



Dhanu Yatra: Folk and Traditional Media

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One cannot ignore the importance of folk media in the communication and development strategies. Government has also realized the significance of the use of folk media as a vehicle for the expression of developmental messages. In 1970s folk media was successfully used for family planning programme throughout India. Subsequently, various health programmes and other developmental messages are popularized through such folk media. In this context, we have to appreciate the potential of Dhanu Yatra of Bargarh as a strong communication device. The district of Bargarh with picturesque mountain, perennial streams and falls and vast array of green forests offer some of the best tourists' attractions. It is not only a land of glorious historical sites and superb natural beauties but also a land of wonderful fairs and festivities which enrich the cultural heritage of Odisha.



Bargarh presents Dhanu Yatra, a widely acclaimed folk drama form. It represents the folk Little Tradition of this area. In this context, it may be said that Krishna cult of Hindu Great Tradition, which has influenced many forms of folk

dramas in different parts of Odisha and India, has also tremendous influence on Dhanu Yatra. "Krushna-Leela" in Gopa-pura (present Ambapali village), "Mathura Vijaya" and "Kansa-Badha" in Mathura (present Bargarh town) are the main attractions of Dhanu Yatra. Kansa, however, is the centre of attraction and he prevails throughout the Yatra. It is known as

"Dhanu" Yatra because it is observed in the Dhanu (Pousa) month between the 'Dhanu Sankranti' and 'Makara Sankranti'. Secondly, from mythological point of view, Kansa had invited Krishna and Balaram on the occasion of Dhanu Yatra with a hidden intention of killing them during the Yatra. Hence, it is known as Dhanu Yatra.



As mentioned above, it is organised in the Hindu month of Dhanu/Pousa (December-January). It is celebrated from Pousa Sukla Sasthi Tithi i.e. sixth day of bright fortnight of Pousa to Pousa Purnima i.e. the full moon day of Pousa. Accordingly, it is carried out for ten to eleven days continuously. It is an integral part of culture of Bargarh. It not only helps in preserving our ancient heritage but also helps in disseminating our old tradition. It is believed that Dhanu Yatra began in the year 1948 immediately after independence. It was the consequences of freedom and self-rule as a show charged with nationalistic passion and zeal. In this sense, Kansa represented the imperialist power on its way out and Krushna-Balaram stood for the patriotic aspiration of the common mass.

Dhanu Yatra is remarkable and distinguishable from the rest in every respect. This is amazing and extra-ordinary in its content and form. It is significant and noteworthy in sense and style. It is astonishing and astounding in grace and grandeur. It is perhaps the biggest open-air folk drama in the known history of the world though the origin of folk drama in West Odisha is yet to be discovered. Though the origin of this folk drama style is shrouded in mystery, Dhanu Yatra of Bargarh has been gaining wider recognition as a folk drama.

Dhanu Yatra has become one of the important items in regional folk tradition of Odisha. It is one of the major drama forms which still hold ground in the cross-section of the society. It is an exceptional and extraordinary form of folk drama wherein divine characters like Krushna, Balaram, Devaki, Basudeva, Ugrasena, Kansa Maharaja and the like are the most important characters and the rule of Kansa Maharaja is celebrated by the people. This folk drama form

is considered to be a class of its own for its unique proposition of style.

Dhanu Yatra is a theatrical representation of a Pauranic myth 'Krushna Leela'. Various events, right from the wedding ceremony of Devaki with Basudeva to the fatal death of Kansa Maharaja as depicted in various Hindu scriptures are enacted to bring the old myth alive in different locations of Bargarh town and Ambapali village. In other words, the Krushna cult which has influenced many forms of folk dramas in different parts of India has not lost its spiritual content in case of Dhanu Yatra. In fact, Dhanu Yatra has placed Bargarh in particular and Odisha in general in the cultural map of the country.

Incidentally, the natural features of Bargarh and Ambapali more or less conform to the neighborhood of the Pauranic descriptions of Mathura and Gopapura. Bargarh town is treated as Mathura. Jira river is on the border of Bargarh town, which serves as river Jamuna. On the other side of the river Jira, there is a small village called Ambapali, which is decorated as Gopapura. There is a mango orchard, which serves as Brundaban. There is also a pond, which is used as Kalindi Sarovara (lake).

Various scenes are enacted in different places of Bargarh town and Ambapali village, instead of at one place. However, one beautifully decorated stage is erected in the heart of Bargarh town to project it as the Durbar of Kansa Maharaja. As per the tradition, one hired elephant is engaged for the movement of Kansa Maharaja. Female characters are performed by the male members. This is the characteristic of folk tradition found in many parts of India.

The whole landscape of Bargarh within a radius of about five to six kilometers turns into a



'Play Zone', which may be called an open-air theatre. As it has been said earlier, this is the biggest open-air theatre in the known history on this earth. This background and setting makes this biggest 'Play Zone' of Dhanu Yatra the largest open-air theatre where the panorama of Dhanu Yatra is performed. The whole landscape provides the festival a lively look. Possibly, in anywhere a play has not been made to achieve such a vast magnitude with fairness and open mindedness.

The most important aspect of Dhanu Yatra is its largest cast and the people's participation. The lead characters like Kansa, Ugrasena, Devaki, Basudeva, Krushna and Balarama are selected from amongst the local artists. Significantly, all the local residents as well as the guests and visitors who happen to be then and there are also taken as characters. Nearly every one has a job to perform; each one has a role to play. Physical involvement of all present on the occasion is apparent. It engulfs and overwhelms all. They all join without any precaution, without any invitation. In this sense, Dhanu Yatra has largest cast.

There is no denying that, Dhanu Yatra is of the people, by the people and for the people. Common people seem to have been elated and thrilled to the mythical age in body and spirit during the time of festival, though the duration of this festival is ten to eleven days only. It attracts a large number of crowds. The performances are so energetic and lively that the district administration has to play a passive role at the back stage. It appears that the rules of Kansa Maharaja prevail in Bargarh. General public enjoy his order as if he is the de-facto administrator of Bargarh.

Another important aspect of Dhanu Yatra is its style of dialogue delivery. There is no specific

dialogue as such for any scene. In fact, the theme and the dramatic content of Dhanu Yatra provide an overall sketch; the particulars are filled up by the performers. This is a freedom allowed to the performers, which gives rise to a series of imaginative compositions and giving a perfect shape to the play. Thus, keeping in view the scene of the episode, the characters speak the dialogue extempore and without preparation in their own way.

Dhanu Yatra also provides an opportunity to the local performing artistes to exhibit their talents. The inhabitants of Bargarh have been watching this for years but they are not tired of it because it does not hamper their day to day life. Buses and trains ply as usual. Working class attends to their duties and offices as usual. Outsiders visiting Bargarh for the first time on this occasion becomes part of the festival without any obligation, without any compulsion. Undoubtedly, Dhanu Yatra takes up social causes and is respected for its strength of mobilizing the mass.

Everyday, the scenes are enacted in the afternoon and in the evening hours. However, cultural programmes continue till the wee hours for entertainment of the visitors. There is no rule, no restriction, but it is so disciplined that there is no dislocation. The intimacy between the audience and the performers provides a realistic colour to the Dhanu Yatra. To be in Bargarh during this festival means to be a part of this folk drama which is a life time experience, a rare occasion to peep into the local culture in its entirety. However, the organizers of Dhanu Yatra should be appreciated and thanked for their commendable job and praiseworthy effort to promote this regional folk tradition.

Kansa Maharaja dies on the final day of Dhanu Yatra. An effigy of Kansa Maharaja is burnt



making the end of his tyrannical rule. The imaginary world of Mathura and Gopapura with the river Yamuna dividing the two comes to an end. Though the make-believe ceases to exist, the cynical laughter of Kansa Maharaja resound the air of Bargarh till next Dhanu Yatra. Even as the screens come down on the final day of the Yatra with the fatal outcome of Kansa Maharaja, the cruel, dictatorial, and oppressive ruler captures more hearts than Krishna and Balaram, his cause of death. Lakhs of guests and visitors fondly and warmly remember the pleasant autocracy and domination of Kansa Maharaja and wait for him till the next Dhanu Yatra. As per the tradition, the leading artist performing the principal role of Kansa in the Dhanu Yatra, visits Sri-kshetra (Puri) after the Yatra to take a holy dip in the Mahodadhi (sea). Then he visits the Jagannath temple and beg apology for his character. He seeks blessings and forgiveness of the deities for all his unholy utterances against Krishna and Balaram during the Yatra. He does this to wash away the sin he commits during the Dhanu Yatra.

The objective of the present paper is to ascertain the potential of traditional performing art like Dhanu Yatra for inculcating rational outlook in the masses. Dhanu Yatra is not a mere ritual; it has entertainment elements too. Secondly, the theme of Dhanu Yatra is though mythological, it spreads social message as well. In other words, an alien message can be incorporated in the theme and form of Dhanu Yatra without disturbing the natural flow of the performance and without hurting the sentiments of the viewers. In this sense we may call it a 'traditional media'.

Bargarh is with no trouble accessible both by roadways as well as railways. There are practically good hotels for accommodation. Visitors can reside at Sambalpur (50 kilometers from Bargarh) as well. The fame and reputation

of Dhanu Yatra has created a centre of attention of people from far and wide. District Administration takes all possible measures to provide safe drinking water for the visitors and maintain hygienic condition of Bargarh town and Ambapali village during this grand folk drama. It takes special care to maintain law and order situation in the entire 'Play Zone'. If situation demands then massive police personnel is requisitioned from outside the district as well.

Notably, Dhanu Yatra is celebrated in other parts of West Odisha namely Chiroli, Talpali of Gaisilet Block and Chichinda in Bargarh district, Bhaler of Puintala block in Bolangir district, Arigaon of Binka Block, Karlapal of Birmaharajpur Block, Ulunda, Hardakhol and Subarnapali in Subarnapur district, Kuchinda of Sambalpur district of West Odisha. Though it is staged at various places in the region, the one at Bargarh is the most popular and is referred to as the world's biggest open-air theatre with biggest congregation of actors.

However, one finds a new chapter in this year edition of Bargarh Dhanu Yatra, which has started from Puri. Kansa Maharaja visited Jagannath Mahaprabhu at Puri and collected "Agyan-mala" after the blessings of the deities. He went to the Govardhan peetha and visited the beach and participated in "Samudra Arati". Reportedly, this is a new tradition to start from Bada-danda of Puri leaving behind half a century's old tradition.

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