The culture of Utkal (Orissa) is great and spiritually rich. The Almighty Deity Lord Jagannath has adorned this holy land and is being worshipped in the form of wooden image (Daru Bigraha) at Puri-Purusottam region or Shree Kshetra, the religious hub of the Oriyas. The socio-cultural consciousness of the people of Orissa has been tinged with spiritual feelings for their deep love and devotion to Lord Jagannath. At the base of this consciousness lies a perfect blending of religion and ethics which is the epitome of socio-cultural values of the great India. Oriya folk dance Pala is the harbinger of that ethical consciousness - its crusader and carrier. This plays a pivotal role in the field of national integration, religious and cultural synthesis, communal harmony and religious tolerance. The deep socio-cultural impacts of this can be easily perceived and felt after proper analysis.

Various folk dances like 'Chaiti Ghoda Dance', 'Sabara Sabaruni Dance', 'Patara Saura Dance', 'Chhau Dance', 'Sakhi Dance', 'Jhamu fair', 'Dhanu fair', 'Pala', 'Daskathia', 'Kela Keluni Dance' and 'Farce' etc. had greatly influenced the socio-cultural life of art-loving Utkal. Among these, Pala occupies the pivotal position. It is quite distinctive along the ceaseless flow of Orissa's culture. It has ennobled the social life of Utkal with its quality of amusement, poetic excellence and religious upliftment. It is very important as noted in Folklore of Orissa. "Pala is a popular cultural institution responsible for the popularisation of ancient Oriya literature".

Even if lot of difference of opinions arise to accept Pala as a popular folk dance yet it has garnered much support in its favour to be considered as a widely acclaimed popular folk art. Pala is directly concerned with the life of common man. Being crowned with the indigenous and special traits of Oriya life, it not only entertains the common man but also inspires him to religious, moral, truthful and spiritual way of life. It is an excellent common art with high intellectual and literary values.

Pala has attained a special position as an indigenous art of Utkal. It possesses two merits - both entertainment and religious upliftment. It has achieved immense popularity for bringing progress to Orissa in fields like religion, culture, literature and social values. It's role in inculcating idealism in human character can never be denied. It is needless to say that Pala, which has so widely influenced the social life of Utkal, is a spiritual and cultural awakening. Before the arrival of printing press in Orissa, it used to help in social, cultural, literary and religious progress. Both the literate and the illiterate were able to achieve the four universal attainments - religion, wealth, desire and salvation (Dharma, Artha, Kama and Mokshya) through Pala. The common man was able to get the spiritual and literary pleasure from Pala easily even without reading the great Hindu epics and mythologies.

Pala is a spiritual institution related to Shree Shree Satyanarayan Puja. It's importance as a successful medium in bringing perfect
blending in between the Oriya tradition and the
tradition of the great India.5

From the time immemorial of the worship of the Lord Shree Shree Satyanarayan is being observed in this holy land of Utkal. By the study of "Skanda Purana", it is found that the merits of Satyanarayan Puja are vividly presented here. As depicted in the mythologies, Lord Satyanarayan Himself told Narada' about this worship and 'Narada' described it before the saints living in the forest of Naimisa.

It is also observed from historical point of view that, during the reign of the Muslim Rulers, the noble saints of high position both of the Hindu and the Muslim religions tried to bring good harmony between the two religions.

Emperor Akbar preached the virtues of "Din-I-Ilahi". Saint Kabir, even being a devout Muslim, also preached singularity and oneness of both the Hindu and the Muslim Gods. In later period, the Hidu Preacher Shree Chaitanya accepted many muslim disciples and vouchsafed the great and universal qualities of Sanatan or Hindu Religion. Saint Nanak brought a religious harmony by identifying both 'Ram and Rahim' as one. This religious harmony and equilibrium and the revealation of the socio-cultural blending are vividly marked in the folk dance-Pala.

Pala has been originated from the mixed worship of the Hindu Deity - "Satyanarayan" and the Muslim Deity - "Peera". As mentioned by the noted historian Krupasindhu Mishra in his book 'The History of Utkal', the Satyanarayan Puja started in Utkal in the year 1716 during the reign of the Muslim ruler Sujauddin.6 In the book "Gradual Progress of Oriya literature" by Pt. Nilakantha Das, Pala originated during the ruler of Hussain Saha of Bengal. Its language was neither Bengali nor Oriya but a unique blending of the both.7

Pala has great popularity in both the states of Orissa and Bengal. According to the researchers, it first originated in Bengal and then spread to Orissa. Kabikarna was the first who wrote sixteen Palas. As collected by the Asiatic Society, the Pala was first enacted in Orissa in 1262 sal on the 26th day of Mina (Pisces), Tuesday, during the reign of Bira Kishore Dev. It was first extracted from the two Palas of Kabikarna-Bidyadhar and Manohar Pala.8

Dr. Kunjabihari Das opines that a certain Brahmin of Medinapur first compiled this Pala and most Oriya words were used in its composition. The main aim of Pala, being observed through the worship of Satyanarayan and Satyapeera, is giving spiritual pleasure. So, for the good of the child, there has been the provision of observing sixteen Palas from the day of its christened ceremony till it attains 16 years of age.9

This Satyanarayan Puja or Satyapeera Puja is performed only by the Brahmns. This puja is accompanied with song, music and dance. The patriarch of the family along with other members and the neighbours get entertained and spiritually uplifted through this Pala. In certain spheres religious books and mythologies are referred and explained in sweet melodious tone. The chief of the singers is called "Gayaka" and his assistants are called "Palas" or "Co-singers". "It consists of five or six persons. The drummer plays on the 'mridanga', other play on the cymbals, dance and help of chief singer 'Gayak' to sing and explain the meaning to the audience. The depth of knowledges, sharpness of intelligence, oratory and keen memory power are put to a severe test when two well - matched groups challenge each other in a Pala competition. Nothing but unreserved admiration is due to the singers for their inexhaustible energy continue the competition every night stretching over a month. The drummer displays the skill of his fingers and relates humorous stories to please the audience. The dialogue between the singer and one of the attendants breaks the monotomy of long speeches and jugglery of words in the song.10
invocation and worship of the five Gods, the mythological discussions give entertainment and spiritual pleasure to the onlookers.

Pala can be started at any time: while it is sung by the singer in a sitting posture surrounding his helpers, it is called "Pothi Pala" and while staged on a decorated altar through a standing posture with song, music, and dance is called "Thia Pala". Similarly, more than one singer singing Pala on a particular stage in different time and turn is called "Badi Pala". The singers of Pala are devoted artists. Through its observation they glorify the nation and at the same time entertain people of all variety beyond caste and creed. They enrich the society and its culture by bringing the legendary facts of the great epics before the public, retaining the qualities of national unity - the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Ramayan, the Mahabharat, the Gita, the Bhagabat, and many mythologies. The common appeal of Pala literature with its social and cultural value is really praiseworthy.

A numerous Pala-singers of this holy land have enriched the society and culture of Utkal through their sacred work of singing Pala. Among them some noted are - Gayak Ratna Harinath, Gayak Samrat Baishnab Charan Pradhan, Gayak Siromani Niranjan Kar, Gayak Sekhar Jagannath Behera, Paramananda Saran, Nari Nath, Ranka Das, Kshetrabasi Das, Niranjan Panda, Agadhu Bhanja, Mani Nath, Duryodhan Panda, Biswabikash Barik, Keshab Kar, Banamali Rath, Krupasindhu Sarangi, Bhabagrahi Sarangi, Damodar Sarangi, Bishwanath Pattajoshi, Markandeswar Bahinipati, Arjuna Das, Dhruba Charan Sarangi, Anirudha Panigrahi, Dharmananda Dixit, Padan Nath, Narayan Mohanty, Dhaneswar Satapathy, Suryamani Behera, Sridhar Debata, Chandrasekhar Dakhinary, Kulamani Satapathy, Krushna Chandra Sahu, Laxmidhar Rout, Kashinath Das, Rajanikanta Prusty, Gayak Sudhakar Nanda Das, Gayak Tilaka Bipra Charan Das etc. They have widened the sphere of Pala in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa through their magical chantings and uplifted the socio-cultural values of Utkal.

Pala carries message of Orissan culture. It is the safeguard of literature. It entertains human mind with religious thought and conscience as well as establishing communal harmony. No doubt everybody admits the important role of Pala in the development of Orissan literature, culture, society and religion. Since long past, the Pala singers with their troupe had tried to keep this art alive by devoting much labour and sacrifice. They brought sensation in human heart exposing them to religion, mythologies, literature and idealism. But, with the flow of time this art is at the verge of extinction. It has lost its popularity for the widespread of electronic media and peoples' attraction towards western way of living. The attraction for T.V., Cinema and theatre has made the present day youth wayward. The scenes of rape, murder, theft and communalism as shown in cinema and theatre instead of the valuable discourses of truth, religion, ethics, and idealism in Pala have corrupted the social life and degraded our culture. In this situation the renovation of the popular art - Pala has been urgently felt.

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