

SOME FOLK DANCES OF ORISSA

D. N. Patnaik

To understand the spirit of rural India one must study the country's folklore and folk art through the centuries. They are an integral part of the culture of the rural population. They have an authenticity and charm of their own and are among the most valuable legacies of our long and varied cultural history. Folk arts, song, dance and drama have nourished a rich tradition. Though many of them have become extinct and some are languishing there are surviving expressions still preserved and fostered by the rural folk, because, they are not merely sources of enjoyment alone but are source of all knowledge—religious, social, cultural—and all that concerns community living. Most of the forms need groups to perform and this becomes easy in villages where life is homogeneous. Therefore, excepting few forms of a solo or duet variety most are group activities. In this way they help to build a social unity.

Each of the folk arts whether song, dance or drama presents numerous varieties each distinctive because of its character, occasion, style and presentation. They are not only related to fairs and festivals but also to various other activities of life. Therefore life in rural India is not dull, it is enlivened by the cultivation of folk arts where each individual is involved as a participant or an organiser or a spectator. The entire gamut of human emotions find expression in these various forms. There are songs from the cradle to the grave. There are dances beginning from merry-making to martial activities and there are dramas depicting various episodes from mythology, history and legend which inspire the people and help keep up their morale.

“Folk-dances are the dances of those who are mainly outside the current of urban culture and systematic education, the unlettered or little-lettered inhabitants of the village and countryside”. The difference between folk-dance and other types of dances (classical, traditional, oriental, ballet etc.) is that the former is performed by dancers for their own enjoyment,

whereas the others are danced for the enjoyment of spectators. Moreover, folk-dances are mostly social and ceremonial in character whereas others are not. Perhaps these are the two basic characteristics of folk-dances, which differentiate them from other forms of dancing.

Judged from this point of view the folk-dances of Orissa are true to the spirit, and are of great beauty and variety. They are closely associated with fairs, festivals, marriages and religious ceremonies, in fact with the whole life of the people. Besides the dances performed on auspicious occasions, there are dances to appease evil powers that bring misfortune and to please good powers that bring good fortune. There are also dances solely for merry-making. Each is distinguishable by its variety of movement, form, gesture, costume and music. All of them manifest different styles derived from the local traditions and the social environment.

Paika Nritya—Battle dance

The word "*Paika*" is derived from the Sanskrit word '*Padatika*' meaning the infantry. In ancient days the kings of Orissa extended their territory from the river Ganges to Godavari with the help of a vast number of valiant *Paika* soldiers. Though they are extinct to-day, their dance of battle is still traditionally maintained by their descendants in Khurda, Nayagarh and some adjoining areas of Puri district. Each village of the region has a *Paika Akhda*—the village gymnasium, where young people assemble in the evening after the day's work. The primary aim of this dance was the development of physical excitement and consequently courage, in the dancing warriors. In ancient times this was unconsciously a rehearsal of battle.

On several festival days the young boys dressed in tightly worn, coloured *dhoti* or *janghia* and turban adorned with a bunch of peacock feathers, dance in unique formation. They annoint their bodies with red clay. In the beginning, with sword and shield in hand they appear one by one in quick succession to the accompaniment of the rippling sound of the earthen drum *tikura*, and *changu* (a country variety of tambourine played with sticks). The dancers shout in excitement. Then rhythm coupled with heroic words (chanted by the dancers) are played out and the dancers weave different geometrical patterns in two groups while acting the role of attack and defence. There are patterns of sword-play too, in which the slightest error could cause injury. Therefore in the initial stage of practice the dancers are given wooden-swords and during ceremonial performances only the experts are allowed to dance with real swords. This dance of fighting is marked by its explosive vitality.

Danda Nata-Ritual—dances

The most ancient and indigenous of Orissan folk-dances is what is known as *Danda Nata*. It has always been a part of the mass religious culture of Orissa. A series of complex rituals are connected with it and it is performed during the *Chaitra* festival when other major forms of dancing like *Chhau*, *Patua*, *Chaitighoda* are performed. In *Danda-nata*, Lord Shiva and His consort Gouri, are propitiated. This type of ritual is also observed

in neighbouring areas. The Gonds call it *Meghnad*. The people of Chhotanagpur area in Bihar observe it as *Manda*; in Bengal it is *Chadak Puja* and *Shiber Gajan* and in different parts of Orissa the religious festival is known as *Jhamu Nata*, *Jhani Jatra*, *Patua Jatra*, *Uda Parab*, *Pana Sankranti*, *Danda Nata*. Though the rituals are the same the dances are different.

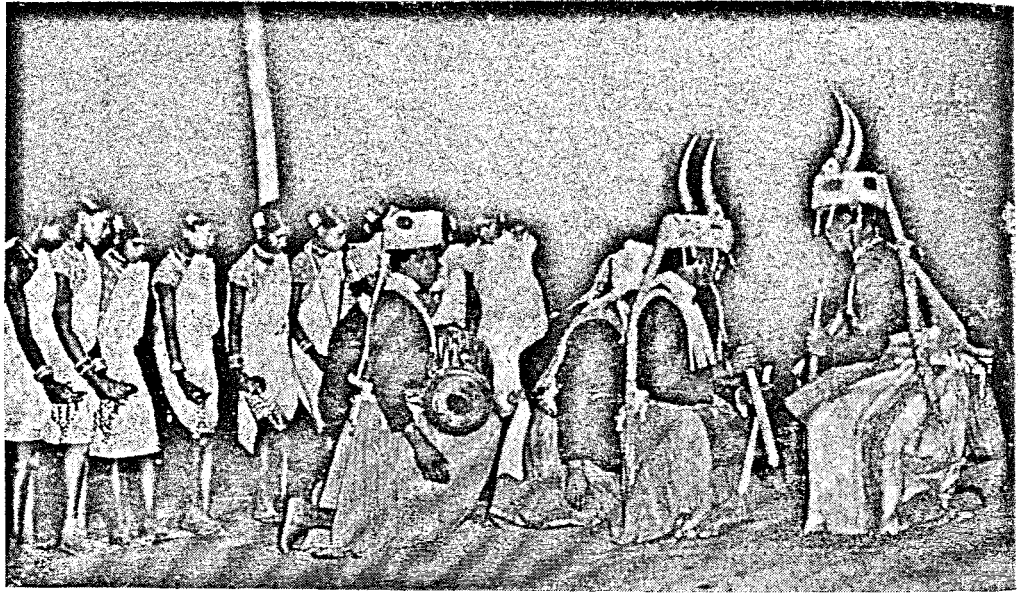
Danda Nata is prevalent mostly among the low-caste Hindus of the former ex-State areas of Orissa. Its origin is traced back to the age of Tantrism (6-7th century A.D.) which found its way to Orissa in the remote past and greatly influenced the art and culture of the people. In those days Orissa became a great seat of Tantric learning and was known as *Uddiyana Pitha*. The founder of the Pasupata system of Shaivism held a *Laguda* (staff) for which he was known as *Lagudisa* or *Lakulisa*. In a number of Shiva temples of Orissa, *Lakulisa* is depicted in carvings and in all cases he holds a staff. A sect of Shaivite mendicants were also known as *Dandi* as they held a *Danda* or staff in their hands. Here, the *Danda* or staff represented Shiva. Before the performance of *Danda Nata* two staffs are planted in the ground representing Shiva and 'Gouri', but they are commonly called *Gouri Beta*. Some scholars are of opinion that *Danda* means '*Bak danda*', '*Manodanda*' and '*Kayadanda*' (control of speech, mind and body). Those who participate in *Danda Nata* are called *Bhakta* (devotee). Others who observe the fast but do not dance are also called *Bhakta*. They walk on blazing coals, on sword edges, they pierce iron nails and hooks through the skin and tongue as a mark of severe penance to draw the attention of the God and Goddess and thus to redeem them of their sufferings and bless them with boons for the fulfilment of their desires. The dancing-devotees always remain thirteen in number. The main devotee is called the '*Pat Bhakta*'. All of them sleep in a house built at a distance from the village which is known as '*Kamna Ghara*' (the house of desire). There, a lamp is kept burning for twenty-one days. They make a meal of rice only once during the day. While they eat, drums are beaten so that the human voice will not be heard by them. If perchance, a voice is heard they do not eat.

The dancing devotees go from village to village on invitation. The villagers donate a performance of *Danda Nata* in return for good fortune. They bear all the expenses by providing food and shelter and some money towards other expenses. Thus the groups keep on moving from village to village for about a month.

The *Danda Nata* has a rich and varied repertoire which includes *Gouribeta Bandana*, *Jhuna Khala*, *Parava*, *Patara Saura*, *Chandaya Chadayani*, *Fakira-Fakirani*, *Sapua Sapuani*, *Kela Keluni*, *Binakara*, *Baidhana* etc. Though deeply religious in import all these dances along with songs present a vivid picture of rural society. Each item of the repertoire has its own music and lyric. *Dhola* (country drum) and *mahuri* (wind instrument) remain the sole accompanying instruments. Songs are sung by

Illustrations: P 47. Above: *Dalkhai Dance*. Below: *Koya dancers of Koraput*.
P 48. Above: *Danda dancers*. Below: *Ghanta Patua dance*.





the participants themselves intermittently. The costumes also vary. All female roles are danced by men.

Karam or *Karma* literally means 'fate'. The dance of this name is performed during the worship of the God or Goddess of fate (*Karam Devta* or *Karamsani Devi*), whom the people consider the cause of good and bad fortune. It begins from *Bhadra Shukla Ekadesi* (eleventh day of the bright-moon of the month of *Bhadra*) and lasts for several days.

This is popular among the scheduled class tribes in the districts of Mayurbhanj, Sundargarh, Sambalpur and Bhenkanal. In Bhenkanal and Sambalpur the dance is in honour of *Karamsani*, the deity who bestows children and good crops. However the rituals before the dance remain the same everywhere. In the afternoon of the auspicious day two young unmarried girls bring two branches of the '*Karam*' tree from a nearby jungle. They are accompanied by drummers and musicians. The two branches are then ceremonially placed on the *pendal* altar of worship and symbolise the God. Germinated grains, grass flowers and country liquor are offered to the deity. After completing the ritual the village-priest tells the story of "*Karam*" who worked miracles with his magical powers. On completion of the rites all drink the liquor (*Handia*) and then leisurely prepare for the dance.

In Mayurbhanj and Sundergarh it is only the women who dance in concentric circles. The males beat the drums (*madal*, *dhumsa*, *dhul* and *chadchadi*) and sing the songs. The women repeat the refrain and dance, intermittently. They hold each other by the hand in a chain-pattern and move with slow steps. A swaying movement of the hips to the sides, serpentine movements of the body as a whole, dancing in half-sitting position are the chief characteristics of the dance. Most of the songs employed are of the '*Jhoomar* variety'.

Among the Binjhals of Sambalpur the dance is most colourful where men and women take part with gay abandon. All of them have a special dance-costume—coloured clothing and conch-shell (*kowri*) ornaments. Peacock feathers fixed in the turban serve as head-gear. Women and men form separate lines and dance to the rhythm of large-size *mandala*, and *jhanj* (big brass cymbals). The costume and the movement are peculiar to the tribe.

The *Karam* dance continues from dusk to dawn. Group after group drawn from nearby villages dance alternately throughout the night. In the early morning they carry the *Karam* branches singing and dancing and then immerse them ceremonially in a river or tank and then disperse.

The dance is usually held in the courtyard of a village which arranges the performance. In the centre of the courtyard a bamboo is fixed and it is split into four on top and then bent to form arches. Each split frond is fixed with a pole on the outside to form the arch. Then it is decorated with mango leaves and water lilies giving it a festive look. The ground is neatly plastered with cow-dung. Men and women dance winding in and out beneath the arches.

Ghanta Patua is a stilt dance and in some ways similar to the stilt dance of Mysore. In Orissa, it is closely associated with the worship of Goddess Sarala. For its performance a *Sevak* (servant of the Goddess) dresses himself as a female with a black skirt with a red border. He places the *Ghat* (sacred pitcher) on his head. The *Ghat* is decorated with flowers, vermillion, sandal-paste, and coloured threads are fixed on a wooden stand. After dancing a while with bare-feet, the dancer tightly fixes the wooden stilts on with ropes. Without any support for the hands the dancer displays rare skill, with wonderful movements. *Dhol* and *Ghanta* (brass bell) are the accompanying instruments and their players control the tempo of the dance.

The *Ghanta Patuas*, generally two to three in a group, move from village to village performing in the village streets. They collect rice and money from the villagers. They continue for about a month and return to the seat of the Goddess before Chaitra Purnima when a big festival is held.

The *Chaitighoda* dance is generally performed during Chaitra Purnima by the fishermen community of Orissa. On this day they worship Goddess Baseli, who is believed to be horse-headed. So the horse-dance becomes a necessary part of their invocation to the Goddess. In this dance a horse made out of bamboo sticks and cloth is utilised. The head of the horse is of wood. It is painted in bright colours and richly decorated with flowers.

In the big cavity inside the horse frame the man places himself and fixes the horse on to his chest. Then he dances, displaying the movements of a horse. Two more characters, a man (*Routa*) and a woman (*Routani*) sing songs and dance with the horse-dancer. Sometimes a clown is also introduced. *Mahuri* and *dhol* are the common musical instruments to accompany the dance.

Kela Keluni is prevalent amongst a nomadic class of people, known as *Kela*. Except for a few months of the year they remain away from their homes. Originally they are snake-charmers and bird-catchers, but they have also taken to dancing as one of their professions. They roam throughout Orissa earning their livelihood. In their dance the *Kela* plays a peculiar instrument known as *chuduki* which produces a peculiar sound. He works out rhythms by playing them on a string. He dances with the *Keluni* (his wife) and also sings occasionally. This is mainly a duet-dance. The principal movements of the *Keluni* are of the hips and knees. The songs are of a special variety and are popularly known as *Kela-keluni geet* in which love and humour predominate. This dance is fast dying out.

Kathinach or *Stick* dancing—is common all over India, but the presentation varies from region to region. In Orissa two varieties of this are seen, one with comparatively long sticks and the other with small sticks. The former with long sticks is performed by the *Gopal* (Cowherd) community of Orissa. During *Dussehra* and *Giri Gobardhan Puja* young *Gopal* boys dance strike each other's sticks in rhythmical patterns. The sticks are five to seven feet in length. All of them sing as they dance and there is no other musical accompaniment.

The other type with smaller sticks is performed by the people of the scheduled class of Mayurbhanj and Bolangir. In this, the sticks are about two feet in length and are made of resonant wood to produce percussion. The sticks are held in pairs. The dancers are all young boys, who standing in a line, begin their dance, striking each others sticks according to the rhythm of the *madal*. Two or more singers and drummers move with the dancers. According to the rhythm of the *madal* they increase the speed of various movements until the dance ends in a crescendo of sound produced by the sharp taps of the sticks. Makar Sankranti and Nua Khia festivals are the occasions for this dance. In the district of Bolangir, this is known as *Kalanga* when the dancers wear costumes like the Karma dancers of the Binjal community.

Changu Nat—*Changu* is a rural variety of the tambourine. It is played by the male members of the Bhuijan, Bathudi, Kharia and Mochi communities of Sundergarh and Mayurbhanj. The dance in accompaniment to the *changu* is performed by women alone. The men only sing songs, play on the *changu* and move with the female dancers with simple steps. But they perform vigorous stunts in which they leap in to the air and make wide circling movements.

Peculiarly enough the women cover up their person with long local-made 'saris'. Only their bangled hands and feet remain visible. In a group the female dancers dance in a half-sitting position with forward and backward jerking movements. During festivals and on any moon-lit night the young boys and girls assemble and dance, to express their joy in living.

Ghoomra dance—This is danced with the *ghoomra*, a typical drum. It is just like a big pitcher with a long stem made of clay. The mouth is covered with the skin of a *godhi* (a kind of snake). When played with both the hands, it produces a peculiar sound quite different from other varieties of drums.

The dance which is performed to the accompaniment of this drum is called *Ghoomra*. It begins fifteen days before the Kahma Purnima and ends on that day. Young boys each fix a *ghoomra* on the chest with strings tied round the body and simultaneously, dance and play. During the marriage ceremony of the Harijans, this dance is also performed. Placing the bride and bridegroom in the centre, young boys and girls dance round them singing traditional folk-songs.

Dancing in sitting and half-sitting positions, making circular movements while playing the drums are some of the peculiar characteristics of this dance. The dance is confined to males alone in the districts of Kalahandi, Bolangir and some parts of Sambalpur.

Dalkhai—Though *Dussehra* is the occasion of *Dalkhai* the most popular folk-dance of western Orissa, its performance is very common on all other occasions.

In this dance only the women dance, men join them as drummers and musicians. The young women dance and sing intermittently. Devo-

tion and love are the theme of the songs. While dancing to the uncanny rhythms of the *dhol*, they place the legs close together and bend the knees. In another movement they move forward and backward in a half-sitting position. Some times they make concentric circles clockwise and anti-clockwise.

The *Dalkhai* dance has several adjunctive forms known as *Maylajada*, *Rasar Keli*, *Gunjikuta*, *Jamudali*, *Banki Jhulki*, *Sain Ladi* etc. All these dances are popular in the districts of Sambalpur and Bolangir.

Medha Nacha, a mask-dance is most common during religious processions in the coastal districts of Orissa. During Dussehra, Kalipuja, Sahi Jatra and other festivals when the idols are taken out in procession for immersion mask-dancers join with the procession. The procession halts at market places and road-crossings, thereby allowing the dancers to show their skill. Huge masks of demons made out of paper-pulp and painted brightly are worn by the dancers who dance to the rhythm of *chengu* and *dhol*.