

Dhuli Danda Nata: Representation of Socio-Religious and Agricultural Life of the People of Western Odisha

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Abstract

Danda Nata is a widely known as a folk theatrical performance like a religious festival by the rural agricultural communities of the Western and Southern part of Odisha. It takes place once in a year at the beginning of April (*Chaitra*) and continues for a period of 13 or 21 days that culminates on *Maha Visubha Sankranti*. In this folk theatre not only dance, music and drama, but also an elaborate range of rituals are performed. It is a festival that dates back to the 8th-9th century AD during the reign of the Somavansi of Subarnapur and the Bhanjas of Boudh. It is thus a religious-theatrical festival participated by the tribal and non-tribal people without any caste discrimination. A day of performance comprises five different phases of *Danda* or punishment or penance namely, *Dhuli Danda*, *Pani Danda*, *Agni Danda*, *Bana Danda* and *Suanga Danda*. *Dhuli Danda* is performed on the ground in the afternoon under the hot sun of April. It consists of short sequences that represent a mixture of rituals, sports, military drill, exercise, yoga, fertility rites, sacred drama, divine possession, dance and other cultural performances. Physical exercises, pranks and ritualized sequences are combined with one another to form a fluid, though sometimes prove ambiguous, a perfectly dynamic structure. *Danda Nata*, thus, has played a vital role in the development of folk literature in western Odisha.

Keywords: *Danda Nata*, Folk, Suanga, Religious, Festival, Prank, Fluid

Introduction

Danda Nata is a cultural synthesis that combines Tantric Buddhism, Tantric Saivism, and Tantric Shaktism with tribal and indigenous folk traditions. It is a renowned folk theatre performed by rural agricultural communities in western and south Odisha, India, every year in April. The festival includes dance, music, drama, and elaborate rituals, and is a religious-theatrical festival attended by all tribal and non-tribal people without caste discrimination. The festival is significant because it coincides with *Chaitra*, the spring season in India, marking a transition in seasons and social and cultural levels. It happens once in a year at the beginning of April and continues for a period of 13 days that culminates on *Maha Vishuba Sankranti*.ⁱ *Chaitra* is also the month of goddesses for their worship in requital of good harvest and anticipation of good crop in the coming year. *Danda Nata* has played a significant role in the development of folk literature, with its songs, dialogues, and proverbial expressions having immense literary values. The festival involves a wide range of dance styles, music, costume, and make-up, and is performed by *Danda* groups who travel through villages barefoot for thirteen or twenty-one days.ⁱⁱ The performance consists of five different phases of *danda* (*Dhuli Danda*, *Pani Danda*, *Bana Danda*, *Agni*

Danda & Suanga Danda) including rituals, sports, military drills, exercises, yoga, fertility rites, sacred drama, divine possession, dance, and other cultural performances.ⁱⁱⁱ

Nomenclature of *Danda Nata*

Danda has a wide range of meanings like stick, pole, staff, club, rod, corporal punishment, chastisement, subjection, control, restraint, to stand, exercise, control, a time unit, penalty etc. The word *Danda* in *Danda Nata* means a 'stick' or a cane stick. It may also refer to a 'pole' that is represented as Shiva and Shakti and worshipped in some places during the performance of *Danda Nata*.^{iv}

'Da' means Female/Nature/*Prakriti* and 'nda' means Male/*Purusha* as explained in scriptures.^v A consummation of male and female principles inspires creation. This is the basis of *Danda Nata* because it is based on fertility rites and it is celebrated for the large agricultural activities related to ancient fertility rites. Some other researchers opine that as *Danda Nata* is normally performed on the village street in Odisha so it is named as *Danda*. The term *Danda Nata* takes its name because the performance takes place in Village Street which is a kind of open air stage. The meaning of '*Danda*' as punishment has also significant role in its nomenclature.^{vi} The 13 *Bhoktas* (Devotees) perform a lot of austerities and ascetic practices during these days of performance. They observe a lot of self-control and restraints. This is a kind of self-punishment they voluntarily accept as a *brata* in order to get the blessings of Almighty. Hence this religio-theatrical performance might be called *Danda Nata*.

Historical Origin of *Danda Nata*

The Keshari dynasty, ruling Eastern Odisha from 5th-11th century AD, was a significant worshipper of Lord Shiva.^{vii} Their patronage and protection led to Shaivism spreading, creating hatred towards Buddhists. They were forbidden from entering Hindu temples, eventually worshipping Shiva annually in *Dandanata*. *Danda Nata*, a folk religio-theatrical performance, is believed to have originated in the 8/9th century AD during the reign of Somavanshi Kings of Koshal.^{viii} This period saw the inception of Tantricism after the decadence of Buddhism. *Danda Nata* was popular among rural agricultural communities and was believed to have originated in the regions between Boudh and Sonapur during the reign of Somavansi rulers of Sonapur and Bhanja rulers of Boudh. The dance was popularized and patronized by then rulers, and the discovery of oldest Shiva temples in the area (Koshaleswar temple of Baidyanath (Sonapur) of 9th century AD, Kapileswar Temple of Charda (Sonapur) of 10th century AD and Shidhheswar temple of Jagati (Boudh) of 9th century AD) supports this idea. According to Kunjabihari Dash, Boudhadharmis were declared untouchable and advised to worship Shiva as their only way to salvation due to the spread of Shaivism.^{ix}

DHULI DANDA

The *danduas* (Devotees) wander from village to village for 13 or 21 days. While passing through a village if a villager wants them to host in front of his house, they make a circle of mud and dung and pour out the water from a brass pot. The *danduas* take it as an invitation to perform *Danda Nata* there in that village in front of the house of the host or at right place on the village street. After worshipping lord Shiva, the band of *danduas* proceeds with the umbrella, *Prabha*(made in Bambo), *Champabara* (made in straw)and other sacred objects to a sacred place at the outskirts of the village where there is the availability of water. Just after the noon, they enter the village beating *dhul* and blowing *muhuri* and

they halt for *Dhuli Danda* in front of the house of the host or any other selected place where 3 or 4 wooden pillars have been fixed on the ground.^x

Dhuli Danda (Sand Service) consists of a sequence of worships, physical exercise, miming and expressive pranks. During the field studies of '*Dhuli danda Nata*', the actual sequence of 16 types of socio-religious service has been carefully observed which is mentioned below.

Opening Puja

In the beginning of *Dhuli Danda*, the devotees first enter the middle of the village with beating of Dhol, singing Mahuri and holding of the metal image of God Siva, flag and umbrella in hot summer of *Chaitra* month. Before *Dhuli Danda* starts, Lord Siva and other deities are first worshipped in the village and then the place where the dance is to be performed is sanctified by sprinkling water. The metal idols of Shiva & Parvati, the *Prabha*, Umbrella, Banners, *Gouribeta*(*cane stick*) are worshipped by offering flower, milk, lamp and incense. Besides Shiva and Parvati, other nine gods and goddesses like *Kalika*, *Dakshina Koli*, *Rudrakali*, *Ranaghanto*, *Bauti*, *Kshetrapala*, *Chandi*, *Bhairavi* and *Bhubaneswari*, are worshipped. Out of these Goddesses *Dakshinakali*, *Rudrakali*, *Bhairavi* and *Bhubaneswari* belong to Ten Wisdom Goddesses and *Ranaghanta*. *Bauti* and *Kshetrapala* are local folk deities of Western Odisha. Along with all gods and goddesses, some minor deities of local primacy such as *Budho Gosain*, *Kandhen Budi*, *Panthei* etc. are also worshipped together. They are worshipped in the way that it seems to be an admixture of both Brahminic and indigenous folk tradition of worship.^{xi}

Then two devotees with anklets on their feet and turbans on their heads bow down to Lord Siva and then bow their heads in all direction. At this time the rest of the devotees who are far away also repeat the same activities. And those two main devotees once again bow down to Lord Siva and when they get up, other devotees come from a distance and start dancing with them and finally everyone claps their hands and loudly chants "Kala Rudra Mani Nku Bhaje". After each service is completed, this process is repeated again and again. In this *Dhuli Seva* everyone addresses everyone as *Rishi Putra* and the service concludes with a question and answer between a gentleman and the devotees.

Gentlemen speak (Bhadra Loka)- Oh Rushi Putre.

Bhokta answer- Yes.

Gentlemen Speak-

Aile Hara

(Hara, the lord Shiva came)

Deigale bara

(Distributed blessings)

Anaseva chhadi ehi seva kara

(Give up all other services and concentrate on his worship).

Bhokta ask question to gentlemen- E seva kale ki phala pai?)

(What are the fruits of his worship?)

Gentlemen answer- Andha netra paai

(Blind gets sight)

Aputrika Santana pae

(Issueless gets child)

Khandia kama hue
(Half left works get completed)
Rogi byadhiru mukti pae
(Diseased gets cured from difficult diseases)
Ajnani jnana pae
(Stupid gets knowledge)
Sukhila katha kancha hue
(Dry wood becomes fresh and green)
Ushuna dhana gaja hue
(Boiled paddy even germinates)
Bhaktire je jaha kamana kare
(With devotion whatever who desires)
Taha prapata hue.
(That he gets)^{xii}

1. In the first service, the devotees clean the garbage from the road and go to Lord Shiva and bow there with their hands behind their backs.
2. The second service, the devotees level the uneven surface of the road with the help of a pestle.
3. In the third service, the devotees level the road with the help of a bulldozer. In this service, a devotee lies upright on the road and is pushed by others.
4. In the fourth service, devotees level the road with the help of two bulldozers. In this service, two devotees lie directly on top of each other on the road and are pushed by others.
5. In the fifth service, the devotees sanctify the road by sprinkling sandalwood water. In this service one devotee sits on his knees and another devotee is held by two others and rubs his back. Meanwhile, another person pours water from above, and collects that water in a bowl. And then mix *ukhuda* with that water and dance with a flower and sprinkle it on the road.
6. **(Well Prank)**^{xiii} In the sixth service, devotees open a well for Lord Shiva. Four devotees will act like a well in a rectangle shape with their heads down. In this service, he goes to the forest and fetches a wood. Then with the help of that wood, he performs the act of drawing water with a rope.
7. In the seventh service, turtles and fishes are released in the well to purify the water of the well.
8. The devotees spread some thorns or thorny plants on the ground and the pata bhokta sleeps in that thorns. Then the metal image of Lord Shiva is respectfully kept on the stomach of the Pata Bhokta. Then the other devotees and common peoples come to see Lord Siva and take his blessings. This service is treated as the hard punishment of the Bhoktas. The Bhoktas ends the physical pain because he has strong faith in religion.
9. **(Temple Prank)**^{xiv} In the ninth service, devotees build a temple for Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati. In this, ten to fifteen devotees first hold each other's shoulders and stand on them by holding the shoulders to make the formation of a Temple. The plan for the establishment of that temple and the principles of Vedic rituals are made and Lord Shiva and Parvati are finally installed.
10. In the 10th service, the devotees bring some bats and monkeys from the forest and leave them in the temple.
11. In the 11th service, his nose and ears will be cut off as a punishment for the bear, monkey and bear being forcibly brought out of the forest by the gluttons.

12. Lord Siva and Devi Parvati will come out in the 12th service, In which two Bhoktas act as bulls and other Bhoktas sit on them holding Lord Siva and Devi Parvati. Then they moved to all direction of the village by singing and dancing..
13. In the next service all the devotees face the Dharmadevata(God of Sun) facing upwards and Naga Deity facing downward. Here a big wide stick or wood is kept on the stomach or Body of the devotees and the worshipping walks away on that wood holding the metal Image of the Lord Siva. This process goes on, one gentle man ask question to the devotees. “Oh *Rushiputre*, did you see the *Dharmadevata* or *Naga Devata*” and the other devotees replay positively saying “yes”. This process repeats for five or six time.
14. (**Ploughing Prank**)^{xv} In the fourteen services, devotees practice the ritual of cultivation. For example, tilling the fields, watering the fields, etc. In this, four, eight, twelve people lie face down in rectangular and square shape and form a long field. At this time Veenakara (the harper player) sing the song with veena and explains all the rituals of cultivation through the words of Shiva Parvati.
15. In these fifteen services, the devotees perform the act of ploughing, sowing and harvesting. In this service, two devotees become oxen and another devotee plays the role of a farmer and edits the farm work.
16. (**Chamara Seva**). The last service is called as *Chamara Seva* where all *Danduas* or *Bhoktas* stand in two lines parallel and bow down their heads. Then the *Pata Bhokta* canes along with a *Chamara* (whisk fan) and gives a divine touch of the *Chamara* on the devotee’s heads. This is considered as the blessings of Lord Siva or Devi Parvati.

The exercises are performed with the accompaniment of constant beating of *dhol* and blowing of *muhuri*. Priestly assistants carefully watch the performances standing in front of the *danduas* holding a cane stick sometime touch the stick to a *dandua* admonishing him to perform the exercises more correctly. However, the *danduas* in spite of the heat of the ground and the summer sun above perform the exercises enthusiastically considering it a pious job to do.

However, the pranks are performed in satirical ways, as farces, having a lot of slapsticks, improvisations, buffoonery, and even mild obscenities. In the pranks, language is much more important where as in simple exercises *danduas* use no language. The actors in the pranks have stories to tell and enact. The ambience of the pranks depends on dialogues and funny word play. One aspect is common to all the pranks that there are usually two actors opposing and dialoguing each other who stand in hierarchical relationship. In the temple prank we find the Brahmin priest and his subordinate priestly assistant argue on the proper way in which a certain worship should be conducted or on the terms of payment for the worship. Other actors come in to settle the dispute but they too get entangled in the quarrel very soon.

In the temple prank the Brahmin priest and his assistant first argue on how a temple for Kali or Shiva should be built; which material should be used; how it is to be consecrated; how daily worship should be conducted to get maximum money out of minimum work. The various mocking scenes show the Brahmin priest, pulling of each other's ears, slapping on each other's cheeks, fisting etc in an undignified position that makes the spectators burst out in laughter. This prank also shows how the Brahmin priests indulge in blasphemous things, greed for money, cheating in worship etc. This temple prank thus designed to ridicule Brahmin priesthood, and damask and mock their social supremacy and hierarchy.^{xvi}

In the Ploughing prank the *danduas* lying on the ground faces turned downwards and touching the feet of the other form several rectangles to depict fields. Two or more pairs of *danduas*, holding sticks over their neck like a yoke run over and around these human rectangles driven by a priest actor, miming a farmer ploughing the fields. Sometimes a mime bullock lies down, the mime farmer beats on its back with a stick. The mime bullock rises up and walks again. The mime farmer sings plough songs (*Halia Gita*) depicting the time of monsoon and the episode of Ram's exile to forest. The plough prank depicts some agricultural themes, but it has also some erotic connotations for ploughing itself. It is a metaphor for sexual intercourse.^{xvii}

Immediately after the bullocks leave the field, four or five women, men dressed as women enter the scene in a file carrying food, water etc for the farmer. They move round the fields singing songs accompanied by *dhol* and *muhuri*. They sing the domestic life of a farmer such as smearing the floor with cow-dung, sweeping and cooking etc. They bring food for the farmer in lunch time. They don't find him working in the field. At last, asking some other farmers they find him sleeping in the shade of a tree. The wife of the farmer scolds him for not working. There a dispute ensues between them. The wife tries to console the farmer informing him that she has brought delicious food for him. There is further teasing between them. The farmer's sister-in-law partakes in the matter. The farmer takes food after further teasing and urging. Finally, the farmer promises to take his wife to town on a shopping trip soon after the work of sowing and planting is over. The women then help him in his work, in ploughing, sowing and weeding etc.^{xviii}

The pranks move gradually from the very simple type to more theatrical type, in all aspects of theatre, like, costume, dialogue, dramatic climax and music. All these pranks are social dramas those depict social as well as familial life. Various disputes depicted are symbolic representation of village life full of spirit, mirth and belongingness to each other. These, however, provide the spectators with a satirical reflection of their own everyday life.^{xix}

Conclusion

Danda Nata is a histrionic folk theatre performed by the rural agricultural communities of Western and Southern Odisha like a ritual dance in honour of lord Shiva and his consort *Gouri* in her terrific image of Kali. As a religious-theatrical festival it involves rituals, dance, music, song and drama. The rituals as well as some theatrical performance exhibit a beautiful synthesis of major religious trends which have spread over Odisha in different phases of history like Shaivism, Shaktism, Buddhist Tantricism, Vaisnavism etc. along with indigenous folk traditions. *Danda Nata* is a unique folk theatre that involves a wide range and varieties of dance style, music, costume and make-up. The costumes are very simple and not expensive. The *danduas* do not take care of even matching *saree*(cloth) with blouse. A yellow *saree*(cloth) is worn with a blue or black *saya*. *Janghia*, *dhoti*, *turban*, feathers of birds, armlets made of feathers or aluminium. *Ghungura* is a very common ingredient tied to the ankles of all male and female characters so that they produce a kind of metallic music while the characters dance. Since *Danda Nata* is basically dance-based, *ghungura* plays a vital role in producing varieties of music in harmony with the dance performed. It is noticed that there is no provision for any formal training for the performers, but as a tradition it has passed from generation to generation by way of observation and imitation. *Danda Nata*, in fact, serves more a social messenger than a source of entertainment. People of different castes and

communities deliberately participate in it. In *Danda Nata*, minimum musical instruments are used. A wide range and variety of enchanting music is produced by using a *dhol*, a *mahuri*, a flute and a *mardal*, *ghanta*, *ghungur*, *ghulgulas* and male human voice. *Dhol* is the leading musical instrument which is used throughout the performance. It is played in 16 different rhythmic patterns called *Shohala Khadi* in each phase namely *Dhuli Danda*, *Pani Danda*, *Agni Danda* and *Suanga Danda*. During the *Shohala Suanga Nata*, for each *suanga* there is a *tala* and that *tala* is elaborated by different permutation and combination of Bols (Mnemonics) to create several numbers of intricate rhythmic patterns. Though all *rasas* are involved, yet *Vira* and *Sringara* are predominant in *Danda Nata*.

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