

***Danda Nata* : A Ritualistic-Traditional-Folk Theatre Prevalent in Western Odisha**

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“Danda Nata”, a ritualistic-Traditional-Folk theatre has been evolved till today since time in memorial. It is famous and prevalent mostly in western odisha. Folk simply means the common people who have taken no pains to be conversant with the laws of consonance, who do not know what is art or science. The joy and sorrow of their life: their emotion, song, dance and drama, their rituals, costumes, religion and social behaviour are called the folk elements. India with her glorious past is today confronted with a new phenomenon called modernisation. In the annals of human history the legacies which our ancestors have passed to us over several years represent the proud achievements of the creative Indian mind in religion, philosophy, art, literature, culture, painting, dance, drama, music etc. It conveys a sense of permanent value which has served as the guiding forces of Indian-life through several centuries. The Indian way of life has found noble expression in classical and modern literature, art, painting, sculpture, dance, drama and music, displaying an unbounded creative energy having lasting influence, which continues to be a vital force even today in the world perspective. T.S. Eliot(1) in his ‘Observation of culture’ states that “The basic of culture is religious beliefs. The Indian

cultural life with mind boggling ranges of philosophical systems, religious beliefs and practices has the highest flight of metaphysics to the simplest folk cults.”

Bharatmuni’s Natyasastra provides guidelines to our social classical Indian drama, but said very little about the folk form of theatre. Only some references to popular folk drama like “Rasaka” and “Charachari” are made. The Indian classical dance and drama because of its association with temples and aristocratic families remained cut-off from the common mass, whereas folk dance and drama, on the other hand, is mainly based on myths having religious overtones which enjoy the patronage of the common folk.

The only rightful place folk drama received was in Jain Shastras where they were vividly described in the context of ceremonies and festivities. The Jain priests spoke the language of the masses and became one of them. They took an interest in all aspects of their life and therefore, these folk forms received their utmost attention. The classical Sanskrit drama became degenerating from the 10th century because of uncongenial social conditions, while folk drama received greater attention by the interest of the mass. The rise of Vaisnavism in the 15th century give an impetus to folk drama and folk forms such as RASLEELA, RASDHARI, ANKIYANAT, depicting the life of ‘Krishna’. The influence of chaitanya Mahaprabhu in the 12th century could also be seen in the dance forms of Manipur and singing and dancing squads of Bengal later known

as 'Jatra'. The Rassadhari folk drama of Rajasthan was perhaps the product of 16th and 17th Century, which is totally different from the Ramaleela and Rasaleela of U.P., influenced by Rama and Krishna cluts. The Kahayal of Rajasthan, the Bhabal of Gujrat, the Tamasa of Maharashtra, The swang of Hariyana, the Bhand Jasan of Kashmir and the Mch of Madhya Pradesh though initially inspired by the devotional folk forms got inspiration from social and other themes touching the day to day life of society: in the 18th and 19th century. These folk forms became so popular that enjoyed their sovereignty in the religion in which they were firmly rooted.

Folk art and folk culture of India have played an important role in the upliftment of tradition, culture and social behaviour of the people of the region. Western Odisha comprising the ten districts- Sambalpur, Sundargarh, Jharsuguda, Deogarh, Bargarh, Bolangir, Sonapur, Nuapada, survived at present with a disappearing condition. Mingled with the emotion and life style of the people of this region. Folk drama is one among them. True to religious spirit with rich beauty and variety one can find the folk element in the folk theatre "**DANDA-NATA**" which is woven with the spirit of religious emotion environment and habitual life style of the people of this region. It can be compared with Baahai of Gujrat, Tamasha of Maharashtra, Raamleela and Raasleela of Uttar Pradesh and Chadak Puja of West Bengal. It is a popular folk theatre known as the **Dance of Torture**. The people of lower status participate in this dance drama. It

is more a ritual dance form of folk drama than dance for dance sake with a great deal of scope for entertainment as well.

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. Its history though shadowed in obscurity stands affiliated to Saivism and Shaktism, the most popular faith and belief of western Odisha which goes back to 4th Century B.C., as attested by the discovery of Terasinga inscription of Asurgarh in Kalahandi district of this region. This is performed in open air on the village streets, without having any proscenium stage. No formal training is given to the artists who dance and act with devotion and convictions. This tradition is passed on from generation to generation by way of observance and remembrance. 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.

Similarly while the original participants in a Danda Nata were said to be only the low caste Hindus, people belonging to all other higher castes such as

Kshatriyas and Brahma 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.

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

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 till pana Sankranti (Vishuva Sankranti) day. The months chaitra and Baishakha are considered to be most auspicious for 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 for the family. In Odisha, like the Danda Yatra, there are other kind of ritualistic festivals as well. These are

associated with self-inflicted penance. These are the festivals as Chadak Puja, Jhamu Yatra and 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 Vew on the otherthe they may be 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 Shakta (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 into 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 the fulfilment of one's desire. There is an interesting story about the pitcher becoming a symbol Kamana happened to be the name of a Rakasyasi (demon) 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 wanted to leave her saying that as least once a year, the people of the earth

world 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 herblessings, Bhoktas are able to withstand the self-inflicted torture without any ill effect. It is she who protects all and fulfil 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 and then taken out in a procession through the village. Then, it is kept in a hut (made preferably in front of a shiva temple) known as **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 6/4 cubits bearing 13 joints (representing 13 Bhoktas) and a piece of cloth tied to its top are worshipped. This is the Kamana Danda. Danda Nata as has been mentioned earlier 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 Danda yatra. 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 Western Odisha in all parts of struggling for existence. It is gasping for oxygen. This art is alive in whole district of Angul, and the adjoining Hindol kamakshya nagar 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, My research work is treatise on the origin and growth of Danda as an ancient folk dance cum drama of Odisha and its struggle for existence an prospects of survival.

References:

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