

# FOLK PLAYS OF ORISSA

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The history of the folk-arts of any country is obscure. It is very difficult to determine the exact date when they came into existence. This is because, folk-arts always adapt themselves to the changing times and accordingly lose something of their original form. So, it becomes difficult to recall their traditional history. Only through intensive study and repeated seeing can we visualise to a certain extent their original form and their historical evolution. Taking all these things into consideration it is believed that the genesis of folk drama in Orissa lies with the *Dandanata*. In rural Orissa *Nāta* denotes both dancing and acting and the word *Nātua* denotes both a dancer and an actor. This is perhaps due to the inextricable connection of dance and drama in a folk-play in which an actor is to act, sing and dance. In a number of items of *Dandanata* like *Chadaya-Chadayani*, *Sapua-Sapuani*, *Kela-Keluni*, *Hara-Parvati* etc. the songs are cast in the form of dialogue through which episodes from mythology and popular legends are told and expressed. At the end of a *Dandanata* performance the Baidhana and Veenakara recite theological and spiritual riddles. Sometimes there occur rhythmic word combats between them which last for several nights. Like mounting suspense in a drama this musical verbal combat appears very interesting to the people of the country-side who attend them with great interest and enthusiasm.

It is therefore believed that all these dramatic items of *Dandanata* have inspired the growth of other indigenous forms of folk-plays, in Orissa.

### Chadaya Nata

Inspired by the *Chadaya-Chadayani* dance of the varied repertory of *Danda Nata*, *Chadaya Nata*, a peculiar form of folk-play is prevalent in Mayurbhanj, Balasore and the adjoining Oriya tracts of Bihar and Bengal, the district of Singhbhum and Midnapur. In this play three characters are essential the *Chadaya*, the *Chadayani* (wife of *Chadaya*) and *Banku Bhai*, the jester. The style of presentation of the play is peculiar. It is assumed before the play that the *Chadaya* and *Chadayani* are in search of each other. The performance starts with a piece of loud orchestral music played on an earthen drum (*Sur Mādal*). cymbals and sometimes a harmonium. Then, *Banku* appears at the far end of the actor's path and proceeds to the acting area dancing and singing through which he conveys his peculiar identity to the audience. He holds a curvate staff all the while. He acts as a *Sutradhara* and announces the name of the play with good humour and departs. Then comes *Chadayani* to the scene, lamenting through song because of her long separation with *Chadaya*. At this stage *Banku* re-appears and asks her identity with sympathy. He consoles her and promises reunion with her husband. When they depart, *Chadaya* comes searching for his wife delineating the details of her appearance. He also encounters *Banku*, who makes an effort to unite them. But long years of separation and consequent physical changes stand in the way of recognition of each other. So, a device, is adopted for mutual recognition from which the actual story beings. A serious song-combat ensues between the *Chadaya* and his spouse. One asks, the other answers with expressive emotions and dramatic actions. Thus the whole story is enacted. At short intervals the *Banku* provides enough humour with his peculiar remarks and interpretations.

*Chadaya Nata* is mostly musical. The refrains of the songs of the characters are repeated by a choral group who also provide instrumental music. The Chief is called *Mausa* (uncle) who serves as an interpreter of the whole play. It is he who controls the performance.

### Ramleela

In Orissa *Ramleela* still appears to be the most popular and widely prevalent folk-play. Prior to the advent of any popular literature on *Ramayana*, it already found its place in the mass religious culture of Orissa as evident from the sculptural representations. In the early temples of Orissa (7th-8th century A.D.) situated at Bhubaneswar and other places there are scenes depicting Ravana lifting the mountain Kailash, Rama killing the golden deer, Bali Badha, conference of Bali and Sugrib, abduction of Seeta etc. This proves an awareness of the various episodes of *Ramayana* in that age. In olden days during festivals and religious ceremonies characters from *Ramayana* were brought out in

processions. The actors interpreted the characters in dance and mimetic actions. There was no song to accompany. It was a sort of pantomime. This tradition is still alive in Puri and Cuttack districts of Orissa. In the *Sahi yatra* of Puri it is more prominent.

The Oriya language received a great impetus during the Gajapati rule in Orissa. The *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagabata* were translated into Oriya verse as early as 15th century A.D. These texts gradually multiplied. In later years the volume of popular literature on the *Ramayana* increased. This Rama literature inspired the folk-play *Ram Leela* to develop on more prominent lines. During the 18th and 19th centuries a number of *leelas* were written by about more than twenty poets. The most popular amongst all is the *leela* written by Baisya Sadasiva (1730-1790 A.D.) Next to this comes the *Ram Leela* written by Pitambar Rajendra (1790-1820). These *leelas* are still popular in Orissa.

The whole *Ramayana* is divided into a number of *leelas* and a single *leela* is intended for a night's performance. Therefore *Ramleela* performances are held for several consecutive nights. Each *leela* comprises of musical verses set to different traditional tunes and therefore is most musical in its rendering.

In the early stage *Ramleela* was a pantomime. All the characters of the *Ramayana* like Rama, Lakshmana, Ravana, Kumbhakarna, Singhika, Surpanakha, Hanuman etc. danced and acted to the accompaniment of choral singing of the *Ramayana*; *mardala*, *gini* and *ramtali* were the sole musical instruments. The characters acted with dance movements according to the contents of the songs. The actions all were interpretative. This tradition is still alive in some areas of Cuttack district. Gradually songs were introduced for the characters to sing in the form of dialogue. But the tradition did not change much. The songs continued to be repeated by a band of (chorus) singers.

The demonic and other animal characters of a *Ramleela* wear masks. Ravana, Kumbhakarna, Singhika, Surpanakha, Hanuman, Jambaban etc. are seen with masks carved out of wood by the village carpenters. The masks are painted in bright colours by the village artists traditionally known as *Chitrakara*. The female characters are played by young boys and there is no place for women in the performance. The vital role is played by Hanuman. Whenever he comes to the stage he arouses great interest. His words of devotion and loyalty, his symbolic display of power, prowess and his miracles appeal directly to the country folk. His actions are always vigorous and the dances difficult. Therefore great care is taken to select a gifted person for the role.

Though *Ram Leela* performances are not uncommon in fair-weather days, *Rama Nabami* is the appropriate occasion during which it is performed for several consecutive nights. Though its performance is seen in most of the districts of Orissa it is most popular in the coastal districts of Puri, Cuttack and Ganjam. It has a deep devotional intent. The actors are the villagers themselves who rehearse it during the off-season when there is no agricultural activity. Though amateurs, their sincerity and devotion towards making the performance a success is commendable. The whole village contributes towards the expenses. When aware of their inefficiency they appoint an experienced *Guru*. As *Ram Leela* performances are closely associated with the religious culture of the people there are no professional parties in Orissa. Till to-day it has remained an amateur activity. The villagers hardly travel for a performance. Throughout the ages it has been confined to each village and its locality though the audience is drawn from the surrounding areas.

*Rama Leela* is staged on a common or on the cross-roads of the main street of the village, or in the temple precincts. Where there are no *pandals* (halls) it is held in the open. The audience sits all around while one side is reserved for the women. Everyone sits on the ground irrespective of caste or social status. A narrow passage is provided from the green-room to the stage for the entrance and exit of the actors. On one side sit the chorus singers who also play the instruments. Before the advent of gas-lamps, oil-lamps used to be placed at the four corners of the stage to provide light. The day on which the *Ramleela* performance concludes is the grand finale and is marked by a grand parade through the village street. All the important characters of the *Ramayana* such as Rama, Lakshmana, Ravana, Hanuman etc. are carried on open palanquins shouldered by the enthusiastic villagers. At the head of the procession village drummers, musicians and singers provide rousing music. Thousands of people, drawn from near about villages, watch the procession with great enthusiasm.

The Ram Leela Samiti of Cuttack organises a festival of *Ram Leela* performances each year and it continues for over a month. Most of the participating parties are of the City and the adjoining villages. This has given an impetus to the older groups to reorganise. Each evening before the performance religious discourses on *Ramayana* are held. The festival is held in Maruti Mandap at a central place of the City. Thousands of people watch the performance for nights together.

*Ram Leela* has inspired a number of other *leelas* known as *Ras-Leela*, *Radhaprema Leela*, *Bharat Leela* or *Dwari Leela*. All these forms are popular in the Ganjam District of Orissa. Though musical narration in the form of dialogue has been added, the presentation remains musical as in the case of *Ram Leela*.

### Suanga

Scholars are of the opinion that the word *Suanga* has been derived from Sanskrit *Swanga Sousthababhinaya* which meant acting or dancing a play. This line occurs in Kalidas's famous play *Malabikagnimitra*. Gradually *Sausthabhinaya* was dropped and only *Suanga* meant the acting of the play which took the colloquial form of *Suanga*. In Hindi *Soyang* means acting a play. Now it stands for farcical acting. In Bengal it is *Sang* and in Manipur *Sumang*.

The tradition of *Suanga* is very old in Orissa. Two *Suanga*s which have had a tremendous influence on Oriya life and society since several centuries are the *Deulatola Suanga* by Bipra Nilambar and *Laxmipurana Suanga* by Balaram Das both belonging to the 15th century. The first *Suanga* depicts the legendary episode of the building of the famous temple of Jagannath at Puri and the other narrates the quarrel between Laxmi and Balbhadra the elder brother of Jagannath who expels her from the temple for visiting the home of an untouchable woman. Both these *Suanga*s are still recited by the Natha Yogis and the Chakulia Pandas who have made them immensely popular among the masses. Older persons testify to the performance of these *Suanga*s in remote villages which later inspired a number of *Suanga*, *Yatra* and stage plays depicting the same theme.

Though in these two early *Suanga*s there are no scene divisions, the stories have been narrated in the form of a long poem with characters conversing in direct speech. Later the verse dialogue was set to various traditional tunes suited to the emotional contents. The narrative portions were sung by a band of chorus singers.

Most probably, *Suanga* as a folk play originated as a development of the *leelas* in which actors indulged only in mimetic actions. *Suanga* is a form of *Geetabhinaya* (or Opera) in which all the characters sing the dialogue. The refrain of each song-dialogue is loudly repeated by the Chorus, *Suanga* as a developed form of folk-play came into existence during the last quarter of the 19th century. It was perhaps the monotonous display of the *leela* that goaded the people of the countryside to invent something new on the model of sophisticated Sanskrit drama. With this purpose *Suanga* was born and it accepted themes from *Puranas*, mythology, history, legends and folk-lore. When it was presented with varied themes, songs and dances, it readily appealed to the masses.

The peculiarity of *Suanga* lies in the self introduction of characters. Each character on the stage introduces himself with his genealogy, relations, powers and activities. Then only does he indulge in dialogue

with his counterparts. The dialogue is all in song. Noble characters such as gods, goddesses, kings and queens sing in chaste Oriya verse while other characters belonging to the lower strata of life such as *Duari* (Sentry), *Dasi* (Maid) etc. sing in colloquial Oriya verse.

The most comic-character in *suanga* is the '*Duari*' (Sentry). He is a stock character like the *Vidusak* of the Sanskrit drama. He is simply a buffoon and fun-maker. He does not play any vital role in the development of the theme, but creates humour through song, gesticulation and harsh satire. Though a mere attendant in the court of a King, he freely makes fun of everybody including the king and the queen. This leads us to agree with the views of M. Schuyler who says". "The *Vidushaka* originated not in the court-drama under the influence of the Brahmana caste, but in the earlier plays of the different tribes of India. This is why we find the *Vidushaka* in the extant plays a simple buffoon and fun-maker." The *Duari* apart from his buffoonery possesses a special aptitude for comic perception. He is also a butt of ridicule and an object of laughter.

In the beginning of a *Suanga*, *Nata* and *Nati* appear to introduce the play to the audience as do the *Sutradhara* and *Nati* of the Sanskrit plays. A small improvised pandal of wooden-cots joined together or a rectangular place in mid-street or in an open field serve as the stage. Prior to the advent of gas-lamps, a few oil-fed torches were required to provide light. The torch bearers were known as *Samalchi*. People used to sit around the action arena to enjoy the performance.

*Suanga* is somewhat of an Opera form. More is involved here than mere "theatre" since these music-dramas combine poetry with music and dance. An actor in *Suanga* had to possess in addition to his vocal talent, the qualities of a mime, a dancer and sometimes an acrobat.

Though *Suanga* did not possess a format for a neat and planned construction of plot as in the Sanskrit plays, or the highly developed characteristics and artistic modes of expression it excelled especially in the display of contemporary satire. The satire was mainly directed against the blind imitation of Western civilisation which was playing a great role in changing the social values of the times. This used to be provided not through any important character but through side-characters and through the inclusion of farces which had no relation whatsoever to the plot. The farces were generally dialogues between a pair of characters such as *Chakara-Chakarani* (Servant and maid-servant) *Dhoba-Dhobani* (Washer-man and his wife), *Keuta-Keutuni* (Fisherman and his wife), *Chamara-Chamaruni* (Shoemaker and his wife) etc. In between the scenes of the play such a farce is inserted. It was not only intended to create humour and provide relief to the audience, but also to suggest moral values. Mainly the farces served as a social corrective. Though

crude and sometimes obscene in treatment, they were effective in the then changing society.

It has been stated earlier that the *Leela* performances were mainly confined to amateur groups in the villages and did not require much rehearsal and preparation as all the actors were silent. Moreover, *Leela* performances were annual features. When *Suanga* came as a development of the *Leelas*, all the characters were trained to sing, act and dance. This required sincere practice for a longer time which the amateurs could not afford. So, professional groups sprang up to cater to the taste of the general public during the second half of the 19th century. A number of *Suanga* play-wrights formed their own professional companies and toured all over Orissa. Those among them who have contributed immensely to the growth and development of *Suanga* are Jagannath Pani, Bandhu Nayak, Bhikari Nayak, Arakhita Nayak, Maguni, Gopal Das, Govind Chandra Sur Deo, Kanhu Pani, Baishnab Pani, Bhagabat Prasad Dan, Ramchandra Swain and Dayanidhi Swain.

From the early 19th century up to the thirties of this century *Suanga* was the favourite entertainment. So far it had no rival in the field. The advent of *Yatra* however challenged this monopoly, as a result, the *Suanga* parties adapted themselves to the *Yatra* form to survive. On the other hand the mimetic *Leelas* adopted the musical form of *Suanga*.

#### Yatra\*

When there was no theatre in Orissa to cater to the taste of the enlightened people and the advent of Cinema was distant, *Yatra* emerged as the only source of popular entertainment for all classes of people. The tradition of *Yatra* came to Orissa from Bengal. But it was not a blind imitation of the form. It's growth and development in Orissa came as an improvement over the prevailing *Suanga* during the last quarter of the 19th century. Most of the pioneers in the field of *Yatra* in Orissa like Baishnab Pani, Gopal Das, Jagu Ojha and Balakrishna Mohanty started their career as *Suanga* play-wrights. The main development was the introduction of dialogue in blank-verse. However the sung-dialogue was not dispensed with. In the initial stage of introduction, the blank-verse dialogue remained almost redundant inspite of the forceful delivery. Later, it developed a proper form and style.

*Yatra* in Orissa still holds its popularity as it adapts to the changing times. During recent years it has changed its character to a great extent. A few decades ago the *Yatra* plays were mostly confined to mythology, history and popular legends. But at present most of the plays are based on social and socio-historical themes.

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\* For a detailed account of *Yatra* read the author's article in *Sangeet Natak* 28.

Though the modern theatre and the film have had a deep influence on *Yatra*, it has its own characteristics of mass appeal. The orchestra consisting of clarionet, cornet, kettle drum etc. remains always an important aspect. The use of songs as a vital media for expression of emotions is still adhered to. Dances are a prominent feature. Therefore *Yatra* provides entertainment to the common masses with the glamour of dance, drama and music. Its performance in the open air with thousands of spectators all around creates an atmosphere of free enjoyment.

At present there are about more than fifty professional *Yatra* parties and there are scores of amateurs. The majority of the parties belong to Cuttack district, the rest to Puri and Balasore. The old tradition of the proprietor being the play-wright, director, and musician has been lost. Almost all the parties belong to the villages. After few months of rigorous rehearsal the parties set out on tour after the Dassera festival and return to their headquarters before Raja Sankranti (in the month of June).

Of all the folk-plays of Orissa *Yatra* still remains as the favourite item of entertainment both in rural and urban areas.

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