

Performing Power, Encoding Identity: Genealogy, Representation, And Cultural Politics of Chhau Dance in Mayurbhanj

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the Chhau dance of Mayurbhanj as a dynamic cultural form shaped by intersecting forces of tradition, power, and modernity. Moving beyond descriptive ethnographic accounts, the study reconceptualizes Chhau as a performative system of knowledge production embedded in indigenous cosmologies, ecological rhythms, and community identity. Drawing on theoretical frameworks of performance studies, cultural capital, and power/knowledge, the paper interrogates the transformation of Chhau from a ritualistic tribal practice into a stylized cultural artifact under royal patronage and colonial mediation. The analysis further explores the semiotic and genealogical significance of mask traditions, highlighting their role in encoding collective memory and negotiating identity. In the contemporary context, the paper examines the impact of globalization and cultural tourism, arguing that while these processes enhance visibility and economic potential, they also lead to commodification and selective representation. Importantly, the study identifies a critical methodological gap in existing scholarship, emphasizing the need for reflexive, participatory, and interdisciplinary approaches that foreground indigenous voices. By situating Chhau within broader debates on authenticity, representation, and cultural politics, the paper contributes to English literary and performance studies by reframing it as a contested site where identity, heritage, and power are continuously negotiated.

Keywords: Chhau Dance, Performance Theory, Cultural Politics, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Cultural Capital, Representation, Intangible Cultural Heritage

1. Introduction

Chhau dance, particularly the Mayurbhanj tradition of eastern India, occupies a complex position at the intersection of ritual performance, cultural identity, and evolving modernity. Often categorized under the broad label of “folk” or “tribal” dance, Chhau has been predominantly approached through descriptive ethnographic narratives that emphasize its aesthetic features, mythological themes, and regional variations. However, such approaches risk reducing the form to a static cultural artifact, overlooking the deeper socio-political, epistemological, and performative dimensions that shape its historical trajectory and contemporary transformations.

This paper argues that Chhau dance should be understood not merely as a traditional performance but as a dynamic site of cultural negotiation, where questions of power, identity, and representation are

continuously produced and contested (Hall, 1997). Rooted in indigenous ritual practices and ecological rhythms, Chhau originally functioned as an embodied expression of community life, integrating spiritual beliefs, seasonal cycles, and collective memory (Turner, 1982). Yet, over time, it has undergone significant transformations through processes of royal patronage, colonial mediation, and contemporary globalization (Dirks, 2001). These shifts have not only altered its aesthetic and performative dimensions but have also reconfigured its social meanings and cultural ownership.

Existing scholarship on Chhau has largely focused on its origins, stylistic features, and mythological narratives, often celebrating its cultural richness without sufficiently interrogating the structures of power that inform its evolution. While studies acknowledge the role of tribal communities and the patronage of regional rulers, there remains a lack of critical engagement with how these interactions reshape cultural practices. Moreover, the impact of colonial knowledge systems and modern institutional frameworks on the representation and dissemination of Chhau has not been adequately theorized. As a result, the dance is frequently positioned within simplified binaries—tradition versus modernity, folk versus classical, local versus global—without addressing the complexities that underlie these categories (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983).

To address these gaps, this paper adopts an interdisciplinary framework that draws upon the theoretical insights of Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Richard Schechner. Foucault's concept of power/knowledge provides a lens to examine how discourses surrounding Chhau are constructed, circulated, and institutionalized, particularly in the contexts of colonial documentation and contemporary cultural policy. Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital and habitus enables an analysis of how Chhau has been transformed through processes of patronage and institutionalization, shifting from a communal ritual practice to a recognized cultural asset. Meanwhile, performance theory, as articulated by Schechner, allows for an understanding of Chhau as "restored behavior," emphasizing its capacity for adaptation, repetition, and recontextualization across different socio-cultural settings.

The central objective of this study is to critically examine the historical evolution and contemporary significance of Chhau dance in Mayurbhanj by focusing on four key dimensions: (1) its tribal and ritual origins as a form of embodied knowledge; (2) its transformation under royal patronage and colonial mediation; (3) the genealogical and semiotic significance of its mask traditions; and (4) its reconfiguration within the frameworks of globalization, cultural tourism, and heritage politics. In doing so, the paper seeks to move beyond descriptive accounts and offer a more nuanced understanding of Chhau as a contested cultural form shaped by multiple and often conflicting forces.

Furthermore, the study highlights a critical methodological concern in existing research—the marginalization of indigenous voices and the dominance of external academic and institutional perspectives. By advocating for a more reflexive and participatory approach, the paper emphasizes the need to recognize Chhau not only as an object of analysis but also as a living knowledge system, sustained and continuously reinterpreted by the communities that practice it.

In rethinking Chhau through the lenses of power, performance, and cultural politics, this paper contributes to broader debates within English literature and cultural studies concerning representation, identity, and the dynamics of tradition in a globalized world. Ultimately, it argues that Chhau's significance lies not in its preservation as a static heritage form, but in its ongoing capacity to negotiate and rearticulate cultural meanings across changing historical contexts.

2. Tribal Origins and Ritual Foundations of Chhau Dance

The origin of Chhau dance in Mayurbhanj is often framed within a simplistic narrative of “tribal expression,” yet such a characterization demands critical unpacking. While it is widely acknowledged that Chhau emerged from indigenous communities and ritual practices, this perspective risks homogenizing diverse tribal epistemologies into a monolithic cultural category. As noted in your text, Chhau is deeply embedded in ritualistic performances associated with seasonal festivals and deity worship, particularly during the Chaitra festival cycle. However, rather than viewing this merely as a cultural artifact, it is more analytically productive to interpret Chhau as a performative system of knowledge production rooted in ecological, spiritual, and socio-political relations (Schechner, 2006).

From an anthropological standpoint, the ritual origins of Chhau can be understood through the lens of embodied cosmology, where dance functions not just as representation but as enactment of the human–nature–spirit nexus (Turner, 1982). Tribal communities in Mayurbhanj historically relied on forests and seasonal cycles, and Chhau performances symbolically reproduce these ecological rhythms. Thus, the dance is not simply expressive but constitutive of community identity and environmental consciousness. This aligns with the argument that ritual performances serve as “cultural texts” encoding survival strategies and moral orders (Mukherjee, 2015).

However, a critical issue arises when these tribal origins are retrospectively framed through dominant cultural narratives, particularly Hindu mythological overlays. As your document indicates, Chhau incorporates stories from epics such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. While this intertextuality enhances its broader cultural appeal, it also signals a process of cultural assimilation and Sanskritization, wherein indigenous narratives are subsumed under hegemonic religious frameworks (Srinivas, 1952). This raises important questions: To what extent does the incorporation of pan-Indian mythologies obscure the original tribal epistemologies? And does this transformation represent organic evolution or imposed cultural hierarchy?

Furthermore, the frequent attribution of Chhau’s origins to martial traditions—such as its supposed links to warrior training—requires careful scrutiny. While scholars highlight the presence of martial movements and physical rigor, interpreting Chhau primarily through a martial lens risks privileging state-centric or elite histories over subaltern cultural practices. Instead, these bodily techniques can be more critically read as “disciplined corporeality” (in Foucauldian terms), where the body becomes a site of both cultural inscription and resistance (Foucault, 1977). The movements, gestures, and rhythms encode not only physical training but also symbolic meanings tied to power, identity, and community cohesion.

Another limitation in existing interpretations—including the one presented in your draft—is the lack of attention to intra-tribal diversity. The categorization of Chhau as a “tribal dance” overlooks the distinct contributions of specific groups such as the Munda and Santhal communities. Each group brings unique ritual practices, aesthetic sensibilities, and socio-political histories, which are often flattened in generalized accounts. A more nuanced analysis would examine how different tribal identities negotiate their representation within the Chhau tradition.

Finally, the framing of Chhau’s origins must also consider the politics of knowledge production. Much of what is documented about Chhau comes from external scholars, colonial ethnographers, or state-sponsored cultural narratives. These accounts may inadvertently reproduce an “outsider gaze,” positioning tribal communities as subjects rather than agents of cultural creation. Therefore, a critical approach must foreground indigenous voices and oral traditions as legitimate sources of knowledge.

3. Historical Evolution, Royal Patronage, and Colonial Mediation:

The historical evolution of Chhau dance in Mayurbhanj cannot be understood as a linear progression from “folk” to “classical” form; rather, it reflects a complex interplay of power, patronage, and cultural negotiation. As your text indicates, the role of the Mayurbhanj royal family was instrumental in institutionalizing and refining Chhau, transforming it from a community-based ritual performance into a more stylized and organized art form. While this patronage is often celebrated as a moment of cultural enrichment, it also necessitates a critical interrogation of how elite intervention reshaped the epistemological and performative foundations of the dance.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, royal patronage can be interpreted as a process of conversion of cultural practice into cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). The indigenous, community-owned performance was appropriated and restructured within the courtly framework, where aesthetic refinement, codification, and spectacle became prioritized over ritual spontaneity. This transformation effectively repositioned Chhau within a hierarchy of cultural legitimacy, where forms associated with elite patronage gained recognition, while their subaltern origins were simultaneously marginalized. Thus, the “refinement” of Chhau was not merely artistic but also socio-political, reflecting the imposition of aristocratic taste and authority over tribal expression.

Moreover, the introduction of elaborate costumes, structured choreography, and formal training under royal support suggests a shift from collective ritual performance to specialized artistic production. This transition altered the role of performers—from community participants to cultural specialists—thereby reconfiguring the social relations embedded within the dance. The communal ownership of Chhau gradually gave way to a more hierarchical structure, where access to resources, training, and performance platforms became unevenly distributed.

The colonial period further complicates this trajectory. As noted in your document, British colonial engagement contributed to the documentation, formalization, and wider dissemination of Chhau. However, this process must be critically understood within the framework of colonial knowledge production and cultural appropriation (Said, 1978; Dirks, 2001). Colonial ethnography often sought to classify and categorize indigenous practices, transforming them into objects of study and spectacle. In doing so, Chhau was recontextualized from a lived cultural practice into a “performable tradition” suitable for external audiences.

Drawing on Foucauldian insights, this can be seen as a form of discursive control, where knowledge about Chhau was produced, circulated, and legitimized through colonial institutions. The act of documentation was not neutral; it involved selective representation, emphasizing certain elements (such as exoticism or martial aesthetics) while neglecting others (such as local meanings and ritual significance). Consequently, colonial mediation contributed to the redefinition of Chhau’s identity, aligning it with broader imperial narratives of cultural diversity and governance.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that local actors were not passive recipients of these transformations. The adaptation of Chhau to new performance contexts—urban stages, festivals, and later national platforms—demonstrates a degree of cultural agency and strategic negotiation. Performers and communities selectively incorporated external influences to sustain the relevance and visibility of the dance. This aligns with Performance Theory (Schechner), which conceptualizes performance as a “restored behavior”—a process where traditions are continuously reworked and recontextualized (Schechner, 2006).

However, this adaptive resilience also raises critical concerns regarding authenticity and commodification. The transition of Chhau into a stage performance for wider audiences often entails the simplification or dramatization of its elements, potentially detaching it from its ritual and ecological contexts. The growing alignment with cultural tourism and national identity projects further intensifies this tension, as the dance becomes a symbolic resource deployed for economic and political purposes.

Another critical gap in existing narratives—including your draft—is the limited engagement with power asymmetries between tribal communities and institutional actors. While royal and colonial influences are acknowledged, there is insufficient examination of how these interventions may have marginalized indigenous voices or restructured ownership over cultural heritage. A more critical approach would interrogate who benefits from the institutionalization and global recognition of Chhau, and whether the originating communities retain control over its representation and economic value.

4. Genealogy, Mask Symbolism, and the Politics of Representation in Chhau Dance

The genealogical significance of Chhau dance extends beyond questions of origin to encompass the transmission of cultural knowledge, identity, and symbolic meaning across generations. As highlighted in your text, the mask-making tradition plays a central role in embodying mythological characters and cultural narratives, functioning as more than a mere performative accessory. However, a critical analysis reveals that masks in Chhau are not simply representational tools but complex semiotic devices that mediate between identity, power, and performance.

At one level, masks can be understood through a semiotic framework as carriers of encoded meanings (Barthes, 1972). Each mask—through its color, structure, and expression—signifies specific moral, emotional, and cosmological attributes. For instance, heroic characters are often represented with bold colors and symmetrical features, while demonic figures are exaggerated to evoke fear and moral opposition. This aligns with Bhowmik's (2018) argument that masks function as cultural signifiers, embodying collective memory and ethical frameworks (Assmann, 2011). Yet, such symbolism is not static; it is continuously reinterpreted within changing socio-cultural contexts.

From a genealogical perspective, the production and use of masks also reflect intergenerational transmission of artisanal knowledge. Mask-making is traditionally practiced within specific artisan communities, where techniques and aesthetic principles are passed down through oral and embodied learning. This process resonates with Bourdieu's concept of habitus, wherein cultural practices are internalized and reproduced through everyday activity (Bourdieu, 1977). The mask, therefore, becomes both an object and a process—simultaneously material and experiential—linking past traditions with present practices.

However, the genealogy of Chhau masks also raises critical concerns about authenticity and transformation under modern influences. As your text suggests, the increasing exposure of Chhau at national and international levels has led to modifications in mask design and performance aesthetics. While such changes enhance visual appeal and audience engagement, they may also result in the dilution of localized meanings. The shift from ritual context to staged performance often necessitates standardization, which can marginalize regional variations and artisanal individuality.

A Foucauldian reading of this transformation highlights the role of power/knowledge regimes in shaping what is considered “authentic” Chhau. Institutions such as cultural academies, tourism boards, and state agencies often define and promote specific versions of the dance, thereby influencing how masks are

designed and interpreted. This institutional mediation can lead to the codification of tradition, where fluid and diverse practices are fixed into standardized forms for easier consumption and governance. Furthermore, the use of masks introduces a critical dimension of identity and anonymity in performance. By concealing the performer's face, the mask allows for a transformation of the self, enabling the dancer to embody divine, heroic, or demonic identities. From a Performance Theory perspective (Schechner and Turner), this can be interpreted as a process of liminality, where performers temporarily transcend their सामाजिक identities to inhabit symbolic roles (Turner, 1969). However, this transformation is not entirely liberating; it is also governed by cultural norms and narrative expectations that dictate how characters should be portrayed.

An additional layer of critique emerges when considering the politics of representation embedded in mask usage. The portrayal of mythological and folkloric characters often reflects dominant cultural narratives, which may overshadow indigenous belief systems. As Chhau increasingly incorporates themes from pan-Indian epics, the masks themselves become sites of cultural negotiation, balancing local identity with broader national symbolism. This raises important questions about whose histories and mythologies are being represented—and whose are being excluded.

Moreover, the commodification of Chhau masks within cultural tourism introduces economic dimensions to their genealogy (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998). Masks are now produced not only for performance but also as marketable artifacts, transforming them into objects of consumption. While this provides livelihood opportunities for artisans, it also risks detaching the masks from their ritual and performative contexts, reducing them to aesthetic commodities. Such a shift reflects broader tensions between preservation and commercialization in the management of intangible cultural heritage.

5. Chhau in the Modern Public Sphere:

In contemporary society, Chhau dance has moved far beyond its original ritual setting and now occupies a prominent position within cultural tourism, heritage discourse, state-sponsored festivals, and global performance circuits. Your text notes that Chhau has increasingly been promoted through educational programs, government initiatives, and tourism-oriented cultural events. While this expansion has undoubtedly enhanced the visibility and survival of the tradition, it has also transformed the social meaning of Chhau, generating tensions between preservation and commercialization.

At one level, the contemporary revival of Chhau may be interpreted as a response to the anxieties of cultural erosion in a globalizing world. The recognition of Chhau as an element of intangible heritage has given local communities and state institutions a framework through which they can assert regional identity and cultural distinctiveness. In this context, Chhau functions not merely as a dance but as a symbolic marker of collective identity for the people of Mayurbhanj and Odisha. The performance becomes a means through which communities reaffirm continuity with the past while negotiating the pressures of modernity.

However, this revival is inseparable from the growing influence of cultural tourism. Chhau is increasingly staged for external audiences—tourists, urban spectators, festival curators, and international cultural organizations—rather than for the local ritual communities from which it originated. Such a shift alters the very logic of the performance. Traditionally, Chhau derived its meaning from its embeddedness within specific ritual occasions, seasonal cycles, and community participation. In the tourism economy, by contrast, the dance is often detached from these contexts and re-presented as a consumable spectacle.

From a critical perspective, this process can be understood through the concept of the commodification of culture. Cultural practices that once carried sacred and communal significance are transformed into marketable products designed to attract attention and generate revenue. Chhau thus enters what theorists of globalization describe as the “heritage industry,” where tradition becomes a resource for economic development and regional branding (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998). The result is a paradox: the very mechanisms that ensure the visibility and survival of Chhau may simultaneously undermine its original meanings.

This contradiction is particularly visible in the selective representation of Chhau for tourism and national festivals. Organizers often privilege visually dramatic elements—elaborate masks, vigorous movements, mythological battles—because these are more appealing to audiences. More subtle aspects, such as ritual significance, local oral histories, or indigenous cosmologies, are marginalized or omitted. Consequently, Chhau is reduced to an aesthetic object, stripped of its deeper socio-cultural context. In Foucauldian terms, this reflects a process of discursive regulation, whereby institutions determine which aspects of Chhau are visible, valuable, and worthy of preservation (Foucault, 1977).

The globalization of Chhau also raises questions about authenticity (Appadurai, 1996). As the dance travels to urban stages and international venues, performers frequently adapt choreography, duration, costume, and narrative themes to suit new audiences. Such modifications are often celebrated as evidence of Chhau’s dynamism and adaptability. Yet they also create a tension between “traditional” and “modern” forms. The search for authenticity becomes complicated because there is no single, fixed version of Chhau; rather, authenticity itself is socially constructed and continually negotiated.

Performance theorists such as Richard Schechner argue that cultural performances survive precisely because they are capable of being recontextualized. Chhau’s contemporary transformations therefore should not automatically be interpreted as decline or corruption. Instead, they reveal the capacity of the tradition to respond creatively to new conditions. At the same time, it is important to ask who controls these transformations. Are local communities and performers shaping the future of Chhau on their own terms, or are they adapting under pressure from state agencies, tourism industries, and global cultural markets?

The role of the state is especially significant in this regard. Government and non-government organizations frequently promote Chhau as part of regional development strategies and cultural policy. Such interventions provide financial support, institutional recognition, and new opportunities for performers. Yet they also produce unequal power relations. Decisions regarding funding, festival participation, and representation are often made by bureaucratic and cultural elites rather than by the communities themselves. This creates the risk that Chhau becomes appropriated as a symbol of national or regional identity while the originating communities receive limited social or economic benefits.

A Bourdieusian framework further reveals how Chhau has been converted into a form of cultural capital. Mastery of Chhau now provides performers with prestige, professional opportunities, and access to cultural networks. However, this capital is unevenly distributed. Urban artists, state-sponsored institutions, and middle-class audiences often benefit more from the visibility of Chhau than the rural tribal communities who historically sustained it. Thus, the contemporary circulation of Chhau reflects broader structures of inequality, where certain actors possess greater power to define, market, and profit from culture.

The contemporary moment also opens possibilities for resistance and reappropriation. Younger generations of performers increasingly use Chhau to address present-day concerns such as migration,

environmental degradation, tribal rights, and social inequality. Through these innovations, Chhau becomes not merely a preserved tradition but a living medium for political and cultural expression. This demonstrates that Chhau is not passively absorbed into globalization; rather, it actively engages with and critiques the changing world around it.

6. Knowledge Systems, Methodology, and the Problem of Representation

A crucial yet often underdeveloped dimension in the study of Chhau dance is the question of methodology and knowledge production. While existing narratives—including your draft—provide rich descriptive accounts of history, performance, and symbolism, they frequently lack a critical reflection on *how* knowledge about Chhau is produced, validated, and represented. This gap is particularly important for a journal-level contribution, as reviewers expect a clear methodological positioning.

Most studies on Chhau rely heavily on ethnographic observation, archival sources, and secondary literature, often produced by external scholars. While these approaches are valuable, they also raise concerns about the dominance of an “outsider gaze” (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Tribal communities, who are the primary custodians of Chhau, are frequently positioned as subjects of study rather than active producers of knowledge. This results in an epistemological imbalance, where academic authority overshadows indigenous perspectives. As a result, lived experiences, oral traditions, and local interpretations may be underrepresented or selectively interpreted.

From a Foucauldian standpoint, this reflects the operation of power/knowledge, where certain forms of knowledge (written, institutional, academic) are privileged over others (oral, performative, indigenous) (Foucault, 1977). The documentation of Chhau—whether by colonial ethnographers or modern researchers—is not neutral; it involves processes of selection, classification, and framing. These processes determine what is preserved as “authentic tradition” and what is excluded or marginalized.

Methodologically, Chhau should be approached as a performative knowledge system, not merely as an object of study. Drawing on Performance Theory, particularly the work of Richard Schechner, performance can be understood as “restored behavior,” where knowledge is embodied, repeated, and transformed over time. This implies that Chhau cannot be fully captured through textual analysis alone; it requires attention to body, gesture, rhythm, and spatial practice as sites of knowledge production.

A critical methodological framework for studying Chhau should therefore integrate:

- **Ethnography with reflexivity:** acknowledging the researcher’s positionality and potential biases
- **Participatory approaches:** involving performers, artisans, and community members as co-producers of knowledge
- **Oral history and indigenous narratives:** valuing non-written forms of knowledge transmission
- **Visual and performance analysis:** examining choreography, masks, and staging as epistemic texts

Another important issue is the problem of representation in academic writing. Chhau is often framed either as an “exotic tribal dance” or as a “national cultural heritage.” Both framings are reductive. The former risks exoticizing and othering tribal communities, while the latter may appropriate the dance into homogenized national narratives. A critical approach must navigate between these extremes by foregrounding local specificity while acknowledging broader cultural interactions.

Furthermore, there is a significant research gap in quantitative and interdisciplinary integration. While your broader work (e.g., forest dependency models, socio-economic analysis) shows strong empirical orientation, Chhau studies rarely incorporate such approaches. There is scope to link performance with:

- livelihood patterns (e.g., artisan economy, performers’ income)

- spatial analysis (distribution of Chhau practices across regions)
- policy frameworks (impact of cultural schemes and tourism)

This integration would make the research more robust and aligned with contemporary interdisciplinary scholarship.

7. Conclusion:

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that Chhau dance of Mayurbhanj cannot be adequately understood through a linear or purely descriptive framework of “traditional folk performance.” Rather, it emerges as a dynamic and contested cultural form, shaped by complex interactions between tribal epistemologies, royal patronage, colonial mediation, and contemporary global forces (Hall, 1997). From its origins in ritualistic and ecological practices to its present status within cultural tourism and heritage discourse, Chhau embodies a continuous process of transformation, negotiation, and reinterpretation.

At its core, Chhau is deeply rooted in indigenous knowledge systems, where performance functions as an embodied articulation of cosmology, community identity, and environmental relationships. However, the incorporation of pan-Indian mythological narratives and the influence of elite patronage reveal processes of cultural assimilation and hierarchical restructuring, which have redefined the dance’s symbolic and social meanings. The intervention of the Mayurbhanj royal family, while instrumental in institutionalizing and refining the form, simultaneously converted a community-based ritual into a structured aesthetic practice aligned with aristocratic sensibilities.

This trajectory was further complicated during the colonial period, when Chhau became subject to documentation, classification, and external representation. Colonial and postcolonial knowledge systems played a decisive role in shaping how Chhau is understood, performed, and circulated, often privileging certain narratives while marginalizing others. In this context, Chhau can be seen as a site of power/knowledge, where cultural meanings are not merely inherited but actively constructed and contested.

The genealogical dimension of Chhau, particularly through its mask tradition, highlights the role of performance as a semiotic and intergenerational system of knowledge transmission. Masks function as cultural texts that encode moral values, historical memory, and identity, yet they are also subject to transformation under modern influences such as commercialization and institutional standardization. This underscores the tension between continuity and change, authenticity and adaptation.

In the contemporary era, globalization and cultural tourism have significantly expanded the visibility of Chhau, positioning it within national and international cultural economies. While this has created new opportunities for preservation and livelihood, it has also led to the commodification of tradition, where performance is often detached from its ritual context and reconfigured as a consumable spectacle. The selective representation of Chhau for external audiences raises critical questions about authenticity, ownership, and the equitable distribution of cultural capital.

Importantly, the study also reveals a crucial methodological gap in existing scholarship. Much of the knowledge surrounding Chhau is mediated through external academic and institutional frameworks, which may overlook or marginalize indigenous voices. Addressing this requires a shift toward reflexive, participatory, and interdisciplinary approaches that recognize Chhau as a living knowledge system rather than a static cultural artifact. The incorporation of performance theory, ethnography, and socio-economic analysis offers a more holistic understanding of the dance and its contemporary relevance.

Ultimately, Chhau dance must be reconceptualized not simply as heritage to be preserved, but as a vibrant and evolving cultural practice that actively engages with issues of identity, power, and modernity. Its resilience lies in its ability to adapt while retaining connections to its ancestral roots. However, ensuring its sustainable future requires critical attention to the politics of representation, community agency, and cultural justice. Only by foregrounding the voices and experiences of the communities who sustain Chhau can it continue to thrive as both an artistic tradition and a meaningful expression of cultural identity.

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