

# “JATRA”, PEOPLE’S THEATRE OF ORISSA

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The word *Jatra* in Oriya, corresponds to the Sanskrit word *Yatra*. It happens to be the exact equivalent term for the English word Theatre. It is very interesting to note that these words and the corresponding words in other languages of the world have a close phonetical affinity in their pronunciations also, thereby pointing to a common origin. The Oriya word *Jatra* has come from Prakrut. According to Sanskrit grammar, Prakrut words starting with the alphabet ‘Ja’ are required to be pronounced as ‘Ya’ (“*Adye Ja, Yah*”, etc.). The word *Jatra* or *Yatra* has several meanings according to the lexicon such as Journey, Festival and Theatre etc. Since the word in Sanskrit is pronounced as *Yatra*, there has been some difference of opinion as regards the origin of this word. Some attribute that the word *Yatra* has come from the root ‘Ya’ meaning journey. Some attribute it to have come from religious festivals but considering the Prakrut word *Jatra* with its root as ‘Ja’, we have a direct meaning of a story born such as in *Jata* and *Jataka*. From history we know that Buddha *Jatakas* were very popular in spreading Buddhism after the incarnation of Buddha, five centuries before Christ.

Just as Theatre happens to be the sphere of reproduction or enactment of histrionic arts, so the indigenous *Jatra*. A written play or the style of writing a play is not *Jatra* but it becomes a *Jatra* when it is reproduced or enacted in an indigenous manner. Even in many religious festivals known as *Jatra*, we see reproductions of a type of drama. In *Ratha Jatra*, *Sitala Sasthi Jatra* and such others, we see a regular theme enacted.

The word *Jatra* does not indicate whether it is urban or rural. However, after the introduction of the English word Theatre in this country along with the style of presentation of plays in the western mode under the influence of the British in this country, the indigenous word *Jatra* has slowly been associated with the production of plays in rural areas.

## Ancient Tradition

Orissa happens to be the only State whose history starts with the genuine documentary records of histrionic arts such as dances, combats, music, orchestra, festivals and plays. This is evident from the rock-edicts of Chedi Raja Maha Meghavahana Kalingadhipati Aira Shri Kharabela, two centuries before Christ, which is still intact and preserved on the Hati Gumpa caves of Udayagiri, Bhubaneswar.

Emperor Kharabela, who himself was also an exponent of all *Gandharva Vidyas* (the histrionic arts) had constructed special theatre halls within his kingdom for the entertainment of his subjects. His inscription, in its 13th line mentions the word *Catara* (sometimes read as *Jathara*) which he had built throughout his kingdom for the people.

Orissa, thus has a great and very ancient tradition of theatre and theatrical presentations. Like theatre halls of today, there used to be *Jatra* halls of a permanent nature which were both hypaethral as well as roofed ones, located at temples, palaces and public places.

Through the passage of time, as this State had come under the influence of alien rule for long years and under the impact of the inflow, many forms of *Jatra* must have been abandoned and forgotten, many must have been altered to suit prevailing conditions but the wide and varied colourful forms of *Jatra* which still live and have survived extinction gives us a glimpse of the glory that was ancient Orissa.

Age long foreign domination, low economic conditions of the people, influx of outside influences, the contempt of so-called sophisticated society, lack of proper patronage and the tropical climate, all combined towards the neglect of this indigenous *Jatra*. Because of this, *Jatra* of Orissa has invariably been performed in the open-air and the *Jatra-walas* always wait until fair weather. In the absence of permanent *pandals* for regular performances, these *Jatra* groups of Orissa today have become peripatetic and keep moving from place to place and accommodate themselves for productions under all sorts of assorted available conditions. But as every dark cloud has also got its silver lining, these conditions have also helped the *Jatra* of Orissa because at certain places, it has been able to reach fantastic heights as an open-air performance which otherwise may not have been possible or thought of at all.

Music and dance have always been part of the dramatic art as well as part of the life of the people. It is always the common people who have consistently remained the real repositories of a nation's culture, else there would have been nothing prescribed after the time of upheavals.

The people themselves form into groups and individual groups specialise

in the repertoire according to their merit, resources and choice. All items of Orissa's traditional histrionic presentations are basically musical, with dancing and acting as prominent features in them. There are items which are performed solo like the *Bohurupi*, *Ghata-patua*, *Mundapota Kela*, *Janughanta*, *Jogi*, *Ghuduki*, *Dhankoila*, *Galpa-Sagara*, *Kathaka*, *Harikatha*, etc. There are others which are enacted as duets like *Ghata Kalasi*, *Dhoba Nacha*, *Sabara Sabaruni*, *Kela Keluni*, *Dasakathia* and such others.

There are items which need four to eight persons such as *Gotipua*, *Sakhinata*, *Ghudukinata*, *Dhumpa Geeta*, *Nachuni Nacha*, *Mahari Nacha*, *Naga Nacha*, *Patua Jatra*, *Apsara Nrutya*, *Chaiti Ghoda*, *Pala*, *Dhankoila Jatra*, *Humo*, *Dalkhai Rasarkeli*, *Jamudali*, *Gunjikuta*, *Maylajada*, *Banki-Jhulki*, *Sainladi*, *Baunsarani* and finally there are other *Jatra* items which need a team of twenty to sixty persons in their productions. They are the *Leela*, *Suanga* (*Gitinatya*, *Gitabhinaya*), *Dandanata*, *Bandinata*, *Nataka* (*Prahalad Rama*, *Harischandra*) *Paika Nata*, *Laudi Nata*, *Chhau Nata*, *Ghoomra Nata*, *Ranapa Nata*, *Karama Nata*, *Sanchara*, *Sabda-swara Nata*, *Rasa*, *Kirtana*, *Samprada*, *Melana*, etc.

#### Common Jatra

The contents of the most commonly known *Jatra* of Orissa with enactment of a whole play with full cast comprising all elements such as music, singing, acting, dancing and the usual conflict is known in various synonyms such as *Jata*, *Samaja*, *Lila*, *Nata*, *Nacha*, *Tamasha*, *Suanga* and *Jatra*.

While '*Jatra*' is a derivative of either *Jataka* (story) or *Jatra* (Theatre), *Samaja* stands for a play. Though *Leela* denotes playing the deeds of characters, in the sphere of *Jatra* of Orissa it only conveys the deeds of either gods, Incarnations or great souls. *Leela* never conveys the deeds of demons or evil characters.

*Nata* is a derivative term of *Natya* conveying dance, music and dramatics and the *Nacha* although it means dance, conveys a form where dance is prominent.

*Tamasha* is a word for play, came to be used in Orissa under the influence of Marathas and Muslims.

In north Orissa a typical form of theatre had developed after the Moghuls known as Moghul *Tamasha*. While the pattern remained that of the then prevailing play productions, both Oriya and Urdu were used in its dialogue and songs. Patronised by the Nawabs, and performed near a Hindu temple, attempts had been made for a peaceful co-existence between the Hindus and Muslims in this Moghul *Tamasha*. Later on, it turned to be a

satire against the Moghuls. The characters used to first introduce themselves and then sing and dance as in the old *Suargas*.

The word *Suanga* is derived from the Sanskrit word *Swanga*, meaning graceful acting. In Orissa full fledged verse-dramas (*Giti-Natyas*) or song-dramas (*Gitabhinayas*) or dance dramas (*Nritya Natikas*) are known as *Suargas*.

Orissa's *Jatra* has a great tradition of this type of play. It is said that the great sage Shankara Deva of Assam who invented the *Ankia Nata* for Assam, had studied the methods of mass communication through song-drama while he was at Puri, Orissa, during the last part of 15th Century. The great writer-sage late Balaram Dasa of Orissa wrote and staged a powerful play *Laxmi-puran Suanga* in the 15th Century, the impact of this play on the spectators was so great that certain customs prescribed by the play such as worshipping Goddess Laxmi particularly on Thursdays in the month of Margasira every year has become part of the traditional life in every Oriya household to-day.

While in early times, each character used to give a self-introduction and sometime the dialogue was improvised on the spot by the characters, this is not now adhered to. In the process of evolution, styles of writing have undergone changes and the themes of *Jatra* plays are no longer confined to only plots from myth, history or fantasy but also include themes to suit modern conditions. While there were *Jatra* plays written only with songs, there have been attempts to write *Jatra* plays with no songs at all. But whether it includes songs or not, loud orchestral music has remained a 'must' with the *Jatra* of Orissa not only at the beginning or the end of the play but also in every sequence indicating a change of scene. There used to be an inevitable character *Dwari* (the gate-keeper) who provided humour throughout the old *Jatra* plays like the *Vidusaka* in the Sanskrit plays. This character has now been dropped from the cast, in the modern *Jatra* plays.

*Jatra* plays of Orissa have followed the pattern close to that of the Sanskrit plays with invocatory songs, dances, *Sutradhar* for introductions, fairy dances or humorous interludes for relief sequences, and the chorus. It is usual for spectators to participate in the *Jatra* of Orissa.

In spite of outside influences, great *Jatra* play-wrights such as Gopal Das, Jagannath Pani, Gopal Charan Das, Bandhu Nayak, Bhikari Nayak, Baishnaba Pani, Balakrushna Mohanty and Shri Rama Chandra Swain of the recent past have kept up the great tradition of *Jatra* in Orissa,

### Production Style

The production style of the *Jatra* of Orissa is simple, with the acting area (stage) in the centre and spectators sitting all around. The *Puspa Patha*



or the artist's passage, wends its way through the spectators to the distant green room (the *Vesha Ghara*). This *Puspa Patha* also serves as an additional acting area beside being the exit and entrance of every character. Sometimes a character slips-off from this *Puspa Patha* and enters or exits from some other side in-between the spectators to add interest. The chorus of boys and the musicians usually take their place near the stage opposite the *Puspa Patha*. There are occasions where the musicians occupy a high platform above the artist's passage. There are no other stage properties on the central stage except a single chair which serves different purposes in different scenes. This chair turns into a king's throne, or a poor man's hut, a cot, a lover's bench, a tree, a hiding place, even a weapon to fight with, as the story demands. It is a symbol for everything required.

With stylised movements, ornate costumes, traditional music, plenty of dances, songs and plots full of conflict and humour, *Jatra* or Orissa has remained not only a mere entertainment but also an essential institution for educating and elevating the people in general.

This legitimate peoples theatre of Orissa, the common *Jatra*, corresponds to the *Caturasra* and *Tryasra* styles of playhouses meant for the masses as described in the oldest treatise on dramaturgy *Natya Sastra* of Bharat Muni with the acting area in the centre and the *Sopanikruta Pithakams*, the Galleries for the spectators, all around. Unfortunately with a complete repertoire of round theatre arts in Orissa, we do not yet possess a permanent *Jatra*-Theatre where we can witness a *Jatra* play in the winter or in the rainy season. Even performances in summer, under the open-sky present many problems. This absolute want must be filled very soon.

***Galpasagara (Ocean of stories), Kathaka (Story-teller) and Harikatha (Stories of God):***

These are all one-man shows, supposed to be the most ancient form of dramatics, each more refined than the other. The stories are dramatically told with voice modulation, song, wit, humour, action, dialogue and occasional dances also. A simple costume is improvised during the performance to suit the sequence. Musical instruments like *Manjira*, *Ektara*, *Ramatali*, *Daskathi*, etc. are also played by the actors.

#### **Daskathia**

Mainly performed with two artists on a central stage, *Dasakathia* evolved and was nourished along with the growth of the Rama cult in Orissa. *Gayaka* is the main singer and his partner is known as *Palia*, who intermittently gives a rhythmic refrain of the words '*Rama je, Jaya Rama je, Nabin Sundar Rama je, Jaya Rama je*'. As the main story is presented in rhythmic commentary, special sequences are dramatised in dialogue form, each of the

artists changing into different roles. Plenty of wit, humour, songs fill the sequences and the average show takes about 3 hours. Both the artists dress in royal attire and beside the ankle-bells tied to their ankles the *Gayaka* plays on a pair of *Ekapali* or *Rama Tali* cymbals, while the *Palia* on the pair of *Ramakathi* or *Dasakathi*. The *Ramatalis* are wooden clappers fitted with tinkling bells and held by clasping a pair in both hands while the *Dasakathias* are a pair of straight 'castanets' made of hard wood held in the left hand and clicked together with the fingers of the right hand to beat time to the rhythm. The usual themes are taken from mythology. Love, romance, deceit, elopement, marriages are some of the interesting features. The whole performance is punctuated with many social skits, humorous anecdotes and adages in a pattern which distinguishes itself from other histrionic arts. In Orissa, more than 150 groups of *Dasakathia* artists exist today, out of which more than 100 are in Ganjam district alone. *Dasakathia* needs a small central acting area and no green room during the performance.

#### Chaiti Ghoda Nata

*Chhaiti Ghoda* is a colourful item of Orissa specially done by the fishermen-community during the full-moon of Chaitra month. It is said that Lord Rama had presented a horse to the boatman who had helped him to cross the river Saraju during the period of his *Banavas* exile. Hence they worship the horse.

Each group has at least three characters beside the musical accompanists of *Dhol* and *Mohuri*. These three characters are the *Rauta*, the *Rautani* and the horse-dancer.

A body of a horse is improvised out of bamboo and cloth, complete with head, body and tail but without the legs. The dancer enters into the hollow body and binds it at the waist to give the illusion of a rider on the horse, complete with straps. Performances are held in an arena without a green room.

*Rauta*, who is the main singer-commentator, delivers discourses mainly from mythology. The *Rautani*, in the role of his wife is the chorus and co-singer and dancer. During the performance, dramatic sequences are highlighted with regular improvised dialogue and humorous episodes. During the discourses, the singer also explains the text in simple language with similes and quotations. Many vigorous dances are performed by the *Rautani* and the horse-dancer. Sometimes a pair or more of horse-dancers join in, which turns the performance into a thing of beauty, with varied compositions.

#### Chhau Nata

*Chhau nata*, although not drama in its fuller interpretation, is a specialis-

ed dance-drama. It is famous for its most colourful virile dance, the *Chhau Nrutya*, which is highly stylised and set in a choreographic frame-work. While *Chhau* of Saraikela uses masks for all its characters, *Chhau* of Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Balasore and Dhenkanal do not use masks thereby adding facial expression to body-movement and gesture. Themes of the dance-dramas are taken from mythology and folk tales. *Chhau* is usually performed during the Chaitra festival and except the sophisticated troupes, all others use an arena for performance with spectators sitting around.

The origin of the word *Chhau* is traced by some, to *Chhauni*, the military camps of ancient kings. While others maintain that the word is a derivative of *Chhaya* (shadow) etc.

The vigorous war-dances with swords and shields, the colourful, dignified yet intricate rhythmic pattern of other dances, the loud yet melodious sound of battle drums such as *Dhumsa*, *Nagara*, *Dhol* and *Chadchadi* with *Mohuri*, create a thunderous effect and hold the audience spell-bound.

### Pala

There are two distinct types of *Palas* in Orissa, the *Baithaki* (sitting) and the *Thhia* (standing). It is associated with the worship of Satyapir, a diety honoured by both Hindus and Muslims and hence its origin is traced to the Moghul period, when attempts had been made for the unification in faith between both the religions, but the form of the *Thhia Pala*, which seems to be a developed outcome of the *Binakara* portion of the age-old *Dandanata* of Orissa has a deeper origin.

The word *Pala* has been derived from the word *Pali*. *Pali* was a highly developed language used for the propagation of Buddhism after Lord Buddha. This language was mainly used in ancient Kalinga and said to be of universal understanding.

The preliminaries or the *Purba Ranga* of a *Pala* play have a lot of similarity with that of the *Purba Ranga* mentioned in the *Natya Sastra*. No other form of play production exist, today which adheres so closely to these formalities as outlined in the *Natya Sastra* as that of a *Pala* play of Orissa. This justifiably signifies the classical origin of this beautiful form of mass communication media of Orissa.

The *Thhia Pala* is a unique form of play presentation with a high degree of literary excellence. This is enacted by about six persons dressed in the ancient royal attire. The chief actor known as the *Gayaka* holds a *Chamara* and plays on a small pair of *Manjiras* and the rest, form the *Palias* or the chorus. Among these there is one percussionist who plays on the *Khol* and the rest on *Karatalas*. One of the chorus happens to be a jester who cracks a

joke for everything. The main theme runs in a commentary form, highlighting important portions in the real enactment of the drama, each player turning into a character with dialogue. The *Gayaka* during his singing, explains passages which are difficult to understand for the common man with lots of similies and quotations from other writers, thereby turning the performance into a literary discourse. Intermittent humorous skits, occasional dancing with small steps, bring variety to the whole performance which runs up to three or four hours. *Pala* requires a central acting-area and no green-room during performance.

Sometimes *Badipala* is arranged where two or more *Pala* groups participate one after the other. These turn into competitions of showmanship and literary duels and it is left to the people to pronounce the verdict and award the best with a prize.

*Pala* happens to be a very popular *Jatra* form of Orissa. There are *Pala* groups now consisting entirely of female artists. There exist *Pala* groups who perform in Sanskrit also.

#### **Daskathia Pala**

A beautiful form has developed in recent times by the combination of both forms, the *Pala* and the *Daskathia*.

The highlights of both the forms have been so well blended making it appear as a distinct style of its own.

#### **Dandanata**

*Dandanata* of Orissa is considered to be the most ancient traditional form of dramatics. The name is derived because a *Danda* or sceptre is worshipped during the performance. The whole thing originated from the ritualistic services prevailing in the ancient times and the *Danda* corresponds to the *Jarjara* flag-staff described in the *Natya Sastra*.

Two phases of this performances known as the *Pani danda* (aquatic feats) and the *Bhumi Danda* (acrobatics) are performed in the day time. The last phase, consisting of dance, music and dramatics, takes place at night. *Dandanata* on the whole, is not a complete story but consists of loosely connected episodes in sequences where various characters appear. Each sequence has a moral and religious base. The characters which appear are *Prabha*, *Chadhaiya*, *Jogi*, *Kela*, *Patra Saura*, *Binakara*, *Baidhana*, *Shiva*, *Parbati*, *Krishna*, *Gopis* and also other characters of society as needed. The characters introduce themselves, and the show takes place in an arena.

The main accompanying musical instruments are the *Dhol* and *Mohuri*

but *Ghanta*, *Sankha* and *Kahali* are also played when gods appear. Every character sings and dances in *Dandanata* which has a great appeal for the rural mass.

Individual sequences of *Danda Nata* have also been made into full performances in Orissa. *Chadheiya Nata*, *Sabara Nata*, *Lela Nata*, *Jogi Nata*, etc. are performed with an additional humorous character beside the consort and these have also become very popular.

### Rasa Lila

Associated with the Krishna cult, *Rasa Lila* happens to be of ancient origin in Orissa. The great sage-poet Achyutananda wrote *Rasa* in Oriya in the last part of 15th century which was performed throughout the country by a band of touring artists whom he taught. *Rasa* was developed as spectacle at certain places in Orissa where a tall Kadamba tree is improvised from a huge log with artificial leaves and flowers, with Gopis sliding in the air on ropes.

*Laudinata* is the enactment of certain phases from Krishna's life performed by the *Gopala* (cowherd community).

*Rahasakirtana* is performed by the followers of the Krishna cult irrespective of caste or creed.

### Radhapremalila

Following the Sanskrit text of *Gitagovindam* of Jayadeva with a few variations and usually found in south Orissa, *Radhapremalila* has remained a distinct form for its style, charm and unique local flavour. With music and lots of dances, this form is enacted by small boys and girls under 10 years of age. A flowery bower is constructed by the side of the central acting area. The child artists are helped by a chorus which sits next to the acting area. The complete form takes a week, for full presentation in phases.

### Krishna Lila

This is another form of presentation of a devotional play relating to the various deeds of Krishna. Once the artists in make-up appear on the central acting area in a ceremonial procession with the retinue of musicians and chorus, they stay there and do not need a green room. There is a *Sutradhara* who recites Sanskrit texts throughout and also explains them. The main character is Krishna and a few *Sakhas*. A lot of singing, acting and dancing is involved in the play which is done in parts each night and the entire series takes 7 to 8 nights to complete. Properties are used to highlight certain

sequences such as a huge artificial serpent which peeps out and slowly rises high from a wooden box kept in the arena.

### Kaliya Dalana

Although the subject matter forms a part of the theme from *Krishna-lila*, there are groups who specialise in this portion to such fantastic proportions that they have established a distinct style of their own.

While an open area is improvised as a pond, this pond with lots of artificial lotus flowers and leaves turns into the acting area. A lot of mechanical devices are used in making a number of artificial snakes which appear in the pond to attack Krishna while he is plucking the flowers, finally bringing the huge serpent Kaliya out who is crushed by Him.

### Patua Jatra

*Patua Jatra* is a ritualistic art like *Danda Nata*, patronised by labour-class. There are many types of *Patua* such as *Ghata Patua* (dances on stilts with a pitcher on the head), *Udapatua* (revolving on a pole), *Nian Patua* (walking on fire), *Kanta Patua* (walking on nails and thorns), *Khandapatua* (standing on a sword's edge), *Phodapatua* (being pricked all over the body), *Jhula Patua* (hanging with the head down over a burning flame), and the common *Patua* of songs and dances.

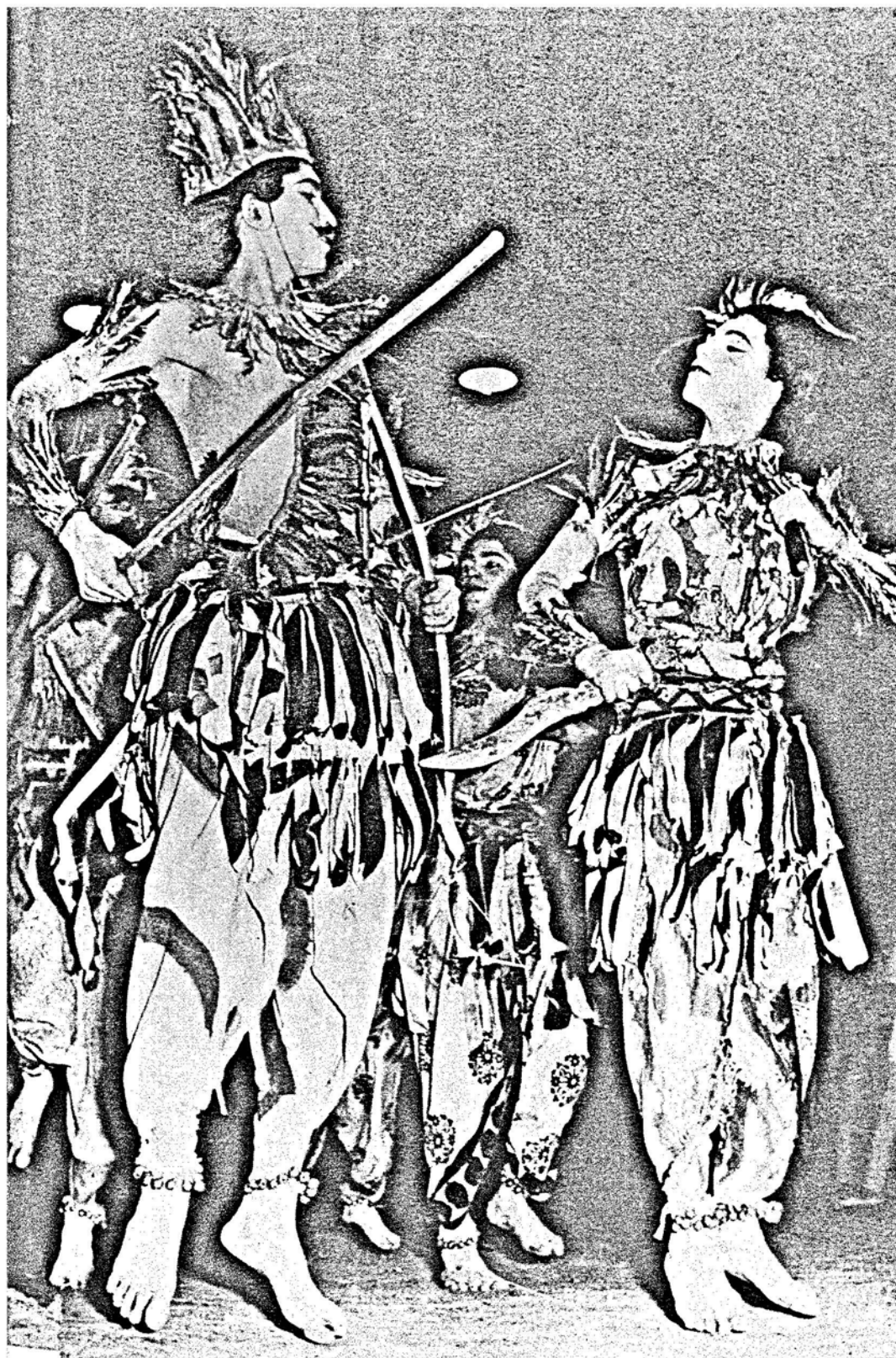
While all the former *Patuas* are self-inflicted penances, the last variety contains song, dance and acting. This *Patua Jatra* follows a pattern like that of *Pala* in its costumes as well as in the variations and is of a simpler pattern. There are characters known as *Rauta* as the main singer and *Rautani* as the main dancer, as in *Chaiti Ghoda*. Besides these, there is the chorus. With *Rauta's* singing, *Ramatali* is performed and then dancing starts to the accompaniment of *Dhol* and *Mohuri*. Although this *Patua Jatra* is not in the form of a drama and consists mainly of singing and dancing, intermittent improvisation of dialogue, and comic skits makes it quite interesting. It usually takes a whole night and needs an arena for performance and no green room.

Sometimes *Badi Patua Jatra* or a competition between two or three groups also takes place.

### Ghudiki (or Dhukuki) Nabaranga Nata

While *Ghudiki* happens to be the name of a local musical instrument made of a round, hollow, wooden cylinder with a piece of hide covering one mouth and played by twangs on the string running from the centre of the hide and held by the other hand, the *Ghudiki Nabaranga Nata* bears it's





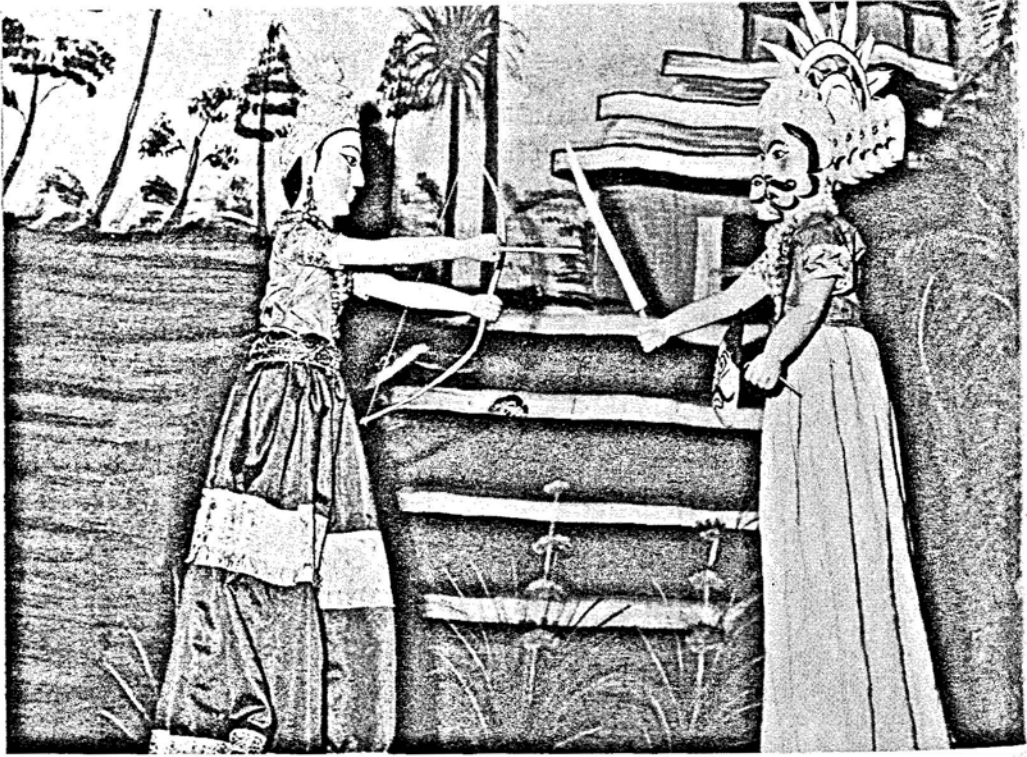


(a) Ranapa; stilt dance, (b) Ghumra dance.









(a) Kathei Kundei; rod puppets.

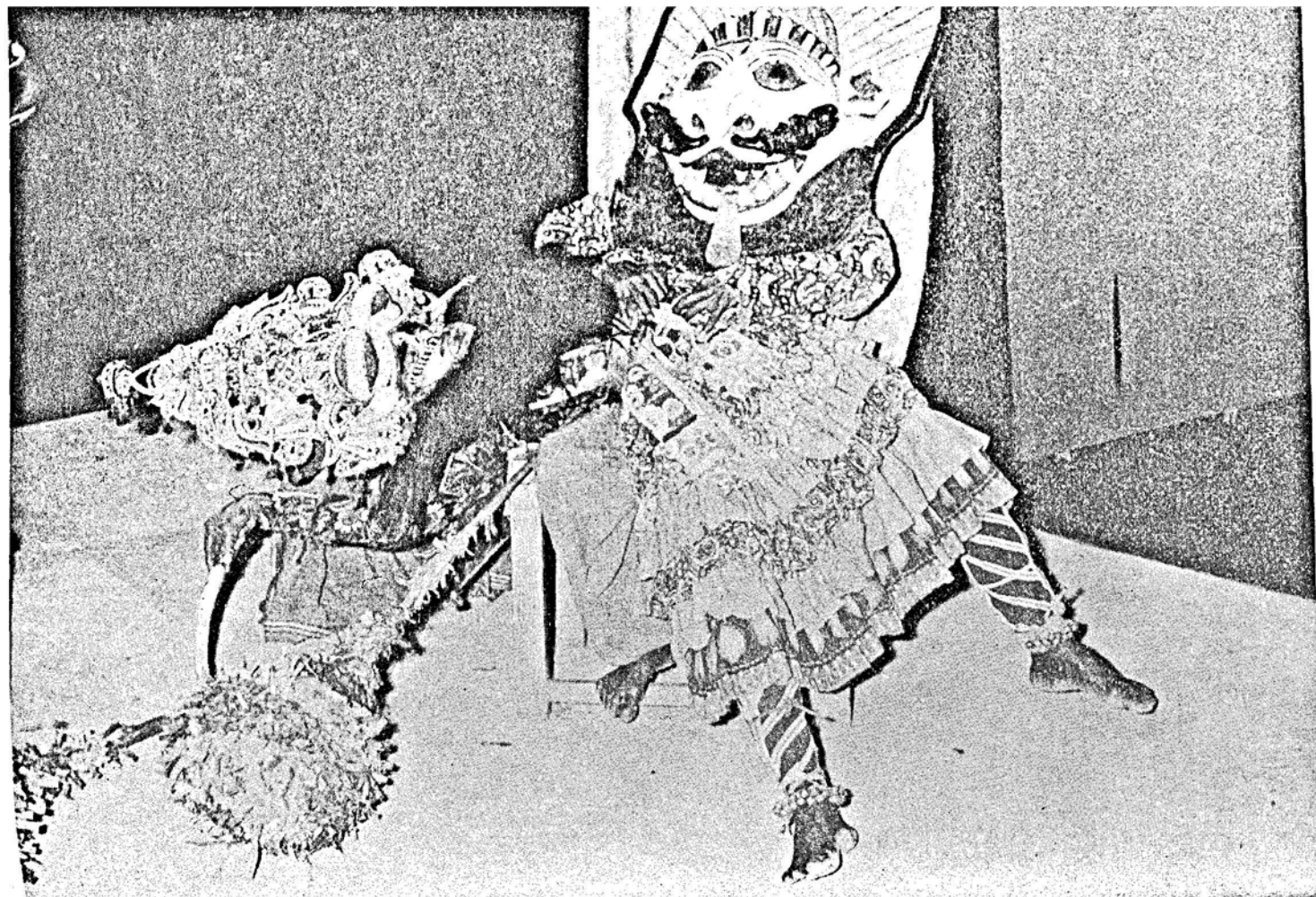


(b) Kundhei Nacho; glove puppet.

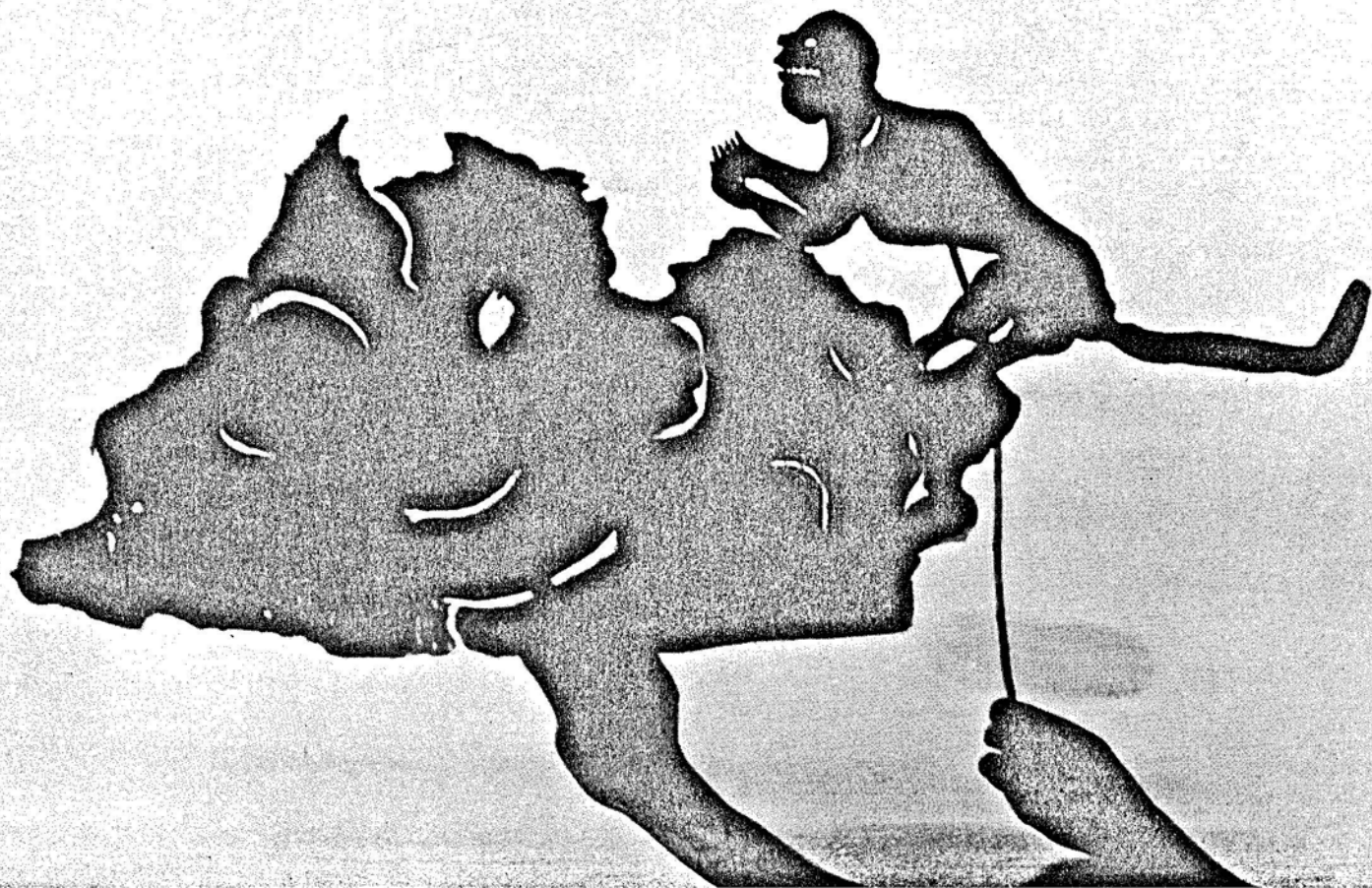


Mahisasura Vadha, Kathei Kundi.









name, because the master of ceremony of this form plays on it throughout.

This *Ghudiki Nata* is a highly stylised form of a total theatre. The group consist of 8 to 10 artists who are all rounders. They do not need a green room and dress up or improvise everything in the midst of the spectators. The *Ghudiki* player is the director, commentator, jester, dancer and also suddenly turns into a character of the play if needed. The play starts with singing and dancing by two boys dressed in female attire and as the commentary goes, the same boys change into different roles assisted by the chorus and the musicians who stand up and fit into the plays according to the demands of the situation. A lot of singing, dancing and humorous skits fill in the production which lasts up to 3 or 4 hours.

#### **Bandi Nata**

*Bandi Nata* is mainly found in central and western parts of Orissa. It has less ritualistic formalities than that of the *Dandanata* and is performed by the scheduled caste people mainly.

Bandi happens to be the nickname of the sister of Chandrasena, the husband of Radha. This *Bandinata* idealises the character of Bandi as against Radha in the game of love towards Krishna, because it depicts the selfless sacrifices of her own utmost love towards Krishna in favour of Radha and her help which brought the pair Radha and Krishna together.

*Bandinata* is an out-come of the so called hatred of the caste Hindu Vaishnavites, who did not favour the low castes to join them in their Radha cult.

In *Bandinata*, the artists in make-up and costumes along with their stage properties in hand, walk into the auditorium and sit down with the spectators mixing and mingling with the crowd and come out to the central acting area only when their roles come, complete with self-introductions in songs.

The only musical instrument played with the *Bandinata* is the *Dhol* and it is really inspiring to watch this solo accompanist for the entire duration of the play which lasts for more than 3 hours packed with lots of dances, songs, actions and humour.

#### **Bharat Lila or (Dwari Nata)**

The main theme of the play is from the epic Mahabharat and depicts the circumstances under which Arjuna is put to accept Subhadra as his wife.

*Bharatlila* is otherwise known as *Dwarinata* because of the main



character Dwari, who not only acts as an interpreter of the play for the audience but also acts as the middle-man in the exchange of affairs and wordy duel that takes place between Arjuna and Subhadra.

These three are the main characters in the play beside the Sakhis who fill in the sequences of relief with their dance numbers as well as to appear in very minor roles if needed during the play.

A lot of question-answer sequences mark the test of the merit and calibre of the artists because beside the main theme, plenty of similies and extracts from Shastras and works of other authorities are quoted or recited, punched with dances, songs and witty humour.

*Bharatlila* is very popular for the element of humour which brings roars of laughter from the audience time to time. A single performance lasts about 3 to 4 hours but in case of a competition between two or more parties, the show continues for several nights. *Bharatlila* needs a central stage with spectators all around.

### Desianata

*Desianata* is a unique and ancient form of play presentation of the Koraput district of Orissa.

*Desia* means local, hence it is completely indigenous and its participants belong to the local area irrespective of caste, creed or even tribe.

This traditional multicoloured masked spectacle of *Desia Nata*, includes every conceivable character i.e. gods, goddesses, animals, birds and also human characters. All characters are masked. The use of masks has never been so widely exploited by any traditional dance or drama form in India. There are also characters who appear without the masks for instance in the role of a common human being. The unique distinction of the *Desia Nata* masks are that they are worn helmet-like where-in the entire head is covered.

The themes are from mythology or the *Ramayana*, interspersed with social skits and humorous episodes. The music and the dances are vigorous but simple and blend into tribal patterns. The dances, occasionally include intricate footwork, gestures and poses similar to the more sophisticated and more famous forms of Indian dance.

*Desianata* is gradually becoming rare, but is still popular amongst the local inhabitants. The performance usually takes place during festivals like Chaitra Parva. *Desianata* needs a central arena for performance.



### Rama Lila

Throughout India *Ramalila* has remained a popular form of theatre based on the theme of the epic and so also in Orissa. There have been many improvisations on the presentation of *Ramalila* of Orissa, they can be put into the following categories:

There are *Ramalilas* where characters appear with masks and others where no masks are used. There are yet others where some characters are masked and others are not.

In some forms of *Ramalila* all characters speak or sing for themselves. There are other *Ramalilas* where characters act and mime, while the *Gayaka* and the chorus do the singing.

*Ramalila* sometimes requires an acting area in the centre. There are other forms where a whole vast field is required for the production. There are *Ramalilas* which need different locales for different scenes and they carry the entire retinue of spectators from place to place with them.

*Ramalila* by tradition, is enacted for several nights in phases. There are groups who perform it for 10 nights and specialise in the spectacular aspects of their productions.

### Lankapodi

*Lankapodi* festival of Dasapalla needs special mention for the lavish splendour employed in the presentation of *Ramalila* in Orissa.

A mile-long street turns into the acting area from the temple to the improvised city of Lanka of Ravana. While the performance is performed in phases, the acting area expands from place to place in the street where platforms are made for the important characters, who proceed from the temple in procession each night.

A high wooden crane with many wheels with a swinging and revolving boom, on which is suspended the Pushpaka Bimana of Ravana complete with a rope ladder and is used for whisking away Sita into the air, while the crane is dragged by the spectators like a chariot. Such innovations which create spectacular illusions in a novel manner, thrill the crowd.

### Dhanu Jatra

While massive spectacular theatrical presentations are a speciality of *Jatra* of Orissa, the *Dhanu Jatra* of Baragarh, Sambalpur outdoes them all, in imaginative grandeur.

While elsewhere in Orissa, a pond, a huge tree and its surrounding, a vast field, a village or a mile-long street, have been improvised as the acting areas, here in *Dhanu Jatra*, several villages, a town including a river, turn into the acting areas of the play.

While the village Amapali turns into the *Gopapura* and the town of Bargarh into *Mathura*, the river Jira becomes the sacred river of *Jamuna*.

This *Dhanu Jatra*, which is a part of the celebration of *Krishnalila* and continues for a week during the month of Pousha, reminds one of the description of Indra's banner-festival mentioned in the first chapter of *Natyasastra*.

Beside other highlights, Kansa's elephant-ride in the streets of his kingdom, his high *Mancha* from where he falls and dies, and his *Durbar*, everything is so well-planned and improvised that perhaps no where in the world, has a play been made to achieve the effect of such a vast amphitheatre.

About the so-called modern technique of spectator's participation in *Dhanu Jatra*, it is apparent that when all the villages, town and the river turn into the acting areas, naturally all the inhabitants and visitors also turn into characters in the play including you if you happen to be there during the *Jatra* period.

And, during his ride in the streets or at his *Durbar* if the actor King Kansa finds you guilty (whoever you are, including top Government officials and whether you did commit a crime or not) you have got to pay a fine (according to your sweet will) all in sportive fun!

The very idea of this *Dhanu Jatra* of Orissa is not only awe-inspiring and fantastic but also very entertaining and educative.

### Sabda Swara Nata

In *Sabda Swara Nata*, the presentation of plays are in regular *Jatra* style with central stage and spectators sitting around. The themes are drawn from mythology, mainly from Krishna's life. The plays are highlighted by interludes of special dance numbers which are classical dances of the *Tandava* variety, known as *Sabda Nrutya*.

*Sabda Nrutya* claims 8 distinct *Tandava* dances such as Siva, Durga, Kali, Ganesha, Ananda Bhairava, Vinayaka, Rudra and Narada. Each *Tandava* has two *Swaras* which in turn have four *Pallavi* dances each.

This form is located at Kumbhari village, off Barapali, Sambalpur and

the institution which keeps it living was established in 1850 by one Bhajamana Das who hailed from Sidhamunda, Kantilo of Puri.

### **Prahalada Nataka**

While *Nataka* denotes a play in its fullness, the presentation of this play is so stylised that it has come to stay as a distinct form of theatre in Orissa.

Based on the most popular mythological theme of the boy Prahalada and how all attempts of his father to kill him failed, because of his faith in God, upto the appearance of Nrusingha Avatara from a pillar who kills his father, Hiranya Kasipu.

A central acting arena with a pillar on one side and a high wooden throne of the other side is essential. Two groups of musicians remain in attendance. While the chorus and the main musicians take their place nearer the throne, another group waits near the green-room to lead the entry of each character in a manner of a ceremonial procession complete with fireworks and crackers, amongst the specators up to the acting area. I think this stylisation has no parallel anywhere in the drama world.

The costumes are extremely ornate and colourful. The music is entirely based on classical *Ragas*. Each character sings and knows the art of dancing very well.

While a life-size dummy elephant is used to bring the king, live cobras are used around Prahalada's neck in the snake-sequence.

Evidently *Prahalada Nataka* of Orissa is a regular classical Indian play with a distinct and highly stylised traditional presentation form. In Orissa, there are only very few groups in Ganjam district now, who have remained as the torch bearers of this great traditional culture.

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Finally a word about the Puppet Theatre of Orissa.

### **Kandhei Nata**

The puppet theatre of Orissa is known as *Kandhei Nata*. *Kandhei* means doll or marionette. Other terms which are used for puppetry in Orissa are *Sakhinacha*, *Gopalila*, etc., Orissa's puppetry is classified into four categories such as hand or glove puppets, string puppets, rod puppets and shadow puppets (*Ravana chhaya* or shadow of Ravana). Usual *Jatra* plays are adopted for *Kandhei Nata*. While only the *Daki Dambaru* or *Dholki* or the *Khanjani* are used as the accompanying musical instruments in former days now they

have a full orchestra. The most interesting character is the jester *Andiripua Udhaba* in the popular string puppetry. The advent of cinema, the crude and unsophisticated oil lamp projection in the sphere of shadow puppetry seems to be losing its significance, and is rapidly growing extinct.