

## ***Danda Nata: An Invocatory Performance***

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### **Introduction**

Danda Nata of Odisha, also known as the Danda Yatra, it happens to be one amongst the most ancient forms of histrionic arts of the State. It is the worship of Lord Shiva, the God of destruction of the Hindu mythology. He is also the Lord of histrionic arts (Nataraj). This theatrical form brings into its fold a harmonious feeling of co-existence between followers of different philosophical doctrines, political principles and opinions. Along with votive dedications to Lord Shiva in a Danda Nata, the greatness of other Gods and Goddesses such as Vishnu, Krishna, Ganesh, Durga, Kali etc. are also equally prominent.

The original participants in a Danda Nata were said to be only the lowcaste Hindus, people belonging to all other higher castes such as Kshatriyas and Brahmins also participate in this institution with keen interest. The word 'Danda' denotes several meanings. Mainly it means:

- (1) staff, club, stick, rod, pole, or sceptre; or
- (2) punishment chastisement.

In Danda Nata, a sceptre of the Lord is worshipped and the participants voluntarily bear self-inflicted penance.

### **Hindu Philosophy**

According to the ancient Hindu philosophy, the greatness of an individual in this materialistic world depends upon his accomplishment of self-control over his own

Body (Kaya), Mind (Mana) and Speech (Vakya). It takes tremendous amount of practice to gain this control and amounts to a lot of self-denials. Those, who achieve this, are known as the Tri- Dandis or attainers of triple chastisement.

Since this method of bringing purity of conduct involves a lot of punishments (Danda) to self, this performance is known as the Danda Nata.

Danda Nata commences from the Chaitra Purnima and continues up till the Pana Sankranti (Vishuva Sankranti) day. The months Chaitra and Baisakha are considered to be most auspicious for the worship of Lord Shiva. Many religious treatises indicate that if Lord Shiva is invoked during this period of the year, the earth is blessed with good harvest, wealth and prosperity of the families.

The invocatory performances of Lord Shiva commence from the sixth day of the Meena Month (March-April). For four days starting from the sixth day, preliminary preparations are effected (people make vows), some receive Hukusm (Nostrums), through trance. Then, for eight days, the Jhamu Jatra takes place. The remaining thirteen days of the month are meant for Danda Jatra.

### **Rituals of *Danda Nata* in Odisha**

In Odisha, like the Danda Yatra, there are other kinds of ritualistic festivals as well. These are associated with self-inflicted penance. These are the Patua Yatra, Chadak Puja, Jhamu Yatra and Uda Yatra. Chad'aka Puja and Jhamu Yatra, Uda Yatra penance is demonstrated. In Patu Yatra and Danda Yatra, regular theatrical performances are displayed in the nights.

The participants, in a Danda Nata, invoke the blessing of Lord Shiva. They are all under one vow or the other they may have taken a vow that they should be blessed with a child fulfil an ambition, get rid of sickness, seek happiness in life, reap good

harvest or secure peace and happiness for all the people of their community. The total number of pledge takers is 13 and the number of days for the festival is also 13. The vow takers are known as the Bhoktas. But there is no restriction of number. The number may also increase the Bhoktas (Devotee / Dandua) first initiated to Shiva Gotra or Shiva's clan. All of them wear sacred threads dhotis coloured with red clay or turmeric and carry a cane-staff all the time.

The word Bhoktas has been derived from the word Bhakta (Devotee) Draw from any community the leader of the Bhoktas is known as the Pata-Bhokta. All the Bhoktas lead a very pious life for 21 days. They do not eat meat or fish; nor they cohabit during this period. The Pata Bhokta does not eat rice and lives on fruit-juice and snacks. Others eat just one meal a day; of plain rice etc. and is cooked by themselves at a place away from their residences. During the time of the gruel, any human voice per chance brings an abrupt end to their eating for that day. That is why at some places they keep on beating the drums until the eating is over.

During the period of Yatra, the Bhoktas carry out different forms of services to the Lord and therefore, they are named differently. They are as under Pata Bhokta, Deula Padia, Danda Swami, Nili Patra, Chandania Patra, Gobaria Patra, Danta Kathia Patra, Betua Patra, Dhupia Patra, Bhandaria, Chua Mali etc.

Ghata is the pitcher. In most of the religious and social function of the Hindus, a pitcher full of water holds a very important place. The pitcher represents the body and the water is the life. It represents the God invoked and hence is worshipped with due reverence. After the function is over, the pitcher is again taken to the pond or river from where water had been brought. It is immersed in that pond or river. In Danda Nata, this Ghata is known as the Kamana Ghata, Kamana means desire. Worshipping Kamana Ghata refers to seeking the blessings of the Lord for

the fulfilment of one's desire.

There is an interesting story about the pitcher becoming a symbol of Kamana. Kamana happened to be the name of a Rakshasi (demoness) with whom, Lord Shiva had fallen in love while moving in a jungle. For some time, Lord Shiva forgot his duties to the mankind. Afterwards when he realised his negligence, wanted to leave her. While partings Kamana asked him about her fate and the Lord consoled her saying that at least once a year, the people of the earth would be remembering her; This Ghata named as Kamana is said to be a symbol of hers.

According to the Late poet, Bhikari Charan, this Ghata represents Kalika, the consort of Lord Shiva. Due to her blessings, Bhoktas are able to withstand the self-inflicted torture without any ill effect. It is she who protects all and fulfils all the ambitions. A new pitcher is taken to a pond or river and water is filled in it amidst the sound of drums and blowing of conch shells. This pitcher is first worshipped under taken out in a procession through the village. Then, it is kept in a hut (made preferably in front of a Shiva's temple), known as the Kamana Ghara.

Two pieces of cane-sticks, representing Hara and Gouri, are also kept near the Ghata and worshipped. A sacred fire is kept alive in the hut from which, Pata-Bhokta lights up an oil lamp. While lighting, Bhoktas yell with the word Rushi Putre. When resin and myrrh powder is thrown on the lighted oil lamp from time to time it burns up with a flare and the Bhoktas yell the words Kala Rudramani Ho Joy. A staff of the length of 6½ cubits bearing 13 joints (representing 13 Bhoktas) and a piece of cloth tied to its top are worshipped. This is the Kamana Danda.

### **Aesthetics of Danda Nata**

Danda Nata as has been mentioned is the most ancient dance -drama

with theatrical alter. At one time this folk drama was prevalent in all parts of Odisha particularly in western and southern Odisha. It was the most dance drama of those good old days. It was performed in the form of a ritualistic festival. It was therefore called Dandayatra. But this dance drama cum ritualistic festival is fast losing its popularity. It has been mostly wiped out from the Eastern Northern and Central Odisha. Although it exists in some parts of southern Odisha Ganjam North East Balasore (Uda Yatra) and in all parts of Western Odisha, struggling for existence. It is gasping for oxygen. This art is alive in whole district of Angul, and the adjoining Hindol and Kamakshyanagar Sub-division Dhenkanal and the neighbouring Phulbani, Boudh and Sambalpur district. It is not only alive but also throbbing with vigour and vitality, trying to pouncing back to its former life. This essay is treatise on the origin and growth of Danda as an ancient folk dance cum drama of Odisha and its struggle for existence and prospects of survival. Its history though shadowed in obscurity stands affiliated to Saibaism and saktism, the most popular faith and belief of Odisha people which goes back to 4<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. as attested by the discovery of Terasinga inscription of Tustikardeva and circular mother temple from the excavation of Asurgarh in Kalahandi district of this region.

The artist and the connoisseurs of this ancient art are conscious of the mortal blows slapped and trashed on the cheeks of this folk art by the electronic media and the imported foreign music both vocal and instrumental. We must be determined to preserve this ancient form of folk art which is the most precious reservoir of our unique folk

culture. The well wishers must encourage the performing artists who are striving to save this art from jaws of the death.

## **Conclusion**

Danda is a thousand years old folk drama of Odisha. This multidimensional art in its sweetness of songs, exquisiteness of dances, enchanting and enrapturing dialogues had established its identity in the golden past as a popular form of people's theatre. But time has changed and is fast changing. If it does not change this art like many other folk arts of the world, it will meet its natural extinction. This folk theatrical art is an invocatory performance of Lord SHIVA to fulfil the desire of the Bhoktas (Performers).

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