

The Folk Dance of Ganjam : Danda Nacha

Rabindra Nath Dash

The folk dance is the dance of the common people living in the countryside. All dance forms owe their origin to the folk culture. Any folk dance, essentially is the fragrance of the soul of the rustic soil and is vibrant with rural sentiments.

Though dancing, as an art, is primarily for the sake of enjoyment and amusement of the individual performer and the audience, it serves as an instrument of social unity. No festival, ceremony or celebration of



any conspicuity is considered complete without a dance performance. Every community, tribe or state has its distinctive variety of folk dance. On the other hand, folk dances are intricately intertwined with the rituals and ceremonies of the rural folk and their religious faith.

The district of Ganjam is a veritable nursery of lively folk-dance traditions. It boasts of a composite culture, comprising the best of Aryan and non-Aryan traditions. Ganjam, a border district, is a rendezvous of the Aryan culture of Kalinga and the Dravidian culture of

Andhra Pradesh providing for a visible confluence of cultures, languages and literatures of both the north and the south. In such a backdrop, the folk dances of Ganjam are highly captivating and distinctive. If we compare the tradition of folk

theatres of other states with Odisha we find that the Odishan tradition of folk theatre is the richest in comparison with all forms of folk-theatres of other states of India. There are innumerable folk theatres of Odisha which have

contributed immensely to the development of folk-culture of India. Among thirty districts of Odisha, the people of Ganjam have shown remarkable artistic qualities in sustaining and nurturing many of their folk theatres. Perhaps Ganjam has the richest tradition of folk theatre both in respect of quality and quantity among 30 districts of Odisha. That is why, theatre actor and director like Habib Tanbeer has shown keen interest in the folk theatre of Ganjam specially in '*Prahalada Nataka*'.

A close look reveals that the people of Ganjam have shown indomitable creative energy

in enrichment of their folk theatres in spite of economic deprivation and lack of patronage. The creative literary texts and musical tradition of *Champu*, *Chhanda*, *Chautisa* of Ganjam district which are enriched by the poet Upendra Bhanja, Kavisurya Baladeva Ratha and Gopal Krushna Pattanayak shaped the aesthetic sensibilities of the minds of the performing artists of the districts in sustaining their folk theatrical forms. Religiosity and musicality are two features of folk theatre of Ganjam district.

Resting for about twelve months, spring comes with sheer joy and happiness. Usually spring arrives during the month of March and April with various fairs and festivals. And then the whole of Odisha dances. Among these dance forms, '*Danda Nacha*' is very popular in the western part of Orissa, weaving religion and theatre together. *Danda Nacha* forms a part of the rich folk tradition of Ganjam. This is performed in the month of *Chaitra-Vaisakha* with much enthusiasm. Performed over a period stretching over thirteen to twenty-one days, *Danda Nacha* is a robust show of devotion of Lord Shiva and Goddess Kali.

Danda Nacha is one of the major theatrical forms of Ganjam district associated with the Saiva cult¹. It has its root in the religious and cultural history of Odisha with special reference to Hindu deities. *Danda Nacha* is essentially a ritualistic folk theatre in its nature and associated with Siva Kali myth². Ritualistic in nature, the *Danda* (Penance) elucidates the Rudrakali myth narrating the activities of Lord Siva and Kali³.

Origin

Its origin is traced to 8th and 9th centuries (inception of Tantrism) after decadence of Buddhism in Odisha⁴. In Odisha, after the degradation of Buddhism, Saivism became a

predominant religion. The downtrodden 'untouchables' and low castes took to the worship of Lord Siva outside the Hindu temples⁵. When the upper class Hindus hated the downtrodden untouchables and debarred them from entering the Hindu temples, they began to worship Siva, for their salvation, once a year at a festival called *Danda Nacha*.⁶

"*Abhinava Chandrika*", a literary work of 1568 A.D mentions the prevalence of '*Danda Jatra*'⁷. That signifies that this folk-theatre was very much popular in the medieval period.

Meaning:

Danda means penance and *Nacha* means dance. Together they mean a festival celebrated for the worship of Siva in which penance, dance, songs and physical feats are all meant to please⁸. The term '*Danda*' has also another meaning. It refers to a stick or staff which symbolises a measuring rod of devotion, representing 'Hara' (Siva) and Parvati (Siva's consort Goddess Parvati). Thus *Danda Nacha* is derived from "*Danda*" (either penance or a pole) and '*Nacha*' a dance which is usually performed in a religious fair called '*Danda Yatra*'. In this Lord Siva and His consort, Gouri are propitiated.

It is noticed that *Danda*, a huge wooden rod or a long bamboo stick having 13 knots, is worshipped by thirteen or more devotees for thirteen to twenty one days terminating with *Chaitra Samkranti* or *Meru Parva* (i.e. *Meru Samkranti*). The devotees or *Bhaktas* known as '*Danduas*' observe '*Manasika*' (fasting with austerity). When a person craves for early fulfilment of his desires viz. to be blessed with a son or to overcome some difficulty or to win a dispute he takes part in *Danda Nacha*. It involves very rigorous self discipline, such as taking food once a day, observing vigil etc. They dance and

sing songs for the entertainment of village community. *Danda Nacha* is a ritual dance accompanied by musical instruments like Dholo (drum), Jhanja (Cymbals), Mahuri or Kahali (Trumpet), *Magaravina* (a bow with a jingling bells), *Mukhavina* (a shahanai like wind instruments), *Gini* and *Kartal* etc.

Aims:

Danda Nacha aims at arousing religious fervour as well as entertaining aesthetic pleasure among the spectators. The main aim of this type of folk dance is to promote spiritual upliftment through self-discipline. People pay reverence to the *Danda* dancers for their observance of religious rites during the course of their dance.⁹ This dance is mainly associated with agricultural activities like ploughing, sowing, reaping and harvesting of paddy. From time immemorial, the oral tradition of performing art in varied forms has been maintained by the rural folk with the twin objectives of aesthetic pleasure and education¹⁰. Thus, apart from entertaining the village-folk with varieties of dances and songs, the main objective of this folk theatre is to impart moral teachings in order to remove superstitions and blind faiths that exist in the society¹¹.

The persons who participate in this *Nata* (dance) are called as *danduas* or *bhaktas*, irrespective of their castes, creeds, economic status and social standing. There is no caste distinction in *Danda Nacha*, whoever desires may join it without any fear of excommunication from orthodox society¹². Thus, the *bhaktas* or devotees are drawn from various castes. However, participation is allowed to males only.

Danda Nata troupe always consists of more than thirteen *Danduas* or *bhaktas*. The leader of *Danda Nacha* troupe is called *pata-dandua* or *pata-bhakta*. The *bhaktas* stay in

the group, avoiding all contact with women or any worldly pleasure. They voluntarily undergo all the ordeals by being participants in their respective 'manasikas' or holy commitments for the fulfilment of their desires. The '*danduas*' or *bhaktas* of different groups are required to observe strict discipline by observing fasting for the whole day and taking very simple food at night.

The *bhaktas* offer their reverence and devotion to both Lord Siva and Goddess Kalika by way of their participation in the *Danda nata*, which means a dance of inflicting punishment on themselves in correspondence to the sins which they think that they have committed in their lives. A *dandua* undergoes several courses of ordeals while doing *Danda*, inflicting injury and torture on himself, so that he would be able to liberate himself from the cycle of *karma* and *pratikarma* or the law of actions and reactions or free himself from the results of the sins if he had committed inadvertently or otherwise.¹³

The *bhaktas* move from village to village and perform at a house only when invited. The *bhaktas* roll on the hot sand in the mid-day sun of summer, dance and sing, praying for the welfare of the householder. Whether someone in the family is childless or poor or suffering from some incurable diseases, the householder usually vows to become a '*bhakta*' next time if his miseries are removed.¹⁴

There was a general belief among the people that men would be free from all the sins if they become *danduas* and observe all rituals. The austerities and physical sufferings include walking on fire, piercing the back with sharp nails, using poisonous snakes as garlands and making them sting the body, piercing the tongue or walking on a sharp sword-edge etc. These are aimed at controlling their senses and taking upon themselves the suffering of the people in general

in order to please and secure boons from Lord Siva, the divine ascetic¹⁵. A *dandua* remains practically on fast with all sanctity in all these days except taking simple food in the night hours, along with his co-participants, in total silence in a remote place away from din and bustle of human settlement. This rigorous dance or *nata* is related to that of the aboriginal tribals. The very conception of this *nata* rallies round a tribal story about how a man while hunting in forest was caught and bitten by a deadly snake, fell unconscious on the ground. His wife deeply perturbed at the pitiable condition of her husband, started instantly praying and worshipping God Siva and Goddess Kalika invoking their divine blessings for bringing her husband back to life and at the end both the God and Goddess being pleased at the prayer of the woman bless her and her husband finally come back to life, which proves the divine aspect of the *Nata*. It also gives emphasis on the eternal truth of the ultimate victory of the good over the evil, and of the truth over the untruth¹⁶.

Different Phases of *Danda Nacha*

The *Danda* is taken into a procession by a large number of devotees. The *Danda natcha* procession starts from the Merughara¹⁷ to the invited places when the occasion starts. The *Danduas* (i.e. the *Danda* performers) never use any vehicle to reach at the different places. The procession is led by *parabha* (or *prava*) a person, believed to be wielding mystique powers and is joined by local artists, who fashion themselves on multiple characters like, Siva-Parvati, Chadheya and Chadheyani, Sabar-Sabarani, yogi, Binakar etc¹⁸.

Danda Nacha is a ritualistic theatre. The *Danduas* move from village to village carrying the colourful triangular flags, *damdaghadis*, *champabara* (straw coil/ added with fire),

Khatuli (a portable wooden pedestal) where the Siva idol is enshrined, *parabha* (a printed Kali banner) etc.¹⁹ During the performing hours, the *pata dandua* performs their acrobatic actions, lighting the *Dandaghadis* following the beats of music. The *Jhuna-atika* (rasin-pots) are meant to carry rasin powders and the *champabaras* utilises to preserve the fire in smoky condition.

The *Danda Nacha* is held in four phases. The first phase is *Bandana* or prayer in the morning. The second phase is *Dhuli-danda*, in the midday, the third phase *pani Danda* in afternoon, the fourth phase is *Agni Danda* (in midnight).

1. The First Phase (Bandana):

In the morning *Bandana* or prayer is conducted by the *danduas* in front of the house of the sponsoring *Bhakta*. In this phase, a contract is concluded between the sponsor and the *Danda* party about holding of a *Nata* (Dance drama) on that day night in front of the former's residence.

2. The Second Phase (Dhuli Danda)

The second phase starts at the midday around 12 O' clock in front of the residence of the sponsoring *bhakti* with the performance of '*Dhuli-Danda*' (punishing his own body by sleeping on and playing with hot sands on the surface of earth by *Danduas*) where the *danduas* do all kinds of torturous physical exercises on the heated ground with bare bodies under the hot midday sun. By doing such painful physical exercises the *Danduas* believe that they are doing a penance for their sins by their prayer to God Siva and Goddess Kalika to bestow blessing on them and as well as on the sponsorer *bhakta*. Thus, the performance done by the *Danduas* (persons, who follow all the rituals of Saiva cult for purification of soul) during daytime is known as '*Dhuli Danda*'²⁰. The conductor *Danduas*,

at whose instructions the *Danduas* do their physically torturous dances with the beatings of the *Dholas* (big drums) is called *Pata dandua*. *Dhuli Danda* is largely associated with the agricultural life of the people in general²¹. During the play different characters such as *hailas* (servant), *khambari* (chief-servant), *tapia* (mason), *bepari* (business person), *kasturia* (plank cutter), *mulia* (labourer etc. come to the arena in their costumes and make up and perform their notes.²² The roles of the different characters are performed by men only.

3. Third Phase (*Pani Danda*):

Another special feature of the *Danda Nacha* is *Pani Danda* (dance in water). Every day after the completion of *Dhuli Danda*, all the *danduas* go to the river or tank to take their bath. Thus, the third phase of *Danda Nacha* begins with the dipping of the *Danduas* deep in the water of an allotted tank off and on for about an hour called '*Jala Danda*' or *Pani Danda* (meaning-receiving punishment or physical torture in the water). At the bathing ghat, the *parabha* (painted Kali banner) is worshipped and the *patta-dandua* lights the *Danda-ghadis* (earthen torches) for the *parabha* with certain rituals and the torches are used to be burnt for the whole night.²³ After *Jala Danda* is over, the *danduas* get themselves ready for taking the days only meal at midnight which is simplest in kind and menu²⁴.

While the only meal of the day is being consumed amidst the continuous sound of drum (*dhola*) beatings, beaten by the drummer, and as soon as the drum beating stops, the *danduas* stop taking their meals. The beating of the drum is felt necessary so that the *danduas* while eating their meals would not be able to hear any sound other than that sound. If a *dandua* happens to hear any external sound, in that case, he abandons his meal

till the next meal on next night and he is to remain on fast without any food till then²⁵.

4. Fourth Phase (*Agni Danda*)

After eating they proceed to a temple preferably that of Lord Siva and stay there till the fourth phase starts in the night around 12 O' clock with the performance of *Ágni Danda* (playing with fire). This is sort of offering worship to Lord Siva and Goddess Kalika through *Agni Danda* or playing and dancing with fire in front of the images.

The *danduas* go to the village in procession during mid-night holding the lighted *Danda-ghadis*. They reach in front of the house of the sponsoring *Bhakta* displaying *Danda - khela*²⁶. During *agni-Danda*, the *parabha-nata* or *Kalika nata* (Kali dance) is also performed. They amuse the general spectators by performing different folk arts including dance and drama. In *Agni-Danda* (midnight performance), the characters like Iswara (Siva), Parvati, *Chadheya*, *Chadheyani*, *Sapua*, *Binakara* etc. appear in the *mandala* with their acting costumes. The performers stage the dance drama on social, historical and mythological themes. Now a days the *Danda* parties stage different social dramas (operas) to entertain the public. Thus from midnight till dawn beautiful dramatic performances take place accompanied by melodious music and beating of *dholas* (drums)²⁷. In the morning, after the end of the dance and drama, *Danduas* disperse from there in a procession with the beating of drums alongwith the images of deities to the doors of the next sponsored *bhakta* where they would repeat the routine *nata* performance in the same and similar manner. On the 21st day, they conclude the *Danda Nacha* on the *Bishuba Samkranti* or *Meru Samkranti* day with all serenity and sanctity in the observation of rites and rituals in the valedictory celebrations.

Conclusion:

This popular folk dance of Ganjam *Danda Nacha* is mainly based on mythological legends. It is influencing the society to a large extent by creating the sense of patriotic spirit, love for literature, belief in God, taste for music, theatre and dance. It serves as an instrument of social unity.²⁸

References :

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Rabindra Nath Dash, Lecturer in History, Gopalpur College, Gopalpur-on-Sea, Ganjam.