

# FOLK DANCE: A DISTINCTIVE PERFORMING ART TRADITION OF ODISHA

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The traditional focus in the study of folk dance has been marked, more or less, on the equilibrium analysis and configurations in societies characterized by its small sizes, isolated location and homogeneous of the population. Folk culture has been generally considered to be the study of primitive societies. The cultural program the source of entertainment has been performed in various forms all over the world since the dawn of the civilization. Archaeological evidences indicate that dancing was a common pastime in Harappan period in ancient India. The literary sources are also replete with the cultural phenomenon of the folk tradition. In Yajur Veda, a pole dancer or acrobat has been mentioned. In the past, people were well versed with the art of vocal and instrumental music. The references of drums, flutes are also available in the later Vedic Literature. Epics, Purans and legends bear clear testimony of the folk culture in reminiscence. Odisha has been considered to be an important center of folk culture since time immemorial.

The Hatigumpha inscription, one of the earliest lithic records of ancient times refers to the arrangement of festivals and social congregations along with performances of acrobatics, dance as well as vocal and instrumental in the capital city in third regal year by the emperor Kharavela who himself was well versed in the art of music. In the historical geography of India, Odisha (Orissa) occupies an important entity from 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. Right from her hoary past the people of Odisha have played significant roles in the cultural and political ferments of the whole country. Though the glory that was ancient Kalinga or Utkal is no more, yet to the antiquarians and historians who dig into the past, historic Odisha still, lives in her extent monuments, inscriptions, copper plates and manuscripts. The reference to the Music, Dance, Drama that has been made in the Hatigumpha inscription speaks of the heritage of performing arts since very early times anterior to Kharavela's reign. By his personal interest and patronage the spirit of dance and music which Kharavela instilled in the lives of the aboriginals of Odisha became a part and parcel of their lifestyle, which continues as a precious artistic heritage even today among them in Odisha. For whatever reasons may be the culture of Odisha has maintained in some form or other its originality and uniqueness till the

present day. The remnants of the past and continuity of the traditional culture which has been possible in spite of the influx of cultures from the outside have been the striking features of the Odisha history. Odisha has been made substantial contributions to enrich the folk culture with a special identity of its folk tradition.

Odisha society is a continuum of tribal and non-tribal elements even to this day. Every aspects of its socio-cultural life – be it religion, language, art, painting, dance drama or literature, bears a stamp of their own culture. Odisha has as many as folk dances and literature of which most of them are identified as primitive and they form considerable percentage of the State's total population. Though the cultural heritage of the tribals is the potential aspect of the socio cultural life of Odisha, little is known about their society, cultural values and mysterious traditions.

Odisha perhaps, has the greatest number of folk dance forms in India, most of which are associated with the ceremonies of worship, marriage, war, courtship, hunting and imitation of antics of animals and daily routine involving household and village life. Each dance is characterized by the variety of its own forms, gesture, costumes and accompanying music. The dance forms own their genesis existence and development of the local tradition and social milieu.

Any form of art whether it is painting or performing, takes a shape in the form and character in a continued tradition over years of sincere pursuit over centuries they draw inspiration from the prevailing religion art and culture. Thus, performing arts of any country or region can be regarded as unassuming creative expression of the people. They form an integral part of their lives, society, age old customs and traditions. From ancient times, dance, music and festivals constitute the common feature of the socio-cultural life of the people of Odisha. The Odias have ornamented the whole land with innumerable magnificent temples dedicated to God and Goddesses. These temples practically epitomize the social and cultural life of the Odias. Be it dance or music, it is a soul filling means of religious participation, a way of reaching the God/Goddesses. Therefore, most of them are associated with religious worship, fairs, festivals and as well as they serve as means of social and cultural recreations. Most of the studies on the life and culture of the Odia people are

mainly anthropological and socio-graphic in their format and texture. The general pattern of history often conceals the variety of ethnic differences throwing a drapery on demographic reality. Historical analysis of the age old practices, lifestyle or socio-cultural habits of the Odias are found neglected in many of the recent works. An humble attempt has been made in this paper to throw new light on this neglected area of Odisha history.

Dance is the most popular form of performing art in Odisha. The people of Odisha evolved their unique native styles which are distinctly different from other regions. Different dances are performed on different occasions according to the religious rituals and they are celebrated and associated with the arrangement of fairs, festivals and gathering of friends and relatives of the rural folk. Especially on festive occasions folk dances relating to the particular festival are performed amidst public gathering and audience.

A brief description about some of the most popular folk dances and performing art tradition of Odisha are given below to know how they are different and distinctive from others performed in other regions of our country.

## II. DANDA NACHA

Danda Nacha or Danda Nata is one of the earliest form of folk dance/performing art of Odisha. It is mostly prevalent in Puri, Ganjam, Balangir, Sambalapur, Phulabani and Dhenkanal regions of Odisha. It is mainly based on religious traditions of the worship of Lord Shiva and Goddess Kali.

Danda means a pole, Nacha or Nata means dance or performing art. Danda also means penance. Together Danda Nacha means a festival celebrated for the worship of Shiva in which penance, dance, music and songs are performed to please the God and invoke His blessings.

The origin of Danda Nacha has been traced to the 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D especially during the period of the inception of tantricism after degradation of Buddhism in Odisha. It is evident that after the degradation of Buddhism, Saivism emerged as a popular religion in Odisha, most particularly for the untouchables and low caste people into which the status of most of the Buddhism were relegated. Since the upper class Hindus monopolized the privilege of entry to the temple and debarred the untouchables and low castes from entering the Hindu temples, they began to worship Shiva outside the Hindu temples.

In due course of time they observed certain rites in connection with the worship of Shiva and started a festival, once a year, popularly called as Danda Nacha. Gradually these practices of the rituals and festivals become the integral part of the Danda Nacha and the practice turning to a tradition.

There is no caste distinction in Danda Nacha, whoever desires irrespective of their caste, creed,

social and economic status may join it as a devotee or bhakta. A bhaktas is otherwise known as a Dandua or a Rishi putra. However, participation in Danda Nacha as a Dandua or Bhakta is allowed to males only. During the period of the Danda the Bhaktas stay in the group avoiding all contact with women or anything worldly in nature and lead an ascetic life. The chief of the Danduas is called Pata Dandua or Pata Bhakta. Generally the Danduas are divided into groups, one on the ritual side and on the other, a group of artists who perform the folk art. The bhaktas or danduas move from village to village and perform the Nacha (dance) at a house or common place when invited.

Danda Nacha is performed in four phases : the Bandana in the morning, Dhuli Danda in the mid-day, pani or Jala Danda in the evening and Agni Danda in the midnight. After the performance, the danduas disperse from there in the morning in a procession with the beating of drums, the prime musical instrument of the event. They repeat the routine in different places for the entire period i.e. 13 or 21 days.

Danda Nacha is a popular folk dance and theatrical performance in Odisha which largely contributes to promote the social harmony, cultural values, spiritual upliftment, taste for music and performing art.

## III. PRAHALAD NATAK

Of all the folk plays of Odisha, Prahalad Natak prevalent in the district of undivided Ganjam is perhaps the most popular elaborate ornate and colourful dance- drama. Prahalad Natak was first conceived and patronised by the Royal family of Jalantar in Ghumsur area. It is essentially poetic in nature. It has one hundred and twenty songs for the Characters to sing. The singer (Gayak) acts as the interpreter of the play. The Gayak has specific songs and dialogues. The theme of the play is mainly based on mythological legends of Bhakta Prahallad, Hiranyakasyapa and Lord Nrusinghnath. The whole episode of Bhakta Prahallad gets enacted through this play. It is performed in the open air on a five or six tired stage. There about twenty characters in this play nearly all of whom are required to dance, mime and use stylized gestures. The characters were distinctively elaborate costumes and make up. The orle of Prahallad is usually played by a young boy. The whole text of the play is a continuous long piece and no scene divisions or acts. Deeply religious in nature this traditional play is a mixed variety of dramatic entertainment with music, song, dialogue, verse and proper narrative, mime and dance to form an unique tradition of folk drama.

## IV. DASAKATHIA NACHA

Dasakathia another popular performing folk art of South Odisha and the most indigenous form of ballad

singing in Odisha, is said to have been originated in the 15<sup>th</sup> century in the village of Pitala of Ganjam district. The word Daskathia has been derived from the word 'DASA' means a devotee and 'KATHI' means wooden pieces. Dasakathia (also called Ramtali) is a pair of castanets or wooden clappers, the playing of which accompany the singing one played by the singers during the dance performance. This dance is performed by two singers (players) only. The senior player is called Gayaka (Main Singer) and the junior as Palia (Co-Singer/Palia), Gayak literally means singer and Palia means repeater or follower. The Gayak first tells the story in lyrics and the same is repeated by the palia adding to it some satires and humour. Generally the theme of the story is based on mythological legends and learned pundits having sound knowledge in the puranas, sastras and literature perform this dance art by narrating different mythological themes with touches of satire and modern taste to entertain the audience. After the performance takes proper gear, the singer-players use to play the role of different characters in the story and perform the actions and events through their dramatic actions which stir much interest among the audience touching their hearts and mind.

#### **V. RANAPA NACHA**

Ranapa literally means a stilt is the main attraction in this folk dance. The dance on the stilts is prevalent among the cowherd communities of south Odisha. The young village dancers standing on the stilts, dance with at most ease to the accompaniment of Dhol and Mahuri. Songs relating to Lord Krishna's childhood are sung during the dance / performance. This dance has become so popular that / often in cultural festivals they are invited to entertain the people. They are also invited to perform this dance in international cultural festivals being organized by different European countries.

#### **VI. SAKHI NACHA**

Sakhi Nacha is another very popular dance, drama of south Odisha. Sakhi means female companion. The concept of Sakhi Nacha has been developed on the central love story of Radha and Krishna. It is believed that Krishna used to meet Radha disguised as different personalities at different time and the Sakhis of Radha played a greater role in helping Krishna for the same. They also use to dance on other similar developed songs. Numerous troops of Sakhi Nacha are found in the Ganjam district of Odisha. The Sakhi Nacha groups mostly perform the Odishi songs composed by the classical medieval poets of Odisha. The songs are composed mainly on the theme of divine love and romance between Radha and Krishna. Most of the Sakhi Nacha teams include young boys for the purpose of singing and dancing in the guise of girls. The participants dance and perform while

singing the devotional songs dedicated to Radha and Krishna. Similarly we notice another performing dance-drama prevalent in the district of Ganjam popularly known as Radha Prema Leela which is also based on the love story relating to Radha and Krishna. The influence of Bhakti Movement in India resulted in the development of literature as well as folk dance. Most of the folk dances were performed centered round the theme of the mythological legends. Besides Radha Prema Leela other popular performing dance drama prevalent in the district of south Odisha include Krishna Leela, Rama Leela, Bharat Leela etc.

#### **VII. KELA NACHA**

The Kela, a particular caste community especially found in the district of Ganjam is famous for its acrobatic feats of dancing nature during the dance performance. It is very popular as a household circus. The male participants in this circus play drums and exhibit muscular feats whereas the female participants climb on the top of a bamboo and display difficult acrobatic feats. Because of their dancing acrobatic feats on the top of the bamboo they are popularly called the BAUNSA RANI or the Bamboo Queen.

#### **VIII. GHODA NACHA (HORSE DANCE)**

Ghoda Nacha is another popular folk performance of Odisha. The dance is originated from the fishermen community who celebrate the dance on the full-moon day of Chaitra (March-April). It is also performed on other occasion. The dancers worship Goddess Baseli through this dance. Baseli is a local presiding deity who is believed to be horse-headed. So the representation of the Goddess Baseli is made of a well decorated horse-head made of wood painted brightly in red, black, yellow and white colours. This dance is usually performed by three characters, the horseman, the Raut, and Rautain. The Raut is the main singer commentator while the Rautani in the role of his wife going as co-singer and dancer. The dance is made lively with improvised dialogues and humorous episodes. The horseman dances forward and backward with the breathing of drums. This Ghoda Nacha or dancing provides popular recreation in the coastal villages of Odisha.

#### **IX. BAGHA NACHA (NATA) OR TIGER DANCE**

Bagha Nacha (Tiger Dance) is an imitative dance of the animal among the tribal people who used to perform it before and after they go for hunting. Now it is performed as a popular folk dance in Ganjam district of Odisha. The dance is intricately associated with the famous Thakurani Yatra of the district. Mainly it is performed during the ritual festivals of

the Mother Goddesses Thakurani or Durga who also rides on a tiger or lion. During the performance the dancer(s) is surrounded by a group of Changu players who by beating the changus encourage him to dance. In this dance the body of the dancer(s) is painted bright in yellow and black in a striped pattern to give the look of a tiger.

There are two types of Bagha (Tiger): the first is instrumental tiger (Kala Bagha) and the second, painted tiger (Chitri Bagha). There are three varieties of dances, thematically different from each other. Kala Bagha dance, in which a life size four footed tiger is projected within a painted frame for performance. But in, Chitri Bagha dance, an individual performer, wearing tiger mask, is painted as tiger and chitri Bagha group dance involves a group of artists performing dance in harmony. The thematic variations include encounter between tiger and ox, encounter between tiger and hunter and tiger preying on horse etc. With amazing synchronization the dancers move so artistically as per the rhythm played, the movements of the tiger appear realistic. Dhola, Mahuri instruments are played to create the environment and rhythmic sense. Roaring, watching, jumping and running movements are displayed in this dance.

Bagha Nata is an offspring of the emotive relation of the tribal folk with nature. Tiger has been taken as a symbol of cruelty and it has been a passionate desire of the man to score a victory over tiger, the king of the forest. Simultaneously, the grace and authority with which king tiger rules over his subjects has captured his imagination. In this sense, Bagha Nata reflects the yearning for nature in a common man.

Apart from Bagha Nata in Ganjam, mask dances of Gods, Goddess, and other animals like bullocks, horses, demons are very popular. The basic reason of using masks in mask dance is the reflection of the primitive urge of human being, where he always wanted to fight with the nature and other external dangers and enjoy greater freedom in self expression by hiding his face behind a mask. It helps to create an appropriate ambience for transformation into superhuman being that he represents.

## **X. GOTIPUA NACHA**

In Odia colloquial language 'Gotipua' means single boy. The dance performance done by a single boy is known as Gotipua dance, when decadence and declination came in to Devadasi or mahari tradition due to various reasons this Gotipua dance tradition evolved as sequel as these performance were practiced to please God. It is totally unknown that when exactly this dance form came into practice. Still some historians say that this dance tradition appears to have originated during the reign of Prataprudradev (1497 A.D. to 1540 A.D.) and gained popularity in the subsequent Muslim Rule. As Vasishnavs were

not approving of the females in to dance practices so it possible that the dance tradition must have come after Sri Chaitanya came to Odisha. The Gotipua Dance Tradition is now seen in the village Raghurajpur situated 10kms away from Puri town, situated on the banks of river Bhargabi. It is otherwise known as the Crafts Village as various Orissan handicrafts' craftsmen reside in this village contributing their expertise in Patta Painting and other handicrafts.

Under the tutelage of Gotipua Guru Maguni Das several Gotipua dancers are learning the finer elements of Gotipua dance. His repertory also performs in the country and abroad. There are four to five boy dancers in a Gotipura troupe. The boys are attired and made up as females. The dance performance begins with an invocation to five Gods and Goddesses, which is known as Bhumi Pranam. Then the pure dance or Nritya is performed which is followed by Pallavi. The gestures or Bhangis are very simple in Gotipua dance.

The Abhinaya is devoid of any Sanchari Bhava. The Abhinaya has the interludes of Nritya. Various Mudras are existent in the form as per the ancient text. In abhinaya the writings of the medieval Oriya Vishnavite poets like Gopalkrushna, Banamali, and Goura Charan etc. are taken. Various situations are depicted through Mudras and body movements. The attire of Gotipua dancers is very simple and resembles the attire of the Devadasis. The ornaments are all made with all small plastic balls and the headgear is not that prominent. The faces of the Gotipuas are heavily made up. The accompanying instruments are harmonium, manjira and mardal. The Gotipua dancers also perform an acrobatic type of dancing known as Bandha Nritya in which several acrobatic poses like Chaki, Shagadi, Mayura and Chira Mayura are create a feast for the eyes.

## **DHANGADA – DHANGIDI NACHA (DANCE)**

Among the tribes of South Odisha, the Kondhas have a special flavour for dance and music. No festivals or ceremony is considered complete without dance performance in which both men and women participate. The Dhangada-Dhangidi dance is performed by the unmarried grown up boys and girls of Kandha community. Both girls and boys take part in this dance. The male members sing and play on the traditional instruments. The girls do not sing but perform the dance by moving forward and back ward. This dance is generally performed on the occasion of marriage and other social functions of the Kondha community of south Odisha.

## **DHEMSA NACHA**

Dhemsas is the most popular and rhythmic folk dance of Koraput district in Odisha. The heritage of folk music and community dance of Koraput district continues to be a part of the rural and tribal life. Despite changing values and influences of modernity,

the tribal folk of Koraput have succeeded in retaining most of their genuine music and the dance forms in their original pristine beauty. The rhythms of life is embedded in this performance.

There is no age bar for the dancers. The dancers use to assemble at one central place of the village and start dancing Dhemsa together in their traditional way what they have learnt from their elders since their childhood. They dance to the tune of the Mahuri, Drum, Dhapa, Dholo and Changu. The musical instruments largely used to create a thrilling and vibrant atmosphere. The instrument players dance and manipulate their instruments fascinating same time playing with one hand and sometimes with both hands. As a traditional folk dance Dhemsa has its own grace, style and colour. It is among the most colourful dances that presents a tribal kaleidoscope of costume, lyrics, style and zest the dance use their customary dress. One prominent feature of this dance is that the dancers dance in circles or semicircles and the music instruments are played by the side of the dancers and drummers are participating to move in the patterns with running steps and circles and than changing direction, kneeling, bending and jumping. Dhemasa has a special culture identity of Koraput district of Odisha. It is a prominent performing art of the district which is universal, elegant, graceful and colourful.

Besides the above discussed performing art-dance and drama there are some other famous folk dance and drama prevalent in Odisha. Thus Odisha has been a rich store house of numerous dances or performing folk arts, over the centuries, which can rightly be regarded as the glorious and everlasting cultural heritage, attracting universal attraction and appreciation at home and abroad in its multi-dimensional forms and expressions, ornamented with

qualities of both head and heart, in most meaningful and conceivable ways, manners and styles. Indeed these performing arts not only serve as recreations to get rid from the busy life but also provide enjoyment, good social relationship, harmony, physical exercise and to some extent livelihood.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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