

Exploring *Leela Danda*: A folk theatre of western Odisha

Panchanan Mishra

Leela Danda (Western Odisha)

The religious current of the Hindus spread from the north to the south and vice versa, and in this process, came the cult of Radha Krishna worship to Odisha. It marked its advent in the remote past as late as 12th century A.D. by the visit in of Sri Nimbarka and his disciples to Odisha who founded five Maths at Puri of which the **Radha Ballav Math** situated just to the east of the Lion's gate of Jagannath Temple is noteworthy. There after a number of Maths grew throughout the length and breadth of the State. Contemporary epigraphic records throw flood of light regarding the religious activities of the great savants of Vaishnavism. It is believed, **Sri Jayadev**, the author of **Geeta Govinda** was himself a devout Vaishnava in his youth and was greatly influenced by the Nimbarka school of philosophy, either by coming into the personal contact of its founder or by intimate association with his followers. Inspired by this school of philosophy that gave great prominence to the worship of Radha and Krishna, Jayadeva gave out to this world his unique creation of Sanskrit poetry '**Sree Geeta Govinda**'. It is not only a piece of poetic marvel but also contains elements of music and drama. According to the tradition of the Sanskrit theatre in Odisha it must have been staged in the premises of the Jagannath Temple where it was composed. The impact of **Geeta Govinda** became enormous in the religious and cultural life of the people of Odisha. It inspired a number of imitations both in Sanskrit and Odiya language. Translations in old Odiya verse of the text is more than a dozen in number of which that by Dharanidhara is the most popular. There are more than fifteen dramas and kavyas in Sanskrit written by Odiya writers in imitation of the **Geeta Govinda**. Ray Ramananda, the then Vaishnavite governor of Raj Mahendri who relinquished his post in lieu of religious pursuits and lived at Puri, wrote "**Jagannath Ballava Natakam**" in imitation of the text and it became immensely popular both in Odisha and Bengal.

The beginning of 16th century marked a religious resurrection in Odisha. The visit of **Sri Chaitanya** and his religious teachings of erotic mysticism immediately caught the imagination of the war ridden people of Odisha. In their hearts it spread like wild fire and the whole mass got swayed with the current. It was more accelerated when **Prataprudra Deva**, the king of Odisha himself became a disciple of **Sri Chaitanya** and extended royal patronage

for its propagation. Under the deep spell of Vaishnavism a number of Odiya poets emerged, who wrote innumerable songs of devotion pertaining to the amorous sports of Radha and Krishna. They added music to their songs and prescribed **raga** and **tala** for each. And all these songs gave the basis to the Odiya '**Ras Leela**' or '**Krishna Leela**'.

Ras Leela centres round the immortal love story of Lord Krishna with Radha and the Gopis. As a dramatic form it is most popular in Odisha. It is known by different names in different areas. In the district of Cuttack it is called Krishna Leela or Gopa Leela at Puri it is Rahasa, and in *Ganjam* it is Krishna Leela and Radha Premaleela and in Western Odisha the amorous love story of Radha-Krishna is depicted in the folk Theatre Danda Nata known as Leela as Danda or Prathamabhet. The story line of Leela Danda depicts the love story of Radha-Krishna. Though Leela is mainly devotional in spirit and content. There is humour in it. Male only play the roles both of males and females. All the actors play the emotions as well as the events by singing of their portions in an action order. In the past, narrative in musical verse was provided by the chorus. But, nowadays short dialogues have been introduced which are said in an artificial melo-dramatic tone. The chorus singers always repeat the refrains. Leela danda performances continue for several nights.

For about a decade Sri Goswami did cast a magic spell over the people of Odisha. In his days, his name became a by-word in every Odiya household. He contributed immensely not only for the growth of Rasa. The Oriya drama, film, dance and music also owe a great deal to his pioneering efforts. Some of the finest actors and actresses of the Odiya stage were from his group. **Sri Kelu Charan Mohapatra**, the eminent Odissi Guru started his career as a boy-dancer in his party. A number of eminent musicians and music teachers of Odisha were his disciples. Leela was more or less a religious-institution. It thrived under the patronage of religious persons and Vaishnava maths. It adapted itself to changing times and therefore entertained the people for long. It is deeply religious in content and demanded austere practices to follow. The dances bear the burden of its continuation. Moreover the basic elements of folk drama attract the attention of the common people touch their hearts for its sweetness. Humour is an essential ingredient of folk drama which finds its place in this Leela. It's a theatre for the common folk. Some people think it to be an ordinary form of Leela but it seems it is very difficult to portray the divine characters as discussed with some folk performers who are enacting the role of Radha-Krishna in Leela Danda.

In this age of science and the modern advancements the religious beliefs are slowly relegated to the back ground and the revelations are making it more forceful. New ideas are over powering the mankind. As such this Leela could not sustain itself as it could not expand or imbibe new ideas. It strictly remained in the iron fold of religion. At present there are professional groups performing this theatre as and when required by the producer.

In the district of Puri and Ganjam there are some prosperous **villages** in which Ras Leela performance is an annual feature. It continues for several nights and the expenses are borne by the villagers. Rich houses take charge of the boy actors whom they provide with free boarding and lodging during the performance period. In the district of Ganjam Ras Leela is known as **Radha Prema Leela. The verse play was written by Raja Sri Viswambara Rajendra the then ruler of Chikiti a Zamindari in the district of Ganjam. In his life time he propagated it and a number of village group have still maintained** the tradition. It is essentially a verse play and one hundred and eighty songs in all. Excepting few songs where verses have been cast in form of dialogue between Radha-Krishna each particular song is meant for a single character. A number of songs are meant for the Gahaka or the interpreter. With a band of musicians (Mardala, Gini, Ramtali and Harmonium players) and chorus singer the Gahaka (Chief singer) holds the strings of performance. The role of Radha is most different as she is required to be present on the stage most of the time. Krishna comes to meet Radha to win her love After various scenes of love play, the lila ends.

As mentioned early the Rasaleela or Radha-Krishna Leela as described in Indian context is also found in Western Odisha in a diverse theatrical tradition depending on words, movements, acting, integrated revolving round with the Radha-Krishna plot of love affairs. The Krishna theme seems to be taken from Harivansa Puran, the appendix to Mahabharata. From the Puranic literature it is amply clear that the rasa (the romantic affair) or rasaka as a distinct category of performance assume importance with its graphic description in the Srimad-Bhagabata. The Leela Danda of Western Odisha is based on the sonorous love theme of Radha & Krishna. Danda Nata is the most ancient ritualistic form of dance drama, a folk theatre performed in the village street or in any open platform with a view to appeasing and supplication of Shiva and Parvati, the presiding deities of this Loka Natya. In the night

sixteen Suangas are performed by the Danduas. In between the two scenes of the main plot a Sakhi dance and is presented. It is the most amorous and exuberant dance of the eight Gopis of Gopapur with Srikrishna who appears before then in the disguise of a boatman. It is Rasa Leela presented in a simpler form in the village street. It can be compared with the Rasa-Leela of Vrindaban. The spectators enjoy the enchanting and amorous question and answer song and dance of the Gopis with their divine lover Krishna and drink the nectar flowing from the songs dialogues.

Shiva-Parvati Leela had occupied the centre stage of Danda Nata from the 6th-8th century B.C till 16th century. But this stereotyped plot lost its appeal. Danda lost its former popularity. The Vaisnava cult was having tremendous impact on the people. They accepted Radha-Krishna Prem Leela. The romantic affair between Radha & Krishna as the plot entered the theatrical arena. This plot enchanted the audience Danda Nata once more bounced back to life bundling with vigour and vitality Co- incidentally 16th century was also the age of Renaissance of the same vaisnab cult in Western Odisha, as a result Vaishnavism flower had in this region . The Sanchar artist had already made Krishna Leela very popular in rural areas. The theme of Radha & Krishna was taken for performance in Danda Nata. The theme provided main inspiration to the creations of Rasa.

Bandi Nata / Bandi Butal

Bandi Nata/ Bandi Butal is an adjunctive form of Danda Nata prevalent in the Western Odisha and some parts of Dhenkanal district Bandi is not related to any festival or ritual. Depicting an episode from the immortal love story of Radha and Krishna it's growth and popularity was marked at a vary later date. Bandi Nata was invented for the propitiation of Krishna and Radha.

Bandi (The nick name) in tribal dialect means a widow Kutila, the sister of Chandrasena. Chandrasena is the husband of Radha. Some scholars opined Bandi is in love with Krishna. But symbolises the character of 'Bandi' as against Radha in the game of love towards Krishna because it depicts the selfless sacrifices of her utmost love in favour of Radha and her help which resulted in the union of Radha & Krishna. Kutila being the central character, the play is called Bandi Nata. Kutila plays a vivacious role in the love play of Radha and Krishna.

The play is full of dance and songs tuned in various folk and traditional styles cast in the form of dialogues. Each character sings a stanza and then puts a piece of pure dance. Like this it continues to the last. A group of chorus singers repeat the refrains in a very loud voice. They occupy one side of the pandal. But the drummer with a huge country drum hung round his neck controls the whole performance. Often he shouts the beats-dances with the characters. He serves as a pivot to the whole show. Generally expert drummers are selected for Bandi Nata those who are apt in bringing outstanding rhythmic patterns.

Though Bandi Nata is essentially Vaishnavite to the core, the invoking piece is still dedicated to Lord Shiva and Parvati who also appear as character in the play in Dhenkanal district. This form is essentially folk, both in dance and music though traditional tune have been introduced of late. On like Suanga 'The Characters introduced them selves through songs. Bandi Nata is not a written play passes orally from one group to another.

Thetal Dance

The other name of "Bandi Butal" is 'Thetal'. In sundargarh district, 'Thetal dance' has gained popularity. A male dressed as a female enters the arena. He is called Thetal. Theta! literally means as intermediary. After dancing for sometime, he (Thetal) invites his inmates in prose order and in local dialect. Then two or three boys dressed as girls come in. All of them use local ornaments of cheap metals. After some humorous conversations all of them sing songs in local dialect and dance, with the Thetal in front. The music of this dance has suffered a lot from the influence of film songs.

Abandone Bandi

Danda originated both in Western Odisha and Southern Odisha at the same time. The people of western Odisha accepted Sri Krishna and Sri Radha as the presiding deities. The 16th and 17th centuries as the Vaishnavism become the dominant cult of the people. Radha - Krishna plot had greater appeal to them that of Shiva-Parvati. In course of time love of the sacred Radha-Krishna theme degenerated. Krishna was depicted as a Bohemian and Radha as a Concubine carrying on an illicit and illegal clandestine affaire. Imaginary characters like Chandrasena a evince, Jotila his mother and Kutila his sister (Bandi) were depicted. The theme was dramatized and presented on the stage first as a

secondary plot and then as the main plot. The plot appealed to the amorous sentiments of the audience which was a conglomeration of the rustic populace. Freudian theory or suppressed sexual desire work well. The dialogues were written in slang language. The pornographic was full of obscenity. Folk-art allows the presence of obscenity with it as obscenity is regarded as the Prana or life-centre of folk-art. But there should be a limit. The new form called Bandi crossed the limits of decency and decorum. It became nauseating. The civilized spectators of rebind caste and artistic sensibility discarded this form. It was abandoned. Production of Bandi was prohibited by the mandatory will of the elite. It was segregated from the main theme. The obscene portions were deleted from the plot. Yet Bandi did not die. It established itself as a separate drama bearing separate name and acquiring its own identity. It is being performed in the interior villages for the rustic villagers who are philistines. There the enthusiastic spectators and sympathetic patrons of the abandoned folk-drama called Bandi.

Panchanan Mishra is PhD, independent researcher-author-theatrician. He is a Faculty at the Department of Drama, Sambalpur University, Odisha, India. Email: drpanchananmishra@gmail.com