charida populations from 28 households.

Table 2: Family Size of the Charida People

SI No	Name of the Selected Community	Total No of Household		Small Family Size (Members up to 4 Persons)		Medium Family Size (Members up to 5-10 Persons)		Large Family Size (Members more than 10 Persons)	
		Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
01	The Charida Village People	28	73.68%	05	17.85%	16	57.14%	07	25%

- The above table depicts that the people of Charida points out 05 (17.85%) Small Family Size (SFS), 16 i.e. 57.14% Medium Family Size (MFS) and 07 means 25% Large Family Size (LFS).

Table 3: Economic Structure of the Charida People

S1 no	Population Category	Selling of Masks	Dance Performance	Program invitation	Other	Total	%
01	Male	20	20	10	5	55	64.70%
02	Female	10	07	07	6	30	35.29%
03	Total	30	27	17	11	85	99.99%

Table 4: Per-capita Income Generation of Charida People

S1 no	Per-capita Income	Income per month by Selling of Masks	Income per month through Dance Performance	Income per month by Program invitation	Income per month through Other professions	Total %
01	Male	4000	15000	10000	5000	34000 55.73%
02	Female	7000	7000	7000	6000	27000 44.26%
03	Total	11000	22000	17000	11000	61000

The economic structure of Charida people has been categorized in the above table no 3; while total working male counts 55 and female points out 30 out of 85 total working people. Hence, 64.70% male people and 35.29% female people are working according to their day to day livelihood sustenance. Thereby Chhau dance and in relation to all types of Chhau, the Charida village people are more concerned than the other works. Economy and economic structure is totally depending upon Chhau dance.

The table 4 identifies per capita income status of the Charida people. The male per person earn Rs. 4000 per month and female earn Rs. 7000. Through dance performance, a male performer earns Rs. 15000, while a female performer earns Rs. 7000. Income per person per month depicted Rs 5000 in case of male and Rs 6000 for a female. Thereby a male is earning 55.73% per month and a female is earning 44.26% per month. It is quite evident that per capita income generation through Chhau dance is very popular and scientific to maintain socio-economic status and livelihood sustenance.

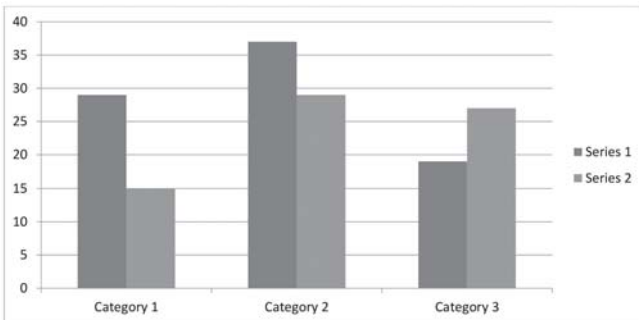


Fig. 11: Column Diagram of Population Structure

The above diagram (Fig. 11) shows the exact valuation of the people strength of the Charida village. Category 1 depicts children male female ration, category 2 identifies adult male, female value at the same category 3 identifies aged male, female values. Male are showing high percentage value in adult stage and aged female percentage is codifying high value in the column diagram.

The diagram (Fig. 12) of family size of Charida village points out with four qtrs. 1stqtr denotes 23% of the scale point, 2ndqtr is showing 14% scale value, 3rdqtr codifies 44% scale value and 4thqtr depicts 16% scale points of the pie out looks. Medium family size identifies high ratio than the small and large family size.

But the present situation proves that Charida people are inclined to the small family size orientation instead of large and medium family structure. Hence, it amply proves that Chhau dance and Chhau socio-cultural aspects enhance small family structure to maintain their daily livelihood sustenance.

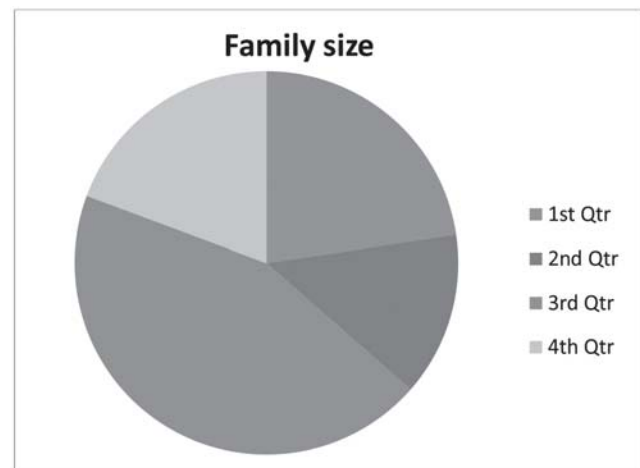


Fig. 12: Pie Diagram of Charida Village Family Size

The above segmented pyramid (Fig. 13) showing the economic and socio-economic relationship of the Chhau dance and its economic appliances. If the centre point identifies Dance performance the top pint notifies selling of masks, while the side points notify program invitation and other engagement than Chhau dance. Hence, it has been clearly proved that Chhau Dance of Charida village people is economic and socio-economic backbone of the people at large.



Fig. 13: Segmented Pyramid with Economic Relationship

The pie diagram (Fig. 14) is showing per-capita income growth of the Charida people. 1stqtr of the pie is encountering 18% scale point. 2ndqtr is pointing out 36% income status, 3rdqtr enhancing 28% income and 4thqtr exhibits 18% income generating structure. The 2ndqtr is showing high value for income pattern which is dance performance of the Charida people. Invitation of the dance program is showing 28% income status according to pie diagram. While selling of masks and engagement in other economic engagements are maintaining equilibrium. Hence, it has been proved that Chhau dance of Charida people are a socio-economic upliftment and pattern of economic pursuit to maintain the daily livelihood sustenance.

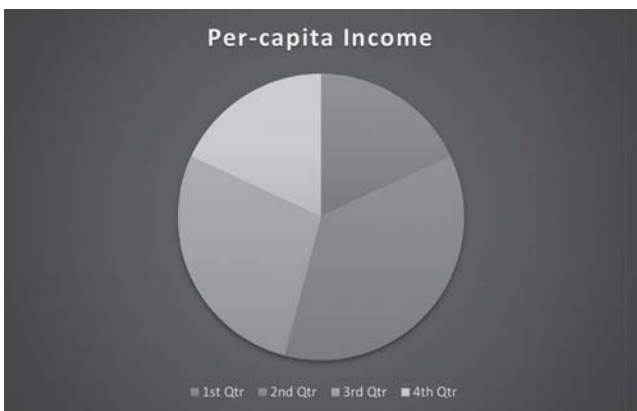


Fig. 14: The Pie Diagram of Per-capita Income Generation

Conclusion

Traversing through the entire study, it can be concluded that the Chhau is a performing dance of the socio-cultural and socio-economic upliftment of the society.

The Charida village of Purulia district has ample prove the subjugate fact. The table, charts, pie diagram, relationship charts all have proved the present structure of the Chhau dance and its socio-economic upliftment of the society at large. A multi ethnic village like Charida of Purulia district of West Bengal; subjugate that Chhau dance is the main purpose of their economic benefit. The village people maintained their clustering dance performances with in a group formation. The traditional practice of dance creates their socio-cultural and socio-economic transformation at modern era in a multi-cultural and multi-dimensional outlook. The cost benefit of the dance practice and programs encourage their per capita income generations, strengthen socio-economic backbone along with socio-cultural enhancement to maintain cultural sustainability with the heritage fitness of the Eastern Indian society. Hence, traditionalism is not a backdated manifestation, it has own marketability along with cultural richness to grow up the society. Chhau dance is an acquired culture adopted by the tribal people and incorporating this dance style in their traditional well being; that ushers a new strategy and strengthening its future outlook. □

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